

THE PLASTICITY OF TIME, “MNGRV”

Susanne Kriemann and Ruby de Vos in conversation

With the art project “Mngrv” (2017-ongoing), Susanne Kriemann addresses a new plant species. The species “Mngrv” emerged in South and South-East Asia, where mangroves’ rhizomatic roots — always exposed to the rhythm of the tides — get entangled with fishnets, plastic waste, and oil remnants. Neither rope nor root, nylon nor plant, “Mngrv” is a material witness to the intertidal processes. For “Mngrv”, Kriemann imprints the photographs she took during field research in Sri Lanka, Singapore, and Indonesia with the plastic waste she found on location, using a chunk of raw oil picked in the water as binding agent for the pigment. In turn, these material intertwined procedures are shaped by the forces of capitalism, colonialism, and petroculture in which Kriemann and anyone engaging with the work are inevitably participate. The work process has a circular nature: Kriemann brings plastic waste found in Singapore, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka back to Germany, where part of it came from in the first place, and in return supports the community-based efforts of Desa Wisata Pengudang in Telok Sebung to sustain the mangrove habitats of Riau island.

“Mngrv” is an ongoing artistic project that has been shown in various forms.¹ In 2020, PhD candidate Ruby de Vos curated one of “Mngrv”’s iterations at the Kunstruimte Galerie Block C, Groningen, where photographs of mangroves overlaid with thick, oily, but photorealistic prints of nylon nets were hanging in the exhibition space.

“Mngrv” explores how actions in one place have an effect elsewhere. In this conversation, we — De Vos and Kriemann — meander through the various places that shaped “Mngrv”, from Berlin to Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia to Groningen and discuss the complex relational dimensions of making art in times of climate change.

Ruby de Vos: In 2019, we met in your studio, in Berlin. You had just returned from Sri Lanka. Displayed throughout the studio were knots of nylon ropes, pieces of slippers, mangrove seedlings, and shells, which you brought with you. It was quite a smelly affair. I vividly remember recognizing a toothbrush in the midst of the rubble. It looked compelling but disorienting at the same time. In line with the circular manufacturing conditions of the work “Mngrv”, we found ourselves in the midst of the international flow of plastics. I think in some way that display already captured the heart of the project: “Mngrv” addresses and engages the aesthetics of plastic and oil, but it underpins this engagement with a fundamental

¹ *Mngrv* was shown as a solo exhibition entitled “Reconsidering Photography: Underbrush” at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg in 2020-21, as part of the 2021 Gothenborg Biennale for Contemporary Art, and in the group exhibition “Fragile Times” at Galerie im Körnerpark, Berlin in 2020.

practical and technical concern of what plastic waste is, where it goes, where it comes from, and what it does on its travels.

Susanne Kriemann: This project really began with research into where my plastic waste goes when I throw it away. Take for example what happens to the packaging of noodles after I buy it in the shop. We eat the noodles, throw the packaging in the garbage, and then it is out of sight. But in fact, some people come to pick the waste up, and they bring it to a larger collection point.² So where does that garbage then actually go from there? I learned that Germany is the European Union's largest exporter of plastic waste, amounting to 1 million tons annually. Seventeen percent is sold to Malaysia (since 2018 — before The People's Republic of China), and fifteen per cent go to The Netherlands, for example.³ There is a lot of energy and labour involved, only to get rid of a product that was a by-product of the noodles in the first place.

Plastic is some kind of “registrar” of its own age. After being used by the individual consumer, plastic stays on earth in a more abstract, material form of existence. In the *Plastic Atlas 2019*, a publication that maps global pollution through plastic, it is stated:

Evidence suggests that plastic, which by the millions of tons finds its way into the oceans, does not stay afloat for long. Currents, biological interactions and degradation mean that it gradually moves elsewhere: into shallower water, down to the sea floor, and onto the shore. Of all the plastic entering the ocean since the 1950s, 98.8 percent is no longer on the surface: most has fragmented and sunk.⁴

At that point, through the action of ultraviolet light and heat and by the physical action of wind and waves, plastic objects in the sea progressively decompose to plastic pellets of around 5 mm and smaller, so-called ‘mermaid tears.’ It is considered that despite its decomposition, all the plastics that have ever been produced are still on the planet, as they do not biodegrade. On the seabed, hundreds and thousands of meters below the waving surfaces of the ocean, an archive of (micro) plastics, conserved by the absence of sunlight, is to be found. The deep sea is the place of this imagined, unreachable archaeological site.

