



“You are embued with tolerance ...”

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ABSTRACT This article tells the back story of a performance dedicated to bearing witness to a corner of a room in a 1990s’ New Zealand kitset home. The video *meeting, you in detail* performs a love poem that asks for forgiveness before demolishing the wall. The video tracks an interlude where the space of tolerance related to building construction meets open-mindedness, empathy and compassion. This performance inquired how maintaining respect for others extends to material processes and interactions. Underpinned by Jane Bennett’s new materialism philosophy, the article draws from poet Francis Ponge’s muse on the muteness of objects, architect Marco Frascari’s teachings and the scholarship of archaeologist Lucy Shoe Merritt.

There you are, three planes pulled into Euclid’s agreement.

What attracted you to one another? Service to opacity and spatial differentiation.

Oh, you make it appear so easy, standing up against the pressures of the room.

Hold it, hold it, in, keep it from.

Bind, ceiling to floor, pry it apart. How do you do, do it?

Three paper pocketed sheets filled with ground and prepared particles of free crystals found stewing in beds of clay or preserved in cavities of limestone line the face of a dimensional stud frame.

You hang off the hearts of tall young radiata trees felled from the north side of a far hill.

Plain sliced into predictable measure and infused with pink resistance ...

Join, join, joint, compound-ing, pound-ing, making-lings, siblings, mating, meeting ...¹

During recent home renovations, I was confronted with the realities of having a creative practice that grapples with the possibility that materials possess a vitality and agency independent of, and yet entangled with, humans. What happens when one professes deep respect towards materials and material assemblages in the everyday act of building construction, or in this case, un-building? How are ethical issues and concerns transferable to what many assume as dead things? How might the tolerance associated with building a wall be linked to the form of tolerance related to human prejudice, bias or ignorance relative to ethnicity, race, gender orientation, age or ability? Is not my new materialist ethos asking for a new practice of tolerance? These are the questions that lingered with me during a performance where my only task was to observe a corner where two walls, a ceiling and floor met in material unison. My intellectual allegiance to the new materialism that political theorist Jane Bennett² professes was put to the test in a penultimate moment as I grasped the sledge hammer. Ready to demolish the interior wall partition, I was willing to sacrifice the labor and material already invested into building the wall several decades ago for the sake of making the interior space better, or admittedly, asserting my aesthetic ego.

This is where action and willfulness were suspended. An interlude emerged where the space of building tolerance oscillated between the tolerance associated with construction details and specifications that moves from zero upwards to that of my open-mindedness, empathy and compassion. As such, the performance, which the video records, is a love poem paying respect and expressing wonder and sorrow towards the wall. In that very moment, the room's details transformed from crisply drafted sectional fragments quantified by industrial material standards to bundles of relational assemblages; the space of duration made new sense of the wall as a complex material being. By virtue of a built-in quotient of tolerance, each material relinquished a degree of independence towards the generation of a common, live surface pulsing in slow time.

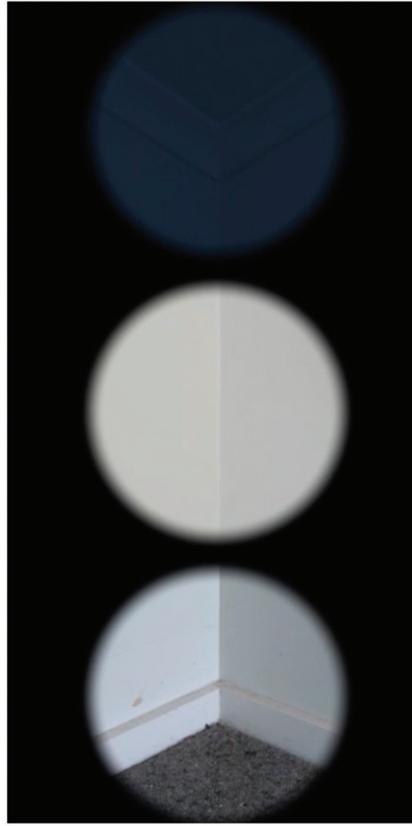


Figure 1

Still image from *meeting, you in detail* [video, 9 minutes 39 seconds], by Julieanna Preston, 2013. Available online: <https://vimeo.com/278844210/>.

