

PERFORMING CARE

NEW PERSPECTIVES
ON SOCIALLY ENGAGED
PERFORMANCE



EDITED BY AMANDA STUART FISHER & JAMES THOMPSON

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Manchester University Press

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engaged performance

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Road care

Jen Archer-Martin and Julieanna Preston

On a most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. (Fisher and Tronto, 1990: 40)

The origins of this chapter can be traced to 1990 and two disparate events: the redefinition of a feminist ethic of care by feminist political scientists Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto and a woman’s encounter with a roadworks scene. Where Carol Gilligan’s (1982) ethic of care challenged the universal morality of patriarchal justice, embracing a feminine, relational voice of care, Fisher and Tronto’s (1990) version extended caring from a human–human to human–environment activity, including world-making and maintenance labours. Understandings of care as a social activity, having influenced practices such as nursing, are now filtering across disciplinary boundaries into such fields as performance and design. The present edited collection picks up that discussion at the care/performance intersection, weaving a conversation around care and socially engaged performance. We seek to inject another voice – of non-human or more-than-human material ecologies – further expanding Fisher and Tronto’s world care through contemporary post-human and new materialist thinking to explore the potential for affective care in material labours of repair. Emboldened by a post-human new materialist understanding of agency, we suggest that this is not just a species activity, but a labour co-performed by a caring ecology of ontologically diverse agents (Figure 6.1).

In this chapter, we critically reflect on our 2015 live art performance *bit-u-men-at-work*, developed as part of a performance-as-research project to become intimately acquainted with bitumen – a petroleum-based material of maintenance and repair – and its working ecology. The discussion unfolds through a series of encounters with various moments of the performance-as-research journey: the 1990 roadworks encounter, two events within our



Figure 6.1 A woman-machine named Desiré, alert, poised, ready to start

concentrated research enquiry performed over the year preceding the public performance and the performance itself, which occurred over three evenings in October 2015 on a public footpath outside the Margaret Lawrence Gallery in Melbourne's Southbank arts precinct. Each evening, Julieanna Preston became a woman-machine named Desiré, performing a durational labour of repairing the cracked, pitted asphalt pavement with bitumen. The repetitive labour took place among a performance ecology that included the site, bitumen, orange safety triangles, two caretakers in high-vis vests, a critical witness (Jen Archer-Martin), passers-by and fluctuating assemblies of spectators. The work was part of the Performance Studies International (PSi) symposium *Performing Mobilities* – a city-wide event conceptualised by performance artist/curator Mick Douglas to rethink performance relative to shifting geopolitical and sociopolitical realities of mobility (Douglas, 2016).

We analyse these encounters and the performance-as-research process through a reflective conversation that confronts theories of care and

affective labour with a new materialist, post-humanist, ecofeminist agenda. Augmenting existing notions of care and affective labour, we shift the focus from human-centred (social) to material-driven (ecological) caring labour. At the heart of this is an attempt to reveal the affective and gestural qualities of material caring labour in order to offer an expanded notion of the aesthetics of care proposed by James Thompson, which ‘seeks to focus upon how the sensory and affective are realised in human relations fostered in art projects’ (2015: 436). We suggest instead an aesthetics of care that critically departs from anthropocentric understandings to respond to affective material labours. Along the way, we wonder: What is it to care for something non-human, something as politically contentious, economically significant and materially abhorrent as bitumen? How might road repair be recognised as a world-maintaining caring activity – as road care? And how can the practice of developing and performing a work of live art propel this critical enquiry?

Context: people, practice, theory

Bit-u-men-at-work continued Julieanna Preston’s series of spatial and performative interventions exploring intimate relationships with the materials of our built environment. This commitment to revealing the vibrancy of matter is grounded in the vital materialism of political ecologist Jane Bennett, who calls for more ethical engagements with ‘vibrant matter and lively things’ (2010: viii). Departing from the human–human responsibility of social ethics, Bennett suggests that ‘perhaps the ethical responsibility of an individual human now resides in one’s response to the assemblages in which one finds oneself participating’ (2010: 37). Aligned with strategies of new materialist, post-human and ecological discourses, Bennett’s framework shares a desire to dismantle ontological boundaries between nature/culture, animate/inanimate, revealing instead an interconnected web of relations. These non-anthropocentric assemblages decentralise the primacy of human agency and acknowledge the agency of non-humans, recognising humans as always already ‘in’, rather than acting ‘upon’, the world (Bennett, 2010). In her introduction to Julieanna Preston’s *Performing Matters*, architectural scholar H  l  ne Frichot describes Julieanna’s work as ‘situated material learning’, building on the diverse, localised and contingent nature of Donna Haraway’s feminist ‘situated knowledges’ (2014: 11). Characterised by this process of following the material and learning material lessons along the way, *bit-u-men-at-work* employed the labouring, performing body of the artist to enter into ever closer and more responsive relations with materials.

