Peeling Ancestors: Jell-O as Archive and Anarchive
Noelle Herceg

The University of Oregon
Master of Fine Arts Thesis Report
2022

Committee
Amanda Wojick (Chair)
Charlene Liu
Colin Ives

In the cold-lit stale rooms of *IDEAL LIVING*, her food tray is brought up as close as it could be to her chair, and my grandpa sits behind it. He picks up the spoon and scoops up mush—brown mush, with a little bit of green mush, and then to the whitish orangish mush. Lifting the spoon to my grandma's mouth, he waits. Sometimes she was able to barely open her mouth, her lips quivering as if taking all of her strength just to move them a centimeter apart. Sometimes he'd push the spoon right into her lips~~,~~ and chunks left around her mouth and dripped onto her chest, which grandpa would carefully wipe away with a napkin. Some days she couldn't open her mouth, some days she probably didn't want to. But even if she wasn't hungry, she'd always have room for her red purée juice. Grandpa would place a straw into the cup and hold it to her lips, sometimes needing to place the straw into her mouth, but she would suck that sweet red juice right up. I'd watch it move from the cup into the straw, going up and up until it reached her. It was thicker than I expected the first time I saw it, jiggling a little bit if you shook the cup.

Jell-O—soups, sits, and sets—undergoing transmutation from fat and solid to powder to liquid to a semi-solid once again. As a sculptural material it is intrinsically linked to the idea of "leftover," a cast born from the mold, the shadow shape from a stencil, the daughter and the mother. Both a leftover in its physicality and materiality, Jell-O also could be deemed a leftover through its literal and metaphorical traces encapsulated—containing extracted and skimmed fat and collagen from boiled bones from other mammals. Jell-O houses both known and unknown histories of the lives used to make its form, while also holding the cultural, societal, and gendered known and unknown histories of its 125-year life as "America's Most Famous Dessert."[i] I am interested in how Jell-O at once is both archive and anarchive.

Noelle Herceg, *Residue Medallions 2/23/21 - 3/23/21, mixed media, wine, coffee, cyanotype, and glue*, 2021

My printmaking work has had a close correspondence with the sculptural world, lifting quasi-copies and impressions from found and produced leftovers. Before discovering Jell-O as a sculptural material, I was using glue—another transmutational substance, changing from liquid to semi-solid, with the ability to peel. From the floor, I lifted large sheets of glue that were once puddles, and when they dried marks from the floor were carried with them. I directly peeled up traces of the floor's architecture and history: impressions of cracks in the concrete, blue artist tape, and marks and drips accumulated over an unknown span of time. The glue layer became an outermost skin of the studio floor, and as I peeled up large layers I was immersed between the floor and its ghost, between the two outer layers of skin. I felt an uncanny connection to the artist Heidi Bucher, who had teared embryonic latex peelings from her parents' home in the 70's. She even called her own peelings "skins", and like my glue, the latex would retain its resilience for a while and slowly harden, darken, wrinkle and congeal.[ii]

Noelle Herceg, peeling floor of the Washburn Gallery, University of Oregon, 2020

Heidi Bucher, skinning her house in Switzerland, 1980s

The glue as binding agent holds dust, crumbs, scraps, and impressions from the concrete, while also containing a history of previous makers in the space made known through stains and paint marks. I soon became curious in how to archive not only my direct environment, but my own body, collecting my leftovers. Lint peeled from the lint catcher of the drying machine. Fallen and pulled hair that sits in the shower drain. Dandruff and other dead skin scratched and accumulated into layers of dust on the many surfaces around my house. These leftovers become indicators of both presence and absence of the body, of my body. In The Scatter: Sculpture as Leftover, Briony Fer examines the leftover in Eva Hesse's "studio leavings" and Gabriel Orozco's tables. "Leftovers are part objects in time rather than space. Leftovers suggest fractured rather than continuous time. They are cut off from both a past

and a future…This is neither an archive nor memory bank of things."[iii] In this way, not only are the lint, sweepings, and stains leftovers and markers what was once-there, but the act of the pour and the peel of the glue skin instills a different kind of trace: Heidi's peelings from her parent's walls linger in the peelings from my floor; the glue peelings contain more than the remains that meets the eye.

