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ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES IN PRACTICE

Redistribute Toxicity

An Art Intervention into the Legacy of the Inter-German Toxic Waste Trade

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Abstract *Redistribute Toxicity* was a commissioned art piece created by visual artist Jonas Staal in close collaboration with environmental historian Jonas Stuck and curator and researcher Caroline Ektander, and later enriched by the knowledge and practices of seed librarian, artist, and activist Zayaan Khan for the exhibition *The Long Term You Cannot Afford: On the Distribution of the Toxic* at SAVVY Contemporary in Berlin in 2019. Informed by historical research on the trade of hazardous waste between the two Germanys during the Cold War—with a particular focus on the landfill Vorketzin, which served as West Berlin's primary hazardous waste disposal site during the division—the art commission asked us to consider what an act of redistribution of a toxic past could look like. Similar to other waste practices premised on systems of externalization, the one that transpired between a divided Germany resulted in an asymmetrical impact on human, animal, and plant lives populating the former East—effects that are till this day hard to account for. The research process generated a series of designs that exposed the various practical and ethical issues entangled with acts of retribution and helped shape a project that became less concerned with correcting the past and more committed to reconfiguring toxic relations in the present. The final installation design propagated seeds from the wetland vegetation surrounding the landfill. This wild vegetation had not only become implicated in Germany's toxic history as silent witnesses but had also helped remediate the soils over time.

Keywords hazardous waste, artistic practice, legacy effects, toxicity, more-than-human entanglements

As we got out of the car, the hot July midday heat hit us. We had started our trip from Berlin and had headed out straight west. As the denser city fabric had begun to taper off, we had exited the highway toward the south, and after another half-hour drive through a succession of flat agricultural fields, clusters of wind turbines, and smaller villages, Vorketzin landfill had



Figure 1. Waste trucks passing through the Berlin Wall to landfills in the East. Stills from a film, RBB media, 1973.

appeared. As its German name suggests, Vorketzin is located outside the village Ketzin, which is known for its beautiful location next to the river Havel. Following an unsuccessful attempt to enter the landfill through the main gate, we had found an inconspicuous dirt road at the edge of the nature reserve that surrounds the landfill where we had inched our way into and had parked next to two older men emptying the boot of their car. The retirees from one of Berlin's western boroughs were there to catch a glimpse of the renowned native wildlife. We cautiously inquired about how much they knew about the history of the area. One of them was aware of the existence of a landfill in the vicinity. Like many others, however, he knew very little about what had actually been dumped there.

In 1973, the first orange trucks crossing from West Germany into East Germany marked the beginning of what was to become a profound toxic legacy of a divided country (fig. 1). The unequal bond between East and West at the time facilitated a cheap export of hazardous waste for the West while at the same time providing an indispensable foreign currency income for the East.¹ Similar to other waste trades premised on a

1. Hazardous waste is broadly defined as wastes that exhibit any one or more of the following characteristic properties: ignitability, corrosivity, reactivity, or toxicity; see US Environmental Protection Agency, *Defining Hazardous Waste*.

system of externalization, the one that transpired within a divided Germany was deliberately moved away from public view and resulted in millions of tons of hazardous waste being dumped in East German territories.²

While the geopolitical border between East and West dissolved more than thirty years ago, the legacy of the asymmetrical trade still shapes the present. The traces of violence remain archived in the landscape, and in the bodies and lifeworlds that, to this day, inhabit them.³ Toxicity by its very nature is transgressive and cannot be controlled through human design.⁴ It is hard to apprehend and represent and, as the violence that it spreads is often a “slower, stealthier and less obvious form of brutality,” it routinely bypasses dominant scientific frames.⁵ Consequently, the accumulated, long-term impacts of the historical inter-German waste trade to human and more-than-human societies of the former East remain little discussed in the environmental discourse of a reunified Germany.⁶

In response to this underexplored research field and in conjunction with an evolving art exhibition on toxicity curated by Caroline Ektander (coauthor of this contribution) and Antonia Alampi at SAVVY Contemporary, visual artist Jonas Staal was invited to develop an installation in conversation with the research by environmental historian Jonas Stuck (coauthor of this contribution) on the trade of waste between the two Germanys. The motivation behind the art commission was to see whether Staal’s artistic practice could help unearth new perspectives on the legacy of the toxic trade. Specifically, the commission was framed around this question: Could moving toxic material back to West Germany from the East offer restitution to a now-reunified country?

