Fabric Cycle – (un)earthed
An artistic project by Sarah Burger, 2015
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Sarah Burger
artist & artistic based PhD candidate
ZHdK, Zürich, CH & Kunstuniversität Linz, AT
mail@sarahburger.ch

Abstract
In my paper for the conference TRANSVALUATION I will present my work “Fabric (Cycle)”. It is a seven-part series of sculptures. The starting materials I use are degradable fabric and a polyester thread, with which I draw or sew, more precisely, abstract-ornamental, architectural structures into the fabric. I then bury these seven starting objects in different places, which all have their own geological particularities, and leave them to the decomposition process. I observe and document this process by unearthing and reburying the sculptures repeatedly during roughly three weeks.

The description of this artwork is enriched with associative reflections on object-oriented ontology, linguistic structuralism, Gestalt phenomenology and some thoughts about the visibility of artworks.

Based on these considerations I propose to understand artworks as ruins, in order to fully embrace their interobjective coexistence.

Keywords: Artwork, process-oriented, material, duration

“Why is Tekla’s construction taking such a long time?”
“So that its destruction cannot begin.”

Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities

Preliminary remarks

I present here the process-oriented artistic project “Fabric Cycle - (un)earthed”. It is a sculptural work in a broader sense, developed in the context of my practice-based PhD at the ZHDK Zurich and at the Art University Linz. In my research I am searching for ways to include material processes, their duration and coexisting layers of time into the visibility of my artistic work. “Fabric Cycle - (un)earthed” is a direct response to this endeavor.

In the following text, I present this project and relate it associatively to reflections from the fields of object-oriented ontology (Timothy Morton), linguistic structuralism (Ferdinand de Saussure), the phenomenology of duration and Gestalt (Henri Bergson, Maurice Merleau-Ponty), as well as to the visibility of artworks (Jacques Rancière) and concluding remarks about artworks as ruins.
“Fabric Cycle - (un)earthed” is a series of seven sculptures. The core material is a degradable fabric, into which I sew inorganic structures based on satellite views of cities and photographs of minerals. I use lasting, non-degrading, polyester thread to draw these structures. The seven textile objects each have a different shape and dimension. Under ideal conditions, it would take three months for the fabric to completely decompose. Until the beginning of June I will bury the seven objects in seven different places in Switzerland leaving them to the decomposition process. In collaboration with Dr. Mark Feldmann, a geologist, I have selected seven places in Switzerland whose geological particularities will probably impact the decomposition process: siliceous (Leventina, TI), calcareous (Glarus, GL), saliferous (Bex, VD), a gypsum quarry (Benken, AG), ellipsoidal lava (basalts) of the former Tethys Ocean (Marmorera reservoir, GR), an asphalt mine (Val de Travers, JU) and a soil contaminated with chemical waste from the time of the emerging textile industry (Mitlödi, GL).

I will revisit these seven places roughly every three weeks to unearth the sculptures (and rebury them afterwards.) I will observe and document, in a kind of reverse archeology, how the decomposition changes the sculptures or rather makes them emerge out of the starting objects.

„But the philosopher who does not want to discard anything is really obliged to ascertain that the states of our material world are contemporaneous with the history of our consciousness. […] As we have said, when one wishes to prepare a glass of sugared water one is obliged to wait until the sugar melts.” The properties of sugar in contact with water determine how long it takes for the sugar to dissolve. The duration of its dissolving process is given by its material properties. The sewn-in architectural and mineral structures have different durations than the decaying fabric on two levels: On the one hand the thread is made from polyester, i.e. plastic, and thus belongs to a relatively young class of materials which will remain visible for many years. On the other hand the stitched structures refer to architectural landscapes and their material properties, which usually ensure the long-lasting visibility of buildings and monuments of past cultures. Henri Bergson’s reflections on duration and time, as developed in “The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics”, can be transferred onto the objects themselves. Time is not a linear entity that encompasses all objects equally and indexes them. Beyond its mathematical abstraction, time is to be understood as the velocity of each object, as its specific duration in the context of and in exchange with all other objects. Objects coexist. They merge with other objects, disconnect and combine with different ones again according to their duration, properties and accidental interactions. Sugar dissolves in water, water evaporates and becomes part of the next rainfall, while ants have already carried away the re-crystallized sugar in the meantime …

Referring to the concept of duration, I also see the project as a reflection on the ambiguity of the present. „The appearance is the Past. Essence is the future. […] What we have […] is a nonspatial rift between past and future that corresponds to the Rift between appearance and essence. Between these two fundamental forces, the present is nowhere: objects are never present.” For my artistic work, the degradable fabric that has been developed over the past five years and dissolves within three months is brought together with basalt rock from the Tethys Ocean, with industrial waste from about 200 years ago and with plastic that will remain visible for the next few hundred years. Thus, the supposed unambiguousness of the present is divided. A multifaceted presence emerges, uniting very different objects with particular durations.