In the case of *bit-u-men-at-work*, Julieanna collaborated with Jen Archer-Martin, whose practice also engaged with creating material-spatial opportunities for learning and providing hospitality, or care. Initially, Jen intended to perform the role of ‘caretaking, hospitality and sustaining relief

in a situation that finds me vulnerable and on my hands and knees patching potholes in laneways and footpaths, a kind of machine-becoming-animal critique of roadworks', as well as documenting the research process and performance. Jen's role, however, morphed into 'being a critical conscience' (Preston, personal correspondence, 2015). The collaboration became a dynamic dialogue of performing, documenting, talking and writing, from which emerged the performance score as well as the character and gestural language of *Desiré*. As the importance of the critical witness became apparent, we resolved that Jen would continue to provide that complicit outside eye to the performance itself, performing various modes of taking note and producing documented observations that inform the present recollection.

We take a moment here to expand on 'performance-as-research' and introduce some of the key voices that we summon to help frame the enquiry. 'Performance-as-research' is a field of scholarly artistic practice and the focus of *PSi* journal *PARTake*. Journal editors William Lewis and Niki Tulk describe it as a 'methodology for the organization and dissemination of knowledge – originating in the processes of making and analysing embodied and practiced performance work' (2016: 1). The goal of *bit-u-men-at-work* was not to produce 'a performance' that communicated the product of research to an audience, but to use the process of performance making as a research method and to create an opportunity for public encounter within that live and ongoing practice. In the spirit of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, whose efforts in carving out a space for the performance practice of 'maintenance art' we greatly admire, we 'consider the process as part of the art' (Ukeles, 2015: 18). Ours was not a linear process of making, performing and then analysing, but a reflexive, dialogic praxis that continually performs situated material-led learning.

The enquiry is framed by two main theoretical concerns – care and post-human new materialism. The first is by informed by Michael Hardt's *Affective Labour* and feminist theories of an ethics of care. Hardt posits the power of the qualities and nature of labouring practices to shape the 'processes of becoming human and the nature of the human itself' (1999: 90). Against a background of paradigmatic shifts in capitalist economies, Hardt suggests that workers, originally engaged directly in material practices, learned to act like machines and then think like computers. In the information economy, it is the immaterial labours of computerised (and we would add, almost twenty years later, networked or even intelligent) machines and people that 'produce collective subjectivities, produce sociality, and ultimately produce society itself' (Hardt, 1999: 89). Hardt draws a distinction between the symbolic-analytical tasks of the computer and the 'affective labour of human contact and interaction', which he associates with the care and cultural sectors (1999: 95). Though Hardt acknowledges the roots of caring labour as lying in feminist discourse on 'women's work', we desire to draw it more vigorously into the realm of feminist sociology, care, ecofeminism and biopower, turning in particular to a feminist 'ethics of care'.

Virginia Held's *Taking Care* (2005) helpfully surveys various definitions of a feminist ethics of care that have emerged since Carol Gilligan introduced care in the 1980s as an alternative to an ethics of justice or moral judgement. Gilligan's feminist ethics of care 'begins with connection, theorized as primary and seen as fundamental in human life' (1995: 122). Held asserts that 'care is both a practice and a value [...] [t]he ethics of care builds relations of care and concern and mutual responsiveness to need on both the personal and wider social levels' (2005: 68–9). Held's extensive analysis of the state of caring relative to nursing, childrearing and childminding, justice, morals, ethics, obligation and empathy largely falls outside the scope of this chapter. Of particular interest to us is the contrast she draws between care as an intrinsically human, face-to-face activity (Noddings, cited in Held, 2005), and the broader definition supplied by Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher, being 'everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible' (1990: 40). Held expresses concern that this definition of care as world repair, that would encompass such labours as house construction, is too broad and that 'the distinctive features of caring labour would be lost. It does not include the sensitivity to the needs of the cared for [...] nor what Noddings calls the needed "engrossment" with the other' (Held, 2005: 61). It is precisely this concern that we wish to address.

