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Deterritorialising Death: Queerfeminist Biophilosophy and Ecologies of the Non/Living in Contemporary Art

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary context of environmental crises and the degradation of resources, certain habitats become unliveable, leading to the death of individuals and species extinction. Whilst bioscience emphasises interdependency and relationality as crucial characteristics of life shared by all organisms, Western cultural imaginaries tend to draw a thick dividing line between humans and nonhumans, particularly evident in the context of death. On the one hand, death appears as a process common to all forms of life; on the other, as an event that distinguishes human from other organisms. Against this background, this article explores how contemporary art—in particular, the series of works *The Absence of Alice* (2008–2011) by Australian new-media and bioartist Svenja Kratz—challenges the normative and human-exceptionalist concept of death. By employing *queerfeminist biophilosophy* as a strategy that focuses on relations, processes and transformations instead of ‘essences’, the article examines the ways Kratz’s works *deterritorialise* the conventional concept of death. In this way, it hopes to attend to the intimacies between materialities of a human and nonhuman kind that form part of the processes of death and dying, and what follows, to reframe ethico-ontology of death as material and processual ecologies of the non/living.

KEYWORDS

queerfeminist biophilosophy; death; the non/living; Queer Death Studies; art; Svenja Kratz

Introduction

Matters of life and death have always catalysed cultural imaginaries, feeding into understandings of the human and the world, as well as cultural expressions and art. In the times of the global environmental disruption, death comes to the fore through ecocide, extinction, environmental and social violence, oppression and exploitation. While in the context of bioscience death appears as a process shared by all forms of life, Western cultural imaginaries tend to present it as an event that distinguishes humans from other creatures. Against this background, the present article explores how the series of works *The Absence of Alice* (AOA, 2008–2011(ongoing)) by Australian new-media and bioartist Svenja Kratz¹ challenges the normative and human-exceptionalist concept of death. By

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employing *queerfeminist biophilosophy* as a strategy that focuses on relations, processes and transformations instead of ‘essences’, the article examines the ways Kratz’s works *detritorialise* the conventional concept of death. While taking philosopher Eugene Thacker’s (2008) definition of ‘biophilosophy’, I develop this concept further through the prism of queerfeminist and new-materialist theorising. In particular, the proposed here framework of queerfeminist biophilosophy has two theoretical foundations: feminist theorist Claire Colebrook’s (2014a) queer passive vitalism and the concept of the non/living, which I propose elsewhere (Radomska 2016). The hope is that such a queerfeminist bi-philosophical engagement with AOA will attend to the intimacies between materialities of a human and a nonhuman kind that form part of the processes of death and dying, and consequently, reframe the ethico-ontology of death as material and processual ecologies of the non/living. In this way, the article contributes to: (1) the discussions on death in a more-than-human (Dixon 2009) sense in the context of the emerging field of Queer Death Studies (QDS); and (2) the research on the nonhuman within queer and feminist studies, by concentrating on the question of death.

Algernon is one of the three named nonhuman characters whose stories are being unfolded in *The Absence of Alice*, a growing series of artworks and evolving exhibitions by Svenja Kratz. AOA² comprises six major and several minor shows and stems from Kratz’s bioartistic engagement with the Saos-2 cell line (osteosarcoma, or bone cancer cell line), which was originally established from an 11-year old girl in 1973. The project builds on the artist’s close collaboration and work with the Tissue Repair and Regeneration (TRR) Group at the Queensland University of Technology’s Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation (IHBI), over the period of five years 2008–2011. Throughout that time Kratz had a chance to work with Saos-2, along with other cell lines and tissue cultures, as well as genetic engineering. The AOA series encompasses works realised in a variety of mediums: photographs, video, sculpture, installation and bioart. As Kratz writes, they all ‘function as assemblages of interconnected ideas’ (2012, 6) and unfold by way of ‘creative evolution’ (2012), often being reworked from one exhibition to the next. Shown art pieces are usually accompanied by the documentation of the process and written narratives (including fictional elements at times) that allow the audience to both contextualise an artwork and engage with it on a deeper level. Kratz sees storytelling as a key component of and method used in her creative practice; the works forming part of AOA ‘essentially represented and connected to a series of inter-related stories—personal/experiential, cultural, technological etc.’, as she writes (Kratz 2013, 165).

Like in the case of most terminally ill patients from whose tissues cell lines—a valuable resource in bioscience and medicine—are established, the 11-year old girl from whom the Saos-2 cell line was derived, remains anonymous, identified only through her age, gender and ethnicity. While working with the cells, Kratz gave the anonymous donor a name, ‘Alice’, which refers to Lewis Carroll’s novel *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). This procedure of naming not only allowed her to build a more ‘personal’ and contextualised relation to the material she was working with, but also contributed to the development of a ‘series of visual and narrative fictions’ (Kratz 2013, 40–41) that, by giving the donor an identity and a history, bring her story closer to the audience, allowing them to ‘sympathise’ with it (41). While on one level the project explores and documents Kratz’s engagements with biotechnologies, their tools and procedures, as well as different biomaterials at the crossover of art and science, on another level it brings to the fore the questions of

death (of individuals as much as of ‘multiplicities’ of cells), its entanglement with life (evident, for instance, in daily practices of tissue culturing) and absence (of long-dead—due to character of her illness—Alice, while her cells, turned into an immortalised cell line, are used in bioscience worldwide).

