

An essay by Sophie J Williamson to accompany the exhibition
Silt by Nika Neelova with Carolina Caycedo and Rachael Champion
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A constellation of works by Nika Neelova, Carolina Caycedo and Rachael Champion, *Silt* weaves together a fabric of movements and transformations of landscapes, materials and beings, as nature's course grates up against human disruption. Silt is a granular, boundaryless body without beginning or end, carried by the flows of waters through landscapes and across geographies. Clinging momentarily in crevasses and nooks, creating blockages and slowing streams. Constructing knobbules of sedimented forms. The debris of building sites or eroding river banks, crumbling breezeblocks or mountain ridges. Swept onwards accumulating in the riverbeds and estuaries, or further still, to join the depths of the ocean. Disintegrated material, once whole, overtaken by the inevitable forces of time. *Sylt, silte, sulte, sealt*: as with linguistic reconfigurations over the centuries, through 15th century Middle Norwegian, Middle Low German and Old English, the material itself reforms in somersaults, transforming into siltstone or silt marshes or merging with clay and sand into sedimentary rock.

In his essay *Undercover Softness*, philosopher Reza Negarestani describes a politics of decay as a malleable architecture that recreates itself in the processes of its own deconstruction. He argues that all structures, both physical entities and conceptual socio-political formations, are always in a process of undoing into something else and can only momentarily perceived to be whole. This is a world of stand ins; a constant flux of material exchanges,



held together for a lifetime at different scales and temporalities: photons forming a beam of light; proteins within a cell; people within societies; buildings within a city; datasets within a digital exchange. Fleeting and ephemeral, a mountain seems held with solidity and permanence yet it is only so comparatively.

Silt speaks of our reality: human and non-human, organic and non-organic, each only momentarily configured within a boundary, all eventually returning to a fluid, fluctuating, recycling of matter on the planet. We are a multitude of molecules each of which can be ripped apart, detached from the whole and reconfigured into a new formation. Silt occupies this space: it exists between geological cycles, eroding time scales into a murky timeless placeless beinglessness. Liquid dust. It seeps out and seeps in; taking momentary form in resting points amongst the drains, channels, conduits and pathways as water traces its course through the urban sprawl to join the seas. Silt doesn't seek permanence; whenever the opportunity presents itself it slips back into liquidity, re-joining the water's outbound journey.

Like sand running through an hourglass, silt's ebb and flow through landscapes measures the passing of time. Nika Neelova's installation *Silt* – from which the exhibition takes its name – reconfigures the bone like casts of the solidified build-up of silt within pipes that were once the life-blood of the city. Calcified veins of the metropolis. Suspended together in collective configuration, they create a shoal of petrified histories swimming through time; skeletal remains, pieced together to suggest a larger whole. Fictions and material traces rub up against one another: histories existing only in fragmentation, we have to fill-in the historical narrative with speculation. Like a whale skeleton looming overhead in a natural history museum, evoking its oceanic movement and the ridges of its once thick blubberous flesh. Neelova's bone-like structure holds the space for what has been lost. The once energetic water ways previously full of amalgamating, intertwining stories, now hang lifeless; animated only in the imagination, awaiting the forces that will transform them into their next geological configuration.

I wonder at what will remain of our cities as the Anthropocene unfolds over deep time – the stratigraphic markers that will endure in the rock record. Over millions of years, the inland megacities of Delhi and Moscow will largely erode into sands and gravels, to be spread by wind and water into unreadable expanses of desert. The coastal cities of New York and Amsterdam, those claimed soonest by the rising sea levels, will be packed more carefully into soft-settling sediments. It is the invisible cities – the undercities – that will be preserved most cleanly, embedded as they already are within bedrock. The above-ground structures we have built will collapse to form jumbled urban strata: medleys of concrete, brick and asphalt, glass compressed to a milky crystalline solid, steel dissolved to leave trace impressions of its presence. Below ground, though, the subways and sewage systems, the catacombs and the quarry voids – these may preserve their integrity far into a post-human future.

Robert Marfarlane, *Underland: A Deep Time Journey*. Penguin, 2019

As I write this, my sodden coat and jeans hang over the radiator, having recently escaped from a downpour of biblical proportions outside. It feels here on the autumnal Kent coast, that water is in abundance. The October rains flood the plastic guttering of rooftops and gush along the pavements, accumulating into pools that block walkways, spluttering down overworked drains to join the expanse of unseen underground pipe networks. Yet elsewhere in Qatar's wadis, the steppe of Afghanistan's Badghis region, Botsawana's Limpopo basin, the list goes on... life-giving springs, streams and rivers dry into seasonal trickles and later into meandering sandy imprints on the land tracing where abundance once travelled: Neelova's skeletal fragments enlarged to continental proportions.

The human species, via our evasive, extracting, expansionist actions, seeps into the geological formations of the land. The earth's strata are being and time solidified; each layer exists as a ghost of its era, laden in silences, loss, mysteries and unknowns. The modern era of the Holocene, with its flora and fauna evolving

over millennia, is now disrupted by the Golden Spike of the Anthropocene: the era of human intervention. Centuries of uprooting human and non-human communities, transforming material compositions through extraction industries, global warming and nuclear fallout, the violences of colonialism and capitalism have irrevocably disturbed the carefully balanced biome of the planet; violences that is now set down in the geological record.

