

#44

Zeszyty Artystyczne

TKANINA ARTYSTYCZNA
Wobec współczesności

TEXTILE ART
In the face of contemporary times



Uniwersytet Artystyczny
im. Magdaleny Abakanowicz
w Poznaniu

2(44)/2023

Marta Leite / Rute Chaves

Marta Leite (1983, Lisbon) – is an artist, art educator and artist-researcher based in Berlin. Graduated in Sculpture and New Media from Universität der Künste Berlin (2010, title: Meisterschülerin). Has exhibited regularly since 2006, particularly in the following venues: Fabbrica del vapore (Milan); Museu do Neo-realismo (Vila Franca de Xira); Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien (Berlin); Fundació Joan Miró (Barcelona). Marta focuses her research on the development of vegetable inks and natural dyeing, often in connection with specific geographies. With her paintings on paper and natural dyed textile pieces, she reflects artistically on the cycle of life – decay – compost – new life.

Rute Chaves – research-based designer/artist based between Naarm/Melbourne, Australia, and Matosinhos, Portugal. rute holds a BA (Textile and Surface Design) from the School of Art and Design Berlin-Weissensee, Germany, and is currently a PhD candidate, research scholarship awardee and sessional lecturer in the College of Design and Social Context, RMIT, Naarm/Melbourne. rute is also a researcher in ESAD – an idea research center linked with ESAD College of Arts and Design, Matosinhos, where they also lecture.

Their practice focuses on performing experimental material investigations and exploring alternative methodologies and critical approaches to making in a multispecies world.



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Knit-Knot

Marta Leite <marta.milch.milk@googlemail.com>
To: rutchaves@gmail.com

3 June 2023 at 12:58

Dear Rute,

I still feel astonished the way time goes by. I think we met two years ago, while we were still living in a pandemic. You in Australia, me in Germany, our first meeting took place in the virtual dimension, where we realized our research interests were pretty much intertwining with each other.

You were doing a PhD on “waste”. Part of your research was a project called “knit talk”, which I had the pleasure to participate in. I remember that you were using a hacked knitting machine that could print text and drawings. Can you talk a bit about how the machine works and how you relate it with waste?

--
Marta Leite
<http://amartaleite.blogspot.com/>

Rute Chaves <rutchaves@gmail.com>
 Reply-To: rutchaves@gmail.com
 To: Marta Leite <marta.milch.milk@googlemail.com>

9 June 2023 at 10:31

Dear Marta,

Indeed, our creative paths got woven together over such a long distance, yet with so much common ground and so much more uncovered every time we share time together (and so much yet to uncover).

My practice-based PhD *Is waste 'waste'?* is in the final stretch with RMIT University in Naarm/Melbourne, and *knit-talk* was one of the participatory public projects which i am delighted you were able to find and be part of.

Back in 2016, still as a textile design undergrad in Berlin, i had the chance to hack a Brother knitting machine from the late 80's using open-source hardware and software to have real-time control over the needles. This means that – live and on-site – one can knit a simple 2-color image (or text) into a knitted fabric. As you noticed, even though it is a machine, the knit itself is easily manually operated by anyone (no knitting experience necessary!), and each row is knitted with each movement from left to right of the machine's shuttle, like an old printer!

What is fascinating about open source and hacking is that tools become vehicles for open collaboration between people to test and share knowledge, and they can be bent into new forms¹, so their functions and abilities are malleable. This opens fields of possibilities, especially the enhancement of open, reciprocal collaboration and participation has become the core of my creative practice. Back then, i made a street *photomaton* which was really fun because of its interactive and playful character; it was featured at several museums and conferences and i still get asked often to repeat that installation!



Most of the PhD research projects invited participants to gain some experience in hack-knitting. But before i get too carried away, it might be good to say something about how waste comes into play.

The world is a complex system of relationships between different actants (human and more-than-human) and environments. As a research-based artist/designer who critically approaches making in a multispecies world, i must deal with the increasing tension which acknowledges the negative consequences that waste or wasteful practices bring to practice. *Is waste 'waste'?* is a provocation which also became the title of my research and emerged from wanting to further understand waste conditions, implications, and situations, and the relationships between its actants and environments. So many questions linger... if in nature it is apparent that there is no waste, why does humanity, within its complex modern apparatus, dispose of anything at all?

Is waste only material or is it conceptual?

What is the meaning of 'disposal' and where does waste go if it actually remains in the world?

Is waste 'waste' because it has lost every kinship?

Is it matter *out of place*² or out of love?

