

***TASKSCAPE:***  
***CARING FOR MIGRANT MATERIALS***

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## **Abstract**

This practice-led research examines concepts of value in art through the materiality of domestic space, and the personal experience of a migrant. The research locates the displaced or migrant entity – be it human or non-human – as a by-product of economic conditions related to standardisation, abstraction, invisible labour and the dematerialisation of the economy. The thesis and project are centred on this question: What diverse artistic methodologies, both in the studio and in the writing, can be pursued to counter standardisation, dematerialisation and revalue invisible labour?

Through several projects initiated in the studio, my artistic exploration led me to adopt the concept of rematerialisation or material correspondence as care for materials: Rematerialisation is understood here as a method for revaluation and is tightly linked with the concept of a taskscape. Taskscape – a term borrowed from the anthropologist Tim Ingold – escapes the dichotomy between labour and leisure, and the separation of land from labour. The final outcome is a mixed media installation that counters economic abstraction and standardisation, creating parallels between the conditions of fragile economies and circulating invisible bodies. The text and the installation reflect the process of material correspondence that was developed in the studio.

While the writing uses academic referencing, it is not in a pure academic style. Two chapters have been written in a fictional experimental style, which helps attune the writing to my concepts of rematerialisation as care and taskscape. It also establishes a correspondence between the studio and the writing. In chapter two, I write through the voice of a devalued coin, drawing on multiple sources related to theories of value, as well as literary examples. In chapter five, an industrialised pine wood pole comments on my studio practice.

My research explores geographically dispersed artistic examples that present material processes of revaluation, rather than a mere critique of value. These examples are compared to twentieth-century artworks, which are considered critical of standardized value. Drawing on affect theories, that rematerialisation (through care and attention) may offer a “reparative” process that posits an alternative, in addition to exposing economic structures.

Drawing parallels between the experience of the human body and objects (both in the studio and through the writing) my practice-led research led me to coin the term “migrant material.” This term is capable of embodying the devalued coin, the pine pole, my studio materials and my own experience as a migrant.

(75% creative practice and 25% written dissertation).

## **Declaration**

This is to certify that

- (i) *the thesis comprises only my original work towards the Masters of Fine Arts except where indicated in the Preface,*
- (ii) *due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,*
- (iii) *the thesis is 13640 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, footnotes, endnotes, bibliographies, and appendices.*

*Eza (Azza) Al Zein*

## Preface

Parts of this thesis have been published, accepted for publication or presented in a symposium.

Chapter 2 “Coinage” has been published in *Art + Australia* 's December 2019 issue entitled “Outside” (2019). The chapter has benefitted from their generous editorial suggestions.

Chapter 3 and 4 were published in one article, “Rematerialization, Art, and Affective Economies”. *Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research* Vol. 5 No. 2 (2019): pp. 118-131. <https://kohljournal.press/rematerialization>. The article has benefited from the review process and suggestions by two anonymous referees. It was presented in their alternative economies conference in Beirut (21-22 June 2019), <https://kohljournal.press/alternative-economies-conference>. For the flow of the thesis, I have made some minimal changes and added a section at the end of chapter 4.

Chapter 5 “The Migrant Material” was read as a performance lecture in the “Care: Transforming Values through Art and Feminism Symposium” at George Paton Gallery, University of Melbourne on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2019.

<https://contemporaryartandfeminism.com/contemporary-art-and-feminism/current-events/care-transforming-values-through-art-ethics-and-feminism>

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# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1: Introduction and practice-led research

I am standing in my studio. I blow a fragment of a mica imitation gold leaf. A gold leaf is fragile. Its value is volatile. Some crushed shells lie in a recycled bowl ready to be inlaid onto a pine pole with resin, an industrial one I bought from Bunnings. Some abalone shells have not been crushed yet and find themselves on top of a resin kit, waiting for their turn to be modified in the workshop – they meanwhile shimmer through their spiral form. There are cowrie shells in a recycled yogurt box; some have been laminated by the supplier. Some pine poles are standing against the wall. Others are lying down on the floor, as they are being oil painted with red and blue pigment. There is also a pile of folded textile from India made of silk, often not pure silk. The textiles have golden threads on their rims and many of their colours tend towards red. Their smooth shiny texture stands in contrast to a collection of dryer's lint. On the sidewall sits an open cut bag of a potting mix. Almost every item in my studio is first sourced as an industrial material: not a readymade, but bought from an accessible shop, except the dryer's lint. Even the lint is the by-product of the machine. Red, blue pigments, gold leaves are materials with vibrant colours. The studio and its materials seem to have a vibrancy that is similar to the rooms I inhabited in India, Lebanon and Syria. Those materials not only form my memory of spaces, they are me and I am them; their diverse colours, patterns and processes form my migrant identity.

### *Research aim*

After this colourful beginning you would think my art should speak directly to some identity politics or reflect a nostalgic longing for a fragmented belonging, or a homeland. Instead of fulfilling such exotic desires, this practice-led research attempts to locate the displaced or migrant entity – human or non-human – as a by-product of economic conditions related to standardisation, abstraction, invisible labour and the dematerialisation of the economy. This thesis highlights artworks that engage with materials to comment on these economic conditions. The emphasis is on artworks, which disturb these conditions through a process of rematerialisation, defined as “attending to materials”. How does one revalue what has been dematerialised, devalued, or deemed invisible? As an artist my focus is on rematerialisation as revaluation rather than other methods of quantification as revaluation.<sup>i</sup>

<sup>i</sup> There is a growing literature in mainstream economics on quantifying unpaid work and the digital economy reimagining new measures of economic production, instead of traditional Gross Domestic Product. See for instance the blog of the World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/focus/beyond-gdp>.

## **Research questions**

What artistic methodology (both in the studio and in the writing) can I pursue in order to counter such conditions and revalue invisible labour? Through several projects initiated in the studio, the artistic exploration led me finally to adopt the concept of rematerialisation as care for materials tightly linked with the anthropologist Tim Ingold's concept of a taskscape.

In the introduction, I show how different stages of the practice informed a new reading of the following paragraph in Ingold's *Life of Lines*.

To make a living farmers and woodsmen must join with the ways of plants; hunters and herdsmen with the ways of animals; artisans with the ways of their materials. Production, in such an ecology of correspondence, is about attending to the trajectories of these non-human lives ... In an economy of lines production is on the side neither of humans nor of the earth; it is rather a correspondence of earthly under-goings and human doings.<sup>1</sup>

Through different studio methods, I unpack different insights and links to multiple concepts taking the research towards the intersection of feminist materiality and care. The practice then becomes a form of collaboration and care with these materials to counter standardisation and economic abstraction.

I am interested in a materialism in which I co-exist and co-work with materials in my studio. I articulate the studio as a space of daily routines as well as coworking with materials. In a way, the studio for me is not a space of production nor is it a scientific laboratory where I test things and make conclusions. These conceptions of the studio are the product of an economic system that favours outcomes over process and artistic product and knowledge as reductive. Nowhere is this reductionism present in the chaos of my studio. Coming from a background in economics, a discipline that favours modelling and reductionism, my process had to escape such rigid structures.

## **Writing styles and structure of the thesis**

While the writing uses academic referencing, it is not in a pure academic style. Two chapters have been written in a fictional experimental style.

- Chapter 2 is a fictional text written in the voice of a coin. The text creates parallels between the invisibility of a coin (an object) and the migrant body. It draws on multiple sources related to theories of value as well as literary examples.
- Chapter 3 defines standardisation, abstraction, and revaluation in this project. The geographically dispersed artistic examples present a possible process of revaluation rather than mere critique of value. These examples are compared to twentieth-century artworks, which are considered critiques of standardized value. With the help of affect theories, I argue that such rematerialisation through care and attention may offer a "reparative" process that posits an alternative, in addition to exposing economic structures.

- Chapter 4 links affect theory with the anthropological concept of the taskscape and gives examples of artworks that rematerialise the relation between land and labour.
- Chapter 5 is a fictional text written from the perspective of an industrialised pine wood pole commenting on my studio practice. Through this text, the industrial material speaks of its migrant condition and comments on my studio practice.

Making objects and sentient beings speak has a long literary tradition, well before new materialism and object oriented ontology spread across different cultures. Such style of writing may still be anthropomorphising, but helps decentralise the practice from the perspective of the artist. It assists in attuning the writing to my concepts of rematerialisation as care. It also establishes a correspondence between the studio and the writing.

### ***Evolution of the practice-led research***

#### Correspondence as isomorphic relations of lines

In my first MFA project, the *Stoppage* series, I treated the economic graph-line like a found image. The title of the project was inspired by Marcel Duchamp's *Stoppages: 3 standard stoppages* and *Network of stoppages (1913-1914)*. They are examples of line artworks that critically "comment on perspectival painting and the logic of measuring."<sup>2</sup> I became interested in the parallels between a warm line in a textile fold and the sharp mark in a wood board, and a cold graphical line.<sup>3</sup> Using gestural painting to enhance some of the pre-existing lines, my process was open-ended without any planned outcome. One of the graphs I used for the *Stoppage* series was of corn prices and sunspots, from William Stanley Jevons' *Nature* (1882). Jevons is one of the earliest economists who advocated the use of data to explain economic logic. Proposing the solar-commercial cycle, he found that variations in the price of corn were related to sunspots.<sup>4</sup> I was drawn to the isomorphism of these lines. My process was isomorphic in the sense that it was highlighting the formal similarities in lines of wood, textiles and the found graphs often marked by ebbs and flows, busts and bursts. From this fascination in looking at lines and noticing isomorphism, my project stressed forms of correspondence.

#### Correspondence as a relation between materials

At the end of each day, while I was making the *Stoppage* series, I left traces of the palette on another wood panel. I was also collecting my dryer's lint.<sup>5</sup> In the second project *Residual Lines* (2018), I used the dryer's lint and the residue of the palette as materials that trace invisible labour. The accumulated lint resembles a stratified land, and, surprisingly, at times, the female vulva.<sup>6</sup> The work creates parallels between the invisible domestic labour and the artistic process in relation to materials and the passage of time. Each wooden board horizontally sat on a wooden pine pole cut at uneven heights. The installation looked like an undulating field gravitating towards the ground. The following question first came to life in the studio: How do materials visualise conditions of invisible economies? In the horizontal display in the gallery, the question unfolded into many others: what is the landscape of invisible labour? Why did Tim Ingold use the term economy? The term *economy of lines* may have actually been meant as ecology of lines: ecology studies relations of organisms with their environment, whereas economy emphasises a management of lines and may convey a form

of reductionism. In Ingold's quote, the term *earthly under-goings* evokes the hidden in the word "under" and "undergoing" as conditioning. Taken in a traditional meaning, the "earthly" here may be opposed to the sky. Could there be a hint of the material in contrast to the immaterial? What could the *earthly undergoing* represent?<sup>7</sup> The term *undergoing* connotes an archaeological relation to change. Why did he use the expression "human doings" not human work or labour, or making? In the term "doing" there is a relation of subordination of the *earthly under-goings* to the *human doings*; yet this was broken by the term correspondence which suggests a horizontal relation. Isn't any artefact or material a correspondence of *earthly under-goings* and *human doings*? Isn't it the case even for the most industrial object?

### Taskscape and Care

When displayed horizontally, *Residual Lines* was suggestive of a landscape artwork. The term landscape is problematic for several reasons: It usually carries nationalistic imaginaries; imagined landscapes construct an image of land to be looked at, seen, rather than experienced as a site. The artwork provoked in me another reading of Ingold's text in relation to the inseparability of labour, land and materials. So I researched what Ingold had to say about landscape and found his text, *The Temporality of the Landscape* (1993), where he conceptualises the term taskscape. This conceptualisation follows Ingold's general interest in dissolving the binary between archaeology and anthropology. He insists that tasks refer to how people generally perform "their tasks, also attend to one another." The taskscape is not limited to the animate.

Ultimately then, by replacing the tasks of human dwelling in their proper context within the process of becoming of the world as a whole, we can do away with the dichotomy between taskscape and landscape – only, however, by recognising the fundamental temporality of the landscape itself.<sup>8</sup>

Instead of the ambiguous word landscape, I became drawn to use the term taskscape. I do not "inscribe" an image but rather "incorporate" my gesture in dialogue with existing lines.<sup>9</sup> For me, the taskscape seems to be an elusive concept and also very grounding. It seems elusive because I have lost all my traditional rituals as a migrant living in modern conditions. The only recurring rituals were my mothering and my work in the studio. I became interested in how materials blur the line between the domestic and public spaces.

During the MFA, I visited an interior designer in Lebanon, and in her workshop I saw the step-by-step process of the traditional shell inlay techniques. We discussed the relationship between textiles and wood works. Fascinated by shell inlay, textile patterns, cowrie shells, I found my work transforming. It gravitated towards showcasing how domestic materials have embedded relations and notions of circulation, labour and changing landscapes that may have been erased with modernity. I started incorporating in my correspondence process, heritage processes such as shell inlay. The first iteration of *Taskscape* prompted questions around the body and the landscape.

