

PLASTIC ATTUNEMENTS
AMBIGUITY, CREATIVITY AND PERFORMING MATERIALITY
IN ENVIRONMENTAL DANCE IN THE UK



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Anthropology & Art

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*Cover image: set design for Plastic Drastic Fantastic tour. Photograph by Brian Hartley, London, March 2022.
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This paper explores the relationship between artistic performance, embodiment and ecological sensibilities. I develop the notion of 'plastic attunements', based on anthropological scholarship on plastics (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2023; Dey 2021; Pandian 2016), to suggest that ecological art can learn something from the very plasticity (Dey 2021) of plastics. Plastic as a form is mutable: it can morph, adapt and is ambiguous. Similarly, ecological art that evokes open-ended, ambiguous attunements, rather than overt moralism, may foster shifts in ecological sensibilities and moods. Secondly, I explore how body-based creative practices, such as dance, allow for the temporally and spatially distant ecological crisis to be more immediately felt, particularly in the context of the UK. For instance, how does one sense that the pollution that circulates in atmospheres and rivers also circulates in one's own blood? How can we feel the consumption of microplastics inside our bodies? I argue that somatic practices may ground and anchor such queries. I draw upon three case studies to situate these claims: a dance-theatre work based in the UK that explores the uses and misuses of plastics, an outdoor guided-movement workshop in East London and the work of performance artist Hanna Cormick.

Plastics and aesthetics

During the first day of a two-week research and development period in December 2021, Suba provided us with a variety of plastic materials as physical prompts for creative tasks. We – myself and two other dance artists – were working on a piece that explored the uses and misuse of plastic objects, and which was to be toured across different cities in the United Kingdom. Suba, the choreographer, was creating a dance-theater work rooted in South Asian dance traditions in response to the ubiquitous planetary

presence of plastic (Pandian 2016). Suba drew choreographic inspiration from images of waves of plastic oceans, landfills of plastic technowaste and emerging research on microplastics accumulating in human and non-human bodies. As scholars have noted, the pervasive presence of plastic has turned the world inside out: plastic has merged with water, bodies and the earth's surfaces, embodying the 'arc of utopian hope and deep despair' (Meikle 1995, as cited Pandian 2016:1). For Suba, the notion of a world turned inside out offered creative stimuli to be explored within South Asian dance traditions, which specialize in storytelling, gestural vocabulary and polyrhythmic musical scores.

One of the main aims of *Plastic Drastic Fantastic* (PDF), created in collaboration with Polka Theatre in South London, was to serve as an educational tool for young audiences in the UK. It was intended that the work demonstrate that the ecological crisis is neither spatially nor temporally distant, but is rather immediate and a part of everyday landscapes. However, equally important was the very aesthetic of plastics, the various textures, shapes, patterns and sounds different kinds of plastics embody. Suba wanted to explore how plastic could be an aesthetic form, and wanted the work to offer an alternative perspective to the dominant discourse of a dystopian, waste-filled future.

'We want to understand how different types of plastic perform, exploring all their beautiful qualities,' Suba shared. The creative tasks involved using our different forms of dance training – contemporary, Bharatanatyam and Kathak – to create movement scores with various plastic objects, considering how plastic objects could become choreographic collaborators. In the first creative task we were given a plastic carrier bag, one that could contract and expand very easily and produce different soundscapes depending



Figure 1 Bharatnatyam mudras (hand gestures) entangled with a plastic bag. Photograph of *Plastic Drastic Fantastic* rehearsals by Brian Hartley, London, March 2022. Image copyright Brian Hartley.

on how one held the object. We found that the bag was manoeuvrable enough to be passed between us, allowing cohesive connection of our movements. As we improvised together with the bag, the plastic morphed into an extension of our movements, forcing us to move beyond an experience in which the body is the only instrument for the dance. After several hours of passing, moving, contracting and expanding the bag, the plastic bag began to decay. Although we repaired it with tape and knots, it became difficult for the bag to perform in ways true to its initial properties, making the variability of the plastic bag—and its decay process—a central part of the choreography.

