

ABSTRACT

Though my head works slowly and in viscous ways, it needs to catch up with the ‘new’, my hands have boldly created over the past months, which I try to pinpoint throughout this writing. So here I am. Naked as I can be. Weaponed with nothing less than my vulnerability, I try to stretch that dominant machinery of fashion today into an amorphic scene that (re)claims and stewards its space. To find references to my research practice, I will touch upon feminist literature from the philosophical discourse of *New Materialism* and *Ecofeminism*. In this current work, entitled SHAPESHIFTING, STEWARDSHIPS, I want to explore the erotic and sensualities textiles can evoke.

On the one hand, I have a fascination for the erotic power textiles and colors can depict or arouse. On the other, I stand critical against the machinery of the textile and fashion industry. The sculptures and paintings within this Serie V operate on an intersection of this eroticism and criticism. They investigate to what extent an erotic power can be depicted without people. Throughout this new serie, I operate on the fine line between eroticism and exploitation, where I draw a parallel between exploitation as a form of cheap erotic and pornography.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

After the Modern era at the beginning of the previous century, post-Modernism writers within the science of humanity argued about how to formulate art movements as these occur in far more complex ways than this former linear depiction of *isms*, that excluded minorities or ‘other-than-Western’ approaches to art. Despite these critiques, their writing – according to New Materialism philosophers – struggled with finding different formats, as their work lacked theories on affect, agency, and materialism for widening the horizon to ‘more-than-human’ perspectives. Opposed to linearity, New Materialism focuses on a more cartographic approach, where scientists ‘lean in’ on knowledge from beta-sciences, mapping its crossovers with humanities. Their cartographic approach stems from feminist scientist Rosi Braidotti.¹ Likewise, Ecofeminism is committed to an intersectional and emancipated approach to equal rights as a counterpart to the exclusion of minorities and their exploitation.²

The term stewardship can be explained in line with both New Materialism as well as Ecofeminism, wherein in the current era of the Anthropocene, our human-centered treatment of the earth has since the industrial revolution led to the exploitation of its sources. This urgently asks for a reset of our habits, and a more modest approach toward our temporary home, earth. To *steward* it, as opposed to exploiting it. The term stewardship can best be explained by chemist Will Steffen et al. in their paper from 1999: “over the past century, the total material wealth of humanity has been enhanced. However, in the twenty-first century, we face a scarcity of critical resources, the degradation of ecosystem services, and the erosion of the planet’s capability to absorb our wastes. Equity issues remain stubbornly difficult to solve. This situation is novel in its speed, its global scale, and its threat to the resilience of the Earth System. The advent of the Anthropocene the time interval in which human activities now rival global geophysical processes, suggests that we must fundamentally alter our relationship with the planet we inhabit. Many approaches could be adopted, ranging from geoengineering solutions that purposefully manipulate parts of the Earth System to becoming active stewards of our life support system. The Anthropocene is a reminder that the Holocene, during which complex human societies have developed, has been a stable, accommodating environment and is the only state of the Earth System that we know for sure can support contemporary society. The need to achieve effective planetary stewardship is urgent. Going further into the Anthropocene, we risk driving the Earth System onto a trajectory toward more hostile states from which we cannot easily return.”³

TITLE NEW WORK: TACTUAL MISFITS

“Creativity is cultural not because it is derivative of it, but because it aims to heal culture. Art saturated with the unconscious acts like a compensatory dream in the individual: it tries to rebalance and address deep-rooted problems.”⁴ – author Ali Smith in *Summer* (2020)

- 1 Rosi Braidotti, “A Critical Cartography of Feminist Post-Postmodernism,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 20, no. 47 (2005): 176.
- 2 Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva and Salleh Ariel, *Ecofeminism*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2014), IV.
- 3 Will Steffen, Åsa Persson, Lisa Deutsch, Jan Zalasiewicz, Mark Williams, Katherine Richardson, Carole Crumley, et al. “The Anthropocene: From Global Change to Planetary Stewardship,” *Ambio* 40, no. 7 (2011): 739.
- 4 Ali Smith, *Summer* (London: Hamish Hamilton, an imprint of Penguin Books, 2020), 143.

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PRELUDE: PARADOXICAL EROTICISM

Sensual, strong, smart, superdeluxe, shiny, street, swift, slim, sized, splayed, sheer, sexy, smooth, surplus, seductive, but also: systematic, submissive, skinny, slick, (white) supreme, skew, sneaky, suppressive, shameful, saturated, seized, (un)sheer, and sadistic. If fashion is bipolar, its symptoms start with many S.