So rather than the disposable, unwanted other, my practice exploration wants to reframe waste as waste-kin – an assemblage of embodied interactions and collaborations between human and more-than-human actants; a set of practices and ecologies; an implicated flux of entanglements which wants to set value based on kin relations. Through sharing making experiences like the one we shared, we explore the responsibilities that arise when humans and more-than-humans interrelate.

Making kin primarily came from the fantastic work of Donna Haraway and it is the lexicon of the discourse on relationality to test the boundaries of viewing material beyond extraction and kinship beyond the nuclear family³. This approach to making moves away from normative family concepts of kinship by recognizing that waste can exist and be loveable despite being unwanted. The projects are designed opportunities to provoke processual cycles of familial recovery in which waste is reused, re-shifted, re-conceptualized, and brought back into relations as kin and no longer disposable. *Do you want to knit-talk?* was one of these projects.

This time, a hacked knitting machine was set up as a knit-typewriter (or a pixel drawing tool) with which people could knit-write their ideas, thoughts, and feelings about 'waste' into digital coded language pattern pieces. With rescued yarn from a local knitting factory closure on its way to landfill, participants were invited to immerse themselves in an experience of collaboratively making and transforming so-called 'waste' into new forms by coming into a relation with it. It was only because we found

ourselves in a global pandemic that the project was adapted for an online setting. Surely the results were different as people could not touch or directly make their knitted pieces, yet co-presence opened the possibility to reach people who were in other places, like yourself. Not to mention how privileged i felt to still be able to still work (and feel connected!) during that time amongst all the fear, uncertainty and isolation.

The art works that were knitted were a result of conversations we had about ‘waste’, and you alluded to your compelling project named *cores podres*, where you were using food waste to make pigments to paint onto paper back then.



The knitted pieces could be shipped or unraveled back into yarn, and you chose to keep yours, and how heart-warming it was to see it hanging in your studio!

As part of our ongoing conversations, we talked a lot about the role of time or processes that demand a certain duration, like the ones you use in your work, and how that affects the ways we relate to the things we do (or others when they also are involved in the process). As well as the role of craft in our practices, not to mention my suggestion (or provocation!) that i made you to perhaps you should experiment with textiles. For me textiles are everywhere – in our history, in our homes, in our bodies – and their effects and affects are deeply ingrained in our everyday life, from shelter to a kind of memory⁴ and historically so *knotted* into a form of (craft) activism. Would you like to expand on all those threads i let loose

above, especially on the alchemic processes of making stunning colors from ‘waste’ and how textiles come into play in your creative endeavors?

- » 1 Busch, O., Rodgers, P., & Yee, J. *Hactivism as a design research method*. In *The Routledge*, 2015.
- » 2 Zalom, C. *Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger* (1966). *Public Culture*, 32(2), 415-422, 2020.
- » 3 Dittel, K., Edwards, C. *The material kinship reader: materials beyond extraction and kinship beyond the nuclear family*. *Onomatopoe* 208, 2022.
- » 4 Stallybrass, P. *Worn world: clothes, mourning and the life of things*. Yale Review, 1993.

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rute chaves

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Naarm/Melbourne, Australia

Researcher at ESAD--IDEA

Matosinhos, Portugal

www.rutechaves.com

/// i acknowledge the Wurundjeri and Bunurong Peoples of the Kulin Nations as the traditional custodians of the lands and waters upon which i live, work and learn. i would like to show my respect to elders past and present. Sovereignty was never ceded. Australia always was and always will be Aboriginal Land.

/// Please note the use of a lowercase ‘i’ and in my name is intentional in my writing to reject the way English language (as well as others) privileges the self above others, human and more-than-human.

Marta Leite <marta.milch.milk@googlemail.com>

23 June 2023 at 10:31

Reply-To: marta.milch.milk@googlemail.com

To: Rute Chaves <rutchaves@gmail.com>

Dear Rute,

Yes, I would love to expand on all those threads, and I will pick one up right away. You gave me the friendly push that led me to extend my practice to textiles. Actually before that, I had a dream about my mother, where she helped me to have access to a very precious ancient textile piece that was kept in a museum (don’t ask me which museum, I just know it was in Portugal). It was a piece made of cloth, dyed in different colors, already very pale colors due to the passing of the years. This ancient textile was used back in the days to measure time, or maybe to make different time combinations possible? I am not sure. I remember the museum’s archivist folding the piece of cloth in different ways to show us its functionality. In fact, this piece of cloth that looked like a colorful patchwork

obeys a code no longer known today. What the museum expert was showing us, my mother and I, was no more than a vague theory on how this device worked.