Kratz’s works are located at the intersection of two fields, art/science and bioart. The term ‘art/science’ refers to transdisciplinary engagements and collaborations between artists and scientists, which ‘facilitate meaningful and transformative exchanges that are mutually beneficial for researchers from both disciplines’ broadly speaking, and where ‘the value of art in the equation [is seen] as fundamental rather than mere aesthetic input’ (Kratz and Gowers 2017).³ ‘Bioart’ describes a form of hybrid art/science practices that involve the use of biomatter (cells, tissues, organisms) along with scientific methods, protocols and tools more specifically.⁴ Its emergence can be understood as a playful, critical and creative response to the development and presence of biotechnologies and related procedures in contemporary scientific and popular-scientific discourses and cultural imaginaries. Bioartworks often explore the boundaries between the living and non-living, organic and inorganic, human and nonhuman, and ultimately, life and death. By doing so, they interfere in conventional Western ontologies of life, pointing at its uncontainable character and its enmeshment with death (Radomska 2016, 2018). An iconic example of this is the ‘semi-living’ sculptures by Australian duo The Tissue Culture & Art Project (TC&A) launched in 1996 by Ionat Zurr and Oron Catts.⁵ Furthermore, as geographer Deborah P. Dixon writes, their pioneering bioartistic work with tissue engineering ‘prompt[s] the questioning ... of the imperatives of a technoscientific biology, ... the prevailing social order within which such a biology is embedded and the grid epistemologies upon which that order is founded’ (Dixon 2009, 422).

In her works and writings, Kratz not only explores the potentials of art/science practices and challenges of working with tissue cultures and cell lines, but also emphasises the ‘ecological’ aspects of living and dying in the context of biotechnology and bioscience. Ecologies of death are in the centre of AOA; the project zooms in on the question of death in a more-than-human sense and, simultaneously, points to the insufficiency of Western discourses at hand. We seem to be able to think about death once the dying entity is given a subjectivity: whether it is Alice or Algernon. But the question of death and dying—anchored in Western cultural, ontological and ethico-political renderings of both life and death—also underpins both optimistic (‘technological salvation’) and catastrophic (visions of ‘doom and gloom’) discourses on the current ecological crises. It lays at the very core of asking about extinction, annihilation, and possibilities of survival.

The problematics of (human) death are studied from a number of perspectives, as the interdisciplinary field of death studies demonstrates. The issues of extinction and nonhuman animal death are investigated through the lens of extinction studies (e.g. Heise 2016; Rose, van Dooren, and Chrulew 2017; Grusin 2018), biopolitics (e.g. Shukin 2009; Wolfe 2012) and animal studies (e.g. The Animal Studies Group 2006; Johnston and Probyn-Rapsey 2013), to name a few. Yet, conceptualisations of death that currently operate in the humanities seem to leave the ‘ecological’ dimension of death and dying or, as literary scholar Erin E. Edwards puts it, ‘the embedded relations between the human and its putative “others”’ (2018, 10), insufficiently attended to. Conventional philosophical perspectives on death (e.g. Bradley, Feldman, and Johansson 2013) do not provide an ontology and ethics of death that could sufficiently account for the naturalcultural (Haraway

2008), entangled, human/nonhuman character of the world we live in, as scholars in such fields as new materialisms (e.g. Alaimo and Hekman 2008), posthumanities (e.g. Åsberg and Braidotti 2018), environmental humanities (e.g. Tsing 2017) and object-oriented philosophy (e.g. Morton 2013), among others, remind us.

Meanwhile, the reception of AOA in both popular media and scholarly work tends to focus on either the relation between aesthetics and scientific knowledge production (e.g. Stephens 2016), or the human figure and main character of the project, Alice, and her absence (e.g. Smith 2014; WMMNA 2014). Against this background, the present article offers a different path: it concentrates on less visible nonhuman actors in Kratz's artworks. Some of them—like Algernon—are given a name and thus become recognised as subjects; some—like bacteria and fungi—although not named, remain key agents of change. It is AOA's particular engagement with nonhumans that, I argue, *deterritorialises* (Deleuze and Guattari 2004) the conventional concept of death. In other words, it carries a potential for transformation and 'undoes' present relationalities and contours of the traditional notion of death. This novel reading of the art project⁶ will be conducted through the lens of *queerfeminist biophilosophy*, which I propose in this article, as a strategy that focuses on relations, processes and transformations instead of 'essences', allowing one to approach the question of death in a more nuanced, less anthropocentric and more relational way.

In the following sections I first look at Kratz's artistic practice and the presence of Algernon in her work. Then, I discuss the ways the question of death may be situated in the context of the current environmental crisis, Western cultural imaginaries and the emerging field of Queer Death Studies.⁷ Subsequently, I turn to queerfeminist biophilosophy as a strategy that addresses death and dying as much as life in a manner that accounts for relationalities constitutive of human/nonhuman and living/non-living entanglements. Finally, I bring these different components in a queerfeminist biophilosophical reading of Kratz's AOA.

Death in a More-than-human Sense: Svenja Kratz's *A Shrine for Algernon*

The culturing of tissues and cell lines requires a number of conditions to be fulfilled. In the case of Saos-2 this means: sterile environment, stable temperature of 37°C, 95% humidity, 5% carbon dioxide atmosphere and regular procedures of 'cleaning' and 'feeding' (Kratz 2013, 73). Mammal tissues are usually kept in a medium containing foetal bovine serum (FBS) that provides necessary proteins for the cells to grow. FBS can be seen as a by-product from an abattoir: it is sourced from calf foetuses removed from slaughtered pregnant cows; their blood is drained for the processing into serum and bodies are discarded as 'unsuitable for human consumption' (95). Asking about the sources of materials used in bioscientific (and—in this case—also bioartistic) practices brought Kratz not only to the exploration of the present absence of Alice, but also of much more 'silent' absences of those whose flesh is used as a resource in science and other, less honourable ways, of consumption. In order to investigate further the questions of 'unseen victims of Western consumption and flows between life and death' (95), in 2009 she collected a body of a 3-month gestation foetal calf from a local slaughterhouse. The artist named the calf 'Algernon'. Subsequently, a plaster cast of his body was taken, which led to the creation of three sculptural pieces and a blood series focusing on these problematics.



