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Gathering Through the Image:
A Performative Kind of Kinship

Framing Kindness

By its nature, performance art is elusive, defying categories and connecting different artistic disciplines. Already in 1979, Roselee Goldberg characterised performance art as "[…] an art which observes less and less the traditional limitations of making art objects […]" (7). However, if we understand this art form to involve the display and action of a body or bodies in public space, then we might consider the relationship between performance art and kindness as a way of appealing and attending to the (invisible) bonds between people. The artist addresses the conscious and unconscious thoughts, habits and feelings in the space between performer and audience and, as a consequence, something shifts in their affective relationality. This appeals to common definitions of performance as marked by presence and ephemerality, and brings in the possibility for vulnerability to emerge. But how do we relate to this emergence in a neoliberal society that largely associates vulnerability with passivity, inferiority and the need for outside intervention? How does the mainstream media's mobilisation of images of pain, poverty, violence, and illness influence audiences' responses to embodied presence? Analysing kindness from a combined historical and psychoanalytical perspective, Adam Phillips and Barbara Taylor state; "Bearing other people's vulnerability - which means sharing in it imaginatively and practically without needing to get rid of it, to yank people out of it - entails being able to bear one's own." (2009, 10) This characterisation feels like a stark contrast to the acts of kindness we often see in the media, where vulnerability is presented in heroic narratives of charity and progress, or as unbearable images of atrocity. As these media frame our daily lives, where do we learn to share in vulnerability, and what role can performance art play in this learning?

There are many works of performance art that explore the vulnerability of the body as both a physical and a social condition. We can think of iconic pieces by Mona Hatoum, Adrian Piper, Ana Mendieta and Marina Abramović, for example.[1] These works involve the artist coming to terms with their own vulnerability by setting up conditions or instructions for bodily exposure and then letting these unfold in a public space. The performances often resist or disrupt the

normative behavioural scripts of a given social context. In Piper's *Catalysis IV* (1970), she rode the New York subway with a towel stuffed in her mouth; for Hatoum's *Roadworks* (1985), the artist walked barefoot through a busy London street; while in the infamous *Rhythm 10* (1973) Abramović made herself into a passive object for potentially violent audience acts within a white-walled gallery. Works such as Mendieta's *Untitled (Body Tracks)* (1974), in which she drags her arms down a wet, blood-red canvas, acknowledge structural violence against women of colour while also affirming the artist's individual agency within vulnerability. The audience's encounter with these works can elicit feelings of discomfort of being in the presence of bodily exposure, as well as reflections on the power relations between bodies, in particular those of sexualised, pathologized and racialized others. While viewing the work, we might reflect on our share of experienced violence, or on our shared role in perpetuating this violence in society, but how does this reflection relate to acts of kindness?

The embodied character of much performance art lends itself particularly well to encounters with vulnerability. It can make us aware of what Judith Butler calls the socio-political "frames" of representation and visibility, which determine whose vulnerability is felt, acknowledged and mourned. These frames often follow state functions of distributing vulnerability, as: "[…] differential forms of allocation that make some populations more subject to arbitrary violence than others." (Butler 2009, xii) Butler argues that performative practices of embodied proximity and public assembly are powerful ways of coming to terms with our own vulnerable condition and acknowledging our interdependence with and responsibility for others (2015). The co-presence of bodies allows us to circumvent the erasure of representational framing. This popular analysis of performative vulnerability temporally coincides with what Claire Bishop has called "the social turn" in visual art (2012b). Bishop identifies a contemporary trend towards bringing the language of protest and activism, as well as the physical bodies of marginalised people, into art world spaces. In works such as Santiago Sierra's *160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People* (2000), we find an encounter between spaces and bodies that are usually kept apart. In the work, four sex workers consented to be tattooed for the price of a shot of heroin in El Gallo Arte Contemporáneo in Salamanca, Spain. Performances such as these attempt to create proximity between vulnerability and responsibility, but we can question whether the experience of the performers and the audience is shared in a meaningful way.

