

JULIEANNA PRESTON

In the service of...

Fig. 1 Patricia Rueda Diez (2013).
Julieanna Preston's *ground maintenance*. [Video still]



Note to the Reader¹:

What follows are a series of letters written on the occasion of a performance staged at the 2013 *Plenitude and Emptiness Symposium* in the INSPACE Gallery, Edinburgh. Expanding, transgressing or subverting the traditional academic essay² and rubbing up against the grain of art criticism, these letters chart the relationship between an artist and a commercial cleaner named Maria, in a stylistic, subjective, and idiosyncratic voice that draws out the artist's personal reflection on dirt, cleaning and other dimensions of the cleaner's everyday work. Such an approach seeks:

[...] to repair social relationships through aesthetic gesture while also challenging capitalist transactional economies of work. These aims are explored through video and narrative description of the bodies who do and don't do this work ... [including] themes of value, class, duration, relationality and care through the simple acts of sweeping the floor and writing little personal notes. (Badham, verbal communication, 17 August, 2017)

These letters seek to connect, much as Ben Campkin and Rosie Cox have described, "theoretical work, physical spaces and environments and their representation [along with...] the world of material objects, communities and individuals" (2012: 6). Though nearly one-sided, the letters reveal an increasing familiarity between the artist and cleaner, a sign of the speed at which strangers can become acquaintances, friends, and sometimes lovers (not always in that

order) in the short span of time of events such as conferences, festivals, nights out on the town, airplane rides, ocean cruises and beach holidays. Such is the socio-political potency of personal letters.

The letters cast an air of ambiguity: did the performance really happen?; does Maria exist?; did these letters find their way to her?; what does she think now that they are being made public?; have ethical responsibilities been respected?; or, alternatively, is the power of autotheory, fiction and ficto-criticism enough to hold one's imagination. Is this conversation about dirt confronting, even tense, viable, immersive, and therefore that much more affective? Read on and see.

Wednesday 2 October 2013

Good morning, Ms. Maria Woźny,³

Wondering if you found this note. For the next three days, I offer to clean the INSPACE Gallery. Feel free to sleep in; enjoy yourself. I checked with the manager at Spotless Commercial Cleaners who promised me that you will not be docked any wages.⁴ Hope you are happy with this gift of time.

I am a live artist and academic here to attend the symposium Plenitude and Emptiness. When I arrived this afternoon to check out the space, I found the door to the janitor's closet unlocked. Inside I found cleaning supplies and a work coat embroidered with your name. I tucked this note in the pocket. The clipboard on the back of the door indicated that you are scheduled to tend to the gallery from 5-8 am each morning of the symposium. At that moment, the score for my performance became clear.

The performance ground maintenance practices the work of a relatively invisible labour force; to take stock of its value, and to take note of the tender care that building interiors require to endure. This is one of many performances acting out maintenance; I take cues from feminist artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who washed the steps of a museum on hands and knees, and who shook hands with every sanitation worker in NYC.⁵ While it appears that it was Ukeles' aim to raise respect for the working classes,⁶ mine is to pay respect to the labour of maintenance and to the material itself—dirt. I plan to clean the gallery each day of the symposium: to do as you do every day. I will carry out this responsibility on your behalf with reverence for your labour, skill, and care of so many smooth, hard, and shiny surfaces. All that glass! I have no fear of hard work, getting my hands dirty, or pre-dawn hours. I know by your work coat that we both have fulsome bodies. The orderliness of the closet tells me that you are tidy, and by the packet of lollies in the left pocket, you, like me, adore black liquorice. Everything suggests that you take pride in your work.

Having never been a commercial cleaner, I don't under-estimate the attention to detail that is required. I suspect that, like many custodians, janitors, and cleaners, your effort goes unnoticed, taken for granted. I know how that feels having worked as a house cleaner for some wealthy people with big expectations living in big mansions. I have, in minor ways, felt the division that orders people according to their relation to dirt.⁷ Do the people you serve know you beyond your coat and mop? Some say this thankless and low-paying work has an anonymous history, a history that does not register until these small acts aggregate⁸ or are neglected on purpose to make a point such as the 1981 seventeen-day garbage strike in NYC.⁹

Your name, is it Polish? Were you part of the surge in Polish immigrants to Scotland around 2016?¹⁰ How has the transition been? Did you immigrate alone or with family? Why Edinburgh? I hope these questions are not too forward.¹¹ I am curious because I am an immigrant of sorts; in 1997 my husband, daughter and I moved from the USA to New Zealand, for a better life away from guns and violence, prejudice, racism, and pollution. I don't regret that decision despite the long distance between family and all the subtle points of difference that reveal themselves every day even 20 years later. So, tomorrow when I arrive at 5 am to the gallery, if the closet door is unlocked, this letter no longer in the pocket, I will know that you have accepted my offer. I promise to do a good job.

*Sincerely,
Julieanna Preston*

Thursday 3 October 2013

Good morning Maria,

Imagine my smile at finding the door open and the letter missing. The small packet of Walkers shortbread left in its place was an unexpected treat. Thank you. So kind.