The group show, titled *The Long Term You Cannot Afford: On the Distribution of the Toxic*, pivoted around the complex notion of toxicity and its neocolonial dynamics and was one of the first outcomes of the art-research collaboration Toxic Commons.⁷ Akin to other initiatives working to deepen the exchange between the arts and sciences as a way to theorize a planet in multiple crises, Toxic Commons focuses on the socio-environmental toxicity inherent to colonial capitalism and advocates for more just ways to inhabit a permanently polluted world.⁸ What followed was a long-term exchange between Staal, Stuck, and Ektander that was later enriched by the invaluable input of artist, seed librarian, and activist Zayaan Khan and resulted in the installation *Redistribute Toxicity* (fig. 2).

2. Lessenich, “Externalisierungsgesellschaft.” On well-established literature around the NIMBY (not in my backyard) discussion, see Luloff, Albrecht, and Bourke, “NIMBY and the Hazardous and Toxic Waste Siting Dilemma”; Mauch, “Out of Sight, out of Mind.”

3. Agard-Jones, “Bodies in the System”; Murphy, “Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations.”

4. Aleimo, *Bodily Natures*; Hird, “Knowing Waste.”

5. Davies, “Toxic Space and Time,” 1540. See also Nixon, *Slow Violence*; Boudia et al., “Residues.”

6. Lange, “Deal over Dirt.”

7. Toxic Commons was founded by Antonia Alampi, Ayushi Dhawan, Caroline Ektander, Maximilian Feichtner, Simone M. Müller, and Jonas Stuck in 2018. For more on the exhibition, see Ektander and Alampi, *Long Term You Cannot Afford*.

8. Liboiron, Tironi, and Calvillo, “Toxic Politics.”



Figure 2. Final installation at SAVVY Contemporary. Photographs by Jonas Staal, 2019. Seed bags filled with seeds from Vorketzin. Graphic design by Jonas Staal, 2019.

Exploring Germany's toxic past through different designs of retribution quickly exposed practical and ethical constraints. With each attempt to reckon with the past it became increasingly clear that there exists no space of purity.⁹ Histories are contingent and entangled and can never be undone. At best, they can be told differently in the present to live on better, together, into more flourishing, egalitarian multispecies futures. The final installation was thus designed to propagate a stronger solidarity with more-than-human others and distributed the seeds of plants growing around the Vorketzin landfill. During decades of landfilling hazardous waste in Vorketzin, these plants had become materially implicated in the toxic trade and remediators of its enduring effects.

After wrapping up our exchange with the two retirees, we headed down a narrow path lined by thick vegetation that opened up onto a wetland area covered in knee-high grass. The expansive feeling of stepping into the thriving biotope that surrounds the Vorketzin landfill was enhanced by the thick July air and the vibrant humming of insect life. As we waded through the wetland, we discovered the flourishing home of an abundance of flowers, birds, and critters.

9. Shotwell, *Against Purity*.

Glancing ahead across the terrain, ponds and meandering water arteries began to parcel the lush green carpet, and beyond that, a hill broke up the otherwise flat horizon. Squinting, one could make out a patchwork of protective layering and shiny metal chimneys coming out of the landfill body. Besides a steady stream of trucks emptying their loads in five-to-ten-minute intervals, the activity of the landfill was minimal, and its gestalt merged inconspicuously into the surrounding landscape.