Figure 1. *A Shrine for Algernon: Instance #1*, 2009. Wood, glass decanters, MDF, polyurethane, polymer clay, pigment, oil paint, stainless steel, feathers, fishbone fern roots, oil. Installation view. QUT Visual Art Gallery, Kelvin Grove. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

One of the nodal points in AOA is the work *A Shrine for Algernon* (Figure 1), shown for the first time in 2009 as part of AOA, *Lines of Flight and Self-Assemblage* exhibition at QUT



Figure 2. *A Shrine for Algeneron: Instance #1*, 2009. Wood, glass decanters, MDF, polyurethane, polymer clay, pigment, oil paint, stainless steel, feathers, fishbone fern roots, oil. Installation detail. QUT Visual Art Gallery, Kelvin Grove. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Visual Art Gallery, Kelvin Grove, Australia, and later reworked by Kratz for the show in 2010. The piece consists of a life-like polymer clay sculpture based on the initial cast of Algeneron's body, placed on a stainless steel surface adjusted to a wooden table (Figure 2). The steel surface, as Kratz notes, refers to steel benches in the abattoir, and the table—to ordinary domestic interiors. Mock blood drips from Algeneron's eye onto the steel surface and from there further down on the base, forming there a pool of maroon blood in which the shape of Alice's face is visible. The pool of blood is edged with green growth, which, according to Kratz, aims to symbolise a potential for scientific development linked to tissue engineering and the use of FBS. Below Algeneron's sculpture there are placed three glass vessels: the first one contains bone balls and hair—referring to previous works focused on the 'uncanniness' of the Saos-2 cells; the second one contains feathers—referring (continuously throughout the entire project) to the 'idea of creative flight'; and the third one includes rhizome roots that reach to two other vessels, referring thus to the continuity and 'creative evolution' of the project (Kratz 2013, 96).

While the artist repeatedly emphasises that the work does not aim to criticise meat industry or the use of FBS as such, it nonetheless exposes that which otherwise remains 'comfortably' hidden from the consumer's eye: the 'source' and process behind products such as meat or substances used in tissue engineering. By giving Algeneron a name and a story she moves him from the context where animal bodies are 'destroyed' (slaughterhouse) to the context where—through being given an identity and, perhaps, a subjectivity—his tiny body is perceived as 'dead' (not only destroyed and removed) and his death becomes a question to think through. In this way, the project tackles the ethico-ontology of death, in which the Western cultural imaginaries are grounded. Simultaneously, Alice's 'absence' is unfolded and documented through the entanglements of living and dying biomatter. Yet, the death of Algeneron and the deaths 'hidden' behind the processes of consumerism also open up the

problem of death in a more-than-human sense more broadly. I return to these issues in the second half of the article, where I look at AOA through the lens of queerfeminist biophilosophy.

Queering Ecologies of Death

As the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) points out, the morbid consequences of global warming are no longer only 'potential', but instead, 'high-confidence' risks, also called by some a 'climate genocide' (Wallace-Wells 2018). The degradation and diminishment of food and water resources render certain habitats unliveable. Simultaneously, researchers (e.g. Bar-On, Phillips, and Milo 2018) draw attention to the drastic decrease in both animal and plant species linked to the rise of human civilisation (including the disappearance of 83% of wild mammals 'from before'). These deadly matters come to the fore in the discussions on the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000): what they demonstrate is that the human impact on nonhumans and the histories of genocide and violence towards non-normative fellow human beings are intertwined (cf. Davis and Turpin 2015).

While bioscience emphasises interdependency, relationality and commonality as key characteristics of life shared by all organisms, Western cultural imaginaries tend to draw a thick dividing line between the human and nonhuman others. In death specifically human fences *himself* off from other forms of life; in the Western context, it is primarily human death that deserves individual attention, specific respect and rituals, which, for example, substantially differ from the usual treatment of dead nonhuman animal bodies. Thus, dying emerges as a process common to all organisms and yet, an event that distinguishes the human from other creatures (cf. Heidegger [1953] 2010; Calarco 2008). The problem of the materiality and processuality of death as a site shared by all the living—as well as a subject of philosophical engagement—remains undertheorised. Western cultural approaches to death are in majority governed by either religious (yet often secularised) traditions, where death is imagined as a step towards afterlife, or by biomedical perspectives, in which it appears as something to be eliminated (doubled by the attitude to the corpse as either sacrum or the abject).

Death in a more-than-human sense occupies a space reserved primarily for the discussions on and imaginings of extinction—more of 'the other' than of our own—which, in turn, directly influence environmentalist and conservationist discourses. As literary scholar Ursula Heise (2016) emphasises, 'values, cultural perceptions, emotions and traditions' (236) underlying our relation to nonhuman others shape our practices of storytelling, which subsequently mould the ethico-political framing of the present, possible futures, endangered species and their habitats, human/nonhuman relations, communities, and extinctions. What we then need are stories that contribute to an understanding of death that is not only informed by the more-than-human condition, but also critical towards often taken-for-granted and not always explicit divisions between 'grievable' and 'ungrievable' (Butler 2004, 2009) lives and deaths.

Problematics of death, dying and mourning have been approached from numerous interdisciplinary perspectives, which since the 1970s have been referred to as 'death studies' (three international journals: *Death Studies*, *Omega* and *Mortality* mark the field).

Yet, as scholars working within the emerging field of Queer Death Studies note, conventional death studies' endeavours

need to be taken critically further, among others, where they have been constrained by *normative* notions of the human subject; the human/nonhuman divide; continuing bonds; family relations and communities; rituals; and experiences of mourning and bereavement. ... Moreover, the current environmental crisis seems to produce new kinds of planetary consciousness about living in ecological and social proximities to extinction, which also gives rise to demands for new kinds of stories of death, dying and mourning. (Radomska, Mehrabi, and Lykke 2019, 5)

Building on insights that employ the term 'queer' as both a noun/adjective describing queer subjects, and a verb/adverb referring to processes of undoing, subverting or going beyond given norms (e.g. Giffney and Hird 2008; Sandilands and Erickson 2010; Chen 2012; MacCormack 2012, 2020), QDS strives to 'unpack and question normativities ... that often frame contemporary discourses on death, dying and mourning' (Radomska, Mehrabi, and Lykke 2019, 6). In the context of QDS, 'to queer' means to question certainties and consistently disturb the familiar or, as queerfeminist theorists Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird put it, 'to undo normative entanglements and fashion alternative imaginaries' beyond the exclusive concern with gender and sexuality (2008, 6). Consequently, to queer the concept of death means to challenge or undermine its contours, to question the binary divides of life/death, living/non-living, human/nonhuman and grievable/ungrievable that are oftentimes taken for granted in the context of Western cultural imaginaries and discourses.⁸