I remember I had this dream in late Spring/Summer 2020, and since then I've wanted to make this piece of cloth. It took me until late autumn, after our Knit-Talk, to trust myself to do it. I must say that your hacked machine – the yarn, the cloth, the plant dyes, the time, the different perceptions and comprehensions of time – echoed with my dream and helped me to feel confident to start working with textiles, to dye old cloth of mine in a bath of dye extracted from vegetable peels.

But maybe I should pull one more of your threads above and speak about how I started to work with plant ink.

The work process with vegetable inks is, on one hand, a result of my own experience in the pandemic; on the other, it's a continuation of previous works which already involved organic matter. Works such as *The Cabbage House* (2008), from when I was still studying at UdK (Berlin University of the Arts), is an installation of several objects made of wood, plastic and red cabbage. Or *Perishable* back in 2017, which consisted of a series of drawings made by printing and painting with cabbage leaves, lemon, orange, vinegar and Indian ink on paper. The execution of each drawing focuses on the action of drawing itself, which does not have to be controlled but may simply consist of registering a gesture. This way, an attempt is made to establish a non-hierarchical relationship between the drawing and the one that draws. The process follows the effects of time and light, therefore the artist does not decide when the drawing is finished. For an indefinite period, time and light transform and change these organic materials, so the drawings are in a constant process of change. My interest lay in the use of processed materials and organic matter in order to create pieces that are alive, that are in a constant process of transformation beyond my own action. The contrast between organic and processed materials made this transformation process more perceptible.

After my experiences with those artworks, I started the *Cores Podres* series in April 2020. Since then, I have been working with natural colors which are made out of self-made natural inks extracted from plants and vegetables, through a process that has provided me with a stronger, more conscious connection with the seasons and their corresponding rhythm and, subsequently, with my surroundings.

The ink extraction consciously follows the principles of the zero-waste movement, as I either use vegetable peels, made from the vegetables I consume, or weeds and wild berries that I forage outdoors. The logic I follow is of sustainable composting and collecting, as the vegetables, fruits and herbs are all locally harvested. The starting point of this

research-based artwork was the vegetable peels, and that is where I think we connect. I was very much interested in the idea of using parts of vegetables that people usually throw away (when they don't make compost) to make ink. By applying them on paper, I was transforming them into shapes and forms that are no longer perceived as waste.

Why do we consider some plants useful and some others not?

When did they become commodities, and how can we learn to relate to them in other ways? How can we consider some parts of them as waste, depriving them of their natural cycle of life?

The creative process I follow with *Cores Podres* is an experiment (or laboratory) to reflect on how we could change our relation to other living beings and adjust our perception of them. How to break the "accumulation – excess – waste" cycle and reconnect back to the cycle of "life – rot – compost – new life"?

When I participated in your *Do you want to knit-talk* project, I remember being around this question. We talked for an hour, while your hands and hacked machine knitted the words *Cores Podres*. I told you about my thoughts on food and painting as matter – that I wondered about not knowing the ingredients in the paints I used for my practice, just as we cannot really read the ingredients of the processed foods we buy. I told you how that bothered me, and so it pushed me to want to make my own paints. We exchanged ideas about the technical differences of applying natural ink on paper and textiles.

In the following summer (2021), I launched my first experiments on textiles and started a new work series called *Stundendecke*. *Stundendecke* is part of the *La mesure du temps* project, in which I create a series of textiles that serve as unusual timekeeping devices. Due to the light sensitivity of the plant dyes, they are ephemeral. For an unpredictable period of time, the colors change until they fade, get more contrast or disappear. For the first *Stundendecke*, I used old bedding and old clothes of mine, things I loved and didn't want to throw away, so I decided to dye them with vegetable peels and wild plants. This work made me feel closer to accomplishing a reproduction of the textile piece I saw in my dream that was used as a timekeeping device.



During the first year of research on plant ink and plant dyes, I was using mainly plants from Berlin, the city I work and live in. Later, I decided to adapt my palette to different regions. For that reason, during the months of November and December 2021, I carried out the artistic residency “Toda la Teoría del Universo” in Concepción, Chile, with the generous assistance of Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation’s Grant for the Support of Artistic Creation and a City of Berlin Research Grant (“Researchstipendium”). In the context of this residency, I started the project *Compost and Weed – Painting on the Edge*, where I created a herbarium of local plants and used some of them to make paint pigments and dyes. I was also lucky enough to visit a one-day workshop to learn some of the wool dyeing techniques from Mapuche artisans, which gave me a deeper and broader perception of the relationship between people and plants.