The materials seemed to embody my condition as a migrant, as well as carry sediments of an interdependent relationship that had perhaps evolved through trade. It has also prompted an aesthetic reading of the work as a beautiful decoration. I was surprised as I saw my work

conceptually as a mapping of care for materials that I have seen in domestic spaces I inhabited. The wooden industrial pole is often invisible because of standardisation. My gestures of carving and embedding shells in its organic pre-existing lines were to reverse this invisibility. It was not an act of decoration as drawing, but decoration as care for the materials. I explored the history of the term decorative and its relation with feminist art. I also framed the work around current discussions in relation to feminism and care. The reframing of the practice into affective gestures and tasks made me underline the term “attending” in Ingold’s quote above. Attending is caring.

A relationship of reciprocity is embedded in the concept of care for humans and non-humans. To channel such reciprocity in the text, I wrote the two chapters in the voices of the devalued coin and the pine wood pole. A coin circulates like a body. A devalued coin is invisible and shifts from being a functional object (currency) to an artefact. A pine pole is an industrial product, functional but often invisible in an architectural building. Its material origin as a pine tree corresponds to the Mediterranean landscape I grew up with.

If I was the material and objects I was making, and they were I, I had to write in their voice. This shifts the writing away from an overemphasis on longing and urgent personal narratives. It makes me think of the economic conditions that led me, and the studio objects, to become migrant materials. My position as an Arab migrant, a mother, and my interest in both economics and art, force me to question the studio as a space of production.<sup>10</sup>

My work explores rematerialisation as care for materials and a form of revaluation. Perhaps one reason for this interest comes from similar discontent of the Lebanese protesters who recently started a revolution against the greed of a capitalist, patriarchal and corrupt ruling class in Lebanon that cares for nothing except its self-preservation. The burning of trees due to climate change and mismanagement, as well as the signs of an economic crisis preceded the protests. In my final installation *Taskscape*, the pine wood poles and a video of melting coins may have metaphorically pre-empted these events.<sup>11</sup>

Drawing parallels between the experience of the human body and objects in the studio, I coined the term “migrant material”: the term is capable of embodying the devalued coin, the pine pole and myself. As migrant materials, we each have our own idiosyncrasies and personal narratives. Through mutual care, we interact, and we turn the studio into a taskscape.

## Chapter 1 notes

<sup>1</sup> Tim Ingold, *The Life of Lines* (London, New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), p.155.

<sup>2</sup> Marzia Faietti and Gerhard Wolf, eds., *The Power of Line : Linea III* (Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, Max-Planck-Institut.: Hirmer Publishers, 2015), p.206-211.

<sup>3</sup> Azza Zein, "Stoppage," documented by Matthew Stanton, painting installation (Rubicon A.R.I, Melbourne 2018), <http://azzazein.com/Stoppage.html>

<sup>4</sup> Williams Stanley Jevons, "The Solar-Commercial Cycle," *Nature*, 1882, p.588–90.

<sup>5</sup> Azza Zein, "Residual Lines," documented by Matthew Stanton, painting installation (Seventh Gallery, Melbourne 2018), [http://azzazein.com/Residual\\_Lines.html](http://azzazein.com/Residual_Lines.html)

<sup>6</sup> In *Laundry Lint (C.O.'s), 1971-1973*, the feminist artist Hannah Wilke, created red and pink objects from folding the lint collected from her partner's laundry, the artist Claes Oldenburg. The work reflects the invisible labour of the female artist and gendered roles. The softness and fragility of the lint sculpture contrast with Oldenburg's often gigantic sculptural commissions. The lint is folded in the forms of flowers or female vulva. It is collected, folded and displayed as separate objects. In the multiple folded objects lies a rhythmic relation of the chore that the body encounters and the cycle of domestic work.

Tracy Fitzpatrick et al., *Hannah Wilke : Gestures* (Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York, 2009), p.22-23.

<sup>7</sup> Should I work with termites or worms? Both artists Nick Mangan and Agnieszka Kurant have collaborated with termites. Norie Neumark and Maria Miranda have worked with worms.

<sup>8</sup> Tim Ingold, "The Temporality of the Landscape," *World Archeology* 25, no. 2 (1993): 152–74.

<sup>9</sup>"(...) the landscape takes on its forms through a process of incorporation, not of inscription (...) If we recognise a man's gait in the pattern of his footprints, it is not because the gait preceded the footprints and was 'inscribed' in them, but because the gait and the prints arose within the movement of the man's walking".

Ingold (2015, p.162).

<sup>10</sup> Before studying art, I studied economics and worked as an economist. I am born to a Syrian mother and a Lebanese father. I am married to an Indian partner. I grew up in Beirut, lived in the U.S. and currently live in Australia.

<sup>11</sup> While I was finalising this thesis, a revolution started across Lebanon on 17 October 2019. The demands of the protesters, ordinary people and grassroots activists from different social classes, were economic and social justice against corruption, patriarchy, and sectarian divisions as well as ecological concerns. On 13 October 2019, forests burned and the wildfires spread due to delayed rescue related to unrepaired firefighting aircraft. The country for several years has had problems of waste management due to corruption. Among many other problems, a proposed tax on WhatsApp triggered the uprising. What is remarkable is that the revolutionary discourse targeted everyone in power, and included feminist demands. The main demand was to change the regime by first the resignation of the government, the Prime Minister and all involved in corruption. Some of the protests were in front of the central bank and some slogans targeted the governor of the central bank. Politicians often used the stability of the Lebanese pound as a threat: any political uncertainty may lead to economic collapse. One of the slogans reverses the logic of fear: "the revolution happened because of a possible currency collapse not the other way." Finding the resignation of the Prime Minister after thirteen days of protests an insufficient response, the protesters continue their demands for new elections and a radical change of the whole political system. Helen Sullivan, "The Making of Lebanon's October Revolution," *The New Yorker*, October 29, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/the-making-of-lebanons-october-revolution>.



## Chapter 2



Fig. 1 *Ancient Greek Coin, Aegina Type*, n.d., [circa 580 to 480 BC], found in Lyttos, Collection of GR Empedocles, Numismatic Museum of Athens, Athens, Greece, Photography: Azza Zein.

## Chapter 2: Coinage

1. *Hi, I am uncertain whether I am real or counterfeit.*

1.1. *Over time, my values changed. So did my weight, like those cowrie shells that tricked a British tax collector in India more than a century ago as he was wondering how to count them. He first chose weight.<sup>ii</sup> I confused everyone regarding what I stood for. I moved from one hand to the next, from one country to the next. Someone thought to mark me and to track my circulation. I deceived them. I lived outside somewhere as a reserve, outside money. Someone said I was memory.<sup>1</sup>*

2. *I was melted and reshaped. In a book, as a counterfeit gold coin, I had a voice.<sup>2</sup> (Well, I guess Pamuk must have read both Baudelaire's and Derrida's *La Fausse Monnaie*.<sup>3</sup> Or perhaps he once had some sort of anachronic conversation with them about gift exchange, with Marcel Mauss hosting the dinner.) I promise not to name-drop but would love to speak to you about debt instead of capital.<sup>iii</sup> Do I owe you some space?*

<sup>ii</sup> Bin Yang gives an account on the difficulty of counting shells in Bengal in the 18th century. See Bin Yang, *Cowrie Shells and Cowrie Money: A Global History*, (Routledge, London and New York, 2019), Kindle edition, pp. 62–65.

<sup>iii</sup> An interesting discussion on the difference between debt and capital can be found in David Graeber and Thomas Piketty, 'Soak the Rich', *The Baffler*, July 2014, Donald Nicholson-Smith (trans.), [thebaffler.com/odds-and-ends/soak-the-rich](http://thebaffler.com/odds-and-ends/soak-the-rich); accessed 10 July 2019.

2.1. *Keep me as shells, paper or metal; real or counterfeit, it doesn't matter. Let me embrace the tactile intensity of materials: the warm fabrics of a pocket or a purse, or the touching sweat of hands. Could one find in these material spaces "affective intensities"?*<sup>4</sup>

2.2. *And perhaps the so-called clash of civilisations is summarised or neutralised in these old sentences:*

*Now let me draw your attention to something quite bizarre: When these Venetian infidels paint, it's as if they're not making a painting but actually creating the object they're painting. When it comes to money, however, rather than making the real thing, they make its counterfeit.*<sup>5</sup>

3. *To the above multiple binaries I am an outsider.*

3.1. *With money, multiplication could mean devaluation. Borrowing this logic, would mirrors become objects of devaluation?*

3.2. *Take me out of this enclosed vitrine with mirrored glass.*

3.3. *Is the image inside a mirror materialised? Someone mesmerised by an Argentine coin insisted "there is nothing less material than money".<sup>6</sup> Obsessions in the material world lead to forgetfulness. (Note that Borges chooses an Argentine coin as a *Zahir*. The term *Zahir* is borrowed from the Arabic for "apparent" or "visible". Is the visible world an illusion? Like a Sufi, Borges resorts to repetition: "Perhaps by thinking about the *Zahir* unceasingly, I can manage to wear it away".<sup>7</sup> See my material properties. Describe my obverse and reverse sides. Touch me. Drop me in water. Let me rust with air.*

4. *A square or a triangle becomes a circle when whirling.*

4.1. *It may seem common sense that coins have tended towards circular forms. Real or counterfeit, a coin is a circle. Is it so that I would fit better in the deep corner of a side pocket? Or are hands*

*afraid of the edges of a square? Can circles integrate better? Don't squares fit into a circle? My "tendency" is the rounded form (of course, I am not talking about the rectangular paper fiat money). Is the "exterior milieu" an outside shell? Is it a shell of a changing body?*

iv

4.2. *Forgive my male references. Talking about value often feels like walking unintentionally into a male toilet. A poet once spoke of the "private parts" of money ... or at least that is the literal translation.*<sup>8</sup>

*For adults only there's something fantastic to see: coins copulating, everything else, the whole operation—educational and very arousing ...*<sup>9</sup>

4.3. *Coins copulate; money circulates and the body drips.*

4.4. *The news surprises me: the economy is going cashless! Some say bitcoin, while modelled on goldmining, may require a theory of value based on "stored energy and intelligence" rather than a labour theory of value.*<sup>10</sup> *I am sidelined and my contribution invisible. I read that the bitcoin industry is male-dominated. "So what do early adopters have in common? One factor is gender."*<sup>11</sup> *Systemic nausea! Hierarchies of currencies. Hierarchies of people. Refugees vs. citizens. Outsiders vs. inside jokes. Don't forget to read the marginalised footnotes of my text.*

5.1. *The footnotes are vomiting.*

<sup>iv</sup> Bernard Stiegler explains the concept of tendency (of technics) by citing André Leroi-Gourhan: "a movement, within the interior milieu, that gains progressive foothold in the exterior milieu". André Leroi-Gourhan, cited in Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (trans.), (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998), p. 58.

5.2. *Why is the focus on my body either sinking or surviving? Has it occurred to you that footnotes indeed feel seasick from the wavy movement of eyes?*

*After a few days the majority of the ~~migrants~~ footnotes\* began to recover from their seasickness ... some grew steadily weaker and more helpless so that their bodies could be seen to be wasting away ... their deteriorating condition created an atmosphere of despondency and demoralization in which many who had recovered began to ail afresh.<sup>12</sup>*

5.3. *Financial contagion on board this illusionary ship. Debt hangover and nausea.*

5.4. *Exceptional/unusual performance for the fragile outsider, unlike her carved stereotype. Tired of the “metonymic slide” that makes the particular of my body invisible. “The slide between figures constructs a relation of resemblance between the figures: what makes them alike may be their ‘unlikeness’ from ‘us.’”<sup>13</sup> There are valued and devalued currencies. There are visible individuals and invisible crowds. Offshore prisoners are controlled by the logic of numbers.<sup>v</sup>*

5.5. *Movement of bodies, goods and coins are controlled by the logic of numbers. In ancient Greece, six spits made one drachma. Their forms remind me of metal kebab sticks. Luckily my tendency didn't extend from those long devices. That would have been too obvious a form of control. I escaped the “logic” of six. Tired of the multiple parentheses*

<sup>v</sup> See a poem on the automated domesticating process of Manus prison by the activist and writer Behrouz Boochani: *“The logic of five / Five people follow on from five people / ... Five chairs prepared at the beginning of the queue / The rest wait, standing in line / Everything is reduced to the number five.”* Behrouz Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison*, Omid Tofighian (trans.), (Picador, Pan Macmillan Australia, Sydney, 2018), pp.190–91.

of justifications at every move. How, in these exhaustions, can one revalue anything?

6. I touch my body to materialise this unrecognised indifference, in the tyranny of seriousness and the necessity of joking. Don't be fooled by the repeated minted stamp. Surfaces vary and shells are far from homogeneous. They are the sea's gifts. They move with the current and circulate. The poet utters and the echo repeats a circulating image like a returned gift.

I cry out to the Gulf: 'O Gulf, / Giver of pearls, shells and death!' / The echo replies / As if lamenting: 'O Gulf, Giver of shells and death.' / And across the sands from among its lavish gifts / The Gulf scatters fuming froth and shells / And the skeletons of miserable drowned emigrants / Who drank death forever.<sup>14</sup>

6.1. *Even echoes steal.*

6.2. Save my lines from the alienating depressing themes of exile. Rematerialise every object I touch. Count every flesh that touched me in *one-to-one correspondence* to my present time.<sup>vi</sup> <sup>15</sup> Every coin has its trajectory and is an image of itself. Survival as an outsider is optimisation and yes, slow like a turtle, but moving nevertheless.

