

APPROVAL SHEET

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ABSTRACT

Title of Document: ALWAYS-ALREADY ABSENT PRESENT:
ON TRAUMA AND MATERIALITY.

Alieh Rezaei, Master of Fine Arts, 2022

Directed By: Dr. Kathy O'Dell, Associate Professor
Department of Visual Arts

In *Always-Already Absent Present: On Trauma and Materiality*, I explore linguistic experience and its effects through my art practice working with organic materials. My story started with a painful car accident. Later, aspects of that trauma were repeated when I realized that being outside my mother tongue, the same traumatic accident was occurring – this time, leaving its mark on my tongue. This thesis provides perspective on the concept of death, expanding the notion to the fundamental connection of human beings with nature and the intermediation of language. Living in a language other than my mother tongue, with its constant mandate of translation, has forced me to navigate the following issue: Humans do not have direct access to nature. Rather, this connection is murdered by language. In my artistic practice, I examine this barrier through the formation of waste, the abject, and the language of excrement.

ALWAYS-ALREADY ABSENT PRESENT: ON TRAUMA AND MATERIALITY.

By

Alieh Rezaei

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Dedication

To Kathy O'Dell

and other welcoming hands.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Kathy O'Dell, who held my hands when I was floating into the air and helped my feet to stand on the educational ground of the U.S. from my first step entering UMBC; Mark Alice Durant, who encouraged me to be brave and embrace the instant; and Cathy Cook who has accompanied my passion and has been a reliable second eye for my practice. I would like to thank Kristen Hileman, who opened my eyes through critical art theories and Kathy Marmor, who spent a considerable amount of time guiding me through the practice of sculpting materials. I am grateful to Irene Chan for sharing her natural objects collection with me and helping me to look at organic materials in a respectful way. Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Morteza Hosseini, who has supported me to pursue my craziness in the world of art.

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Introduction

Approaching the installation space within the Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture (CADVC) that is dedicated to my works, the visitor sees a configuration of orange peels surrounded by feathery looking seeds pinned to the exterior wall. Upon entering the space, the visitor sees that the orange peels continue to trail around the corner and onto the interior wall. Now inside, the visitor also encounters three rows of curtains hanging on steel wires attached to two opposite walls at a height of approximately eight feet. The curtains comprise long strands of beeswax and wicks hung several inches apart from each other on the steel wires. The strands resemble umbilical cords. On the floor between the curtains lie pieces of beeswax-covered tree bark and shattered wood, the wax contributing to a fleshy look. The visitor can walk around in the space, pass between the hanging rows of cords and navigate around the bark pieces. They can also view, on the wall opposite the orange peels, a single flat piece resembling an animal hide, six feet by four feet, made of palm fibers. Finally, on the floor at the base of the remaining wall lies a 31 inches by 39 inches framed rectangular piece of window glass, atop and underneath which is an arrangement of small objects resembling eggshells and other organic forms, also made of beeswax.

Across campus at the Joseph Beuys Sculpture Park, another portion of my thesis project was installed as a pop-up exhibition and performance, titled *The Tongue in the Landscape*, for three hours on the afternoon of April 1, 2022, a few days before the CADVC exhibition opened on April 5. The materials for this event included many of the wax-covered pieces of bark and wood that I then repositioned in my CADVC

installation, along with a video documenting the performance, made available to visitors by scanning a QR code on the wall label.



Figure 1. Views of my thesis installation at CADVC, UMBC, 2022



Figure 2. Views of my thesis installation at CADVC, UMBC, 2022



Figure 3. Views of my thesis installation at CADVC, UMBC, 2022

Chapter 1: Metamorphosis

*French psychotherapist and theorist Jacques Lacan in a 1972 lecture talks about a dream of one of his patients. She dreamed “that the source of existence would spring forever from her. The Pascalian dream, an infinity of lives descending from her in an endless line. She woke up half mad.... It’s a question of the thought of seeing life as a concept.”*¹

¹ “Jacques Lacan giving a lecture at The Catholic University of Louvain in 1972,” YouTube, September 17, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1PmWy4aSaQ>

Trauma

I'm opening my eyes. My lips are dehydrated. I can barely move them. The nurse puts her ear to my lips: "What do you want?" She repeats the question. I ask: "Can I hold your hand?" She held my hand for a few seconds, but she was too busy to stay with me in the recovery room that day. I still vividly feel those seconds. My fingers still keep that warmth. Traditional descriptions of the senses measure that touch, which lies close to pain.² I needed touch to replace my pain, or else another body to replace mine. I've experienced this self-replacement in object-making, as beeswax responds to my fingers' warmth. As I sense this warmth with my thumbs, I remember the night I felt my bed standing vertically, my body attached to it in a cross formation.

In *The Ontology of the Accident*, French philosopher Catherine Malabou explains how the understanding of "plasticity" in science, art, and education is consistently framed as something positive, as "a sort of natural sculpting that forms our identity."³ She asserts that plasticity also carries a certain negativity, however: "[T]he destruction too is formative.... Destruction has its own sculpting tools."⁴ In this book, she outlines an entirely different condition of plasticity from that which has become the norm, linking it to "the possibility of explosion, the annihilation of

2 For more on this topic, see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 165-166.

3 Catherine Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, trans. Carolyn Shread (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2012), 3.