As anthropologist Elizabeth A. Povinelli warns in her book *Geontologies*, the previously stable ordering of Life and Non-Life 'shake'. Climbing and colonising the walls, Rachael Champion's defunct lab machinery and research apparatus provide structures for hybrid biomes to take form: the different temporalities of rocks, mosses and man-made materials intertwine to create new uncanny ecologies. Intersecting entities devise new and novel identities. A dystopian stage of human experimentation, abandoned, it is rapidly reclaimed by nature's Frankenstein architect, lichen. Lichen, a symbiotic partnership of a fungus and an alga, these two organisms merge to operate as a single, united mass. Agency activations of collaboration on a micro and organic level. Elsewhere the precarity of such micro-entanglements speak through Carolina Caygado's depictions of the communities, human and non-human, of the Yuma (Magdalena River), as they face the seismic interruptions of late capitalism. Cement chemicals decimating fish populations, the rerouted river drying out previously fertile farmland, and banks withdrawing financial support from the family run businesses that depended on access to this natural resource. The ecologies, geographies, histories, cultures and spiritualities of this significant body of water, crumble under privatisation. A dying artery. Neelova's ripple stone works, where the artist's overlain thumb imprints in a clay slab, witness the moments of their interaction; they mimic the pockmarks on the planet's skin: the thermokarst hollows that cover the northern Siberian territories. A great expanse of once vibrant azure filled concaves, teeming with life, now coalesce into vast networks of dying lakes. The fragile permafrost landscape bearing the thumb-marks of the collective interactions of our species as the planet warms and the frozen land gives way.

Between 1927 and 1940 philosopher Walter Benjamin compiled dozens of dossiers full of fragmentary and unfinished meditations on the topography, history and humanity of Paris' subterranean networks. Rather than writing a linear history of Paris, Benjamin collected notes, quotations, aphorisms, stories and reflections to create a kaleidoscope of twists, coils and enfoldments. For him the city's structure possessed a metaphysical aura; both a collective dream and a material presence, knitted together not only in the pre-planned plots but in patterns, echoes, memory-ghosts and tangled subtexts. *Silt* presents a larger fragmentary constellation: moving from the remnants of ancient waterways, completing the imaginary trajectory between surviving roundels; to modern overused pipe ways accumulating histories and blockages; to millennia-old rivers that now struggle to compete with the forces of extractive capitalism; to the blurred, amalgamated ecosystems that these frictions create. From the veins of the city to the veins of the planet and the unstable fragility of each, the works in the show present a porosity of being. A snowballing entanglement of our individual actions as they conjoin with others to provoke changes on a colossal and planetary scale.

Yet they also remind us of our fleetingness: perceived boundaries between things imposed only through an anthropocentric worldview. The delineations between life and non-life, minerality and organic, are artificial, human-conceived separations.

A stone is a vibration of quanta that maintains its structure for a while, just as a marine wave maintains its identity for a while before melting again into the sea.

What is a wave, which moves on water without carrying with it any drop of water? A wave is not an object, in the sense that it is not made of matter that travels with it. The atoms of our body, as well, flow in and away from us. We, like waves and like all objects, are a flux of events; we are processes, for a brief time monotonous.

Carlo Rovelli, *Reality Is Not What It Seems: The Journey to Quantum Gravity*. Allen Lane, 2016.



Electrons, molecules, brittlestars, jellyfish, coral reefs, dogs, rocks, icebergs, plants, asteroids, snowflakes, and bees stray from all calculable paths, making leaps here and there, or rather, making here and there from leaps, shifting familiarly patterned practices, testing the waters of what might yet be/have been/could still have been.

Karen Barad, *On Touching - The Inhuman That Therefore I Am*. Differences: Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies, Duke University Press, 2012

No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.

Heraclitus, *Fragments*. Brooks Haxton (Translator), Penguin Classics 2003

We are amongst a universe in constant flux from quarks within neutrons to the stars in the furthest depths of the cosmos, nothing is static. A constant churning mass of movement. Quantum mechanics describes the world as a reality comprised only of the relations between physical systems: rather than a world made up of things. Things only exist because they enter into relations with one another. We are not within a world of objects but a world of events.

In 2006 a new kind of rock was discovered by sea captain and oceanographer Charles Moore on the shores of the Hawaiian archipelago: Plastiglomerates. The fossils of the future. In the heated pressure of volcanic currents, plastic waste melts and fuses together with natural materials; basaltic lava fragments, sand, shells, wood and coral, forming a plastic / rock mutant of looming planetary futures to come. Plastiglomerates index humankind's relationship to the movement of water: rivers, rains and seas breaking down stone over the millennia into sand and fossils, into oil, refined by humans into polycarbons which now return to the shores amalgamated into new mineral realities. Each of the artists in this exhibition, Nika Neelova, Carolina Caycedo and Rachael Champion, invite us to sit in the uncomfortable, insecure margins where the natural world grates up against the human. New liminal spaces where the man-made forces new and unretractable hybridities. Equilibrium disturbed. Now the question is what



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events do we unfold from here and what stories do we lay down to
be read in the stratigraphies of the future?

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