6.3. In my desolation, I have made friends with two forgotten coins: a turtle coin and a cowrie shell. My friends have multiple identities and are not confined to their roles as mediums of exchange. I wonder what 'Borges' forgetfulness story would look like had he encountered them. They would incite obsessions of different kinds, perhaps sexual desires or maybe traces of invisible female labour. Is my charm due to my intrinsic qualities or your belief? In a 19th-century ritual in Madagascar, a king is given coins in exchange for a sprinkle of water,

<sup>vi</sup> Countable body and accountable flesh? "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing." John 6:63, Holy Bible (New International Version), biblehub.com/niv/john/6.htm; accessed 22 August 2019.

a form of blessing. Should we tell Borges that someone mentioned that magic “is not inherently fetishistic, in that it recognizes that the power to transform the world ultimately goes back to human intentions.”<sup>16</sup> In the giving of these coins (*Hasina*), Maurice Bloch recognises an “inherent grace” in the ruler.<sup>17</sup> Refuting this “intrinsic superiority”, David Graeber reconsiders Maurice Bloch’s argument around this practice and emphasises that human action is as necessary in these rituals as the charms of the object. A very engaging discussion on the human action, the object’s agency as charm and the dismissal of magic in describing these actions is beautifully linked to the dichotomy between Marxist economics and Mauss’s gift economies.<sup>18</sup> (We had to get back to Marcel Mauss.) While hiking near a spring, I saw global travellers spray Evian water on their faces. Dissolve me with them in the illusion of water.



Fig. 2 Azza Zein, *Taskscape Experiment*, 2019, cowrie shells and potting mix soil, installation detail, Victorian College of the Arts, Stables, Melbourne.

6.4. Both my friends, the turtle coin and the cowrie shell, carry symbols of female desire and fertility. The turtle is a symbol of Aphrodite's desire and command over sea and land. The cowrie shell resembles a vulva. An anthropologist refuted cowrie shells as female organs on the grounds that touching female genitals was seen as repulsive in societies where cowrie shells were extensively used. Such repulsion, in her opinion, could not have been consistent with their common use and role as money. She concluded that the cowrie shell was, rather, a charm against the evil eye.<sup>19</sup>

6.5. My first encounter with the cowrie shell was in Damascus. There were not only crushed mother of pearl and inlaid shells in these homes. There were also 'free' shells: cowrie shells used as binary dice in a game called *Barjees*. In Arabic the cowrie is called *wadā`a*. The Arabic dictionary associates it with the same root of the word *wadī`a*, meaning 'deposit'. The word *wadī`* means "soft". In his travel accounts, the 14th-century Arab traveller Ibn Battuta referred to this shell as a medium of exchange in the Maldives.<sup>vii</sup> I remember that after long days of work helping and cooking for others, grandmothers would propose to play *Barjees*. Surrounding the force with which they threw the cowrie shells as dice, was perhaps the only field where they exercised complete free will, as well as signalling their love for playing with their grandkids.<sup>viii</sup> The intensity of the cowrie dispersal may have operated like a "reparative" response to their invisible hard work of the day.

<sup>vii</sup> "... both Ibn Battuta and his Chinese counterparts found that the Maldives was a prosperous trading centre that supplied cowrie shells to Bengal, Pegu and Siam, where these shells functioned as money". Bin Yang traces the cowrie shell's history in India, China and West Africa as a global currency for trade. Yang, p. 31.

<sup>viii</sup> In Physics, a "field" is the space where a force operates. Fields can be electromagnetic, gravitational or quantum. They can also be poetic.

6.6. In the Numismatic Museum of Athens I once met an old coin from Aegina, one of the earliest minted coins with an embossed turtle. A geometric shape on the back of the coin has puzzled researchers. It refers to spatial equivalence as a metaphor of a fair and just exchange. In earlier forms of the turtle coins, lines whose measures were irrational numbers were concealed; only those that were integers were revealed. The concealing operates as though it is the work of a trickster, rather than an abstraction, and tells that incommensurability is a dangerous idea.<sup>20</sup> Here there is no arithmetisation of geometry.<sup>ix</sup> This is, rather, *geometrisation* of the economy: “a square deal”.<sup>21</sup> Compare this to the following:

Intrinsically universal and necessary, ~~the~~ *money\*\** is adapted to itself, and not determined by what surrounds it, while the “~~technical object~~ *money\*\*\** made to measure is in fact an object without intrinsic measure”, without *self-determining* measure.<sup>22</sup>

7. Stop seeing me as a technical object. Let me whirl out my value and get determined by the stunning view and this rich conversation on gift, exchange, memory and desire. Let me surf a wave, the arbitrary sound waves of a binary dice.

<sup>ix</sup> Discussing the mechanism of modern arithmetisation, Bernard Stiegler asserts: “modern technics constitute the Gestell [enframing] of nature and of humanity through calculation.” Stiegler, p. 10.



Fig. 3 Azza Zein, *Taskscape- Counting with Cowrie Shells*, 2019, work in progress, video still with cowrie shells and gold mica leaves on mdf, VCA Stables, Melbourne.

## Chapter 2 notes

\* The original text has been altered by striking through the word “migrants” and adding the word “footnotes”.

\*\* The original text has been altered by striking through the word “it” and adding the word “money”.

\*\*\* The original text has been altered by striking through the words “technical object” and adding the word “money”. This fragment of the original quote is from Gilbert Simondon, cited in Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (trans.), Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998, pp.72–73.

<sup>1</sup> Narayana R. Kocherlakota, "Money Is Memory," Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, Research Department Staff Report, no. 218, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Orhan Pamuk, "I Am a Gold Coin," in *My Name is Red*, Erdağ M. Göknar (trans.), Random House, New York, 2002, pp. 102–106.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "La Fausse Monnaie," cited in Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, Peggy Kamuf (trans.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1992, pp. 31–32.

<sup>4</sup> See T43, Scholium c., on the conceptual relation between affect and intensity, and T94, Speculative Strategy K, on the use of the term “affective intensities” in relation to the gift and surplus-value of care. Brian Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value: A Postcapitalist Manifesto*, University of Minnesota Press, 2018, Kindle edition, Loc 662–682 and Loc 1765–1785.

<sup>5</sup> Pamuk, p. 104.

<sup>6</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "The Zahir," *Collected Fictions*, Andrew Hurley (trans.), Penguin, London, 1998, pp. 242–249.

<sup>7</sup> Borges, "The Zahir", p. 249.

<sup>8</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Tenth Elegy," (1923), A.S. Kline (trans.), *Poetry in Translation*, poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/Rilke.php#anchor\_Toc509812224; accessed 11 July 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Tenth Elegy," (1923), A. Poulin Jr (trans.), *The American Poetry Review*, vol. 2, no. 5, 1973, p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> Harold James, "Lucre's Allure," *Finance and Development*, International Monetary Fund, Washington, DC, vol.55, no.2, June 2018, p. 17–19.

<sup>11</sup> Hannah Kuchler, "Bitcoin: Why Is It so Male-dominated?," *Financial Times*, 7 February 2018, ft.com/content/259734ca-0b95-11e8-839d-41ca06376bf2; accessed 20 August 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, John Murray, London, 2008, p. 430.

<sup>13</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2004, pp. 118–19.

<sup>14</sup> Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, "Rain Song," Lena Jayyusi and Christopher Middleton (trans.), *Poem Hunter*, poemhunter.com/poem/rain-song-7/; accessed 10 July 2019.

<sup>15</sup> The term “one-to-one correspondence” is borrowed from Denise Schmandt-Besserat’s analysis of how Mesopotamian tokens were used until the fourth millennium BCE for direct mapping between the counted stock and the tokens. These tokens predate abstract counting with incised marks. Denise Schmandt-Besserat, *How Writing Came About*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1996, chapter 7.

<sup>16</sup> David Graeber, "The False Coin of Our Own Dreams, or the Problem of the Fetish, IIIb," *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*, Palgrave, New York and Basingstoke, UK, 2001, p. 245.

<sup>17</sup> Maurice Bloch’s writings on Madagascar’s rituals are analysed and cited by David Graeber, "The False Coin of Our Own Dreams," p. 233

<sup>18</sup> Graeber, "The False Coin of Our Own Dreams," pp. 254–261.

<sup>19</sup> See the discussion around the research of the anthropologist, archaeologist, historian and Egyptologist Margaret Alice Murray (1863-1963) on “the meanings of cowrie ornaments” in Bin Yang, *Cowrie Shells and Cowrie Money: A Global History*, Routledge, London and New York, 2019, chapter 9.

<sup>20</sup> Gerhard Michael Ambrosi, "Pre-Euclidean Geometry and Aeginetan Coin Design: Some Further Remarks," *Archive for History of Exact Sciences*, vol. 66, no. 5, 2012, pp. 557–83.

<sup>21</sup> Rudy Rucker, cited in Ambrosi, p. 577.


<sup>22</sup> Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (trans.), Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998, pp.72–73.



## Chapter 3



Fig. 4 *Devalued Lebanese currency, Azza Zein's collection, Beirut, Lebanon.*



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Fig. 5 *Envelope, Tokens and Corresponding Markings*, n.d., from Susa, Iran, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités, Orientales, Paris, France, (in Denise Schmandt-Besserat, "The Evolution Of Writing", University of Texas Website, 2014), p.3. [https://sites.utexas.edu/dsb/files/2014/01/evolution\\_writing.pdf](https://sites.utexas.edu/dsb/files/2014/01/evolution_writing.pdf); accessed 20 October 2019.



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Fig. 6 Nicholas Mangan, *Limits to Growth*, 2016, hand-printed C type photographs, 120 x 120 cm each. Installation view, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, Photographer: Andrew Curtis. <http://www.nicholasmangan.com/selected-works/limits-to-growth>; accessed 20 October 2019.

## Chapter 3: Rematerialisation, Art and Affective Economies

### *Devaluation and play*

One evening in 1987, my father came back home asking how many Lebanese coins we had. We brought our piggy-box savings and went fishing for more coins in diverse pockets around our small apartment. It all felt like a funny game. After collecting the coins inside a metallic bronze box, he explained: the Lebanese pound had just been dramatically devalued. “We are sitting in front of history”, he uttered. Between his sense of grand exaggeration of political events and his sense of humour, we didn’t understand much but happily believed him. That night as kids, our game turned into exchanging different types of coins instead of marbles.

It was my first experience of how coins turn from a medium of exchange to an artefact or maybe a material to play with. Perhaps here lies the seed of my interest in both economics and fine arts. What exactly happened to the coins that night? Any standard economic textbook would say money is a medium of exchange, a store of value, and a unit of account. Due to inflationary pressure and the central bank devaluation, the coins lost these three functions and regained their material existence as objects in our environment. ‘Lost’ is often the verb used by economic professionals; I would prefer to say those coins were *freed* from their role to count and account for economic standardised value. Through the act of play, the coins took a new role. By tracing this shift and the relation between the act of playing and the object, one can understand both the affective space around the object and the bodies.

This memory paves the way to a current economic condition: the conceptual disconnection between the material encounter with objects and resources, and the way economics as a mainstream discipline represents it. The dematerialisation process in capitalism is tied to a restricted understanding of labour and land as productive resources. The memory underlines the role of play in rematerialising an object that has lost its economic value. To avoid general terms about the economy, I would like to focus on some features of the economic system: abstraction, standardisation, quantification, and productive labour and land.

### *Dematerialisation and abstraction*

Abstraction of value is a process by which an object, a person, or a resource is reduced to its market exchange value disregarding other social values. In order to be reduced to its market value, there needs to be a standard to compare it with. Such a standard needs to be quantified. Exchange value of the object in the market may include emotional relations such as fetishism for the goods or stock that may drive its price up or down. Any other emotional values that are non-marketable, such as personal or collective association around the

material, become irrelevant and often invisible. It is to these indeterminate sets of non-marketable emotional values that I refer to when I talk about affective space. Through abstraction, economic dematerialisation becomes a detachment of value from life and social history of its materials due to an emphasis on productive or efficient outcomes. This can happen to an object, land, or a person. For an object, the dematerialisation occurs when it is only perceived as a commodity in the market (like a commercial art object) or a medium of exchange (like the devalued coins). For land, the dematerialisation occurs through contracts that can move the ownership of the land for productive goals only, independently from its ancestral history or ecological concerns. Mainstream media and economics divide labour between skilled vs. unskilled, and migrants between refugees and economic migrants, creating abstract hierarchies among those who are on the move. Labour that is *less* valued becomes invisible. Those hierarchies reinforce capitalism as a system tied with land, which becomes an economic resource worthy of productive labour only. The erased ties to the land also erase the other non-productive tasks culturally associated to a place.<sup>1</sup> In the nineteenth century, examples of such dematerialisation can be traced in the history of land ownership contracts.<sup>2</sup> Financial markets are another example of the disconnection of value from the material production as well as labour time.<sup>3</sup>

The notion of dematerialisation of the art object is slightly different. Since the 1960s and 1970s, many artists have decoupled the notion of artistic concepts from the art object and its materiality through conceptual art and performance works. In 1972, Lucy Lippard and John Chandler explain the term as follows:

The visual arts at the moment seem to hover at a crossroad that may well turn out to be two roads to one place, though they appear to have come from two sources: art as idea and art as action. In the first case, matter is denied, as sensation has been converted into concept; in the second case, matter has been transformed into energy and time-motion.<sup>4</sup>

With diverse practices, and in light of the quote above, the dematerialisation of the art object came as a rejection of the fetishised singular art object in the market. Yet it seems to be a condition that mimics the contemporary tendency of markets to become more and more abstract and dematerialised. How can there be a process of rematerialisation in art in the face of a 'dematerialised' economy?