4 Ibid., 5.

equilibrium,”⁵ and the destruction of general identity. Malabou points to an instance in Greek mythology when Daphne transforms into a laurel tree to save herself from Phoebus, who is chasing her.⁶ Malabou identifies this transformation as a type of redemption and salvation. She goes on to describe transformation-by-destruction as a form of the impossibility of escape. In explaining metamorphosis by destruction, she writes, “all of a sudden [the traumatized] people became strangers to themselves because they could not flee.”⁷ She describes this as “a situation in which an extreme tension, a pain, or malaise pushes a person toward an outside that does not exist. What is a way out, what can a way out be, when there is no outside, no elsewhere?”⁸ In these circumstances, the only form of alterity that exists is “being other to the self.”⁹

Having had a spinal prosthesis implanted and constant pain for years following a car accident that caused me to be ejected from my body and, subsequently, having moved to a new country and confronting a new language – these things alone/together constitute trauma. Trauma has transformed my body as a creator and changed my method of creating, leading me to my current practice of making series of repetitive acts. Trauma has also led me to ponder how death can leak into my life and how, in turn, that process can be conceptually explored through language, repetition, and the materials I choose to work with as an artist. Novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard describes death as a “dimension of life” that embodies a certain negative capacity. Death, he

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 10.

7 Ibid., 13.

8 Ibid., 10.

9 Ibid., 11.

writes, is “no more than a branch that cracks in the wind, a jacket that slips off a clothes hanger and falls to the floor.”¹⁰ It is not an impulse toward self-annihilation or organic demise, but an impulse toward inertia.



Figure 4. An early experiment with wax in which I explore trauma by attempting to transform a luminous candle into the abject. Spring 2019. Materials: my hair, two bricks, paraffin, soy wax.

10 Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle: Book One*, trans. Don Bartlett (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 441. Originally published in Norwegian in 2009.

Excess

Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, in his 1989 book *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, takes a Lacanian approach to discussing the death drive,¹¹ arguing that it is not the driven tendency of every living thing to return to an inorganic state. Rather, it is part of the “human psychic apparatus” to favor a “blind automatism of repetition” that persists “beyond pleasure-seeking” and even “self-preservation.”¹² To Žižek, the death drive is a sort of “ontological derailment,” which throws subjectivity out of joint with its milieu. Žižek argues “all ‘culture’ is a way to reaction-formation to limit, canalize - to cultivate this imbalance, this traumatic kernel, this radical antagonism through which man cuts his umbilical cord with nature, with animal homeostasis.”¹³

In a chapter of his book, titled “You Only Die Twice,”¹⁴ Žižek explains that to Lacan, the structure of the unconscious, like language, is governed by “a traumatic core,” which lies beyond the symbolic order. Žižek argues that “[a]s the symbolic order is striving for a homeostatic balance, there is in its kernel, as its very center,

11 Sigmund Freud introduced the concept of the death drive in his 1920 essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” wherein he argues that the death drive is closely bound up in biology. Lacan follows Freud, though he states that the death drive is not associated with a kind of negativity or mortality in opposition to life; instead, it is “an inherent self-blockage of the drive” itself. (Quoted in Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* [New York: Verso, 2011], 305.) For Lacan, all those impulses that entail a kind of activity and libidinal enjoyment are instances of drive, and all instances of drive potentially constitute the death drive because it pushes toward excess. To summarize, the death drive comprises those impulses and libidinal enjoyment that characterize human subjects’ dedication to the pursuit of exceeding the limits of their biological best interests. According to Freud, the life drive tends toward cohesion and unity, while the death drive veers in the opposite direction, toward the undoing of connections and destruction of things. Lacan follows Freud in reaffirming the concept of the death drive, though “Lacan states that ‘the death must be distinguished from the biological instinct to return to the inanimate.’” (Quoted in Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* [New York: Routledge, 1996], 32-33.)

12 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), xxvii. Originally published in 1989.

13 Ibid., xxviii.

14 Ibid., 145.

some strange, traumatic element which cannot be symbolized, integrated into symbolic order.” Žižek describes this situation as “exactly the opposite of the symbolic order: ... [it is] the radical annihilation of the symbolic texture through which so-called reality is constituted... not the death of the so-called ‘real object’ in its symbol, but the obliteration of the signifying network itself.”¹⁵

This Lacanian point of view is also found in Julia Kristeva’s theorizing of the “abject” as the “jettisoned object,” which “is radically excluded and draws [a person] toward the place where meaning collapses.”¹⁶ Žižek uses the term “Thing” when discussing this place of the “pre-symbolic.”¹⁷ He describes this Thing as “being nothing at all in itself ... it is the real at its purest: a semblance, something which on a strictly symbolic level does not exist at all ... but at the same time the thing against which the whole [of] reality is defenseless.”¹⁸ Similarly, Kristeva asserts that the cause of being abject is not the lack of cleanliness or health, but the disruption of identity, system, and order.¹⁹

With these theories, I aim to clarify how a seemingly unrepresentable entity can stand beyond a signifier’s structure and slip from my language but become representable in the process of formation and sculpting. As a foreign person, I’ve experienced strangeness and abjection through endless attempts to personalize my host country’s language. It has been back-breaking to express/verbalize my innermost feelings outside my mother-tongue, and therefore, failure to do so feels like a

¹⁵ Ibid., 146.

