

**Cathy Wilkes' care-full matter-scapes:  
female affects of care, feminist materiality and vibrant things.**

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**Abstract**

The relationship between corporeal feminism and materialisms has been addressed in a number of recently emerging writings and artistic projects. In this essay, I focus on Cathy Wilkes' exhibition in the British Pavilion at the 58<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 2019 (although I suggest rather than being a singular event, it belongs to and further evolves her overarching constellation weaving art and life together) and explore her practice of meaning-making and questioning of production of knowledge driven by non-representationalist methodology understood as an affective material inter-action. I propose that Wilkes' practice performs embodied feminist materiality in matter-scapes activating threshold spaces in which intimate care-full encounters emerge. The figure of the threshold animates matter *with/in* which subjectivity is embedded and embodied, nurturing a care-full response-ability and a political responsibility in the context of patriarchal neoliberal and late-capitalist social structures marked by poverty, unpaid reproductive labour, precarity of work, refugee crisis, incomprehension and social injustice. It invokes vulnerable (resistant) transitions and liminal spaces. Wilkes' constellations grow together through vital matter and liveability.

'I place my hand on the hand  
of the dead, invisible palm-print  
on the doorframe.'

Adrienne Rich, *From an Old House in America* (1974)

Adrienne Rich describes memory, invisible and yet material. A doorframe is a threshold, a liminal space in between; a 'hand on the hand' – touch; writing that invites memories. Rich's writing becomes part of a ritual of connectedness that also nurtures Cathy Wilkes' art practice encountered in her constellations or *matter-scapes*.<sup>1</sup> This facilitates affective encounters between and *with/in* subjects and objects.

#### *Room 1*

*Dried plants – herbs, wild roses, rowanberry, olive tree twig, some wild plants and a thorny stem; a rectangular table or a pedestal covered with a semi-transparent fabric surrounded by four childlike figures with pronounced bellies; open blank books or perhaps notebooks; pebble stones; dried bugs - a dragonfly and a grass hopper; an empty toilet roll tube; fragmented plaster casts; paintings; some coins; squashed foil wraps; hair ties; plastic lily of valley in a solitary tiny pot placed directly on the floor; Julie Corsover's drawing of children playing; abstract paintings in a foggy palette of greys, greens, yellows, pinks...*

#### *Room 2*

*A cast of an arm; a plastic bowl; reddish stains on the floor.... Layer after layer, many and intimate relationships are created between the objects and the space, objects and visitors, visitors and space; a matrixiation of experience...*

#### *Room 3*

*A female mannequin wearing a green dress, attached to the fabric fragments of a photograph, which is framed and hangs on the wall...*

#### *Room 4*

*A childlike figure in a dark green tunic, a crystal decanter with silver handle, plates, a coffee table... minutiae of daily life...*

#### *Room 5 & 6*

*Unframed canvases with frayed edges and surface covered with layers of paint in muted colours, space filled with Venetian light and air.*

The above are among many found objects, hung or placed either directly on the floor or on a 'table' in a sepulchral form, that are scattered across and in between the six rooms of the British Pavilion in Venice Giardini being part of the 58<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. Created, found and care-fully placed by Cathy Wilkes, who represents Britain, they form an intimate and melancholic environment which is marked by different thresholds interwoven with one another. Orchestrated into elaborate and yet *seemingly*

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<sup>1</sup> Wilkes care-full attention to becoming and her axial practice creates transitional threshold spaces. Rather than discussing her work using terms such as an installation, performance, sculpture or landscape, I suggest 'matter-scapes' as lived-scapes, which captures her attention to matter and liveability, the unfolding and evolving. Matter-scapes embody continuity of self *and* matter. I also use the term 'constellation' that refers to the outlines and associative patters Wilkes creates *across* her exhibitions.

casual sculptural constellation, the objects are brought together into a rhythm that is overarched by pale colours, almost muted blues and dusted pinks, earthy colours, washed wood, shades of white and grey from pearl and cream, egg shell, to stone greys complemented with hints of bottle green. [Fig. press pack] Wilkes works with objects that are usually undervalued, vernacular in nature, suggestive of replaceability, discarded and abandoned because they are no longer useful although traces of their use are still visible. They embody her own social and cultural heritage and raise issues pertaining to class and gender. In this essay I argue that Wilkes performs embodied feminist materiality and materialises thresholds activating matter.<sup>2</sup> Her untitled matter-scape pays attention to female affects of care, embodied feminist materiality and agency that goes beyond the human-centered thinking. It is an invitation to a search of affective and associative meaning of objects through assembling bodies and matter and questioning the production of knowledge. It nurtures becoming; threshold spaces in which care-full encounters emerge.