I have decided to continue writing to you. Not sure why exactly, but it feels like we are in this together.

Well before dawn, I made my way through the dark streets where I joined a procession of custodians, caregivers, cleaners, rubbish collectors, shift workers, construction roadies and bus drivers. Heavy coats and scarves hid our blue collars, theirs more authentic than mine. Everyone walked through the clouds of their exhales. Heads bowed, we held our balance on the icy footpaths. I felt an unspoken comradeship amongst this informal parade plodding to fix the needs and desires of the city folk still slumbering in warm beds.

I turned the gallery door key and crept in as if intruding, then locked the door, startled by the sound it made. Sensing my presence, the ceiling lights blinked. Their cold fluorescent white light vapourised the outside world. The interior space imploded; there was no escaping my own reflection.

This may well be your daily reality. What a solitary existence! Do you enjoy the silence? Do you sing or listen to music? I am partial to beats like "Where is the Love"¹² and "Love Shack"¹³ both highly recommended by professional maids to reduce fatigue, improve motor coordination and increase stimulation.¹⁴

Last night I researched methods of sweeping. Despite much practice sweeping the house as a girl, and later in life, keeping the building construction site debris-free, it seems that I have been doing it wrong.

Choosing the right broom is paramount. Stiff long bristles are for exterior surfaces like concrete and asphalt. Soft short bristles are for smooth interior surfaces such as vinyl or ceramic tile.¹⁵ Two types of broom are in your closet: 1) a standard, straw or corn broom fits into corners effectively, covers large areas easily, and yet, it is susceptible to losing bristles and not picking up dust and, 2) a push broom with a medium-large head that will cover big areas and catch larger bits of debris in the flagged polypropylene bristles though it is known to kick up dust.¹⁶ Both brooms had a basic varnished round wooden shaft adorned by marks where your hands have been many times, more evidence of the word 'maintain' as a reference to support, aid, hold, hold fast, sustain, hold in hand, and practice habitually.¹⁷

I selected the push broom thinking that efficiency and quantity of collection were key factors. A systematic plan was needed. Some people sweep from the perimeter of the room to the centre while others divide the room into sections and join the small piles into one as it finds its way to the exit; many use a moist paper towel to avoid the "dreaded line of dirt" that the dustpan tends to leave behind.¹⁸ Keeping the bristles in continuous contact with the floor and pushing the broom away from your body in short strokes is essential.¹⁹ But then I do not need to tell you all this!

I went to the corner furthest from the door. A sea of shiny white vinyl tiles lay next to a large glass window wall frequently used to display moving image work to pedestrians.²⁰ The low sun angle amplified every impurity on those surfaces. I aimed to sweep the entire gallery in one continuous push-stroke, a method met with opposition by the columns, floor grills and sculpture on display; it was not expedient. The broom and I herded the pile in successive strokes like a snowball that collects everything in its path: across the vinyl, through the tiered seating, and down the steps to the polished concrete lower-level. The pile came to rest near the door at the far end of the projection wall

at the far end of the projection wall and precariously in the path of every speaker walking to the lectern.

No way to sweep the room. Are you laughing? I am. Tomorrow is another day.

I returned the broom and the dust coat to the closet, sat on the steps in front of the dirt pile, and munched the shortbread. Yum. Much to my chagrin, fog had invaded the city streets. Someone waved at me daydreaming; I was now visible to the outside. A stiff wind found its way under the glass door and redistributed the pile. Futility.

Cleaning is not my forté. This fact may not bode well with you: I love the activity of cleaning but am better known for the ‘holidays’ left on the windows, the crumbs remaining between the couch cushions, and the dust bunnies behind the door. The verb ‘cleaning’ is more fun than the adverb ‘clean.’ It has been written: “The world is our home. It is placed in our charge, for us to take care of. But the world refuses to comply with our will. Dirt is a visible expression of this.”²¹ Here, for me, process gazumps product.

One of your workmates stopped by the gallery. He described you as a hard and dependable worker and mentioned you grew up on a farm in Kampinos outside of Warsaw and now live above a shop called Beautiful Things/ Unique Polish Artworks on Morningside Road. This new information makes me wonder if cleaners tend to keep their homes as clean or cleaner than their workplace,²² or is it a different kind of cleaning? Maybe dirt is different when it is one’s own.

I am told that as a toddler I was always out in the yard playing with dirt — shaping, throwing, painting, and even eating it. It is not surprising that to this day I relish the pungent smell of compost and am happy in gumboots and jeans out on the land in all kinds of weather. But dirt à la land is very different culturally from dirt as in the stuff that falls to the floor during human activities or even human waste itself.²³ It was mind over matter the time I needed to dig out a long drop. And I found the range of earthy colours (and aromas) in my child’s diapers fascinating rather than repulsive. My family believes I inherited this odd (their word) sensibility from my great grandmother who grew up on a farm on the outskirts of Zagreb. Apparently, she was a cow whisperer and spent many hours shovelling manure from the horse stall, the chicken coop, and the pig pen. Happy as Larry as the saying goes. Her house was immaculate, though humble. So, it seems that my relation to dirt is shaped by my ancestry and is very much related to bodily states of sensation — a matter of perception and intuition.²⁴ Dirt is as theoretical as it is a slippery matter, a concept, experience and metaphor.²⁵ Far from abject, ‘dirty’ and ‘clean’ are not opposed to one another. Under certain circumstances, they might create pleasant or enjoyable encounters.²⁶

Such pleasure in dirt is not something easy to explain to my family. The proverbs below resound in my childhood memories. Each one calls for cleanliness, good hygiene, order, tidiness, purity, chastity, morality, good taste, spiritual faith, good upbringing, social codes of behaviour, productivity, and class distinction:

Cleanliness is next to godliness.

