"What branches grow out of this stony rubbish?" Some notes on the art of Yelena Popova, Joanna Rajkowska, and Jan Eric Visser

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> *April is the cruellest month, breeding*
> *Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing*
> *Memory and desire, stirring*
> *Dull roots with spring rain.*[1]

"Breeding", "mixing", "stirring", "rain": three present participles, each one in the same position at the end of three of the most famous lines in English poetry: the opening to *The Waste Land* (1922) by T.S. Eliot. Each comes just after the comma that pauses the rhythm of each perfect iamb. Each leads onwards from the end of one line down into the beginning of the next. "Breeding", "mixing", "stirring". Together, they point to the (thwarted) generation of new life through a process of gathering and merging: life with death, the past with the future, the meteorological with the subterranean. To stir is both to mix and to spur to action. There can be no composition (of the poem, of the organism, of art) without composites. Or without compost. "We are all compost," wrote Donna Haraway, "not posthuman."[2] And then, delayed right to the very end of Eliot's first sentence, falls the rain.

If the very different artistic practices of Yelena Popova, Joanna Rajkowska, and Jan Eric Visser do indeed converge, then perhaps it is around compost. Organic waste material, gathered together, left for a time, given the occasional stir: compost is formed through a process of decomposition. Popova gathers ash and earth and organic matter in order to produce her own pigments according to centuries-old recipes; Jan Eric Visser makes sculpture from materials composed of recycled consumer waste; Joanna Rajkowska hastens the decomposition of a concrete structure by handing it over to the non-human.

In lines 19-20 of *The Waste Land*, Eliot asks the first of several questions that litter the text:

> *What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow*
> *Out of this stony rubbish?*

Here Eliot draws upon Ezekiel to ask the question in terms that are probably metaphysical or at least metaphorical. The exhibition title is a recycling of these lines, which are themselves recycled. But now the context has changed: Popova, Rajkowska and Visser are concerned not with the Christian soul, but with the actual matter of rubbish itself: the material legacies of Modernism, the cracked concrete that separates humans from the earth, the colossal wastefulness of contemporary consumer capitalism.

As per Haraway the compost-ist, Popova, Rajkowska and Visser are unquestionably materialists. Not necessarily in the sense of scientific materialism (which sees life like a mechanism) and certainly not in the sense of materialist consumerism, but in the sense that,

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[1] T.S. Eliot, 'The Wasteland', 1922

[2] Donna Haraway, 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin', *Environmental Humanities 6*, 2015

for each of them, in their own different ways, materiality matters. *The Waste Land* enacts a process of fragmentation, riddled with anxiety as order crumbles to dust. But for these three artists, the physical matter of the work – earth or muddy water, plants or concrete – is just as important as what it might signify in the realms of language or theory. "My work has always been connected to the materiality of painting," says Popova. Visser, meanwhile, writes of his work as "an artistic reconciliation between concept, matter and activism". Rajkowska has spoken of her antipathy to the symbolic: "I'm very much in this area of being low down on a material level."

But what are the roots that clutch? For both Visser and Rajkowska, the answer is in places quite literal. For *Trafostation* (2016), her site-specific installation in the city of Wrocław, Poland, Rajkowska has planted ruderal plants like horseweed and goosefoot, as well as ferns and ivy, geraniums, mosses and euonymus in the crumbling concrete of an old transformer station. She also replanted lots of local plants. The structure stands by the banks of river Oława that runs through the city. It was built in 1930, eight years after the publication of *The Waste Land*. Having stood disused for years, the Modernist concrete structure is now an unconsenting host to Rajkowska's public art. The air is made moist by a hidden fogging machine. A wall of water flows down the outside of the concrete building before being pumped back to the top by an unseen mechanism. Birds flit in and out. To Rajkowska's surprise, algae now coats the wall. Roots spread and the concrete begins to peel, like wallpaper or birch bark. *Trafostation* is a subtle work. When I visited in the summer of 2018, I got lost in suburbia before realising I had already walked right past it.