I suggest that queering, understood as challenging and subverting normativities and 'fixed' divisions that frame our (Western; human) notions of death and, what follows, of life, unfolds not only through a queerfeminist biophilosophy as a philosophical strategy, but also and importantly, is mobilised in AOA. There, despite the direct reference to the human 'protagonist' Alice in the title of the series, human contours, the remembering of an autonomous individual and the centrality of the human face as a stand-in for the unitary subject of Alice, become 'disrupted' by the multiplicity of living/non-living micro- and macro-organisms and other nonhuman characters (like Algernon). These characters are all involved in material processuality and ongoing transformations at stake in Kratz's works. In other words, the project queers the conventional Western understandings of death. Simultaneously, perceptive and affective engagement with Kratz's artworks unsettles preconceived conceptual frames that one might carry when engaging with the pieces for the first time.

Biophilosophy as a Queerfeminist Methodology

In his work focused on the problem of life, Eugene Thacker distinguishes two modes of engagement with the concept of life characteristic of Western philosophy: (1) the dominant trend (from Aristotle to Immanuel Kant) that concentrates on the essence or 'principle of life' on the one hand, and 'boundaries of articulation' (i.e. that which delimits the living; boundaries between the living and non-living, etc.); and (2) an approach that instead (of binary divisions) focuses on a critical, creative and rigorous practice of asking 'What relations are precluded in such-and-such a division, in such-and-such a classification?'

(Thacker 2008, 141). For Thacker, this becomes the key focus of biophilosophy: an investigation of life that pays attention to what transforms life instead of a twofold question of the basic principle and boundaries of articulation; an investigation that looks at life as a multiplicity, that traverses binaries, avoids anthropomorphisation, and pays attention to the issues of relations, their dynamics and mechanisms of exclusion (Radomska 2016).

I argue that such a biophilosophical approach to the concept of life is not limited to the writings of process philosophers discussed by Thacker (2008; 2015). Quite contrarily, biophilosophical modes of engagement with 'life' can be found in the work of queer and feminist philosophers and theorists: Claire Colebrook (e.g. 2010), Patricia MacCormack (e.g. 2012), Elizabeth Grosz (e.g. 2011) and Rosi Braidotti (e.g. 2006). There, life is often conceptualised as a material force, an intensity, a form of dynamism, inventiveness, creativity, but also a potential for destruction and idleness that extend beyond the organic, and that directly tackle the question of death. It is their grounding in new-materialist and queerfeminist traditions of theorising that allows them to approach life by focusing on its multiplicitous and uncontainable character.

More specifically, for Colebrook—as I discuss it later—in her queerfeminist take on passive vitalism, life is a multiplicitous, 'differentiating field of powers that expresses itself in various manners' (2014b, 105) and carries a potential that 'always threatens to destabilize or de-actualize' (104) bodies or relations in which it expresses itself. For MacCormack in her elaboration of ahuman ethics and theory, life is thought as affect, as 'the infinite beginnings which teeter upon potentialization at each constellation of interaction and relation' (2014, 181); it is 'a connective consistency, not my, one or human life' (182). Grosz builds her take on life in a dialogue with the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Henri Bergson, Friedrich Nietzsche and Charles Darwin; there, life is 'the tendency to extend, to prolong, to differ from itself that it both borrows from and returns to matter' (Grosz 2011, 35). Finally, Braidotti (2006) sees life as *zoe*, a generative material force of transformation and modulation (juxtaposed with a political life of the subject: *bios*) that extends beyond subjects or enclosed entities and can be understood through relationality and multiplicity rather than classifications.⁹ Furthermore, by combining both the ontological and ethical concerns that go beyond what is conventionally seen as 'life', biophilosophy—particularly in its queerfeminist rendering that I seek to elaborate here—offers a critical and innovative approach to the issues of death, extinction, (un)liveability, and terminality, among others, which all form the backbone of the environmental crises and changing conditions of life on Earth.

In other words, queerfeminist biophilosophy addresses life—and, I argue, its 'counterpart', death—in both ontological and ethical terms: not by taking a certain 'image of life' (cf. Deleuze 2004) and its attributed value as a point of departure, but instead, by focusing on that which transforms life—multiplicitous differences, processes and materialities that carry a potential for generation as much as for self-destruction. In this way, biophilosophy, as proposed here, is inspired by Colebrook's queerfeminist reading of Deleuzian passive vitalism that does not draw a firm distinction between a vital force and passive matter, since matter is always already a creative force. Passive vitalism zooms in on the differential relation of forces which may actualise in the form of bounded organisms, their living norms and meanings, but which are never exhausted by these elements (Colebrook 2010, 115). Forces enable the emergence of bodies, but 'if extended, would destroy the bordered organism' (39). In this way, queerfeminist biophilosophy sees the processes of

living and dying, and growth and decay not as binary oppositions, but as complex interweaving and entangled phenomena. Consequently, it also challenges the Western cultural imaginaries that draw thick dividing lines between bodies, between the human and non-human, organic and inorganic, and life and death. It is these interweaving phenomena that are explored in *AOA*.

Such a rethinking of ontological frames of both life and death (fashioned on the hegemonic human so far) has clear ethical consequences. For MacCormack, abolitionist ahuman ethics 'are only truly possible if we are not here' (2014, 183), that is, when life is no longer shaped in a human manner. In a similar way, Colebrook suggests that perhaps the annihilation and extinction of the human species arising as a result of the discussions on the Anthropocene may 'destroy the subject or humanity as we know it' (2014a) and, subsequently, encourage the consideration of other modes of relating and connecting, not premised on the human subject and human life. In other words, non-anthropocentric and more emancipatory ethics cannot rely on ontologies of life and death conceived through the human prism (or, life 'as we know it').