Rooted in 17th-century Cartesian Dualism, theorized by French Enlightenment philosopher René Descartes, and still today, our Western society approaches the mind and the body as bipolar, as two separate things where the body cannot think, but merely function as a machine. A machine fully utilized for our contemporary capitalist system. This use of the body and the earth as a machine within our contemporary capitalism is accurately explained by philosopher Sylvia Federici in her book *Beyond The Periphery of Our Skin*: “I have argued that the “historic battle” that capitalism has waged against the body stemmed from a new political perspective positing work as the main source of accumulation, thus conceiving the body as the condition of existence of labor power and the main element of resistance to its expenditure. [...] What is certain is that with the Enlightenment, we see a new step in the assimilation of the human and the machine, reconstructed views of human biology providing the ground of new machinal conceptions of human/nature.”⁵

The fashion and textile industry are intrinsically part of contemporary capitalism since also this industry is fueled like a machine by both cheap labour as well as sources, with seasonal distinctions in what material, silhouette, model or accessory is trending (and who/what certainly is muted). The Western perception of beauty – what is considered as ‘good taste’ – is often framed by a hierarchical approach towards binaries within all matter used and embodied in fashion. This perception also might have influenced my gestures guided by the dominance of Western aesthetics, as my addiction to fashion spans my life both as a privileged consumer, as well as an educated designer/maker in Western European fashion education. The binaries expressed within Western fashion-promotion symbolize its strong hierarchic thinking part of a landscape that excludes, and every season makes clear cuts of what is ‘in fashion’ and what is ‘out’. Besides, the exploitation of people and materials – especially within the fast fashion industry – is not a secret, and hard to legislate in a ‘free market’. Nevertheless, and despite this knowledge, our dependency and addiction to fashion often wins from our solidarity towards the abused, which – in my view – adds an obscene factor to our consumer behavior. When we all know this industry must shrink, a perpetual dissatisfaction where nothing is ever enough, and a continuous longing for the more or the exclusive are thriving. All to silently maintain a mantra of quantity over quality, by making ‘commercial’ presentations and selling profitable collections. This way, fashion became an alienated place to me. And its ‘mold’ was exactly what blocked me from creating freely.

I consider the attraction fashion continues to have on its consumers as a perverse incentive of the ‘cheap erotic’. I argue we could draw a line here with pornography where eroticism has become a ‘consumer product’: Pornography forms a parallel with fashion as both form addictive products tracing back to our capitalist system where this ‘body-machine’ is consumed. The prudish paradox here is that fashion always has claimed to be contemporary and ahead of its time, when in fact, the bodies of both its business models as those appearing on most catwalks are still and systematically skinny, slim, and supremely: white, more so forming a gap with reality’s longing.

“Pornography”, famously writes black and queer feminist Audre Lorde, “is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling.”⁶ Lorde wrote her essay in 1978, amid the Second Feminist Wave, where the generation of my mother fought for ownership of their bodies. Reading Lorde’s essay, I wondered: If fashion functions like pornography, and its body as a machine, what does this mean for its erotic power? More worrisome even – affected again both as a consumer, as well as a maker – what does it mean to *my* erotic power? Does fashion suppress my true feelings? Over the past years, I have learned – through trial, and many errors, how this seemingly pleasure-giving industry overshadowed my primary drivers, such as my love for the body, its erotic strength, its sensual tactility throughout materials, and its movement around that same body.

Guided by the philosophy of Audre Lorde, I believe women have a powerful force within them, that has been muted over centuries by systems of repression. Following the traditional fashion system, and as a woman, something has been muted within me, perhaps

- 5 Sylvia Federici, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2020), 78 – 80.
- 6 Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” *Whole earth review*, no. 63 (1989): 1.

that same power. If the erotic within me contains power, I'd like to use this strength to challenge the dominant machinery of fashion today and to overcome a possibly pornographic approach to its body that increased the distance to this inner erotic power.

Through questioning of my creative practice, many readings, and the composing of this writing, I now attempt to grasp my sensations and get a hold of that erotic power again. Could my fashion-embedded work awaken feelings just for the sake of feeling? Could it (re)claim erotic power without falling back to its pornography as I have experienced it to be? I am hopeful. I cannot and do not want to deny my past, and I am hopeful that this power has been lingering all along at the back- and frontstage of creation, in the soft pleats of the in-between.

This in-betweenness I witness in our streets, where intimacy and trustworthiness cooperate. On one of my daily walks in Amsterdam, I noticed something peculiar, occurring in front of the Central Station: on the busiest square for bikers and pedestrians, there is no single traffic light to control the crowds. Hundreds of people pass every minute, entering or leaving the city from the ferry or the bike lanes that intersect, and they rely on: trust. If you want to cross that road you have to interact, make eye contact, and move as if you trust a stranger that is for one second your best friend. It makes this one of the most intimate places in the public sphere of the city.⁷ From these walks I learned: to move forward, I must expose myself, and search for connections. To do so, I must overcome fears and peel off my filters. The vulnerability of the most naked self that will inevitably appear is most needed in creating something new. It takes courage to reveal your most vulnerable self, as you must overcome shame. Shame is the one thing we all share, for it exists in the eye of the beholder. By considering this and having solidarity with each other as I share these fears, I'm making space for shame, expanding myself to grow.