To the violence of invisibility, art may offer an alternative: revaluation through rematerialisation. I use the terms rematerialisation and material correspondence interchangeably. I am defining material correspondence as an artistic process that 'attends' to materials.<sup>5</sup> I would like to argue that creating correspondences between the artists' embodied gestures and the properties of materials can resist economic dematerialisation. Attending is caring. Tasks include care and rituals among all living things, not only humans. They are performed. They escape the binary of work vs. leisure. To revalue invisible tasks of caring, one may attend to the material associated with it.

This chapter emphasises artworks that can reimagine forms of alternative economies through material and bodily encounters, by subtle disturbances of current economic conditions such as abstraction and standardisation. The choice of artworks is not to identify an overarching movement in art history. They have inspired my practice-led research and my interest to

identify materials that correspond and counter these conditions in my studio. In particular, I look at rematerialisation in Cecilia Vicuña's *Symbiosis, Ritual Battle* (2015), Mira Gojak's *Distant Measures* (2016), Kate Newby's *A Rock in this Pocket* (2018). These examples offer a possible process of revaluation rather than a mere critique of value. The choice of geographically and aesthetically dispersed examples does not undermine the particularity of each artistic process. It is meant to show some common conceptual features of rematerialisation. These examples are compared against the tropes of some twentieth century artworks considered critiques of standardised value.

### ***Writing as abstract record-keeping***

Early forms of dematerialisation, from concrete counting to abstract counting, offer insights into how writing as abstract record keeping has emerged. One could conjecture that national economies as understood today are founded on abilities to measure (count), record (written and other visual forms), and make policy (statecraft). In *How Writing Came About* (1996), the archaeologist Denise Schmandt-Besserat explains that counting is at the origin of writing. Until the fourth millennium B.C., small tokens were used to account for how much food and animals a household had in storage. The token operated with a "one-to one correspondence" between object and value. In other words, if someone had six bags of grain they would create six identical clay tokens and place them in a clay envelope. This process of one-to-one correspondence is a direct mapping between the counted stock and the tokens. These Mesopotamian tokens would have counted commodities. Schmandt-Besserat makes the distinction between computing and accounting: "Computing consists of making calculations. Accounting, on the other hand, entails keeping entries and withdrawals of commodities".<sup>6</sup> The neolithic system was incapable of dealing with large quantities and varieties of goods. To account for tax or debt purposes, the tokens were stored in clay envelopes. Since the envelope would have been opaque, the tokens were first impressed on the outside surface of the wet clay before enclosing them inside the envelope. Eventually, the marks of the token without the tokens themselves became sufficient as a sign of accounting: this marked the beginning of writing in Mesopotamia.

One-to-one correspondence and concrete counting are interesting historical moments. They allow us to imagine how concrete phenomena through mapping are at the inception of the making of an artefact like the token and its relation to the idea of the state. The early state emerged in wetlands where grain agriculture became possible. The historian James Scott links this phenomena to the idea that the surplus, associated with grain agriculture, generated the possibility of a social class being able to rule over others. For the state to have emerged, the grain is of importance because it was visible, above the ground, and countable. For taxation purposes, this was an ideal crop to measure.<sup>7</sup> Coerced or "domesticated" labour was captured and forced to produce beyond their needs.<sup>8</sup>

In the early states, it was necessary to take stock and to count. Paraphrasing Schmandt-Besserat, counting takes three forms: one-to-one correspondence, concrete counting, and abstract counting. The counting we know today is abstract counting and it seems to have emerged as a more efficient method to account for the variety of data.<sup>9</sup> In other words this

historical move to abstraction in thinking can be immediately linked to an initial process of dematerialisation.

What do we mean by dematerialisation in this case? First, the writing of numbers became a trace rather than an object. Secondly, the one-to-one correspondence suggests a literal relation between the stock and the tokens. A technical word in mathematics for this process is cardinality. Cardinality refers to the number of elements in a set. The stock of food in a household and the tokens would presumably have the same cardinality. Thirdly, the dematerialisation happens through a form of generalisation that detached counting from the form and the material qualities of the object.

In other words, dematerialisation is the disconnection and abstraction from the physical world to account efficiently for data and to make the transfer and circulation of information quicker.

In response to this dematerialised condition of the economy, the following section defines rematerialisation as an artistic process that revalues materials through correspondence and care. To rematerialise is to reconnect with how materials act and perform and how the human body can facilitate these actions. It is to create correspondence between the material properties and the body. To rematerialise invisible tasks is to identify the corresponding materials that have endured similar invisibility and create the commensurate gestures and actions that can make them visible.

### ***Rematerialisation as affect, revaluation as rematerialisation***

I saw the work of Nicholas Mangan, *Limits to growth*, at Monash University Museum of Art in 2016 in Melbourne. It revived my memory of the devaluation night from my childhood. The large prints of the Rai stones, a currency from the Micronesian island Yap that can be as large as three meters in diameter, seemed incongruent with current forms of currencies that circulate rapidly. In the show, there was a room in the basement with a bitcoin machine. The photographs presented the Yap currency as tied to the landscape in contrast to Mangan's bitcoin-mining machine.<sup>10</sup> Both types of currency had a relationship with the physical world, but the bitcoin seemed dematerialised from the landscape. The virtual mining of the bitcoin relies on decoding a blockchain. In an interview, Mangan explains that the Rai reflects a society that is trustful of each other and the bitcoin a distrustful one.<sup>11</sup> One is left with the general question: How does the materiality of an economy reflect its social life?

Note that mistrust and processes of coding and decoding – inherent in the blockchain technology that makes bitcoins – have parallels with the “hermeneutics of suspicion” and the “paranoid” critique discussed by the affect theorist Eve Sedgwick.<sup>12</sup> The paranoid reading is a “strong theory of *negative affects*” that “places its faith in exposure”.<sup>13</sup> For Sedgwick, the multiple possibilities of a “reparative reading” are proposed and favoured in contrast to the limits of what she calls a “paranoid” critical reading. In the context of art and the current economic conditions, the artwork may indirectly comment on the economic conditions by avoiding a didactic position. This seems necessary in a world where the economy of information is driven by negative affects of fear and precarity.<sup>14</sup> The devaluation night

remains a pleasant memory despite its tragic consequence. In the memory of play as kids, we reclaimed a role for the coins independent of their economic value. My parents could have been 'paranoid' or worried; instead, we were reminded of the coins' artefact value and the potential of play.

To escape the rigidity of structural academic research without compromising my interest in forming an academic inquiry, my approach to writing is to create a drift of correspondence between the conditions of the current economic system and certain artworks that attest to material and formal responses to these conditions.<sup>15</sup> To comment on the economic system, I avoid the "paranoid position" in the following way: first, I focus on artworks that do not have an explicitly visual political position. Second, the artworks I choose do not fall under one overarching artistic style. I qualify their process as "reparative" since it generates a positive affective experience rather than take a didactic critical position. Third, this chapter highlights the concept of *material correspondence*, or "attending to materials" as an affective process to navigate through these artworks along with personal narrative.

In terms of form, I would like to explore the relational method between image, material, and text in the video *Symbiosis, Ritual Battle* (2015) by the Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña. This collaborative video between Vicuña and the conservation ecologist Meredith Root-Bernstein asks us to imagine the formal visual qualities of forces such as competition, reciprocity, and symbiosis by playing with simple tasks/gestures on the video plane, using horizontal and spiral movements. The video emphasises kinaesthetic forces generated around the objects rather than each object separately. The use of text is not didactic but emphasises both human impacts and the relationship between materials. The form that the materials take corresponds to the words.

There are three key frames: Symbiosis, Competition, and Reciprocity. The titles are overlaid as text on top of the image. The screen shows objects made of multiple found materials, including corks, fish cans, lines, threads, wires, matchsticks, brushes, found plastic, felt, and nails. The first frame, entitled "Symbiosis", is immediately followed by the words, "Tinkuy: a ritual battle." The word symbiosis on the screen corresponds to the action of a hand upon the materials: it is a mixture of the hand's performance and resulting unexpected movements of the materials in relation to each other. The text 'a new creature emerges' confirms the organic possibilities in the inorganic assemblage. The objects taken out of the tin can are ready for the battle. The human hand is driving these micro-forces playfully, but not necessarily with mastery. The word "Reciprocity" is matched with a spiral entangling around two metal pieces looking like an abstract figure.

*Competition* is not visualised against reciprocity; rather, both are intertwined as part of a ritualistic cycle. We are not alerted about a fearful condition or a critical reading of what *competition* is, but rather to the possibility that this affective ecology could suggest a shift in our understanding of these words. We are not forced into a critique of competition but rather a *revisualisation* of it as a force among many other forces and thus a *reevaluation* of these forces. The three words and the found materials all correspond to a system of exchange and circulation.

Can rematerialisation be a form of caring? How can we revalue care? Can caring be a site of resistance and knowledge? If rematerialisation is a form of care and repurposing of materials by the bodies that enacted this care, can it be a kind of an epistemological practice? One that revisualises alternative economies?



Fig. 7 Cecilia Vicuña and Meredith Root-Bernstein, *Symbiosis, Ritual Battle*, 2015, image from video at minute 2:24, Kunsthal Aarhus, Denmark. <https://vimeo.com/138162864>; accessed 20 October, 2019.

### ***Rematerialisation as correspondence***

I argue that rematerialisation as correspondence is a ‘reparative’ process, as it is not bound to one general method. I will discuss two distinct contemporary artworks from artists whose works are in tune to materials: Mira Gojak’s *Distant Measures* (2016) and Kate Newby’s *A Rock in this Pocket* (2018). I will compare their process of revaluation to two canonical works that critique value: Carle Andre’s *Equivalent* (1963) and Marcel Duchamp’s *Stoppage* series (1913).

The artist Mira Gojak’s work *Distant Measures* (2016) is an example of rematerialisation taking the form of correspondence. She chooses the wrapping of blue acrylic yarn to map the distance between the earth and the blue sky.<sup>16</sup> This is not a quantified measurement. It is an accounting of the movement of the body – all the possible hand gestures of wrapping the yarn. It reflects concrete counting in the sense that the gesture is *commensurate* to the wool-like material. The properties of the thread are not driving the work. It is the conjunction of the properties and the process of correspondence that renders the work an active resistance to quantification. I chose the word *commensurate* not in the meaning of ‘reducible to one measure,’ but in the sense of weaving its broken components *com-* and *mensurate: to measure together*.<sup>17</sup> Thus, *Distant Measures* is a proposal to rematerialise by measuring together, with the material and with the hand rather than outside and away from them. The

action is not in the gallery, nor is the body. The length of the thread wrapping is accounting for the distance; the suggested action of the missing body is counting time. The thread is hugging the metal in a cocoon form. Unlike the winding of a thread in a standardised industrial process, the thread is instead amassed and spun around the metal, embodying the hand action. The variation of the form each time the action takes place and its organic distribution in height and width across the space creates a rhythm. It is in this rhythmic display that the repeated action accentuates that the accounting is each time different. The time-space matrix is replaced by another: the time-material-body matrix.

The concept of quantification relies on the idea that one can have a unit standard. In *3 Standard Stoppages* and *Network of Stoppages*, Marcel Duchamp throws a one-metre thread on the ground from a one-metre height; he traces the resulting undulating line and declares it 'a new standard'.<sup>18</sup> This work is often read as a pseudo-experiment, a parody of the scientific process, by questioning the idea of standardisation behind science.<sup>19</sup> Gojak adopts the seemingly "perfunctory" task of wrapping the thread, which is an inherent feature/action of a yarn. Of course, the action of wrapping is human-driven, but it operates as an engagement with the inherent quality of a thread, unlike the action of dropping it. The thread seems to have succumbed to the natural ritual of spinning like a cocoon, more so than a contemporary industrial process. The artist gives the thread the opportunity to borrow the cocooning action embodied in a silk thread. So in comparing the two, Duchamp's *Stoppages*, while metaphoric, remains structurally elegant and reductive, whereas the action in Gojak's work seems to be "attending to materials".

Another very different work that reflects a process of rematerialisation is Kate Newby's installation at the 2018 Sydney Biennale, *Equilibrium and Engagement*. It is also a piece that evokes my memory of the devaluation night. In the site-specific installation *A Rock in this Pocket* (2018), there are coins among the diverse materials and inscribed gestures embedded in or laid onto 900 bricks. The coins, rocks, and gestures are finding their natural space among the cracks of the brick, or in some cases forcefully claiming it. The subtlety of the small objects doesn't reduce the suggested violence of some of the gestures that intrude into the brick. The work is displayed in a grid form on the ground. The horizontality and the brick material remind me of Carl Andre's *Equivalent* series; yet, it is a totally different take on value.



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Fig. 8 Carl Andre, *Equivalent VIII*, 1966, Firebricks, 127 x 686 x 2292 mm, Tate Museum, London UK.  
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/andre-equivalent-viii-t01534>



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Fig. 9 Kate Newby, *A Rock in this Pocket*, 2018, bricks, glass, ceramics, coins, metal, installation view of the 21st Biennale of Sydney (2018) at Cockatoo Island, photograph: silversalt photography,  
<https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/artists/kate-newby/>; accessed 20 October 2019.

