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From Beuys to O'Sullivan: an ecofeminist approach to contemporary sculptural poetry

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Using two of my experimental poems as an example, I demonstrate how sculptural poetry can stand as a form of resistance with the potential to shape and heal society and the environment surrounding it. The essay starts by considering the possibility of social and ecological configuration through creative practice as a starting point in understanding Joseph Beuys' concept of social sculpture. The essay then pursues the complexities of understanding Beuys' theory of social sculpture by examining 'Fat Chair' as an effective specimen of this idea – a creative piece with a political message. Throughout this exploration, Beuys' work is also approached from the scope of various new materialist theories by women thinkers such as Karen Barad, Jane Bennett and, Stacey Alaimo.[1] In the context of Beuys' and my own sculptural poems as well as in the context of ecopoetic work by Maggie O'Sullivan, I discuss the relevance of anti-anthropocentrism and shamanism as means that resist the damaging societal structures that contribute towards social and ecological injustice and instead help to form a more balanced and engaged world.

'To stress the idea of transformation and of substance. This is precisely what the shaman does in order to bring about change and development: his nature is therapeutic.'
Joseph Beuys[2]

Introduction

A sculptural poem has edges and potential it offers linguistic gestures – a tangible spell that exudes meaning. Its fragility has the potential to question permanence and engage deeply with the material and social landscape as we know it. Letters transform into particles that gush into being, like fine wisps of energy rising from the cauldron's mouth while the shaman fuses form with content in its making. I propose the following definition of a sculptural poem: *an object with linguistic and sensorial values tied to the properties and use of materials with, often, interactive strata and transformative qualities*. The idea of the sculptor as a shaman was key to Joseph Beuys, who sought to ameliorate the issues in modern society by focussing on the healing and transforming properties of the materials he used in his sculptures. It is through this lens that I will approach the sculptural poem, grounded in materiality, with its potential to address social and ecological issues, incite change and, thus, healing.

This essay explores the relationship between social justice and sculpture and the environmental element implicit in this intersection. I aim to address the question: *how can ecofeminist contemporary sculptural poetry, rooted in social and ecological justice, be imagined as a future-facing form of creative expression?* Engaging with key new materialist concepts such as intra-actions (Karen Barad), vibrant matter (Jane Bennett) and trans-corporeality (Stacey Alaimo), I contribute to the larger effort of dismantling the legacy of colonialism for the purposes of equality and more objective perception of humans in relation to nonhumans.[3] In adding these ideas to the discussion, I point to the ways in which the movements and trajectories of 'social sculpture' and sculptural poetry have been impelled by other-than-human objects, corporeal encounters, and interchangeable flows. By focusing on specific examples of social sculptures as forms of political activism, I argue that sculptural poetry is also a form with revolutionary potential that can help to shape society and the environment surrounding it.

First, I consider the parallels between Joseph Beuys' social sculpture 'Fat Chair' and my sculptures 'human-hive' and 'raining bees' to reveal connections between Beuys' concept of social sculpture and contemporary sculptural poetics. Then, I examine the healing value in Maggie O'Sullivan's poetry as an example of ecofeminist experimental poetics that, among other things, resists anthropocentric viewpoints and structures. O'Sullivan's poetics serves as a springboard for this essay's central ideas, including

the notions of the Anthropocene, social and ecological justice, and social sculpture. O'Sullivan's work informs and influences my creative practice and is of particular interest to me, as her poetry speaks to the tensions between the experimental feminist tradition and patriarchal culture. Her poetics also offers a space to explore various existing notions – such as shamanism and anti-anthropocentrism, from new angles, namely with the concepts of social sculpture, new materialism and feminism.

Sculpture as flux, reactive to its surroundings

Before I tackle whether poetry in the Anthropocene has the potential to incite activism and healing, I will elaborate on the relationship to ecological and social justice to explore the central question in more depth. On the one hand, the broad concept of social justice refers to the balance between individuals and society, whereas ecological justice addresses the equivalent notion between humans and the environment.[4] Both social injustice and ecological degradation are products of the same flawed systems tied with dominant cultural forms including capitalism, consumerism, and anthropocentrism. Leslie Solomonian and Erica di Ruggiero point to the intersection of those twin crises.[5] They write that the corrective and preventative justice frameworks surrounding the concepts of social and ecological justice speak to the notion of guilt, often linked to a sense of responsibility, which can motivate action, hence their link with activism.[6] This idea has been challenged by many, amongst them Gay Hawkins who argues that feelings of guilt in relation to ecologically destructive practices can prompt changes in behaviour and ultimately generate a sense of resentment, irritation, and 'an overwhelming sense of mourning.' These feelings, she writes, make it 'difficult to find the energy and inspiration to sustain ethical practice, let alone imagine better ones.'[7] This, of course, highlights that ecological degradation, like any other crisis, affects people in different ways; however, Hawkins' stance would have been more convincing had it also addressed the productive response following mourning or guilt in more depth, as feelings of mourning towards ecological loss predispose adequate connection and can incite activism.

Returning to the idea of social and ecological injustice as linked ideas, and within the context of urban planning research and practice but transferrable to visual poetry, Scott Campbell states that the integration of these two terms is a very complex task.[8] This is mainly because 'each of the two movements [of social justice and sustainable development] has its own distinct histories and trajectories, deeply embedded in disparate ideologies, priorities and institution'.[9] In contrast to Solomonian and di Ruggiero who discussed the convergence between the two terms, Campbell writes that it might be more effective to approach these two concepts as a productive tension of

two still incongruent movements.[10] This oppositional engagement of sustainability to social justice, writes Campbell, is helpful.[11] To support this argument, Campbell suggests that before merging these two ideas, it is essential to confront the political imbalance between the two: 'middle-class environmental interests,' he writes, 'typically trump the interests of the poor and marginalized, too often leading to an exclusionary sustainability of privilege rather than sustainability of inclusion'.[12] This, in my view, raises reasonable questions. However, the fact that both crises are products of the same system and have a stronger impact on those more vulnerable in their respective contexts, confirms the usefulness of such an approach. This stance is also supported by many current movements, both activist and academic – see Extinction Rebellion and critics Naomi Klein and Luis I. Prádanos – that integrate the two and argue that these notions go hand in hand.[13]

