

Toxic Material(itie)s: Eco-Material Entanglements in Art

Workshop at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg Cultures of Research, Aachen,
6–7 December 2023



Daphné Le Sergent, screenshot from *The Extractive Image*, 2021, video, black and white/color, 20'.

Our workshop sets out from the obvious, yet underexplored assumption, that much of the very stuff that art is made of is toxic. Whether working in the studio, in the dark room, in the quarry, or at contaminated sites, artists have been, and continue to be, exposed to a wide range of toxic materials. But exposure always goes hand in hand with its inevitable corollary, pollution—from the dumped toxic waste generated by the production of photographic materials to the air and water pollution generated by marble extraction. The toxicity of artistic materials extends far beyond the hazards of the artist's job—

they are part of larger environmental issues. So what can we learn when we explore artworks through the lens of their materiality within an expanded frame that is attentive to their art historical as well as environmental and sociopolitical context?

Organized by

Christian Berger (Universität Siegen), Kyveli Mavrokordopoulou (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam), Ruby de Vos (University of Groningen)

Schedule

6 December

17:00–18:30

Keynote by Esther Leslie (Birkbeck, University of London):

Art's Mediation as Remediation: On Some Artworks and their Reuses of Toxic Materials

There is so much toxicity and contamination in the world. It is incontestable that vast parts of nature are poisoned, ailing or in retreat, and under threat. We live amongst poisoned materials. Drawing on the various ways in which Adorno and Benjamin addressed both the assault on nature, in the name of progress, and the possibility - or significance - of art in and after catastrophe, a number of contemporary art practices are examined in this lecture as a working through of art as a form of mediation. This mediation is multiple: between nature and culture, between world and self, between politics and aesthetics. The works and practices under examination engage directly with toxic materials, actual or evoked. In this way, the toxic materials are re-mediated, in a double sense. They are used and reused as toxic materials, but in addition, they are remediated, which is to say provide some sort of remedy or alleviation of the dire circumstances. Through such practices, the transmutational capacities of art practice are engaged, but without negating the actual hurt in the world.

19:00 Dinner for participants

7 December

09:00–09:15 Set-Up

09:15–09:30

Christian Berger, Kyveli Mavrokordopoulou, Ruby de Vos: Welcome and Introduction

09:30–10:00

Ann-Sophie Lehmann (University of Groningen):

The Golden River: Depresenting Pollution in Flax Production

10:00–10:30

Marjolijn Bol (Utrecht University):

Materials and Institutions of Permanence: Durable Art for Nuclear Waste Containment

10:30–11:00

Material Engagement Session

11:00–11:30 Break

11:30–12:15

Kaja Ninnis (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin):

Poisonous Craft? Toxicity and the Arts and Crafts Movement

12:15–13:00

Ingrid Halland (University of Bergen):

White Waste? Towards a Deep Surface Aesthetics

13:00–14:15 Lunch break

14:15–15:00

Jessica Varner (Getty/ACLS Fellow)

Exhibiting Toxicity: Indanthren's Empire, Selling Coal's Modern Colors at BASF

15:00–15:45

Kappy Mintie (Yale University, online):

Oil of Vitriol: Sicilian Sulfur Mining and the Photo-Chemical Trade at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

15:45–16:15 Break

16:15–17:00

Marek Jancovic (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam):

The Poison Upstream: Toxic Materials in Celluloid Manufacturing and the Possibility of an Equitable Geography of Cinema

17:00–17:45

Screening: Daphné Le Sergeant, *The Extractive Image*, 2021

17:45–18:15 Closing Remarks

19:00 Dinner for participants