



Waste Archipelago

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I am an artist whose photographs, sculptures, events, and installations are exhibited internationally, both in galleries and in the public realm. Much of my art practice has been concerned with exploring waste as a material, as a temporal state, as an atmosphere, as a process, as a sensory experience, and in terms of understanding through both intimacy and distance. I use a methodology of *Imaginal Travel*, which is an interplay between interiority and exteriority, an exploration of individual and collective, in which objects, people, process, and activities move between each other with the potential to re-organise themselves in different configurations.

In previous works I have explored aspects of waste, consumption, tourism and development. *Cockaigne*, 2004, is a series of twelve large-format photographs based on fourteenth-



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century ideas of a glutton's paradise. Each depicts a mythical landscape constructed from a single foodstuff, which explore the exotic and the way in which tourism is altering, theatricalising, and consuming the landscape of Mauritius (figs 1-2).

In *Paris Remains*, 2009, I created a ruined landscape from leftover discarded food I collected from pavements (figs 3-5). In *Wastescape*, 2012, I brought together thousands of used plastic bottles as an immersive installation of stalactites and stalagmites (figs 6-7). Interspersed throughout the installation was sound recordings of people's experience of waste, including those who live in Moravia in Medellin in Colombia, an area built on and out of the city's waste, and who live near Bywaters Waste Management Centre in Bow, which manages the Southbank Centre's waste



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In *The Golden Tide*, 2012, I documented the discarded and found waste objects that I encountered along the Thames Estuary stretch of water in London (figs 8-10). In *Anthropo-scene*, 2015, I collected the secondary waste from an archaeological dig, that would have been thrown away, as contemporary, historic and archaeological objects and materials, juxtaposing excavation and construction, ruin and renewal, and confounding their chronology in order to question what we leave to posterity (fig. 11).

In 2019 I was awarded the Sustainable Art Prize by ArtVerona and Sustainable Ca' Foscari University in Venice. As recipient of the prize I was invited to develop a project with students and academics at Ca' Foscari University to explore issues of sustainability related to one or more of the seventeen goals of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. I decided to develop practical and theoretical sessions to explore different perspectives on our lived experience of waste, which I called *Waste Matters*. Whilst previous prize winners had developed projects in which students became involved in the physical making of the work, I wanted to involve them from the first moment in a collective thinking and making process. I wanted the work to develop out of the sessions, as a form of devised practice in which the process is not determined from the outset, but in which outcomes are temporal manifestations of the thinking and making together. I also brought this approach to the sessions by developing each in relation to reflections on the previous session, and in response to the students' engagement, the academics' research, and by thinking through relevant texts.

How to come up with a title for the project and artwork that is focused enough to form some kind of framework but also open enough to allow for the development of the project and work? The loose title of the project, *Waste Matters*, pivots between the two words and their meanings and has an urgency to stress the importance of its subject. Themes that I focused on included waste in terms of matter out of place, classification and colonialism, the *herbarium* and botanical, waste as vibrant matter, mapping domestic and societal waste, and exploring food, recipes, and familial memories through waste.

The earliest recorded uses of the word 'waste' accounted for a sense of emptiness, which is reflected in its Latin etymology: we take 'waste' from *vastus*, giving waste the same Latin root as the word 'vast', for spaces that are void, immense, or enormous. The word 'matter' is derived from the Latin word *materia*, meaning 'wood', or 'timber', in the sense of 'material', as distinct from 'mind' or 'form'. From around 1200, it came to mean 'a subject of a literary work, content of what is written, main theme'; the sense of 'narrative, tale, story' is from c1300. The meaning of a 'physical substance generally' is from mid-fourteenth century and from the late fourteenth century it meant 'piece of business, affair, activity, situation, subject of debate or controversy, or a question under discussion'.



I started to explore how we could think about waste as a process, a flux, a situation in constant movement, and an uninterrupted process of change transforming what has been created. I began by exploring Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* (2010), which was originally published in 1966. She explained: "[a]s we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder" (2010, 2). Douglas writes about dirt as an ordering system: "[s]hoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs; outdoor things indoors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where other-clothing should be, and so on. In short, our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications" (45). For Douglas, "[i]f we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the



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old definition of dirt as matter out of place. This is a very suggestive approach. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements" (44). But for Douglas, in this disorder is the potential for infinite patterning (117).