To reach and peel all layers of hierarchical fashion, the solidarity needed should also consider solidarity to its materials 'used'. Feminist philosopher and new-materialist academic Jane Bennett offers a tool here with her notion of 'thing-power': "thing-power gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience."⁸ In her book, she further examines found objects such as garbage, mechanical items, or objects for children that can come to live with a particular *effectivity*, a form of independence from text, visuals, and sensations they provoke in us.

Especially in fashion, there is a strong hierarchy and binary thinking in its approach to materials, take for instance 'fast' versus 'sustainable'. At stake here is the power of language, when in fact one could ask: isn't all matter there to stay? It's no news how fast fashion brands cleverly react to new styles seasonally presented on catwalks by high-luxury brands, by swiftly mimicking these styles in 'low' quality textiles that hit the stores often only weeks after and are distributed throughout online sales. This vicious circle repeats itself every season and its chain of production has a huge impact on our environment. Take for example the tons of disregarded textiles that are shipped yearly to continents such as Africa and form leaps of waste there.⁹ Last Summer in Kassel, Germany, a bunch of this bulk was thrown back at us by the Kenyan art group *The Nest Collective* who questioned this policy during documenta fifteen. The Global North sells their disregarded textiles as second-hand goods to Kenya, but the actual profitable secondhand bulk is kept for our own markets, and textiles that are shipped outside of our sight, out with the old, in with the new, are useless waste materials and create mountains of waste elsewhere, such as in Kenya.¹⁰ There is no construction preventing new 'fast fashion' to reach our markets, nor is there waterproof law legislation preventing us from shipping the follow-up wasted textiles elsewhere, and so this loop is expanding to problematic dimensions.

'Fast fashion' is also a creation by humans, its fibers fabricated upon our supervision, but its production process is often located outside of our public sphere. The final products are abundant in stores as if they have been falling right out of the sky. A single tag inside a fleece vest with a minuscule written 'Made in China' hardly appeals to anyone's imagination, let alone its abstract 100% PE characteristics, which reads like mysterious algebra to most of us.¹¹ Even though 'fast fashion' appears as machine-produced, they too are human-made, and their original material connects to many different places and organisms worldwide. Perhaps we need to contemplate its 'thing-power' more often on where things

- 7 GPS coordinates, "Intersection Amsterdam Central Station: 52.380559, 4.899079," accessed on 24 April 2023, <https://www.google.com/maps/>
- 8 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 14.
- 9 Greenpeace, "Poisoned Gifts," accessed on 24 April 2023, <https://www.greenpeace.org/static/planet4-international-stateless/2022/04/9f50d-3de-greenpeace-germany-poisoned-fast-fashion-briefing-factsheet-april-2022>.
- 10 documenta fifteen, "The Nest Collective," accessed on 28 September 2022, <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/lumbung-members-artists/the-nestcollective/>.
- 11 PE or PES means Polyester (Polyethene) and is a synthetic fiber material, gained from petroleum.

originate in order to revalue its existence as opposed to replacing them ‘fast’.

Queer, disabled academic writer, and performance artist, Petra Kuppers hands us a start for this contemplation by imagining the life of her fleece-blanket poetically in her book *Eco Soma*: “nonrealist representations that take flight from recognizable human figures and bodily configurations can allow for deep expressive potential. Instead of mimicry, we find other ways of creating relationality and of infusing objects with emotions and interactivity. This is another facet of eco soma imagination at play: an extending of one’s skin envelope into expressive collaboration with materials, enacting and literalizing the poetics of new materialist perspectives on material’s agency. In my manipulation of the blanket, for instance, the blanket also speaks back to me. I am aware of its materiality: an oil-based process creates the fluffy, soft, and easily washable fleece blankets we are using, and I am aware of the fiber shedding that accompanies these materials and contaminates our waterways. Sometimes, when I am under it, deep into performance trance, I imagine the tiny marine creatures that died long ago, and I feel the pressure.”¹²

To submit ourselves more to matter, both its ‘perks’ and ‘flaws’, and in relation to the fashion discourse, also made me think of philosopher Donna Haraway’s book: *Staying with the Trouble*, where she masterly kneads a meditative path towards a more mindful approach to dealing with one’s troubles, by committing to and accepting them rather than ignoring. She points out how ecological transformations taking place on our planet are not a threat, but the mining and exploitation of its sources and the further release of greenhouse gasses because of these changes are.¹³ It made me wonder if fashion could *stay with its trouble*. Could we find beauty in our own disregarded ‘out of fashion’ matter, beyond the distinction of ‘fast’ versus ‘during’? Especially when all ‘fast’ is, in fact, lasting. Acknowledge the traces of our past, current, and future and stick with it, deal with it, instead of shutting our eyes by creating new ones. What happens if you take these ‘discredited’ fast fashion materials outside of that discourse, can you stretch their meaning, will its tension evoke new aesthetics, how to define the borders of beauty outside a discourse of fashion?