### Meaning of objects

When discussing Wilkes' art practice, Michael Stanley (Wilkes and Stanley, 2008, p. 10) notes, 'At the heart of Wilkes' practice is a search for the associative meaning of objects. [...] [It] unashamedly draws on the most intimate of personal experiences.' Whitley (in Wilkes and Whitley 2019) talks about psychoanalytic theory of object relations when analysing Wilkes' assemblages. It concerns the role of the object, other persons, most often a mother, or elements of others, in child's psychological processes and more specifically, the internalisation of experiences of others. The importance of objects is emphasised when discussing sculpture. Whitley (Ibid, p. 11) looks more closely at the figure of a doll, 'an idea of being' and an imaginary object that is not a representation of a literal living body. However, it connects to human experiences. [Fig. 1] The presence of dolls, or mannequins, with pronounced tummies, in the first room of the Venice exhibition, may be interpreted in various ways, Whitley (Ibid) suggests,

uterine interconnectedness' and says, 'The circumstances accounting for each distended physique are latent in the work but not be laboured: eagerly anticipated pregnancy; sin and shame of incest; burden of starvation; satiation from gluttonous overindulgence. Or none of these.

The figures, with almost transparent 'skin' of transitory quality, may be suggestive of poverty, malnourishment, or alienation. Given Wilkes' Irish ancestry, they may reference the Great Hunger (1845-1849) in Ireland when approximately one million people left the country. Wilkes' work invokes those issues, however, accompanied by other objects, the Venice constellation seems to unsettle relations between humans and objects, and objects themselves. This care-full articulation materialised in the ways in which objects are assembled, creates an intimate and vulnerable environment.

Wilkes' matter-scape, similar to several others from past years, is left intentionally unnamed. The artist does not give us any definite clues. The works are untitled, there are no descriptions and little is said in the exhibition catalogue. There is a spectrum of possible interpretations and an array of sightlines from which to encounter the objects. O'Sullivan (2005, p. 65) argues that, 'It is this internal

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<sup>2</sup> So far Wilkes' work has been analysed in the context of memory, accretion, time, process and change (Amy 2019), women as visual signs of popular culture (Budd 2011), reproductive labour (Edmonson 2018), war traditions (Rich 2012; Johnson 2012), transfiguration (Raymond 2018), haunting assemblages exploring issues such as femininity, motherhood and sexuality referring to domesticity (Amazeen 2015, Jeffery 2015) or mourning for the value of individual handwork craft and human touch (Ibid).

affective complexity, this consistency and cohesiveness, this obvious carefulness but also impenetrability, which constitutes the force of Wilkes' assemblages. Put simply, they pose a challenge; they force us to thought.' The work operates in a given space and in a given time, subject to the changes of light from Spring until Fall in the case of the exhibition at the Venice Biennale. It invites care-full looking inducing an affective encounter with a paradoxical meaning. The un-naming of work addresses Wilkes' attention to unacknowledged care practices and women's unpaid labour, and slave labour of production. She practices attention. Carefully orchestrated assemblages reference other assemblages; a water decanter may have appeared elsewhere, in a different context, at a different time. There is no chronology though and this element of cyclical return (Lyotard 1994), 'neither/nor' narratives and the figure of the threshold enable revisiting what has already taken place. There is no end to this story that unfolds through entanglements. Arrangements of objects are framed and reframed, suggesting connotations beyond their materiality. These possible scenarios are intriguing and it is the secret life of objects that draws us in, inviting into a closer inspection of our own relation to the object-word, our caring for others and the self.

### Care-full ecologies and thresholds

The concept of care, and mutuality and solidarity which it implies, is central to Wilkes' practice. Objects are placed in care-fully<sup>3</sup> constructed matter-scapes. The energy released when we care, moves us into action. Caring for myself and others is not a self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, an alternative structural principle critical to feminist critiques of neoliberalism and transactional value of forms of capital. When we care we are connected, solidarity is central and necessary.<sup>4</sup> The concept of vulnerability is linked to care. However here vulnerability, as Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay (2016) argue, may be used as a tool of resistance offering a counter model to the militant.<sup>5</sup> Wilkes' art practice activates forms of care relations in contemporary encounters as a critique of neoliberalism and late- (or neo-) capitalism suggestive of exchange and use value and, specific forms of capital. Her objects are porous and function beyond normative signifiers having affective value open to vibrancy of matter. Feminist ethics is re-enacted through lived experience, facilitating social relationships through care-fullness – caring structures, practising care and ontologies of becoming (changing to and moving toward) transforming the dynamics of gender. Joan Tronto (1993) associated care with being in the world, matter-based reciprocity rather than a transactional exchange. Wilkes' method when 'growing' her matter-scapes through subsequent constellations could be read through the lens of Donna Haraway's (2016) concept of 'making with', de-emphasising human exceptionalism and reconfiguring our relations with non-human. As a matter of *care*, Wilkes pays attention and 'cares about' (Tronto 1993), *cares for* and is *care-full*.