¹⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

¹⁷ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 86.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

symbolic death, like being banished from the construction and transmission of language.²⁰ It's as if the language is dictating orders to my tongue, and my tongue produces a stutter that impedes the articulation of that language, leaving an "always-already absent present"²¹ mark on my tongue. At the same time, I have found myself becoming a channel for revealing the transitive quality issuing from my lingual experience. Through my materials, I am able to expand on this personal issue, not only to refer to a more generic gap inside the language, but also to its capacity to sculpt and be sculpted.

20 Žižek explains Lacan's conception of two different deaths: biological and its symbolization. For example, excluding Antigone "from the symbolic community of the city, precedes her actual death," which is the opposite of the ghost of Hamlet's father, whose "actual death [was] unaccompanied by the symbolic death – which is why he returns as a frightful apparition until his debt has been repaid." Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 150.

21 Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology* articulates the contradiction of experience and thought inside language as an original lack inside the language. Calling on his terminology of the "trace," he describes this lack as the "mark of the absence of presence, an always-already absent present," a "contradicting logic" that one "must learn to use and erase the language at the same time." Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Corrected Edition, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) xvii.

Chapter 2: Materiality

I whispered, while sleeping and feeling a rubbery mass between my fingers, which were massaging and playing with the mass: “Now I’d like to put a slight pressure on this side.” I wake up and see my hand playing with the silicone ear plugs that I had put in my ears to block night noise. I have no idea how I could have taken them out without knowing and, moreover, found them moldable enough to sculpt objects in my sleep.

Deject

There are lives not sustained by desire, as desire is always for objects. Such lives are based on exclusion.

~Julia Kristeva²²

I stare at the linear map, a floorplan of the CADVC, a portion of which I will fill with my sculptural objects within a few months. The absence of content squeezes my throat and drives my belly to vomit. The whiteness of the gallery walls reminds me of Kristeva discussing the abject in terms of loathing an item of food. She describes a moment when a person's "lips touch that skin on the surface of milk,"²³ and the body immediately experiences "spasms in the stomach, the belly; and the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeats, cause forehead and hands to perspire."²⁴ Kristeva points to this nausea as a sign that "I" is separating from the parent's proffer. But according to her, as "the food is not an 'other' for 'me,' I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which I claim to establish *myself*."²⁵ She declares that this physical reaction protects the self, preventing "defilement, sewage, and muck." According to her, "I" becomes an "other" in this process at the expense of its own death and gives birth to itself "amid the violence of sobs, of vomit."²⁶

²² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 6.

²³ Ibid., 2.

²⁴ Ibid., 3.

²⁵ Ibid. The italics are Kristeva's.

²⁶ Ibid.

The purpose of the blank gallery space with its milk-white walls is meant to honor my art practice. Still, it constantly differentiates me as a stranger and pushes the boundaries of my body to the unknown future condition of being a foreigner,²⁷ precisely like the thin creamy layer of skin on milk that operates as a border, a layer of the situation between two states of being. In this encounter, I cannot decide about forms and object-making; this is where the meaning of objects collapses, and I am in suspension, realizing my position is in opposition to the objects and their content. But I endure the “emergence of uncanniness,” which Kristeva describes as bearing the “weight of the meaningless, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me... if I acknowledge it, [it] annihilates me.”²⁸

Consequently, I can survive through the abject. To Kristeva, “the one by whom the abject exists is ... a *deject* who places [herself], *separates* [herself], situates [herself],” and “is in short a *stray*” engaged in questions “concerning [her] place: ‘*Where* am I?’ instead of ‘*Who* am I?’”²⁹

27 The MFA exhibition and my graduation will terminate my alien, legal, and social status as a student.

28 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.

29 Ibid., 8. The italics are Kristeva’s. NOTE: I have changed the pronouns himself/him in the quotation to herself/her.

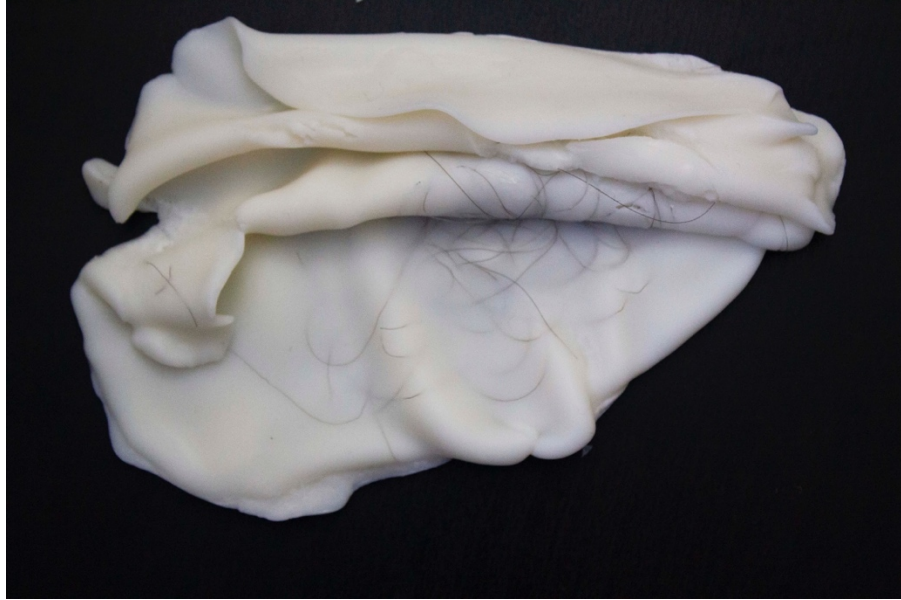


Figure 5. My early pieces using wax and my hair to create a layer resonating a milk surface.