By contrast, the bold sculptural forms of Jan Eric Visser on show at l'étrangère make use of innovative new materials as way to critique today's over-reliance on concrete. If the cement industry were a country, it would be the third largest emitter of carbon dioxide in the world.[3] For the outdoor sculptures that Visser has been working on since 2008, he refuses to use traditional materials like bronze or stone. Instead, he has been working with a new type of concrete developed by the University of Technology Eindhoven, Netherlands. It is made from waste glass and left-over slag cement instead of sand, gravel and Portland cement. He also uses a material called Aquadyne. Produced from 100% consumer plastics, Aquadyne is a compressed mass of grey, with tiny flecks of man-made colour. Verified by University of Newcastle, Aquadyne is increasingly used as a drainage material. Because it contains pores that allow for the rooting of plants and vegetables, Aquadyne also makes an effective ground for green walls and facades. With both Rajkowska's *Trafostation* and Visser's Aquadyne sculptures therefore, if you wait long enough, the roots will thicken and spread. The structures will crumble but the branches will continue to grow.

Visser has not always used such cutting-edge commercial materials. Since 1987 he has been turning his own inorganic waste (plastic wrapping, packaging, used paper…) into indoor sculptures through a laborious personal process that has often been likened to alchemy. These sculptures also incorporate found materials such as sea clay and the ashes from friends' bonfires. "Form follows garbage," is Visser's reworking of the Modernist maxim, "Form follows function". The resulting works combine hard lines and geometric structures with forms that are altogether softer and more organic or anatomical in appearance. These hybrid sculptures are not intended to foreground a juxtaposition of differences but stem rather from an aesthetics of

[3] Jonathan Watts, 'Concrete: the most destructive material on earth', *The Guardian*, 25 February 2019

harmony. Each emerges organically out of the process of making. Visser does not work with a preconceived idea or design: "the sculpture, as it were, reveals itself to me," he says.

One has to look a little harder for the roots and branches growing out of Popova's work. You could say that she 'grows' her own pigments out of ash and earth. Popova's other paintings and installation works often seek to create their own space, but the paintings on show at l'étrangère point to pre-existing places beyond the confines of the gallery. She first started producing these Post-Petrochemical Paintings during a residency at Girton College, Cambridge in 2016/17. The college lies a little outside the town. There's an orchard and a duck pond. Taking walks in the grounds, Popova noticed the gardeners' work of keeping up the college grounds: pruning the orchard, cutting back bushes, how the apples were left to rot for the birds and animals. She began to collect mementoes: a pine cone or a handful of soil. She has always made her own paints and so it was a logical step to begin to incorporate these elements from the landscape. "Making pigment is part of my painting practice as much as making images," she says. "Maybe going for a walk is as important as making an image."

Popova's mementos from the landscape must be sieved twice, then ground through a marble grinder. The resulting powders are stored in jam jars in the artist's studio, before being mixed into paint. This is a time-consuming process that, for Popova, constitutes a conscious refusal of both the modern petrochemical industry and the ever-accelerating consumer cycle, the emergence of which can be traced, roughly, to the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century. As such, Popova's practice – so too Visser's – aligns with Isabelle Stengers' critique of what she calls 'fast sciences', the extractive technologies that emerged alongside industrialism. That era's fixation with endless growth and 'progress' is still with us, stronger than ever. Conscious of living and working within an era of crisis (both of capitalism and the climate), Popova's rejection of this industrial legacy is two-fold: a rejection of its materiality (the synthetic pigments born of the petrochemical industry) and a rejection of its obsession with speed. Popova's practice involves a conscious slowing down. "Chemists, for instance, used to be artisans, craftsmen. They were working with semi-purified compounds and recipes," says Stengers.[4] It is this artisanal, alchemical, pre-Modern tradition of making that Popova revisits through a painting practice that she terms, with a certain embrace of contradiction, Medieval Modernism.

Popova's foraged and hand-ground pigments create paintings characterised by a crisp-edged transparency that builds up in multiple pale layers. The application of paint is an organic process that follows the movements of the artist's body. Like Visser, Popova does not plan. Instead, she speaks of work that "unfolds itself, builds itself like an oyster or a spider web". This circular forms of the resulting works can then be read, in part at least, as a visualisation of Popova's interest in slower, more circular economic models that eschew the loud transience of capitalist production. You will not find bright synthetic colours in Popova's paintings. The caramel brown
colour originates in the soil of the Lake District; ochre and sienna come from Portugal. The darkest grey is burnt seaweed.