Wilkes' engagement with politics of discomfort and vulnerability is manifested in her mobilisation of uncomfortable social issues through care-fullness and vulnerability, and the figure of the threshold that undoes binary oppositions between self and other, private and public, past and present. She does not work with borders as there are no clear edges or zones that stay clear of each other. Her works, care-fully distributed in a given space, are placed in ways that creates gaps and distances. [Fig. 2] This

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<sup>3</sup> By 'care-fully' I mean 'full of care'.

<sup>4</sup> If we think of a literal definition of 'care', as a noun it means 'attention and thoroughness', 'caution', 'worry and anxiety', 'a responsibility'. As a verb, it signifies concerning oneself about others or something, or being considerate and even watchful and cautious. (Chambers Dictionary Online 2019).

<sup>5</sup> It does not require protection, it articulates, 'a different conception of embodiment and sociality within fields of contemporary power, one that engages object worlds, including both built and destroyed environments, as well as social forms of interdependency and individual or collective agency.' (Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay 2016, p. 6)

in turn generates intimate spaces around themselves, among each other and between objects and visitors. The concept of intimacy has potential for exploration of political ideologies through bodies and quotidian encounters but also a negotiation between care-fullness and abjection. It implies a slippage between the public and the private, the self and the other and as such produces a threshold state with a political potential. When working on a constellation, Wilkes touches her objects again and again before their care-full positioning and moving around. Her collecting of objects, important to the artist's personal history and memory, their retention, salvaging and scavenging manifests what Adrienne Rich called a feminist 'struggle for survival' (in Rose 1999). Wilkes' matter-scapes nurture separateness *and* connections, the gaps, distances and differences making visible the complexity of affective inter-relationships between the self and the others, and matter.

Such mapping of spatial encounters gives an opportunity to trace thresholds on the level of individual objects but also between material and immaterial matter, human and non-human, live and dead. Her paintings are not framed and the canvas is often frayed<sup>6</sup>, fabrics have visible threads as though waiting to unravel into other materials, bodies are unfinished and at times seem melted as in the case of feet and arms in Venice matter-scape. Nothing is set and every encounter produces a threshold, including subjectivity that is conceived through or rather *with/in* matter. Marsha Meskimmon (2011, p. 35) argues that the threshold is 'a transformative state, a process of liminal engagement or a segue, it becomes a locus of possibility rather than a dead marker between two irrevocably opposed forms.' She discusses the productive transformation of politics, ethics and relational subjectivity where aesthetics plays a vital role, suggesting that justice is founded on reciprocating past acts and generosity enables social relations by extending towards the future (Ibid, p. 42). Meskimmon refers to Grace Clement and Fiona Robinson who renegotiated this opposition by working through responsibility and 'responsible moral subjects' (Robinson 1999, p. 31) that are generous and enabling the emergence of responsible/response-able moral agency. This responsibility and response-ability nurtures the power of individuals to care for communities and others. Such logic of dialogic exchange negates binary exclusions while creating threshold spaces where justice and care, contractual reciprocity and generosity not only coexist but co-nurture each other. Similarly, Jane Bennett (2010, p. XII) addresses the ethical turn inspired by feminist discourse on the body and Michel Foucault's work on the 'care of the self' (1990), creation and governmentation of the self, constituting individual freedom-preserving practices. Bennett (2010, p. XII) locates ethics beyond a set of doctrines but 'a complex set of relays between moral contents, aesthetic-affective styles and public moods'. Affect, she argues, is central to politics and ethics, and also concern nonhuman bodies, 'the agency of the things that *produce* (helpful, harmful) effects in human and other bodies'. (emphasis in the original)

The concept of threshold enables transition, which is central to Wilkes' matter-scapes that evolve, together with her. Through mapping of care and response-ability they mobilise interconnections between matter and the self. These are liminal or even affective spaces neither inside nor outside, here or there. The threshold states enable *becoming*, animating objects into a dynamic growth, *with/in* which subjectivity is embedded and embodied. The exhibition offers the viewer an initial insight into artist's engagement with the site. When I first visited the matter-scape, I imagined Wilkes walking into the building and becoming annoyed with space sheltered from Venetian light. I imagined her wanting to let in as much natural light as possible and asking for the dimming panels to be removed from ceiling lights; no artificial light she said, and the flooring should also reflect this luminosity. She invited light into the space and started working from there, adjusting the colours of her paintings. I then imagined her walking around Giardini, inhaling the scent of wild roses, maybe jasmine, rosemary

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<sup>6</sup> Unframed canvases may be suggestive of economy of dirt and marginalisation. They lack heavily ornamented frames and focal lighting appreciative of Old Masters paintings so proudly exhibited in multiple museums around the world, still lacking appropriate representation of women artists who remain unnamed and unheard of.

and other intoxicating herbs. She picked some of them or maybe she brought them with her from an allotment or a garden. Then, perhaps, she took a *vaporetto* and sailed to Venice Lido. Walking along the beach and listening to the sea she found some pebbles. Or, maybe, she found them in Scotland when visiting the seaside. Or maybe? Does this uncertainty invite an affective exploration of what is negotiated here between the universal and the particular? Wilkes' strategy, feminist in the sense that it nurtures co-existence and welcomes the other into a collective encounter, seems to encourage a care-full response-ability and a political responsibility.