Andre's work emphasises the equivalence of mass reproduction of objects and their loss of individuated gestures. In contrast, Newby's *A Rock in this Pocket* modifies each brick with subtle inscriptions. The work may blend with the site but each piece maintains its particularity. The fitting or placement of objects suggests correspondences of contours or forms. There is no standardisation in the work but there is equal treatment of materials. The implied gesture of tools and hands mimics the errant forms that time inflicts on materials. This is not an eroded wall from an ancient civilisation or floor mosaic. It has a tentative form of the archaeology of the everyday economy. How do the forms and lines of inscription reflect the brutality of everyday economy? The coins, porcelain pieces, and rocks all fill and fit in a hole or stand provisionally as if waiting to be collected. The objects have no use-value. They are neither taxonomized inside a museum vitrine, nor inside the shelves of a pharmacy. They seem to be waiting. The whole site seems in waiting. Waiting is counting time, in a continuous way. Waiting is slow. Does it look like a segment, with infinite points inside? Maybe the image of the segment is the result of the arithmetisation of time and space. It is not a segment; it is rather a body with a hunched back looking at the floor and walking back and forth.

Both Mira Gojak's *Distant Measures* and Kate Newby's *A Rock in this Pocket* attend to materials in different ways: Gojak through an embodied measure of distance, Newby through a tentative archaeology of the everyday. In both works, the body gestures become dissimilar to the one before and the one after – as a force activating and responding to the material at hand. Both works gravitate towards the ground. Both works' processes speak of some cyclical measure of time and tie such account to the body. While the works do not critique value, they each propose a distinct process of revaluing and accounting. The embodied gestures in these different artworks echo the playful repurposing of the devalued coins in my memory. This is not rematerialisation from virtual space into physical space. Rather, it is about care for materials and care as a relation that can be embodied. The revaluation relies on the body and the artistic labour time spent to create the installation. The rematerialisation does not end up with an art object, but rather with an occupation of space. To rematerialise is not to revalue the art object as singular, but to emphasise the forces within materials corresponding and interacting with the body or the human gesture.

## Chapter 3 notes

<sup>1</sup> One could discuss modernity in this way but that is a different project.

<sup>2</sup> The artist and writer Rachel O'Reilly (2018) clarifies how the same legal framework of shipped property to land property led to more efficient transfers. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, titles and contracts were dematerialised through a "threefold principle of mirror, curtain and indemnity" process.

Rachel O'Reilly, "Dematerializations of the Land / Water Object," *E-Flux Journal*, no. 90, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> See the different types of abstraction in the financial economy and the link with symbolism in language in chapter 2, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *The Uprising on Poetry and Finance* (Semiotext(e), The MIT Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (California, US; London, England: University of California Press, 1973), p.43.

<sup>5</sup> The term "attending" to materials is borrowed from Tim Ingold (2015), p.155.

<sup>6</sup> Denise Schmandt-Besserat, *How Writing Came About* (University of Texas Press, 1996), p.103.

<sup>7</sup> "The key to the nexus between grains and state lies, I believe, in the fact that only the cereal grains can serve as a basis for taxation: visible, divisible, assessable, storable, transportable, and 'rationable'."

James C. Scott, *Against the Grain : A Deep History of the Earliest States* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017), p.129.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 5.

<sup>9</sup> Concrete counting differs across different cultures and it utilises a variety of the number-words sets to count different objects. The word or symbol simultaneously refers to both a number and the type of the counted object. So for example words used to count long objects are distinct from those for round objects. See Schmandt-Besserat, (1996, p.112).

<sup>10</sup> See Nicholas Mangan et al., *Nicholas Mangan : Limits to Growth* (Sternberg Press, 2016); Nicholas Mangan, *Limits to Growth* (KW Institute for Contemporary Art, 2017), <https://vimeo.com/220428594>.

<sup>11</sup> Mangan explains: "I find bitcoin's removal of the need for trust through its block chain technology very telling. In a way this antisocial technology befits our social fabric-it is appropriate to the level of mistrust in society" (2016, p.231).

<sup>12</sup> In relation to queer and feminist literature, Sedgwick's *Touching feeling* (2003, p.124) explains how paranoid critique relies fundamentally on *exposing* the systemic practices of exclusion by being "reductive" and "mimetic" and may end up "unintentionally" making it less possible to challenge the political status quo.

Eve Kosofsky. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling : Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003), p.124.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> On economies of fear, see Sara Ahmed (2004). On financial markets dereferentialisation and labour market precarity, see Berardi (2012).

<sup>15</sup> Rather than a museological approach that presents an exhaustive summary of the topic, I am more interested in works that I have seen and experienced in cinema, galleries, or in my studio.

<sup>16</sup> Tamsin Green, "Mira Gojak: Distant Measures," *Eyeline Contemporary Visual Arts*, no. 86, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> As per the Online Etymology Dictionary.

<sup>18</sup> Marzia Faietti and Gerhard Wolf, eds., *The Power of Line : Linea III* (Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, Max-Planck-Institut.: Hirmer Publishers, 2015).

<sup>19</sup> Herbert Molderings (2010) follows the concept of chance in the work of Marcel Duchamp to analyse the contradictory nature of his playful work. He documents the historical knowledge of mathematical theory and painting perspective theory referenced in Duchamp's *Stoppage* series.

Herbert Molderings, *Duchamp and the Aesthetics of Chance*, John Brogden (trans.), (New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2010).



Fig. 10 Azza Zein, *Residual Lines*, 2018, Dryer's lint, oil painting onto wood, installation view, Seventh Gallery, Melbourne, Photographer: Matthew Stanton.

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Fig. 11 Hannah Wilke, *Laundry Lint (C.O.'s)*, 1971-73, Dryer's Lint, dimensions vary, (Tracy Fitzpatrick et al., *Hannah Wilke : Gestures*, Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York, 2009), p.22.



Fig. 12 Azza Zein, *Residual Lines*, 2018, Dryer's lint, oil painting onto wood, installation view, Seventh Gallery, Melbourne, Photographer: Matthew Stanton.



Fig. 13 Ibid.



## Chapter 4

## Chapter 4: Rematerialising the relation between land and labour

How to rematerialise my floating migrant body among multiple places? The concrete touch and gesture onto materials in the studio makes visible my distant relationship to all the places I inhabit or inhabited. How to revalue the invisible tasks in the studio and of my invisible labour as a mother? How is such revaluation tied to my floating relationship with land – all land?

This chapter draws on personal narratives and artworks in relation to affective spaces. My aim is to rematerialize the connection between land and labour through the concept of taskscape introduced in chapter one. I discuss the works of Francis Alÿs' *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002), Omar Amiralay's *The Plate of Sardines* (1997), Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* (2018) and Remy Jungerman's *Visiting Deities* (2019). I consider how the artworks relate to invisible labour, taskscape and migration.

### ***Dematerialisation of the ground***

During the Lebanese civil war, I spent long hours sitting at the backseat of cars. On the route, escaping from Beirut to Damascus, I would try to imagine how far the blue sky was. Yet, the sound and feeling of the bumpy mountainous road always drew my attention downwards, to the ground. As a child, the ground was materially diverse and uncertain. There were rugs and carpets: some for decoration and others for prayer. There were carpets hanging from bombed buildings, residue of torn grounds in Beirut's streets. There were carpets on car seats of taxi drivers, whose knowledge of routes and maps was essential to get us safely from Beirut to Damascus. How can one represent the data in this affective space? Should one graph the number of taxi drivers along the route per month? Can one model the high demand for a particular taxi company based on the drivers' better knowledge of the mountain's paths or for being friendlier and more caring? Could such knowledge help cope with the uncertainties and fragilities of war?

Take for instance this simple tool for representing economic data: the Cartesian graph. The graph is not a tracing. It does not operate through correspondence, but is rather based on some reductionist relations. A graph is a popular way to represent a snapshot of a set of data. How can one compare the economic graph to any other line? Once one has forced the abstract concept of the zero x-axis, the ground is homogenized. Every point in the space can be mapped in reference to it: above, below and on it. In this assumption, the granularity and diversity of the ground that a bare foot may navigate becomes irrelevant and gets erased.<sup>1</sup>

At the root of this dematerialisation is a process of arithmetisation of human behaviour. Explaining Heidegger and Husserl, Bernard Stiegler asserts that "modern technics constitute the Gestell (enframing) of nature and of humanity through calculation".<sup>2</sup> What cannot be

measured cannot be valued, and thus cannot be appreciated. To measure is founded on some form of standardisation.<sup>3</sup> In fact what mainstream economic models refer to as resources such as land, capital or labour are perceived as quantifiable notions often dealt with in a standardised way.

The experience of a space is intertwined with its diverse materiality. It is through the emotional relation with its materials that we form an affective impression of the space. Many of us have migrated and travelled to seek economic opportunities and escape fragile states. Our relation to the land has become an unneeded fantasy, subordinate to “rational” decisions to move as human labour. To be valued as labour, one had to build skills that can be visibly valued in the globalised market – so valuable that it can overcome market uncertainties. This seemingly personal choice to leave turns out to be embedded in a systemic process of migration: the dematerialisation of the body from other collective bodies, from a continuous relation with a place, and from the material environment that one cares about. By migrating, I exchanged the uncertainty of the economy for the uncertainty of belonging. In such trajectories one searches for care. The taxi drivers who drove us to Damascus understood that.

The safety associated with the ride required an intertwined relation between the land as a route, the care of the driver for the passenger and for the car. The care is revealed through tasks of cleaning and arranging the interior space of the car with objects from a domestic space: carpets, rosary and home photographs. Today any Uber rating may reduce all this into one number: a rating given to the driver. Would that be sufficient to reflect the affective space created through care? How can we delineate this embodied ‘parallel economy’ of contingent routes and knowledge that are constantly changing? I have argued that one way is through reclaiming how materiality with its temporal changes and local qualities can reflect care.

### ***Taskscape vs. productive land and labour***

My memory of Damascus is filled with tactile emotions: love, and memories of women gathering at the home of *`amme* (my mother’s aunt). At her home, she would often be making embroidered pillows and bags, or fixing and tailoring clothes. I vividly remember the residues of threads on the floor, scattered from the embroidery. The door of the balcony would open and the incoming hot air blows a small red thread onto the floor. The thread moves freely and joins a soft dandelion seed head, that blew in with the wind. *`Amme* picks the thread gently and lets it roll around her fingers. The curvy coloured cotton threads and dandelions made the walls of her apartment seem softer. Everything seemed softer in this home: the voices, the hugs, and the expectations. The attention of my *`amme* to minutiae – from the tiniest thread to the eloping dandelions – made her work pleasant and unquantifiable. One could not measure it by the market value of her embroidered bags or the input of hours spent. She seemed an extension of her working space, which was also her home space. The thread and the dandelions’ soft movements trace what is *more-than* value in this space.<sup>4</sup> “What is more than value” may seem theoretically difficult to determine. In reality it is defined within a context, a space, and a particular time. Brian Massumi affirms that “a revaluation of value must contrive to develop this connection between value and vitality that is presupposed by the market but disavowed by it.”<sup>5</sup>

A process of rematerialisation is connected to how the body acts and cares for materials. In this section I turn to frame material correspondence within the concept of the taskscape. “Labour is homogeneous and quantitative,” reminds Tim Ingold, referring to productive labour; in contrast, he proposes an “entire ensemble of tasks, in their mutual interlocking”.<sup>6</sup> Given that the global economic system’s central anchor is the dichotomy between work and its negation of certain forms of leisure dismissed as laziness. Thus, the concept of task (rather than work) is more inclusive of activities such as rituals, chatting, regular care for people, objects and nature etc. Animals and insects perform tasks. Embedded in the concept of tasks is a non-hierarchical relation between objects and beings. The concept of tasks includes invisible labour. It seems to be open-ended and frees us from the categorisation of quantification and homogeneity. It allows a form of embodiment when considering alternatives to labour and landscape.

The temporality of the taskscape is social, then, not because society provides an external frame against which particular tasks find independent measure, but because people, in the performance of their tasks, also attend to one another.<sup>7</sup>

The work of Francis Alÿs, *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002), is often given as an example of “lavish expenditure of energy” and a cooperative economic model. Five hundred volunteers were given the task of digging the ground and eventually moving a sand dune a few centimetres outside Lima in Peru. In addition to highlighting a cooperative framework against a competitive-efficient model, the work reminds us that capitalism is tied to a particular understanding of land as a resource subjugated to human labour. The land is worked. The land is occupied. In capitalism, it has no agency beyond being a quantifiable resource.