In *bit-u-men-at-work*, the sought-after engrossment is with the non-human or material other. Another chapter would be required to celebrate the army of women who have shaped our understanding of what we refer to in short as 'post-human new materialism':

Fundamental to this area of enquiry, including its redefinition of material not as something mute, but lively, vibrant and also politically entangled, is a debt that is owed to feminist thinkers. Luce Irigaray, Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Moira Gatens, and more recently, the architect and architectural theorist Katie Lloyd Thomas, the feminist theorist Karen Barad, and the political theorist Jane Bennett have all drawn crucial attention to revitalised engagements with matter. (Frichot, 2014: 10)

Here, along with Bennett's aforementioned vital materialism, we reference Donna Haraway's (2008, 2016) post-human relations and 'response-ability' to the non-human other and, to a lesser extent, Karen Barad's (2007) influence on our understanding of Bennett's agentic material assemblages and support of Haraway's call for 'response-ability' within intimately entangled intra-actions (Barad, 2012). These concepts will be unpacked in relation to the performance in the proceeding reflection.

Encounters: scenes, machines, material, labours

Dusk, late spring, 1990, on an American desert road.
A snorting beast emerges from the dim remnants of the day's unrelenting light.
Headlamps, warning bleats, rank breath meeting evening air as gaseous exhalations.

Orange cones, MEN AT WORK signs, swarms of high visibility vests.
 Sensations of speed replaced by enforced braking,
 a disruption to the freedom of unchecked forward progress –
 at least the insects in the path of my beams are afforded a momentary reprieve.
 Tunes from the radio drowned out by grumbling engines.
 A complex symphony of grinding, whirling, mechanical parts.
 The queue in the rear view mirror grows.
 Wasting time, sitting idle, nothing to do but take in the scene.
 Engulfed by an oily black heat, a smelly, noxious haze,
 the road-eating-bitumen-spewing mechanical creature creeps forward at 3 mph,
 attended by a score of labourers engaged in mechanical physical exertions,
 sweat making tracks on dust-caked skin.
 Bored vision blurring, it appears as a mechanical whole,
 bound together by a sense of purpose,
 a vibrant web of lights, reflectors and fluorescent materials,
 and a reverence for the steaming virgin black surface appearing in its wake.

‘STOP’ becomes ‘GO’, I proceed back into the night, the moment evaporates.
 Impatiently accelerating, I think no further of the scene or my place in it.
 Of the synthetic petroleum-based rubber tread of my tires.
 Of the bitumen-bound surface they grip.
 Of the exploitation of human and material resources in the name of mobility.
 Of the strange satisfaction of all those moving parts working together.
 Of the unexpected sensory appeal of the fresh bitumen.
 It is behind me – before me is only open road. (Preston, field notes, 1990)

In this recollection of Julieanna’s 1990 encounter with roadworks, the spatial, temporal, sensorial and material qualities of the scene are amplified as the suspension of forward motion makes way for an aesthetic experience. In this space of interruption, the mundane labours register as carefully choreographed performance. Years later, this memory surfaced as fertile inspiration to our affective relationship with the material bitumen. Through the lens of Julieanna’s new materialist performance practice, the scene invited reinterpretation as a live performance – a socially engaged, material-centric, politically, environmentally and philosophically fraught piece of live art embedded in the everyday circumstances of modern life. With such sensibility and concern for material ethics, agency and vitality, an investigation of the material labours of road repair met the research aim to recognise the vibrancy of materials; the thing-hood and thing-power of a material usually assumed to be inert.

This agency is not located within a discrete entity but emerges within an ecological assemblage in which we humans participate as material configurations. In employing this material-ecological framework in both the performance and our reflection, we are not dispensing with the critical value of socially engaged performance but, rather, expanding the realm of social interaction to include a mutual entanglement with sentient and material others. These interactions do not occur between individualistic subjects,

but emerge from within already-existing relations. Barad describes this as the intra-action of entangled agencies within a field as the locus of world making: ‘phenomena – whether lizards, electrons, or humans – exist only as a result of, and as part of, the world’s ongoing intra-activity, its dynamic and contingent differentiation into specific relationalities. “We humans” don’t make it so, not by dint of our own will, and not on our own. But through our own advances, we participate in bringing forth the world in its specificity, including ourselves’ (2007: 353). In the case of the roadworks encounter, the field is all of the things in the scene, including the spectators. The impatient driver is not outside of the act of world repair, but always-already entangled as a road user, resource consumer and world sharer – an implicated party with a vested, if not yet conscious or empathetic, interest.