I was also interested in Bennett's thinking on matter in *Vibrant Matter, a Political Ecology of Things* (2010). She writes that, "[i]n the eating encounter, all bodies are shown to be but temporary congealments of a materiality that is in a process of becoming, is hustle and flow punctuated by sedimentation and substance" (49). Waste is symptomatic of life's spatio-temporal continuation, it is semi-biotic, and there is a physiological reminiscence in waste: "reminiscence is almost always present where there is waste: waste consists of leftovers that contain the memory or echo of the matter they used to be. Waste, even if it does not putrefy, is abject because it



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is characterised by misplaced, animating excess, inflecting it with the physiological reminiscence of decay” (8). Bennett describes ‘thing-power’: “[t]hing-power perhaps has the rhetorical advantage of calling to mind a childhood sense of the world as filled with all sorts of animate beings, some human, some not, some organic, some not. It draws attention to an efficacy of objects in excess of the human meanings, designs, or purposes they express or serve. Thing-power may thus be a good starting point for thinking beyond the life-matter binary, the dominant organizational principle of adult experience” (20). Bennett discusses the connectedness of effect and harm: “[t]he ethical aim becomes to distribute value more generously, to bodies as such. Such a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations. And in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself” (13).

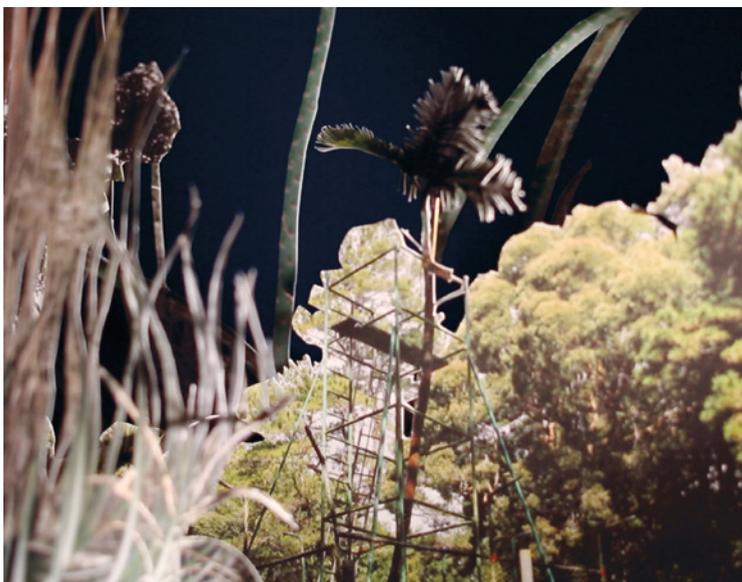
I started to explore issues and activities relating to waste, focused around a video work, *Plot*, that I made in 2015 (figs 12-13). I shot the footage in Mauritius, around the intricacies of a small, supposedly ‘empty’ plot of land in the north of the island, which was once owned by my father. The plot was actually teeming with life. Amongst the rubbish and leftover building materials, insects, birds, and animals took shelter in what felt like a small respite of space in the midst of the concrete small-scale tourist developments built in the area. It was whilst taking a break from filming that I made my first visit to Curepipe Botanical Garden, where I came across the last known remaining tree of the *hyophorbe amaricaulis* palm species, which found itself framed by the botanical garden, which was established in 1870. A hundred years earlier the main botanical garden on the island, Pamplemousses Botanical Garden, had been set up by the French colonial administration. It was under the British colonial administration that the smaller garden at Curepipe was established, with the initial goal of cultivating varieties of plants that could not grow in the less temperate regions of the island. This last remaining tree of a species and the ideas of emptiness of a plot of land converged into thinking through ‘waste’ in terms of ideas of categorisation, framing, and visibility and invisibility.

Botanical gardens continued to have a role in the story of the palm. On my return to the UK, I visited the laboratories at Kew Gardens in London where I spoke to Dr Sarasan, who in 2007 had travelled to Mauritius to collect seeds from the tree, in the hope that it could be propagated. He explained that his attempts failed as the seeds produced by the tree were infertile, and the tissue cultivation experiments did not yield plants that survived outside the test tube. Dr Sarasan lamented that horticulturalists in Mauritius focused on orchid growing for the export market, rather than on protecting the rare or under-threat plants and species.





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The insubstantial frame that was set up around the twelve-metre tree spoke to me of a confluence of pathos and hope, visibility and invisibility, a contrast to my exploration of a seemingly empty plot of land. The tree found itself framed within the Botanical Garden. This framing occurs within the wider colonial system of ordering and classification, which was designed for exploitation and profit. The framing is a mode of collecting and categorisation, whereby species, people, and places can find themselves in a 'system' of hierarchies, in which they become split from the context, cosmologies, or relationships in which they previously existed. In the new system they are made strange, curious, or of profitable value. One system becomes visible, as other relations and realities disappear.