In an ongoing sculpture series of *casserole calendars*, my leftovers are preserved in glue, coffee, tea, and other weekly collections. The main ingredient (so to speak) are sweepings—swept up detritus from my kitchen, bathroom, or studio floors. Sweepings often compile of crumbs, dust, small scraps and peelings, and hair. What's left over in a seltzer can on my desk might get poured into one container, while the next week gathered eggshells from previous breakfasts are added to another. The remainder of the coffee left over in my mug from the weekend gets poured into the soup; the bits of paper in my pocket are sprinkled into Jell-O. Once "calendars" are peeled out of their Pyrex dishes, the leftover bits/crumbs/spottings on the glass aren't washed out, and instead become incorporated into the next, a perpetual stew of sorts.[1] Sometimes the peelings themselves are reconstituted and added to subsequent stews. Ultimately, many layers of time are brought into one "layer" of the casserole.

Sculptor Liz Larner works in a similar way, often re-ingesting materials from previous projects, referring to her process as *composting.* In her "cultures", Larner would use three levels of differently colored nutrient media: red, yellow and blue. Within

[1] In medieval cooking, a staple of medieval inn meals would be something known as 'perpetual stew,' which is a stew containing whatever is on hand and added to as needed. Also referred to as "garbage soup" or "forever soup," it can be in the same pot for years if always above 140f, creating a perpetual cycle of adding and removing from it.[1]

a few days, bacteria would begin to grow and feed of the nutrient media—and colors would mix wildly, "like a miniature action painting that's constantly changing and making itself."[iv] The nutrient is eventually used up and bacteria die, but as Larner states even though the culture begins to purify and shrivel, some trace is always left. As Beau Rutland describes them, these petri dishes attain a "funereal quality." The work is defined by a temporal stutter or dislocation, always already dead and simultaneously in the process of dying—an everyday instance of death begetting rebirth (5). Larner's recent exhibition *Don't Put It Back Like It Was* at The Sculpture Center includes these culture works such as "Orchid, Buttermilk, Penny" which have significantly changed since its making in 1987. Thirty-five years later, more browned delicate cultures are still alive and still dead, continually dying.

Liz Larner, *Orchid, Buttermilk, Penny,* 1987

Noelle Herceg, *casserole calendars I* and *VI*, coffee, wine, glue, studio sweepings, and mixed media in glass Pyrex dishes, 2021

In another one of my ongoing series *Jell-O Squares*, the changing state of the material is significant to the work. Flimsy membranous sheets wrap to enclose leftovers, and day by day shift state, growing ever more delicate, brittle, vulnerable to being broken and re-collecting what has been inside. Translucent bright yellow-green gradually alters to a dull browned-green. These squares might also have a "funereal quality" to them—but through their slow deaths, I see shifting, and changing, weakly holding on for "life."

Returning to Fer's essay, the leftover also comes to stand not for what once has been, but what will be. They suggest forever-fluctuating possibilities. What is kept as important and what is cast out as unimportant have always been mutually dependent. Focusing our attention on the leftover calls into question the value of what we choose to keep. The things that seem important at first end up being abandoned, and what is at first abandoned ends up being the most productive (228). I began collecting leftovers with the absurd intention to preserve the ephemeral. Actions such as documenting my combed-out hair every time I take a shower for over two years, or trying to collect my underarm sweat for nine weeks which I then drank in the video piece "Sweat Disposition,"—describe a certain affinity for the trace, more specifically traces of my body. Traces like the sweat are transient—evaporating as I try to collect beads. I am urged to "protect" matter within faux-shields of glue or Jell-O.

The Jell-O as transient material becomes surrogate for my own skin. My body. My memories. Holding and containing what is and/or seems vital, while letting other substrate pass through.

Noelle Herceg, *Jell-O Square n/n,* Jell-O with custard container, 6" x 6", 2022

There remains a tension between containment and porosity; fixity and unfixity. Encasing and embalming, transparency and vitrification. I am reminded of Anicka Yi's body of sculptural "soap stomachs," in which materials are encased in resin-coated blocks of hardened glycerin soap. *Cyberbully 1* (2014) contains desiccant beads, vinyl tubing, acrylic paint, acrylic rods, sodium silicate, and Prada moisturizer. Desiccant sucks up the moisture in glycerin and moisturizer while staving off microbial growth in food—stabilizing the work while making ineffective substances used to suppress the wrinkling of skin. The sodium silicate, or "liquid glass", repels water and permanently hardened resin seals the soap.[v] In "Irreducible Ambiguity," Alise Upitis writes that the work occupies the space of dying, "it seems constantly regained as it is constantly lost again…life that endures in death and maintains itself in it."