Vorketzin Landfill: A Historical Account

Vorketzin landfill, located in Brandenburg, was like many other small-scale waste pits in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Located in Berlin's hinterland, it was used to dispose of municipal waste coming from Berlin as early as the 1960s.¹⁰ However, the scale and nature of the operation changed drastically after the "long-term contract" came into effect on January 1, 1975, which regulated the export of waste from West Berlin to three landfills in East Germany for a period of twenty years. The GDR would receive approximately forty marks per ton as a fixed rate—whether the waste was classified as municipal waste, construction rubble, or harmful waste.¹¹ Because the price was the same no matter what the material was, it was an ideal way for the enclaved West Berlin to dispose of its hazardous waste.

Each of the three landfills specialized in the disposal of certain types of waste; Vorketzin's focus was on hazardous waste. During the 1970s and 1980s a mix of hazardous waste, including lead batteries, unwanted pesticides, oil-contaminated soil, and incinerator ash, was routinely dumped directly into its open pits.¹² The surrounding areas and bodies of water were consequently polluted with high levels of lead, mercury, arsenic, copper, and polyaromatic hydrocarbons.¹³ The contract regulated that a fixed amount of forty thousand tons of hazardous waste could be disposed of in Vorketzin, but in reality, this total grew much higher. Until 1989, the GDR government earned around one billion marks with the import of waste from West Berlin, which made it a very valuable asset in the procurement of foreign currency.¹⁴ Even though the GDR legally considered hazardous waste an environmental problem, there were no strict protocols on imported waste.¹⁵ The standard practice was that industrial and hazardous waste was regularly mixed with household waste in the landfills, and Vorketzin was no different (see fig. 3). Powerful politicians like Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski, the architect behind the trade deal and head of the GDR's secret enterprise Commercial Coordination (which had the goal to bring foreign currency into the country), regularly prioritized economic gains over environmental concerns.¹⁶

10. Rat der Stadt Ketzin, "Pachtvertrag," October 10, 1963, BStU, BV Pdm Abt. 18, 1252, fol. 2, 2–5.

11. Park, "Der 'Langfristvertrag.'"

12. Zielinski, "Informations- und Augmentationsmaterial zum Deponiestandort Vorketzin," February 19, 1988, BLHA, Rep. 401, 23054, 1–14.

13. Schmid, "Aktuelle Schadstoffanalysen."

14. Lösch and Plötz, "Die Bedeutung des Bereichs Kommerzielle Koordinierung," 82, 124–27.

15. Strasser, *Waste and Want*.

16. Hesse, "Information zur Leitungssitzung am 13.02.1985," March 7, 1985, BStU, Pdm Vorl. A, 111/88, fol. 2/1, 62.



Figure 3. Archival photos show the state of Vorketzin during the 1980s. Photographs by BStU, undated.

Various groups in the GDR expressed their environmental concerns, but they were largely ignored by the authorities in charge. A part of the “long-term contract” was the promise to create a lab in Neufahrland (East Germany), only a twenty-five-minute drive away from Vorketzin, that could test imported waste and judge its harmfulness in accordance with Western scientific standards using imported lab equipment. However, due to the lack of political and financial support and high maintenance costs, the lab would never serve as the controlling counterpart to the seemingly unregulated trade of waste that it was meant to be. The lab was forced to cut down the number of employees and sell off some of their most advanced high-tech testing tools by the mid-1980s, but it

remained a site of contention between the environmentally aware lab staff, on the one side, and the top-level landfill managers, on the other. In the reports filed by the Ministry of State Security (the Stasi) in the GDR, the lab's mostly young and well-educated scientists voiced their opposition to dumping hazardous waste, as they feared long-term contamination and ecological damages at the landfill sites.¹⁷