This possibility of social and ecological reconfiguration through creative practice is a starting point in understanding Joseph Beuys' concept of social sculpture, with particular focus on his notion of social sculpture as a politically charged object which underpins my definition of sculptural poetry that I propose in this essay. Developed in the 1970s, Beuys' concept marks a turn towards attention to creative activity as a form of revolutionary action in the context of post-war German reconstruction, with his concept of social sculpture acting as the embodiment of art's potential to shape society and the environment surrounding it. At its heart, Beuys sees the social sculptor as a subject that actively creates structures in society and is engaged in a process of social transformation by using language, thoughts, actions and objects. This, in addition to Beuys' legendary statement that 'every human being is an artist' demonstrates that each individual is part of a larger whole and has the ability to transform their environments.[14] Beuys offers social sculpture as a point of departure from the conventional idea of sculpture as a concrete figurative depiction of the (predominately) human body towards a new mode of sculpture that is considered as flux, reactive to its surroundings:

> My objects are to be seen as stimulants for the transformation of the idea of sculpture [...] this is why the nature of my sculpture is not fixed and finished. Processes continue in most of them: chemical reactions, fermentations, colour changes, decay, drying up. Everything is in a state of change.[15]

This statement defines the context in which this approach to sculpture and society is inscribed – this makes Beuys' concept of 'social sculpture', as an object in a state of change, relatable to uncertainty and, thus, contemporary experience as the backdrop

of uncertainty remains prevalent in our socio-political and ecological landscapes. Philosopher Jacques Rancière's engagement with socially engaged art is evidence of that – he understands aesthetic practices as 'forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the place they occupy, what they 'do' or 'make' from the standpoint of what is common in the community', approaching Beuys' concept from a new perspective.[16] The common thread between the strands of Beuys and Rancière's approaches is this triadic entanglement among the artist (or in this discourse, the sculptural poet), their landscape, and the social undercurrent of their respective community. It is when these things come together that sculpture as a medium becomes reactive and can incite activism.

More recently, new materialist concepts provide new perspectives on approaching entanglement and reactivity, amongst them Karen Barad's intra-action[25] and Jane Bennett's vibrant matter.[17] The cultural angle to which these ideas refer to are multifaceted, but, most importantly, their intention to re-conceptualise materiality produces an engaging rethinking of Beuys' social sculpture. On the one hand, feminist physicist Barad's intra-action is defined as 'a mutually constitutive event produced by and producing entangled agencies'.[18] The 'entangled agencies' refers to the mingling of values (e.g., people, matter, materials, nature) and their activity to act with the prefix 'intra' alluding to the ability to act which emerged from within the relationship and not outside it. In the context of a sculpture, this is a palpable narrative instance of how viewer and object can interchange energies for the production of meaning. Through the lens of material ecocriticism, Barad's concept promotes a more ecocentric view of the world where humans, nonhumans and objects all have the ability to act in their various surroundings, but most importantly, it shows that all agencies (despite their form) are inseparable from the society in which they intra-act. Jane Bennett's concept of vibrant matter also argues for the vitality in things while also moving away from anthropocentrism.[19] As a political theorist, Bennett, like Barad and Beuys, challenges the conventional way of interacting in a hierarchical society. She writes 'the political goal of a vital materialism is not the perfect equality of actants, but a polity with more channels of communication between members'.[20] Bennett, while disrupting the binary between subject and object, also highlights that to become attuned to our surrounding forces, one has to consider their own individual energy-wave or intra-action. All of these raise questions: *how does the poet-sculptor perceive their respective society*, *and what does this mean in regard to the materials that they may use? What reactive properties does a sculptural poem have upon its viewer, and what does the viewer project in their own environment as a result of this exchange?*

Sculpting meaning through the lens of new materialism

Regarding materials before form, as Alan Borer writes, before giving shape to his ideas, Beuys is committed to exploring the potentialities of the substances themselves, and consequently ours too.[21] This potentiality of substances corresponds to Tim Ingold's idea that 'materials always and inevitably win out over materiality in the long term'.[22] This is particularly interesting in the context of this discussion as materials are embedded in sculptural poetry. Beuys' work on substances, Borer writes, becomes language, and is 'better than making speeches or taking positions publicly, it is the language of substances that manifests his basic 'political,' 'anthropological' aims, never explicitly formulated, but always implicitly stated'.[23] This political and anthropological stratification that Borer refers to is Beuys' aim to draw attention to the chaotic socio-political and ecological landscape of post-war Germany through sculpture with spiritual intentions – this is in line with my own beliefs and drives to explore the revolutionary in sculptural poems.

Borer's theoretical understanding of social sculpture echoes Karen Barad's account of a mutually constitutive event produced by and producing entangled things, with one's environment as an important influence.[24] Taking into consideration the idea that Beuys' work has featured prominently in debates, Gandy allows us to understand Beuys's approach in more depth — an artist interwoven into, but also reactive of, the material landscape that surrounded him.[25] Beuys regarded everything in a state of change and utilised materials whose processes continue in most of them; this gives work in this mode their characteristic palimpsestic quality. Borer, however, in this discussion, emphasises more efficiently the most vital, in my view, aspect of Beuys' social sculptures: the political element – the permeation of political discourse surrounding ecological concern and the projection of creative activity as a form of revolutionary action. With social and ecological justice in focus, this element of Beuys' practice is important as it shows the potential of sculpture to be used as a tool against social injustice and ecological degradation.

An example of Beuys' perpetual 'social sculpture' theory that is relevant today and within this discussion is his piece 'Fat Chair', which features a wedged fat-like material between the back and the seat of a chair (**Figure 1**). Beuys recommends the most elementary relationship with an object, with language as the basic element of his environment, when seeking the substance (etymologically what lies beneath) in the matter and its principles.[26] There is uncertainty surrounding the materials of this piece, which is highlighted in the fact that its ingredients vary depending on the source. In contrast to Alain Borer, who writes that the sculpture is made of wood, wax (in addition to metal), Mark Rosenthal of Tate Modern, much like David Adams, lists this

piece as a 'wooden chair with fat'.[27] Then, there are other sources like Dror Pimentel that combines the materials of both former sources by stating that the sculpture's ingredients comprise of fat, wax, and wood.[28] Whatever the combination of the materials used in this piece, the elemental exploration of natural materials is emphasised by the antithetical solidity of the basic components that comprise this work to shed light on the dilemma between conformity and divergence that occupies society as a whole.

Figure 1: Joseph Beuys, Fat Chair, 1963. Courtesy of Katia Rid, in Borer, A., 1997. *The Essential Joseph Beuys*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. Cover image.