It is essentially unfathomable from an individual perspective to understand what is happening on a global scale or to comprehend the network of relations involved, but any plastic product's manufacturing involves Big Oil, global finances, and endangers ecosystems globally.

RV: So then, how do you begin to tackle this process as an artist? It is very difficult to wrap your brain

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Moving between absence and presence, waste haunts. See Lisa Doeland, “Turning to the Spectre of Waste: A Hauntological Approach,” in *Perspectives on Waste from The Social Sciences and Humanities: Opening the Bin*, edited by Richard Ek and Nils Johansson, 22-38. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020.

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“Export von Plastikabfällen” NABU, accessed 14 July 2021, <https://www.nabu.de/umwelt-und-ressourcen/abfall-und-recycling/26205.html>

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Nadja Ziebarth et al., “All at Sea?” in *The Plastic Atlas: Facts and Figures About the World of Synthetic Polymers*. (Berlin: Heinrich Böll Foundation and Break Free From Plastics, 2019), 28.



↑ fig. 1 2018/2019 field research for “Mngrv” on Bintan, Indonesia, photo: Susanne Kriemann

around the pervasiveness of oil even if it is probably at the foundation of almost every product that surrounds you or me when we sit down at a desk to write. It’s also a challenge to approach conceptually or artistically in a meaningful way, I think. Notions such as “entanglement” are helpful up to a certain extent, as they can show the interconnectedness of global processes, but I think it remains really important to pay attention to how and where things entangle, and what kind of effect (and specifically what kind of violence) this produces.

SK: In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer points to language as the crux to our lack of understanding of the world’s complexity.⁵ She refers to the names we give to animals, land, plants as unable to contain or convey the complexity of each of these living matters. I wonder which word would express the interconnectedness of mangroves, oil spills, water bottles, and us. Inevitably, we have arrived at a moment in modernity where there is no way to erase the amount of produced stuff covering the planet. Understanding the relations that got us here calls for thorough research, and that process is time-consuming and also overwhelming.

For my own research, I turned to books by Wall Kimmerer, sociologists Anna Löwenhaupt Tsing, Hartmut Rosa, and literary scholar Rob Nixon, all of which really informed my understanding of the complex



< fig. 2 2018/2019
field research for
"Mngrv" on Bintan,
Indonesia, photo:
Iwan Winarto



↑ fig. 3 2020
work "Mngrv" in
progress, print
workshop of
Keystone Editions,
Berlin



↑ fig. 4 2020
work "Mngrv" in
progress, studio of
Susanne Kriemann,
Berlin



↑ fig. 5 2018/2019 field research for "Mngrv"
in NTU CCA Singapore, temporary studio of
Susanne Kriemann

global interrelations and their effects across space and time.⁶ At the same time, their research also offered a much-needed perspective beyond the linear and progress-driven narratives that dominate industries and politics. While remembering Tsing’s writings on “the possibility of life in capitalist ruins,” for example, I witnessed a plastic bottle surface in the fresh waters of a mangrove habitat in Bintan.⁷ I also drank water from such a bottle back in Berlin. The bottle’s and the water’s two different appearances signify complex interrelations that require a response of sorts. With “Mngrv”, I investigate these interrelations, while also being conscious about the kinds of aesthetic and artistic methods I employ in the process in order to engage in new imaginaries and narratives we can forge collectively.

RV: I first learned about mangroves when I read Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004), where they play an important role in protecting the local ecosystem. In your project, it becomes very clear that this protective role is under threat, as the landscape is increasingly filled with plastic residue brought in by the tides. Consequently, the mangroves also appear in a new guise: the “Mngrv”. I am curious how your general research into plastics brought you to the specific landscape of the mangroves. Could you expand on what drew you to this landscape, and what you propose with the idea of the “Mngrv” as a species?