Caring and maintenance labours operate within larger institutional systems – themselves a form of machine. How, then, to enter into the system of road repair in order to understand its capacity for care more critically? Artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles provides a precedent with her performance practice that critiques the social institutions of maintenance labours. As artist-in-residence with the New York City Department of Sanitation (1979–80), Ukeles developed ‘maintenance art’: a mode of artistic practice concerned with the politics, ethics and aesthetics of maintenance labours. Ukeles describes her aesthetic appreciation of maintenance work as ‘trying to listen to the hum of living. A feeling of being alive, breath to breath [...] it is like this repetitive thing that as much as you chafe at the boredom of the repetition is as important as the other parts’ (quoted in Bartholomew, 2009). Maintenance is both a mundane labour that ‘takes all the fucking time’ (Ukeles, 1969: 2) and an opportunity for affective encounter with the everyday performances of living-in-the-world. Entering the space of maintenance work, Ukeles employs performance art to draw undervalued labour into a space of critical aesthetic consideration.

In *Touch Sanitation Performance*, Ukeles shook hands with 8,500 New York City sanitation workers over eleven months. Through this act, the artist-at-work met the maintenance-worker-at-work face-to-face. The importance of touch cannot be understated here: perhaps the most powerful gesture of care in Ukeles’ work is the recognition of mutual humanity, through skin-to-skin contact, with the performer of a labour perceived as ‘unclean’ – a person in close contact with lively, hygienically dangerous, undesirable matter. The in-person social engagement with workers is at the heart of both the ethics and aesthetics of Ukeles’ performance practice and characterises all phases of the project: ‘Even if she had never shaken a single hand, the preliminary planning, listening tours, observation, research, and analysis required to imagine and implement the work would stand as key examples of late twentieth-century conceptual art’ (Phillips, quoted in Steinhauer, 2017: 6–7). *Bit-u-men-at-work* followed a similar agenda while shifting from the primarily human or social aspects of maintenance work toward the material ecology. Through this more-than-human lens, human interaction became material intra-action. In order to come face-to-face with bitumen – to ‘shake

hands' – the labour was explored at the scale of one small, intimate act of road repair.

Wellington, New Zealand: ... well, there are different mixes ... that's what I learned, going up at 5 o'clock in the morning to Ngauranga Gorge, to the plant, because the guy would go into the little hut, and say, I need a mix, and this is what I need it for, and the woman would say, well ... today's temperature is this, and when are you going to pour it, and how long do you want it to last for, how big is the hole, you know ... etc. ... and those all would be factored in ... and then I'd go up into his little control room which overlooks everything and you could see down to where the chute would dump it into the truck, and he would type in all these variables, and you would hear churn, churn, churn, churn, churn and you'd see it move up the conveyor belt and do all these things ... it would be fluffed, it would be heated, it would be mixed, it would be condensed, you'd see the sand coming in, you'd see the gravel going in, the different kinds of gravel, and it all – talk about temporal – it all had to do with the temperature and the moisture in the air at that time, each batch has this life ... and so you see this kind of thing being just processed like an intestine, which was what informed the costume ... and then you'd see this 'phooohwhh' and then there'd be this cloud of steam coming up ... this weight drop ... like a big, giant, black, poop ... just popped into the truck, and the truck would go away, and it would be steaming ... 'cause it was, you know, it was the middle of the night, then ... that was ... that it must have been July ... and it was just this very very theatrical thing, you know the rest of the world is sleeping, and here we are, digesting, regurgitating the bowels of the earth, the kind of veins of the earth squeezed dry of this stuff that is pure gold, but we spread it all over the surface of the earth. (Unpublished transcript of conversation between authors)

The research began with Julieanna seeking out ways to encounter bitumen: 'an attempt to come into relation with it, to get closer, to spend time together ... to cultivate empathy or response-ability, to become attentive/attuned to its agency – political and aesthetic' (unpublished transcript of conversation between authors). Investigations explored how bitumen is mined and manufactured; the impact these processes have on land, people and climate; how roads are repaired; the industries that it supports; the economies of road-works; how the material behaves and feels; health-related issues; and the contentious debates concerning the promulgation of oil-hungry appetites in the contemporary developed world. Much of this research comprised 'field work': visits to asphalt plants, discussions with manufacturers and many nights following road crews to observe the repetitious labours of moving the sticky black material with big machines. Bitumen was impossible to separate from its contexts of production and consumption, including their mechanical and human labourers. With all its noxious toxicity, the material proved difficult to get close to, hidden behind the trappings of health and safety that attempt to care for the humans who engage with it. Physical and institutional barriers served to exclude a mature, white-haired female academic artist from joining a road crew and gaining first-hand experience

of working with the material in situ. These activities made the complex realities of bitumen evident, revealed the centrality of the machine in all its forms – mechanical, institutional, ecological – and shaped the performance.