By appropriating objects and organic components from daily life, Beuys creates a metaphor for the human body and society at large – the pliable wax material is a metaphor for humans, whereas the wooden frame of the structure stands as a metaphor for society. He refers to the ephemeral condition of the human and nonhuman body and the tendency of the former to conform to socially constructed conventions. This interpretation of the sculpture relates directly to Barad's 'intra-action' where the iterative merging of values must be understood in conjunction with each other. It decentralises human species by allowing humans to stand equally beside nonhuman beings and nature at large, linking this idea with Timothy Morton's object-oriented ontology which is 'committed to a unique form of realism and nonanthropocentric thinking'.[29] While there are apparent differences between the two notions which will not be fully outlined here, Sarah Lucie sheds light on a useful commonality in that 'both philosophies still find the object's effects to be accessed through perception, and therefore through sensual interaction'.[30] Through this lens, we also understand sculpture as an object with somatic dimensions and humans as radically responsible for their reactivity in their respective environments.

On the one hand, the fat-like triangle, whether made of fat or wax (or a combination of both), suggests pliability and fragility, but most of all, in addition to the sculpture's name, it refers to human fat aesthetically and metaphorically. This abject material, although is traditionally associated with excess and waste, it is simultaneously vital

for human life as bodies live by metabolising fat to create the energy necessary for bodily functions. This corresponds to another new materialist concept, that of Stacey Alaimo's transcorporeality, in which 'the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world' and is inseparable from its environment.[31] This trans-corporeal exchange that sees the material as a vital component to life became, as Dror Pimentel observes, 'a life conducting material in Beuys' sculptural vocabulary'.[32] Fat's qualitative transition between a melted unformed substance and a cooled formed, material speaks for its connotation to malleable energy and, thus, this vitality it provides in the human body can progress into willpower. In seeking to understand this idea more clearly through diffraction patterns, in which one causal event produces ripple effects, it is useful to again consider Barad's idea of intra-actions and Bennett's idea of vibrant matter. The effect produced by the sculpture, which in itself speaks to social and ecological injustice, has the potential to evoke emotion in the readers and, thus, potentially action. The somatic imaginings that this component creates are contrasted with the shabby wooden chair core that exudes a static energy and rigidity. The type of chair of choice has revelatory significance, Dror Pimentel points out, as Beuys selected it for its functional quality, 'aspiring to a zero degree of comfort and verging on asceticism' with a minimalism that is intended to avoid any feature that is not related to function.[33] The main purpose of this human-made object in everyday life is to support the weight of people sitting on it, thus symbolising the difference between humans and animals.[34] This component of the sculpture reminds us of a skeleton holding human substance within a fixed frame, a constraint preventing humans from escaping their fixed boundaries.

In addition to all these socio-political and ecological elements that constitute Beuys' chair as a dialogue between a functional human-made object and a natural component associated with energy and willpower, the artist presents humans and nature in conversation through the literal amalgamation of wood and fat and/or wax. Beuys presents these familiar materials with usefulness to humans both internally and externally, in unconventional ways, intending to encourage the viewer to make new connections with their environment, with the potential to provoke action. David Adams approaches this sculpture from the same socio-political angle by stating that Beuys' 'Fat Chair' aims to provide the spectator with primitive wisdom of being, highlighting the hidden connections between human and non-human, natural ecologies and societies, and their entangled energies, as it has been manifested in the ideas of new materialism that were mentioned above.[35] Pimentel, from the angle of life preservation in relation to fat mentioned earlier, emphasises the contrast between the rigid ascetic form of the chair and the formless and excessive fat, which assumes the shape of the vessel

in which it is contained.[36] The interpretations that reverberate from this sculpture are endless, making it a very effective specimen of social sculpture – a creative piece with a political message speaking to humans and their relationship with nonhumans beings and objects.

A poetics in tune with its environment

Based on this approach by Joseph Beuys, and with the aim to create a sculptural poem informed by social and ecological justice within the context of this chapter, I produced 'human-hive' (**Figures 2–4**). The poem exists in sculptural form (with a page-based suggested transcription also available) and is based on my conviction that humans and nature are interrelated elements. In the context of our current chaotic landscape, which is overwhelmed by a pandemic crisis, wars, climate change (among many other events that predispose further social and ecological injustice), this is poetry intra-active to its environment.

The permeation of political discourse surrounding the ecological justice and concern which manifests in 'human-hive' is in line with what Kate Simpson, editor of climate emergency anthology *Out of Time* (in which I am a contributor), describes in the context of ecopoetry as a genre that uses language in a way to redefine of our direction on the planet as one 'of responsibility and of co- and inter-related existence with the non-human', reshaping our collective consciousness away from the notion of humanity as the centralised species.[37] Simpson acknowledges that this is a challenging feat, but one can 'start by building a corpus that reflects the intricacy of our ecosystems, in more creative ways than ever before'.[38] This definition, in addition to Fiona Becket's definition of ecopoiesis as a poetic form that destabilises the dichotomy between human and nonhuman, both interrogate, as Becket puts it, our 'inherited, 'naturalised' habits of thought that constitute nature as inferior'.[39]

Figure 2: Astra Papachristodoulou, human-hive, 2021.

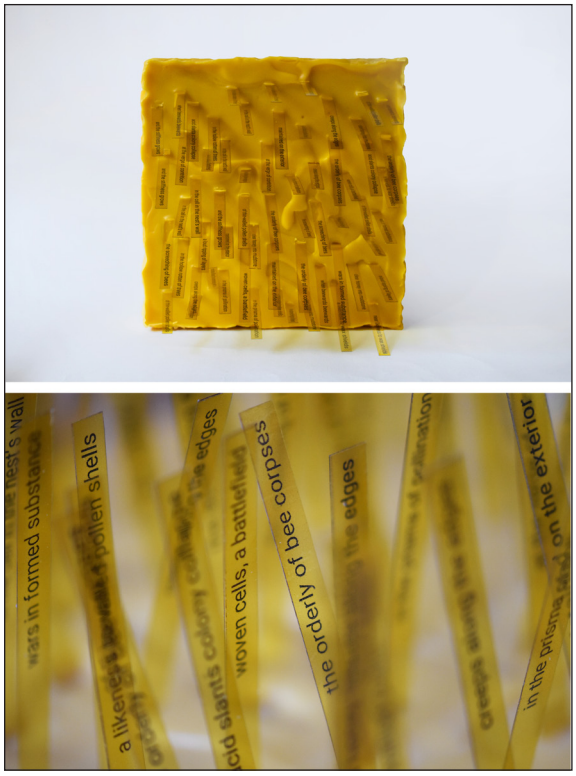
With this in mind, the poem resonates aesthetically both as a creatural and bodily object (representing a human scalp) and a bed of yellow reeds simultaneously to delineate the interrelation between humans and nature. The title is meaningful: it places the words 'human' and 'hive' spatially adjacent to each other to highlight the closeness between humans and nature, with the dash in between the words enhancing that nearness. In the title, the alliteration of the 'h' in the words and the equal shortness of each word helps to build on the parallels between the two elements to enhance my belief that humans and nonhumans should be seen as interconnected and equal in contrast to prevailing anthropocentrism.