Wilkes' work invokes immaterial labour and female affects of care. When talking about her earlier constellations she mentions trying to feel what someone else feels and be a companion to them. (Wilkes 2008). Her sculptural compositions of worn wooden furniture, faded fabrics, coins, dead leaves and flowers, mismatched dinnerware and broken ceramics, drawings of others more and lesser known, and her own paintings create intimate matter-scapes in which objects seem not to relate to one another. [Fig. 7] This apparent diffusion of connections portrays human relationships also with material culture. Objects are recirculated between constellations which disrupts chronology and emphasises the lingering concerns of patriarchal neoliberal and late-capitalist social structures such as poverty, undervalued and unpaid reproductive labour, precarity of work, political and economic refugees, intolerance, incomprehension and lack of empathy. Wilkes pays attention to these issues with her care-fully distributed miscellaneous items incorporated into the constellation.

Wilkes uses stuff she has found, encountered, sometimes looked for, stuff she used before and stuff she kept, stuff that is somehow important to the evolution of her work. Her intuition to matter is vulnerable in Butler's understanding that it is connected to resistance and also intimate in Haraway's sense of 'making with'. Figurative recognisable elements and everyday objects together with scaffolding in the form of text or paintings become more than matter. Vulnerable and abandoned they occupy threshold liminal spaces between the private, the domestic and the public. There is no hierarchy of thingness to counter monolithic power structure inherent in neoliberalism. This nurturing of these threshold spaces is transformative, as proposed by Meskimmon (2011). The process of engagement with these transitional spaces is embodied and performative and allows to locate ourselves *with/in* materiality. The notion of transition is also encountered in her material choices - almost transparent fabrics, 'skins' of mannequins, dried flowers and plants, paint and fragility of glass and porcelain objects – used in dual way: to exist and be attended to but also to be seen through as much as overseen. [Fig. 3]

### **Gendering of care**

The dolls in the British Pavilion discussed by Whitley (Wilkes and Whitley 2019) reference other mannequins introduced by Wilkes in her earlier exhibitions. They are de-individualised individuals becoming 'others'. Amy Budd (2011) discussed Wilkes' denuded female mannequins in compositions such as *Non Verbal (version)* (2006), *We are Pro Choice* (2007) or *I Give You All my Money* (2008) in the context of colonisation of women's bodies. She drew upon Parker's and Pollocks's (1987) writings on images of women produced according to sexist and patriarchal ideologies and contextualising them in wider art historical discourses and representations of women as passive nudes. Those manufactured bodies, signifying female subjectivities and experiences, become objects, implicating that they may be equal to other household materials used by Wilkes. The female figures are mute; vulnerable and powerless. Their vulnerability is not a source of passivity and inactive subjectivation but by focusing on the body as relational and interdependent, it references Butler's (2016) proposal to rethink vulnerability in relation to agency which enables an alternative politics of solidarity. The mannequin endorses an artificial ideal of femininity, an image of woman exploited as representational subject and a fetishised objects for male scopophilic pleasure. Wilkes' articulation of female subjectivity critiques the stereotypical ideal of femininity embedded in neoliberal commodity culture and

domesticity still defining women's social role and reinforcing models of social reproduction. Kokoli (2016, p.2) points out that women's domestic narratives are suggestive of the foundations on which domesticity is based and this includes 'the suppressed discontents, silences, inequalities and even violence.' Wilkes' choice of objects such as pottery, broken china cups, a dress, a coffee table, lace, dirty towels, a bowl, a cloth, a cut curtain, among many others, references intimacies of a home and the body. Her constellation of glass shelves holding miscellaneous items predominantly associated with the kitchen, the dining room or living room address inscription of femininity in domesticity. The misplacement of objects and portraying them as sculptures rather than usable objects critiques vulnerability of female affective labour.

Wilkes' mannequins at the Venice Biennale exhibition are different. In past works the female mannequins invoked the figure of a woman as a signifier associated with domesticity and motherhood. Wilkes implicitly commented on woman's being in the world and her becoming. In the Venice constellation there is only one female mannequin present. She is different from past female figures with affixed helmets, torn tights, wigs and make-up or stained and damaged cloth, or nude. In 2008 Wilkes' exhibition in MK Gallery in Milton Keynes the female mannequin had objects associated with multiple forms of labour and gender social role stuck to her face (such as a frying pan, a china cup, a wire, dried rose buds) whilst she sat on the toilet. Wilkes works with female nude distancing herself from what is often expected and assumed of it. Her other nudes on toilets also sport items rendered devoid of women's social roles. Affixed horseshoes or a nurse cap address reproductive labour and possibly make a statement on the overbearing demands to multi-task. The mannequin in the Venice constellation animates an alternative representation of woman and troubles the gendering of care.