Touchstones³⁰

Fat in Joseph Beuys's works, particularly *Fat Corner* (1982), *Fat Chair* (1964-1985), and *Tallow* (1977) have influenced my approach to working with organic materials to create forms. Mark C. Taylor in the book *Refiguring the Spiritual*³¹ asserts that fat is traditionally associated with excess and waste. Taylor notes that for *Tallow*, Beuys chose to engage the abject by showing the piece "in the least desirable location..., [where] the devastation of the site is captured in the abjection of [base] material."³² Beuys is interested in the character transformation that happens with fat as it moves from a messy and unsettled state to an ordered and solid state. For him, three fields of power are at work in constructing the idea of sculpture: form, movement, and chaos. In his short statement titled "Introduction," 1979, he asserts: "Processes continue in most of [my sculptures]: chemical reactions, fermentations, color changes, decay, drying up. Everything is in a *state of change*."³³ Beuys's approach to sculpture has influenced my understanding of form, as I work with beeswax as my primary material, the character of which, similar to that of fat, can be shaped into different formations through warming processes that change its temperature, color, and texture.

I've also been curious about and analyzed Matthew Barney's works to decode the psychosexual narrative in *Cremasters* (1994-2002). Subsequently, I became

30 For illustrations of works by the artists discussed in this section, see Appendix 1.

31 Mark C. Taylor, *Refiguring the Spiritual: Beuys, Barney, Turrell, Goldsworthy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 41.

32 Ibid., 19. Taylor describes the site in Münster as "a dangerous underground passage where drug users and criminals often hung out."

33 Joseph Beuys, "Introduction," in *Energy Plan for the Western Man, Joseph Beuys in America, Writings by and Interviews with the Artist*, compiled by Carin Kuoni (NY: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990), 19. The italics are Beuys's.

interested in his sculptural components, which make a cohesive narrative along with the films. Like Beuys, Barney's sculpture demonstrates the quality of not being fixed as it remains in the process of formation. Taylor describes Barney's materials in compelling terms: "it's all about the goo: the way it looks, smells, feels – the way it oozes and seeps, jiggles and ripples, mold and melts, drips and splashes.... Some things stick, others slip."³⁴ Also, I've been moved by the live performance scenes in Barney's film *River of Fundament* (2014), based on Norman Mailer's 1983 novel *Ancient Evenings*. These scenes are taken in the landscape and, as he describes in an interview, are witnessed by a group of onlookers, so what we see in the movie was for them happening in real-time. Barney also explains the intercut between the character and the environment he was inspired by in *Ancient Evening*. He describes an interchangeable connection between the description of the environment and the protagonist while dying; when the earth is excreting sulfur gases and the molten iron is bubbling below the surface, the body's waste product is identical with the waste of the earth.³⁵

The following artists and works have also been touchstones throughout the research for and creation of my thesis exhibition project. I have been drawn to the immersive smell of wax and the sensation of touching it in Wolfgang Laib's *Wax Room*, 2013, in the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.,³⁶ as well as his repetitive

³⁴ Taylor, *Refiguring the Spiritual*, 47.

³⁵ Pitchfork, "Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler Talk *River of Fundament* on Pitchfork.tv," December 3, 2015, <https://pitchfork.com/news/62362-matthew-barney-and-jonathan-bepler-talk-river-of-fundament-on-pitchforktv/>

³⁶ Klaus Ottman, "WAX ROOM: WOHIN BIST DU GEGANGEN – WOHIN GEHST DU? (WHERE HAVE YOU GONE – WHERE ARE YOU GOING?)," 2013," *Phillips 100*, adapted from *Seeing Differently: The Phillips Collects for a New Century*, Washington, D.C.: The Phillips Collection in association with Giles, 2021, <https://www.phillipscollection.org/collection/laib-wax-room>

act of collecting pollen every year since 1977 as material for his work.³⁷ The meditative quality in Laib's work is close to my experience in collecting and stitching the seeds as a component of my work even though this meditative quality is not my aim. Neri Oxman's research on the behavioral dynamics of bees and the interconnection between humans and bees has also been helpful, despite the very different function of her research outcomes. As an architect and designer, her comb construction projects like *Synthetic Apiary I*, 2016, and *Synthetic Apiary II*, 2019, created in collaboration with The Mediated Matter Group at MIT, reveal better design strategies to pursue for everyday architecture.³⁸ Oxman's visionary observations of beehives nourishes my thought to distinguish two different aspects of human connectivity with beeswax combs: not making for smashing, but making for constructing. This option has helped me feel less despondent when facing my psychoanalytic research on human destructive behavior. Among the artists who work with trauma as subject matter, I've been looking at Eva Hesse's life and sculptures, specifically the irregular form of cords and organic color in her sculptures even though her choice of industrial material – like liquid latex – is different from mine.³⁹ Michael Armitage's painting on lugubo bark cloth made in Uganda by Baganda

37 In the catalogue for Laib's 2005 exhibition in Australia, curator Anthony Boyd explains: "Each year in May [Laib] sets out to collect pollen. He collects in dedicated areas at very precise times according to the cycle of the plants - first hazelnut, then dandelion followed by buttercup and finally pine." Anthony Boyd, *Wolfgang Laib* (Sydney, Australia: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2005), 13. I relate to this precision of timing, as it was crucial to my collection of wild Clematis seeds (more on this shortly).