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?

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[4] Isabelle Stengers in Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers, Anna Tsing, Nils Bubandt, 'Anthropologists Are Talking – About Capitalism, Ecology, and Apocalypse', *Ethnos, Journal of Anthropology*, 2018

In the final lines of *The Waste Land*, the narrator – one of many in this composite composition – asks what to do. In a world turned desert, is it too late to set the land in order? The language of the Anthropocene suggests that this is now humanity's problem to solve. But maybe some humility would not go amiss. "'What do we do now?' is the question most frequently asked," wrote Hannah Arendt, "and there is no answer."[5] Instead, each of the three artists asks the question differently. For, in the end, the question of what to do is a question of ethics and of the future.

By embracing the latest technologies, Visser's might seem to suggest hope that human ingenuity will provide some form of salvation. This reading would frame Visser's art as fundamentally optimistic. Visser himself, however, sees it differently: he is highly critical of a global building industry that is too slow to reduce its reliance of concrete. His choice of newly created materials therefore forms a criticism of those companies that continue to use harmful materials when less expropriative alternatives already exist. But more than this, Visser sees garbage itself as a metaphor for the human tendency so often to avoid the most important questions, such as that asked by Arendt. His abstract forms remain untitled and unrecognisable. The need that visitors feel to reach out and touch these strange, bewildering shapes suggests perhaps that there will always be a mystery, held in reserve, just beyond our grasp.

Popova's paintings are also a political critique of industrial, mass-produced modernity. Instead, she advocates a retreat into a slower, more personal practice attuned to labour and limitation. "I'm not trying to escape the cycle of production and consumption," she says of her decision to avoid the use of petrochemical products in her paintings. "I'm trying to create a different cycle of gathering and making and placing oneself."

> *The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf*
> *Clutch and sink into the wet bank: The wind*
> *Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.*

Rajkowska treads another path altogether. She offers *Trafostation* as a gift to the non-human. As with all gifts, this is a strange, contradictory gesture. While some of her other public art projects contains elements of hope, *Trafostation* is not an uplifting work: the wall of water recalls the 1997 flood that devastated Wrocław and nods perhaps to the great floods of mythology that today's climate scientists tell us will one day come again. At the same time, Rajkowska's decision to produce photographic documentation of the project brings it back into the realms of the human and of the present. This may be a work for a non-human future but tomorrow always grows out of today. Gifts always come with strings attached. The photographs also beg the question: if the work outlives the artist, who (or what) will record the changes then? Perhaps *Trafostation* will function as its own archive. "*Trafostation* is an articulation of complete disappointment," says Rajkowska. And yet the photographic documentation that she has produced is so alluring: concrete turning slimy, rusting edges overrun with green.

"We cannot pretend to know the future," argues Isabelle Stengers, "but we can ask the question: What can we leave to these [future] generations?" In the arid desert of *The Waste Land*, the fragmentation of the old order is a flood that must be defended against with vigilance and care ("These fragments I have shored against my ruins"). For Stengers, and possibly Rajkowska too, one answer lies in accepting, rather than resisting, ruin: "We cannot leave them

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[5] Hannah Arendt, Letter to novelist Mary McCarthy, May 15, 1972

anything but ruins. They will have to go on living in ruins, because there is no other possibility. Gaia is here to stay."[6] At *Trafostation*, the crumbling of modernity is inevitable and damp.

> *Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.*
> *The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,*
> *Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends*
> *Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.*

"Humans leave their mark, and the earth carries it forward as an archive."[7]

"We all live downriver now."[8]

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[6] Isabelle Stengers in Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers, Anna Tsing, Nils Bubandt, 'Anthropologists Are Talking – About Capitalism, Ecology, and Apocalypse', *Ethnos, Journal of Anthropology*, 2018

[7] Jussi Parikka, A Geology of Media, 2015

[8] Ken Worpole, New English Landscape, 2013