

Artist Lecture Series Vienna

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Skulpturinstitut, Paulusplatz 5, 1030 Vienna

6 p.m. - Lecture

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Firstly, thank you very much, Rainer and Ezara, for inviting me to be part of the Artist Lecture Series Vienna. I am very grateful to be here. Let's just dive right in. I have chosen some series of works of mine that I am going to speak about tonight.

What connects these series of works is especially a collecting or gathering of material, which was also shortly mentioned in the introduction. I am going to start by somehow framing this, in particular the gleaning as it is called and, as I refer to it, as a working method. This painting that you see here is called *The Gleaners*, and it is an oil painting by Jean-François Millet, which was completed in 1857.



Here is what is written about it on Wikipedia:

*It depicts three peasant women gleaning a field of stray stalks of wheat after the harvest. The painting is famous for featuring in a sympathetic way what were then the lowest ranks of rural society; it was received poorly by the French upper classes. Having recently come out of the French Revolution of 1848, these prosperous classes saw the painting as glorifying the lower-class worker. To them, it was a reminder that French society was built upon the labor of the working masses, and landowners linked this working class with the growing movement of socialism. The depiction of the working class in *The Gleaners* made the upper classes feel uneasy about their status. The masses of workers greatly outnumbered the members of the upper class. This disparity in numbers meant that if the lower class were to revolt, the upper class would be overturned. With the French Revolution still fresh in the minds of the upper classes, this painting was not perceived well.*

*Millet's *The Gleaners* was also not perceived well due to its large size, 84 by 112 centimetres. This was large for a painting depicting labor. Normally this size of a canvas was reserved for religious or mythological style paintings. Millet's work did not depict anything religiously affiliated, nor was there any reference to any mythological beliefs. The painting illustrated a realistic view of poverty and the working class.*¹

This was one thing that I wanted to introduce, and the next is a film by Agnès Varda from 2000 called *The Gleaners and I*. I am just going to show the first couple of minutes.

FILM PLAYS

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gleaners



They've got to frisk for tidbits

In the film Agnès Varda features various kinds of gleaning, so not only methods employed out of a necessity for life-support so to say, but also applied for artistic production. So, it is a broad field that she maps.

But anyway, as I initially mentioned, I am going to speak about some series of works of mine where this process of gathering, bending down, or picking up has importance.

The first series of work I will speak about is titled *loaf of meat (3109g - 4326g), 2020 — ongoing*. Here I began to use some things, scraps or elements, that I had collected for quite long, and not necessarily for something particular, yet.

I am starting a bit backwards. I am showing some exhibition views. I am speaking about these little figures standing on the floor, along the walls, sort of taking care of or guarding the space. They were distributed around the exhibition space at a low level, facing or even confronting whoever came in. Their bodies each consist of a brick as torso, terra cotta pebbles as limbs and terra cotta vessels or containers as heads. Additionally, some grains, metal, and textile scraps. These were all things I collected. The figures become different characters, so to say, depending on whatever material they consist of exactly. How this collecting came to interest me has some different aspects. It is an urge or a habitual activity that seems weirdly inherent to me. I have spent a very long time learning to curb this behaviour, but at some point, I began allowing it, if simultaneously analysing it. I became curious to understand whether my modes of collecting are work, hobby, or leisure, a mix maybe, or something else.

The bricks were found on the way to my studio when walking, and I brought them there piece by piece, and they became the bodies or torsos of these figures. These were the easiest to relate to *work*.

And then there is the leisure time somewhere in between, I would say. I connect this with hobbies, which, in my case, is going to flea markets searching or scanning for materials. I enjoy this rattling in the head while looking for things that, for some reason, are not yet clear to me and catch my interest. I began collecting little containers made of terracotta and came to use these vessels as heads for the figures. The way I collect them is quite without hierarchy; it is a rather wild collection of all sorts of terracotta containers. They can be made industrially, or they can be handcrafted, either in a skilful or less skilled way — or even completely ‘unbeholfen’, like someone without experience is trying something for the very first time, and it clearly shows.

The next is a poem I would like to play, connecting quite directly to bowls or vessels but maybe also to the capacity or circumstances of carrying or holding.

AUDIO PLAYS Judy Grahn reads: *To The Mother of All Bowls*

So that is a poem by Judy Grahn, *To The Mother of All Bowls* (2004). What I appreciate about this poem is how it connects a character to an object and to what an object has been or lived through somehow. This, I would say, relates to how I approach material or how I try to read and understand it.



Here are some terra cotta pebbles, most of them collected on holidays, at the beach usually. In this image, I have started to put together the bricks, pebbles, and containers. “Different” materials that are the “same” materials, but have different properties. I just wanted to show some work in progress.

All of these figures have the same title, *loaf of meat*, and that is very often the case with my work. All of them have a parenthesis attached at the end of the title, with the weight of what the sculpture weights. So they have literally been weighted, *loaf of meat (3662 g)* for example, and they all have the approximate weight of a newborn.