But, as mentioned earlier, biophilosophy also entails focusing on the complexity of relationalities, intra- and interactions (Barad 2007), and connections and disconnections, in place of individual forms of life and the manners in which they may be categorised. Against the backdrop of the contemporary ecological crises, a queerfeminist biophilosophical ethical approach means not only responsibility for the protection or preservation of life, but also, as literary scholar Sarah Ensor puts it, 'acknowledging the end as an extended temporality that we already inhabit, rather than we are working to prevent' (2016, 51). It may enable us to attend to the issues of death in the midst of *terminal* ecologies, where 'terminality', following Ensor's (2016) elaboration of this concept, describes not only a state and intimate belonging, but also a practice and a horizon. Put differently, 'terminality' refers to a 'lifelong' (54) and shared condition, characterised by the potential for relations, non-linear temporality, and an ongoing responsibility for and accountability towards the harmed, the ill, the perishing, and the dead milieus, ecosystems, organisms, and other entities. 'Staying with the trouble' (Haraway 2016) of terminality—a striking concept if we think about the origin of the Saos-2 cell line, which forms one of the key foci in Kratz's artworks—is but one example of the queerfeminist biophilosophical approach that does not depart from given images of life and death, but instead, from a multiplicity of relations, forces, and materialities (that which transforms and traverses life) encompassing the potentials for both growth/development and decomposition/decay. Read through the queerfeminist biophilosophical lens, *AOA* is primarily about tracing the multiplicities of relations and material transformations forming part of the ecologies of death.

Biophilosophical Attunement (part 1): Queer Passive Vitalisms and Aesthetics

Queerfeminist biophilosophy, as proposed and developed here, builds on two theoretical components that allow one to explore the deterritorialisation of death in Kratz's art project: (1) Colebrook's reading of Deleuze and Guattari's passive vitalism; and (2) the concept of the non/living.

More specifically, vitalisms—philosophies concerned with the concept of life, the living and ‘principles’ of life—can be divided, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1994), into ‘active’ and ‘passive’. Active vitalism, characterised by ‘an idea that acts but is not’ (213), sees life as ‘defined through actual life: here vitalism begins from living bodies (usually human, usually heterosexual, usually familial) and then asks what it means to live well’ (Colebrook 2014b, 100), while being focused on generativity, productivity and fruitfulness. It accounts for that which is active, which orders, synthesises, renders meaningful and makes decision.

Passive vitalism, on the other hand—‘force that is but does not act’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 213)—conceives ‘life’ as ‘a pre-individual plane of forces that does not act by a process of decision and self-maintenance but through chance encounters’ (Colebrook 2014b, 100). As Colebrook underlines, such a passive vitalism is characterised by the latter’s ‘difference and distance from already constituted images of life as necessarily fruitful, generative, organised and human’. (89). This, in her perspective, has consequences for perception and, what follows, aesthetics: passive vitalism ‘comprises a power of imagining that is not oriented to the eye of recognition, the eye that views the world according to its own already organized desires’ (89). Bodies and understandings emerge through sensations, perceptions and encounters. Differences that may or may not actualise through these encounters always exceed both the subjects that emerge through them and relations they are embedded in. Passive vitalism sees life as carrying a potential for deterritorialisation, divergence and destabilisation, queering thus any preconceived coordinates of concepts, bodies and processes; it focuses on that which takes life beyond itself; and, last but not least, undoes the normative binary of life and death.

An aesthetics of passive vitalism opens up a space where perceptions and sensations intra- and interact with one another, allowing thus for the shaping of meanings and subjects. Employing a queer passive vitalist aesthetic lens when approaching AOA means that one does not enter into an encounter with the artworks while carrying preconceived understandings of the subject (Alice as the main character of the project), as well as clear-cut boundaries and hierarchies of the human/nonhuman, living/non-living, growth/decay, and life/death. Instead, the viewer remains open to inter- and intra-actions with the pieces, to perceptions and affects that emerge in/through the experience and further allow for the materialisation and shaping of meanings, understandings and the very relation to the artworks.

Despite the ongoing reference to the long-dead human subject, the pieces in Kratz’s peculiar art-science ‘wonderland’ disturb the idea of a pre-existent image of life and death. AOA queers the binary notions of life and death, human and nonhuman; they are no longer distinct from one another: the insect cells alter the properties of the human cancer cells, and the death of an individual becomes deterritorialised into a more-than-human multitude of material processes and modulations. It is through the visual and affective engagement with AOA that different conceptualisations and imaginaries of death are mobilised: ecologies of the non/living come to the fore.

Biophilosophical Attunement (part 2): Ecologies of the Non/Living

As I suggest elsewhere (Radomska 2016; 2018), what we conventionally call 'life' should instead be rethought as 'the non/living', which seems to be a more suitable way to articulate the dynamics and necessary entanglement of the processes of living and dying and growth and decay that are often at stake in bioart¹⁰ and that form part of our own materiality. The two components of the concept: 'non' and 'living' are separated with a slash. The gerund form of the verb emphasises the material processuality and dynamics of both an organic and an inorganic kind, while the slash (//) points to the entanglement of living and non-living; its potential lies in 'indicating an active and reiterative (intra-active) rethinking of the binary' (Juelskjær and Schwennesen 2012, 19).

The concept of the non/living stems from a theoretical and practical engagement with the contours of what is conventionally marked as 'life'. Firstly, the non/living addresses the issue of locating the constitutive characteristics of life, that is, what counts as life and how we account for life forms that do not fulfil the four basic criteria of the living (the entity has a body; it metabolises; it reproduces; and it is capable of movement).¹¹ Some of the iconic examples are viruses, viroids and prions.¹² Secondly, the non/living attends to the complexity of the relationship between living and dying (i.e. their material and temporal entanglement); these are the processes where material forces unfold, intertwine, and express themselves in what we evaluate as 'life' and 'death'. By challenging binary categorisations and focusing on relationalities, the non/living problematises the often taken-for-granted notions of life and death in a queerfeminist biophilosophical way.