With no room to romanticise the materiality of bitumen, the research adopted Haraway's technique of 'staying with the trouble': 'learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings' (2016: 1). Getting close to the material was, most simply, about spending time with it – working with it, getting down on hands and knees to take note (and rubbings) of its texture, observing how the raw material responded to the touch of human hands and the cracks of pavements. Becoming horizontal, abandoning the vertical stance of the dominant human, brings one even closer: face-to-face, belly-to-belly. This zone of intimate proximity was where Julieanna began to cultivate 'response-ability' – 'face-to-face in the contact zone of an entangled relationship' (Haraway, 2008: 227). Barad contends that 'in a breathtakingly intimate sense, touching, sensing, is what matter does, or rather, what matter is: matter is condensations of response-ability. Touching is a matter of response' (2012: 215). Barad further extends this touching to theorising, claiming that all lively forms of matter 'do theory', with the idea being 'to do collaborative research, to be in touch, in ways that enable response-ability' (2012: 207–8). In this sense, the research assemblage or ecology could be said to include the material and material processes, the machines, the labourers, the theoretical texts and the researchers, all collaborating toward an emerging 'response-ability'.

On reflection, the gestures of coming close to bitumen through the research process begin to respond to Held's critique of Tronto and Fisher's world-maintaining vision of care. Invoking Noddings' condition of face-to-face interaction or 'engrossment with the other' as a prerequisite for caring labour, Held (2005) cautioned against the broadening of care to include world repair, expressing concern that this intimate quality was missing from relationships with non-human others. In our view, this is a particularly anthropocentric concern that denies the agency and vitality of non-humans and, in doing so, negates the possibility of a mutually caring relationship with the world. Through a new materialist understanding of agency and relation – one that recognises the liveliness of materials, their capacity to produce affects and our capacity to become 'response-able' – it becomes possible to imagine and enact coming face-to-face with bitumen. Through an expanded understanding of touch, we might understand that to spend time being present within the entangled relations of the road care ecology, as well as literally coming into close contact with the material itself, is to perform this necessary engrossment with the material other.

I follow her down the corridor. She is dressed in a white boiler suit criss-crossed with silver reflective tape. Coiled around her torso and hanging over her shoulder is a plastic tube. It looks greasy on the inside, more

yellow-brown than clear – oily residue of bitumen. It waggles behind her as she walks – a tail, an intestinal organ, a protuberance.

Out in the courtyard, it is dark. I hear her slump to the ground. Switching on the torch on my phone, a jumbled pile of wrinkled and writhing reflective lines burst into view, tracing bodily contours yet resisting any reading of a human form. I can see the orange triangles that mark the extent of the worksite. Her headlamps, once activated, cast a strange three-eyed illumination on the ground in front of her. Abruptly she starts making noises – I didn't know there was going to be sound. The sounds accompany actions, but they feel forced. At one point she sounds like a duck. How should it end?

With more light the figure is more obviously human, although the gestures, along with the prosthetic appendages and strange vocabulary of noises, is starting to hint at something other – glimmers of the woman-machine, not-yet-formed. What is becoming more apparent, though, is that there is a clear sequence to the labour: identify areas in the worksite to be repaired, excrete bitumen from the tube, then pack it down. Each step entails a coming-closer – to the ground, to an intimate relationship, to the possibility of enacting desire. (Archer-Martin, unpublished notes, 2015–18)

The character of *Desiré* and the performance aesthetics – gestures, vocalisations, costume and score – emerged out of an iterative process that included test performances and reflective conversations between the authors, informed by the initial fieldwork and ongoing engagement in the discursive ecology of the research. In these conversations, we traversed notions of becoming machine, otherness, empathy and desire, against the established background of feminist, post-human, new materialist thinking. Some central understandings unfolded:

1. *Desiré* was neither human nor machine; she was 'both-and'. She was woman – was Julieanna – but was also other-than, more-than woman; gendered neither-nor, both-and. She was the road worker, rendered masculine in dominant culture, but she was also machine and ecology. She was trying to hold them together as different kinds of bodies, and look for empathetic relationships between them. Our understanding was by way of Haraway's notion of the cyborg: 'hybrid entities that are neither wholly technological nor completely organic, which means that the cyborg has the potential [...] to disrupt persistent dualisms that set the natural body in opposition to the technologically recrafted body' (Balsamo, 1999: 11).
2. Bitumen was not characterised in the work as 'unnatural'. Binaries of live/inert and natural/artificial were problematised through notions of material agency – the material was entangled in an ecology that was both natural and artificial (or 'neither-nor'). It was also not characterised as inherently 'bad'. Meeting the other 'as they are', we attempted to suspend moral and aesthetic judgement. This resonates with a move toward the more relational, situated, contingent ethics of care.

3. Desiré's labour was both to repair the pavement and to explore a desiring relationship with bitumen. There was something about fondling the material that got us thinking about the desiring-machine: if you could get to that place with the material that doesn't have that first primary sensibility about it, that you will have maybe transcended its abhorrent qualities or recognised the abhorrence of what is happening with it. The desiring-machine is a Deleuzian concept, lifted from *Anti-oedipus*:

Desiring-machines are binary machines [...] one machine is always coupled with another. The productive synthesis, the production of production, is inherently connective in nature: 'and [...]' 'and then [...]'. This is because there is always a flow-producing machine, and another machine connected to it that interrupts or draws off part of its flow [...] [and so on] [...] Desire constantly couples continuous flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented. Desire causes the current to flow, itself flows in turn, and breaks the flows. (Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1983: 5)

While we recognised the riskiness of desire as a word (and a name), with its tints of possession of the other, we were drawn to the possibility of desire to activate a flow of affect.

4. The idea of falling in love with bitumen, of intimately desiring it, may appear a ridiculous notion. Being open to moments of humour was a tactic: 'admit[ting] a playful element into one's thinking and [being] willing to play the fool' (Bennett, 2010: 11). Being thought foolish is nothing when the possibility of knowing the material otherwise is at stake. With that in mind, we embraced the possibility of the sounds and gestures of the machine to be read as absurd, clownish or preposterous; witnessing strange (yet curiously familiar) beeps and growls, or the woman-machine humping or pummelling the pavement to flatten the pile of bitumen, invoked empathy even if eliciting dis-ease.

The aesthetics of the caring gesture has, on reflection, stood out to us as central to the work. Desiré's movement language progressed from Julieanna attempting to 'act' like a machine, to a stripped-back programming of behaviour that responded directly to the task at hand. While this initially resulted in fairly functional movements of standing, scanning and reversing, the quality of the gesture shifted when Desiré came into contact with the material, circling defects with chalk or working the bitumen belly-down on the pavement – qualitative feedback from the materials, registered in the performing bodies, provoked response. This was not an imposed choreographic decision so much as something that emerged in relationship with the materials – chalk, pavement, bitumen, suit and human flesh. It suggests that an aesthetics of more-than-human care and affective material gesture might be considered possible through a post-human new materialist lens.

The more that we attuned our sensibilities to care and desire, the more the gesture expressed an affective quality. In hindsight, this could be read as the emergence of a contingent aesthetic of caring material gesture – not in that the material itself was performing the gesture, but in that it was agentic in co-producing the response.

a scene:

reflectors, headlamps, visibility markings ...
 utterances of steam and engine and reverse signals ...
 of affection and longing and desire ...

a woman-machine:

the functional qualities of a machine ...
 human contours accentuated by a white boiler-suit ...

a labour:

the figure identifies the parts that need repair,
 marks those areas,
 fills the imperfections with bitumen,
 presses the material in ...

But still I want to write of smells and mouths, of being close, of skins touching –
 because this is how the road and machine/woman-woman/machine come to
 know one another.

the figure murmurs lovingly to the road,
 heaves and undulates over the markings that need attention,
 speaks to it in indecipherable loving tones,
 caresses it, warms it and humps it with her belly ...