There is a danger of equating what might also be called an "aesthetic of vulnerability" with acts of radical kindness. The act of public exposure, even the act of performing affective relationships such as a cry for help or an invitation to interact, can become another normative script, another framing of distance. After all, the modern subject is constantly surveyed through systems of visibility that support power structures of policing and control. Thus, as McKenzie Wark (2016, unpaginated) has argued in response to Butler's theory of assembly, it is essential that we pay attention to the ways performances of vulnerability and precarity are mediatized, circulated and disseminated. Specific to the context of contemporary art, Amelia Jones (2011) warns that even participatory performances can fall into patterns of re-enactment and simulation of authentic and intimate connections. The audiences that encountered works such as *Rhythm 10* in one of its many gallery iterations or *Roadworks* in the Brixton streets were certainly aware of their visibility to other audience members, bystanders or even police in ways that might regulate their responses.[2] These works appeal to a sense of interdependence with their surroundings, and

trust viewers to do no harm in a potentially harmful situation. However, they also take place in highly visible, surveyed and documented surroundings. Furthermore, most viewers will have encountered these works through their documentation in photographs and videos. Asking whether these works provide an authentic opportunity for the audience to share vulnerability and perform kindness thus connects us to the structural relationships between live and non-live, present and absent, visible and invisible experiences. What differentiates an audience's normative response of interest or empathy to an artwork from the shared experience of kindness? The question of how vulnerability touches us is more complex than the inclusion of precarious others into a singular space of empathy or recognition. The frame may have been widened, but its essential theatre of control and regulation has not been changed. How, then, might artistic performances circumvent existing scripts and contribute to the transformation of the relational bonds that shape interdependent spaces?

The aesthetic process of incorporating performativity and affect can be considered as functions of what Anna Tsing terms "salvage accumulation" (2015, 63). Tsing argues that salvage accumulation translates non-capitalist relationships into products of capitalism through different methods of appropriation. In a similar way, performances of disruption, risk or the symbolic inclusion of oppressed bodies are converted into products for the neoliberal economy. Drawing on Tsing's theory, I posit that when acts of performative inclusion and recognition are seen through these frames, exposure and disruption become superficial signifiers of aesthetic innovation. Mainstream media teaches us to salvage value from harm and optimism from acts of resistance or subsistence. In this way, the presence of embodied vulnerability is translated into an opportunity for art to address "real" issues, and for the audience to co-perform morality and to distribute this performance by collecting and sharing its images in catalogues, on the internet, and on social media. Rather than simply declaring that there is no alternative to capitalist structures, Tsing advocates for studying the "peri-capitalist" spaces that nurture alternative "entanglements" of relation (2015, 20-21). She argues that we need to look outside the frames of progress associated with twentieth-century modernization, which continue to shape our notions of value in terms of growth, productivity, and expansive forward movement. In order to attend to peri-capitalist spaces of visual and affective relation which might value kindness over progress, we need to consider other possibilities for translation between performance and image. How can we follow the movement of artistic practices towards shared spaces of kinship rather than an extractive (re-) distribution of risk? How can we carry our own vulnerability into relations without letting humanist, modernist frames of progress and separation curtail our embodied imagination?

Thinking about the relationship between performance and kindness involves thinking about the role of documentation. What happens to a relationship of kindness when a performance of vulnerability becomes an image, or many images; reproduced, printed, displayed and observed? Is kindness still present for the viewer of these images, or does it become a ghost of past performativity, unable to feel and be felt? Does the image become the evidence of an exchange that took place, as form of currency or a moral parable to be traded and exhibited at a distance? Or does the translation between performance and image enable another, peripheral space of relation to be felt? In this article, I discuss two recent works: Autumn Knight's *Do Not Leave Me* (2013) and Tejal Shah's *Between the Waves* (2012), and explore how these artists work between

performance and moving image. Attempting to follow these practices outside the frames of extractive and productive representation, I study the different ways they make use of an image's ability to pass through normative borders of time and space, in ways that touch our imaginative vision and movements with the kindness of shared vulnerability.