The notion that plastic ‘performs differently’ was a central part of the research and development

phase of the work. Over the next few months, a collaborative group consisting of lighting designers, dance artists, choreographers, set designers and costume designers contemplated the ways plastic performs differently across our media and how it could yield distinct artistic configurations. We explored what kinds of images, soundscapes and movements could be produced by the involvement of various objects. For example, based on the density and type of plastic involved, different plastics may produce unique sounds when interacting with the wind, fall to the ground at different speeds, or move harmoniously or in opposition to the body. We also explored questions such as: What types of recycled plastic can be combined to create a dance costume that would maintain a particular shape?



Figure 2 Set design for *Plastic Drastic Fantastic* tour. Photograph by Brian Hartley, London, March 2022. Image copyright Brian Hartley.

How does the thickness of different plastics refract light in specific ways? What rhythmic scores can be created by recording different plastic materials? All of these aesthetic questions and decisions were set against a backdrop of various movement scores that constituted the arc of the performance. In our 25-minute dance set, we depicted uses of plastics in everyday life, the manufacture of plastics in factories, the different properties of plastics and the impact of plastics on marine life. The work was also made accessible to Deaf audiences by devising a cushion that emitted pulsating vibrations in synch with the tempo of the music, also made out of recycled materials.

How materials perform, their capacities to affect our bodies and move us beyond

an experience in which the body is the only instrument for the dance, and their propensity for repair, are my topics here. I am offering another aspect to conversations on new materiality, environmental dance and ecological ethics through three key arguments. Firstly, I address questions about the capacity for dance to enable an appreciation for the natural world (Kramer 2012; Stewart 2010). 'Environmental dance' can be understood as a way to deepen an appreciation of nature and generate ecological knowledge through the use of the body and its movement (Linge 2022; Stewart 2010). Rooted in dance and performance praxis, this paper moves beyond a phenomenological understanding of the body, in which external experiences with nature are only rendered ready-to-hand for the subject's world

(Stewart 2010), towards an analysis in which plastic is agentive and comes alive.

Secondly, following Bennett (2010), who argues that bodily and aesthetic disciplines are spaces in which ethical sensibilities are formed, and constitute a kind of micropolitics, I contend that attention towards bodily, creative tasks encourages the fostering of ecological sensibilities and moods. These creative tasks, I will demonstrate, enable participants to notice and attune to their environments, objects and landscapes differently and intimately.

Thirdly, I explore how environmental dance – and ecological dance broadly – can learn something from the very plasticity of plastics, its inherent ambiguity and its potential to shift, change and resignify. Environmental dance and art do not need to attempt to generate immediate change (as called for by activism) or constitute direct intervention, but can instead embody plasticity itself, a concept referred to in this paper as ‘plastic attunements.’ I argue that environmental dance can generate attention toward the ecological crisis, but can do so indirectly and ambiguously. While this may be explicitly, as in *Plastic Drastic Fantastic*, where plastic is depicted as both beautiful and dystopic, or implicitly, as in abstract art, such plastic engagements in the arts can eschew direct moralism (Simoniti 2023) and instead foster simple curiosity. Drawing upon ethnographic reflections and artistic praxis, insights garnered through plastic attunements allow me to explore what options individuals might have amidst circulating images of plastic oceans, mounds of accumulative waste and haunting statistics.

What can a body be?

Suba’s movement direction regarding the way materials perform can be put in dialogue with scholarly debates around materiality. Political

theorist Jane Bennett (2010) develops the concept of ‘vital materiality’, which recognizes all matter, including rocks, plastics, threads and planets, as alive, vibrant and interconnected. According to Bennett, matter has been divided into ‘vibrant’ matter (humans) and passive matter (everything else). The concept of vital materiality offers a perspective on the lively power of material formations, such as how omega-3 fatty acids alter human moods or supposedly immobile trash generates lively streams of chemicals and volatile winds of methane (ibid.). Vital materiality challenges the idea that only vibrant matter can exert influence on passive matter, suggesting a more relational perspective on subjects and objects.