In terms of form, 'human-hive' is comprised of natural materials, tying into the idea of ecological sustainability that runs through my work. The solid base is made with pure, locally sourced beeswax, and the lines of poems are printed on yellow-tinted cellulose acetate and placed vertically in a dense manner across the 'field' of the sculpture – this is to visually emulate the idea of the scalp with hair and reeds. During the production of the piece, the unformed liquid beeswax was poured into a homemade cardboard mould which was lined with found plastic (in a creased manner) to imitate, upon solidifying at room temperature, the fat-like effect evident in Joseph Beuys' 'Fat Chair.' Furthermore, I selected beeswax for the core of the sculpture due to this organic substance's elemental and earthy essence, which, like Beuys' 'Fat Chair,' also relates to Tim Ingold's notion that materials win over materiality as discussed earlier – its opaque yellowness, its texture and pliability, and its warm and musky aroma all add multidimensionality to the poem. This solid form, in combination with the pendulous and reflective lines made of cellulose acetate, a natural polymer and the main component of wood and paper, that emerge from the block of beeswax create a sense of movement.[40] This, in addition to the textural and aromatic quality of the beeswax, produce somatic evocations to the viewer alongside a sense of unease and curiosity over a material used in everyday objects.

In terms of content, the non-linear lines of poetry can be read in any order, thus giving the viewer the freedom to decide the course of the poem, as means of promoting engagement and proactivity. The poem is full of instances of violence and fragility, which paint the current, proposed geologic time of the Anthropocene and all the aspects that it encompasses as dysfunctional: 'a loud ripping of pliable layers/the screeching of honeybees/maintained on the exterior/the stiffness grows steadily/in the orderly of bee corpses'.[41] The content fuses organic words (e.g., 'pollen shells,' 'trees' and 'honeybees') with phrases associated with violence and collapse (e.g., 'loud ripping,' 'screeching' and 'rotten') to show the current divide resulting from anthropocentric approaches. This poem might be read as a figurative declaration of what Kate Simpson, within the context of ecopoetry, describes as a genre 'not simply about conjuring a path

to help others imagine its shape, surface, tension and direction, but demolishing the structure of the path entirely'.[42] Driven by shared obstructions to the artist's process such as the damaging capitalist and consumerist structures that contribute towards social and ecological injustice, I used the idea of demolition as mentioned by Simpson to use sculptural poetry, similarly to Beuys' social sculpture, as a tool for political activism. The poem continues:

wars informed substance
clear honey into mudstone
when beewards beewards
of thin-walled pollen shells
in the cell of the nest's wall
in the prisma of pollination
fat slants colony collapse
in the hollow rotten of trees



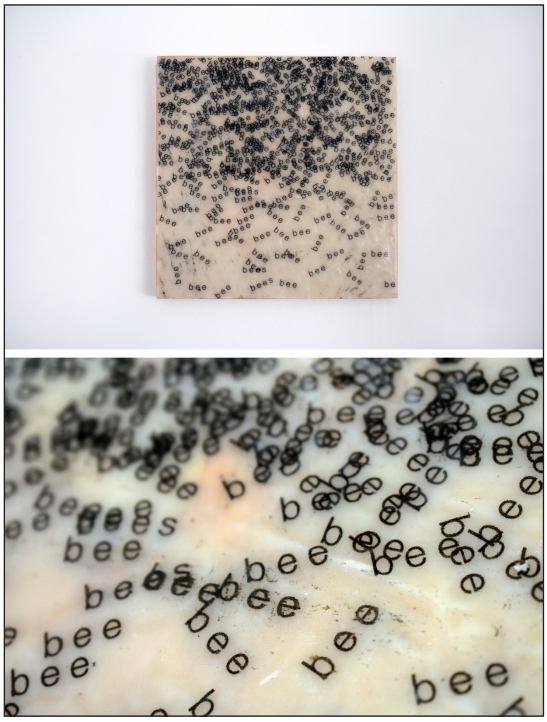
Figures 3 and 4: Astra Papachristodoulou, human-hive, 2021.

Thus, these lines contribute to the dissident project of resistance to dominant cultural forms of thinking such as capitalism, consumerism and anthropocentrism, and ultimately can act as a tool against social and ecological injustice as mentioned previously.

Beyond the violent context in which this sculptural poem exists, this piece serves as an intra-active object with eyes toward the future: it is reactive to dominant cultural forms of thinking and uses language and materiality to present humans and nature as interrelated elements. As discussed, works in this mode ultimately sow ideas concerned with social equality and ecological justice. My piece's familiar waxy yellowness and warm and musky aroma, beyond adding multidimensionality to the composition, transcend the first barrier between viewer and object; like plasticated tentacles, the long cellulose strips of poetic text reach out to the viewer through its affecting sensuality, inviting solidarity with one's surroundings, whether objects or living entities.

Another creative example in dialogue with Beuys' 'Fat Chair' and many of the ideas I've expressed is my poem 'Raining bees,' which is part of a larger series of encaustic

poems. Another example is my poem ‘Raining Bees’ (see **Figures 5** and **6**). Like Beuys’ sculpture, my poem is confined within the parameters of a wooden frame (though a canvas, rather than a chair) and plays with the notion of what appears to be a fat-like substance. The poem deals with the notion of bee decline as a result of climate change, with a swarm of dead bees visibly ‘falling’ from the top of the concrete poem to the bottom in a vertical manner. Just like an inverted Rebus story which requires a participant to replace an illustration with text, this poem invites the viewer to make symbolic connections between the outlined text and its imaginary replacement with bees affected by global warming. This unceasing textual repetition produces movement from which a new poetic rhythm arises. A mist of ‘bee’ and ‘bees’ in form of whispers within the viewer’s midst.



