

Emily Eliza Scott, “World of Matter” audio tour, HMKV Dortmund, March-June 2014
Assistants: Judith Funke and Mirjam Gaffran

STOP 1: material histories/cartographies

SCRIPT: “World of Matter” is an exhibition by an international group of artists and theorists about raw materials and the complex “ecologies”—or, the social, economic, geopolitical, and earth systems—of which they are a part. Before encountering any artworks, however, we encounter the space of the gallery, already surrounded by myriad species of matter. Stand still for a moment and observe: how many can you identify? What do you know about their origins, properties, or the routes they’ve followed to arrive here? Take the column before you. If we were to peel back its outermost layer of paint, we would discover that it is composed of ferrocement, as is most of the Dortmunder U building, which was constructed in 1926-27. This architectural substrate is itself an aggregate of human-made and natural substances: chalk and clay, gravel, sand, water, and various chemicals; closer analysis would reveal the presence of iron, calcium, silicon, and other elements. Each of these base ingredients moreover carries with it specific cartographies and histories—deriving from a particular place, having been passed through multiple hands and machines, traded on a series of markets, transported on barge, train or truck. Within a small block of ferrocement, as with any number of other materials in this room, the temporal and the spatial, the human and the non-human, the local and the global, congeal. [224 words]

STOP: schichte/geschichte in the Ruhrgebiet

SCRIPT: Find your way to a window on the 4th or 5th floor, or—if accessible—to the rooftop of the Dortmunder U, which offers a sweeping, 360-degree view of the surrounding landscape. What clues about the history of this place can you read by looking at the land and its urban overlay? Not long ago, the Ruhrgebiet was an epicenter of extractive industries, some say the most densely industrialized place in the world. Coal mining, among other activities, has left behind a particular topography, or lay of the land. First, we notice monumental architectural and infrastructural elements rising up into the sky—industrial skeletons punctuating the landscape. A trained eye might also discern subtle variations in the contours of the ground’s surface, such as artificial hills composed of mining waste to the north. In 150 years, more than 7 billion tons of rock has been displaced in order to mine 11 billion tons of coal in the Ruhrgebiet. These operations are indexed at multiple depths and scales, from the hollowing of coal seams down to a thousand meters, to the cracks in sidewalks and lopsided buildings around Dortmund, which have shifted due to destabilized earth below. Geologic strata and human stories are here entangled across deep time, the term “eternal damages” referring to those impacts expected to stretch beyond the imaginable horizon of history. Much is not visible, as well, eluding our ability to know by looking alone: changes in the chemistry and course of water passing overland and of groundwater below; the atmospheric “footprint” of industrial processes; the constellation of flora and fauna compared with that in the past; the bodies, thoughts, and actions of workers who performed the sweaty, muscle-tweaking labor that contributed to such transformations. The ways that *this* place intersects with *other* places. A number of artworks within “World of Matter” depict instances of land being reshaped on a massive scale, including at faraway sites where certain industries moved when they left the Ruhrgebiet.

STOP: globalization + “new” versus “old” industries

SCRIPT: As heavy industry has waned in the Ruhrgebiet, it has waxed in other parts of the world—namely in China and the global South. It is not a thing of the past, in other words, but a thing that now occurs largely *elsewhere*. The Ruhrgebiet has long been entwined with global exchange circuits—already a thousand years ago, the “Hellweg” served as a trade route that helped connect this region to the

Atlantic and what are now Poland and the Baltic territories; by the 19th century, the Ruhrgebiet was well-established as an exporter of coal on the international stage. Since the mid-20th century, however, the expansion of a globalized capitalist economy—characterized by the de-regulation of markets, establishment of multinational corporations, and advancement of telecommunications technologies—has led to dramatic *de-industrialization* in Dortmund and its environs. Today, many unprocessed or minimally processed materials are *imported* to Germany for high-tech finishing. The economy here is also increasingly service oriented, with logistics, banking, and tourism among new branches. In the case of tourism, it is precisely the area’s industrial past that has been reclaimed as a spectacle for consumption. What does it mean to live in a place once identified as a source for raw materials, and now, with their distribution, refinement, and display? How do “new industries” relate to “old”? [219 words]