Vital materiality diverges from an exclusively political-economic critique of plastics and aligns with Suba’s challenge to reimagine grotesque images of plastics and consider their aesthetic potential. However, Bennett’s vital materiality does not seek to romanticize passive matter but rather provides a framework for considering what a body can be and how passive matter can be transformed into vital matter. For Bennett, ‘a fiber stretches from a human to an animal, from a human or animal to molecules, from molecules to particles and so on’ (Browning, Prokhovnik and Dimova-Cookson 2012:148). Recognizing that all matter is vibrant presents a critique to human exceptionalism and offers a framework to theorize the potential of ecological art. For instance, how would consumption patterns change if trash were viewed as an accumulating pile of lively and potentially dangerous matter? Bennett argues, ‘my aspiration is to articulate a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans to see how analyses of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due’ (Bennett 2010:viii).

How can this theory, which details how matter is vibrant not exclusively for human worlds, be concretized through bodily practices? How might this change perspectives for artists and performers who work with objects not simply as extensions of their bodies, but rather as active collaborators? How would this cultivate an attunement toward materials and waste? As Bennett (2010) argues, bodily practices are vehicles through which ethical sensibilities and social relations are formed and reformed, and this includes practices of environmental dance. However, as Suba asserts, environmental dance does not have a responsibility to inform or offer a direct intervention. ‘Dance does not need to teach us anything. Bodies are simply vessels to share stories,’ she explained in an interview.¹ In exploring the harmful but also aesthetic potential of plastics, Suba’s work is ‘praxical, axiological and ontological’ (Stewart 2010:33), and enables individuals participating in it, but also those watching it, to gain insight into the waste crisis, which might otherwise seem temporally and spatially distant for those in the UK. Suba continues, ‘Yes, everyone has access to knowledge about ecological values at this point. But taking something out of its everyday use and into an artistic context offers a sense of curiosity, possibilities and exploration.’ The ambivalence, ambiguity and aesthetics of plastics allows audience members to draw their own conclusions about ecological attitudes, without the heavy-handed applied or interventionist model of political-economic critiques. While Dey (2021) argues that the very materiality of plastic is multiple and contested, mutable and elusive, this very elusiveness is precisely what can generate ecological curiosity.

For instance, *Plastic Drastic Fantastic* opens with a large plastic sheet. Myself and the other dancer improvised entering and exiting under the plastic sheet in response to the music and dramatic lighting. The focus, choreographically, was on an aesthetic representation, not a symbolic or literal one (such as a plastic ocean). Yet, by the end of the show, one adult audience member asked where the plastic sheet would go after the show and what we do with it in between shows. Do we reuse it? Do we recycle it? Doesn’t it generate waste? A child then inquired whether it would go into the ocean. Such responses are enabled by plastic attunements.

Such sensibilities have stakes. As Dey (2021) highlights, world leaders are negotiating terms for a global plastic treaty, with hopes for interventions based on law and policy. Simoniti (2023) argues that it is precisely art and artistic representations that cultivate attitudes and approaches that allow for changes in policy and the law to take place in the first instance, mirroring Bennett’s claim that cultural-psychosocial practices are intimately tied to larger political-economic interventions. While, as Suba points out, ‘dance does not need to teach us anything’, it can foster noticing, attention and curiosity (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2023; Tsing *et al.* 2017), cultivating changes in atmospheres and moods.

Additionally, working on *Plastic Drastic Fantastic* as a dance artist allowed me to develop an awareness of attitudes towards the environment, moving dance beyond an ‘intrabodily’ experience to one that understands the body as a continuum with the outside world. For the dance artists, performing with these materials meant exploring an embodied quality, or an extension of one’s body, through the use of a prop, thereby extending what it means to ‘become’ plastic. This involved

1 A personal interview, conducted in September 2022.



Figure 3 Plastic sheet in *Plastic Drastic Fantastic* tour. Photograph by Brian Hartley, London, March 2022. Image copyright Brian Hartley.

investigating what it means to move like different kinds of plastic. This allowed us to reflect on our training as dancers, and also on the capacity of our bodies to be affected by substances that are not stable, but are rather volatile performers in themselves. For example, what does it mean to move like melting plastic compared to hardened plastic? How might my body move in a way that mirrors a plastic bag or one that opposes it? How might we respond to a musical score made from recording different plastics: keep in tempo, or go against it? We also became sea creatures that had ingested plastic: we swam in an ocean of plastic objects and laid still as turtles washed up shore. Through repeated exercises over a three-

month period, my body became attuned to the various properties of plastics and I learned how to embody matter by being attentive to its vibrancy and volatility. Not only did this push me from a performance perspective, it also allowed me to have an embodied experience of the ambivalence of plastics while resisting any overt moralism.