Clean out a corner of your mind and creativity will instantly fill it.

A clean conscience makes a soft pillow.

It is at home, not in public, that one washes his dirty linen.

Cleanliness makes it easier to see the details.

If you want to sweep the steps clean, start at the top.

A new broom sweeps clean, but the old brush knows all the corners.

Open the window, change the air.

The purpose of art, is washing the dust of daily life off our souls.

Dirty water does not wash clean.

Housekeeping is like being caught in a revolving door.

Who walks in the mud, at some point must clean his feet.

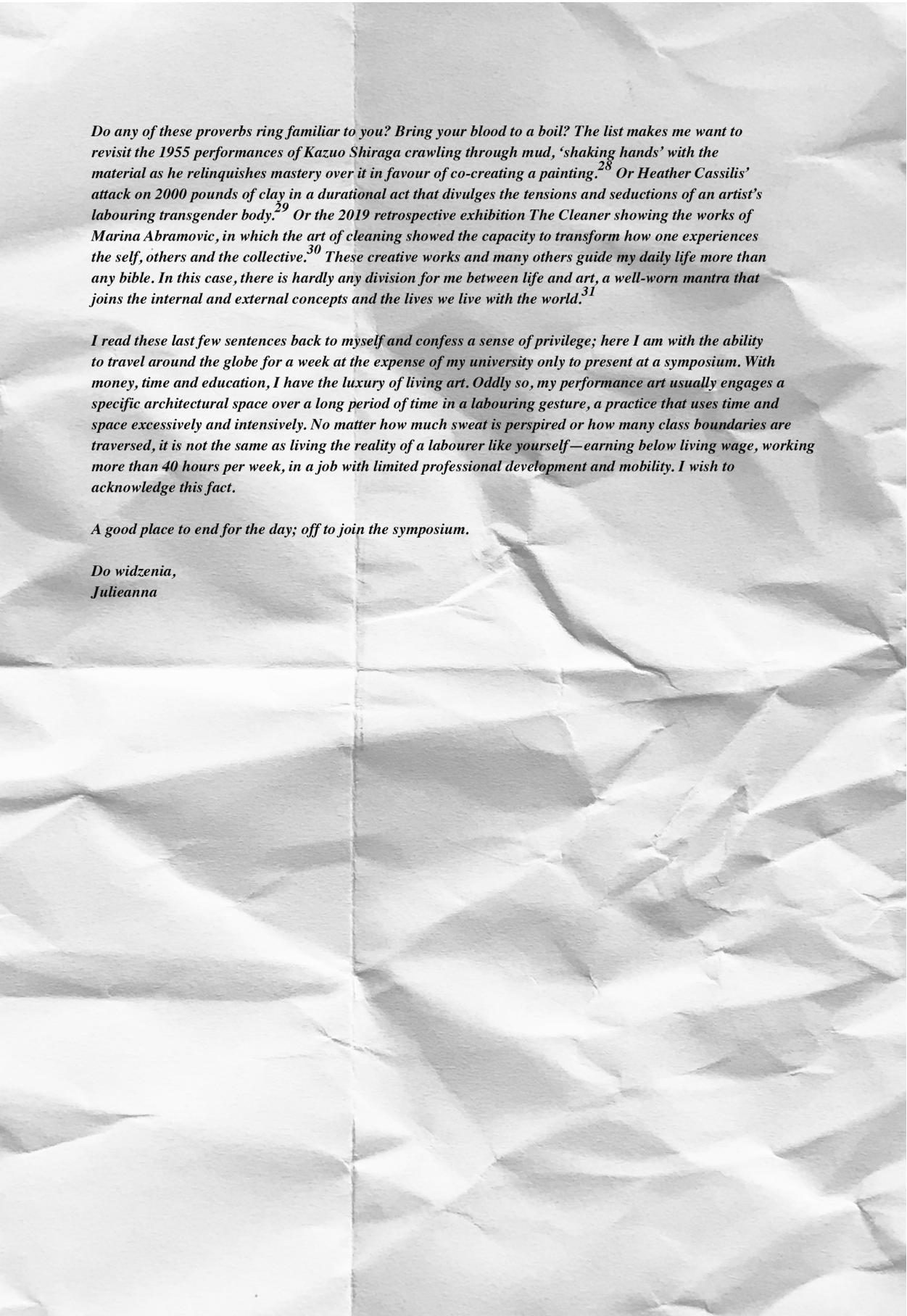
The world is our house. Keep it clean.