Mapping risk

Walking around Houston, Texas in 2019, I was viscerally reminded of the segregated experience of the city that is performed as a collection of anonymous images. Almost all its inhabitants were behind the tinted windows of cars or office buildings. The only other people walking any distance, precariously exposed, seemed to be the homeless. The sidewalk often disappears completely, only leaving space for cars. The vulnerability of a walking body hardly seems to register at the pace of most movement through the city. The reflective surfaces that frame the urban environment communicate a sense of constantly being watched while never being seen. The people inside the flow of cars are encapsulated within their own individual screen. Each cocoon of movement is designed to avoid the seepage of a glance, a word, a touch. As streets and pavements are designated primarily as transit zones, they start to resemble the "non-places of supermodernity" that Marc Augé (1995) describes: spaces of anonymity and social insignificance. Not coincidentally, these non-places, such as airports, shopping malls and motorways, also have a high density of surveillance cameras. And as it is more and more common to carry a phone with a mapping application, we are constantly being tracked and tracking ourselves against a seemingly universal, neutral, and abstract map. However, the translations of the map's images into palpable experiences of navigating a city are profoundly shaped by normative historical categorisations of race, class, gender, and ability.

The use of photographic and filmmaking technologies for mapping territories enabled what Walter Ong described as the modern consumption of the "world as view" (1969), emptied of lived relationality and history. The weight of this loss is carried through the relationship between image-making technologies and our experiences of cultural space. The collection and exhibition of images and objects in museums and galleries continues to separate many communities from their social contexts of craft and ritual, their traditional world-making capacities, and the right to their own image (Azoulay 2019). Even the sites of artistic performances, whether located inside or outside the gallery, are almost always populated by surveillances cameras, security cameras, and methods for documentation, rather than relation. Entering a museum, we might feel the optimistic relief of having arrived somewhere protective. Inside, we can look at the artworks for as long as we like, while maintaining the illusion of not being seen. At the same time, we can feel recognized as belonging and acceptable by taking on the performative identity of the visitor. And yet, the sign on the museum door carries the trace of a threat. The words warn against entering the building with a concealed handgun. It is also a reminder that outside the museum, in Texas, anyone you meet could have a license to carry a weapon. The sign's attempt to segregate public and private spaces highlights the unstable protection that visibility provides, as well as the limited options for moving through space unthreatened or un-surveyed.

As Sarah Ahmed and Lauren Berlant show, many everyday performativities have violent or destructive consequences for individuals both inside and outside a given community. Ahmed

argues that utterances which carry "the promise of happiness" orient subjects towards normative objects of desire and pre-scripted behaviors, which exclude other social and familial options (2009). The role of the visitor could be seen as complicit in the promise of cultural institutions to transcend violence and produce civilised enjoyment. Similarly, Berlant discusses how contemporary subjects form attachments of "cruel optimism" towards fantasies of "the good life", while simultaneously undermining their own agency (2010). These attachments are deeply connected to the neoliberal economy of performance and investment. They reproduce exclusionary forms of heteronormativity, elitism and whiteness, while distributing precarious positions to marginalized subjects. These hierarchical forms of circulation are replicated in artworks that follow what Jane Blocker calls an "aesthetic of risk" (2008) or what Claire Bishop describes as performative "outsourcing": they employ the bodies of marginalised communities to produce "a guarantee of authenticity, through their proximity to everyday social reality" (2012a, 110). Returning to the example of Sierra's *160 cm Line Tattooed on Four People,* the performers are given access to the space of the gallery and its associations with cultural progress and paid four times the rate of their usual services. However, the bodies of the marginalised continue to carry the risk in this equation, while the performance benefits from an aesthetic of social change and authenticity. In cases such as these, taking on the role of audience member can mean reproducing the outsourcing of risk. This role, although it may incorporate expression of empathy, mirrors the erasure of lived relationships of interdependence in the non-places of contemporary society.

Do not leave me

In the Contemporary Art Museum Houston, the work I am looking at is playing on a small television screen in the corner of a group exhibition. It is a video recording of a performance by Autumn Knight, entitled *Do Not Leave Me* (2013). In the video I can see the artist, who is African American, walking up to visitors in a gallery space similar to the one I am standing in. She approaches them slowly, from behind or from the side, with a (fake) handgun visibly sticking out of her back pocket. She touches one audience member lightly on the arm, tracing a tattoo, and offers another visitor a simple embrace. The gesture of laying an arm on a stranger's hand or shoulder, which she repeats several times, carries a powerful mixture of affects. Fear, vulnerability, and trust mingle within the space of this encounter. The recorded audience's uncertainty is palpable, even in the context of the gallery. By touching the visitors in this unscripted way, Knight contacts an invisible line separating the voyeuristic spectator from the artwork. At the same time, she crosses the border between abstract threat and palpable relation. Within gallery space, the possible roles of spectator, participant, victim, protector, and aggressor become disorientated, unframed. It is not clear at what point the audience members might become part of the performance. Which invisible line do they cross to open themselves to an encounter? In which vision of society are they investing, now that the personal and institutional bubble of abstract separation has been burst?