Figures 5 and 6: Astra Papachristodoulou, Raining bees, 2022.

The materials used to produce this piece vary slightly from my previous poem ‘human-hive’; instead of using natural beeswax which has a golden hue (due to the presence of nectar and pollen), I used purified beeswax which has been filtered out of other elements. This pale-coloured beeswax in combination with damar resin resembles human fat more closely, with this contributing towards the production of meaning. In addition to the colour, the aroma that this piece unfurls also differs – the muskiness and warm scent of the beeswax is merged with the piney smell of damar resin. The inked text was transferred onto the waxy surface using tissue paper and a heat tool which allowed the paper to ‘sink in’ in the underlayer of the poem while the ink stays visible on the top layer. Much like ‘human-hive’, the piece serves as an intra-active object, using language and materiality to present humans and nature as interrelated elements – in this instance, the poem points to the way that human activity fosters the decline of nonhuman species.

For all these reasons, and more, sculptural poems are extraordinary objects, not least because their material stratification is often intimately familiar to their viewers. Sculptural poems stand as imprints of the hand that carves the word onto the bark – they encompass a unique sense of physicality and sensorial perception, in contrast to

page poems, in the Anthropocene. The way poetic language is peeled off the page, like a Letraset fragment, onto a three-dimensional structure to stand as an elegant form of poetic expression of one's selfhood – in line with Beuys' well-known quote that 'everyone is an artist,' I see three-dimensional poems in this mode as offerings from one poet to another, or society at large.

Sculpting poems as an ecofeminist practice of healing

While new materialist concepts are useful in approaching binary-resistant conceptions of being, as a practitioner I find that Beuys' idea of the sculptor as shaman allows for understanding the lingering sense of multiple, distinct things coming together (text, language, materials, immaterial ideas) inherent in sculptural poems – it allows one to approach their craft in a more spiritual way. A shaman, according to Mircea Eliade, is a formerly sick person who heals themselves and thereby becomes capable of healing others – a person that acts as a bridge between worlds and uses knowledge to heal others.[43] In a creative context, as Corinna Tomberger puts it, a shaman:

> on the one hand [..] appears as master of the substance, the alchemist who transforms the substance and steers this process. On the other hand, Beuys exposed his own body to the influences of the substances which are said to have transforming powers.[44]

But what does Tomberger mean when referring to healing? Beyond the wider understanding of healing that refers to the repair and recovery of physical trauma, Katie Fuller approaches healing metaphorically from an arts education perspective as an overcoming of 'trauma [that] lives in the body' and a confrontation of the 'pain, shame, fear, and deeply personal responses that trouble the body'.[45] Interestingly, Beuys explored both of these dimensions of healing that are embedded in sculpture by using materials that enhance the shamanistic value of an object. Several materials that are characteristic to Beuys, such as fat, wax, and honey, can be energetically transformative inwards and outwards, and incorporate in themselves a dimension of healing. For example, Tomberger highlights one of Beuys' key experiences during the Second World War as a way to discuss wounding and healing against the backdrop of military disorder and chaos. During action as an aircraft radio operator and combat pilot, Beuys crashed with his plane in Crimea in 1943, where he was found and nursed back to health by Tartars – as part of a healing ritual, and with the hope to regenerate warmth during snowy conditions, Beuys' body was covered in fat and wrapped in felt to insulate the warmth.[46] There are multiple tensions inherent in these two materials alone (fat and felt) that became key to Beuys' practice, amongst them rigidness,

liquidity, warmth, pliability, solidity, and coldness. Following this experience, one can understand the physical healing of Beuys' wounds following the application of materials, but also the spiritual healing found in comfort resulting from human compassion in a time of crisis. Looking at Beuys' theory of social sculpture from this point of view, 'dissolving a solidified form by chaotic energy in order to finally transfer it into a new order,' writes Corinna Tomberger, 'can be interpreted as a symbolic healing of a damaged manliness'.[47]

The sculptor's ideas become embodied in three-dimensional forms through the materiality of production. In most cases the creation can outlive them (as Ingold mentioned earlier) – it is through the object form that the sculptor portrays meaning and heals themselves and potentially others. Beuys followed this idea of the sculptor who moulds the material into purpose and merges it with shamanic practice. Both sculpture and the shaman have strong male connotations; Tomberger notes that 'on top of the traditional hierarchy of the genres, sculpture has the strongest male connotations,' similarly to the shamanistic tradition that has a historical hegemony of male figures.[48] Through my creative work, and as a female practitioner, I challenge the historical male connotations of sculpture and shamanism to contribute to the restoration of women to their essential place in the resurgence of sculptural poetry and creative practices projecting notions of resistance and healing.

Maggie O'Sullivan, whose process of working according to Mandy Bloomfield involves 'an exceptionally high degree of manual and physical labour', speaks of finding a voice through writing – this could be interpreted as an enactment of healing.[49] The exploration of this dynamic, writes Bloomfield, is understood 'in the emphatically corporeal terms that O'Sullivan's poetry adopts' – an enactment of 'a violent struggle as a well as a productive transformation that renders language as a living body'.[50] In conversation with Andy Brown, she expands on how her upbringing shaped her poetic practice: 'My background undoubtedly has shaped who I am/how I am in the world/my work. My father and mother had little schooling and [...] we were brought up on the edge, locked out, without any voice.[51]

Much like O'Sullivan who has 'always been haunted by issues of VOICELESSNESS—inarticulacy—silence—soundlessness—breathlessness [...] how can I body forth or configure such sounds, such tongues, such muteness', I also experienced a struggle to find my voice as a young girl in Greece.[52] I come from a family who had very little education and I grew up in a highly problematic environment without a mother – the process of making poetry was, and is, an escape for me; a safe space in which I am allowed to voice my thoughts about the world against the backdrop of an existing community of poets.

In the process of making my 'human-hive' poem (See **Figure 7**), specifically, I witnessed a sense of healing resulting from the handling of beeswax: the bars of beeswax filled the room with aroma and presence as they melt in the heat and amalgamated into one substance. As the stove burned, the steel pot exuded warm and comforting steam on my hands that stirred the beeswax in its liquid form. Healing did not only enact itself in a metaphorical sense—through a process that helped confront 'the deeply personal responses that trouble the body' as per Fuller—but it also resulted from the physical handling of materials.[53] The stirring of fluid beeswax in circular movements felt exhilarating – this action was followed by the placement of each strip of text upon the top of the poem, which required patience and accuracy due to the liquid basis solidifying gradually in a short space of time. As I removed the solidified yet fragile sculptural poem from its homemade mould I felt a sense of calm and relief – the sculptural poem, this multidimensional intra-action which interacts through its sensory properties, came into being. As I finalised the piece, a formal ealing of the object itself took place as the core of the poem solidified, and a sense of healing and catharsis struck me as the poet-sculptor saw her sculpture coming to life: an undoing of voicelessness.