38 "Neri Oxman's Synthetic Apiary II shows how beehive construction 'is a responsive and dynamic process,'" *Dezeen*, November 19, 2021, <https://www.dezeen.com/2021/11/19/neri-oxman-synthetic-apiary-two-honey-bees/>

39 Whitney Museum of American Art Collection, "Eva Hesse, *No Title*, 1969-1970," <https://whitney.org/collection/works/5551>

people, a material traditionally used for funeral cloths, stimulated my interest in cultural connections with nature.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ In an interview with Hanna Grima, Michael Armitage explains his interest in “the innate and cultural issues” within his use of material. Hanna Grima and Michael Armitage, “Bark Cloth: Artist Michael Armitage explains how a Ugandan cloth changed everything,” *MoMA Magazine*, January 14, 2020, <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/219>

Something, Nothing, Something ...

Hold it fast no matter what it may try in its burning desire to free itself; it will assume every kind of form, will transform itself into water and into divine fire; but you must hold on to it without flinching or grasp it even more tightly.

~ Eidothee warns Menelaus against the ruses of Proteus.⁴¹

I'm opening my notebook and see the beeswax that has built up around my pencil and begin to gently remove it. Now I'm sensing a thick wax building up under my fingernails and remembering the effort to tame the wild wax in my studio and catch its essence of form. Sometimes my body subdues the wax to a desired form like a matador gains control over a bull. I'm amazed by the wax's formation, as if it's grown into a part of my own body; as if the material has grown into an independent organ all by itself. The beeswax formed by hive worker bees progressively becomes yellow as they chew and contaminate it with pollen, chewing until it is suitable for them to build a honeycomb for containing bees' larvae and storing honey and pollen.

From my research, I know that one gram of this beeswax, the amount that I was playing with under my fingernails just now, is procured by smashing 1,100 hexagonal cells of a beehive.⁴² There is no way to describe the enormous effect of this story on my life.

Wax has been an excellent material through which to gain an understanding of the dynamics of elasticity. I have spent countless hours tracking the transitions from

⁴¹ Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, 9. NOTE: I have changed the pronouns he/him/his in the quotation to it/its.

⁴² For my main research sources on the lives of bees, see the "Documentaries on Bees" section at the end of my Bibliography.

liquidity to firmness at different temperatures. In reheating, remelting, recooling, and retouching the wax, I would seek and find a perfect moment of warmth that called on me to create a form, and I would do so at one precise moment over the course of a couple of seconds.

Chapter 3: Installation

*Life has been washed away by the hands of language
I'm brought back to a cold, slippery, fleshy ground
You might feel it with turning your tongue around in your mouth
I return home
Waiting for the only thing that I will cry for
Milk
While the only connection urges me
The umbilical cord*

The Umbilical Cords

Wax is a smashed womb, squeezed out to extract sweetness, so as to alter an eternity.

The cords (from four feet to twelve feet in length) dangle from the gallery ceiling, gradually approaching the ground, some of them falling while I try to hang them from a wire. The cords suggest human umbilical cords and their dis/connection from nourishing resources. If one falls, it changes into a little pile of shit lying on the wood floor. This change strikes me as the fundamental result of nourishing one's body, the nourishment transforming into material waste.

While creating the umbilical cords, I encountered what seemed like a miracle. My friend showed me her child's umbilical cord, which had been preserved for years, and it was the exact color tone I had chosen to work with: the natural yellow of beeswax. In the process of making the cords, pulling them out from a hot pot in one motion, resonates with pulling a child out of a womb. To me, this gesture, alongside the warmth of unshaped beeswax, recalls the abject quality of matter surrounding a fetus.

After hanging the cords, I feel they are inviting me to touch them, to feel the safety of the home from which they came, and to witness their temperature gradually falling. Sometimes experiencing this process tempts me to reheat the beeswax and make another cord – again and again. I spent several days in the gallery, recreating them to capture my desired form.



Figure 6. *The Umbilical Cords* installed at the CADVC, 2022.



Figure 7. *The Umbilical Cords* installed at the CADVC, 2022.

The Tongue in the Landscape

Over the course of the last two years, I've been taking large pieces of bark that have fallen from trees along the Patapsco River and carried them to my studio to preserve them from decaying by covering them with wax, thereby transforming them into a series of pieces titled *The Tongue in the Landscape* (2020-2022). Spending long periods of time in the woods, placing my hands on the surface layer of the trees' trunks, my skin and flesh have experienced a kind of intercession.⁴³ In other words, I sense my flesh mediating my psychical connection with and perception of vital living. Something is always there – a cancelation, failure, and lack – that echoes humanity more than nature. Manipulating the appearances of organic objects and transforming them into human-body-resonating forms emanate not only from a curiosity about organic material, but from the desire to explore the potential of that material to illustrate traumatic detachment through the quality of the abject – here, the abject in the form of wounds and shattered fragments of tongue.