Fig. 1. Autumn Knight, *Do Not Leave Me*, 2013. Video of performance documentation (still). Courtesy of the artist.

Knight's work communicates disorientation because it questions our habitual frames of relation. Is the gallery really a safe space, or does it merely produce its own scripts of normative visibility? Upon entering, do I expect to perform the role of the autonomous, sovereign viewer, surveying the works on display? Do I become implicated in the exhibition's visual regime, open to all gazes traversing the space? Or is my presence felt as a constant question mark, an element of tension and potential threat? The video of the performance does not end with the artist's performances of touch. Continuing to move slowly to the soundtrack of Nina Simone singing *Ne Me Quitte Pas* (Do Not Leave Me), the artist lowers to the ground. Kneeling on the floor, Knight raises her hands behind her head in the position of an arrest, then lies prone on the floor with her arms outstretched. The size of the screen and the partial framing of the camera, which cuts out some of the context and audience members, makes the footage resemble that of a security camera. The connections between trust, fear and vulnerability are made palpable once again. Will this black artist be protected by the same context of normative, civilised space that Abramović entrusts herself to in her performances? Or will the fear and tension built up in the space be transmitted onto Knight's body? In the video, we can see some audience members are still sitting on the floor, while other visitors stand somewhat awkwardly in a semi-circle around the artist. The video ends, and then begins playing again from the start. I can continue walking through the exhibition, as the performance has already taken place. And yet, the title of the work does not leave me. The imaginary borders between different types of witnessing (of art, violence, or injustice) have been made porous, and I feel that I might be touched, or questioned, or seen at any moment.

Fig. 2. Autumn Knight, *Do Not Leave Me*, 2013. Video of performance documentation (still). Courtesy of the artist.

Philip Auslander has argued that performance artists who use visual documentation for their works address themselves to audiences in other times and spaces, in "[…] a gesture that ultimately obviates the need for an initial audience." (2006, 7) I am not arguing with Auslander's point that a work does not always need a live audience for it to be called performance art. However, when discussing the circulations of kindness, the relationships between image, performance and spectator cannot be so easily equated or erased without consequence. In the case of *Do Not Leave Me*, the effects of the work on the visitor will likely be different based on one's experience with racialised policing and forms of social exclusion. This is equally true for the live audience and for the viewers of the video work. But the fact that both audiences exist does add another layer to the work's shifting dynamics of visibility, agency, and movement. Both audiences are aware they are being watched: autonomous spectatorship is, after all, only an illusion within the highly regulated space of an exhibition. The apparatus of surveillance, including the frames of security cameras, forms of racial profiling, and social scripts of suspicion or control, do not disappear at the threshold of the museum. In fact, the work appeals directly to promises of safety and comfort connected to distance and visibility, and the way these promises are distributed differently across racialised bodies. It asks why some bodies are expected to set others at ease, through performances of happiness, optimism, denial, and defeat.

Auslander builds his argument by referencing three instances of performance documentation: *Leap into the Void* (1960) by Yves Klein, Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971) and Vito Acconci's *Photo-Piece* (1969). The first is an edited image of Klein jumping out of a second-story window. Burden's work is an image of him being shot in the arm by a friend and the third work consists of photographs Acconci made every time he blinked while walking down a New York City street.

Through these works Auslander attempts to find a connection between two categories of performative image-making which are often contrasted: the documentary category, which gives access to the “real” performance event, and the theatrical category of “performed photography”, where the event only takes place in the (staged or composite) photograph (2006, 2). Because both types of performance are staged for the camera, he argues that the difference between the two is ideological, where one type is assumed to be autonomous and “primarily staged for an immediately present audience” (2006, 4). To this, Auslander counters that theatrical documents are performative in themselves, because the act of documenting constitutes the performance. He goes on to state: “[…] when artists decide to document their performances, they assume responsibility to an audience other than the initial one, a gesture that ultimately obviates the need for an initial audience.” (2006, 7)