STOP: water trail

SCRIPT: Rather than providing an overarching narrative or one-directional guided route, this audio tour encourages you to build and explore multiple pathways through the material on display. Pull out a thread, or facet, and follow it through various works, using it as a prism to direct your viewing. You might, for instance, hone in on a particular substance, like water. Even within a single piece, water might be shown to mean and to do many things. In *Egyptian Chemistry*, Ursula Biemann examines water as “a coalescing agent in land-use politics, crop cycles, nitrate industries, soil composition, farmers’ collectives, oxidants, irrigation technologies, and hydropower.” The Nile, for her, is a “primal force” that has “always powerfully meddled with life [in Egypt], human existence included.” Water as a non-human actor. Water as a primary resource. Water as a vital element in the production of *other* resources, such as crops. Elsewhere in the exhibition, we find examples of water as something to fend off, or hold at bay, as in the Netherlands, where for centuries artificial polders have been constructed to prevent flooding and to gain arable land from the sea; or in Bangladesh, where low-lying communities are now frantically attempting to battle rising sea levels from overtaking their settlements. Or, water appears as something that flows and leaks, carrying pesticides and other contaminants downstream. Water as something—like the stories represented here—that is not easily contained and that can simultaneously bind, divide, and cuts across.

STOP: multinational corporation trail

SCRIPT: As faraway places become ever more entangled via flows of labor and capital, it is increasingly impossible to tease one place apart from another—a more *territorial* optic of analysis is demanded. The world, once organized largely by national territories, is progressively characterized by global connectivity and jurisdiction. Yet, how to picture globalization—including its complex networks and dizzying temporalities—in a way that does not generalize or flatten? In a way that attends to the hyper-local while keeping larger geopolitical and earth systems in view? That considers how global forces hit the ground, unfolding and mutating as they interact with particular contexts? We might blaze a trail between the works on display here based on their shared connection to a single multinational corporation, as one way to cobble a picture. The tentacles of corporate conglomerates often extend across vast scales today, touching many places at once. Monsanto, the biotechnology giant that is rapidly patenting seed varieties around the planet, appears in nearly all stories involving agriculture—from those in Burkina Faso to India, Texas, Brazil, and the Philippines. The same is true for pesticide manufacturers such as Dow Chemicals. An energy company like Chevron likewise appears in multiple projects within World of Matter. We could alternatively trace links by way of an individual international law issued by the World Bank, World Trade Organization, or the like.

STOP: uneven development/environmental justice

SCRIPT: Globalization is not a smooth, seamless, or evenly distributed phenomenon, but—to the contrary—one that has contributed to growing disparity and precarity across the world. Critical geographers have been especially helpful in theorizing the uneven development that is endemic to globalized, advanced capitalism, whereby violence (to land and people) is often shifted from one place to another, and in the process further from common view. The geographer David Harvey notes: “Vast concentrations of productive power here contrast with relatively empty regions there. Tight concentrations of development in one place contrast with sprawling far-flung development in another.”ⁱ This type of relational thinking quickly brings questions of justice to the fore. The rampant privatization of resources in recent decades furthermore marks a new stage of ecological imperialism: from the corporate patenting of life forms such as seeds, to the transfer of basic goods like water from public into private hands, to the quickly-expanding practice of neocolonial land grabs, wherein large tracts of land are sold off to foreign investors. Many projects in World of Matter draw connections between seemingly unrelated sites to highlight the inequitable relations between them, and moreover, to intervene in the conditions at hand. As such, they align with other radical, eco-aesthetic practices which, in the words of art historian T.J. Demos, “chart the operations of globalisation,” in order to “open up” and imagine other, more just, forms of world-making.

STOP: art versus non-art

SCRIPT: An enormous amount of research is contained within this exhibition, enough to likely prompt some visitors to ask if we’re in the midst of art or something else. Indeed, the visual works you see reflect a spectrum—some being more aligned with photojournalism and others with experimental forms of contemporary art. Regardless of whether or not we find it important to delimit the boundaries of “art,” it is unusual that this range of visual practices is brought here into close proximity. Some exhibition-goers may further wonder how the projects on display relate to political activism, especially given their engagement with timely, real-world subjects. As you move from piece to piece, pay close attention to the ways that certain works fall in line with versus depart from straightforward modes of documentary representation. Can you find instances where the artist has troubled the authority of the documentary genre, perhaps by “contaminating” her own “evidence” or by including passages that are perplexing, oblique, or where it’s unclear what we’re meant to glean? How do events unfold within each work—is there a detectable beginning, middle, and end, or, is a sense of open-endedness instead evoked? Which works bear traces of their own making, wearing process on their sleeve? What adjectives and references would you use to describe “World of Matter” to a friend?