Scholars have explored how attunement to bodily sensibilities can be used as a tool to bring issues of ecological disaster, waste and climate change 'home'. Such engagements with the body allow for crises to become spatially and temporally immediate (Neimanis and Walker 2013). Change has been consistently framed by a sense of urgency and the rhetoric of crisis,

which has ‘taken on an abstract quality in contemporary Western society’ (ibid.:559). How might an engagement with the body allow us to understand notions of an environmental crisis in a more intimate way, something connected to our immediate bodily sensibilities? How might we, as Grosz (2018) says, become otherwise?

Plastic, as a form and substance, allows speculation on the different ways a body can be made, echoing Bennett’s inquiry of ‘what can a body do?’ Dancing with plastic, the variability of the object and its relation to the body can encourage a ‘shift in attitude from ready-to-hand possession’, in which a subject has particular control over the object, to an ‘open-handed non-possessiveness’ (Stewart 2010:34), where both the body and object are working in variability and ambivalence. Unlike ecological dance work that is situated outdoors in nature and aims to cultivate a relationship between the body and the natural world, *Plastic Drastic Fantastic* was set indoors. In *Plastic Drastic Fantastic* our bodies moved from being nurdles in a factory to using plastic bags as an extension of our bodies, to becoming turtles in the ocean choking on plastics, to miming out all the creative ways a plastic bottle could be reused rather than recycled. The expression of our bodily capabilities became varied, continuously confronting a body’s relationship to plastic. In doing so, it still allows for a ‘chiasmatic’ (Merleau-Ponty 1968:102) experience of the body with objects. The dancing body develops into a symptom of the landscape, which includes plastic and waste, an intertwining of the elements of the world that surround the dancer (Stewart 2010). All of the dance artists working on this project felt a significant shift in how we attended to plastics in our everyday life, and in our engagement with the waste and environmental crisis. We also found that our bodies felt more fragile, malleable

and porous after our continued performing with variable objects.

As the plastic objects performed in varied ways, this created uncertainty about the kind of interaction a body would have with it on any specific day of rehearsal or performance. Throughout the two-month tour, every performance yielded a slightly different engagement and performance, based on several affective bodily capacities. At times, the large plastic sheet that represented the ocean ripped in the middle of the performance; at other times, a plastic object malfunctioned, causing us to mime objects through gesture and emotion rather than using an object for direct signification. And sometimes our tired bodies did not match the speed at which a plastic bag fell, changing the choreography in the middle of the performance. A dancing body’s relationship with plastic involves an engagement with strong and volatile presences (Bennett 2010) – plastic objects that were never reliable collaborators.

Dancing with plastic invites attention to the relationship between humans and non-human substances. Theories of new and vital materialities can be concretized through performance, in which the uncertainty of an object’s performativity cultivates an ethical sensibility that decentres the human. This constitutes a response to Pandian’s question, ‘Could we find a way of cultivating more liveable relationships with those countless things and beings that we use and dispose of so lightly?’ (Pandian 2016:1). Dancing with plastics fosters an attention to the kinds of ways a body can be – fragile, malleable, cutting or destructive – while simultaneously decentring the human by engaging with the variability and performativity of objects. In doing so, plastics are seen as ambivalent: artistically inspiring but also ecologically harmful. Repair (of a body, of ecological sensibilities) takes on a plastic quality.