SK: I was drawn into the world of mangroves through a text written by curators Natasha Ginwala and Vivian Zihlerl in which they poetically describe a mangrove habitat. They write: “This tropical coastal ecology is a site of continual refiguration: neither sea nor land, neither river nor sea, bearing neither salty nor fresh water, in neither daylight nor darkness.”⁸ Mangrove forests are inaccessible: people cannot really set foot in them. For a long time, they were devoid of human traces, a more-than-human refuge, or, as biologists name these habitats, the cradle of life in the oceans. Today this wondrous place finds itself full of different kinds of artefacts: bottles, ropes, and the thousands of other things we throw away daily, entangled with roots and covered in mud. Moreover, the research on microplastics shows that there is virtually no place on earth where plastics, especially microplastics, do not occur. Polymers enter bodies through drinking (water) and eating (fish, plankton, crop). And this means that any plant, any animal, and human already bear the traces of polymers in their veins, cells, and flesh.

So, what are humans and more-than-humans transforming into? What are we becoming? For me, an image arises, which perhaps is close to the idea of cyborg — not as it was represented in blockbuster

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“A bay is a noun only if water is dead. When bay is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb *wiikwegamaa* — to be a bay — releases the water from bondage and lets it live. To be a bay holds the wonder that, for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores, conversing with cedar roots and flock of baby mergansers. Because it could do otherwise — become a stream or an ocean or a waterfall, and there are verbs for that, too. ... this is the language that lets us speak of what wells up all around us.” Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 55.

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Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011). Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *A Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2015). Hartmut Rosa, *Unverfügbarkeit* (Salzburg: Residenz Verlag, 2018). Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2015).

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Tsing, *A Mushroom*.

movies, but rather through the way industrial pollution inscribes itself on us and on any living organism on earth. From this perspective, we can see how the mangroves are becoming cybernetic organisms between polymer-plants and pythoplasma objects, a new kind of species. “Mngrv”, a name that we cannot speak easily, “Mngrv”.

RV: Related to this idea of the cyborg is another notion that I think is important for both of us, namely artist-researcher Susan Schuppli’s idea of the “material witness.”⁹ With this phrase Schuppli refers to the idea that material and matter not only bear the traces of past events, but that they expose them, if we are willing to see and to investigate. In ““Mngrv”,” plastics and oil take on that role: they are the traces of a capitalist, colonial system, but they also reveal it to us.

SK: Yes, Schuppli’s understanding of material as a highly informative agent in any research is as inspiring as it is troubling. What Schuppli calls for is to understand that matter bears witness, and for it to be used as testimony in court cases. In her book, she asks us to look beyond the established documents such as film, photo, text, and reports, and examine the materiality of these archives, but also to widen our views to other materials, including the more-than-human, and to ask how they record evidence of violence. I was very much drawn into this broader understanding of the material as a witness. I think these mangrove habitats are one of these terrains where the slow violent effects of plastic pollution in oceans can be witnessed, proven, and brought to court.

I have always worked with archives, mostly photographic ones. The familiar notion of the archive became a lot more radicalized when I encountered the remnants of consumer culture inside the mangrove habitat. These items will stay there for hundreds of years to come. They might alter their shape, but they are also altering our understanding of natural environments, and they will provide an unmistakable image of humans’ relation to the lands we inhabit. So, the mangrove habitats turn into a more-than-human archive, whose archivists are more-than-human, too. The encounter with this landscape left me speechless, outraged, overwhelmed. When seeing the complex reality of a mangrove forest that had been turned into a plastic archive, a single response surfaced in my confused and foggy mind: here I witness the very precise and ever-enlarging image of the murderous effort of living in “capitalist ruins.”

And then, while sitting behind my computer, writing and reading, another slow — as much as — violent material witness entered this research in the form of crude oil: during monsoon season, a sheath of raw oil emerges from the bottom of the South China Sea and covers the mangroves of eastern Bintan. I received pictures through online chat with Iwan Winarto, who is part of the sustainable tourism

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Natasha Ginwala and Vivian Zihlerl, “The Negative Floats: Questions of Earth Inheritance,” *e-flux* 58 (October 2014), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/58/61154/the-negative-floats-questions-of-earth-inheritance/>

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Susan Schuppli, *Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence* (Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2020).

movement on the island in the Riau Archipelago. Another loop between plastics' main ingredient, crude oil, mangroves, and water occurred. Oil seems to be an irretrievable part of our oceans: it has accumulated over the years through oil spills, ship engine oil-changes, shipwreck oil, oil containers, etc. Yet another impossibility to comprehend the details of what unfolds as our present tense.