Here, they are lined up, and then you see these kinds of pillows, which are scrap materials of textiles that have come from other series of work, which I then made into these little cushions with grains inside to put around their bellies. They are these kinds of small sacks that they carry around, and they work somehow in a similar way as needle cushions. Into the cushions, spiky metal scraps are jabbed. I began collecting these shiny metal scraps while walking my daily routine paths. I tried to reenact animal stereotypes, for example, “search like a magpie” or “pick like a hen”, and then put it in my pocket. Keep it. Examine it. I did this for a long time and the material sort of accumulated before I knew exactly how to put it to use.

Magpies (and by extension other corvids such as ravens and crows) have a compulsion to steal, particularly in regard to shiny things (...) This stereotype is based on the commonly held (though actually false) belief that magpies collect shiny objects to line their nests in order to attract a mate. What is true, however, is that magpies and other corvids are intelligent animals with an innate sense of curiosity, and they may carry off unfamiliar objects such as jewelry simply to examine them more closely.²

A chicken is naturally inclined to forage for food by scratching and pecking at the ground. When too many chickens occupy too small a space, pecking opportunities are limited and chickens get on each other's nerves. Henpecking is when one or more chicken gangs up on another and pecks at her or even plucks her feathers out. Pecking is a natural chicken behavior that allows them to check out their surroundings, including their flock mates.³

² <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ThievingMagpie>

³ <https://www.purinamills.com/chicken-feed/education/detail/three-steps-to-a-peaceful-backyard-flock>

So these are approaches of mine where I somehow collect, and these things get connected. This is a list of materials: This is approximately what I gather in about a months time, if I just pick up things and let them slip into my pocket while walking. I am going to read the list of what it is.



four can tabs
two nuts
two eyelets
muselet from a bottle of sparkling wine
cap from a lighter, two of those
silver piece of paper from a cigarette pack
four grommets
four thin flat metal rod
flattened can tab (run over by tram)
star shaped confetti
safety pin
oval shaped cap nut
oversized staple
half a keyring
triangular D-ring
curly peace of wire
bolt with two eyelets
large grommet (run over by tram)
piece of plastic with metal optic surface
piece of metal (undefinable)
two metal clips
key
aluminum foil curled up and curled into ball shape
bolt
u-shaped bolt
a clamp
a metal peg for a shelving system
aluminum foil from a chocolate coin
an earring

To me, it is at the same time important and unimportant what these things are.

What I find interesting about this continuous gathering within the same routine is that one starts to notice patterns: Patterns are always going to occur. For example, these grommets could come from bikes or vehicles that move them, or these 'thingies', which I spent years figuring out, are from street-sweeping vehicles. Or can tabs, for example, I regularly find in combination with parts of lighters and cigarette butts, and I will start to notice at which places these tend to occur. It is typically near supermarkets or workplaces where there is a spot where the employees have their breaks, smoke cigarettes, and drink a canned beverage, where they put off the can tabs out of habit or as some sort of unconscious ritual, I assume. So these tiny objects that are just lying around allow for me to notice systems and patterns of behaviour, but also to start building a narrative.

The last material in the figures is jute. The sourcing of this material is a different procedure, as it does not just occur in the streets, like other things I collect, but is typically still in someone's possession when I take it over. I simply contact people, often farmers, who no longer have use for these sacks. This is a material that has been overtaken by others in the process of optimising production methods and, by now, to me, symbolises an almost archaic token for trade. It is a material that is quite accessible, although often a bit further away, but people want to get rid of it, basically. I end here with the needle cushions and move on to a series with certain similarities, the *huswifs*. They are shown like this, hung on the wall. These are the works I brought here today as well, so you can have a closer look after the lecture if you want. I am

going to talk a bit about them. They consist of leftover material from other projects of mine with jute. So, I will use scraps that are left over when I work with things on a larger scale, as well as collected material. Some carry other scrap leftover textiles, and some carry weeds, wheat grains, and wooden sticks, and again, collected metal scraps. And what brought me to these was the topic of pockets. When collecting, you also need something to put things in. This is part of a larger terrain and research, but I have been looking at the claim of a pocket or bag being a tool somehow equal to those tools used for hunting. Here, also looking very much into garments: How have pockets looked over time, and how did they look different in men's and women's clothing? First of all, pockets were available much later for women because possessing or owning things was prohibited for women for a long time. When they finally occurred, they were these pear-shaped 'tie-on' pockets. Women would tie them around the waist, hidden underneath their garments. So, there was a clear difference in the pockets in male clothing, as they were integrated visually into the garments and were shown off as status symbols, too. In the case of women's tie-on pockets, they were hidden, but they were also much more fragile. The possibility of losing them was much greater. These pockets would then wander from the waist onto the wrist over time and slowly transform into handbags.



Inside the tie-on pockets, women would often have these 'huswifs', a little or another pocket or bag to roll up and carry needles and other sewing equipment, basically. These I used as torsos for the little figures that I made. I literally took the shape and the dimensions of some of these historical bags, copied them and started to build bodies from them. I attached legs and then arms that would cross over. That initiated another series of mine, *sit-up*. Here you have the whole jute sack as the torso, so life-size figures. The size of a human body basically and they consist of sacks sewn into 'skins' or 'vessels' and filled with varying materials, with a similar approach as the collecting I have spoken about already.