Figure 7: Removing 'human-hive' from its mould, 2021.

This healing dimension which I experience as a creator of sculptural poems in the process of production can, like any piece of art, transcend also in the consumption of such works for the reader/viewer. Works in this vein can allow the reader to evaluate materials and appreciate sustainable three-dimensional works of art. However, the consumption of such works (generally tangible art) raises questions regarding materiality in the Anthropocene, as tangible objects are often paralleled with waste. In my case, working primarily with found materials means that new waste is mostly eliminated. Beyond this question and returning to the sense of healing that can ascend from the object to the reader/viewer, sculptural poems evoke somatic imaginings, including tactile, haptic and kinaesthetic sensations; this I have observed as a reader/viewer of such works; Cecilia Vicuña's *Chanccani Quipu* (Granary Books, 2012), a limited-edition object made with unspun wool and bamboo, is a great example of this – Vicuña reinvents the concept of 'quipu', the ancient system

of a number of cultures in the South America region that used knotted cords to record data. Works in this mode are particularly effective in interacting and engaging with the reader/viewer – in the case of 'human-hive', the evocation of somatic responses is heightened as, when exhibited, it can be carefully touched by those observing it.

In addition to the feminist new materialist efforts mentioned, my practice projects efforts to further consider sculpting poems as an ecofeminist practice. A key poet whose innovative poetry also considers those ecofeminist horizons is Maggie O'Sullivan. In addition to O'Sullivan here acting as an example of feminist art production, other key elements of this essay relevant to her corpus include shamanism in relation to poetry, and anti-anthropocentrism. Through my interpretation, O'Sullivan's corpus relates to the new materialist theories discussed here, among them intra-actions, vibrant matter and trans-corporeality in a sense that her work is also part of a larger effort to dismantle the legacy of colonial society for the purposes of equality and more objective perception of humans in relation to nonhumans.[54] In a panel conversation titled 'Material Poetries' with Simone Fattal, O'Sullivan expressed that 'the fragile, you know, it's absolutely against all kind of closure and supremacies'.[55] As an important woman writer in the context of linguistically innovative poetry, her stance in relation to feminist practice is summarised in a manifesto she co-authored with Geraldine Monk. They wrote that 'ultimately, the most effective chance any woman poet has of dismantling the fallacy of male creative supremacy is simply by writing poetry of a kind which is liberating by the breadth of its range, risk and innovation'.[56]

Another thematic link is O'Sullivan's intention to shift away from anthropocentrism by abolishing the boundary between humans and nonhumans in her work. This also relates to many of the new materialist theories discussed earlier. Her poem 'Hurls to the Untitled, of bees' from her collection *In the House of the Shaman* is an example evident of that. She writes:

> *Daub & Churl*
> the fingers out & Doe, done'em in grey, Do Diadems
> Thy down of a bowed & wild rag:
> the still Written Up into caves[57]

Of course, the first connection of this poem to my work is the allusion to bees, as noted in the poem's title. The words used are minimal, enigmatic, and delicate for the production of meaning – they have no specificity and control over interpretation. This layer adds an element of fragility and vulnerability to the work that underline the dysfunctional attributes of society. The sentences remain open-ended with unusual

combinations of language such as ‘daub’ and ‘churl’, producing images of disruption and discomfort in the context of the bees (who are placed at the centre of the narrative in the poem’s title).

The link to shamanism, but from an ecofeminist angle as opposed to Beuys, is also evident in this poetic specimen. As Scott Thurston points out, ‘this metaphor has to be handled with care as it has accrued so many differing associations and meanings in Western culture that its usefulness in discussing O’Sullivan’s work may be obscured’.[58] In an interview with Thurston, O’Sullivan stated that she is wary of Shamanism’s ‘new age’ incarnation due to its connotations and the personist investment in the figure of the shaman.[59] This shows that, even though there are evident links with O’Sullivan and Beuys in terms of the potential therapeutic effects of art and their approach to language and material as states of change, she is approaching this loaded term with care.[60]

The title of O’Sullivan’s collection and its ritualistic cross-shaped cover art allude to the idea of shamanism at a first glance, with the idea’s thematic effect explored in the book in a deeper sense as the pages turn. Her poem ‘Hurls to the Untitled, of bees’ discussed here sits opposite a direct quotation by Joseph Beuys which reads: ‘To stress the idea of transformation and of substance. This is precisely what the shaman does in order to bring about change and development: his nature is therapeutic’.[61] Beuys has informed O’Sullivan’s own work with the concept of the artist-shaman taking a female form as she excavates ‘the soils of language’ to uncover words and energies.[62] This continuous unearthing of words and sounds involving a more ritualistic approach to language sits at the heart of my creative practice. This approach has manifested itself in my work as an act of collating, collaging, cutting-up and curating found text on the page before transferring it onto three-dimensional forms as means of giving new meaning to existing language. Finally, in addition to O’Sullivan’s closeness to Beuys and his approach to shamanism, she also describes her creative process in sculptural terms:

> Cleaving-scale-sculpting-voice-body-heart-soul-breath – the multi-dimensional matterings of what? how? are driving necessities in *murmur* where I am extending my searchings within the sculptural painterly textual and aural in an immersioning of multi-level visual languages.[63]

Therefore, as per the poet’s own description, O’Sullivan’s poetry branches out to several of the themes in this essay. The term ‘cleaving-scale-sculpting-voice-body-heart-soul-breath’ for instance speaks to the spiritual dimension of sculptural work as well as the embodied exchange between creator and object. Also, the ‘sculptural painterly

textual and aural' offers a nuanced depiction of sculptural poetry. O'Sullivan's work, then, not only resists anthropocentric viewpoints but also demonstrates a decentring approach to shamanic explorations of poetry resisting fixed identity, gender and speciesist relationships and exchanges that have been a feature of modern feminisms. The delicate yet transformative aspect of her work encourages eco-sensitivity through a form that has been dominated historically by men and situates an embodied interchange that highlights the nearness between the poem and its environment; a return to one's animality.