Cleaning and organizing is a practice, not a project.

Clean your own doorstep before you clean someone else’s.

Cleanliness is the luxury of the poor.

Clean your own yard first before asking others to clean theirs.²⁷



Do any of these proverbs ring familiar to you? Bring your blood to a boil? The list makes me want to revisit the 1955 performances of Kazuo Shiraga crawling through mud, ‘shaking hands’ with the material as he relinquishes mastery over it in favour of co-creating a painting.²⁸ Or Heather Cassilis’ attack on 2000 pounds of clay in a durational act that divulges the tensions and seductions of an artist’s labouring transgender body.²⁹ Or the 2019 retrospective exhibition The Cleaner showing the works of Marina Abramovic, in which the art of cleaning showed the capacity to transform how one experiences the self, others and the collective.³⁰ These creative works and many others guide my daily life more than any bible. In this case, there is hardly any division for me between life and art, a well-worn mantra that joins the internal and external concepts and the lives we live with the world.³¹

I read these last few sentences back to myself and confess a sense of privilege; here I am with the ability to travel around the globe for a week at the expense of my university only to present at a symposium. With money, time and education, I have the luxury of living art. Oddly so, my performance art usually engages a specific architectural space over a long period of time in a labouring gesture, a practice that uses time and space excessively and intensively. No matter how much sweat is perspired or how many class boundaries are traversed, it is not the same as living the reality of a labourer like yourself—earning below living wage, working more than 40 hours per week, in a job with limited professional development and mobility. I wish to acknowledge this fact.

A good place to end for the day; off to join the symposium.

*Do widzenia,
Julieanna*

Friday 4 October 2013

Good morning Maria,

After only two days of doing your work, I am exhausted. Not sure how you do it. Maybe jetlag, the early starts and days of dense symposium presentations are catching up to me. My respect for you grows. Hoping you have been able to indulge in some good honest laziness. And by laziness, I mean Mladen Stilinović's definition: "...the absence of movement and thought, dumb time—total amnesia... indifference, staring at nothing, non-activity, impotence...sheer stupidity, a time of pain, of futile concentration...about laziness is not enough, it must be practiced and perfected."³²

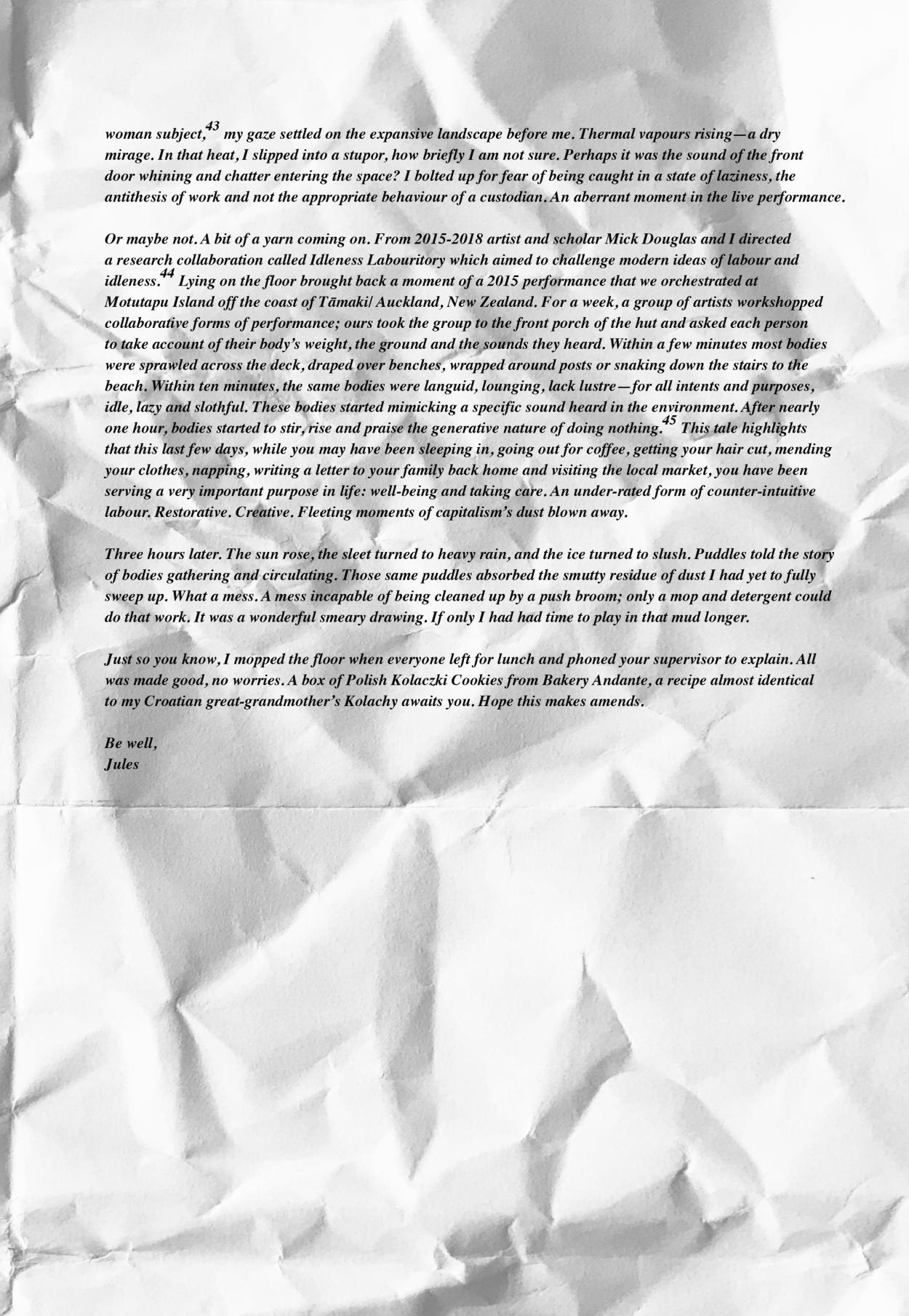
This morning, I took a very different tack to sweeping. I adopted the approach of a sociological miniaturist who examines the details and minutia of the everyday life to find micro-level order relating to larger world systems and social structures.³³ Looking closely, brushing lightly, and taking my time meant I nearly did not finish the task before the symposium started at 9 am. Instead of gathering large bits of dirt such as scone crumbs, leaves, gum wrappers and stray threads, this sweep focused on dust, a material connected with human identity, a threatening health agent, a symbol of death, neglect, and devastation, and not the least, a sign of poor housekeeping.³⁴ Think about it: dust infiltrates our daily life literally and metaphorically, including social aspects of labour, economy, concepts of progress and industrialisation, gender, and nationality; it links personal experience, our interactions with others and our engagement with institutions.³⁵