This article consists of two equal and mutually dependent parts: a written text that locates a field of concern and my video, *meeting, you in detail*,³ which practiced those same concerns in a live art performance. Both parts exercise acts of listening to three generic interior details: when the floor meets the wall, when the wall meets another wall, and when the ceiling meets the wall. Such artistic research adds to the history of architectural discourse specific to detail ranging from Vitruvius' declaration of architecture as a well-proportioned, site-sensitive and purpose-fit building art;⁴ architectural historian Kenneth Frampton's view of architecture as a culturally embedded constructional craft;⁵ architect and design graphics writer Francis D. K. Ching's dissemination of how building materials connect to one another in practical (and economical) fashion;⁶ and architectural theorist Marco Frascari's portrayal of details as the smallest building elements capable of conjuring architectural concepts.⁷ The video *meeting, you in detail* uses Frascari's method of illumination to structure the modality of looking closely and adapts French essayist Francis Ponge's literary practice to form prose poems that meditate on miniscule details of everyday life.⁸ These two referents serve to script a synapse between the facts and fictions of interior details as live or inert matter (Figure 1).

I employed all the above-mentioned sources in a research project that used a variety of arts-based media, methods and disciplinary perspectives to inquire about an expanded notion of tolerance that emerges from its specific meaning in building construction and its identity as a societal permissive attitude toward opinions, beliefs and practices that differ from one’s own. A creative act – the performance and the act of video post-production – coupled with the lens of new materialism made this expanded notion noticeable. As far as I know, there is very little scholarship or creative work that examines tolerance as both a practical and a theoretical facet of architectural knowledge.⁹ The idea that tolerance might inform how one picks up a tool and what one does with it is posited in relation to a material’s vitality and agency. This notion is arguably radical given the centuries of dominant discourse that proclaimed matter as dead and merely the subject of human instrumentality. This new understanding of tolerance would not have occurred without my understanding of “mauri,” a Māori concept that recognizes a material’s life force.¹⁰ It is where my experience as a building laborer, an architectural lecturer and a live artist meet.

Meeting is a state of introduction, encounter, rendezvous or tryst. As person-to-person, person-to-object or object-to-object interaction, meeting is a relational event even if there is no physical contact involved. When two or more things meet, their forces accelerate the event’s complexity and shape a congregation, convocation or conference, even a revolution or energy crisis. Recall the last time you met the eyes of a stranger, reached out to shake hands with an adversary or rushed into the arms of a loved one. “You are imbued with tolerance ...” practices how these social interactions might be transferable to other-than-human material beings. This is the point of difference. And as such, this article constitutes a meeting site of seemingly unrelated methods: it asks you to entertain methods gathered from social science, contemporary philosophy, architectural theory, fiction literature, drawing practices and building construction. It invites you to consider them in a non-didactic, yet dialogical, manner. My intent in provoking associations amongst what some might call an “unnatural interdisciplinary field” focuses on how this collection of methods and practices casts a light on generic interior details as events whereby live matters meet, perhaps even proliferate. The body of this article will introduce, in some cases very briefly, the key forces acting in this meeting site as a means of preparing you to respond more attentively to the accompanying video. In this case, the video is really the primary work; this text operates more accurately as a trailer shaped to fit proper academic discourse and the journal printed page template, although the online digital version of this article will add some degree of interactivity.

There are numerous interlocutors informing this project, each offering unique voices, skills, outlooks, processes and energies to the matter at hand. Let us start at the field’s periphery, a liminal zone that

manages what is in and out in a murky state of light to dark, sound to noise. It is here that the project is shaped by such thinkers as social scientist Bruno Latour,¹¹ French philosopher Gilles Deleuze¹² and philosopher Graham Harman,¹³ to name just a few. Despite their distinct perspectives, purposes and terminology, they share a sensibility around the complexity of worlds teeming with actants, flows, objects, things or forces, which are interacting as networks, rhizomes, assemblages or associations. Each contributes to a burgeoning theoretical discourse (with various degrees of caution and exuberance) on the agency, animation or live-ness of all things, a key tenet of new materialist thought.