More precise: what does beauty in fact mean to me? I think it might be the opposite of the very word beauty: the dirty, the vulnerable, and the ugliness, all always fascinated me much more. The moment ‘the smooth façade’ cracks and the fragility steps in. To find out I felt I had to reconnect to my most vulnerable side and use it as a tool, a weapon if you like. I’ve importunately worked with the discarded to push myself not to be ashamed of ‘the ugly’. As with this series, I ought to take a stand for the discarded, to what’s already out there, to reclaim its identity, to empower ‘things’, and to immortalize its ‘fast’ character into timeless and dynamic beings. This way, I ought to question our Western concepts of what defines ‘good taste’, the distinction between ugliness and beauty, and shine light upon the zone in-between these binaries, and how we can stay there, right through simultaneously moving by not losing our tentacle-like connections with our surroundings.

But how to move within a system that seems to be so tightly shut by harsh binary mantras? Again, I find solace in the enchanting writing by Petra Kuppers who transcribes a beautiful metaphor in her book *Eco Soma* on the transformative being of the moth to finding possibilities in entering the public sphere when this almost seems completely inaccessible: “by taking my critical field here not just from queer and Brown performance studies but also from Native American literary imaginaries, I can enlarge the field of co-conspirators, and I can look for the moths: those of us who find ways of entering imaginatively into the public sphere, armored with play against the stares and the stories. In the case of the Melbourne performance, some of what I witnessed relates to what Jose Muñoz has called disidentificatory-moves: “disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning”: disidentificatory moves emerge from ambivalence and from some kind of identification with (gender, racialized or other) stereotypes, consciously critiqued, in an ironic/longing play. This kind of self-knowledge and irony might well be part of what I am seeing on the city square. But Vizenor’s emphasis on dreams gives me a different purchase for thinking through the political agency of people with cognitive differences. Styling moth dreams, gossamer desires, weaving images out of what finds a hold in one’s bodymind.”¹⁴

This brings me to the key question of this essay: how to give shape to my ‘moth-dreams’, and what are those, in the essence? Over the years, I realized how the industry that welcomed me – a privileged young white woman, almost a girl still – I grew into perhaps

- 12 Petra Kuppers, *Eco Soma: Pain and Joy in Speculative Performance Encounters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 156 – 158.
- 13 Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 90.
- 14 Kuppers, *Eco Soma*, 39.

could not offer me what I need to create or feel freely. Being blinded at first, by the show, the outside glamour, and the press attention, I could not separate creation from the hierarchy and machinery, and this made me feel deeply alone. Within this rhythm where the pace is dictated by seasons and set in mere beauty, there was no space for me at hand to really deepen the imagery of my practice to the more nuanced field of work that I maybe for longed it to be.

I emphasized the importance of breaking existing patterns, but at the same time, I value the use of what is already there, the existing, to shed light on possible in-betweennesses. Making fashion became like predicting what the uniformity wants, while I have always been more interested in listening what the misfit had to say. Pursuing my moth-dream, for this new Serie, I have pushed myself outside the boundaries of my comfort, meditating on materials that perhaps bring a connotation that I wanted to outgrow, for it to exist in a universe free of hierarchy, where the thing becomes its own identity, or where, in Bennett's words, they gain 'thing-power'.

A few years ago, a catwalk photographer warned me to never 'bend over backward' nor give *all* when it comes down to creation. I feel this anecdote subtly though accurately describes a hierarchy that mutes. With this Serie that is exactly what I wanted to trespass as I believe that's the only way to change, and reform my practice into more inclusive dimensions, inclusive to the erotic of matter. Bent to angles of discomfort and disbalance, stretch material to new dimensions, let objects rise into subjects, cluster graphics, dangle glass, amorph wood, and clashing colors for this might be the only way for the nonhuman-beings to claim back space into a world dominated by humans.

I admire those who can create freely within the discourse of fashion, but I felt incapable of being overshadowed by the pressure of its capitalist weight always lingering to impact our surroundings with every step you'd take. A dear friend once ironized how the industry is plagued by a piece of chewing gum under the sole of your shoe: every step you stick and leave marks. It made me think of what activist Sara Ahmed has taught us: we cannot undo our histories, for its objects are 'sticky'.¹⁵ This new Serie is a practice of painting a counterpart towards the pornography that fashion has become to me, under the pressure of a capitalist whirlwind that cannot be controlled, but, with the use of the disregarded, challenges pre-set aesthetics and assumptions and welcomes the misfit.