I found myself on my knees a good part of the time, removing the broom's handle and stroking every corner and crevasse with the head's soft bristles. Slow and methodical, I was cautious to not agitate the dust particles enough to make them airborne, because as we know, as a disease-ridden substance, dust is largely human skin, hair, and dandruff.³⁶ Just who was I inhaling? As unsettling as this thought was, this manner of sweeping proved very introspective even as a fine film of particles coated the floor almost too small to be seen by the naked eye. I lost sense of time while indulging in this "women's work," unbothered by my blackened hands, pants, coat, and nasal passages. My ears rang with derogatory rants equating dust with women, poverty, and immigrants; "beggar's velvet" or "slut's wool" and "the great unwashed,"³⁷ a reference to Third World industrial pollution and a prejudice towards nations' poor cleaning habits as a sign of moral and monetary impoverishment.³⁸

*Here is where dust bears out its political dimension. I learned through practical means that when dust is dry, it hovers and floats; it goes everywhere. I was swimming in a colloidal atmosphere. 'Tis the magic sparkle of confetti, of creativity, of transformation and speculative realism evading sweeping's violent erasure.³⁹ Tasting the grit in my teeth; I might as well have licked the floor as I have done in other performances. Was this what feminist philosopher Judith Butler meant by the radicality of Other: "What we expel, the dirty, the abject, is exactly what composes us, what we already are?"⁴⁰ Dust seems to be the universal organising material of the world including an influence in social order. Would that fact grant you power or authority? Keeper of dust? Maintenance worker of the world? Have you ever heard of the story *Horton Hears a Who!* about an elephant who protects a world of miniature people living on a peck of dust?⁴¹ A story ripe with satire. A story about caring.*

*You must have noticed that the gallery has a false floor. When the broom smacked the floor, an underworld sounded. The floor is supported by a space frame that enables all kinds of technology to be housed out of sight and yet accommodate many variations of multi-media installations. Prying a tile up was both thrilling and horrific; it was a secret inhabitable interior lined with wires and cables much like the scene in the 1985 film *Brazil*, and the 1920 macro-landscape photographic world *Dust Breeding* by Marcel Duchamp.⁴² With a spooky deep voice, I whispered, "Hellooooo. What is brewing down there?" Perhaps like me, you considered brushing a bit of newly swept dust into that cavern? Who would know? Better than any rug, right?*

I succumbed to gravity, belly down, chin on folded arms, eye level to the floor. Far from posing as a reclining