In my Joseph Beuys' Sculpture Park⁴⁴ installation, by positioning tongue-like fragments of wax-covered bark next to the trees and stones, I pointed to the impossibility of human beings returning to a balance with nature. In this manner, on the one hand, I echo Žižek describing the human being as “the wound of nature,”

43 Giuseppe Penone's conceptual and material work with trees came to my attention near the end of my thesis research. I plan to look at his work more closely in relation to my own in future iterations of my installation. For now, these two sources have confirmed a relation between our interests in natural materials, though my interests are more rooted in psychoanalytic theory: Giuseppe Penone, “Trees,” *Giuseppe Penone* (artist's website), <https://giuseppepenone.com/en/words/trees>; Elizabeth Mangini, “1000 Words: Giuseppe Penone,” *Artforum* 49: 2 (October 2010), <https://www.artforum.com/print/201008/1000-words-giuseppe-penone-26418>.

44 The Joseph Beuys Sculpture Park at UMBC expands on Beuys's *7000 Oaks*, a multiyear tree-planting project he initiated at documenta 7 in Kassel, Germany, in 1982. See [here](#) for more information.

which, as such, can do nothing but “accept fully this cleft, this fissure, this structural rooting out.” Otherwise, he continues, we engage in an “illusion of a possible return to nature, the idea of a total socialization of nature [which] are a direct path to totalitarianism.”⁴⁵ To clarify Žižek’s argument, psychoanalyst and theorist Derek Hook, in an article titled “Of Symbolic Mortification,” explains Žižek’s interpretation of the death drive through the notion of “denaturalization.”⁴⁶ Hook clarifies Žižek’s argument on how human beings, as driven entities, seem to constantly bypass and go beyond their instincts or instinctual values, and thus are motivated by what is not in their best interests. Their pursuit of a certain type of enjoyment invariably takes them beyond what is rational, thereby submitting their animality to the death drive.⁴⁷ Therefore, Žižek’s notion of denaturalization means that because we are able to find certain gratification and moments of enjoyable

45 Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, xxviii.

46 “Denaturalization” is being referred to here as meaning “the sociocultural overwriting of vital being [which] involves the colonization of the living by the dead...human life is lived under the dominance of a lifeless set of cadaverizing signifiers,” as Lacanian scholar Adrian Johnston points out in Derek Hook’s “Of Symbolic Mortification and ‘Undead Life’: Slavoj Žižek on the Death Drive,” *Psychoanalysis and History*, vol. 18, no. 2 (June 2016), 20-21. In other words, Hook continues, Lacan’s “prioritization of the symbolic over the registers of biology and individual human experience -- ‘Man is prior to his birth and beyond his death, caught up in the symbolic chain’ [Lacan] – picks up notable momentum here.” Ibid., 21.

47 Hook posits that in Lacanian terms, the death drive is not a separate drive but an aspect of every drive. And because every drive is involved with the subject of repetition and attempts to go beyond the pleasure principle, it enables and reproduces repetition, or what Lacan calls “repetition automatism.” Žižek asserts that this condition of repetition enables humans to put the whole notion of the death drive into language, resulting in the consistent repetition of “the symbolic.” And he addresses how this insistent repetition overrides the vitality of direct experience and perception and comes between humans and their experiences. By citing a Hegelian phenomenological idea that “the word is a death, a murder of a thing,” Žižek argues that “as soon as the reality is symbolized, caught up in a symbolic network, the thing itself is more present in the word [Lacan later shifted from the “word” to “language”] in its concept, than its immediate reality.” Being caught up in this automatic network brings a mortifying effect on humans, Žižek writes, as they “become part of a strange automatic order disrupting [their] natural homeostatic balance.” Ibid., 20-21.

suffering (in Lacanian terms, *jouissance*), we pursue a variety of activities that are beyond the instinctual scope of our animality.⁴⁸

My three-hour *The Tongue in the Landscape* performance featured me laboriously peeling the wax layer off the pieces of bark as I held them, one after another, in my arms or lap. Portions of the wax eventually, after much scraping and blowing on them to get the wax warm, would pop off the bark. This gesture suggests a manipulation and re-formation of the material that acts as a kind of search for an enjoyable suffering beyond rational pleasure; but at same time, it is a reminder of the fundamental desire to be rooted out from nature as a human in order to construct culture. For the viewer, my attempt was to create a haptic effect through transference of visual experience to corporeal experience with a focus on sensual predilections for touch.



Figure 8. Still from the 13-minute video documentation of *The Tongue in the Landscape* performance, Joseph Beuys Sculpture Park, UMBC, April 1, 2022

⁴⁸ Ibid., 17-20.



Figure 9. The pieces in the gallery after the performance, CADVC

Collective Womb

Seeds

Walking in a neighborhood in Maryland, I spotted a wild plant with tiny feathery seeds climbing a pine tree and the fence rows alongside it. Later, I found that the plant is called wild Clematis (*Clematis vitalba*), which is native to North America. This plant changed my assumptions of what could serve as material for art-making. I brought some of these seeds home and started to stick them together one by one. Sticking seeds together in rows with utmost care has been the most repetitive and mechanical act of making art I have developed in my studio. Particularly during the Covid-19 quarantine in Spring 2020, as I was experiencing inertia from not engaging in communal activities, I found a method of working that produced something with no meaning or function, something out of joint with time but still generative in its nature (seeds). This method and outcome could be repeated and reproduced over and over. From my point of view, the resulting seed rows question the quality of time in relation to meaning. I dedicated considerable time and intensive labor to constructing them. To me, these materials challenge chronological time and demonstrate an abstraction, all through the repetition of their making.