Misplaced objects

I now move away from indoor theatre work to movement practices and performances curated in outdoor settings, drawing from both my experience as an artist facilitator and the work of an Australian performance artist, Hanna Cormick. In the latter half of 2022, I was part of an ongoing art and ecology engagement project titled *Re-Wild Ilford*, curated by London-based visual artist Sheyamali Sudesh. The project housed artist residents working in a variety of expressive forms: visual artists, dance artists, poets, sculptors and multimodal artists. Each artist ran a series of workshops open to the public in East London in a natural space. Workshops included natural printing workshops, building habitats for creatures in the park, sustainable weaving, clay impressions of fallen leaves and portraits inspired by foraging. I was the dance artist on the project and responsible for holding an outdoor guided-movement workshop in one of East London's local parks.

Scholarshavenotedthatartistsshouldbewary of somatic-based practices that simply use the environment for one's own goals (Kramer 2012). Focusing on cultivating ecological sensibilities by using the environment for artistic production can easily fall into the category of 'stewardship,' in which humans have a responsibility to take care and protect those around them (Balibar 2021; Ginsburg 2015). Assuming that one is responsible for nature, can easily slip into assuming one is above it, reinforcing a particular ideology that reorders nature through human moral categories and reinforces an anthropocentric orientation of human exceptionalism. This section echoes these scholars who do not glorify the separation between the human and the non-human, but rather, explore an ambivalent affective encounter between the two. As I will show below, environmental dance can resist reinforcing

human exceptionalism by generating ecological values without using the natural world for one's own goals.

My aim in facilitating the workshops was, in a very concrete way, to explore the ambivalent connection between one's own body and a nature that is 'out there'. I was inspired by the questions I had to face earlier in the year during my tour in which we explored how bodies move in relation to plastic objects. I wanted to examine if it was possible to evoke a similar transcorporeal curiosity in the participants through movement and gestural practices by direct exposure to the natural environment. All bodies, including human, earth, water, animal and plant bodies are 'weather bodies' (Pollitt Blaise and Rooney 2021). How does one cultivate an attention to how the water in our bodies is made up of the same properties as the water of the earth? How is our flesh derived from the same matter as the soil? How do we sense that the pollution that circulates in our blood is what circulates in the atmosphere and rivers? Such questions, of course, cannot be answered in the scope of a series of short workshops, but I argue that somatic practices may ground and anchor such queries. Movement practices have the potential to go beyond understanding nature through aesthetic theories and instead encourage approaching nature through sensuous experience (Linge 2022).

During the workshop, I facilitated several creative tasks related to the environment, including a sensorial walk, guided foraging, movement-based improvization, collective sculpture making and an embodied response to a poem. There were thirteen participants, who came from various boroughs in East London. In the first exercise, a guided sensorial walk in which participants explored one of the local parks, they attuned to all the distant and nearby sounds, the spectrum of colours in green spaces

and the multitude of textures found on the earth. The goal of the walk was to warm up the different senses and encourage participants to start observing the mundane or everyday with an enhanced sensorial quality.

After the warm-up, I moved onto facilitating the main creative task. I asked the participants to forage for about ten minutes. They wandered around the green space, bringing in objects in different sizes and forms, such as acorns, a tree branch and uniquely patterned leaves. I then gathered all the participants in a circle and explained that we would be making a collective sculpture with their foraged objects. There was no order to the arrangement of the collective sculpture; an individual entered into the circle, put their object down and another came into the circle when they thought their object could be added to the sculpture. Some participants moved their objects based on the location of other objects as the task progressed, producing a constantly evolving shape.

After building the sculpture, the participants moved to the second half of the task, exploring how they might embody their material in relation to the other materials around them. I prompted them to consider how movement might facilitate an inquiry into their body's relationship with their found objects. Participants were asked to close their eyes and think about all the different properties of the material they found. What did it sound like? How might one move as a response to this sound? What was the texture of their object? How might the objects respond to different temperatures and the different seasons? How would it float, how would it descend?

While most of the participants found rocks, flowers, sticks and leaves, one participant found a piece of plastic, a misplaced piece of rubbish. While making the collective structure, the plastic offered dimension and texture. However, while

taking part in the second exercise of attempting to embody the plastic, the participant found herself stuck. Although she was able to articulate verbally all the different properties of plastic – shiny, malleable, clear, flexible – when she had to construct a movement score around the plastic, her body resisted. She found that she was unable to move and her body felt 'fixed and rigid', as she shared later. 'My body didn't want to move. I felt awkward and uncomfortable.' The participant decided to sit out from the exercise.