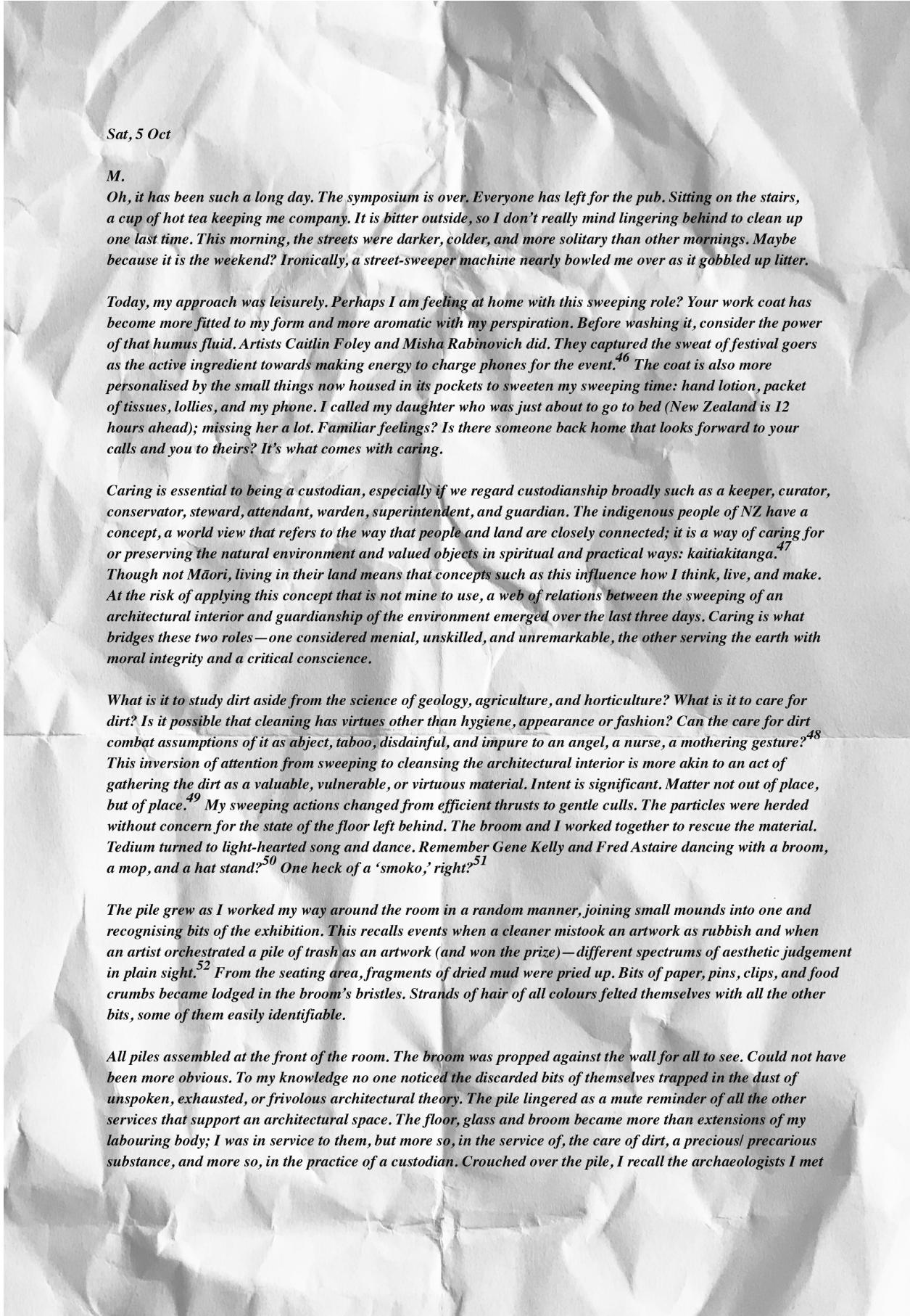
woman subject,⁴³ my gaze settled on the expansive landscape before me. Thermal vapours rising—a dry mirage. In that heat, I slipped into a stupor, how briefly I am not sure. Perhaps it was the sound of the front door whining and chatter entering the space? I bolted up for fear of being caught in a state of laziness, the antithesis of work and not the appropriate behaviour of a custodian. An aberrant moment in the live performance.