To submit ourselves to matter, all matter, and to be attentive towards those things that may be 'more-than-human' is a characteristic of modesty I'd like to cherish in my work as – in my view – this most touches upon solidarity. In his collected essays *Illuminations*, German philosopher Walter Benjamin refers to writer Kafka and his *Odradek* character: "Odradek is the form which things assume in oblivion. They are distorted [...] These Kafka figures are connected by a long series of figures with the prototype of distortion, the hunchback. [...] in this attentiveness, Kafka included all living creatures, as saints include them in their prayers."¹⁶

SHAPESHIFTING COCOONS, ON PAINTING

Perhaps like Benjamin's reference to Kafka's hunchback *Odradek* and following my wish to embrace attentiveness towards 'more-than-human' beings, this is the very reason I have started to look closely and pay attention to my surrounding. Working alone in my brand new and temporary studio in a former brown coffee café in the center of Amsterdam in early October, I stared at the blank canvas that just came in: one meter wide and two meters long, quite a human-perspective life-size scale. Shifting my gaze outside, to the single window of the souterrain that leads you directly to the street, I suddenly noticed a strong gaze looking at me, coming from across the road. Then I noticed, these weren't the eyes of an animal, but the dimmed and dark headlights of a scooter that were lurking back at me. How could it be that not only with brief encounters with humans on the street, but this machine-like creature parked in front of the studio managed to offer me a similar experience of connection?

Bennet's 'thing-power' theory partly offers an answer where the object is turned into a subject. The theory also partly questions to what extent I could have sensed a form of connection to that scooter in front of my studio as this 'connection' is considered from a human perspective again.¹⁷ Nevertheless, I intended to assess this technical gadget – that is so abundant in these Amsterdam streets – having its own character or *amorph* appearance.

- 15 Sara Ahmed, "Happy Objects," in *The Promise of Happiness* (United Kingdom: Duke University Press, 2010) 21.
- 16 Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Harry Zorn. *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 133 – 134.
- 17 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 14.

And so it happens that, throughout a leather-belts installation like branches, with the tiny oily painted cocoons as on paper-like leaves, a bigger pair of eyes hold their nascent gaze upon you, wherever you stand. These eyes are part of something more than just a machine: a body, a chrysalis that transformed, and an object that became a subject.

Furthermore, last Summer, I had the privilege of visiting the Leopold Museum in Vienna, to finally encounter Egon Schiele's portrait of his friend and dancer Moa from 1911. This work strongly reminded me of the small painted cocoons I painted earlier that Summer, in contrast Moa's body is similarly covered in a shield of colors, seemingly wrestling out of a textile patchwork. Her head is subtly tilted towards the viewer, prior to the body, as if awaiting to be freed by her limbs from the suffocating wrapping any time soon. Schiele painted the work with rough brushstrokes in watercolor. Remarkably, Moa's feet are not in the framework. These aspects all contribute to the piece's dynamic and energetic appearance the work had on me. One year before Moa, Schiele immortalized a kneeling female in an orange-red dress, also the title of this work in gouache. Here the woman in the painting has crossed legs and (partly) laced-up boots: all in the same hues of orange and red. Her body seems to lift off from the ground, with her arms mysteriously entangled around her face. Her hand covers one eye, with the other left visible and casually gazing at the viewer. Today, both she and Moa continue to watch me from their copied cards that I brought from Vienna and stuck to my studio walls.

Throughout first the clarity of oil-painting the cocoons in their temporary vessels of shimmering harnesses, and later metamorphosing the scooter object into a living creature, I might have found a crack in the door of my creating practice. Where their symbolic meaning, to transform is to live, could mean: to transform is to create. Within a fetishist installation of collected black strings, straps, and belts, like branches – more about of collecting will follow later – my enlarged chrysalises on small paper canvasses, thin as leaves, now seemingly patiently undergo their sleep, whilst transformed into new beings upon awakening. As part of the trilogy with the life-sized painting and the installation of insect-like hanging belts, I've made a ground textile piece in the Schiele-reminding shapes referring to the old skin that has been left as flakes from the past. The piece might also refer to Schiele's Moa and the Kneeling Female as if they break free from their wrapped straitjackets, unlacing their boots, ready to reform.

INTERLUDE: AMBIGUOUS TACTILITIES

As I have been withdrawing my design work within the fashion industry, and reforming my practice into autonomous art, my love for textiles hasn't diminished. Textiles are ambiguous: on the one hand, the global industry behind them has disastrous climate consequences, on the other hand, everyone necessarily wears them, and needs them. Some for covering the body, some for revealing it. As a second skin, textile equates and intertwines us, averse to the class or status where the wearer finds himself.