Objects encircling the female mannequin in Venice are re-organised as suggestive of a new organisation of the world surrounding her. [\[Fig. 6\]](#) There are bodily remnants gathered around the figure, arms holding dirty used towels, a lonely foot and some folded stained rags placed against the wall. Apart from a worn-out bottle green dress she is wearing, suggestive of her status as a manual labourer, there are attached to the fabric miniature copies of a photograph hanging on the wall, which represents children eating a soup. She is animating memories and affect. A mannequin is an object and here the 'woman' is represented as an object but if Wilkes negotiates the power of things and performs an embodied feminist materiality, then all her objects, including the mannequins, have the power to intervene into the status quo of social structures and expectations. When talking about the Venice exhibition, the artist explains that, 'The work suggests the Assumption, the burial of the body (the subject) when it leaves a state of personal definition and the ascent of the soul into Heaven when it joins the infinite (the object).' (Wilkes and Whitley 2019, unpagged) Given that Wilkes was born and raised in Ireland, assumption may be associated with Catholic belief concerning the Assumption of Mary into Heaven and the end of her earthly life. However, assumption itself, may refer to taking on responsibility and power to take on an active role. Wilkes' Venice exhibition demonstrates Meskimmon's (2019) three elements of the 'vital feminist corporeal-materialist aesthetics' according to which subject-object binary oppositions are dissolved, the subject materialises into a dynamic and generous self and diffractive figuration replaces figurative representation. The artist yet again encourages us to look and to think, and manifests the process of capitalisation of social services inherent to the concept of welfare states, an ongoing dismantlement of the middle class, and her concern with social reproduction lacking care-fullness. She activates the notion of mutuality and solidarity within concepts of care.

Fraser (2016, p. 99) reminds us that social reproduction, including affective and material labour, is indispensable to society. She says,

Variously called 'care', 'affective labour' or 'subjectivation', such activity forms capitalism's human subjects, sustaining them as embodied natural beings, while also constituting them as social beings, forming their *habitus* and the cultural ethos in which they move. (Fraser2016, p. 101) (emphasis in the original)

Feminist ways of working and care ecologies, which I argue are present in Wilkes' work, can provide much required frameworks liberating from a system of relentless exploitation characterising neoliberal and financialised capitalist economies and societies from 1970s onwards. Social reproduction, affective and material, is historically gendered and assigned to women. Its performance for the sake of love and virtue within the private domestic sphere and also public institutions, was naturalised, making it an unacknowledged obligation and unpaid labour. In the interview with Sarah Leonard, Nancy Fraser points to the current 'crisis of care', encompassing public and personal reproductive labour, which is demonstrated also through liberal feminism's convergence with contemporary capitalism. (Fraser and Leonard 2016)

### **Vibrancy of things and transformative matter**

In the Venice Biennale exhibition catalogue, Wilkes (and Whitley 2019, unpagged) included a letter to the viewer:

Dear Viewer / Daor Breathn.ir

My creations will occupy six rooms.

The smallest particle of suffering is the object, and I, the subject who acts upon the object, am every atom unfolding from the womb. An atom here among us and another atom in a faraway galaxy are inseparable epitomes of the same.

Via the publication she secondarily addresses the audience and invites us to engage with the objects *with* which she acts. They await activation beyond their aesthetic function. Chambers (forthcoming 2020) argues for the agency of objects and the subversive disruption of materiality and the suppressed discontents in the context of a feminist reading of new materialism. Meskimmon (2019, p. 353) proposes that corporeal feminisms are central to new materialist thinking in the arts and 'concepts of embodied subjectivity, situated knowledge, corporeal theory and the materialisation of meaning have had a profound effect upon feminist work in art, art history and aesthetics.' The potential of materiality is key to Wilkes' matter-scapes. The artist operates *with/in* threshold spaces testing the narrative potential of objects and vibrancy of matter. She uses objects that are either equated with feminine qualities or are *feminised* through art historical associations, social narratives or attached stereotypes. [Fig. 0] The artist works with plants and flowers, usually dead or artificial, mannequins, pottery and glass, fabric, domestic objects such as ladders and objects associated with femininity such as dresses, tights or hair ties, among others. They have domestic and gendered resonances but many of them are also forms of social and spatial barriers. Items from earlier Wilkes' constellations such as for example a television or a mobile phone have a supposed capacity for communication but they depersonalise interpersonal exchanges.