But to say ‘belly’ and to gender it is to lean too heavily on the human and on
 dominant structures that try to order the world.

there is a kind of perversity in this sensuality which induces discomfort ...
 the interchangeable qualities of human and machine, organic and inorganic ...
 the artist embodies the machine but also bodies-forth human desires ...

this is a private and intimate moment unfolding in public ...

this intimacy complicates the relations between road, machine, and human ...

this is vital:

the audience must endure this work
 so that they might access these indeterminate spaces of human, machine
 and road
 as they are held together by flesh, breath and bitumen. (Adapted from Glisovic,
 2016: 77)

Over three Melbourne evenings, Julieanna became *Desiré*, a hybrid woman-machine, set to work surveying a stretch of pavement for defects to repair

with bitumen. Desiré was something more than Julieanna, who enacted a becoming-other, however, the labour was real. There was no script, only a set of parameters and a score that programmed the labours of Desiré, garbed in a white boiler suit, work boots, coiled bitumen-filled hose and a trio of headlamps. Two caretakers (Scott Morrison and Kerensa Diball) were hired to watch over Desiré/Julieanna and to take care of the start and finish of each durational labour – setting out two high-vis orange triangles (one with a go-pro recording-appendage) to demarcate the work site, and manoeuvring Desiré into position. Not ‘in character’ as in theatrical performance, they had received only the necessary briefing needed to don their high-vis vests and do the job like any conventional road worker, free to engage with the public as they supervised proceedings.

The work was encountered by a diverse audience including programme-toting symposium delegates and passing members of the public, not explicitly called out as ‘a performance’ but simply happening in the fray of life as does most roadwork. With a loose start time and indeterminate duration dictated only by the labourer’s stamina, few experienced the work as a ‘complete’ performance with beginning and end, with three exceptions: the two caretakers and a woman in a red hat – Jen, the complicit witness, observing and documenting, simultaneously inhabiting the critical enquiry of the work as it unfolded and experiencing it from the outside. As she observed, Desiré worked, the caretakers hung about, people (and dogs) passed by. At times, some gathered on the road and footpath, lingered and dispersed. Interactions ranged from complete disinterest to active expressions of concern for the woman on the ground. For many, the nature of the scene as performance or maintenance work appeared to remain ambiguous.

As in our rereading of the original roadworks encounter, we offer a reading of this scene as an ecology of performance (or of labour, work, repair) in which everything is implicated – site, materials, performer/machine, crew, spectators, symposium organisers, civic bodies, political and theoretical discourses on ecology, care, labour, repair, mobility and so on. From her inside-outside position as critical witness, Jen observed a dynamic scene of diverse response and attentiveness to the labour, which, through duration and repetition, became background. This blending into the site or situation of roadwork was amplified at night, when the contours of bodies disappeared and the scene materialised as a networked assemblage of lights and high-vis materials. Headlamps, reflective strips, vests, safety triangles, street lights and car lights were all drawn together as a set of moving and static points operating in relation to one another, the individual bodies to which they were attached melding into a single connected field of dark but lively matter. A shift in aesthetic and empathetic response occurred over the duration of the performance labour: as the demands on the bodies of both the performer and spectator began to take their toll, a relationship of shared endurance emerged in which everything but the sensation of the pavement and the repeated gestures of the labour fell away.

The machine started without me. Does it feel the difference? Does it know I'm here?

People walking, cycling, skating past. Some glance, some smirk or laugh, raise an eyebrow.

Someone leaves their bag with me. Because I'm sitting/immobile?

A person wanders up and stops. I think she intended to be here.

Two people standing behind, slightly beyond. Talking, not watching.

Someone stops to look from other side of street, then keeps walking.

A lady looks at me instead of *Desiré*. Smiles.

I think I am too close to the work site. Moving.

What is the mobility of the machine? Of the material?

From across the road it looks more strange.

A woman in a white suit lies prone. Two people in high-vis look on. She looks like she's having a conversation with the footpath.

A circle forms around *Desiré* ... the most intimate moment yet. Light comes on inside the gallery! Circle maintains then breaks. Some leave. Some want a different perspective.

The machine only gets the perspective it's given. I move again.

It's a person! I thought it was a doll (- kid)

A man in a people mover pulls up as *Desiré* is humping the ground. I think he might be concerned she is having a medical episode.

A person walked past and didn't even look. Minders weren't there but *Desiré* was, lying on the ground. Close to the wall though, maybe looks like she's supposed to be there, fixing something?

Woman and dog pass by. Dog looks. Woman keeps walking. Dog keeps looking back over shoulder.

It's getting cold. I wonder if *Desiré* is cold. It was more sheltered over by the wall though.

No one around to see *Desiré* reversing. Only minders, chatting casually, not looking. Only me.