I find comfort in observing textiles worn by passengers in daily life, where the passing of people is only brief, but the tactile memory of the print, structure, and color they wore remains with me, and this fragility connects us to a tactual world. The reminiscence of those encounters makes me briefly feel interwoven with that person and our mutually shared world, our home. In his work *Illuminations*, German philosopher Walter Benjamin refers to his colleague Hegel who ascribes his experience of the streets of Paris in a similar way to a sense of recognition: "he [Hegel] wrote to his wife: "when I walk through the streets, people look just as they do in Berlin; they wear the same clothes and the faces are about the same aspect, but in a large crowd.""¹⁸ This feeling of recognition in people, wherever they may be, I'd like to cherish as it's becoming rarer to be solo in a virtual space most of the day, sitting behind our computers or phones. This way, 'analog' encounters on the street form enrichments I'd like to honor and materialize throughout tactile beings, functioning as an antidote to our excessively and overwhelmingly growing digital ways of being. Simultaneously, I am fascinated with how we eventually digest our digital identity offline, through pictures or animated films.

STEWARDSHIPS, ON SCULPTURE

My 'tactual' fascination, as I would like to describe the above, has led to a history of collecting

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all sorts of textile materials that could represent those encounters. In months of building sculptures, I have been working with banal items from my personal wardrobe that I have collected over the years. From a Western fashion perspective, these items might be considered from ‘past season’. Instead, the rearrangement of these materials in an artistic environment invites the viewer to contemplate on an equal base about the history of the material and their own position within. The ideas of philosopher Walter Benjamin can be best explained by what he considered an accumulation of banal objects as a reference to its history. At the same time, he drew a parallel with the revolutionary: the collector fantasizes about a better world in which existing objects are liberated from previous functional use.¹⁹ In line with his theory, I too attempt to *assemble* a ‘better world’ using the existing.

Important here is the notion of *assembly*. Tuning in on the reading of Jane Bennett, assembly originates from the French word *assemblage*: the action of assembling elements into one piece. In line with the philosophy of New Materialism, Bennett explains this act by reading a poem that describes things on the street, where she found herself first ignoring them for merely being loose objects, directly followed by imagining the vitality of these things, transmitting them with ‘thing-power’, and finally sensing her own provoked *affects* the whole staging has on her. She mentions how the objects seemingly come to life: “and so I caught a glimpse of an energetic vitality inside each of these things, things that I generally conceived as inert. In this assemblage, objects appeared as things, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics.”²⁰

This *energetic vitality* is what triggers me as a maker, for the assembling of textiles recreates a similar dynamic as raw ‘baroque’ imagery that hands a notion of movement to the sculptures with an amorphic appearance. According to Bennett we then could understand *assemblage* in the following way: “assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that can function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within. They have uneven topography because some of the points at which the various affects and bodies cross paths are more heavily trafficked than others, and so power is not distributed equally across its surface. Assemblages are not governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group.”²¹

This liveliness described above resembles the metamorphosis of things into beings that I wanted to bring across in the sculptures. By tossing with expectations and ignoring the former purposes of the textiles, their assembly forms a ‘liberating’ figure where I’ve opened a meditative dialogue with the material. The term *affect* that these assemblages mentioned above suggest having – for instance throughout their vibrancy – can be best explained by the writing of queer activist and academic Sara Ahmed: “affect is what sticks, or what sustains, or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects.”²² So, affect is the moment before you define or categorize what you’re seeing, but you only experience its atmosphere, or what something does to you. It’s the porous *in-betweenness* where the difference between a mere object and a subject hasn’t entered yet, but they only exit attention to the matter. This isn’t necessarily ‘cheerful’ but can also be uncomfortable or alienate you from what you’re used to or what you expected. Ahmed describes these encounters as *affect aliens*: “affect aliens can do things, for sure, by refusing to put bad feelings to one side in the hope that we can ‘just get along.’”²³ Ahmed explains how these affect aliens confront you with what might stick from the past: “objects are sticky because they are already attributed as being ‘good’ or ‘bad’ as being the cause of happiness or unhappiness.”²⁴

I’d like to argue this *stickiness* also covers the matter I’ve used within the sculptures. These sculptures are a practice of becoming one with the material, to see how far I can stretch these materials for them to create a new meaning in between their old and new context, in between the ‘ugly’ or ‘beauty’. I also associate this fluid way of assembling with the punk movement that occupied fashion in the seventies with late fashion designer Vivienne Westwood as its agent: Westwood passionately incorporated costume elements with wrecked denim or painted T-shirts and safety pin-pierced traditional Scottish tartans. This reminds me of Benjamin’s revolutionary theory I referred to earlier: the revolting act of assembling,

- 19 Astrid Schmetterling, “Histoires de Musée,” *Women Artists Slide Library Journal*, January-February 1990, 3.
- 20 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 25.
- 21 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 44.
- 22 Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” 29.
- 23 Ahmed, “Happy Objects”, 50.
- 24 Ahmed, “Happy Objects”, 35.