Bennett is one of those deep thinkers.¹⁴ With advocacy for matter's vibrancy, she explores the force of things and, in the process, builds bridges between the abstraction of philosophy and the concreteness of material objects. Her argument is grounded in visceral stuff and hence philosophy becomes even more relevant in corporeal, everyday life. The reverse is also pertinent: live bodies of all kinds have a role to play in the making of philosophy. While walking in her neighborhood after torrential rainfall, she stumbles upon a storm drain obscured by debris matted by the water flow. Her analysis does not linger on the loss or destruction of these items nor turn them into memory devices that reference their owners or users; she resists an archaeologist's practice to dig up dead stuff and try to piece together what has already happened. Bennett seems to stare at these things with eyes wide open in their temperate, not cold, reality. Warming them, stirring them in the immediacy of the moment, a rogue incubator. What accumulated at the drain as a seemingly useless pile of trash is fodder for something to happen, a turn to the speculative and what matter can do, and what matters can do together. I am attracted to her theorization; by the way she flirts with animism. It is as if she is prying at the edges of notions of aura, spirit, soul, fetish, consciousness, transubstantiation, personification and other (Western) anthropocentric practices. The reason I have put the spotlight on Bennett is because she will poke at something lying still and appearing to be inert to see if it will react.

Ponge has a similar relationship to things, taking their side, defending every day randomly selected objects, practicing "optimistic materialism"¹⁵ – objects capable of announcing their own intentions, from their own point of view.¹⁶ Obsessed with language, he also treats the text as a material object.¹⁷ He works words as if they are material, fondling and scratching at them to take a new form. His poems are demonstrations of coming to grips with text as object, and objects as living things, not entirely at the service or disposal of human beings. Ponge refuses, or is unable, to explain his own poems. His efforts to share his making of a poem have been referred to by others as textual studios, workshop spaces where one can see his writing process as the work.¹⁸ Works that are never finished, and necessarily imperfect. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, Ponge's poems are "inactuals" written in

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the perpetual present,¹⁹ persisting, a still life (with an emphasis on "still").²⁰ Ponge insists on the reader's active engagement in meeting an object that gifts aesthetic pleasure and effective moral code.²¹ For example, the fish on the plate looks back at us with glazed eyes at the same time as the morsels of its fried flesh draw our salivation.²² His work gives cues to humans to assume a new and unique position in relation to the everyday environment, one that cherishes rather than covets things assumed to be inert.²³

In recent years I have been prompting conversations between interior material surfaces to build up a repertoire of ethical practices specific to matter, human or not.²⁴ Like many others, I am drawn to this re-ordering of the world – a material turn of sorts, an effort to activate horizontality amongst all things, a parliament of matter and a democracy amongst species. Such notions assist me to connect to others – other people, other surfaces, other objects, other energy fields, other molecules, other forces, but, most of all, other materials, most especially materials dubbed as generic or standard. My latest effort to conjure liveness in interior finishes focused on a 1990s' house in Otaki Beach, New Zealand. Its layout, proportions and features offer tell-tale signs of a house design actioned in accordance to a developer's imagination and a builder's pragmatism (Figures 2 and 3).