A more familiar example of the non/living at work is the corpse (of a human and a non-human kind). The dead body of an individual is a lively site, where elements of the microbiome of the body, along with other (micro)organisms thrive and continue to overtake the space and volume of the corpse. It is this liveliness of decomposition that leads to the dead body being perceived as 'abject' (Kristeva 1982), repulsive, too 'alive' and too 'dead' at the same time. The materiality of the corpse dwells in liminality (cf. Mehrabi 2016; Mehrabi 2020), where the processes of growth and decay are entangled with one another in viscerally visible ways and where the vibrancy of matter (Bennett 2010; Lykke 2019, forthcoming 2021) is exposed. Recognising the non/living character of the corpse demands revisiting and nuancing our approaches to the 'dead' body, beyond the double focus on either its 'abjectness' or 'sacredness' (the latter reserved for the human corpse exclusively).

An entanglement of the living and non-living, organic and inorganic matter, and life and death, requires an ontology that could account for its own 'flat' (i.e. non-hierarchical (DeLanda 2002)) character on the one hand, and its multiplicity of processual differences, on the other. As emphasised by many a feminist scholar, while a non-hierarchical ontology is desirable, it cannot be accompanied by 'flat' ethics or ethico-politics (e.g. Alaimo 2016; Lykke 2019). The non/living as an ontology takes multiplicities of processual differences seriously by drawing on and addressing the life/death enmeshment theorised by Deleuze as 'radical immanence' and later adopted by Braidotti in her elaboration of life as 'zoe' (2006).

Calling immanence 'radical' suggests that it cannot be contained within anything else but itself. Here, Deleuze's approach is anchored in Baruch Spinoza's formulation of ethics, in which all entities and events are diverse expressions of one 'substance', equated with

life. From a Spinozian point of view, there is no transcendent agent or source of transformation. Rather, there is one radically immanent and non/living substance that expresses itself in a multiplicity of relationalities: neither immutable nor rigid, but unfolding through modulations and affects; it is in a state of becoming where the processes of living and dying are always already intertwined. Spinozian-Deleuzian conceptualisations also serve as an inspiration for MacCormack's theorisation of ahuman ethics (linked to her discussion of life, death and extinction), which are defined as 'indescribable relations and connectivities seeking, in secret and silence and invisibility, and never arriving at the sought. They are instigated by the life we must immanently live in order to respect the death that we perpetrate'. (2014, 185–186).

Thus understood, the question of becoming, that is, of matter's (or, radically immanent non/living substance's) processuality is at the centre of Kratz's work. Her art projects directly engage with the processes of matter's mutation and transformation, exposed through different elements of AOA. It is there that living and dying, life and death are intrinsically entwined with one another. The non/living mutates: the ways we perceive different elements and relations constitutive of the artworks continuously re-shape the contours of meanings and concepts that the project mobilises.

Deterritorialising Death: Svenja Kratz's *Death Masks*

Having discussed the conceptual components of the queerfeminist biophilosophical approach, which I develop in this article, I will now look at how these theoretical tools shed light on the deterritorialisation of death mobilised not only in *A Shrine for Algernon*, but also in AOA broadly speaking.

Apart from the bone cancer cell line, Kratz also worked with the SF9 insect cell line, that is, cells derived from the Fall Armyworm *Spodoptera frugiperda*, the larval stage of the Armyworm moth. As she notes, these cells are cultured in the temperature of 28°C and do not require CO₂ and FBS. While working on one of her projects, *Untitled Insects* (part of AOA: *Alice Ants and the Armyworm* [2008]), Kratz cultured Saos-2 and SF9 cells together. This 'experiment' demonstrated that the Saos-2 cells were capable of surviving in unusual environmental conditions (28°C; no CO₂ and no FBS). They also changed their shape and became 'increasingly similar to the ball-shaped insect cells' (Kratz 2012, 30). Yet, they were able to persist in these conditions only if co-cultured with the SF9 cells. When cultured alone in such an environment, the Saos-2 cells died after three days. Thus, the experiment drew attention to the cells' potential for transformation. In the liminal space of the experiment, the non/living processes mutated.

The co-cultured Saos-2 and SF9 cells were later captured with a light microscope and their magnified image was projected onto a moving body of a young girl, photographed with the use of a digital camera and processed. The outcome: two photographs, entitled *Transition piece #3*, as Kratz notes, serve as a record of the experiment (Figure 3). In the photos the audience can see a white, 'moving' shape of a girl's body that refers to the presence/absence of Alice. In the experiment the nonhuman co-becomes with the human; the death of an individual (Alice) that constitutes a potential backdrop of the project dissolves in the multitude of material transformations. Instead of the clear-cut realms of 'life' and 'death' the viewer encounters a complex of changing relationalities.