to reclaim power. Another notion of the revolting affect within the sculptures comes with the use of glass. Not only do the glass shapes create views of in-between universes these textiles embody, simultaneously, as Koppers contemplates in her book *Eco Soma*, the materiality of glass also has an ambiguous affect: it's fragile for it can easily break, and once broken it becomes dangerously sharp.²⁵

Within my assemblies, I deliberately use all these contrasting materialities that seem 'misfitting' in terms of shapes, patterns, textures, fibers, and colors to shed light on the ambivalence that we all encounter within and outside our skin. I believe that only by accepting these inconsistencies, can we learn to live with our 'misfits' and overcome alienation from ourselves and more-than-human beings. My practice forms a poetic synergy within this ambiguity that my making is undoubtedly also a part of. By giving agency to these materials throughout assemblies, I attempt to acknowledge our responsibility for their existence. To make space for them to exist. Bennett invites the reader to develop lasting encounters with vibrant matter and lively things. She boldly asks the following questions: "how would political responses to public problems change were we to take the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies seriously? [...] How, for example, would patterns of consumption change if we faced not litter, rubbish, trash or "the recycling", but an accumulating pile of lively and potentially dangerous matter?"²⁶

The act of reassembling existing clothing and accessories felt like a form of three-dimensional painting with textiles. By stretching, folding, pleading, winding, and 'dressing' textiles on unvarnished wooden furniture, such as a stool or an easel, combined with the round glass shapes, the flat fabrics grow into spacious three-dimensional shapes and steward the objects into subjects. The stretching and gradients of the materials create a fluid appearance as if the pieces are about to morph into new shapes and question their previous coding. Throughout these gestures, I attempt to give the 'thing' its identity and territory. This way, I approach the human figure, as an intermediate body where textiles function as the skin of all living matter where the object and subject move into one affective assemblage of tactile stewardships, as the surface might constantly change and renew itself.

The gradient patterns within the textiles I worked with are an important asset to the notion of moving. They suggest a space *beyond* mere textiles and connect them to future shapes of beings. Philosophers Melissa Gregg and Gregor Seigworth describe in their book on affect theories how within this assembling of things space is indeed created for differences amongst them to coexist, which they call 'bloom-space': "in the accumulation of gradient tweakings, one finds the simultaneous delivery of a bodily capacity and a world of sometimes near-infinitesimal difference: nurturing differences through affective relay into perpetually finer-grained (and concurrently enlarged) postures or comportments until there are only articulations of a world in its expressiveness: expressions that are only ever the interval between sensing or the stretching of this sensuous interval that comes to progressively produce (when successful) a passion for difference, where the pathology of a body meets the pedagogy of an affective world. In fact, as much as anything, perhaps that is what such a "neutral" bloom-space offers: the pathology of a body intersecting with the pedagogy of an affective world."²⁷

Throughout these sculptures, I try to visualize this bloom-space by challenging my gestures and reassembling existing matter. I have realized I'm just at the beginning of dissecting my well-defined patterns as I'm also a product of my time. For instance, coming from an *Arbeit-ethos* upbringing I feel familiar with the Marxist term *Homo Faber* of an ever-creating human, looking for a grip, which was so desperately experienced by the main character in Max Frisch's roman from 1957.²⁸ Somehow the feeling of 'guilt' for not working enough in the eyes of others was always stronger than the feeling of 'being true' in my own eyes. I reckoned, perhaps I could shake this guilt off with a more playful approach, and reconnect to my playing character, the *Homo Ludens*. By solely playing, I have tried to disconnect my current gestures from pre-set patterns. This way, I'd like to stretch expectations created by former aesthetics. I attempt to make choices of contrast and ambivalence, to overcome my Western sense of aesthetics and reconnect to a more wild, chaotic inner world: an inner world fueled by erotism, and my attraction to the body, in line with Lorde. I play with the sensuality of the matter used, created by stretching and drawing outside the lines that evoke tension. This tension could be read as stretching to reveal a different body,

- 25 Koppers, *Eco Soma*, 108.
- 26 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 6.
- 27 Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 12.
- 28 Max Frisch, *Homo faber : ein Bericht* (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp, 1977), 1-222.

an exposing of an inner erotic. Here, *erotic* functions as a power tool as opposed to the pornographic imagery that fashion has become over time, or at least the addictive asset it has gained throughout capitalism over the past century.