While Alÿs uses a social engagement strategy to present a positive cooperative framework, the Syrian director Omar Amiralay documents a personal history of land through an emphasis on chatting. In *The Plate of Sardines* (1997), he films the ruins of Qunaitira, a Syrian city at the border with Israel/Palestine. It was occupied in 1967 and completely destroyed by Israeli forces upon their withdrawal in 1974. The director’s voice narrates how his first childhood memory of Israel and the displacement of his aunt were associated with eating sardines. At the end of the documentary, a woman sits in front of the fence between the Syrian and Israeli lands. She holds a speaker and starts updating her family on the other side about her life. Her concerned voice crosses the border; perpendicular, yet invisible, to the fence dividing the horizon. This last scene follows the narrator describing how the Israeli army used the electric plough to occupy the Syrian land and to provoke the Syrian army to shoot in 1967. The women’s chatting scene acts as a refusal to confine the land to productive economic labour. The director seems to make a statement not just against occupation, but also against the alliance between capitalism and nationalism.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Rematerialising invisible labour***

To trace invisible labour is to find the material and action that account for it, and not only for its value. Otherwise, we would fall back into the issue of quantification. To trace invisible labour is to find a material that can engage with the affective relation surrounding the labour – a material that can *understand/experience* the invisibility rather than *represent* it. In both

Gojak and Newby's work as explained before, the materials experience and embody the invisibility and do not opt to only represent it abstractly.

The cinematography and the script in Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* (2018) explore the problem of invisible domestic labour of an Indigenous Mexican maid. There are other political dimensions to the work in relation to Indigenous language and patriarchy. In *Roma*, water as a material has an active relationship with the protagonist. She directs it through sweeping it at home and it borders on drowning her in the wavy seascape.

I am interested in the appearance of water as a material tying the body with the seascape and domestic work. Cuarón uses the water's materiality as a folding device between the domesticated (restricted) environment and the open seascape. The black and white movie highlights water in its fluidity as a symbol of risk and rescue for the Indigenous maid. The opening scene starts with the task of sweeping water on the ground to clean the floor. Yet, to her male master, her labour is invisible. In the middle of the movie, her unwanted pregnancy ends with her water breaking and a dead embryo. One of the movie's final scenes includes her rescuing the children of her master at the beach during a family holiday trip outside Mexico city. She hangs onto the shore despite the water's force. The rescue shows her love and care for the children. The water creates a triangular relationship between the body, invisible labour, and the seascape. Note here the possible similarity (and differences) with how the thread operates in Gojak's work as a folding device to create an embodied measure of distance and the spinning movement of the hand.

### ***Rematerialisation and circulation***

At the Dutch pavilion of the 58<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, the exhibition entitled *The Measurement of Presence* (2019) embodies a flux of measurement through the patterns and forms of fabrics. One work by Suriname-born Dutch artist Remy Jungerman, entitled *Visiting Deities*, is made up of a series of horizontally stretched fabrics on canvas with Afro-Caribbean patterns (some hanging and some set on a long table). The table with multiple legs sits onto a base filled with dry river clay. Some wooden sticks painted with modernist patterns stand inside a grid-shaped box. The structure of the installation is open to interpretation; it could be a city-scape, or a ship. The suggested flow speaks of both the mobility of textile patterns and Jungerman's own migrant identity. Jungerman is interested in decolonising modernism by reappropriating his Afro-Caribbean heritage and demonstrating its influence on Dutch modernism. The work rematerialises a contemporary relation with African heritage, which is present but often erased in modernist art. On one of the hanging works, there are water bottles filled from rivers in Suriname, the Netherlands and New York. This triangulation links the work to the slave trade economy. All the materials used (both the fabrics and the clay) are linked to African rituals that travelled with the slaves; they also embody the condition of circulation.<sup>9</sup> The installation asks us to consider what the measurement of presence is; is it always tied with the materiality of space? Heritage is not a measure of the past but rather the present as its materiality and material history continue to occupy and inform the art practice. In an interview Jungerman notes:

From my perspective, when I take this object and take it apart, I see all the influences of Africa, of Europe. Then I feel that's what I am.<sup>10</sup>

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Fig. 14 Remy Jungerman, *Visiting Deities*, 2019, painted wood, meranti table legs (58), cotton textile, kaolin (pimba), dry river clay, nails, yarn, mirror and river water samples, 340 × 975 × 260 cm, curated in the Measurement of Presence, Dutch Pavilion, Venice Biennale, Venice, Photographer: Azza Zein.



Fig. 15 Azza Zein, *Taskscape*, 2019, mixed media installation: Shell inlay, cowrie shells, textile, silk thread, oil painting, pine wood, soil, hibiscus, gold acrylic, dryer's lint. VCA Artspace, Melbourne, Photographer: Matthew Stanton.



Fig. 16 Ibid.



Fig. 17 Ibid.

## Chapter 4 notes

<sup>1</sup> See the discussion on land vs. landscape in Tim Ingold, "The Temporality of the Landscape," *World Archeology* 25, no. 2 (1993): p.158-160.

<sup>2</sup> Stiegler, (1998, p.10).

<sup>3</sup> Talking about the determinism of the technical object, Stiegler explains: "This tendency to standardization, to the production of more and more integrated types, makes industrialization possible, and not the converse: it is because there is one or another tendency in the process of technical evolution in general that industry can appear, and not because industry appears that there is standardization." *Ibid.*, p.72.

<sup>4</sup> See T10, Lemma a, Brian Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value : A Postcapitalist Manifesto*, Kindle edition (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> See T10 Lemma c, *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Tim Ingold, "The Temporality of the Landscape," *World Archeology* 25, no. 2 (1993): p.158.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.159.

<sup>8</sup> This image can be contrasted to the colonial British army documentary of Palestine in 1946, *Palestine Police*, where the Arab Bedouin is portrayed as working the land with rudimentary tools in comparison to the advanced agricultural machine of new settlers. *Palestine Police* (Imperial War Museum, 1946). <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/node/6717>; accessed 21 February 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Remy Jungerman, *The Measurement of Presence – Venice Biennale 2019 on Vimeo, Studio International*, 2019, accessed 24 October 2019. <https://vimeo.com/341414349>.

<sup>10</sup> Nadine Botha, "The Measurement of Presence," *Damn 73* (2019), accessed 22 October 2019.

<https://www.mondriaanfonds.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/DAMN-73-July-August-September-2019.pdf>.

## Chapter 5

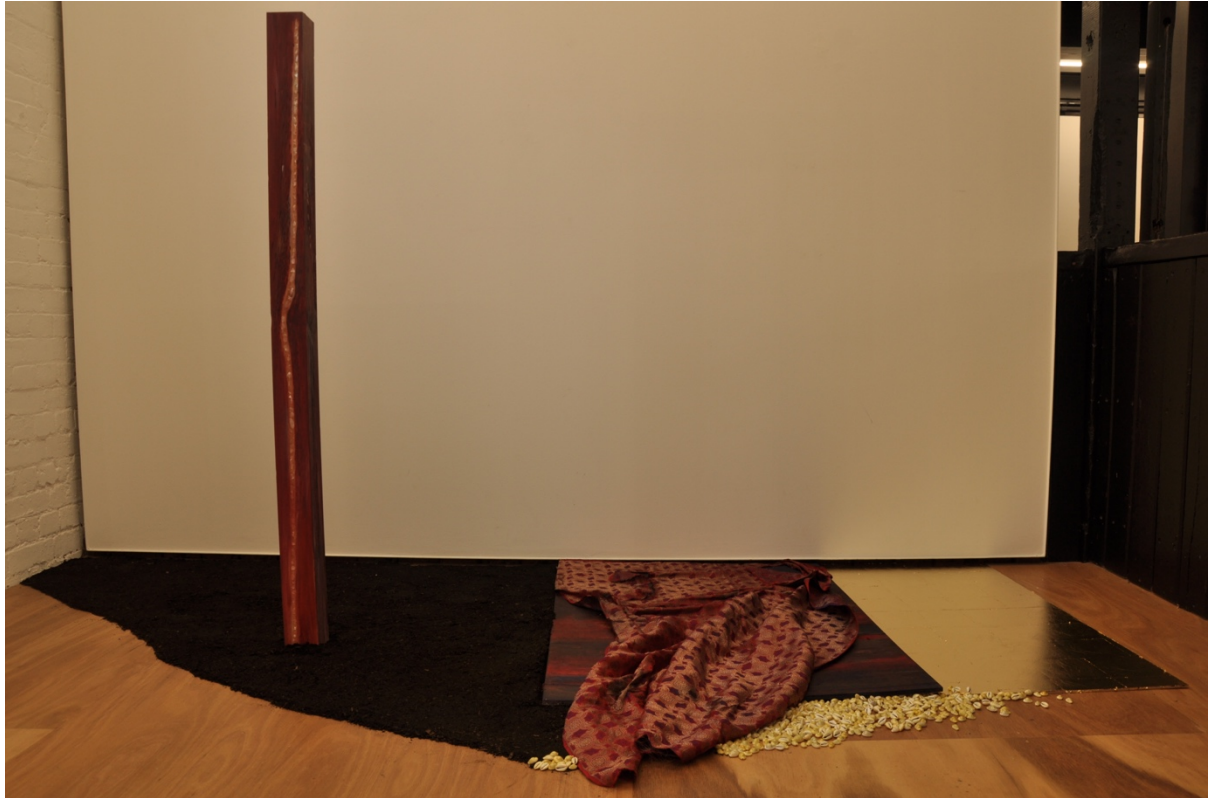


Fig. 18 Azza Zein, *Taskscape Experiment*, 2019, cowrie shells and potting mix soil, installation detail, Victorian College of the Arts, Stables, Melbourne.



Fig. 19 Ibid.

## Chapter 5: The migrant material

1.0 *Hi I am a pole.*

*Ninety by ninety by two point four.*

*My name is Noubar.<sup>1</sup>*

*I was originally a pine tree in the industrial forest, not as much of an oxymoron as it sounds.<sup>1</sup> Organic or non-organic, I still breathe while Azza carves me.*

1.1 *As a witness and a participant, I am happy to explain the process of her studio practice: she cares for materials. In her studio, I have been sitting on the side leaning horizontally for a while, missing the sky and especially the clouds. I miss the forest and the feeling of my height when touching the ground. I had many friends when I was a tree. We cuddled through our branches and our roots, sometimes wrestled under the soil. Like all families we fought. We were deported en masse to a factory then a warehouse. Until that moment I could have remained a tree forever but I was unplugged, cut and my body shattered in pieces.*

1.2 *As an industrial pre-fabricated, dressed timber, I am neither a raw material nor ready-made. Cut from a cylinder into a long rectangular pole, I was ready to hold the structure of a home. Not so ready is the ready-made. I went through multiple scars and reshaping to become a standard, and to fit the norm. Linguistically, I even changed genders or at least so in the Arabic language. A pole is 'amoud' in Arabic (masculine) whereas a tree is *shajarah* (feminine). Is the industrial patriarchal? And is nature female? Or does saying so just reemphasise old binaries? I*

<sup>1</sup> It is not clear what is the etymology of this name. Maybe it refers to Snoubar which is the pine tree in Arabic or it might be referring to mnawbar from spoken Arabic meaning in slang frizzy hair. Some other meanings from Farsi could be 'fresh' and 'new'.

understand that for Azza, decorating is a form of care, paying attention to all my details. Decorating is like story telling, of how time has changed me. Thanks for sourcing me as an industrial piece. The hardware store is accessible for a migrant artist without roots. The industrial is inescapable.

1.3 As a migrant pole, my fate could have been a home with a suburban room and a standard kitchen. I could have held its corner or plasterboard, and leaned sometimes next to foam. I would have hidden behind a grey or white paint. The space would have been precarious and light. Despite my soft grain, I would have carried the weight. Invisible, I could have overheard an intimate conversation or a fight over who would clean the dishes. Oddly, I ended up in Azza's studio, lying there with textiles, dryer's lint, threads, shells, mica golden leaves and paint pigments. In this non-standard setup of excessive space, lost ideas, and wooden floorboards, I try to predict and understand my role.

### *The informal lines as folds*

2.0 She starts looking into my lines. At first I worried that she would turn me back because I did not fit the standard. She sees fossils of my tree life in my wood lines. Against my static condition as an industrial type-object, my lines testify to the liveliness of my thingness. She interjects: "Do you mind to be called a thing?" Indifferent, I remind her that my name is Noubar and thingness is a quality not a name. I surprise her that I have memorised some lines from the feminist philosopher Elisabeth Grosz:

*The depositing of movement, its divisibility, and its capacity to be seen statically are the mutual conditions of the thing and of space. The thing is positioned or located in space only because time is implicated, only because the thing is the dramatic slowing down of movements, the atomic and molecular vibrations, that frame, contextualize and merge with and as the thing.<sup>2</sup>*

2.1 With her small wood carving tools, Azza starts scratching through my lines like a skin. At first it tickles, then it hurts, then I feel relieved. I feel she is forcing me to reflect upon myself. She carves and carves. What a brutal act to ask so much of self-reflection! She collects the wooden residues in a bag. Why was she following these lines? What was this attention about? Were they like maps? Some are lines of the tools that reshaped me, scars of my assimilation. And some are wrinkles of time. I like to call them my folds, my texture:

*As a general rule the way a material is folded is what constitutes its texture. It is defined less by its heterogeneous and really distinct parts than by the style by which they become inseparable by virtue of particular folds.<sup>3</sup>*

2.2 I have become harder as time passed. She could carve me till I disappear as a rectangular pole and become piles of wooden residues. Is form a presence? Is it an identity? Are my lines a testimony of memory: my tree rings and the passage of time? Or are my multiple forms (from a tree to a wooden pole), a sign of material forgetfulness? Perhaps I will continue to exist as a material without any commitment to form but rather consent to spontaneous past and present gestures. Am I formless? Or am I rather informal?<sup>4</sup> I am not abstract but rather informal. The translator of the book *The Fold* mixed the two when translating the word “informel” in French into the word “abstraction”. A whole field of nuances may have been lost.<sup>5</sup> “Mais l’informel n’est pas négation de la forme.”<sup>6</sup> Does the informal inform? “Objects provide essential labour, they do important things for subjects, and this dynamic creates hierarchy between them that endures.”<sup>7</sup> In this studio I am not instrumental at all. I choose to be dysfunctional but I still can inform. Georges Bataille playing on the relation between in-form and informing wrote:

*A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus formless [informe] is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things*

down in the world, generally requiring that each thing has its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm.<sup>8</sup>

Bataille used the word task instead of function. The function is productive like labour and is not aimless.<sup>9</sup> The news speaks of an informal economy of migrants. In this studio there is an informal economy of words, lines and objects.