Ferdinand de Saussure, in his structuralist analysis of language, has coined the notion of “la valeur” to describe the difference between words: words are different from each other due to their particular value. What separates and distinguishes “and”, “mice” and “squared” from each other is their specific value. In his text “Indirect Language”, Maurice Merleau-Ponty transfers de Saussure’s reflections to poetry and painting and notes that the meaning of a poem emerges exactly from in between the words, i.e. between their values, and a
painting equally renders its meaning visible between the strokes of the brush. He further transfers this productive ability to create new things onto perception itself: “We would never see any new landscape if our eyes did not give us the means catching, questioning, and shaping patterns of space and color hitherto unseen.” In his reflections on the analogy of painting, poetry and perception, Merleau-Ponty stresses that the creative act lies between the objects, in the supposedly invisible, in forces influencing each other beyond ages and places. Timothy Morton describes this space in between objects as abyss, as an immense space shared by objects, as a transcending interaction: “The abyss in front of things is interobjective. It floats among objects, between them; though this between is not „in” spacetime – it is space-time.” Objects transcend themselves. Their sense and their visibility emerge between them, between their values by becoming their mutual context and thus by coexisting. (“[...] intersubjectivity – a shared space in which human meaning resonates – is a small region of a much larger interobjective configuration of sapce.”).

There is no outside of objects. Each context becomes an object and an entity in itself. Textiles, in connection with images, traditionally become canvasses. Canvas and paint together are a painting. The image itself is misunderstood as color that has to be kept together by something else. The decomposition process of the fabric renders the coexistence of both materials – thread and fabric (color and canvas) – visible: The decaying sculptures will no longer pretend that there is a hierarchy of carrier and carried, but find their form in the connection of both the materials and the conditions affecting them. At what point I will intervene aesthetically and decide that the sculptures have an interesting shape will only become clear in the course of the process. The seven sculptures will leave their seven places in the end and will be shown together at an exhibition in August of this year at Corner College in Zürich.

“I call the distribution of the sensible a system of sensible evidence that renders visible what produces community and at the same time also renders visible the divisions that define these places and proper parts. A distribution of the sensible thus fixes both a shared common space and its exclusion.” Sharing is not dominating nor is it fixing as it is contingent on passing arrangement. Sharing is a coexistence of different durations, of creating spaces and situations. Rancière's notion of the distribution of the sensible can be understood with object-oriented ontology as not only created by humans but distributed by all objects. Following Rancière, art is one of the fields that make the existence of the common visible.

“Fabric Cycle - (un)earthed” elucidates the impact that material properties (fabric, thread, different soils, me) have on each other. The distribution of the sensible that happens here encompasses the visible materials as well as the invisible forces determining their change. The different states of visibility of the process are also shifts in presence, absence, time layers and durations. “Fabric Cycle - (un)earthed” goes through different states of visibility and is thus involved in the distribution of the common in different ways. The initial objects are first buried and hidden from our view among other objects. Even though they are present in our shared space, they remain invisible – a mere rumor or story only shared by the people who know about them. Their existence is a mediated, communicated one. Then the objects leave their esoteric invisibility and enter the new context of the exhibition space. There, they become multilayered presences of their own creation process and thus have new visibilities, i.e. new contexts. This new visibility and the structuring of the shared space – the coexistence – extend the objects. They are process and presence at once, encompassing the absent places of their creation as well as the then-present context of the exhibition and it's viewing.

Timothy Morton has called the time we live in “the Age of Asymmetry”. Anthropocentrism has shifted because of the insight that everything forms each other's context, that everything is in motion, yielding and changing. We do not exist on a time axis with a chain of sequential events within an immobile space. The next mythological aura of materials, the next way of dealing with the world slowly comes into consciousness. Here, objects are granted a new peculiarity, and together with them, we form an unfinished whole. „The Age of Asymmetry resembles the Symbolic phase, in that materials now gain a new „life“ [...]. So the age of Asymmetry is not a return to animism as such, but rather animism sous rature (under erasure).” This shared space is defined, shaped and negotiated by us subjects and all other objects.

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Epilogue: Artworks as ruins

The word “curator” comes from the Latin verb “curare”, which means “to take care of” or “caring for”. To take care of someone or something, to care for someone or something, mainly requires a will, empathy as well as a loving and respectful attitude. To take care of something is an attitude towards coexistence. A ruin is a cultural construction exposed to different conditions, mostly consisting of mineral substances. Ruins are not broken objects, but material changes becoming visible in the context of other objects. The notion of the ruin should not be misunderstood as a romanticizing of the past, but as a visible coexistence of different animistic forces. „[...] Ruins are sites, in which the becomings of new forms, orderings and aesthetics can emerge.”11 If we understand “ruin” free from nostalgic, distorting values, we can consider ruins as the direct visibility of coexistence, as creative places, as the visible and invisible presence of the past and the future. Ruins are realizations of duration and materiality, time lapse and standstill at once. If we take the notion seriously that objects have their own animistic forces and are thus animistically charged entities, the value of the word “curare” will change as well. The act of caring for something can alter according to the cared for-objects themselves, in the rhythm of their duration and their changing contexts. To consider artworks as ruins opens up a possibility to (re)gain a concept of the dimensions of duration and of coexistence as well as an understanding of our mutual presence as interobjective and temporally multilayered. Change is not destruction, but the emergence of new contexts. “Fabric Cycle – (un)earthed” is a ruin, a past and future object at once, something that extends beyond itself.

Images:
Sculpture No 1 as initial object and buried.

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