Many materials such as fabrics or glass are porous and looked *through* rather than upon. The hierarchical form of ladders and vertical elements obstructs vision preventing us from fully seeing what is behind them; they may act as part-disguises. The paintings are hung at different heights interrupting sightlines, as though to configure the possibility of another bodily means or forms to reject the universal standardised viewing body, or perhaps even reject the gaze. Wilkes seeks connections multi-directionally; her multitude of sightlines, only seemingly coincidental and scattered position of objects, the placement of mannequins whose eyes or their suggestion apparently look beyond matter and produce yet another axes weaving connections, the dispersal of objects and the



changes of light affect how her matter-scapes are experienced. There is so much to see and look at we are forced to twist and turn, bend and rich up on our toes to see, endlessly shift and swivel our necks up and down, left and right, that it seems we are asked to be everywhere at once and perhaps, ironically, have it all. Wilkes requests from the viewers to become active and engaged. Through found, repurposed and salvaged objects that fold in and out of their meanings, she forces the viewer outside of familiar cultural and social references and signifiers. When discussing readymades, she talks about 'a splitting', where a thing is one or the other but the line that differentiates this is blurry. (Wilkes 2008) Through activating the viewer, she animates these transition spaces, the thresholds, in the matter-scapes. Wilkes' objects perform power relations, social structures, desires and dreams, memories and traumas, experiences and feelings. They tell stories. The artist creates threshold spaces that open up a possibility of a new language of things that transforms social relations between non-humans and humans. Her objects have agency and actualise new kinds of such relations as proposed by new materialist thinking.

Wilkes' objects have powerful agency that works by our sense of memory – of past sights, touch, sounds, tastes and smells. Through materiality we are invited into a social realm in which the artist mobilises many issues that concern our being in the world and inter-actions with other(s) but also fractured disassociations and broken signifiers. We enter into an embodied and ethical exchange with matter and others. I propose that Wilkes' work is about this care-full activation of matter and attentiveness to things that *seem* no longer of use to us but raise questions concerning human/ non-human relations. The uselessness is only apparent. Her objects, even though suggestive of being discarded and perhaps abandoned, wear a shadow of their use (for example a stain, a mark left on a teacup). Her threshold spaces create meeting points of affective exchanges.

Jane Bennett (2010) argues for the recognition of nonhuman forces in events, theorising a 'vital materiality', running through and across bodies. She proposes that materiality is potentially a forceful agent, emerging from configurations of human and nonhuman forces. Bennett (2010, p. 2) 'gives voice to a thing-power' and investigates active powers of nonsubjects and material formations. She calls it, 'a culture of things irreducible to the culture of objects.' (Ibid, p. 5) Thomas Dumm (1999, p. 7) through 'the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen' references Merleau-Ponty's (1981, p. 197) suggestion of the significance of the living body extending to the sensible world. This is also raised by Meskimmon (2011). In her recent text, Meskimmon (2019) discusses the non-dualist perspectives on embodiment and materiality and the resonances between corporeal feminisms with 'new' or 'vital' materialisms. She says (2019, p. 353),

*A feminist corporeal-materialist aesthetics challenges conventional concepts of subjectivity, moves away from representation and helps to rethink agency, potentially beyond the limits of a human-centred system. [...]. In every sense of the term, a corporeal-materialist aesthetics demonstrates that art matters and, for feminist art/theory, this is both a crucial insight and a critical challenge, asking us to think, make and write otherwise. (emphasis in the original)*

Wilkes' assemblages, and particularly her constellation at the Venice Biennale exhibition can be read through the lens proposed by Meskimmon's feminist corporeal materialism. Silent contemplative figures often at care or domestic labour, voiceless and perhaps dispossessed, an array of mismatched porcelain plates, some of them chipped and discoloured, ornamented with floral designs, silver platters, worn fabrics, discoloured lace, broken domestic items and a variety of discarded trinkets from a personal archive, a flea market, a street or a rubbish bin, are not just objects but things that *matter*. [Fig. 4] Wilkes' visual language is personal and it enables an intimate encounter with matter that lets the viewer approach the rituals of daily life. The assemblages manifest process and change but they also live their own life in new unexpected configurations (a coin and a dead dragonfly?). They are dead and lively at the same time, as objects encountered by Bennett, who makes a reference to

American culture of materiality, which, in fact, is a culture of antimateriality as she notes. 'The sheer volume of commodities,' she says, 'and the hyperconsumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, conceals the vitality of matter.' (Bennett 2010, p. 5) This vital materiality, even when discarded, continues its different activities, as is the case with things in Wilkes' constellations that continue exercising their agency and life beyond their original purpose or affiliation with their owner(s). They are 'actants', which, as Bennett (2010, p. 9) explains, can be human, nonhuman, or a combination of both. Referencing Bruno Latour, she defines actants as sources of action, 'interveners', 'decisive forces catalysing an event'. It is also a substitute word for agent.