Simultaneously, landfill workers physically felt and reacted to the hazardous quality of the incoming waste: the intolerable smell, nausea, and headaches.¹⁸ Once such effects were reported, very little could, however, be done about it, as it was generally too dangerous to remove and relocate hazardous materials from the pit. Instead, it was simply covered up with more of the incoming waste, dirt, and rubble from the West. Regularly, the landfill employees raised concerns to the Stasi about leachate escaping from Vorketzin into the adjacent ponds, which were connected to the Havel, one of the biggest water arteries in northern Germany, and which could also impact the nearby fisheries.¹⁹

Local residents also felt the effects of smoldering fires that regularly lingered sixty to seventy centimeters below the surface. The fires would slowly move through the landfill and were difficult to completely extinguish.²⁰ To this day, dust clouds that emerge when trucks tip their waste onto the landfill cavities disseminate through atmospheric drifts and move on in the three-dimensional world of mixtures and mobility.²¹ It is impossible to know how far winds and water have translocated toxic matter from the landfill in the years leading up to the fall of the Wall and how much still regularly escapes its partly illusionary confines.

For the East German environmental movement, waste disposal was one of the central points of contention in the late 1970s and 1980s. In 1982, environmental data became classified in East Germany, and no official information about the waste deal with the West or the state of the landfills was available to the public. To counterweigh the secrecy, East German environmental activist groups collected and disseminated information about landfills, through secret filming, soil sampling, and exchanges with Western environmental groups. In 1987, the East German environmental group Environmental Library, or Umweltbibliothek, acquired a video recorder through the help of Roland Jahn—an expatriated member of the GDR's opposition—and filmed the dire situation in Vorketzin. After the film was successfully smuggled back to West Germany, the footage was aired in January 1988 on the primary national West German television

17. Winter, "Information zur Person," March 3, 1988, BStU, Pdm 18, 106, fol. 1/2, 100; Hesse, "Beispiele der Verletzung der Stoffcharakteristik," February 2, 1985, BStU, Pdm Vorl. A, 111/88, fol. 2/1, 45.

18. "Ablagerungen von ölhaltigen Boden auf der Mülldeponie Ketzin/DDR durch Westberliner Firmen trotz Verbot durch DDR-Behörden," February 18, 1977, BStU, HA 18, 3145, fol. 2/3, 280–81; Poethke, "Informationen über Vorkommnisse auf der Mülldeponie," May 5, 1987, BStU, BV Pdm 20, 747, fol. 1, 1–2.

19. Heinz II, "Information zur Lage im VEB (B) Deponie," January 22, 1983, BStU, Pdm Vorl. A, 115/83, fol. 2/2, 62–63.

20. Heinz II, "Informationen zur Lage im VEB (B) Deponie," October 12, 1981, BStU, Pdm Vorl. A, 115/83, fol. 1/2, 211–12.

21. Boudia et al., "Residues," 170.

channel, ARD.²² The film was debated widely in Western media outlets and caused an equally large stir among the East German public.²³ Despite public attention, the waste business persevered and continued to grow.

With Germany's reunification, all East German companies fell into federal ownership and were systematically reorganized and privatized through the Treuhand agency.²⁴ The operations of Vorketzin were taken over by MEAB, a public company that has since made steady investments to free itself from its hazardous legacy. New environmental protocols and containment technologies—designed to prevent further leakages into the already contaminated groundwater and surrounding landscape—have been put in place, and Vorketzin still remains Berlin's number one landfill for the disposal of hazardous waste.²⁵ According to the Environmental Protection Agency in Brandenburg, the landfill, like so many other industrial sites of the time, will require monitoring and management indefinitely.²⁶

A barbed-wire fence, hostile signs, and the conspicuous glare from the security guard confronted us on our attempt to enter the landfill through the main gate. We had decided to try our luck after Stuck's official application to visit the landfill as researchers had been formally denied, but to no avail: we were impolitely dismissed and left standing at the edge, watching the steady stream of stocked garbage trucks effortlessly enter its confines. It is hard to imagine that at the time of division, people would regularly climb the feeble fences that demarcated the landfill and scavenge around in the mounds of Western waste for a rare pair of jeans, foreign magazines, or valuable electronics. The ever-changing meanings and value of matter tend to be accentuated in borderlands.