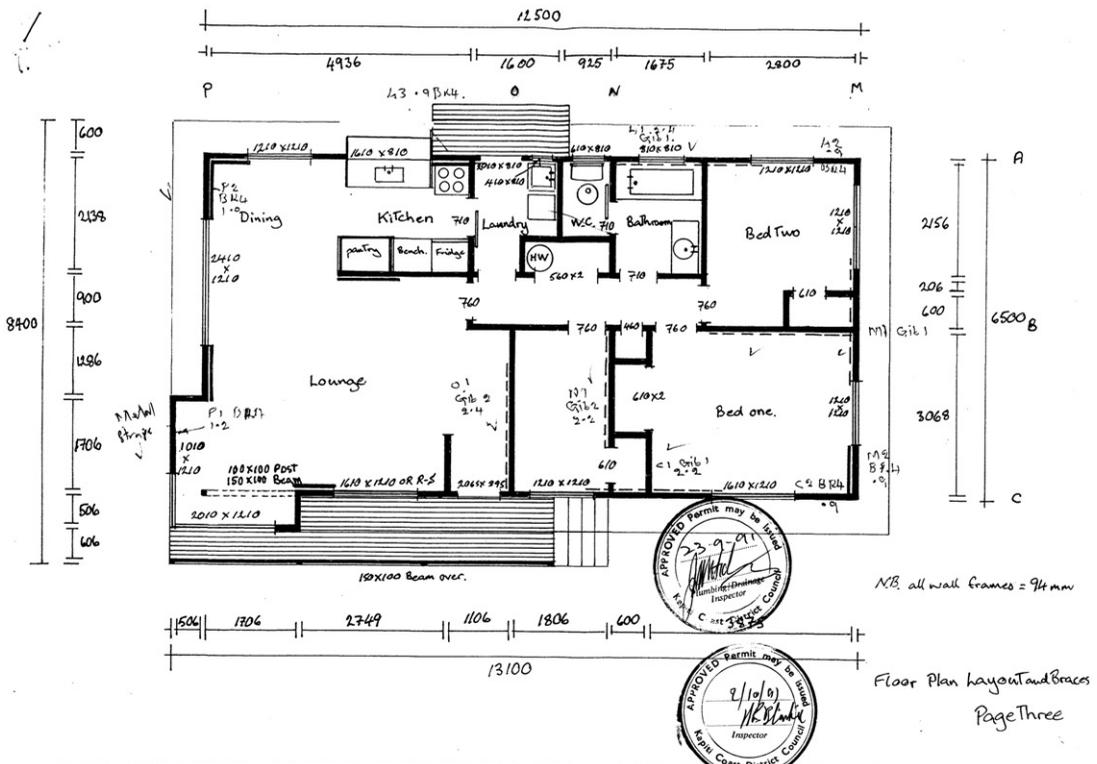


Figure 2
Building plan.

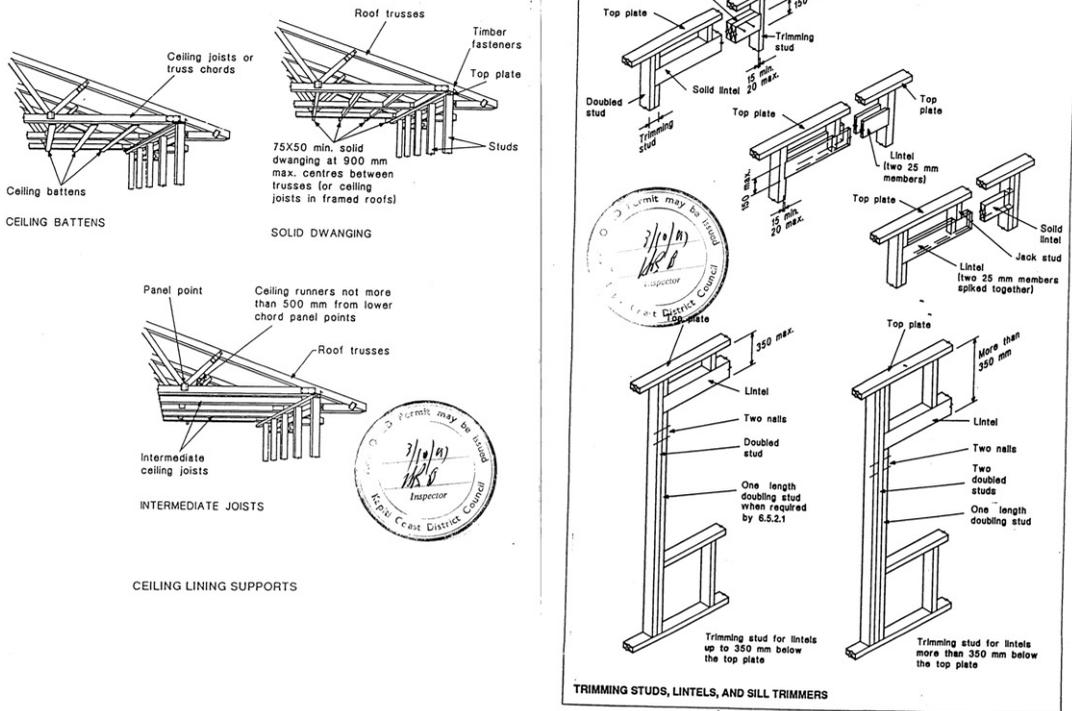


Figure 3
Structural details.

The construction drawings are scant copies of engineering tables and structural diagrams describing an eighty-seven square meters of building on one-third of a hectare of land located one street back from a beach facing the Tasman Sea. All detail drawings are directed at building as a calculated state of safety and mitigated risk from flood, earthquake, fire and wind. There is a stingy economy at play here that overwhelms any hint of spatial or material poetics. Materials have been handled, managed, attached to one another as if they are dumb and mute. Their generic dimensions overpower the traces of previous inhabitation lingering on material surfaces such as gypsum board, timber architraves and wool carpet. Somewhere there is a building parts' catalogue with dog-eared corners lying within arm's reach. An early edition of architect Ching and Adams' *Building Construction Illustrated*²⁵ littered with post-it notes is probably close by. The haphazardly applied coat of flat white paint on the ceiling and walls belies a realtor's ambition to neutralize and homogenize the space further.