Figure 10. Seeds placed on wooden sticks, 2021.

Orange Peels

I preserve orange peels with beeswax and attach the seed rows on their edges. After peeling and tasting an orange's sweetness, something remains that's beyond taste and other signifiers. As discarded skins, orange peels trespass into the world of waste. The no-longer-desirable materials call attention to the realm of death. In the documentary *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*,⁴⁹ Žižek suggests we should not react to commonly seen heaps of waste, which represent the other side of consumerism, but "accept that there are things out there that serve nothing [and] break out of the cycle of functioning." He continues with the necessity of "authentic passive experience," which emerges after suspending the importance of proper functioning, as a means toward understanding what history means. Reflecting on Walter Benjamin, he states that it's when the "waste of culture" is "being half retaken by nature," [that] "we get an intuition of what history means."⁵⁰ A seed on the edge of an orange peel attempts to build toward a world of excess, as it also represents a non-functioning repetitive attempt at preservation to linger beyond its own death. Something undead, because it is already dead, stays alive in the realm of meaningless.

49 Sophie Fiennes, James Wilson, and Slavoj Žižek, *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2013).

50 For a good summary of the film *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* cited in the preceding footnote, see Nicholas Laurent, "What is 'The Pervert's Guide to Ideology' About?" *norswap*, December 20, 2017, <https://norswap.com/zizek-ideology/>



Figure 11. *Collective Womb*, seeds and orange peels, CADVC, 2022.

Name-of-the-Father

In my dream, a child attempts to remove his poop from the rug in one quick swipe. The poop is smoother than he estimated. His tiny fingers get messy, and the poop remains on the rug. He fails. I watched him and thought: “He is precisely the patriarchal figure who has censored my desire and body for a long time. And now, he cannot clean up his own mess.” That childish patriarchal figure failed to lift its poop, and my matriarchal role remained muted as I couldn’t grasp the language.

On the floor of my space in the CADVC is an installation I consider an “inscription,” in which visitors see objects of different sizes on a framed piece of window glass, 31 inches by 39 inches, placed on the floor. Some of the objects appear to be eggshells of the same size, made of wax, and arranged in a linear order. In addition to the forms resembling eggshells are others, also made of wax, that have been molded and changed into forms resembling fingers, or smashed into small fragments, or injured with force. All of them began as precisely molded and intact eggshell forms, which I made in repetition. I then picked up each eggshell and if I wanted to change it, I warmed it by pressing it with my fingers or feet. I found that my body’s temperature reforms, reshapes, reconstructs, reanimates, reproduces, and redefines the forms in response to my state of mind – sometimes curiosity, sometimes anxiety, but always stress.

This emotional, psychological, and ultimately physical stress is extruded from my body as a reaction to its not fitting into but transgressing the prohibitive symbolic,

which Lacan referred to as the “Name-of-the-Father.”⁵¹ I choose not to invite and absorb this invisible yet powerful force beneath the surface of my body. But I do choose to sustain it on my skin. My aim is to turn the reactions of my body into an alphabet shaped by the different wax particles that I produce. These forms include my fingerprints, which serve as traces, which in turn record the codes that make my body official – in other words, an inscription.

Ancient inscriptions have informed the making of my inscription/installation – specifically, those written in Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian cuneiform and inscribed with hand-carving gestures onto smoothed stone located on the side of a rocky slope near what is now Van, Turkey, between 486 and 465 BCE. Far from the everyday travels of people and their outreaching hands, the location of the inscription – some 150 feet above ground level – and the translation of the inscription⁵² manifest the dominance of invisible linguistic power over people. For whom is this inscription engraved, as it is not readable or even recognizable at that height?⁵³

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Name-of-the-Father infers the “prohibitive role of the FATHER.” Lacan insists, as scholar Dylan Evans has summarized, that “we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of

51 The Name-of-the-Father is considered the “fundamental signifier,” which “confers identity on the subject (it names him, positions him within the symbolic order) and signifies the Oedipus prohibition, the ‘no’ of the incest taboo.” Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 119.

52 Wikipedia offers a reliable (based on three scholars’) translation of the 27 lines of this inscription: “A great god is Ahuramazda, the greatest of the gods, who created this earth, who created yonder sky, who created man, created happiness for man, who made Xerxes king, one king of many, one lord of many. I (am) Xerxes, the great king, king of kings, king of all kinds of people, king on this earth far and wide, the son of Darius the king, the Achaemenid. Xerxes the great king proclaims: King Darius, my father, by the favor of Ahuramazda, made much that is good, and this niche he ordered to be cut; as he did not have an inscription written, then I ordered that this inscription be written. May Ahuramazda protect, together with the gods, and my kingdom and what I have done.” Wikipedia, “Xerxes I inscription at Van,” last modified January 9, 2021, 1:24, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xerxes_I_inscription_at_Van.

53 See Appendix 1 for illustrations.

history, has identified his person with the figure of law.”⁵⁴ As I attempt for my work to suggest a marginalizing of the legislative and prohibitive function of patriarchal language, I’m inviting in the literature of excrement, as well as evoking the delicacy and abjection of a thin layer of warm milk. I bring this invitation and evocation together for purposes of alienating patriarchy.