Redistributing Toxicity: A Play in Three Acts

Finding a form for insourcing toxicity from the former East back into the former West felt like a simple and conceptually straightforward task at the outset. In practice, however, it quickly proved far knottier and progressively exposed the project's inherent ethical stickiness. The project underwent a series of design modifications that came to reveal pit stops and dead ends, while also providing opportunities to think further about toxicity in ways that dismantle nature/culture dichotomies and destabilize anthropocentric frames that so often limit the understanding of recurring, complex phenomena.

Act I: Redistributing Topsoil

Staal's initial design was to bring topsoil from inside the Vorketzin landfill into the gallery space in Wedding, located in former West Berlin (see fig. 4). The twenty-centimeter-

22. Rüdtenklau, *Störenfried*, 128.

23. Hans Reichelt, "Information und Standpunkt zu einer Sendung im BRD-Fernsehen über die Abnahme von Abfallstoffen aus Westberlin durch die DDR," January 13, 1988, BArch, DK/5, fol. 5755.

24. Knaebel and Rimbart, "Economic Anschluss of the GDR."

25. Senatsverwaltung für Umwelt, Verkehr und Klimaschutz, *Abfallwirtschaftsplan Berlin*.

26. Reiner Drewes (Landesamt für Umwelt Brandenburg), interview by Jonas Stuck, Potsdam, December 7, 2018.

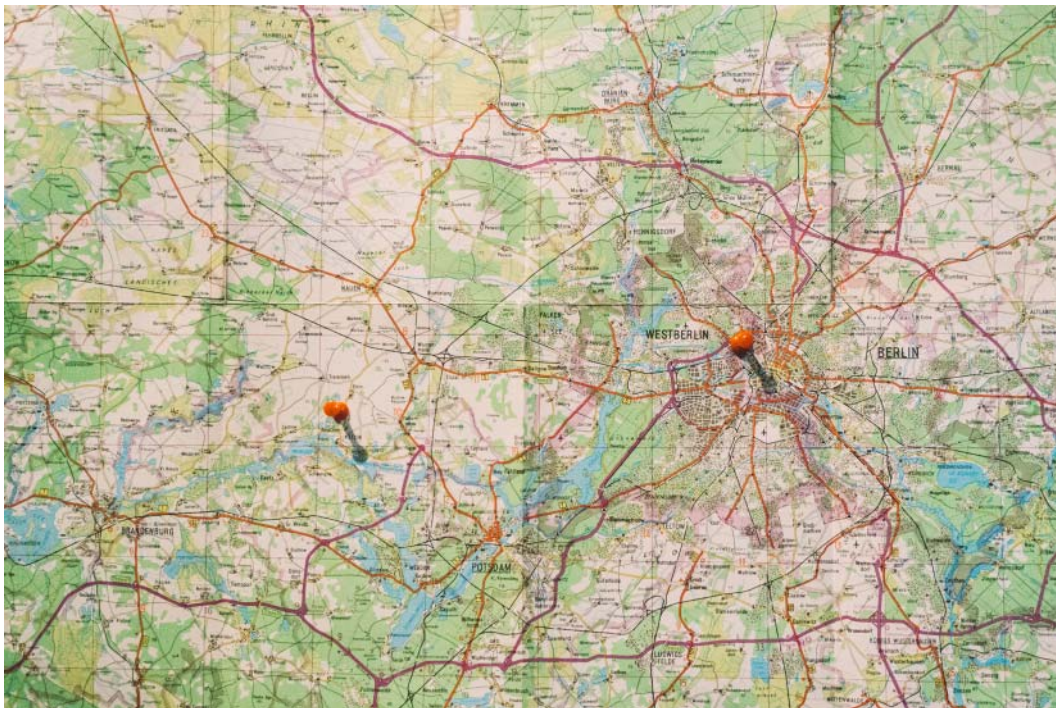


Figure 4. East German map from 1975 showing the distance between SAVVY art gallery (right pin) and Vorketzin landfill (left pin). Photograph by Jonas Stuck, 2019.