It is important to note that knowledge of plants’ properties and the practices of weaving, dyeing and basketry are essential political acts for the preservation of Mapuche culture. As well as preserving local flora, the autonomy of women and our own awareness (us the visitors) of the destruction caused by forestry companies in that region of Chile.

It is precisely within these craft practices that the borders between culture and nature are blurred and crossed; most of the plants used by Mapuche artisans are endemic species, currently endangered by eucalyptus and pine monocultures. This endangerment is a common link between the Portuguese and Chilean landscapes, both disturbed by eucalyptus.

With the making of *Manta Bío-Bío*, I specifically intended to problematize this issue; the piece is made of dyed fabric with endemic plants and eucalyptus leaves, and after that I focused on other Portuguese flora.



The next series of events only came to fortify my artistic experimentation. I was very lucky to be part of the artist residency *Wireless* at Cortex Frontal, Arraiolos in autumn 2022, which consisted in four series of residencies where artists learned textile-related craft processes. I participated in Flávia Vieira's dyeing workshop, where I got more tools to manipulate textiles and gathered more momentum to follow the path of linking textiles to places. I started creating imaginary territories where I join different regions that come together through the plants they are made of. But I've left one thread pending above: isn't it curious that eucalyptus comes from Australia, where you studied?

After participating in *Do you want to knit-talk?* I remember you were so generous and sent me a wonderful book by Robin Wall Kimmerer called *Braiding Sweetgrass*. I now have the book in front of me and have opened it randomly: I am on page 275 and see words and sentences I underlined with a pencil back then:

Mutualism

Some of earth's oldest beings, lichens, are born from reciprocity.

Our indigenous herbalists say to pay attention when plants come to you; they're bringing you something you need to learn.¹

During the hard and unpredictable times of the pandemic, I felt plants came to me, and they were definitely bringing me something that I was/am still learning. I paid more attention to vegetable peels and their potential, especially to plants I encountered during long walks in parks.

I will pick up on one other thread you left above: don't we need more mutualism and reciprocity to overcome waste?

If we try to give back to plants the gift they give to us, wouldn't it lead us to a way of producing less waste?

After looking through the book another time, I found a key idea:

Here is where ecology, economics, and spirit are woven together. By using materials as if they were a gift, and returning that gift through worthy use, we find balance.²

Materials as gifts. I must mention a secret gift you sent together with our collaborative knitted piece: two eucalyptus leaves from a species I never saw before. At that time, it was still unknown to me the important role eucalyptus leaves would have in my later works. Yet here it is – once again you threw the right thread that would find an echo in later creative processes of mine.

Dear Rute, apologies, perhaps I wrote too much. But maybe you would like to weave one or two of the loose threads I left hanging?

Maybe on the idea of material as a gift and how it can help us get out of 'waste logic'?

Or isn't it related to your thoughts on kinship?

How should we rethink our relationship with material, things, and even works of art?

I cannot resist the urge and to share with you this last quotation:

In the ethno-poetics and performance of the shaman, my people, the Indians, did not split the artistic from the functional, the sacred from the secular, art from everyday life." "Instead, the work has an identity; it is a "who" or a "what" and contains the presences of persons, that is, incarnations of gods or ancestors or natural and cosmic powers. The work manifests the same needs as a person, it needs to be "fed", *la tengo que bañar y vestir*.³

» 1 Kimmerer, Robina Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013.

» 2 *Ibid.*

» 3 Anzaldúa, Gloria. "Tlilli, Tlapalli / The Path of the Red and Black Ink." In *what happens between the knots? A Series of Open Questions*, vol. 3, edited by Jeanne Gerrity and Anthony Huberman. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2022.

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Marta Leite

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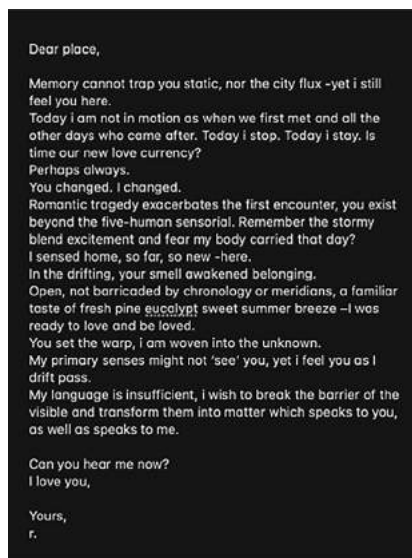
29 June 2023 at 10:31

Dear Marta,

No apologies necessary, it was a pleasure to hear more about your thoughtful creative endeavors and the links with plants and ancient knowledge you have been finding.