Plastic here is a misplaced object, unlike my encounters in the performance space where plastic was an essential and intentional part of the choreographic experience. Dance scholars and theorists have explored the capacity of environmental dance to raise awareness of human–world engagement and to foster a sense of possibilities of being otherwise (Giannachi and Stewart 2005; Kramer 2012; Linge 2022; Stewart 2010). This moment of disruption can be interpreted as an alternative entry point for body-based practices to facilitate ecological values without romanticizing the natural world. In theatre/studio spaces the object becomes repurposed into an aesthetic that allows for a unique embodied interaction. Theatre conventions typically allow for certain spatial and temporal jumps that enable an imaginative engagement with objects that is not always possible in the natural world. In other words, the curated stage is an affective space in which everyday realities are abstracted. Taking art outside of the stage and into the outdoor world offers a different space of engagement and habitation. For the participant, the movement improvisation facilitated an awareness that her body did not want to become plastic. Her insight turns our attention to materiality that is out of place, both in the body and within a landscape.



Figure 4 Hanna Cormick in a Mermaid costume. Photograph by Shelly Higgs, 2019, Mollymook Beach, NSW, Australia. Image copyright Shelly Higgs.

The work of Australian performance artist Hanna Cormick also offers insight onto misplaced objects. Her works explore anti-extractivism, climate justice and access rights. She argues that these themes are, in part, a response to an immunological condition she has known as Mast Cell Activation Syndrome (MCAS)² Cormick, in her own words, is 'allergic to the world' and forced to spend most of her life inside a sealed room (Dow 2019). When exposed to plastic, fumes,

² A condition in which mast cells, a type of immune cell, are overly reactive and release excessive amounts of chemical mediators. Symptoms range from mild to severe to life threatening (Valent *et. al* 2020).

odours, or even ink in books, she has very violent seizures, hives and throat swelling. The seizures 'look like I've lost consciousness and my whole body is jerking and moving about on its own', she explains (*ibid.*). In a lecture entitled 'The Earth shakes, my body shudders', Cormick explained how there are no edges between her and the world (Cormick 2023). Around seven years ago, her body started to change, mirroring what she sees as the decline of the Earth. 'I realized, like the world's reliance on fossil fuels and their impact on the planet, I had been treating my body with the same hyper-capitalist mindset.' (Dow 2019). Her 'hyper-mobility', which once allowed

her to be an acrobat, has now turned into 'hyperporosity': a body allergic to the outside world.

Cormick's performance work 'The mermaid' was staged outdoors in 2019 and 2020. It is a metaphor for her life and the poisoning of the planet, turning her 'private suffering into public activism' (Cormick 2023). Cormick's condition requires her to perform the entire piece with a mask on, in which her stillness and silence is the primary movement vocabulary. However, a pivotal moment in the piece occurs when she takes her mask off and endures a violent seizure in the middle of the show. The audience (with their objects, plastics and breath) becomes complicit in her suffering as she endures a choreography not of her own making, prompting the questions: who is the audience and who is the art-maker?

Although Cormick's exposure to plastic and toxins affects her body with violent seizures and the participant in my nature workshop simply resisted an improvisational task, the idea of the body disturbed by plastic, by misplaced objects, carries insight. In a seminal paper on environmental dance, Nigel Stewart (2010) argues that the capacity for environmental dance to encounter nature as it is, external to the body, rather than simply as another intraworldly, intrabodily experience, is limited. Stewart writes, 'The extent that we used our bodies as tools for rendering the environment ready-to-hand ... could not involve "an encounter [with] nature as it is in itself" but only an "intraworldly" encounter' (ibid.:34). He holds that dance remains an intrabodily experience, even in outdoor settings. However, the idea of plastic being a misplaced object renders the environment not a ready-to-hand experience, but rather a negotiation between the body, waste and landscapes. By this I mean that the environment is not simply a tool to further an artist's own agenda. The misplaced

object, for the participant in my workshop and especially for Cormick, draws attention to a disruption between the human-to-environment continuum in which the body responds and reacts to misplaced particles and objects.