deep topsoil and its carpeted vegetation would have been portioned and placed in identical planter boxes uniformly labeled *Redistribute Toxicity* and assembled in the gallery space to create a green landscape zone—not dissimilar from the historical border zone that used to surround the Berlin Wall. The visitors would have been invited to take a planter box from the gallery, leaving an outline of the box in white tape as a trace. The space would have undergone observable change through the visitor’s active engagement with the artwork and made present the redistributed material burdens of the past, figuratively speaking. At the same time, the shared act of care for the soil would slowly have undone the border zone within the exhibition—a reenactment of the fall of the Wall, which had its thirtieth anniversary at the time of the show.

To ensure the health and well-being of staff and visitors, we needed to provide scientific evidence that the soil from Vorketzin was safe to be around. Finding a credible way to account for soil toxicity proved an insurmountable barrier, though. After multiple attempts to contact labs and research institutes throughout Germany, it turned out that there is no standardized test for contaminated soils. For a toxicity test one needs to have precise records of what exactly had been dumped in the soil in order to know what to look for. After consultation with our peers, and particularly SAVVY’s founder, Bonaventure Ndikung, we agreed that moving soil from Vorketzin into the gallery space would subject both the public and the staff to an undefinable toxic load. The knowledge about the Vorketzin landfill that Stuck had revealed was enough to make the act consciously harmful. It also turned out to be impossible to get access to the contaminated

landfill. Since the fall of the Wall, the current owner, MEAB, has receded from public view and, not unlike the East German regime, showed little interest in sharing knowledge, let alone cooperating with us on such an inquisitive scheme.

We therefore decided to shift the focus from the heavily regulated landfill to the more diluted toxic landscape surrounding the site. The idea was to extract topsoil that hosted a more diverse greenery just outside the landfill fence. The motivation was to bypass the practical and legal hurdle of access and to concentrate on soil that had been metabolized by what Staal refers to as “plant workers” for the last three decades.²⁷ Similar to the first design, the soil, and its wilder vegetation, would be redistributed in a similar way, and the plants and their ancestors would be recognized for their reparative and regenerative labor and eventually find new homes in a now unified Germany. Moreover, these caring acts would cultivate awareness of the landfill and its history all over Berlin and beyond—in gardens and allotments and on balconies and terraces.

However, it turned out that just as the landfill was protected by property rights, so too were its surroundings. It was forbidden to dig and remove vegetation from the area, which is now a designated nature reserve and protected forest. In addition, removing such a substantial area of topsoil and plants felt problematic. The topsoil, as our visits had shown us, was teeming with biota and serves as a basis for all the life that resides and flourishes there.

Act II: Redistributing Weedy Others

To bypass any legal and technical ownership hurdles, Stuck suggested that we turn our attention to the countless illegal landfills scattered all over the Brandenburg countryside (fig. 5). These started to appear in the postunification years, when shady, opportunistic entrepreneurship coincided with a weak state eager to foster economic activity. Newly started recycling companies, which were by law authorized to accumulate waste on site, would file for bankruptcy after accepting tons of waste that was paid for by the waste handlers.²⁸ These sites were then left abandoned and only dealt with once public pressure mounted and the state was forced to clean it up. Due to their often-peripheral locations in forest clearings or industrial grounds, little attention was brought to them, and they were often left to deteriorate in their own, disorderly fashion. However, judging from the skin rashes, headaches, and even nausea experienced upon a visit to one of these illegal landfills, it became obvious that discarded matter found in these places held a palpable toxic load. Under the warm rays of the summer sun the unsorted waste hills smelled rancid, so we quickly ruled out further engagements.