Further investigation into the house's history revealed that it is a kitset design. Kitset homes in New Zealand are not novel. Pre-designed, modular, affordable and easy to build, they might be considered the norm for housing in the country.²⁶ New Zealand's investment in kitset homes might contrast to what Frampton asserted as the poetic, expressive and

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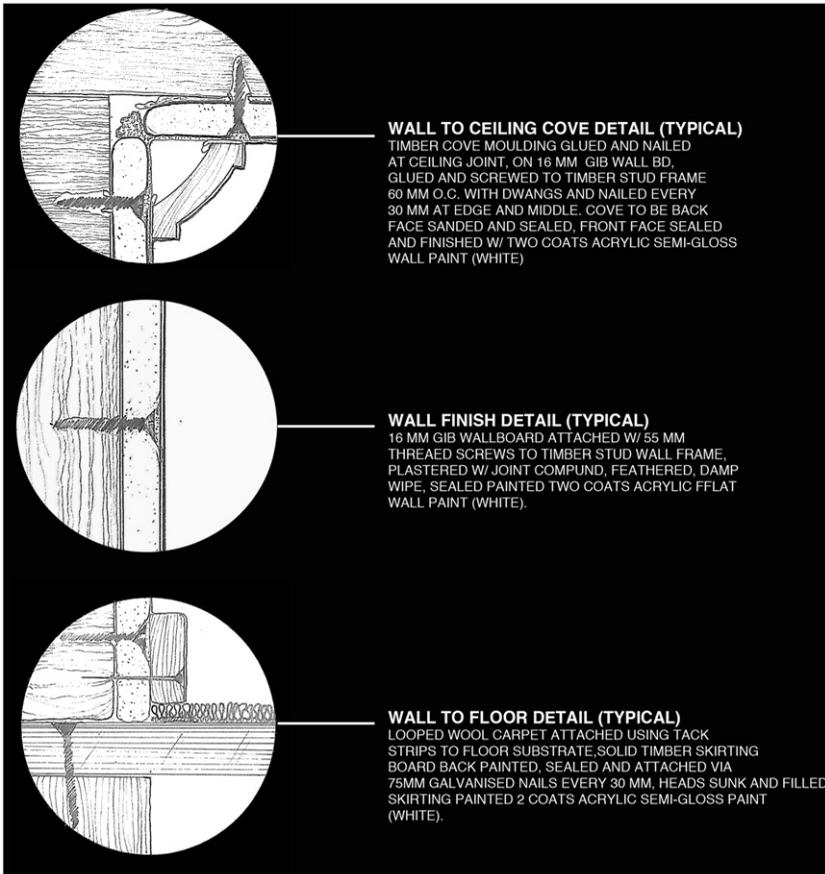


Figure 4
Illuminated construction details.

artful affiliation of construction to culture where “the built comes into existence out of the constantly evolving interplay of three converging vectors, the topos, the typos, and the tectonic.”²⁷ In his scheme, the carpenter assumes the role of poet whose craft is the art of joints.²⁸ According to Frampton, a joint tells the story of its own making. He links the joint to philosopher Martin Heidegger’s concept of notion of “thing-concept” whereby things present themselves to us through a phenomenological presence:

That which gives things their constancy and pith but is also at the same time the source of their particular mode of sensuous pressure – colored, resonant, hard, massive – is the matter in things. In this analysis of matter, form is already co-positd. What is constant in a thing, lies in the fact that matter stands together with a form. The thing is formed matter.²⁹

(I suspect that philosophers such as Bennett might want to revise that affirming statement: the thing is forming matter, or the thing is matter forming.)

Consider the phenomenological presence of a corner in this house. The heat of the day conspires with my armchair to lull me into a stupor. The room's details transform from crisply drafted sectional fragments quantified by industrial material standards into bundles of relational assemblages stimulated by thermal gain. The walls radiate tints of pink, blue, gray, golden, green whiteness as midday melts into afternoon and clouds interrupt the path of the sun. I think I can hear the pores of the plaster inhaling between the roof belching and the siding expanding and contracting. Spiders are taking up residence at the skirting board and a fly is indulging on a smudge of something at hand height. It is only in the space of duration that one can sense each detail's cold-blooded, amphibian-like response to the complexity of situated forces that bring two or more materials into contact with one another.