Here, they are shown at the exhibition *girl anachronism* at Vestjyllands Kunstpavillon in Denmark. I installed them in the centre of the space, sitting on the boxes they were transported in. The way I worked with these sculptures was to transport the jute sacks so the 'vessels' could be transported to the space and then filled up as I came there. I collected material in the time before the exhibition, in those immediate surroundings. So I came two weeks early, and I spent that time collecting all that was inside and around the bodies, what gave them shape and what became their surrounding. These jute bag bodies can be emptied out and filled up again. In between exhibitions, they are really packed away and folded, as you would fold garments like you would fold your shirts and put them in the closet until you wear them again. Packed away. So, the logistics of how to transport and store an artwork is also part of the work itself for me, in a very pragmatic sense.

In this case, the material in and around them was a kind mix of whatever I could gather. It was at the seaside in Denmark, so a lot of it came from there: Driftwood, rusty nails, terracotta, rocks, glass

shards, bleached plastic and so on. It was also left open up until the moment of installation, what exactly this would become or what kind of material would come to give the figures character. Then, all of the leftover materials were placed in the centre of them and became what they were somehow protecting. It was categorised and placed in piles. When the exhibition ended, most of this material was brought to the recycling station nearby.

This is the exhibition that is currently on view at MAK. Here, you see the same bodies, but I have collected other materials for them this time. It is a different scenario. This was in Vienna, a more urban environment, and I collected 'Altpapier', old newspapers, to re-fill them and then a lot of metal scraps. Those I found in the streets, at construction sites and at junkyards around town. In this space, I installed them differently. The exhibition space at MAK is in the basement. It is a room that has no light source and can only be lit artificially. A dark basement room with very many noticeable plugs on a low level in the space. So, quite early on, I knew I would like to bring my own lights for the exhibition and keep it quite dark somehow. Also, I wanted to show the bodies on the walls instead of in the centre of the space. Again, they guard the space or confront whoever comes in, but in a different way. In this case, they are placed more as the sacks they are and also somehow more between being bags or being bodies. So, on one hand, there is a gesture that I keep using: The arms crossed over. In this case, they are in a different position, sitting, almost man-spreading, almost claiming space just in their posture. On the other hand, they are 'hung' on the walls like bags, items, and objects; they are passive. And then, they each have these sorts of light sources that illuminate them. They carry material themselves within their bodies,

but they also protect the material around them. The exhibition is titled *dead stock* and consists mainly of material that is considered of low or no value within a capitalist system. Either it has fallen out of time, or it has defects, or for different reasons, material that has somehow lost its function and value. All of this metal, for example, is rusty. That was a decision: To collect only rusty metal because, by the process of becoming rusty, it loses its function and its use. This was one decision, and from this came the lamps, exactly how they came to look like this. I was looking at how, back in time, especially in the countryside, when there was no electrical light, light sources were of a different value, so to speak. The time during the day when there was no sunlight yet or anymore, when you would have to establish light yourself was more precious. Typically, this time was used for craft, not for the 'real' labour, but for more domestic chores like sewing, these kinds of secondary activities. Candles would be produced, usually from the cattle or animals that were at the farm, so from their fat. This would be the stock of light for the season, and it was important and precious. Making holders, 'Halterungen', for these candles, which allowed them to burn as thriftily as possible, became equally important. It was essential in order to make them last as long as possible. I read a lot about and looked at a lot at this type of 'holders'. They would often be made from tools that were no longer useable.



Here, as an example you see some parts of saw blades, repurposed to adjust the height of the candles in the holders. These elements and processes I have adapted in a very direct way to the lamp sculptures that I made, but using the standard of what a lamp consist of today: A plug, a cable, and a light bulb, simply.



Here is an image of this collected material, just before assembling. Here it is also visible how I (mainly with wire) sort of twisted it into spirals or made it become applicable to a cable. The logic of applying is similar to jewelry or beads, but it is also a very similar process to sewing: You put something on a thread again and again, with some different variations.

The last part of the exhibition at MAK was a little pocketbook, which I brought here today to give to anyone interested. The text inside is a description of a house or a home, where you are walked through from basement to attic. You are taken through the memories and objects in this house, but you are repeatedly and constantly interrupted by lists of things that have accumulated in this house over time. Descriptions and lists that become absurd or simply too much for what a house can hold. So, for example, you would not see it yet, but there is a shelf with Axe deodorants on the cover of the book. There are six of them here in the photo, which is already somehow too much for one person's supply or need. But, in the text, this is stretched out to the complete array of deodorants that Axe has produced since the 80s and to the present day. This is the kind of moment that happens again and again within this text: You enter something, and then it opens up way too far and beyond what is physically possible.

I was examining whether material or objects — when they are turned into words — can also become a burden or *heavy*, in the same way, that physical matter does when an amount becomes too much to oversee or deal with. Or how words might also take too much space in similar ways as physical objects can. It is an experiment and, in many ways, an exhausting little read. Nevertheless, whoever wants one is very welcome to have one. Thank you.

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Organized by
Ezara Spangl and Rainer Spangl

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