Anika Yi, *In-Q-Tel*, Glycerin soap, resin, wax, petri dish, acrylic paint, rubber tubing, acrylic frame, 2013

In her 2014 series of stomachs, Plexiglas encases resin-soaked tempura fried flowers, paraffin wax, stainless shelves, and chrome-plated dumbbells. The embalmed flowers, although bound in irreversibly hardened matter will nevertheless rot. The transparent qualities of glycerin, resin, and Plexiglas do not open us into understanding but sink us towards "lucidity at the depths of torpor," and "the work as a whole has the opaque meaning of a thing that is being eaten that is also eating, that is devouring, that is being swallowed up, and re-creating itself in vain effort to change itself into nothing" (30-31). "Dying—a present absence—is encoded, and we are turned in the direction of the death of pure materiality that comes with understanding" (31). Death is both present and absent—and materiality has a power/magic/role in reminding this. Both Larner's and Yi's matter are in flux—the resin, Plexiglas, or photograph a means of false protection and/or preservation. Bodies of mold or fried flowers will continue to rot and shift states of being, although held in place by their outer surfaces.

Noelle Herceg, *Jell-O Square Series*, 2022

I submerge my trimmed hair, peeled onion skin, clipped nails.

The pink skin from the onion in the Jell-O has begun to mold, growing greener and more pungent each week.

Within the Jell-O, visible leftovers like coffee grounds, crumbs, or hair are kept in place. Beyond what is at first noticeable, the Jell-O is also a container for the invisible leftovers—the traces of animal collagen to make gelatin. It contains histories of labor in meticulous effort involved in its initial production and shifts in the product's marketing campaigns across its 100+ year life as a bought and sold American food product. In Jell-O Girls: A Family History, Allie Rowbottom writes about some of these unseen layers with Jell-O's history, including the impact the product made on her grandmother, her mother, and herself. These histories (both fictional and nonfictional) that Rowbottom addresses are only a few of the unseen and unknown layers within Jell-O. The gelatinous matter in this way is a container of both visible and invisible. It is archive and anarchive.

The anarchive. What Erin Manning calls the anarchive is "something that catches us in our own becoming."[vi] Julietta Singh names it "the future archive. The archive of alterity."[vii] And as "my own impossible archive."[viii] The archive and anarchive go hand in hand. My collections of lint when I do the laundry for example, is an archive of lint: collected peelings of dust from the trap within a two-year time frame. But the anarchive of this lint collection is what cannot be collected. It is a resistance of the archive, an attempt to harness the process itself of collecting the lint while understanding it cannot be done.

Erin Manning's work with SenseLab involved seeking an alternative mode of capture, with hope to find "a practice that would allow action traces to become mobilized across other environments of collective experimentation," but in trying so found the anarchive needs the archive. She looks to

Whitehead's process philosophy for tools to understand how all experience is made of cracks and captures, archival and anarchival at once.[ix] To Whitehead, a world of activity is one that creates the present by transforming the past, and by anticipating the future.[x] But this way of approaching experience from the middle, or "middling," resists past, present, and future as linear time. Manning proposes then to think topologically, to consider perspectives other than our own, and to encounter these questions from the orientation of the more-than-human (83). The anarchive then, is activating and orienting—making it a collaborator in all takings-form.

Manning's use of the term "infrathin" also has resonated with my work. Culling from Duchamp's use of the word, the infrathin is the most minute of intervals, a quality of the in between, an interval that cannot quite be articulated.[xi] Similar to an anarchive or ghost archive, I view the infrathin as a layer just out of reach, but still under your nose. Felt but not seen. Perhaps it operates as intuition: a guiding force which is not known but felt. Gilles Deluze writes about intuition as a process not being in-time: "intuition is rather the movement by which we emerge from our own duration, by which we make use of our own duration and immediately recognize the existence of other durations."[xii] What is most interesting is that he states the motor of intuition to be sympathy. Sympathy is an objectivity focused not on inert matter but on matter a part of time, on matter as something transformable and ever-changing.[xiii] My material engagement is bound to sympathetic modes of making, thinking, and dreaming. Akin to Sam Moyer's proposal of softness—being beyond textural quality, as an approach to how you perceive and care for material[xiv] —I work with a sympathy, a material empathy for my own

leftovers and the leftovers of unknown others contained within the Jell-O.