Figure 12. Screenshot from video documenting the making of *Name-of-the-Father* - smashing the eggshells - I made with wax- with my feet.

⁵⁴ Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 122. Evans goes on to summarize how “[s]ince the concepts of LAW and of STRUCTURE are unthinkable without LANGUAGE, the symbolic is essentially a linguistic dimension.... in which elements have no positive existence but which are constituted purely by virtue of their mutual differences.” Ibid., 201-202.



Figure 13. *Name-of-the-Father*, wax forms appearing in the inscription/installation, CADVC, 2022.

Appendix 1



Joseph Beuys, *Fat Corner*, 1982. Five kilograms of butter in a corner of his art room in the Düsseldorf Academy of Art.



Joseph Beuys, *Tallow*, 1977. Installation view at Atrium of the Landesmuseum, Münster. Temporary installation from 1997 until 1978.



Matthew Barney, *The Accidental Guest*, 2006. Gladstone Gallery, New York.



Views of the exhibition *All in Present Must Be Transformed: Matthew Barney and Joseph Beuys*, 2006-2007.

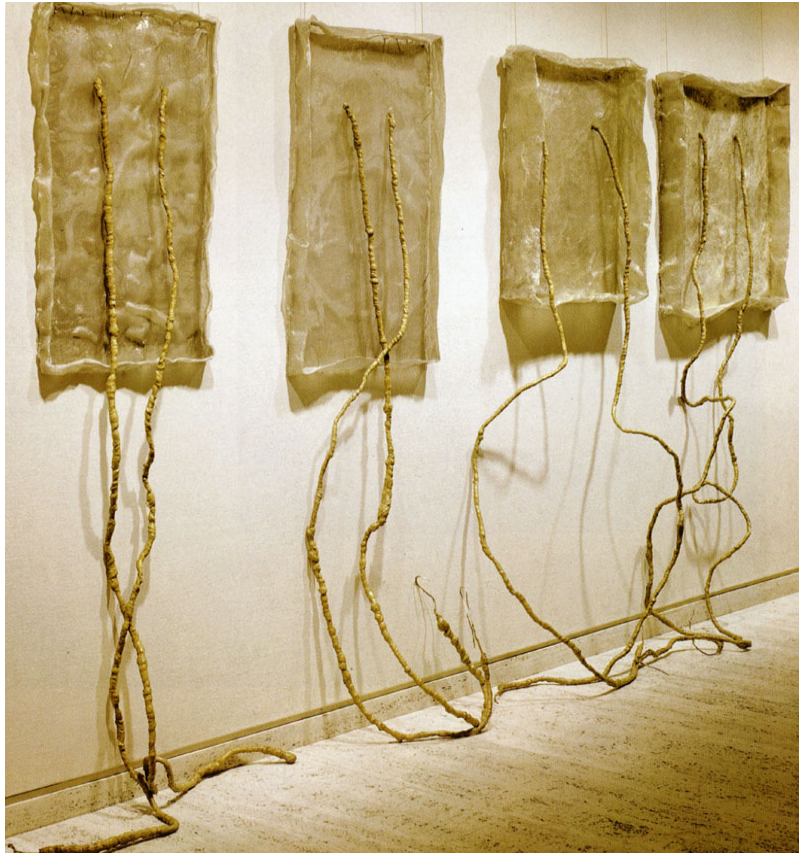
Beuys's installation *Terremoto*, 1981, with Barney's multipart sculpture *Chrysler Imperial*, 2002, from *Cremaster 3*. Organized by Nancy Spector. Deustch Guggenheim, Berlin.



Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 3*, 2002. The character of the Architect, played by Richard Serra, throws Vaseline in exactly the same way as Serra had thrown hot lead in his studio in the late 1960s. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.



Wolfgang Laib, *Wax Room*, 2013. The Philips Collection, Washington, D. C.



Eva Hesse, *No Title*, 1970.



Neri Oxman, Honeycomb structure co-fabricated by humans and honeybees from *Synthetic Apiary II*, 2020, MIT Media Lab.



Michael Armitage, a stretched lubugo bark cloth before being primed for painting.



Inscription, known as the Xerxes I inscription, or the “XV,” on the slope of the ancient citadel of Tušpa, near what is now the city of Van in eastern Turkey. Note the person in a blue jacket at the foot of the slope, giving a sense of the height at which the inscription appears.

Appendix 2

I performed *The Tongue in the Landscape* at Joseph Beuys Sculpture Park on April 1, 2022, a cloudy and cold day. The temperature affected the wax, making it more solid. At the temperature in my studio, I could remove the wax in a way that was fleshy and pleasurable. I used to obsess about not breaking the wax layer as I peeled all the wax off the bark entirely. But at the park, trying to remove the wax was like picking a scab off, with a holy pleasure, but in tiny pieces. I needed to apply more pressure and sometimes blow on the wax to warm it with my breath before I could move it at all. During the performance, I walked, laid down on the ground, held the pieces of waxed wood in my arms and lap, and worked to remove the wax skin for three hours straight, while I had wax earplugs in my ears and did not communicate with anyone. When I stopped performing after three hours, my fingertips and nails were suffering. They suffered for three days thereafter. The video documentation was taken from a single point of view in a master shot.





Stills from the video documentation



Photos taken by the viewers

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