Thus, the sculptures could mimic a specific time-sensitive momentum of their creation. Simultaneously, this time-specificity of textiles used in collections and presented throughout calendars is a tool used by fashion, and ‘past’ this time set, items are considered ‘old-fashioned’. In this sense, the series of sculptures touch upon vanitas symbols of impermanence, with its textile skin as momentary relics. This reminds me again of Ahmed who elaborated strongly on the melancholic factor of subjects due to their history: “a concern with histories that hurt is not then a backward orientation: to move on, you must make this return. If anything, we might want to reread melancholic subjects, the ones who refuse to let go of suffering, who are even Prepared to kill some forms of joy, as an alternative model of the social good.”²⁹ This is in line with the famous words by author and activist James Baldwin: “we carry our history with us”.³⁰ The history of fashion is entangled with the history of colonization. Nowadays, we stand in the ruins of that history of exploitation that beats on until today. Opposed to merely creating new images for a story of the future, and by being aware of this timeframe we can reconsider the potential of this ‘past’ material also for the future, as opposed to disposing of it in the waste bin. Looking at the sculptures, this raises the question of where the textiles come from and from what materials are they made, until what part can we actually know this?

In his publication *Illuminations*, Philosopher Walter Benjamin draws parallels with an ‘empty’ feeling when there is no urge in time-relevance: “even though chronology places regularity above permanence, it cannot prevent heterogeneous, conspicuous fragments from remaining within it. To have combined recognition of quality with measurement of the quantity was the work of the calendars in which the places of recollection are left black, as it were, in the form of holidays. The man who loses his capacity for experiencing feels like he is dropped from the calendar. The big-city dweller knows this feeling on Sundays.” I think a similar sense and fear of ‘empty’ feelings has penetrated my seasonal catwalk-experience over time: as an appearance is a wafer-thin or shallow creative expression, affected by capitalism through a human-centered (lofty) perspective.

The fact that I work from the discourse of fashion, my background, offers me access to exploring, but also to soak off that time-specificity. I want to connect this history with the now to re-set its melancholics, not by ignoring them, but by righteously embracing them. This way, I might break free from feelings like fear, guilt, or shame, and give shape to this inner erotic power. Writer Petra Kuppers refers to the importance of pivoting our consumption and reinventing our perception of time: “these projects invite this axial pivot, the social sculpture, the unfolding of aesthetic spacetime, to offer a new perspective on plant and human time, on shared humanity in public, on asymmetrical horizons, on a trajectory toward repairing damaged publics. They invite the interconnectedness of things as living works of art, as cultural productions open to improvisatory interventions.”³¹

For this series of works, I anticipated the idea of stewardship: a momentary vessel that cares for its transitory content. This idea stems from my fear that we irreversibly lose touch with our humbleness as temporary residents on this planet. If we would try to dominate the earth less and care for it more as its temporary stewards, we might sustain it.³² This thinking is in line with the activist and academic movement of ecofeminism, which focuses on stressing out and ejecting all sorts of repression whilst touching on our interconnectedness with all terrestrial.³³ Over the past decades, and within the history of colonization and capitalism we have lost touch with this connection. Coming from – and touched upon in the first part of the introduction – the 17th-century Enlightenment heritage of Descartes, but also the Romanticism concept of mystifying nature within Western thinking where nature and man have been considered separate entities which led to a gap between them.³⁴ This has led to a distinctive way of thinking that is embodied in our systems and separates our ecological surroundings from our beings. Ecofeminism argues how an intersectional restoration of history will lead to restoring species. With this series and work to come, I have tried to stretch our human-centered way of experiencing the world: to widen the perspective from human-focused to a more-than-human inclusivity.

29 Ahmed, “Happy Objects”, 50.

30 James Baldwin, Raoul Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro: a Major Motion Picture Directed by Raoul Peck*. First Vintage international edition. (New York: Vintage International, Vintage Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, 2017), 1 – 118.

31 Kuppers, *Eco Soma*, 44.

32 Steffen, Persson, Deutsch, Zalasiewicz, Williams, Richardson, Crumley, et al. “The Anthropocene: From Global Change to Planetary Stewardship,” 739.

33 Mies, Verdana and Ariel, *Ecofeminism*, 5.

34 Federici, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin*, 78 – 80.

POSTLUDE: STEWARDING THE FORCE OF SISTERHOOD

“Bare your buttocks” is what my friend and mentor, Marcelo Horacio Maquieira Piriz, urged me when preparing for this publication. Nobody in the field had seen my new work yet and I was scared to death for exposing it. And so much it has brought me. Talking with copywriter Karime Salame Sainz, photographing with Io Coomans, and working with graphic designer a.k.a. magician Beau Bertens meant the world to me. I truly experienced a sisterhood, which I am grateful for. It made me realize once more: only by being vulnerable can we grow, but only through trust can we present our most vulnerable selves. Besides, I strongly believe by connecting to this sisterhood I have restrengthened my inner erotic power which has to appear to be fruitful for current and will strengthen future work even more so.

By soaking my hands in materials that are familiar to me, and that I trust, by just *doing*, I might give shape to my inner erotic, and transform into a more honest being, that I never dared to be fully, even felt ashamed of. By composing those materials that were already there, collected over the years, disregarded, but kept for reasons I only begin to understand now. By playing, touching, moving, and creating amorphous and perhaps imaginary bodies, I have challenged myself to move closer to the body and its power.

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