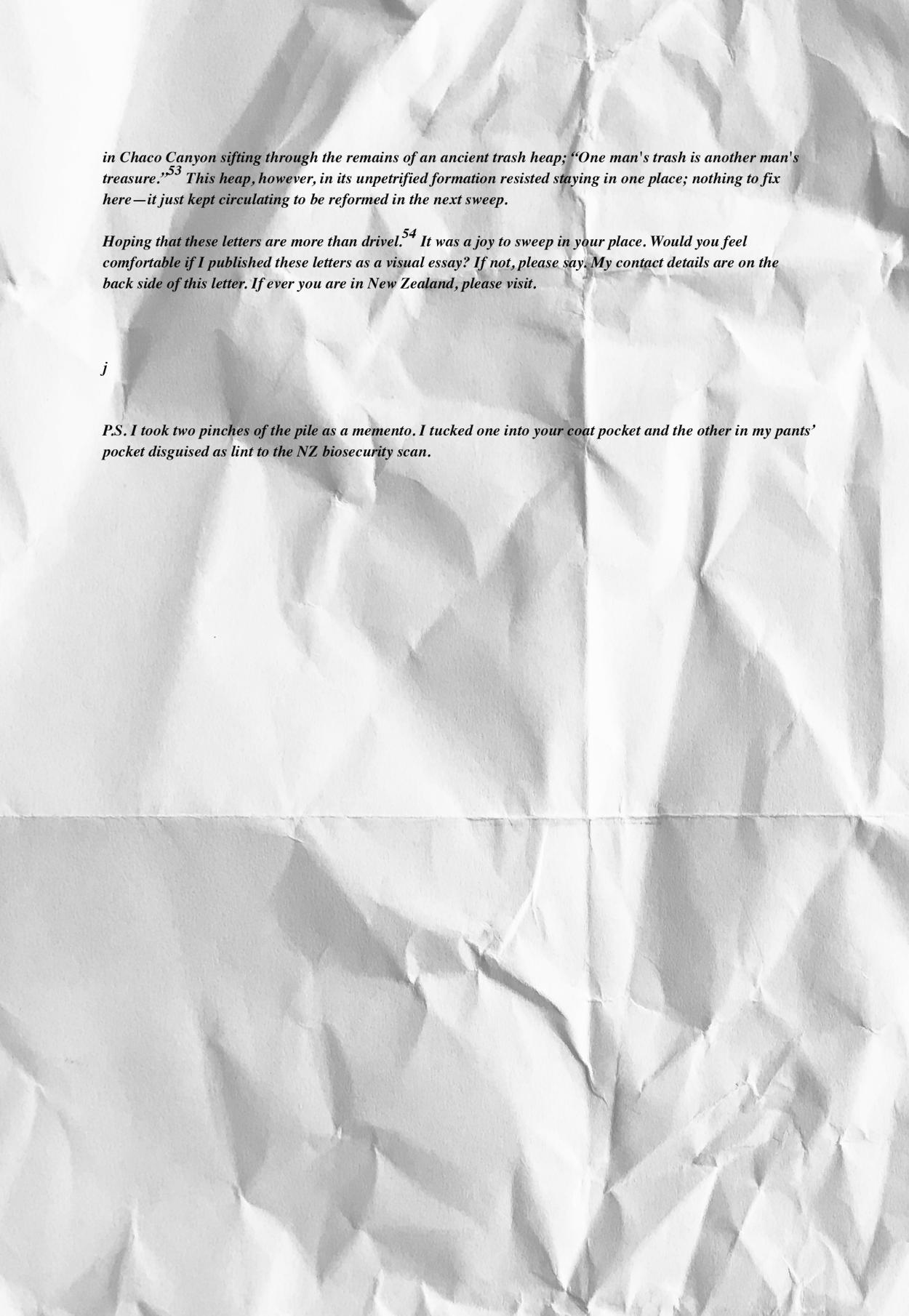
Or maybe not. A bit of a yarn coming on. From 2015-2018 artist and scholar Mick Douglas and I directed a research collaboration called *Idleness Labouritory* which aimed to challenge modern ideas of labour and idleness.⁴⁴ Lying on the floor brought back a moment of a 2015 performance that we orchestrated at Motutapu Island off the coast of Tāmaki/Auckland, New Zealand. For a week, a group of artists workshopped collaborative forms of performance; ours took the group to the front porch of the hut and asked each person to take account of their body's weight, the ground and the sounds they heard. Within a few minutes most bodies were sprawled across the deck, draped over benches, wrapped around posts or snaking down the stairs to the beach. Within ten minutes, the same bodies were languid, lounging, lack lustre—for all intents and purposes, idle, lazy and slothful. These bodies started mimicking a specific sound heard in the environment. After nearly one hour, bodies started to stir, rise and praise the generative nature of doing nothing.⁴⁵ This tale highlights that this last few days, while you may have been sleeping in, going out for coffee, getting your hair cut, mending your clothes, napping, writing a letter to your family back home and visiting the local market, you have been serving a very important purpose in life: well-being and taking care. An under-rated form of counter-intuitive labour. Restorative. Creative. Fleeting moments of capitalism's dust blown away.

Three hours later. The sun rose, the sleet turned to heavy rain, and the ice turned to slush. Puddles told the story of bodies gathering and circulating. Those same puddles absorbed the smutty residue of dust I had yet to fully sweep up. What a mess. A mess incapable of being cleaned up by a push broom; only a mop and detergent could do that work. It was a wonderful smeary drawing. If only I had had time to play in that mud longer.

Just so you know, I mopped the floor when everyone left for lunch and phoned your supervisor to explain. All was made good, no worries. A box of Polish Kolaczki Cookies from Bakery Andante, a recipe almost identical to my Croatian great-grandmother's Kolachy awaits you. Hope this makes amends.

Be well,
Jules





in Chaco Canyon sifting through the remains of an ancient trash heap; “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure.”⁵³ This heap, however, in its unpetrified formation resisted staying in one place; nothing to fix here—it just kept circulating to be reformed in the next sweep.

Hoping that these letters are more than drivel.⁵⁴ It was a joy to sweep in your place. Would you feel comfortable if I published these letters as a visual essay? If not, please say. My contact details are on the back side of this letter. If ever you are in New Zealand, please visit.

j

P.S. I took two pinches of the pile as a memento. I tucked one into your coat pocket and the other in my pants’ pocket disguised as lint to the NZ biosecurity scan.

NOTES

1 Because the creative expression of the letters included here as images strain against *Interstices'* official citation style, the author and the editors have sought to prioritise the narrative intent of the letters and so have limited APA in-text citation to this initial framing text. Citation and reference within the letters themselves have been unconventionally formatted as endnotes to better sustain the performance of intimacy intended for the correspondence. These endnotes are, in turn, supported by the references that follow.