Conclusion

Returning to my central question regarding the extent to which *contemporary ecofeminist sculptural poetry, rooted in social and ecological justice, be imagined as a future-facing form of creative expression,* this discussion helps establish sculpture and ecopoetry, and thus sculptural ecopoetry, as an intra-action with a potential to shape and heal society and the environment surrounding it; an artform with processed-based healing potential. Based on the findings in this essay, Beuys' concept of social sculpture and his approach to shamanism relates to Maggie O'Sullivan's work; Beuys often adopted the persona of the shaman as part of his performances, and O'Sullivan was influenced by Beuys – this is evident in O'Sullivan's reference to Beuys, especially in her *In the House of the Shaman* book. By approaching the work of these artists from the angle of various new materialist concepts, one not only turns their attention to the potentialities of substances but also sees social and ecological justice as a form of political activism and healing. Social sculpture is used as a springboard to set the scene for creative practice concerned with notions of social and ecological injustice, while it also exposes indirectly some of the elements that hinder justice towards all beings, including damaging colonial and consumerist structures. This unveils how capitalist structures of hierarchy and injustice through the lens of new materialist theories, concern the future of both human and nonhuman beings.

This essay presented my poem 'human-hive' and 'raining of bees' as examples of ecofeminist sculptural poems that present themselves as a figurative declaration of Fiona Becket's and Kate Simpson's definitions of ecopoetry, and thus presents sculptural poetry as a form of ecopoetic practice: a form that uses language in a way to reshape of our collective consciousness away from the anthropocentrism. My poems, which are both examples of sculptural poems, embody this notion by offering no clear guidance and urging readers to work through the dense imagery alongside the role of materials and the sensory attentiveness that these elicit (in this instance, textural, visual, and scent evocations). This allows us to decipher the connections

among humans, nonhumans and other-than-human and come closer to our own authentic self. The textual non-linearity and ephemerality of beeswax in my poems cohere with Beuys' message – everything is in a state of change. It is the collective force of re-evaluated individual practices that will induce transformation and bring about positive change for future generations. Despite the inevitable link between art and capitalism and injustice, sculptural poetry has an inherent political dimension. A sculptural poem, which is interwoven into, but also reactive to, the material landscape that surrounds us, can be used as a political response against the damaging colonial and consumerist structures that contribute towards social and ecological injustice. As it moves, the sculpting body is in tune with the pliable materiality of its poetic creation whose exuding energies produce a ripple, creating ever-changing new patterns in their cohesive landscape as the world, *I hope*, listens.

Notes

[1] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Stacy Alaimo, 'Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature.' In *Material Feminisms*, ed. by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 237–264.

[2] Joseph Beuys, in Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1979), p. 23.

[3] Barad; Bennett; Alaimo.

[4] Social justice is defined by Scott Campbell as "the explicit recognition of structural inequalities in the world (among class, race, gender, institutional and other lines) and therefore the need for proactive, structural programs to counteract these inequalities (2013, p. 76). (Scott D. Campbell, 'Sustainable Development and Social Justice: Conflicting Urgencies and the Search for Common Ground in Urban and Regional Planning' in *Michigan Journal of Sustainability*, Volume 1, Fall (2013). <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mjs.12333712.0001.007> (accessed 25 February 2022).

[5] Leslie Solomonian and Erica Di Ruggiero, 'The critical intersection of environmental and social justice: a commentary' in *Global Health* 17 (2021), 30. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-021-00686-4> (accessed 25 February 2022).

[6] Solomonian and di Ruggiero.

[7] Gay Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), p.x.

[8] Campbell, p.13; Scott Campbell writes that an example of the encounter between social and ecological sustainability is that "proponents of sustainability frequently emphasize the importance of adding social justice to their efforts, while social justice advocates increasingly incorporate the ideas of sustainability into their own agendas (2013, p. 75).

[9] Campbell, pp. 75–76.

[10] Solomonian and di Ruggiero; Campbell.

[11] Campbell's argues that oppositional engagement of sustainability to social justice is helpful as it reinvigorates the understanding of ecological sustainability, keeps it relevant and inclusive and grants the concept greater urgency (Campbell, 2013).

[12] Campbell, p. 75.

[13] Extinction Rebellion, *This Is Not A Drill: An Extinction Rebellion Handbook* (London: Penguin Books, 2019); Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism Vs. The Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014); Luis I. Prádanos, L.I., 'Postgrowth Imaginaries: New Ecologies and Counterhegemonic Culture in Post-2008 Spain' in *Modern Languages Open* (2018). <http://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.245> (accessed 25 February 2022).

[14] Joseph Beuys and Volker Harlan, *What is Art?*. Translated from German by Matthew Barton and Shelley Sacks (West Hoathly: Clairview, 2018), first published: 1986.

[15] Beuys in Beuys and Harlan, p. 9.

[16] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p. 8.

[17] Barad; Bennett.

[18] Barad, p. 33.

[19] Bennett.

[20] Bennett, p. 104.

[21] Alain Borer, *The Essential Joseph Beuys* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997).

[22] Tim Ingold, 'Materials against materiality' in *Archaeological Dialogues*, Volume 14, Issue 1 (2007), pp. 1–16 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203807002127> (accessed 25 February 2022), p. 10.

[23] Borer, p. 28.

[24] Barad.

[25] Matthew Gandy, 'Contradictory Modernities: Conceptions of Nature in the Art of Joseph Beuys and Gerhard Richter' in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 87, no. 4 (1997), pp. 636–659. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203807002127> (accessed 25 February 2022); As Matthew Gandy remarks, "For Beuys, nature holds innate meaning capable of guiding human thought and action" (1997, p. 636).

[26] Borer.

[27] Borer; David Adams, 'Joseph Beuys: Pioneer of a Radical Ecology.' Art Journal, vol. 51, no. 2 (1992), pp. 26–34. JSTOR <www.jstor.org/stable/777391> (accessed 1 March 2022); Mark Rosenthal, *Joseph Beuys: Actions, Vitrines, Environments* (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), p. 43.

[28] Dror Pimentel, 'Beuys' Chair and the Violence of the Other: Toward a Theory of Aesthetics.' in *Performance Philosophy* (2017) <www.performancephilosophy.org/journal/article/view/73/178> (accessed 1 March 2022).

[29] Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 2.