Revisited in past, current and future constellations, Wilkes' things are independent. They create matter-scapes suggestive of Bennett's vibrant matter and thing-power. Her objects tell stories that go beyond their use value. They are no longer discarded or found objects but become matter-scapes through their vibrancy. Disrupting signifiers, they are porous through their care-full placement and through their vulnerability they resist patriarchal norms. They are not simply things that are produced and used and, as Marx (1976) suggested, have fetishist character embodied in their exchange value. Commodity objects constitute social relations of capitalist economy and reveal narratives of the politics of power. This has been discussed by many, including Arjun Appadurai's (1986) 'thing theory' according to which the qualities exchanged between the living and the dead form power relations. Appadurai (Ibid, p. 15) explored objects humanised but also recommoditised or turned into bodies. Objects are different from things as they lose their primary purpose when they fall out of economic circulation and may become repurposed. Wilkes' carefull-ness with objects is a transformative practice. She moves them outside of the networks of commodification and gives them affective value. Boscagli (2014) suggests that new materialism can be approached through aesthetic consideration and through culture, which enables us to renegotiate the subject/ object encounters.

The production of meaning is achieved through compositions that repeat elements within a work or in between works so that entanglements are created between different projects, and matter. These constellations are not coincidental even if seemingly they may appear so. It could be argued that throughout the duration of her career Wilkes created one artwork that has been growing and endlessly evolving through its life and hers or more broadly liveability. Its continuity and disruption asserts meaning in other ways to semiotic meaning making. Her practice is axial, nurturing a rotational, cyclical but also systematic growth. Wilkes' objects occupy agential space that avoids geometrical constructions. It is a dynamic constellation, a vibrant constellation of a relational interplay. Wilkes weaves an intimate web of experiences and knowledge production that spans across time and space. Suggestive of continuity but also disjunction, it demonstrates recently proposed by Meskimmon (2019, p. 354) 'a vital feminist corporeal-materialist aesthetics' that is based on three elements,

an unravelling entanglement of mind-body, subject-object binary oppositions, a performative materialisation of a generous and dynamic subject ('self') and a move away from the logic of figurative representation toward a diffractive figuration, replete with a profoundly reconfigured concept of agency and ethical/political responsibility.

Wilkes' constellation portrays this dynamic subject and a diffractive figuration. The self and objects are never fixed or finished, they are becoming and materialise in each of Wilkes' projects through an embodied performance.

### **Disorderly subjects and objects**

In the second room there are reddish stains on the floor, just next to the bowl; and in the bowl, reminiscent of blood. [Fig. 5] Many fabrics used by Wilkes' are stained and dirty or torn and often damaged. There are plastic flowers and objects associated with working class; there are also those

aspiring for at least middle-class associations such as cut-glass bowls, a poignant emblem of suburban aspiration. They are abandoned or lost and found again, often undesired. Wilkes uses undervalued material objects; many of her materials are suggestive of replaceability through multiplicity and their vernacular nature. Through their preservation and articulation she questions a temporality of usefulness, a holding onto-ness and their liminality. There are residues of liquids, soiled and dirty items that may reference abjection, the state of being cast off. This removal of objects in late capitalist societies is linked to notions of value and functionality. This implies a value system in which commodification determines value; what is sold and for how much suggests quality and class. The stained and dirty things disrupt this order. They are associated with things that are displaced – from a community of belonging. They become anonymous and unwanted, often estranged, in a transitional state. In 1966, Mary Douglas (1966, p. 3) defined dirt as matter out of place, ‘dirt offends against order’, the transgressive spatial materiality necessary for social structure. The abjection of dirt points to boundaries, social and physical, that are imposed by legal, cultural and social structures. Dirt concerns exclusion. It is spatial rather than material. Dirt is wrong and disruptive, however, Douglas argues that it has the potential for power that lies in the threshold spaces produced by boundaries. This is where the transgressive agency of subjects manifests itself. Similarly, Marc Cousins (1995, p. 63) proposes an ‘economy of dirt’ that ‘is therefore one way of opening up the question of ugliness.’ This is a spatial economy, ‘As a first approximation, in so far as dirt is a matter out of place it must have passed a boundary, limit or threshold into a space where it should not be.’ (Ibid.) Dirt then contaminates, spreads, crossed boundaries and floods spaces where it should not appear, and as such transgresses fixed concepts. (Sliwinska 2016, p. 108) It has the potential to disrupt, disturb and undo social and cultural abjections and casting out of subjects and objects.

Douglas’ dirt in relation to objects outside of existing socio-cultural categories and systems is explored further by Julia Kristeva (1982) in her concept of abjection as a productive act in meaning making. The abject is located in liminal spaces between that which is expressible and that which resists expression. It produces boundaries and causes meaning to break down. Similarly, Wilkes exposes the fragility of normative orders and questions how that which is set to be radically excluded returns. Her evolving matter-scapes are productive growths contesting boundaries and divisions and, through the figure of the threshold, care-fully orchestrating a breakdown in dichotomous ways of making meaning of the world.