Thinking of Knight’s performance, Auslander’s point about responsibility seems fitting at first, as both the live performance and the video documentation implicate the audience in a space of affective relationality, heightening awareness of the possibility of violence within the gallery. He appears to be making a radical claim against a system that overvalues “authentic” risk in live performance, in a way that resonates with Bishop’s critique of performative “outsourcing”. However, Auslander’s notion of responsibility is not towards “interactional accomplishments” but towards “the fine art tradition of reproduction of *works*” (2006, 6). By equating the staged encounter with the image, he negates the value of affective relation and the possibility of agency or kindness on the part of the audience. He also does not account for differences in the risk of performing, being seen or being documented. He compares *Leap into the Void*, *Shoot,* and *Photo-Piece* by assuming that in each case, the artist is in control of the staged situation. He does not ask what might happen if a black woman brought a gun into a gallery or walked with a camera through a desolate city street. What Knight’s work shows, specifically through the presence of an audience, is the power dynamics of affective interrelation between viewer and performer, citizen and surveillance. Furthermore, the presence of the initial audience in the video work acts as a reminder that the secondary audience is also playing a part and being addressed by the performance. *Do not leave me* helps us feel how closely the performative roles of observing, witnessing, and policing align, and how these roles carry responsibility for adding to or subtracting from the risk of a situation.

Disarming distance

Auslander’s denial of the interaction between audience and performer as meaningful for the "work", in favour of its “[…] iconicity and standing in the history of art and performance.” (2006, 7) parallels the ongoing erasure of lived relations in public space. In Knight’s performance, which was conceived as a response to the fatal shooting of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012, the stakes of resisting erasure are particularly high. The work can be connected to the American “stand-your-ground” law referenced in the trial following Martin’s death. This law states that citizens have no duty to retreat before using deadly force in self-defence. Which person’s presence registers as requiring self-defence is often determined along racial lines of perception. As a black woman, the artist knows she is often perceived as a threat, whether she has a gun or nor, and whether she is in a gallery or not (Garr 2020). Furthermore, the threat to herself (to be misunderstood, misidentified, injured, eliminated) is much greater than the threat to the art

world's largely white, upper-class audience, precisely because of their proximity to her. Knight's work contains an invitation to share this space of vulnerability, to remain together in this space. The vulnerable request "do not leave me", holds the possibility for a relationship of kindness to emerge, counter to the defensive propriety that motivates one to "stand ground". It is an appeal to carry kindness as antidote to the anonymity, seeming neutrality, and structures of surveillance that characterise both physical and virtual spaces. The camera, rather than acting as a mechanism of distancing or documentation, gathers the spaces of the audiences on each side of the screen, and associatively links many other spaces of encountering and watching violence. The presence of the audience on both sides enables responsibility and kindness to flow between these spaces, and the documentary apparatus is transformed into a possible mode of sharing.

The artist's gestures of touch prevent the presence of the threat to black bodies from being disowned by the museum environment. They bring the body back into embodied space, even for those of us not watching the performance live. Whereas some of the video images echo those of arrests all too often circulated on news channels, the artist's embraces at the start of the performance create a relation that disarms spectatorial distance. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has observed: "[…] the sense of touch makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity […]" (2003, 14). Touching always involves being touched and negates the clear distinction between subject and object. In her work, Knight touches others but is also touched herself, supported by those she embraces. By reminding us of the possibility of being touched or being held at any moment, the artist recalls that the space of witnessing and observing also contains a potential space of healing. When violence is not disowned, it can be transformed into a different kind of bond. We may not be able to eliminate the institutional grid of separations completely: the dualisms of inside and outside, entering or exiting, visibility or invisibility still exist. But the interplay of images and touch, on various levels, can change our experience of moving through space. It can allow us to mobilise kindness to and break through the internalised boundaries that we carry with us.

What Knight's performance highlights is that radical kindness is better understood as a bond that enables the sharing of affects than an act. Returning to Phillips and Taylor's definition of kindness, we can add that sharing in another's vulnerability imaginatively and practically unfolds in time and takes place across time. The problem is that contemporary expositions of kindness, especially in mainstream media, often present kindness as a heroic moment in an evolutionary process of human improvement. The notion of vulnerability as a burden to overcome can conjure up problematic notions of self-sacrifice and moral duty (Sontag 2003). These associations can also be found in many conceptions of bearing witness to violence. Squarely within the "frames of progress" Tsing identifies, kindness is equated with overcoming adversity and acts of charity made from a stable position of moral superiority. As a tool for disarming relations, *Do Not Leave Me* shows us that the performative, tactile image can play a role in the de-segregation of weaponised spaces. It re-writes the scripts of proximity based on racial bias, public safety and normative roles through the touch of kindness that connects us to a common need to be held.