Reading Lars Spuybroek's *The Sympathy of Things*, in which he writes about the matter of ornament through "wall veils", drapery, and encrustation—I return to my Jell-O pourings and peelings. Ornament encounters fusion of the petrified and the fibered, the mineral and the vegetal, of stillness and liveliness. In the volume of *Modern Painters*, John Ruskin describes the surface of the planet as "The Earth-Veil." Being living but not alive, dead but not passive, it is an enormous sheet stretched over the whole surface of the earth, a horizontal wall veil composed of stone and foliage, encrusted and woven, ornate and alive, but also preserved and still.[xv]

My own Jell-O skins hang as curtains and veils—delicate ornamented sheets that droop and drape in similar nature to how Ruskin describes The Earth-Veil: being living but not alive, dead but not passive. Traces of unknown others' are contained in the Jell-O, with gelatin derived from collagen taken from animal parts. The Jell-O is then a living surface of others' deaths. The material quality of the Jell-O sheets slowly morph from malleable, translucent plastic-like films, to more and more opaque, crisp surface that grows brittle, darkens, and breaks away. It is living but not alive through stilled undulations of frozen drapery, but also in perpetual state of dying in that there is no "end." There is no "final form" the skins take. As they darken, harden, and break apart, fragments are kept to re-melt and re-pour. Throughout my practice, materials often play a reciprocal role with one another in being a container, while also becoming that which is contained. Working with glue and Jell-O as surfaces that encase other matter, remnants are "preserved" yet are not completely

Noelle Herceg, *decorticated*, coffee ground and Jell-O on aluminum, 64" x 27", 2022

protected from being stopped in time. Cinnamon roll leftovers kept in glue or a dried clementine within Jell-O continue to gradually shift under the surfaces of these skins—while the glue and Jell-O outer layers also harden, warp, or grow brittle. The thing that is being eaten is also eating. The skins that hold pieces absorbed, are also absorbing.

A living surface. A skin of seen and unseen layers. These peelings imitate layerings of time and protection found in my own dermises, while temporally existing as embodied actions toward my own skin—holding my urges to pick, scratch, and peel. My body as nail and hair clippings become material; and the Jell-O as material become body.

The body that contains is also one that collects. Holding my blood, my organs, my cells and my breath, my body also holds metaphysical assemblies of traces: that/who which have passed through me and impressed into me, their smells, their stories, their urges. In *No Archive Will Restore You*, Julietta Singh reflects on the body as both archivist and archive, as it gathers its own materials. In knowing the body as both a becoming and unbecoming thing, of scrambling time and matter--the body archive is a way of thinking-feeling the body's unbounded relation to other bodies (29). Bodies extend into space beyond the skin, and as Nancy Tuana describes, the boundaries between our flesh and the flesh of the world become entangled, porous.[xvi] In the example of drinking from a plastic bottle of coke, the parts of plastic become as much a part of her flesh as the coke she drank. Once that molecular interaction occurs, there is no divide between nature/culture, natural/artificial. As Singh puts it, the body is not and has never been singular, but an infinite collection of bodyings.[xvii]

The body is many bodies—a collection of others' traces. I want to point to a quote from Singh: "I begin to think there is no woman without the other woman—including the other woman that I am. Two figures that are also one, and also infinitely plural. She is an incalculable catalogue of traces that make up the body-self. Her accretions are infinite; I feel her, and I cannot stop from turning toward her." And, "…I feel that I have become part of a womanish assemblage, collectively linked through our contact with S we comprise an archive of gendered bodies, dispersed across time and geography but no less entwined."[xviii] With her words, I feel a vein, a root that attaches to makers, materials and mothers across time, which have intersected my body at one point (or many), whose routes are known and unknown.