3.0 So what is my task? Perhaps one of informal collaboration with Azza? I have made friends with many visible and invisible objects in her studio that are roaming around and piling up. She collects dryer's lint, remnants of her motherly care and keeps residues of her painting palette. Once she asked me if she could call these dryer's lint accretions Odradeks.<sup>10</sup> "Greet them warmly they will let you know their name preference," I whispered, and repeated a line I heard her read from Judith Butler: "This creature emerges in the interstices of family but fails to conform."<sup>11</sup> I tend to be more outspoken than those lint spools, and I am rarely wooden-mute. "Wooden yet lively, verbal yet vegetal, alive yet inert, ~~Odradek is~~\*\*\*\* I am ontologically multiple."<sup>12</sup>

3.1 Well my petrified condition is the reason she can work with me in the studio. In general my grain makes it clear to her hand holding the tools what directions to carve and how far to go. Sometimes I consent to the act and sometimes I resist.

3.2 In a novel about the murder of a miniaturist, a fallen and stolen tree said: "I don't want to be a tree, I want to be its meaning."<sup>13</sup> I am not sure I agree and would rather be the tree. I love it that I am being carved: It reminds me of the time when people would sit under my shadow and scratch my bark with love messages.

3.3 In my dream installation there are fuzzy epigraphs in the details and no graph bars in the bigger taskscape. The data is affective and I will yearn to be in the cosiest of colourful folds,

emerging and rooted in the ground. I may not be allowed to let my roots grow deep: perhaps it is just this installation or maybe it is systemic exclusion. Perhaps it is all in my head. In the next one maybe I will get the right to let my roots grow into the land with my invisible labour. Till then I hope she doesn't forget to offer me, from time to time, some tea, while I accept her obsessive care. The dentist says tea stains the teeth.



Fig. 20 Nina Canell, *Treetops, Hillsides and Ditches*, 2011, mastic gum and logs, dimensions variable, Centre d'art contemporain d'Ivry – le Crédac, Ivry-sur-Seine, France, 2014.

4.0 The artist Nina Canell gave her timber poles mastic gum. I personally don't like chewing gums. Apparently the mastic when chewed has a flavour similar to pine and cedars. In *Treetops, Hillsides and Ditches* (2011), Nina Canell's laid mastic gum onto wooden poles. The gum drips down slowly. The work may look static if not experienced multiple times. Time traces the way materials interact with each other. The installation changes as the days go by. Can we say that the poles chew the mastic gum as it slid down the poles during the installation? Her work relies on material agency and gravity. Which agency? The agency of the wooden pole resisting the dripping gum, or the agency of the mastic itself? Or perhaps the agency lies in the relation between the two. Isn't that what is called the fold? Doesn't this formal process resemble Baroque pleats?

4.1 *As an artwork I am different. I am not performing in real time. There are residues of gestures that are driven by the artist but allowed by the material in use; in other words, allowed by the softness of my pine skin. She finds it funny and absurd when people call her skin olive. She loves olive oil and oil painting. I crave her carving. She sees my lines like her daughter's hair, and her carving like combing. The inlay of course like decorating my body. Why is she so keen to embed me with those crushed abalone shells? Nacre is organic and inorganic composite she tells me. Her shells are grown in industrial farms. She is fascinated by their spiral growth. She continues in surprise: Should I add Lapis Lazuli and red limestone like the 'Ur standard?'<sup>14</sup> In its lonely movement across time, doesn't this old artefact already have an agency by just outliving humans, by being the storyteller? Archaeologists can infer trade and civilisation contacts from such material juxtapositions and the different type of shells.<sup>15</sup>*

4.2 *Isn't the artist anthropocentric by claiming she can give me a voice? When I ask she recites with a triumphant accent what Jane Bennett wrote:*

*If a green materialism requires of us a more refined sensitivity to the outside-that-is-inside-too, then maybe a bit of anthropomorphizing will prove valuable. Maybe it is worth running the risks associated with anthropomorphizing (superstition, the divinization of nature, romanticism) because it, oddly enough, works against anthropocentrism: a chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a nonhuman "environment".<sup>16</sup>*

4.3 *Can we say this performance is anthropomorphizing not anthropocentric? Is this a playful trope? She is not doing that only by letting me give the performance today on her behalf. She is anthropomorphizing by caring for me as if I was a human. I was forced to be an industrial object, by being standardised in the factory. I see the act of carving as an act of redemption to retrieve*

some of my identity, an act of care to undo the violence of standardisation.

4.4 *There is magic beyond the standard. There is magic in gestures and there is magic in shining shells. The resin drips in excess and that reminds me of the natural resin that imbued my branches in my early life as a tree. My skin is wet. My body shivers. Beautiful memories can also be scars when one is pining for them. I never saw the sea, but I hear her speak of its shimmering blue, with drops of red, orange and golden yellow at sunset. I can see why she chose a pine wood pole: I never saw the Mediterranean. I heard her speak of its soft current flows. Since her childhood she confessed to the sea. Its waves spoke back with warm noise and lured her to travel. She migrated. She sees us all as migrant materials in the studio, displaced like her, yearning for a task to make do with the new land.*

5.0 *I am a decorated and loved body! Someone called me a decorative art, implying a less creative work.<sup>17</sup> Craft is subordinated and forced to be less valued.<sup>18</sup> Can carving, inlaying and staining still be an artistic gesture?*

5.1 *Modernity negated decoration in fascination with manufacturing and industrial innovation. The architect and designer Le Corbusier wrote:*

*We are indeed committed to apply all our knowledge to the perfect creation of a tool: know-how, skill, efficiency, economy, precision, the sum of knowledge. A good tool, an excellent tool, the very best tool. This is the world of *manufacture*, of industry; we are looking for a standard and our concerns are far from the personal, the fantastic, the eccentric; our interest is in the norm, and we are creating type-objects.<sup>19</sup>*

5.2 *I have been inscribed with marks. My maker hates type-objects. I am a life-object.<sup>ii</sup> She types words and inscribes gestures. Most of the artists she wrote about in earlier chapters have used industrial objects and transformed them through individuated gestures: A brick with marks, a thread with winding and mapping distance to the blue sky, a performance of found objects.<sup>20</sup> Here I am in the studio wondering on what grounds to help her respond to Le Corbusier, both in the implied patriarchy embodied in his claimed 'we', and in the systemic negation of other cultures' creative processes.*

5.3 *Does an ecological interest in materials and objects mean that artists need to deny human-driven decorative work? Or could the two interests be present in one artwork? One could argue that either one cares for materials or one cares for decoration. Could this dichotomy come from a reductive understanding of both decoration as well as materialism? Is the Greenbergian ghost looming in such binary?<sup>21</sup> Decoration is reduced to a luxurious gesture associated with an excessive accumulation of wealth and superfluous gesture. Materialism is reductively understood as only what is confined to the material physical properties of an object. This binary between the raw materials and their properties against the decorative carries with it the essentialist ghost of modernity and the reductive elegant thinking of knowledge production in Le Corbusier's quote above. Historically decorative elements occupied domestic space because of their sacred materiality. The manual labour associated with such gestures also emanates from an act of care rather than an act of "decorative" un-innovative automation. Thus the decorative gesture when it corresponds to a material ecology is beyond ornamentation. In the haptic nature of such relation with materials, care is materialised: care finds its texture.*

<sup>ii</sup> In the chapter titled "type-needs, type-furniture" Le Corbusier explains: "To the *tool-object*, the *human-limb object* is now opposed the *sentiment-object*, the *life-object*." Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, first published 1925, (trans.) James Dunnett (London: The Architectural Press, 1987) p.73.

5.4 I have become dysfunctional, unemployed sitting in the studio and yet I feel her hands sweating. I feel the closeness of her breath. I feel her invisible work. I have seen her crush those shells to embed them with resin into my carved lines. It seems a violent act, but it is a form of a weekly offering in the studio. Is the studio a space of routines and tasks in response to the discharges of past gestures? Or could the studio be a space of material encounter similar to the agricultural field?<sup>22</sup> And is the creative process then an act of care? I surrender to her care and the company of other materials. I also care for her. In an earlier chapter she argued that her practice is one of material correspondence. "Production, in such an ecology of correspondence, is about attending to the trajectories of these non-human lives".<sup>23</sup> To fine tune, material correspondence is mutual. I would like to coin the term care-matter to emphasise the reciprocity between us.<sup>24</sup> I am care-matter and the studio is a taskscape.

5.5 All her story lines matters. Everything matters. All is matter.

6.0 I see it as an act of care because she doesn't impose any drawing designs. She follows my pre-existing lines. I see them as my life markers. Sometimes she inlays me with shattered shells. She was inspired by the home furniture that she has seen visiting her family in Damascus. Then she starts sanding me, in a rhythmic movement, back and forth. I move back into the studio: she paints me. She stains me I would rather say. Layer after layer of red and blue pigmented oil paint.

7.0 Our relation is of entanglement but we have our ups and downs. In general I think she cares about me. With care I have to still manage her control freakishness. Don't misunderstand me, I love her organic and obsessive gestures looking for one line after the other. But sometimes I need a break.

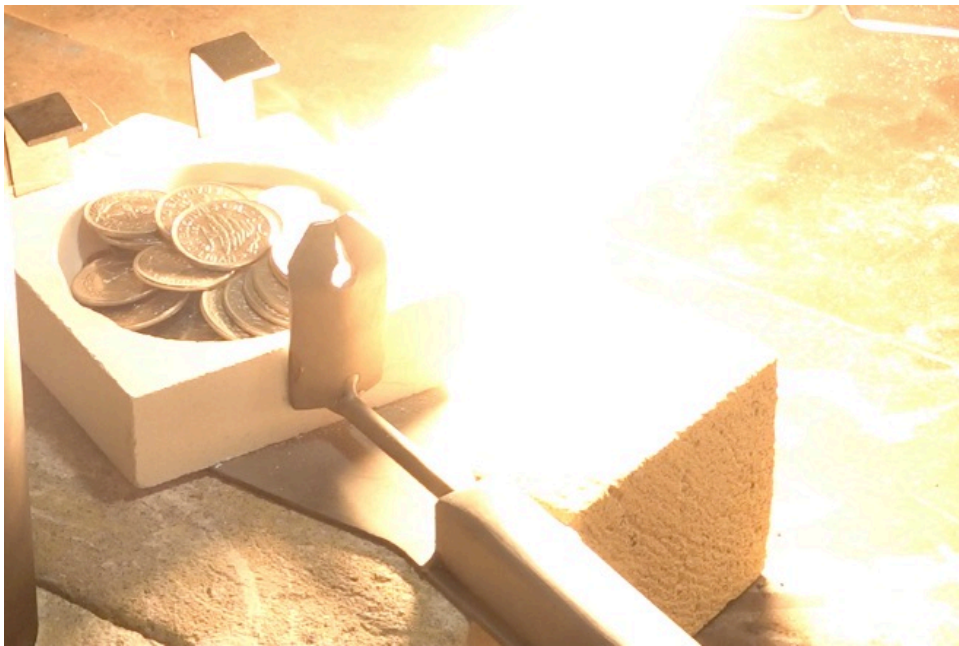


Fig. 21 Azza Zein, *Taskscape Experiment- Rematerialising Coins*, still image from video work in progress, Victorian College of the Arts, 2019.

## Chapter 5 notes

\*\*\*\*The original text by Jane Bennett was modified by striking Odradek is and adding "I am".

Odradek refers to a character creature in a short story by Franz Kafka.

"Wooden yet lively, verbal yet vegetal, alive yet inert, Odradek is ontologically multiple."

Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter : A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), p.8.

<sup>1</sup>The pole is made of *Pinus Radiata*, a soft pine wood. See details in Australia on the industrial plantations of the *Pinus Radiata* and others. <http://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/forestsaustralia/profiles/industrial-plantations>

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, "The Thing," in *Materiality*, ed. Petra Lange-Berndt (London and Cambridge, Massachusetts : Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press , 2015), 148.

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold : Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (London and New York : Continuum, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> See the use of the word in the following link: <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/movement/art-informel>.

<sup>5</sup> Deleuze, *The Fold : Leibniz and the Baroque*, p.40.

<sup>6</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Le Pli : Leibniz et Le Baroque* (Éditions de Minuit, 1988), pp. 49-50.

<sup>7</sup> Irina Aristarkhova, "A Feminist Object," in *Object-Oriented Feminism*, ed. Katherine Behar, Kindle (University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> George Bataille, "Formless", (1929), in Petra Lange-Berndt (editor), *Materiality*, 2015, pp. 90.