Lateral relatives

The kindness of moral superiority is often tied to parables of innocence, purity or heroics, the value of which Donna Haraway has thoroughly dismissed for “the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth.” (2016, 2) Haraway critiques the narratives of objectivity and innocence associated with science and technology as well as with humanity itself. Instead, she advocates for “making kin” (2008, 19) beyond familial, cultural and species borders. As the destructive effects of late capitalist society on the ecology of the earth become increasingly clear, we need stories, performance and images of kinship more than ever. Challenging the abstract perspective of “the world as view” these responses reflect an inter-relational positionality. As a model for the kind of “situated, mortal, germinal wisdom” (2016, 118) needed to think in terms of kinship, Haraway looks to Ursula K. Le Guin’s “carrier bag” theory of fiction (1989). Le Guin herself drew on Elizabeth Fisher’s anthropological thesis that the first human "tool" was probably not a knife, a dart or an arrow, but a container; a receptacle for gathering foods and other goods. For Le Guin, this theory calls for a completely different, feminist way of understanding cultural evolution and human nature.

Rather than the common heroic "killer story," which centres the tool as a weapon of action, conflict and aggression, centring the container leads her to the importance of the unheroic "life story" (1989, 168). In her essay, Le Guin paints a visceral image of walking, gathering, and along the way finding what nurtures a collective, rather than an individual storyline. This act of gathering resembles a continuous process of learning together with the beings and things around us. It allows ample room for a spacious, relational kindness. Le Guin states: “A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us.” (1989, 169) Connecting science fiction, mythology and technology, she argues that the tool of fiction can be approached as a cultural carrier bag, as a way of relating to “[…] the womb of things to be and the tomb of things that were […]”, rather than a weapon of domination (1989, 170). For Haraway, this suggests “stories of becoming-with, of reciprocal induction, of companion species whose job in living and dying is not to end the storying, the worlding.” (2016, 119). This notion of becoming-with kindness also suggests forms of kin-making that are performative, rather than biological, and which bear relationships sustainably, rather than forcefully.

The image is another tool that has been conceived of as a weapon of domination and mobilised in one-sided narratives of conquest. Led by a fear of instability within ourselves and others, we grasp at images, names, and categories to fix our sense of self the world. How can we let go of this fixation and embrace a kind, healing way of being together? This is a question taken up by Indian artist Tejal Shah’s work *Between the Waves* (2012). Shah’s practice explores intersections of art, ecology, and healing in relation to consciousness. Their five-channel video installation revels in the power of transformation through a myriad of inter-human, inter-species and inter-material connections. Uprooting the linear tracks of traditional film narratives, it follows a cyclical rhythm that brings forth images through breath, digestion and symbiosis. Rather than following the progressive frames of documentation as preservation, reproduction and consumption, I argue that Shah’s use of moving image resembles the making of what Haraway calls “lateral relatives” that can “[…] stretch the imagination and change the story.” (2016, 161) Making lateral relatives performatively and visually might involve horizontal movements into

the past and the future, between queer and non-human bodies. In *Between the Waves*, we can also think of the image as moving laterally in order to disorient violent processes of recognition and identification.