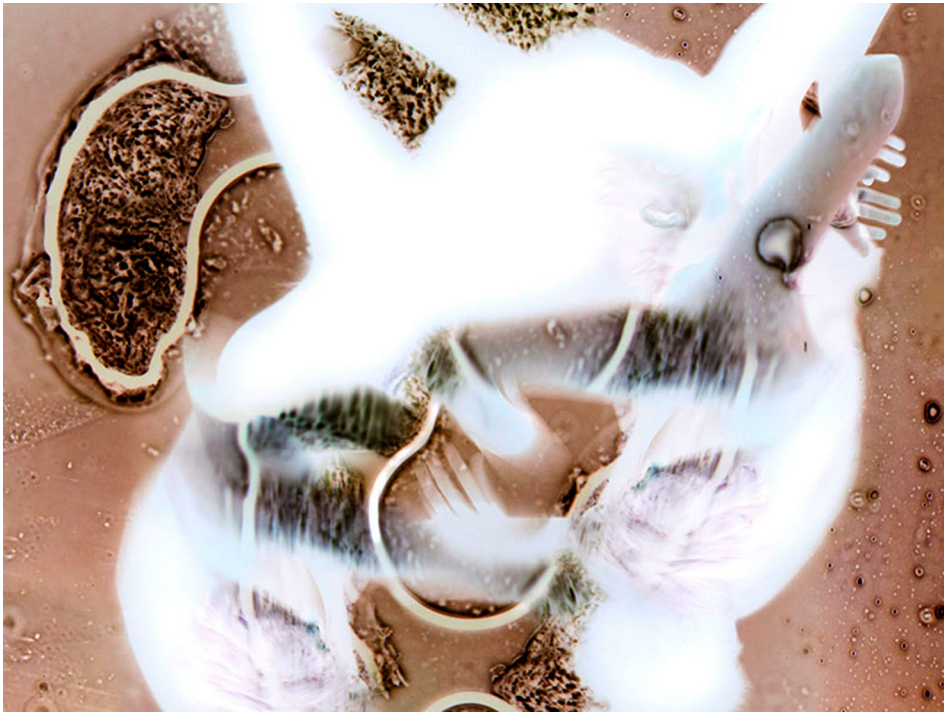


Figure 3. *Transition piece #3*, 2008. Giclée print on photo rag. Image detail. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Yet, AOA also encompasses a series of art pieces entitled *Death Masks*,¹³ the initial version of which formed part of the collection of works *AOA: Alice Ants and the Armyworm* (2008) and was continued as *The Contamination of Alice* in the series *AOA: Lines of Flight and Self-Assemblage* (2009). The form of a ‘death mask’ refers to the long Western tradition of making a plaster, wax or metallic cast of a person’s face after their death. In some cultures, there are also funeral masks.

The original project *Death Masks* is composed of three parts. The first instance, ‘#1: Alice Becoming’ consists of a series of degrading plaster casts created from a single alginate mould of a girl’s face, which results in the gradual erasure of facial characteristics and the ‘emergence of abject blobs’ (Kratz 2012, 36). In this way, as the artist emphasises, the work deals with transformations and mutations that the Saos-2 cells undergo over generations and are themselves ‘becoming other’. The second instance, ‘#2: Mutable Death Masks’ is a series of face masks made of foam. The viewer is encouraged to interact with the masks (for instance, by pressing the foam), which—as Kratz notes—in the end ‘retain a “memory” of previous interactions’ (2012, 39). The work refers to both the capacity of the Saos-2 cells to adapt to different environmental conditions and their relation to the original source of the cells, that is, 11-year old ‘Alice’. The third instance, ‘#3: Alice Ants’ consists of a series of plastic masks/flasks; each of them contains a specific ecosystem with live ants fed with the sugar/Saos-2 cell mixture (Figure 4). The work, as the artist underlines, is supposed to comment on the cells forming part of a larger assemblage of relations. This component of the project is also accompanied by a video ‘Ants Eating



Figure 4. *Death Masks #3: Alice Ants*, 2008. Live ant colonies, soil, vacuum formed plastic, MDF. Installation view. QUT Art Museum, Gardens Point. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Alice' showing ants consuming the Saos-2 cell/sugar solution. While Kratz's series of works suggests the haunting presence of the long-gone individual, in their queerfeminist biophilosophical explorations the pieces point to the entangled multiplicity of processes and entities constitutive of the non/living.

As a follow-up to the *Death Masks* series, Kratz proposed *The Contamination of Alice* shown in 2009 in three instances. The series was influenced by the fungal contamination of the Saos-2 cells with which Kratz had been working. Some of the artworks also aimed to



Figure 5. *The Contamination of Alice: Instance #2*, 2009. Residue of bacterial and fungal colonies grown on Agar Agar faces, archival watercolour paper, epoxy. Installation view. QUT Visual Art Gallery, Kelvin Grove. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 6. *The Contamination of Alice: Instance #3*, 2009. Agar Agar nutrient faces, Perspex, steel, MDF. Installation detail. QUT Visual Art Gallery, Kelvin Grove. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

expose the use of FBS as an essential element (nutrient) in mammal tissue engineering—including the piece *A Shrine for Algernon* discussed earlier. The first instance of this series has a form of art installation, consisting of wire clusters attached to the gallery walls. The clusters are modelled on the microscope images of the fungal contamination of the Saos-2 cells that Kratz had worked with; in this way they ‘infect’ the space of the gallery. The second instance in the series consists of the residues of fungal and bacterial colonies grown on agar-agar faces placed on watercolour paper (Figure 5). The colonies grew on the agar-agar ‘faces of Alice’ containing different combinations of nutrients over the period of six months (2012, 70). The piece troubles the questions of presence, absence and traces of the terminally ill individual, their ‘life’ and ‘death’. The third part of the series consists of the agar-agar heads made from the mould of an 11-year old girl (which, in contrast to the second instance, are three-dimensional; Figure 6). The heads contain various combinations of nutrients, which allow for the growth of different bacterial and fungal colonies, as well as maggots and mites (72).

In particular, the second and third instance of the series amplify the ways in which the mask—a stand-in for the human face and, what follows, signification, as well as the human subject (Alice)—becomes undone and turned into ‘a living block’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 211), ‘a zone of intensity’ (173), a dynamic ecosystem of more-than-human multiplicities: bacteria, fungi, mites, and the very processes of their growth, metabolism and decay. Facial features of the agar-agar masks become distorted, undone. The hegemonic figure of the human subject and, what follows, firm notions of their/her life and death recede in favour of the multiplex, intra- and interacting ecologies of the non/living. Deleuze and Guattari call this ‘a veritable “defacialization”’ (210), which ‘dismantle[s] the strata in their wake, break through the wall of signification, pour out of the holes of subjectivity, fell trees in favor of veritable rhizomes, and steer the flows down the lines of positive deterritorialization and creative flight’ (210). In other words, *Death Masks* as a series of

works invites the viewer to let go of the hegemonic notion of the human subject (no matter how persistent or ‘haunting’ the absence of the main character, Alice, is) and clear-cut understandings of both life and death. Instead, in a queer-vitalist manner, the artworks invite the audience to open themselves to ‘strange new becomings, new polyvocalities’ (211) mobilised through the dynamics and processuality of the non/living.