Anthropologist Michelle Murphy's work on the notion of the alterlife (2017) also explores the body and chemical relations. For Murphy, 'alterlife' names a life open to alternation in the wake of atmospheric and pervasive chemical compositions. Murphy explores chemically altered metabolisms and how bodies ingest human-made substances, including microplastics. By opening up the category of the body to include direct and indirect exposures to toxins, Murphy questions the very category of the human. The concept of an afterlife might include recent discoveries of microplastics in the bloodstream, where the pollution of plastics 'has joined the molecular fabric of our bodies' (ibid.:495). Plastics challenge what it means to exist, including whether humans are bounded or porous entities (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2023). What can a body be or become within the wake of such alterations? Microplastics can latch onto the outer membranes of red blood cells and may limit their ability to transport oxygen (Leslie *et. al* 2022). The particles have also been found in the placentas of pregnant women and in pregnant rats: these substances pass rapidly through the lungs into the hearts, brains and other organs of the fetuses (ibid.).

What can art and movement add to a conversation seemingly better suited to science and technology studies or the hard sciences? Can insights produced by a guided-movement workshop in green spaces or watching a performance of violent seizures offer any kind of intervention? As phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (2012:94) argues, it is through the body that we are more 'outside' of ourselves than



Figure 5 Photograph by Brian Hartley from *Plastic Drastic Fantastic* tour, March 2022. Image copyright Brian Hartley.

inside ourselves, and the motor capacities of the body are the fundamental way by which we come to know the world. Merleau-Ponty contends that individual consciousness is not locked inside the self or the psyche, but rather, it is an active perceptual engagement with the external world in and through the body. However, anthropologist Talal Asad (1997) critiques phenomenology's autogenic assumption of bodily capacities as a framework that ignores how bodily dispositions and techniques are cultivated, including in and through practices such as dance. For instance, while Merleau-Ponty argues that consciousness is more outside us than inside, how does one come to actually feel this? To know this? I argue that creativity, art and movement offer practices to consider how this might be possible. At the moment when the body is creatively tasked to 'become' plastic in the natural world (that is, outside of the abstracted theatre experience), the body resists. Although the body might not be able to resist the consumption of microplastics, a creative task forces the body to think and

feel what it might be like to have plastic inside of it, in a concretized practice through which plastic might be joined to the 'molecular fabric of our bodies' (Murphy 2017:495). The alterlife of plastic can be encountered through a curated artistic task that offers the ability to be outside oneself, to encounter and embody the outside that has come inside.

Similarly, Morton (2013) develops the concept of 'hyperobjects': objects that are effectively beyond human comprehension with widely distributed impacts. Plastics, as a hyperobject, are vast both temporally and spatially; they are 'non-local entities and stick to humans and non-human beings in various ways' (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2023:6). The effects of plastics can be 'temporally dispersed,' rather than immediately felt (*ibid.*:16). In instances like my participant's inability to become plastic or of an audience member becoming unwittingly complicit in Cormick's violent seizures, dance and movement tasks may facilitate an anchoring of these seemingly incomprehensible temporally

dispersed hyperobjects, or of whether bodies are bounded or permeable.

Plastic as praxis, plastic as repair

This final section focuses specifically on plastics as an artistic medium, providing another entry point into thinking about its ambiguity as a material. In *Plastic Drastic Fantastic*, for example, the choreographer made a deliberate choice to incorporate plastics throughout the show as a kind of artistic infrastructure. The musical score was created by recording different pieces of plastic and much of the set design was constructed from recyclable materials. Our costumes were made from strips of plastics and other recyclable materials, such as an old IKEA bag, a shower curtain and fabric strips from used saris. The form mirrored the function: plastic is malleable and offers multiple signifiers to any one signified.