Between the Waves

I encountered *Between the Waves* as it was installed at Mimosa House in London, in 2018. This complex work, consisting of five channels, was displayed across different spaces and floors of the exhibition space. *Channel I*, *A fable in five chapters,* the longest video, was projected larger-than-life scale. Next to it, *Channel IV, Moon burning,* was projected to about half this size, following the process of a mirror melting to ash and liquid flames in real time. *Channel III*, *Animation,* in which fantastical paper creatures are torn away in stop-motion from the gaps between drawn buildings in stop-motion, was shown on a large monitor in the hallway. In the stairwell, *Channel V, Morse code,* played on a small screen framed like a paper cut-out, blinking with a single letter at steady intervals. *Channel II, Landfill Dance*, was again projected large-scale upstairs. *Channel I*, *A fable in five chapters*, is just under half an hour long, but feels like an anti-heroic odyssey of co-evolution. The video travels from an urban cityscape to arid landscapes and salt flats, to seashore and mangrove forests and back again. In one chapter, storm clouds gather above two brown bodies rubbing together on an apartment balcony, their sweat evaporating into the air, while bubble wrap and pomegranate seeds pop in time with distant lighting.
The intimacy of this scene, where the camera seems to move in time with the delicate touch and penetration of orifices, is only increased by the sense that the environment forms a part of this coupling. The camera is not an apparatus of reproductive grasping here. It seems primarily to serve the purpose of guiding, supporting and following bodies in their embrace with others. The moving image becomes a way of travelling with what is gathered visually, performatively and haptically; a relationship of "ongoingness" (Haraway 2016) that is radically kind. The bodies are performing with the camera and each other. Another chapter shows two figures in white-horned harnesses signalling each other with mirrors before engaging in pronged eroticisms. Released from the need to reflect body-images performed in the service of normative commercial scripts of sexuality, power and pleasure, these post-pornographic subjects are free to explore what might become of their communion. Used as a beacon, the mirror draws the performers and the viewers into a space of multiple and heterogenous relations. In place of the reflection that frames a single figure and forces identification or rejection, the mirror-image works refractively here, dispersing different wavelengths and perspectives. Its reflective surface winks at the viewer, peripherally, through its slow melting transubstantiation in *Channel IV* and the tinfoil costumes of the dancers in *Channel II.*

Fig. 3. Tejal Shah, *Between the Waves*, 2012. *Channel I, A fable in five chapters*. Photo: Damian Griffiths. Courtesy the artist, Project 88, Mumbai and Barbara Gross Gallery, Munich.

Bobbing beneath the surface of a swimming pool in the next chapter of *Channel I,* the camera reveals a secret world of synthetic reefs and fluorescent detritus, shoals of electrifying fish and buoyant flesh. In *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway also references an artificial oceanic landscape. *Crochet Coral Reef* (2005-ongoing) is a collaborative artwork by Margaret and Christine Wertheim, which encourages crafters around the world to engage with the complex algorithms of threatened ecosystems. Through crochet, participants engage with these environments without pollutive travel or documentation practices. In a similar way, Shah's filmed underwater performances take place in a coral reef made of plastic debris and trash. There is kindness in this methodology of letting ecosystems be and working with what we already have. We can engage in knowledge of beings and environments without plucking, dissecting or transplanting them, and we might learn more about their value and their beauty in this way. Shah's oceanic landscape was made through a participatory process of improvised foraging, gathering and assembling. This process is another kindness: submerged by the performer's touch and the viewer's gaze, these materials are given a vocabulary beyond the frames of extraction and abandonment. Trash becomes a medium for stories of protection and a receptacle for beauty. Seen from below, these floating substances contains the possibility of gathering and sustaining other life-forms.

This mutating quality of trash also finds expression in *Channel II,* for which Shah worked together the Hrishikesh Pawar Contemporary Dance Company. The young dancers are filmed swaying with slow and gestural movements on top of a landfill site in Poona. They wear costumers of upcycled waste material adorned with cockroaches, a fitting mascot for a nuclear future. Adding an ecological twist to Mel Y. Chen's observation that queer, racialised and disabled people are

often regarded as "toxic assets" (2011, 266), this dance of the Anthropocene's outcasts refuses the framing of human evolution as progressing towards purity and immunity. Toxic assets are denied recognition and representation for fear of contamination: they threaten to cross the boundary between inside and outside. By performing with refuse, Shah's work resists the common conception of the landfill as a black hole, an erasure from the global map. Avoiding perspectives of survival tied to battling, rejecting and isolating from foreign objects, the work sutures together a reverence for informal tradition, embodied knowledge and the labour of making communal futures. The mountain of trash fills the video's horizon without a vanishing point, while the performers line up along its length. Neither a blind spot to be skipped over, nor a frame that focuses our vision, the video acts moment and place of gathering. The landfill is revealed as a site of neoliberal depositing and erasing, a space that is created and denied by rampant consumerism. Following a similar method to Chen's "resignifying toxicity", the performance and the image work together to subvert associations of trash with disabling qualities, towards non-human animacy (2011, 266).