STOP: fieldwork

SCRIPT: The projects in this exhibition, almost without exception, incorporate extensive fieldwork—conducted over the course of weeks or months, and often at locations that are time-consuming, difficult, or even dangerous to reach. An entanglement in and with the field, in all its messy complexity, has been a key dimension of the research process. All of the artists, in various ways, grapple with the question of how to give representation to embodied, field-based knowledge and experience. They moreover share a fundamental conviction that the worldly *exceeds* representation. In opposition to traditional maps, which relay a God’s eye point of view, or to diagrams and charts that presume the possibility of quantitative truths, their own visual compositions reflect necessarily partial, on-the-ground perspectives. As you move through the exhibition, consider how each artist reinforces the fragmentary nature of his or her position within the piece itself. Which traces of the field have they chosen to portray? Do they somehow hint at things outside of the camera’s frame? How do they link material gathered in the field to other forms of information? Image-making here involves a translation of “raw” data into finished product, with much clearly falling away in the process. In some sense, this

visual production parallels the very resources under investigation, which are harvested, refined, and then put into circulation. Unlike commodities, however, the artworks on display here resist neat packaging and easy consumption.

STOP 9: matter & temps

SCRIPT: A turn to matter is a turn toward the worldly and away from the purely human-centric—a move beyond the social, political, and historical alone, and especially beyond a dominant economic paradigm that frames the stuff of the world as passive objects for human use and consumption. The philosopher Michel Serres claims that we have “lost the world” through our isolation from its natural cycles and forces, or *temps*. (In French, he reminds us, the same word “temps” connotes both time and weather). Whereas peasants and sailors once lived and worked out in the world with things, in direct response to seasons, storm fronts, animal migrations, and the rhythm of night and day, we now live inside walls of our own making, inhabiting a strange, hermetic kind of time—one that is perpetually short-term and obsolescent, that folds in on itself, sealing us from and blinding us to everything outside of it. For Serres, this relegation of the world now threatens our very own existence. In his 1990 book, *The Natural Contract*, he argues (or even pleads) for a radical re-orientation: “It could be said that the reign of modern natural law began at the same time as the scientific, technological, and industrial revolutions, with the mastery and possession of the world. We imagined that we’d be able to live and think among ourselves, while things around us obediently slumbered, crushed by our hold on them: human history could take pleasure in itself in an a-cosmism of inanimate matter and of other living things. History can be made of everything and everything comes down to history. [...] This period is coming to an end [...].”ⁱⁱ A number of projects within “World of Matter” point to non-human, multi-species, or indigenous temporalities. More generally, might the realm of aesthetics offer a kind of suspension of the familiar, a window for slowing down, for looking closely, for becoming more attuned...?

STOP 10: WOM collaboration

SCRIPT: This is the inaugural exhibition of World of Matter, a multi-year research endeavor that involves an international group of artists and scholars. Eight core participants have come together to pursue questions concerning aesthetics and the political ecology of resources, in active exchange with one another, over the course of many months. Our self-initiated organization—reflecting a broader trend in contemporary art—operates somewhere between institutions, between different disciplines, between academic and non-academic, art and non-art arenas. The theorist Irit Rogoff has argued that the “notion of ‘conversation’” is “the most significant shift within the art world over the past decade.” Our own discussions have coalesced at intensive, bi-annual research meetings since early 2011, and in the form of a multi-media web platform, joint writing projects, symposia, and exhibitions like this one. Dialogue has been the basis and adhesive for our community formation; and our community—like our research subject—spans and links diverse, transnational geographies. The “knowledge commons” we’ve built is intended as a catalyst for further inquiry and debate. We especially hope that it will be taken up as a tool for education, activist work, and increased public awareness in light of the ever-more-privatized nature of both actual resources and knowledge about the powers that control them. The library amassed here includes a number of texts that have been central to our group conversations or to the development of individual projects within World of Matter. We invite you to sit down and spend some time, to read, and to share your feedback.

ⁱ David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (1982; London and New York: Verso, 2006), 373.

ⁱⁱ Serres, *The Natural Contract* 1990, page 39.