The detailed wall section is all too familiar; I have drawn it many times as an architectural intern. It is as if I know for sure what lives behind that paint in those cracks of space that standardized materials cannot fill up. That is a space of tolerance. The section, itself the result of a conceptual cut, a practice that severs material from a context so one can see inside and up close, is divided into three parts, those classic three parts of base, shaft and capital. Circles corral the field of vision. Look here! Look here! This is what I am made of. This is how regulatory bodies govern me. This is my relation to other building parts. All data are coded and cross-linked, for these are legal documents that anticipate a detail's capacity to articulate place, determine material form, link structure to meaning, relate part to whole and signal scale's part in perception.

At this house, the interior details, not structural details, do not belie "an inherent ideology in the larger building" and nor do they seem to serve as "the mechanism by which certain ideas are communicated, ideas that might be absent," abstracted or fetishized in the simplicity of the constructed form.³⁰ They are but the solution to a technical problem. They do not try to connect to place. Architect Edward Ford might say these details are abstract in that they express indifference to material, a sense of weight or apparent connection.³¹ Such non-specificity to place or material expression leads me to believe that these interior details are evidence of matter in deep stillness. Generic on the outside, they are hibernating, waiting for the moment to arrive.

Need I remind you that it was Vitruvius who declared details as generic and, as it follows, imparted a great deal of credit (and responsibility) to the builder.

Vitruvius [...] saw his "prescriptions" of different building types as general guidelines, and that the builder (craftsman, contractor) was the one who had to make the necessary adjustments to fit the reality of location, building material, and available tools. And in so doing, Vitruvius allowed for the juxtaposition of ideal form with actual ancient building practices

that relied on the skill and experience of the craftsman in executing the work with the use of drawings, including full-scale detail drawings, to check the results.³²

It was early twentieth-century anthropologist Lucy Shoe Merritt³³ who explored the Vitruvian detail for its individual particularity. During site visits to Greece and Rome, she literally touched and felt the workmanship of ancient craftsmen, an experience that helped her make sense of stone moldings beyond that which theory could elicit.³⁴ When asked to describe how she carefully drafted full-scale details of Greek and Roman monuments, Merritt simply asserted: “seeing what you look at.”³⁵

Harbor that thought (Figure 4).

If we were listening to this text, chatting before we watch the video, you would be handed an envelope. Inside you would find a technological instrument typically used to carve a path in the darkness, a small torch, a flashlight, an illumination tool employed in Frascari’s article “The Tell-the-Tale Detail,” a touchstone reference for many generations of architects and designers. Frascari recounts architect Carlo Scarpa’s practice of visiting a building site during the night and using a flashlight to verify the sensorial dimensions between design and craftsmanship, expression and execution.³⁶ As the circle of light edits out the darkness, the detail comes into closer focus.³⁷ Frascari writes: “The flashlight is a tool by which is achieved an analog of both the process of vision and the eye’s movement in its perception field (with only one spot in focus and the eye darting around).”³⁸ The video practices this method. In it, the warmth of the light rouses the meeting of generic interior details. The torchlight slows the apprehension of material surfaces, which allows the detection of small changes to their outward appearance. Patience, a mode of tolerance, ensues the wake of such an intimate encounter. It is in this state that one might transcend the primacy of vision and the presumption that materials are merely dead substances at human disposal. It is here that matter is vibrating, darting around, not one’s eyes. Retinal disturbance induced by quivering aural energies.

So, turn on your torches and turn to the video.

Julieanna Preston is an artist, writer and academic based in New Zealand. Her research probes the vitality and virtuality of materials and atmospheres through site-responsive live artworks coupled to a performance writing practice. www.julieannapreston.space