Fig. 4. Tejal Shah, *Between the Waves*, 2012. *Chapter II, Landfill Dance*. Image courtesy the artist, Project 88, Mumbai, and Barbara Gross Gallery, Munich.

Early theories of film spectatorship and psychoanalysis place the viewer at the centre of the cinematic apparatus, as an empty site to be projected on to and out from. The viewer's experience is filled with the images on the screen, identifying with the objectifying power of the camera while remaining passively seated in the darkened theatre. In an exchange of absences, this disembodied, virtual gaze also allows the spectator to pass over and pass through (violent) scenes without being marked by the encounter. The screen world is a space of ephemeral, repetitive experiences. In *Between the Waves,* a very different kind of embodied immersion is proposed. The screen acts as a zone of contamination between the space of the performance

and the space of the gallery. Across from the projection of *Channel II*, a pile of empty packaging and other detritus was spread out into the gallery. The artist had asked the curators to gather all their litter in this area for the duration of the exhibition. Instead of portraying the inhabitants of Poona as silent victims or toxic subjects, whose plight may be recognized but then abandoned, Shah invites the spectator to experience their material connections to systems of waste management and ecocide. A visual and haptic resonance thus inter-animates the spaces of viewing and performing.
In a 2020 conversation with the artist, they spoke about their interest in drag rather than performances of passing, as drag contains an element of friction: "between inhabiting something else but never quite leaving the very mundaneness of what you are." They related this to allowing gestures to spill over the borders of a particular identity. In a similar way, the non-human litter of *Landfill Dances* exceeds both the frame of the video and the space of the gallery, potentially overwhelming the audience with consciousness of embodied reality and its consequences. The scale of this environmental disaster is not one that calls for individual heroics or the temporary immunization of spectacle. In *Landfill Dance*, the embodied, performative temporality of human lives is brought back into contact with the extended afterlife of human residue through the digital image. In an inversion of the cinematic experience of spectacle and visual bombardment, the spectators find themselves in an intergenerational, post-human temporality that responds our refuse and our environment as our kin. This is a space of ingestion and digestion, of kindness which cannot be held by the imagination of a single individual. The viewer is no longer in a place where static makes sense. We are not even in a space of bridges, conceptual or physical. We are becoming part of the rhythmic breath of the film, part of the wave.

Gathering: Conclusion

Considering the relationship between performance art and kindness through documentation, we might say that the artworks discussed above appeal to the bonds between people, and to ways we can visualize their transformation. Returning to the question at the start of this article; what happens to a relationship of kindness when the performance becomes an image, or many images? I posit that in order for kindness to survive, there needs to be an acknowledgement of the distancing frames and scripts of social relations that precede and succeed an encounter. In fact, it would be difficult to recognize radical kindness in a single act or gesture. It is a vulnerable shared space of touching and being touched, seeing and being seen. *Between the Waves* and *Do Not Leave Me* are two examples of works that address the tension between the morally engaged and socially distancing conventions of affectivity and spectatorship. They acknowledge the violent histories and hierarchies of visual documentation, identification and surveillance, whether interpersonal or technological.

Furthermore, they refuse to accept that the art gallery or museum space should function smoothly as another distancing lens of abstraction or performance of neutral productivity. These functions have been incorporated into the gallery context by the neoliberal performance and experience economies. They reproduce the distribution of risk, violence and environmental damage onto already marginalized and precarious communities. Kindness in this context calls for different forms of spatiality and temporality. In the works of Shah and Knight, the screen

becomes a site of mediation that is not a form of separation or violent dialectics, but a gathering of perspectives, voices, and care. Their works suggests that in a true space of kindness, openness to others would not be dependent on physical proximity alone or the performance of a particular script of engagement. The physical space of the performance, as a place of physical and imaginative sharing, extends into other spaces and times of relation. In the kindness of this gathering, we can find the kin who are also extending, stretching, touching, breathing, and "staying with the trouble" (Haraway 2016). The healing comes from the sense that we don't carry this weight alone.

Notes

[1] See Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (1998) and Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (1997) for more on these artists and works.
[2] In "Activist Intention: Mona Hatoum and Morehshin Allahyari's Disruptive Bodies" (2020) I discuss Hatoum's active-passive mobilisation of the tension between bodies under surveillance and threat further.

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