<sup>9</sup> See discussion on labour vs. tasks in the introduction and Chapter IV.

<sup>10</sup> Odradek refers to a character creature in a short story by Franz Kafka. "But it is not only a spool, for a small wooden crossbar sticks out of the middle of the star, and another small rod is joined to that at a right angle. By means of this latter rod on one side and one of the points of the star on the other, the whole thing can stand upright as if on two legs...Even these answers are not always forthcoming; often he stays mute for a long time, as wooden as his appearance."

Franz Kafka, "The Care of a Family Man," 1919, pp.469-470. [https://www.vanderbilt.edu/olli/class-materials/Franz\\_Kafka.pdf](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/olli/class-materials/Franz_Kafka.pdf); accessed 24 October 2019.

<sup>11</sup>In a talk at the European Graduate School, Judith Butler reads and explains Kafka's text. She argues that Odradek is a character that comes out of the family/work system but in a way is a protest against it. It exemplifies uselessness as an excess of household. It is a protest against instrumentality.

Judith Butler, "The Figure of Odradek in Kafka", *European Graduate School Video Lectures* (YouTube, 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v573KaWGfrc>; accessed 24 October 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Bennett, (2010, p.8).

<sup>13</sup> Orhan Pamuk, "I Am a Tree", in *My Name is Red*, Erdağ M. Göknar (trans.), Random House, New York, 2002, pp. 47-51.

<sup>14</sup> The standard of Ur was a shell-inlaid wooden box which depicted the early stratification of the Sumerian society from manual labour to divine kings. See the archaeological history and evidence of a surplus society in this simple summary: "Standard of Ur and A Story of Social Organization · HIST 1039," Harvard.

<http://dighist.fas.harvard.edu/courses/2016/HIST1039/exhibits/show/standard-of-ur--a-novel-model->; accessed February 21, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas R. Gensheimer, "The Role of Shell in Mesopotamia : Evidence for Trade Exchange with Oman and the Indus Valley," *Paléorient* 10, no. 1 (1984): 65–73, <https://doi.org/10.3406/paleo.1984.4350>.

<sup>16</sup> Jane Bennett, (2010, p. 119, Loc. 2393).

<sup>17</sup> Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois wouldn't want their work to be called decorative. Luckily there was a "Dinner Party"! Feminist heritage craft was invited back into the room.

Elissa Auther, "The Decorative, Abstraction, and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in the Art Criticism of Clement Greenberg," *Oxford Art Journal* 27, no. 3 (2004): 339–64.

Brooklyn Museum, "Brooklyn Museum: Women's Work," Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminism.

[https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner\\_party/womens\\_work](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/womens_work); accessed September 21, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> "In summary, [Terry] Smith asserts that craft was (1) 'defeated', (2) 'separated out', (3) 'isolated, marginalized and devalued' (4) 'absorbed, aestheticised and rehistoricised', and finally 'decrafted' under Modernism." See the whole article by Auther for a detailed account of Clement Greenberg's use of the term decorative and its ghostly presence in modernism and some contemporary arts criticism.

Elissa Auther, "The Decorative, Abstraction, and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in the Art Criticism of Clement Greenberg," *Oxford Art Journal* 27, no. 3 (2004): 339–64.

<sup>19</sup> Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, ed. (trans.) James Dunnett (London: The Architectural Press, 1987) p.84.

<sup>20</sup> See discussion in chapter 3 on Kate Newby, Mira Gojak Cecilia Vicuña. All three artists have used industrial objects and transformed them through individuated gestures.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Rex Butler compares two nineteenth century paintings which use images from agricultural processes as metaphors of the process in painting. He interpreted that the child in the background of the painting of Tom Roberts' *Shearing the Rams* (1888-1890) is actually a girl who had 'the job of covering up any cuts in the sheep with tar'. He wrote that this is a work that reflects "the various stages in the long process of Roberts making his painting." He compares it to Gustave Courbet's *Wheat Sifters* (1854-1855). One could extrapolate that the key to the process in *Shearing the Rams* is the care of the girl: she took care of the sheep after they were wounded. Rex Butler, "Tom Roberts, Shearing the Rams," *Memo Review*, 2018, <https://memoreview.net/blog/shearing-the-rams>.

<sup>23</sup> Ingold, *The Life of Lines*, pp.155.

<sup>24</sup> See the argument in this article to support moving from care "for" country to care "as" country, coming from an Indigenous pluralistic ontology. The authors argue that the relationship of care is mutual between country and people and that is why "for" should be replaced by "as." L. Bawaka Country; Suchet-Pearson, Sandie; Wright, Sarah; Lloyd, K.; Burarrwanga, "Caring as Country: Towards an Ontology of Co-Becoming in Natural Resource Management," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 54 (2013): 185–97.

**Appendix: Documentation of M.F.A. final installation**

Master of Fine Arts (Research) final Installation  
at Martyn Myer Arena, Victorian College of the Arts grad show,  
5-16 December 2019.

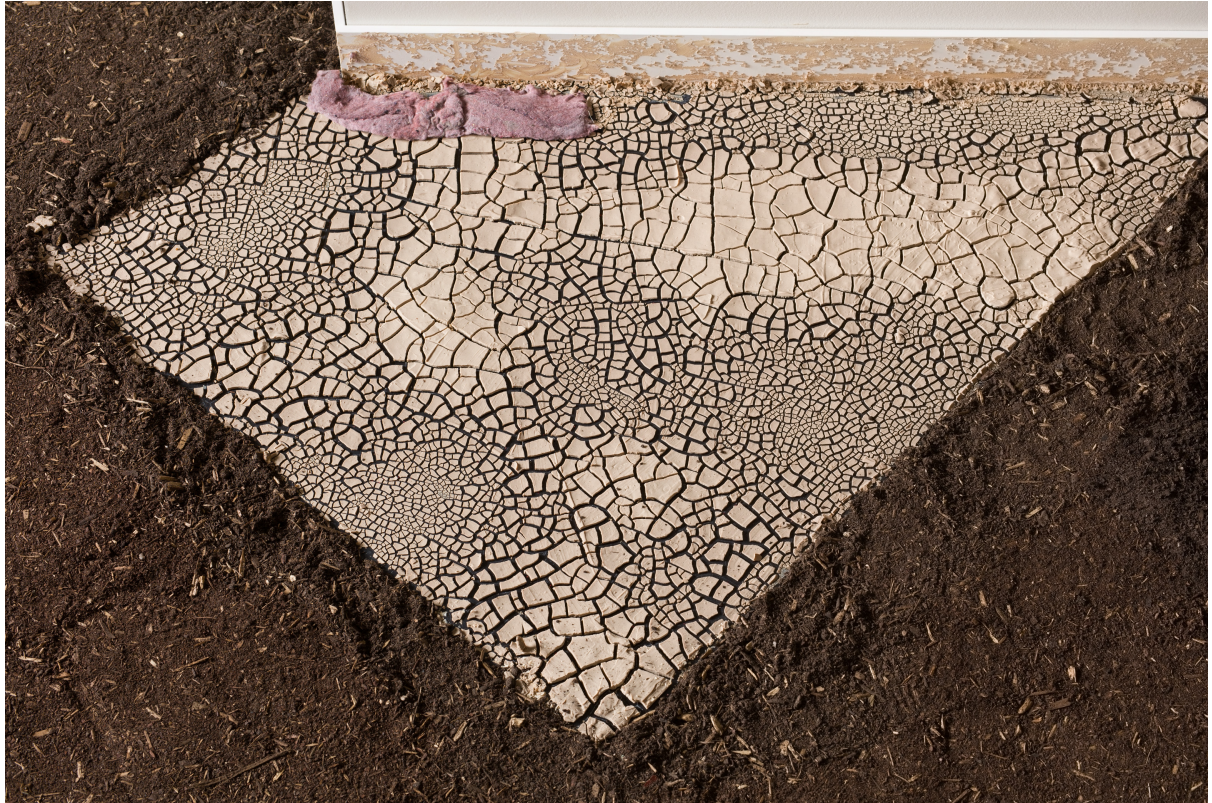
All images are documentation by Matthew Stanton, unless otherwise mentioned.



Azza Zein, *Taskscape*, mixed media installation.



Azza Zein, *Taskscape: Migrant lines in the depositing of movement clay, textile, mica golden leaf on MDF, potting mix soil, cowrie shells*



Azza Zein, *Taskscape: Migrant lines in the depositing of movement, clay, textile, mica golden leaf on MDF, potting mix soil, cowrie shells*



Azza Zein, *Taskscape: Migrant lines in the depositing of movement clay, textile, mica golden leaf on MDF, potting mix soil, cowrie shells*



Aza Zein, *Taskscape: Noubar, the migrant material*, pine wood poles with oil painting and /or shell inlay, resin, dryer's lint.



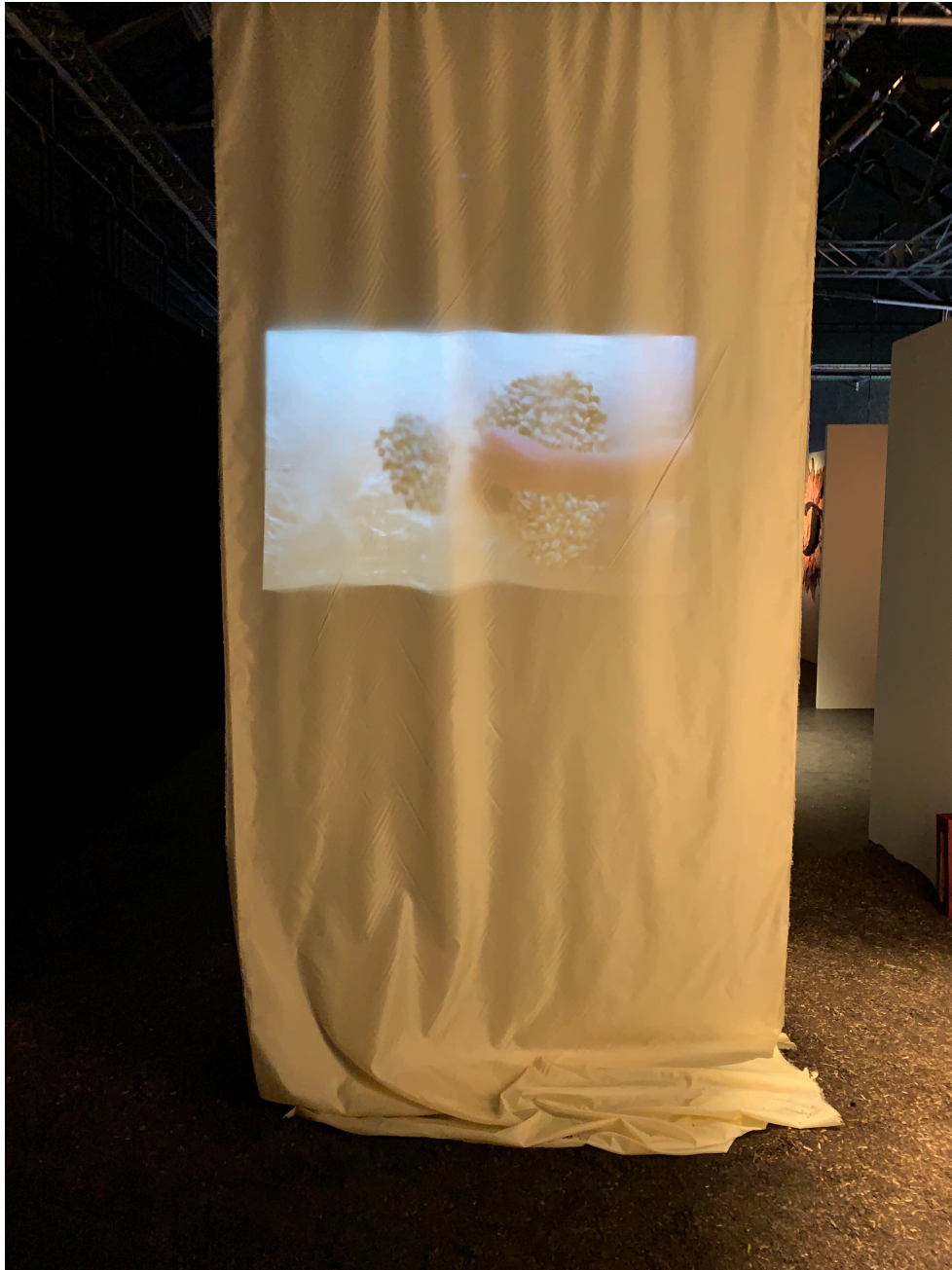
Azza Zein, *Taskscape: The inherent grace of melting coins*, pine wood poles with melted old Lebanese coins, resin, acrylic and oil painting



Azza Zein, *Taskscape: Noubar, the migrant material*, pine wood poles with oil painting, shell inlay, and resin.



Azza Zein, *Taskscape: Rematerialising coins; revaluing liquidity*, video work, 26:49 minutes on a loop, <https://vimeo.com/394711174>, contact [azzazein@gmail.com](mailto:azzazein@gmail.com) for access.



Azza Zein, *Taskscape: Rematerialising coins; revaluing liquidity*, video work, <https://vimeo.com/394711174>, photo credit: Simone Slee.



Azza Zein, *Taskscape: Textural echoes of informal tasks*, sound work, 7:30 minutes running in loop **(Click on image to listen)**.

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