Conclusion

To conclude, this article sought to examine the ways Svenja Kratz’s series of artworks *The Absence of Alice* deterritorialises and queers the conventional understandings and Western cultural imaginaries of death, while employing queerfeminist biophilosophy as a theoretical and methodological lens. By doing so, the present study (1) offers a different/novel reading of Kratz’s art project and (2) develops queerfeminist biophilosophy as an approach supported by queer passive vitalism and the concept of the non/living. In this way, the article contributes to: (1) discussions within the field of interdisciplinary Queer Death Studies, in which it is anchored; and (2) the research on the nonhuman within queer and feminist studies, by concentrating on the question of death.

In her explorations of the assemblages emergent from working with the cell lines, Kratz comments not only on the human or the microbial, but also on other deaths involved in both scientific and bioartistic procedures of tissue culturing. FBS has its source in the unborn calves which are by-products from the slaughterhouse. Their existence and death are often erased from the narratives on mammal tissue culturing and—as it has made headlines in the past few years—*in vitro* meat production (e.g. Ghosh 2015). In Kratz’s works the stories of the animals used as a source of nutrients for tissue engineering, like Algernon, and those who became the source of the cell line meet and entangle with one another—like the very bodily human and nonhuman materialities at stake. While looking at consumption and exploitation present in both the laboratory and daily life, Kratz (2012) emphasises the Western cultures’ tendency to sanitise and erase the link between the product and its source. The naming of Algernon brings him from a place where (nonhuman) death is ‘erased’: not recognised as death or, at least, not as a grievable death; where bodies (alive or not) are seen as a raw material to be used, exploited, consumed and discarded.

In *Death Masks* the representation of the human face decays while the material transformations take over: the hegemonic individual recedes and mutates into a multiplicity of more-than-human agents and processes, bringing to the fore ecologies of the non/living. The contours of both ‘living’ and ‘non-living’ become blurred. Tracing this blurriness, multiplicity and the changing relations and processes at stake becomes a queerfeminist bi-philosophical task. Material modulations take both life and the subject beyond itself, disrupting the unique character of the individual and the ‘moment’ of its death. Simultaneously, ontology and ethics are being revisited. The radically immanent non/living opens up a space for imagining different—perhaps less anthropocentric, less oppressive and more common—futures.

Queerfeminist biophilosophy seeks to go beyond ‘essences’ and ‘norms’; beyond the opposition between techno-optimism on the one hand, and the dread and demonisation of human extinction, on the other; and instead, focus on relationalities, processes and modulations. Queerfeminist biophilosophy traces that which transforms life and takes it

beyond itself; it undermines and queers human exceptionalism of the concept of death that underpins Western cultural imaginaries. The hope is that such a perspective opens up a critical and creative space for ontological and ethical reflection and different kind of narratives desperately needed in the times when 'our common present always exists in the wake of a complicated past, and ahead, to a common future that may best be understood as an ongoing end' (Ensor 2016, 55).

Notes

1. <http://www.svenjakratz.com> (Accessed May 1, 2018).
2. In her talk '(Micro)chimerism and the temporality of life: rethinking the bio-imaginary', delivered on 26th April 2019 at SOLU Bioart Society in Helsinki (FI), philosopher Margrit Shildrick referred to the project *The Absence of Alice* in relation to the questions of presence/absence and Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology. While Shildrick employs a different (from mine) approach to Kratz's work, I am grateful for her critical comments on the previous versions of this article.
3. See, for example, Bulatov (2009) and Reichle (2009).
4. See, for example, Kac (2007), Mitchell (2010), Zylinska (2009), Dixon (2008).
5. TC&A is known for its engagement with the issues of consumption in relation to animal products—one of the examples is the iconic by now series of works *Victimless Utopia*. See: <http://lab.anhb.uwa.edu.au/tca/> (Accessed July 7, 2019).
6. I have not had a chance to see any of the artworks included in AOA personally. Thus, the reading of the project relies on the archival materials (exhibition catalogues and related publications, the artist's writings, media reports, etc.).
7. See: <https://queerdeathstudies.net/> (accessed December 2, 2019).
8. Although death has been thoroughly studied and discussed in queer theory (e.g. Butler 2004, 2009; Edelman 2004; Snorton and Jin 2013; Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco 2014), the majority of these writings concentrate on human subjects, while leaving the ecological dimension of death insufficiently discussed.
9. These theorists do not explicitly label themselves as 'biophilosophers' and the concept of life is not always their main concern. However, their ways of approaching 'life' are of biophilosophical character. Furthermore, queerfeminist biophilosophy can be seen as a way of theorising directly linked to new materialism. Yet, while the latter constitutes a broader theoretical field characterised by its commitment to matter as non-inert and agentic, the former concentrates on the question of life/death.
10. In my previous work, I discuss how the concept of the non/living captures processual entanglements of growing/living and decaying/dying biomatter exposed, for instance, in *Victimless Utopia*, a series of bioartworks by TC&A, where the 'semi-living' sculptures made of bioengineered animal tissues – when contaminated with bacteria and fungi – are dying while the contaminants (another involved 'form of life') are thriving.
11. The question of the necessary criteria for the living forms part of the ongoing discussions on the definition and theory of life in astrobiology (e.g. Cleland and Chyba 2002) and chemistry (e.g. Luisi 2006).
12. In order to replicate, the virus needs a host cell. Thus, the criterion of reproduction combined with the passing on of hereditary information is not fulfilled. Prions do not contain any genetic material, and viroids consist only of circular RNA. Simultaneously, research in synthetic biology and chemistry provides further critique of so-called carbon chauvinism (Sagan 1973): for instance, scientists create inorganic protocells that fulfil most of the basic criteria for life (e.g. Rasmussen 2009).
13. See: <http://www.svenjakratz.com/portfolios/death-masks/> (accessed July 1, 2019).

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