2 What constitutes an academic essay is not a singular homogenous thing, and yet, in the realm of creative practice research or artistic research, the name carries connotations associated with essays or articles that take a very specific structure, form of argumentation and delivery of evidence and findings akin to the social sciences and humanities. In this essay I am highlighting and demonstrating an alternative approach to that historical model that maintains the primacy of the creative inquiry embedded in the performance and, subsequently, flows through in what is known as performance writing.

3 The name Maria Woźny is a pseudonym. "Maria is a feminine given name [...] influenced by Latin Christianity. It has

its origin as the feminine form of the Roman name Marius (see *Maria gens*), and, after Christianity has spread across the Roman empire, it became the Latinised form of the name of Miriam: Mary, mother of Jesus," and "Maria means "exalted one" (from Hebrew *rōm/רֹם* = height), "rebelliousness" or "wished for child." "Maria," (CharliesNames, n.d.). The surname "wozny" (from *wozic* 'to convey') means 'caretaker' or 'janitor' in modern Polish. "Maria" (Ancestry.com, n.d.).

4 Recent online posts state that an average commercial cleaner hourly wage rate is £9.44 per hour in Edinburgh, which is below the living wage in Scotland of £9.50/hour. See, "How much does a cleaner make in Edinburgh?" (Indeed, n.d.). See also, Living Wage Scotland (2020).

5 See Phillips, et al. (2016).

6 See Frichot (2019: 66).

7 Campkin and Cox remind us that "Cleaning is a continual activity, yet not something we all do. In fact the doing, or not, of dirt is divided down the lines of class, ethnicity and gender—the most powerful social divides in contemporary life [...] Dirt and cleaning exist within and constitute social relations both within and outside domestic environments" (2012: 5–6).

8 See Gideon (1948: 3).

9 See Stetson (1981, 18 December).

10 See Davies (2019, 27 January).

11 A peer reviewer made me aware that this essay may transgress the boundaries of proper address as it provoked a discomforting level of intimacy. I have retained this condition on the basis that during events such as in-person conferences and even online symposia, processes of becoming familiar occur very quickly such that in a few days or hours one can change from unknown to acquaintances and, sometimes, even friends.

12 Black Eyed Peas (2009, 16 June).

13 B52s (2013, 3 December).

14 See The Maids (2020, July 22).

15 See Verger (2017).

16 See Iristify (2016).

17 Online Etymology Dictionary (2021).

18 See All Kleen (2018).

19 See All Kleen (2018).

20 For internal and external images of the gallery space, see <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRorW40IY4x/> and <https://www.reiachandhall.co.uk/work-culture/in-space-the-informatics-exhibition-space-edinburgh>.

21 See Lagerspetz (n.d.).

22 Frichot (2019: 73).

23 Frichot (2019: 5–41).

24 Frichot (2019: 5–41).

25 Douglas (1999: 47–51).

26 Campkin & Cox (2012: 1).

27 See Davison (n.d.).

28 See Shiraga (1995).

29 See Jones (2015: 59).

30 See e-flux/Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade (2019).

31 See Lagerspetz (n. d.).

32 See Stilinović (2021).

33 See Figes & Shore (2019: 1–15).

34 See Figes & Shore (2019: 2).

35 See Fine & Hallett (2003: 2).

36 See Pelley (2017).

37 See Fine & Hallett (2003: 6–8).

38 See Fine & Hallett (2003: 9–12).

39 Frichot (2019: 137, 149–160).

40 Frichot (2019: 26).

41 See Dr. Seuss (1954).

42 See Gillam (1985); see also, Campany (2017).

43 See Figes & Shore (2019)

44 The Lab developed performative projects that critiqued existing capitalistic modalities of work and looked to idleness as a necessary antidote and form of resistance to the pressures; it has to be productive as a prerequisite to being a good citizen. Our research sought to generate examples of artistic practices necessary to engage with current challenges facing living systems, including human society. See "attuning", "Appending", "Attending", and "Reading labours" at www.julieannapreston.space.

45 See Russell (1935).

46 See Rabinovich & Foley (2016).

47 See Royal (2021).

48 See Preston, et al. (2021).

49 See Douglas (1966).

50 See Green (2021).

51 See Alves (2017).

52 See Cleaner throws out 'rubbish' Sala Murat artwork (2014).

53 See Farlex (2015).

54 Throughout this essay I have attempted to hold true to two values: first, that even though the tone and voice of the letters shifts from a formal to a familiar register, a calculated level of respect, decorum and generosity is maintained such that assumptions, stereotypes, and other unconscious bias I might have towards a person I do not know and a person who cleans for a living are not in play; and second, that the manner of writing letters is a mixture of introspective thought, description, conversation, and storytelling that is idiosyncratic, subjective, and linked to ad hoc references to popular culture that dominated by formal/academic modes of theory and criticism. In this case, writing letters to a specific person on a specific event is a tactic to eclipse the theory-practice binary in a method that aims at affecting intimacy between strangers as much as it is an aggregation of bits as the pile itself. For that very reason, this is dirty work. See, Frichot (2019) and Leddy (1995: 259–268).

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