The ruderal plants thriving on the mounds of discarded matter, however, made a strong impression, as they were able to flourish in conditions where humans allegedly could not. Reasoning that these weedy plants contained tolerable traces of their toxic surroundings, we set a new course. The idea was to bring the weeds into the gallery

27. Staal, “Deep Future Propagandas.”

28. Billig, *Schwarz. Rot. Müll*, 37–38.

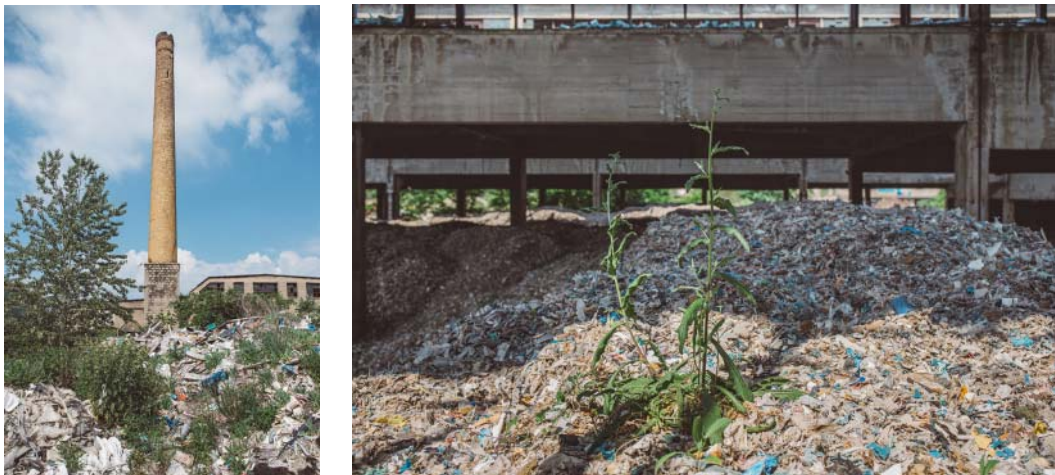


Figure 5. Interconnected ecologies on illegal landfills in Brandenburg. Photographs by Jonas Stuck, 2019.

space—this time replanted into new, “clean” soil. But when we reached out to different experts on weedy plants, our plan was, again, quickly derailed. It turned out that weeds, by their very nature, refuse cultivation and domestication. Weeds are adapted to their surroundings and grow in coordination with a multitude of different biota and microbiota, metal-rich soils, sunlight, and wind. Attempting to uproot such a firmly situated life-form would make it so stressed that it would most likely die. The encounter with the weeds and their capacities to survive in such hostile conditions however invited us to think deeper about the more-than-human entanglements in these toxic spaces.

Wading through the knee-high grasses enveloping Vorketzin landfill, we reflected on how the weedy plants that populate the wetland have propagated in the metal rich soil over the last five decades and have, bit by bit, absorbed the imperceptible traces of radium, cadmium, arsenic, mercury, potassium hydroxide, and fluorocarbons into their plant tissue. And each year, as Earth’s tilt dictates, a generation of plants will die and wither and gradually disperse their dried-out fleshy remains, along with an abundance of their seeds, in the mild autumn winds. In doing so, they contribute to making new hopeful futures through their ceaseless yet undervalued labor of mitigating toxicity in and around Vorketzin.

Act III: Redistributing Seeds of Weedy Others

Through a series of encounters and unfolding events—sometimes orchestrated, sometimes serendipitous—the final design for the exhibition emerged. The practice of Zayaan Khan, a South African artist, researcher, and decolonial seed librarian visiting Berlin for a previous show at SAVVY, helped tie together the project’s loose threads. Khan’s work and research centers on Indigenous food reclamation and unhitching our collective consumption from neoliberalism. Seizing the opportunity to endow the project with Khan’s knowledge of decolonial seed practices, we arranged a public seed collecting event in the Vorketzin biosphere ahead of the exhibition. Meandering the wetlands around Vorketzin with a group of participants, Khan shared her knowledge of botany and artfully showed us how to find the seeds of trees, weeds, wildflowers, vines, and grasses and how to pick



Figure 6. Open seed bag from a visitor who planted the seeds at the Allmende-Kontor allotments near Tempelhofer Feld. Photograph by Constanze Lechler, 2020.

them with care. She instructed us to preserve seeds by covering them in ash—not only to protect them from mold and the passing of time but also to offer a gift of nourishment for their further propagation.²⁹ Many hands helped collect seeds that late summer afternoon, and the bounty was laid out to dry on blankets in SAVVY and later combined with another mix collected by Stuck, Staal, and Ektander for the final installation.