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Notes

- 1 The first few lines of the poem read in the video *meeting, you in detail* (2013), by Julieanna Preston. Available online: <https://vimeo.com/278844210/>
- 2 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Indianapolis, IN: Duke University Press, 2010).
- 3 Preston, *meeting, you in detail*.
- 4 Vitruvius, *Vitruvius: The Ten Books on Architecture*, trans. H. M. Morgan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926).
- 5 Kenneth Frampton, *Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture*, ed. John Cava (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).
- 6 Francis D. K. Ching and Cassandra Adams, *Building Construction Illustrated* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2008).
- 7 Marco Frascari, "The Tell-the-Tale Detail," *VIA 7: The Building of Architecture* (1994): 23–37.
- 8 For example, Francis Ponge, *Mute Objects of Expression* (New York: Archipelago, 2008).
- 9 I have addressed this same topic in "Neutral, not so," a book chapter that also prefaces a performance video; Julieanna Preston, *Performing Matter: Interior Surface and Feminist Actions* (Baunach, Germany: AADR Spurbuchverlag, 2014). Genevieve Baudoin expands upon tolerance related to the architectural detail, but not to tolerance from a social perspective; Genevieve Baudoin, "A Matter of Tolerance," *The Plan Journal* (2016). Available online: <http://www.theplanjournal.com/article/matter-tolerance/> (accessed November 12, 2018). Another source is Saul Fisher, "Philosophy of Architecture," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2015). Available online: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/architecture/> (accessed November 12, 2018).
- 10 "Mauri: (noun) life principle, life force, vital essence, special nature, a material symbol of a life principle, source of emotions – the essential quality and vitality of a being or entity. Also used for a physical object, individual, ecosystem or social group in which this essence is located"; *Māori Dictionary*. Available online: <http://maoridictionary.co.nz/word/3960> (accessed October 21, 2018).
- 11 Bruno Latour, "Can We Get Our Materialism Back, Please?," *ISIS: The History of Science Society*, 98 (2007): 138–142.
- 12 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).
- 13 Greg Harmann, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Penguin, 2018).
- 14 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.
- 15 David G. Plank, "Le Grand Recueil: Francis Ponge's Optimistic Materialism," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 26, no. 2 (1965): 302.
- 16 Francis Ponge and Violaine Huisman, "The Table," *World Literature Today*, 80, no. 5 (2006): 52.
- 17 John Stout, "The Text as Object: Francis Pong's Verbal Still Lives," *Symposium*, 47, no. 1 (1993): 53.
- 18 Ponge and Huisman, "The Table," 52.
- 19 Robert Melançon, "My Creative Method," *Maisonneuve: Quarterly of Arts, Opinions and Ideas* (2002). Available online: <https://maisonneuve.org/article/2002/11/18/my-creative-method/> (accessed December 2, 2017).
- 20 Stout, "The Text as Object," 50.
- 21 Plank, "Le Grand Recueil," 304.
- 22 Stout, "Text as Object," 52.
- 23 Plank, "Grand Recueil," 308.
- 24 My recent publications include performances such as *RPM Hums* at the Performance Arcade, Wellington, New Zealand, 2018; *murmur* at the old Town Wall, Newcastle, UK, 2017; *windwoundweatherwirewovenwoman* at Matiu Island, New Zealand, at the Performing, Writing: A Symposium in Four Turns, 2017; *WANING* at Birling Gap, UK, hosted by Brighton University, ONCA Gallery and The National Trust, September 2016; and journal articles such as "four castings" in *On Writing & Performance/Performance Research*, 23, no. 1; "SPEAK matter SPEAK," *Studies in Material Thinking*, 16 (How Matter Comes to Matter through Transversal Practice: Matter, Ecology and Relationality) (2017):

- 2–10; and "Reconciling Carboniferous Accretions: A Performative Script," *Architecture and Culture* (Into the Hidden Abode: Architecture and Production), 3, no. 3 (2015): 281–296.
- 25 Ching and Adams, *Building Construction Illustrated*.
- 26 "Kitset homes" are a New Zealand name for modular residential house often designed with option packages for extra features or variation in stylistic conventions such as window types and interior finishes. Developer-driven kitset homes are pre-engineered and designed to lower construction material and building permit costs. For example, see <https://www.trenzhomes.nz/>.
- 27 Frampton, *Studies in Tectonic Culture*, 2.
- 28 Ibid., 3–4.
- 29 Ibid., 23.
- 30 Edward Ford, *Five Houses, Ten Details* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press: 2009).
- 31 Ibid., 6–11.
- 32 Ingrid Edlund-Berry, "Architctural Theory and Practice: Vitruvian Principles and 'Full-Scale Detail,'" *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, 50 (2005): 10.
- 33 For example, see Lucy Shoe Merritt. *Profiles of Greek Mouldings*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936).
- 34 Ibid., 10.
- 35 Ibid., 5.
- 36 Frascari, "Tell-the-Tale Detail," 25.
- 37 Ibid., 24.
- 38 Ibid.

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