RV: I think that your understanding of the cyborg and the material witness as central to "Mngrv" can be seen as gestures towards the breakdown of binary oppositions and the search for alternative models of knowledge construction in times of environmental degradation, which is a theme that runs through the project on multiple levels. During the preparation for the exhibition in Groningen, which included photographs that were taken by Iwan Winarto, we discussed this idea of developing a way of working that goes beyond the individual, of finding a way to think about and work with photography that can go beyond the colonial paradigm of the Western tourist who comes with their camera. What does that look like in practice?

SK: When I first arrived in Singapore and then in Bintan, Indonesia, I was focused on photographing plastics in the mangroves.¹⁰ The pictures center around garbage hanging in mangrove roots, for example the curved entanglement of the mangroves' limb with a rope. The pictures are telling a story very much based on my expectation, which was important for me to comprehend. Back in Germany, community-based tourist organization Desa Wisata Pengudang and I — with Iwan as the one I closely communicate with — began to send images and text about the everyday mangrove habitat and life on the shores of Bintan. This exchange happened because of our shared concerns for the mangroves, it wasn't anticipated from the beginning. Taking and sending pictures had become our way of communicating what we cannot address with words.

The photographs by Iwan are led by the need to show what is happening: here's the oil, these are the nets, here is the garbage, here is the habitat, the shore, the muddy waters, the boats. I understood that these images were like wordings for the ever-changing mangrove habitat of climate change, oil spills, and the pandemic. Over time, we have come to forge a kind of collaboration, which is based on the exchange of pictures, of information, of ideas, and we try to establish a form of trust. The realities we are in are extremely different, yet through a shared concern for waste and mangroves we are connected.

RV: So how, then, do these ideas play out in practice?
I like that you bring up the theme of collaboration, connection, and exchange because it brings us to one of the knots in this work that goes to the heart not only of the project itself, but also of art concerned with ecological issues more broadly. Collaboration

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In 2018 and 2019 Susanne Kriemann joined the NTU CCA residency program, chaired by Ute Meta Bauer and co-organized by Anna Lovecchio.

is a key word in this field; it pushes against the individualist mindset that got us here in the first place. But collaboration can also be messy, it can be fraught with power structures (whether we like it or not) and talking about these aspects requires self-reflection as well as vulnerability from those involved. Exchange, moreover, involves the idea of economy, even as this does not necessarily have to be an economy of money. These are crucial, but also difficult issues to navigate.

SK: Working as an artist is completely different from sustaining your family by organized mangrove tours on an island in the South China Sea, and from the physical labour and mental energy it takes to collect waste, every day. But on a micro level, these worlds are linked in “Mngrv”. I would like to share the working process with you as we established this during the last year.

On the island of Bintan, the plastics arrive ashore, daily. Keeping the beaches clean is an all-encompassing undertaking, and I write this as a citizen of a country that ships waste to South-East-Asia. I was invited to Singapore by NTU CCA to research mangroves and plastic pollution. In 2018 and 2019, I went to photograph the mangrove habitats of Bintan. By canoe, facilitated by Desa Wisata Pengudang, we entered the mangrove habitat, and I realized that I had more knowledge about the plastic bottles, slippers, nets, ropes surfacing along the canoe, than about the complex landscape we were surrounded by. Intuitively I took the waste and brought it home. Back in the studio in Berlin, I made prints using the collected materials as print-template and pigment. We continued to exchange pictures and also goods. Just last week I received a package with ropes and raw oil collected in the mangroves by Iwan for me. In return I support the community-based tourism in Pengudang financially. This is the practical part of the working, and when exhibiting the images; the materials are strong communicators. They speak of the complex interrelation between waste, tourism, us people, and the oceans on which we depend.

Collecting plastic waste in Mangrove habitats in Indonesia and Singapore and Sri Lanka, and carrying it back to Berlin raises questions of origin and belonging, of circulation and ecology, of archiving. “I do not know what to do with it...” the inconclusiveness appears to be helpful to discover this vast subject matter. I am looking at these ropes and cups, straws, slippers, and other again and again; their site is yet to be found; their index, forever, mumbles in mangrove roots, it wheezes in deep-sea bedding, it expands into anything I view.

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Ruby de Vos is a PhD candidate at the University of Groningen, where she is finishing her project on the temporalities of toxicity in contemporary art and literature.