Building on Staal's conceptual idea of a climate propaganda designed to establish new comradely ecosystems between humans, nonhumans, and other-than-human actors, *Redistribute Toxicity* obtained a central location in the gallery and clearly demarcated a space where the past was brought back into the present.³⁰ The installation channeled visitors through a border zone and offered them a glimpse back at a socialist past. In 850 neat, identical envelopes, seeds of plants endemic to Germany's toxic legacy and remediators of its past awaited their further propagation in the former West and beyond (see fig. 6).

29. This traditional practice has endured for many generations throughout the world. See also Oguntade and Adedotun, "Preservation of Seeds against Fungi Using Wood-Ash."

30. Staal, "Climate Propagandas," 13.

To present the role of history, the envelopes were accompanied by a looped archival film clip showing yellow waste lorries moving through the former border zone, formerly classified photographs from the Stasi archive evidencing the negligent disposal of waste in Vorketzin in the late 1980s, and a historic East German map that referenced the location of the gallery in relation to the landfill. To situate these historical artifacts, a timeline showing the broader history of the inter-German waste trade from the 1960s up to present day rounded off the installation.

Visitors were encouraged to take the envelopes, thereby acknowledging everyone's complicity in the past and inviting a comradely gesture toward the more-than-human populations native to Vorketzin, helping to disseminate them in the wind. A project that had started off as a human-centric scheme concerned with correcting the past through actual material redistribution instead helped lay bare the inherent violence of a purely human-centric design.

Gathered in a forest clearing on the outskirts of the biotope, we ceremoniously lay sticks and bark on a small fire contained by an imperfect circle of stones that we have gathered and amateurly arranged to prevent the spread of fire. We watch the wood burn and release a gray cloud that is quickly engulfed by the late summer sky. Living matter combusts and leaves a fine ash that we later use to guard the seeds that we, and many more, have harvested over the course of the summer.

Conclusion: An Attempt at Retribution

To attempt to redistribute a toxic past is a lofty endeavor. No solution is all-encompassing or even near complete. Generations of weedy plants surrounding Vorketzin have been silent witnesses of the inter-German toxic trade and have been routinely overlooked by the public. However, these plants not only contain the residues of their past but also carry in their offspring a blueprint for futures to come. By propagating their untold histories, a future vocabulary of plant-people alliances is articulated—one committed to balancing human agencies in a much bigger scheme of planetary becoming.³¹ The age of toxicity, as Michelle Murphy writes, “is a condition that is shared, but unevenly so, and which divides us as much as binds us.”³² Toxicity teaches us that the past, present, and future are neither self-contained occurrences nor a series of chrononormative events that can be reversed. On the contrary, the indistinct contamination of life continually interconnects us in new and unknown ways, slowly forcing linkages between supposedly separate and stagnant beings.

CAROLINE EKTANDER is an architect and artist researcher based at Bauhaus University Weimar. Her practice-based design research revolves around issues of pollution, environmental justice, and the complex conditions that lead to the contamination of planetary commons.

31. Myers, “Photosynthetic Mattering,” 127.

32. Murphy, “Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations,” 497.

JONAS STUCK is an environmental historian whose research speaks to trends that continue to this day, including the relationship between states, citizens, and the environment. His historical work focuses on the permeability of political borders through the international trade of hazardous waste, particularly between the two Germanys during the Cold War.

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