Machine seems angry. Have I done something? Missed something?

Is this okay? Am I doing it right?

The machine seems tired. Sore. (So am I - the pavement is hard and bits of gravel stick in my palms.)

It hasn't been worked this hard before. Are we driving it too hard?

... my soul sees a soul in the machine. But does the machine see me? perhaps it sees the machine in me.

... does the material, the stuff, see the stuff in me?

I need to wee. I wonder if *Desiré* does. She still has work to do. I can go when I want ...

I'm back from the bathroom.

There was a piece of rubber hose in there, like a shed skin or banana peel or half a dead worm.

I think it might have fallen off *Desiré*.

I was distracted talking to a caretaker about the performance feeling more machine-like, especially after I went away and came back. The machine was still working, without needing me there to witness it. The contractual obligation of me as witness or audience or observer was broken. The performance is reduced to a banal, albeit odd, act of labour. It seems strange to keep watching now, as if I should just leave her to her business, but yet there's

something more that compels me – a feeling – a strangely intimate connection visible in the way she works the material.

That's it, right there. It's just work, but done differently, made new.

(Archer-Martin, unpublished notes, 2015–18)

Conclusion: toward a material-led aesthetics of care in ecologically engaged performance

Our reflections on *bit-u-men-at-work* have posed a number of challenges in terms of the present conversation on performance and care, and, in particular, the aesthetics of care. Primarily, this edited collection aligns care with 'socially engaged performance' through an interdisciplinary interrogation of the relationship between creative or aesthetic practices, and the ethics and practices of care. Much of the existing discourse focuses on the qualities of caring human–human relationships. We have made the case for more voices, asking what might happen if we were to consider care through a post-human new materialist lens. In this scenario, agency is extended beyond the human to material ecologies in which humans are implicated but not dominant. Extending the call to matter, things and material assemblages, invoking the likes of Bennett, Barad and Haraway, we have begun to refigure the topic of concern from 'care and *socially* engaged performance' to 'care and *ecologically* engaged performance'.

Bit-u-men-at-work employed a performance-as-research methodology, exploring the making of and public encounters with live art performance as modes of enquiring into or enacting care. Whereas various modes of participatory performance take the social co-production of experience as a central tenet, the ecological co-production of experience poses a different challenge. Framing the enquiry within a post-human new materialism worldview, we considered materials and machines as participants in the research assemblage and the performance ecology it informed, prompting different ways of thinking about and experiencing performance that recognise the agency of non-humans in the co-production of affect: a first step toward developing a post-human new materialist performance-as-research methodology.

Central to both the enquiry and our reflection on it has been an emerging vocabulary of gestures and affect. In a material-led rather than human-led performance ecology, we have had to think otherwise about the agents at play in producing the affects that might be said to comprise an aesthetics of care. If the capacity for caring relations extends beyond the human, then a study of an aesthetics of care must necessarily include non-human actors and the affects that they co-produce as part of agentic assemblages. We are a long way from being able to define what an aesthetics of post-human new materialist care might look or feel like. Rather, we have begun to attune our embodied sensibility to the qualities of gestures and affects produced by these trans-ontological assemblages, cultivating a new 'response-ability' and



Figure 6.2 Desiré, a tangled pile on the pavement, face-to-face with bitumen

positioning affective material labours as performances of care that maintain and repair our world.

We end with two questions around the role of desire in the aesthetics of care: Who defines the terms of reference in a desiring relation and what does that mean for the relationship between aesthetics and desire? In opening the performance of care to the non-human or material other, we have found it necessary to become open to aesthetics of the other. We challenged ourselves to work with an undesirable yet wilfully exploited material, taking seriously Haraway's call to 'stay with the trouble' (2016). On a superficial but affectively powerful level, bitumen did not appeal to our senses. The dirty and monotonous labours of people and machines engaged in acts of road repair did not sing out to us as being beautiful. Nevertheless, we proceeded, unafraid to play the fool, with the notion of desiring and becoming intimate – and not just in the sense of proximity – with this material through up-close and personal caring labour. We attempted to suspend our human

judgement in order to meet the ontological other as they are. An aesthetic did emerge, but it was not one defined by some socially constructed ideal of beauty. Rather, it was born out of time spent together, of hard labour and shared suffering and of joyful moments when everything seemed to just work together. It was at once ridiculous, disgusting, imperfect, strange, sensual – and caring (Figure 6.2).