Heidi Bucher, Liz Larner, Anicka Yi—their processes and urges of peeling the imprint or pouring resin over matter which continues to decay—are contained in my own pourings and peelings. My glue and Jell-O work maps histories within (1) leftovers as parcels/materia, (2) leftovers of unseen bodies from hooves, fats, proteins, etc., and (3) leftovers as infrathin recollections from other makers across time and space.

My current work operates as ancestorial non-chart. I map materials, mothers, and makers who are contained in visible and invisible ways. This map is an attempt to track intersections of intuition, such as crossings between Heidi Bucher's latex tearings and my glue peelings, or ties between my grandmother's mush and my jelly; grandpa's fridge and my cabinets. Threads of time are tugged again and again, and the untraceable is still untraced.

Noelle Herceg, *Plastic Flesh*, Jell-O, glue, and mixed media on plastic and aluminum, 2022

Noelle Herceg, *PF2*, Jell-O and nail clippings on acrylic, 2022

Consider our porosity. We are porous in our thoughts, our energy, our creativity, our storytelling/sharing/making. We both spread and share with others—human and non-human bodies. We are collections—of our unique histories and each other's, of infinitudes of intersections. We are each leftovers. Our bodies hold remembrances, influences, and longings for others. We are collections, and a part of others' collections. Maybe this is why we go on collecting—because the more fragments culled from other bodies, places, and time, the deeper our archive grows, and the wider our ghost archives reach.

Noelle Herceg, detail of *PF2*, Jell-O and nail clippings on acrylic, 2022

[i] Allie Rowbottom, *Jell-O Girls: A Family History.* New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2018.
[ii] Anne M. Wagner, "What Women Do, or The Poetics of Sculpture," in *Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture By Women 1947-2016*, eds. Paul Schimmel and Jenni Sorkin, 78-91 (Skira: Milan, 2016), 89.
[iii] Briony Fer, "The Scatter: Sculpture As Leftover," in *Part Object Part Sculpture*, 222-233.
[iv] Liz Larner, Interview with Richard Armstrong, in *Mind Over Matter: Concept and Object*, 118-122 (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1990), 118.
[v] Alise Upitis, "Irreducible Ambiguity: in *Anicka Yi: 6,070,430K Of Digital Spit*, ed. Alise Upitis, 26-33 (Cambridge, MA : Milano, Italy: Mit List Visual Arts Center ; Mousse Publishing, 2015), 30.
[vi] Erin Manning, *For a Pragmatics of the Useless* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).
[vii] Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You*, Santa Barbara, CA: Punctum Books, 2018, 113.
[viii] Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You*, Santa Barbara, CA: Punctum Books, 2018, 18.
[ix] Erin Manning, *For a Pragmatics of the Useless: What Things Do* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 77.
[x]Manning, 85
[xi] Erin Manning, *For a Pragmatics of the Useless, or the Value of the Infrathin* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 99.
[xii] Giles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 32-33
[xiii] Giles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 32-33
[xiv] Sam Moyer, "Material Empathy" in *Feelings: Soft Art*, New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2015.
[xv] Lars Spuybroek, "The Matter of Ornament," in *The Sympathy of Things: Ruskin and the Ecology of Design*, 75-144 (New York: V2 Publishing, 2011), 86-87.
[xvi] Nancy Tuana, "Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina," in *Material Feminisms*, eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, 188-213 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 198.
[xvii] Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You*, 31.
[xviii] Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You*, 91-92.

Additional Influential Texts:

Bois, Yve-Alain, Krauss, Rosalind E., and Centre Georges Pompidou, Host Institution. *Formless: A User's Guide*. New York: Zone Books, 1997.

Bolender, Karin. R.A.W. Assmilk Soap, chapter from Multispecies Salon, ed. Eben Kirksey, published by Duke University Press in 2014.

Derrida, Jacques., and Prenowitz, Eric. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Pbk. ed. Religion and Postmodernism. Chicago [Ill.]: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Experimental Futures. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

Linn, Kathleen. *Like water we ebb and flow across time and space.* Exhibition Essay for "Honey Long & Prue Stent: Touching Pool." PDF file. August 21, 2020.

Morton, Timothy. *All Art Is Ecological.* Dublin: Penguin Books, 2018.