The link you found in Chile regarding the issue with Eucalyptus is interesting, while being so far away in such vast and foreign territory – so-called Australia – to see and smell Eucalyptus around grounded me in a familiar carrying connection. So important, especially during the hard pandemic times. Even though Australia has such a diversity of Eucalyptus species. Did you know Eucalyptus makes a stunning black textile pigment?

Hearing about the connections you are drawing with your work and landscapes and territories (tangible or intangible), i had to think about an invitation i received to be part of *Epistolary* (March 2021). The project consisted in a series of public workshops and producing work that expresses care and connection with a place by writing love letters to a city. The love letters were collected in an interactive map that acts as an online exhibition, where everyone was invited to upload their contribution to a place on an interactive map that acts as an online exhibition.



The place i chose was linked with the smell of pines and Eucalyptus trees, which took me straight back to my childhood summer adventures in coastal Portugal. More than that so-needed emotional landscape, the making of this work and thinking about the more-than-human ‘waste’ actant (here, yarn) is helping me build insight on how to bring materials’ agency (or material as a gift as you invited me to reflect on) to the fore-front of my projects.



The process and approach i chose to produce this performative artifact became an important exercise to build sensorial awareness to connect to the more-than-human, to further understand the sentiments materials can carry (representational/constructed), as well as how to undo or set materials free from the processes humans force materials into. By burning

the material, i was trying to recover its elemental form and return it to nature, albeit again enforced by another set of human hands. More so, i was attempting a translation of my words to assure the place understood the words i wrote to it.

It is a hard task to conclude our letter-like email exchange: threads will be left hanging in this ongoing process of becoming in relation to each other and the world – and that is beautiful.

As a non-invited guest of the country of those unceded lands and waters i was able to live and work in, i feel extremely privileged to have learnt and continue to learn such important lessons, from deep care to tough ongoing colonial violence. I will leave you a piece of a book by Tyson Yunkaporta titled *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*, which amongst so much else also tells me why gathering and doing work that invites others is (re)generative.

If people are laughing, they are learning. True learning is a joy because it is an act of creation.¹

Looking forward to creating and re-creating all the next wonders. ●

» 1 Yunkaporta, Tyson. *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*, 2020.

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//// Please note the use of a lowercase 'i' and in my name is intentional in my writing to reject the way English language (as well as others) privileges the self above others, human and more-than-human.

Abstract

In *Knit Knot*, research-based designer/artist Rute Chaves and visual artist Marta Leite exchange e-mails in which they reflect on their first collaborative textile piece. Back then, Rute was in the middle of her practice-based PhD *Is waste 'waste'?*, reflecting

on questions such as “is waste only ‘waste’ because it has lost every kinship?”. In this research context, their project *Do you want to knit-talk?* involves Rute using a hacked knitting machine as a knit-typewriter (or pixel drawing tool) with which people could knit-write their ideas, thoughts, and feelings about ‘waste’ into digital coded language pattern pieces, using rescued yarn from a local knitting factory.

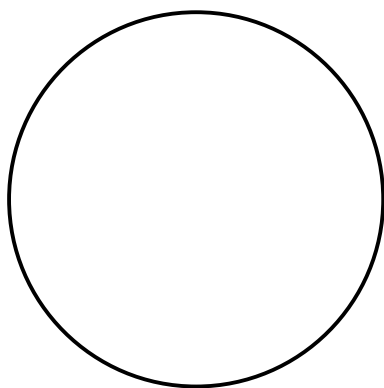
On the other hand, Marta was researching natural ink extracted from plants and vegetables – mainly using vegetable peels – and reflecting on questions such as “why do we consider some plants useful and some others not?” and “how can we consider some or parts of them as waste, depriving them of their natural cycle of life?”

Here is where their research meets: collaboration on the project *Do you want to knit-talk?* and the beginning of Marta’s research on plant-based dyes, which later took her to create several textile pieces.

In this paper, both artists chose the e-mail exchange format to question each other about their studio process with textiles and reveal some of their theoretical context. This exchange takes the reader to an intertwining of ideas related with arts and crafts, material kinship, material as a gift, plants, as well as place and the possibilities when humans and more-than-humans inter-relate.

Keywords:

Knitting, hacker, natural dyes, plants, waste, kinship





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w Poznaniu 2023

Wersją pierwotną czasopisma
jest wersja drukowana.

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