Various artists have utilized found materials in their creations as a subversive response to the waste crisis or have played with scale to critique human exceptionalism. For example, Yayoi Kusama's *Fireflies on the Water* (2002) and Tadashi Kawamata's *Overflow* (2018), both award-winning installations, explore how small changes to the environment can have significant consequences, and invite the viewer to recognize their complicity in the crisis through the scale of each installation. Kusama's piece – a site-specific installation that utilizes light and mirrors to transport viewers into a space that seems endlessly expansive – is more implicit and invites the viewer to momentarily speculate on human exceptionalism. On the other hand, Kawamata's piece directly implicates the viewer, in a similar fashion to the way Cormick's audience becomes the crisis in her show. As the viewer enters the room, they are submerged under an ocean made up entirely of waste. The lighting is designed to allow glimmers of light to peek through

the recycled materials, offering an image of an ocean floor also made up of a shadow of waste. Cecilia Vicuña's *Brain Forest Quipu* (2023) consists of two sculptures that hang twenty-seven metres from the ceiling, woven together from found objects, rope and cardboard to evoke bleached-out trees that express a ghostly form, signifying the mourning of regeneration cycles of the rainforest. Several of the items used in the Vicuña's sculptures were collected from the banks of the River Thames in London. All of these installations draw attention to how open-ended objects invite possibilities of reimagining and reinterpreting waste.

However, there is another way to interpret artworks beyond their creative use of recyclable materials or their ability to facilitate awareness of the dangers of human exceptionalism. Part of artistic inquiry is the awakening of creative associations between different entities, moving 'things' from mere things to materials in the processes of becoming (Ingold 2011). Artistic thinking allows for new associations between signified and signifier, breaking a signification system that is virtually invisible (Jain 2018), similar to an anthropological inquiry into processes of becoming (Biehl and Locke 2017). Many artists have brought different materials together to create something new, resulting in an approach that allows different objects to conjoin, providing a visual representation of the processes of becoming. For example, the famous surrealist artist Man Ray was known to make artwork by juxtaposing seemingly random materials. In his work *Emak Bakia* (1926), Man Ray juxtaposes an upright wooden part from the neck of the cello with loose horsehair, creating something both striking and disorienting for the viewer. What I am drawing attention to here is the idea that art reminds us of the fact that items need not be so readily thrown away, recycled or even upcycled,

for materials always have the opportunity to become something else. Plastic is not just plastic but can be the ocean, music, an instrument or light. Plastic can also be and become.

Such an inquiry also had an afterlife for me, moving outside of the stage and into the space of the everyday. How might thinking creatively about materials become a kind of generalized disposition, a way to cultivate an ethic of un-disposability that negates planned obsolescence? For instance, how might we find creative uses for objects in our everyday lives that go beyond their obvious designations? As Wittgenstein shares in his philosophical investigations, ‘problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known’ (2011:109). What would it mean to take this claim – of thought, of thinking, of theory – and configure it to the material world? Can plastic attunements become a mode of material imagination? What does it mean to think about materials that are existing and rearrange them to use them in novel ways, attending to their very plasticity (even if they are not plastic)? While this might be something artistic, literally a piece of art such as *Emak Bakia* or making a collage from used items, it can also facilitate a different awareness towards our everyday objects, encouraging us to view them with potential, in the process of becoming. Such a disposition, similar to Lévi-Strauss’s (2010) conceptualization of bricolage, akin to Wittgenstein’s claim, suggests solutions to problems are found through what is already at hand. A bricoleur, like Man Ray, does not care about ‘coherence’, and this serves as a reminder of the potential to work through objects, juxtaposing them, combining, slicing and dicing them, and even freely associating with them. To imagine an alterlife of materials, facilitated by plastic attunements, may be one way to think about repair.

Conclusion

In this paper I have examined how plastic attunements might offer an alternative perspective on the waste crisis. I have situated my analysis in performance and artistic praxis, arguing that the performativity of objects is a way to concretize theories of vital materiality. I further contend that creative, bodily tasks can bring the ecological crisis home, providing a means to mitigate the paradox of a temporally and spatially distant crisis. Finally, material imagination – that is, thinking about what materials could be – offers a way to counteract the tendencies of hyper-consumerism, waste and planned obsolescence. The fundamental argument is that ambiguity and plasticity function as oblique entry points to cultivating ecological sensibilities. I present these speculations not merely to make art an educational tool or a form of ac/rtivism, but rather to think about plasticity, to notice plasticity, both within art itself and in everyday spaces.

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