Wilkes’ constellations portray the marginal and cast-out objects and materialise subjects otherwise activating the power of margins and ‘confused lines’ discussed by Douglas (1966, p. 118). In neoliberalism and late- (or neo-) capitalism, a one-dimensional orthodoxy characterised by monolithic ways of acting upon the world and singular power structures, there is no space for peripheries: the damaged, marginalised and the dirty. They are dangerous as they have capacity to alter our experiences and ideas. Imogen Tyler (2013) in her analysis of a ‘feral underclass’ explores the concept of abjection as that, which is cast out in relation to a ‘lived social process’. Nonetheless, Wilkes shows us that thresholds have transformative potential. Those unwanted objects have agency and their use supersedes their purpose defined as commodities at the time of their manufacture. Boscagli (2014) proposes that garbage positioned as unruly stuff disrupts the cycle of commodity culture as it is neither desirable consumer culture nor waste. Chambers (forthcoming 2020) further extends this arguing for feral materiality that is potentially dangerous and troubles defined social and cultural roles, norms and expectations. Similarly, Wilkes’ objects with class and gender associations address those positioned in society as marginal and as such threatening to social order. Stained, inappropriate and often poor, they evidence something that is uncontrollable and surpassing boundaries. They suggest disorderly subject - specifically female - and object, associated with femininity, that is capable of transgression.

Meskimmon (2019, p. 356) argues that the instance of materialisation has potential as it focuses on processes of subjectification through becoming and the conception of matter as vital. Such approaches radically reconfigure binary and dualistic logic that separates subjects and objects. Subjects are not fixed as object and objects have the potential to have an agency. Becoming is central to 'feminist corporeal-materialism' discussed by Meskimmon (2019, p. 357) and,

it signals a deeply ethical and political entanglement with/in the world [...] There is no agency without entanglement; subjects and objects emerge in mutuality. This is a profoundly responsible position to hold, as it locates the very concept of the individual *in* sociality and also places humans *within*, rather than *above* a much expanded, sentient world. (emphasis in the original)

Wilkes' constellations grow from one another, demonstrating Meskimmon's thinking. She animates matter and positions dirtiness in the centre of her assemblages. Wilkes' objects are becoming in the sense of not being finalised and together with them, the subject is articulated while acknowledging the 'others'. She performs ethical and embodied politics that engages with difference and marginalisation, specifically activating gender and class. Her objects carry traces of others, of histories and stories, pasts and presents, and possibly futures. Meskimmon argues (2019, p. 363) that, 'A feminist corporeal-materialist aesthetics moves away from representation towards figuration and thus shifts the methodological ground from reflection to diffraction.' Such performative, non-representationalist methodology is committed to understanding of differences in configuring of the world and it facilitates the emergence of aesthetic agency between subjects and objects. This is achieved by Wilkes who within her matter-scapes creates possible worlds that are respectful of subject and object agency and governed by care-full engagements with matter.

### **Attentive to *with/in* matter**

I started this essay with fragments of Rich's poem *From an Old House in America*. Further, she writes,

The other side of a translucent  
curtain, a sheer of water

a dusty window, Non-being  
utters its flat tones.

'A translucent curtain' functions as a threshold, connecting and disrupting here and there, now and then, life and death, you and me, subject and object. Rich's poem performs a ritual of connectedness undoing separations and enabling them to see through, look through, go through, think and connect *through*. Similarly, Wilkes' constellation keeps evolving; suggesting continuity and disjunction, and demonstrating Meskimmon's 'vital feminist corporeal-materialist aesthetics'. This apparent diffusion of connections and the disrupted chronology animates human relationships and resonances between corporeal feminisms with vital materialisms dissolving subject-object dualistic oppositions and activating 'diffractive figurations' and a 'generous self'.

Wilkes' search elsewhere, behind masculine structures of power, nurtures memory and community through and *with/in* care-fullness and transitional threshold spaces nurturing a care-full response-ability and a political responsibility. Her laborious matter-scapes pay attention to self-continuity and matter-continuity that keeps unfolding. Scavenging and searching, finding and re-positioning, Wilkes' political pertinence and ethical insistence are vulnerable and intimate. The poetics of her constellations activate ethical and political agency of matter and the self. It is a method of making, (un-)thinking and un-knowing that refuses what is fixed and appeals to experiencing from everywhere,

each vantage point, below or above, left or right, or diagonal. Wilkes is attentive to becoming *with/in* matter and *through* it, orchestrating thresholds, flooding spaces and disturbing social and cultural abjections, and casting out of subjects and objects. Matter reaches out to her life and vice versa, transitory and translucent, nothing is finite.

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