Carl Linnaeus' *System Naturae*, which was published in 1735, led to the extraction of specimens from their relations with each other, and from their places in other peoples' histories, economies, social and symbolic systems. In the new scientific and analytical writing and image making, landscape is presented as uninhabited, unpossessed, unhistoricised, and often unoccupied. For Pratt, "[t]he activity of describing geography and identifying flora and fauna structures as an asocial narrative in which the human presence, European or African, is absolutely marginal, though it was, of course, a constant and essential aspect of the travelling itself. In the writing,



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people seem to disappear from the garden as Adam approaches – which, of course, is what he can walk around as he pleases and name things after himself and his friends back home” (2008, 50). For Lévi-Strauss, “[e]xploration is not so much a covering of surface distance as a study in depth: a fleeting episode, a fragment of landscape or a remark overhear may provide the only means of understanding and interpreting areas which would otherwise remain barren of meaning” (2011, 47-8). The writing of Alexander von Humboldt reveals how places are viewed in terms of their prospect to produce a marketable surplus, he writes: “If then some pages of my book are snatched from oblivion, the inhabitant of the banks of the Oroonoko will behold with ecstasy, that populous cities enriched by commerce, and fertile fields cultivated by the hands of freemen, adorn those very spots, where, at the time of my travels, I found only impenetrable forests, and inundated lands” (Pratt in Robertson 2001, 143). But as Arendt points out, there is no such thing as an empty landscape: “[n]o human life, not even the life of the hermit in nature’s wilderness, is possible without a world which directly or indirectly testifies to the presence of other human beings” (1958, 22).

I began to explore the herbarium with the students by thinking through texts and images and by making herbaria with waste materials and foodstuff. In this method, specimen sheets are



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stacked in groups by the species to which they belong and placed into a large lightweight folder that is labelled on the bottom edge. Groups of species folders are then placed together into larger, heavier folders by genus. The genus folders are then sorted by taxonomic family according to the standard system selected for use by the herbarium and placed into pigeonholes in herbarium cabinets. The practice of drying and pressing specimens has been in use in Western culture for over four hundred years. The term *herbarium* was first used as a collection of dried medicinal plants catalogued within a bound book in the sixteenth century, when Luca Ghini is credited to be the first person to have pressed, preserved under pressure and then bound specimens of plants within a book. While most of the early herbaria were prepared with sheets bound into books, Linnaeus came up with the idea of mounting them on loose sheets that allowed their easy re-ordering within cabinets. Linnaeus's legacy is a classification system for the natural world to standardise the naming of species and order them according to their characteristics and relationships with one another. Although his own research trips were limited to Sweden, his collaborators were encouraged to make trips around the world to collect new species. With their assistance Linnaeus collected 5,900 plants, most of which are now maintained at the Linnaean Society in London.

Herbaria are the visual expression of this possession: through the modificatory processes of drying and pressing, they become visual representations of plants. In the herbarium, plants are separated from their environmental, historical, and cultural contexts and renamed in Latinised scientific terms. Leading scientific institutions in Britain, such as the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew and the British Museum, relied on a global network of

colonial collectors. Botanical gardens played an important role in the political economy of the British Empire, with Kew Gardens holding a central role as receptor of seeds, cuttings and dried flowers from the colonies. Botanical gardens were established in Europe to cultivate the specimens that were brought back from explorations, with a view to marketable profit.

At the time of the project, I was particularly struck by the ecological consequences of the MV Wakashio oil spill near the marine park of Blue Bay in Mauritius, the island of my father's birth, and the construction of homemade ballasts by local people using straw and hair to soak up the oil in the water. Through the process of thinking and making with the students and academics at Ca' Foscari, and my connections with ecological disasters occurring at that moment in the place of my father's birth, I began to create *Waste Archipelago, 2021*, a new body of photographic, installation, and event-based work that explores waste through the prism of the archipelago, and the interconnectedness of how we conceive of, create, and manage waste through our relationships with objects and our bodies.

Works include: *Oil Spill Islands*, eight photographs of islands made from documentary images of recent oil spills in the world's waters, and then preserved in sea salt; *Food Waste*, six photographic collages as headpieces made of images related to food waste, on wooden stands, and c-type photographic prints of them – the headpieces are worn during processional walks through Venice; *Plates*, inverted photographs of waste food based on artificial islands; *Waste Matters*, two c-type photographic collages of an island of food at the top and its corresponding waste inverted and underneath, also installed as large banners on the balcony of Ca' Foscari University overlooking the Grand Canal; *Herbarium*, six collages made from the waste paper and card cut outs of the process of making the other work; and *An Anecdoted Topography of Waste*, a cotton table cloth of sewn outlines of culinary objects, food waste and oil spills as a key to the whole exhibition, that is a way of thinking of what we ultimately leave behind after human production and consumption (figs 14-19).

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