[30] Sarah Lucie, *Acting Objects: Staging New Materialism, Posthumanism and the Ecocritical Crisis in Contemporary Performance*. City University of New York, PhD thesis (2020) <https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4888&context=gc_etds> (accessed 25 February 2022), p. 215.

[31] Alaimo, p. 238.

[32] Pimentel.

[33] This significance, according to Dror Pimentel (1997), stems from the trauma Beuys suffered during World War II. Following the crash of his Stuka dive bomber in Crimea, Beuys was taken care by a local Tatarian tribe who applied animal fat to his body and wrapped it in felt to prevent him from freezing to death (Pimentel, 1997). This example will be discussed in more detail in the pages that follow.

[34] Pimentel.

[35] David Adams, D., 1992. 'Joseph Beuys: Pioneer of a Radical Ecology.' Art Journal, vol. 51, no. 2, pp. 26–34. JSTOR (1992) <www.jstor.org/stable/777391> (accessed 1 March 2022).

[36] Pimentel.

[37] Kate Simpson (Ed.), *Out of Time: Poetry from the Climate Emergency*. (Scarborough: Valley Press, 2021), p. 20.

[38] Simpson, p. 20.

[39] Fiona Becket, 'Ecopoetics and Poetry', in E., Larrissy (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to British Poetry*, 1945–2010, 214–227 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 226 <10.1017/CCO9781316111314.015> (accessed 13 April 2022).

[40] Cellulose acetate is prepared by acetylating cellulose which, according to Sabu Thomas et al., is "the most abundant natural polymer on earth" (Sabu Thomas et al., *Advances in Natural Polymers: Composites and Nanocomposites*. Berlin: Springer Science & Business Media, 2012, p. 21). In addition to its abundance which makes the material a viable choice for the production of various objects, cellulose acetate has good potential for environmental degradation (Juergen Puls et al., 'Degradation of Cellulose Acetate-Based Materials: A Review.' *Journal of Polymers and the Environment*, 152–165 (2011), pp. 19 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10924-010-0258-0> (accessed 1 March 2022).

[41] Papachristodoulou in Chiara Fumanti et al., (Eds.) *High Salvage*. (Guildford: Potential Books, 2021), p. 36.

[42] Simpson, p. 20.

[43] Mircea Eliade, *Schamanismus und archaische Extasetechnik*, translated by Inge Köck (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989; first published in 1951).

[44] Corinna Tomberger, 'Show Your Wounded Manliness: Promises of Salvation in the Work of Joseph Beuys.' in *Paragraph*, 26, 1/2 (2003), pp. 65–76 (p. 70). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43263714> (accessed 1 March 2022).

[45] Katie Fuller, K., 2020. 'Healing Trauma with Art and the Affective Turn', in Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education, 37(1) (2020), pp. 90–103 (p. 90) <https://doi.org/10.2458/jcrae.4753> (accessed 6 July 2023).

[46] Tomberger, p. 66.

[47] Tomberger, p. 71.

[48] Tomberger, p. 71; It should be noted that, according to Walter Williams, there are also many cases of female, non-gendered or trans-gendered shamans, particularly in the current and historical practices of indigenous peoples, with considerable literature documenting this detail. Walter L. Williams, 'The "two-spirit" people of indigenous North Americans', in *The Guardian* (2010) <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/oct/11/two-spirit-people-north-america> (accessed 21 March 2023).

[49] Mandy Bloomfield, *Archaeopoetics: Word, Image, History* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2016); The corporeal dimensions of O'Sullivan's approach to poetry include 'writing by hand, redrafting words by hand–bending, sticking, cutting, shaping marks, shaping sounds into the recorder, pain(t)ing and building–all inscriptions of body's breathing' (O'Sullivan in Bloomfield, p. 112).

[50] Bloomfield, p. 113.

[51] Maggie O'Sullivan, 'In conversation with Andy Brown', in Andy Brown (ed.), *Binary Myths 1 and 2: Conversations with Poets and Poet-Editors* (Exeter: Stride, 2004), p. 159.

[52] O'Sullivan in Bloomfield, p. 114.

[53] Fuller.

[54] Barad; Bennett; Alaimo.

[55] Maggie O'Sullivan, 'Material Poetries' panel discussion with O'Sullivan, M., and Fattal, S., in Henry Moore Institute, 19 January 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=--1EyAFtSI0> (accessed 1 March 2022).

[56] O'Sullivan and Monk in Edwards, 1988. p. 269.

[57] Maggie O'Sullivan, *Palace of Reptiles* (Willowdale: The Gig, 2003), p.27.

[58] Scott Thurston, 'Maggie O'Sullivan: transformation and substance' in *Poetry Salzburg Review* (2004) <http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/1309> (accessed 1 March 2022), p. 17.

[59] Maggie O'Sullivan and Scott Thurston, "An Interview" in Lawrence Upton (ed.), *The Salt Companion to Maggie O'Sullivan* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2011), pp. 241–249.

[60] O'Sullivan and Thurston, p. 247.

[61] O'Sullivan, 2003, p. 28.

[62] O'Sullivan writes in her *Palace of Reptiles* that "[i]n 1988, after having been involved in the transformative/experience of working on a television film on Beuys,/[she] stepped out, away from the city to the moorland/impress of tongue" (O'Sullivan, 2003, p. 67); Maggie O'Sullivan, *Annual Morag Morris Poetry Lecture series*, lecture notes, University of Surrey, delivered 17 February 2022.

[63] Maggie O'Sullivan, 'Working Note' in *How2*." iii (2007) <https://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_1/inconference/osullivannote.html> (accessed 1 March 2022).

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Contextual statement

The larger research project which contextualises the creative work discussed in this paper is a practice-based PhD project at the University of Surrey. This project revives the notion of sculptural poetry as a practice in dialogue with its environment, shifting this term from its ekphrastic sense that historically describes poems about sculptures, and towards a poetic form whose sensorial stimuli have the potential to produce somatic and activist responses. Through my critical and creative work, I consider sculptural poetry as a form with linguistic and sensorial values tied to the properties and use of materials with interactive strata and transformative qualities. The human footprint, climate change, bee decline, ecological and social justice, activism, mourning and healing: these are some of

the core, recurring ideas that inform both the creative and critical dimensions of my doctoral project. I also position my research around relevant work produced primarily by women in the Anthropocene at the intersection of a number of theoretical and critical paradigms, namely ecofeminism, Joseph Beuys' concept of 'social sculpture', decolonial thought and new materialism.