

## Archiving/Composting by Sophie Soobramanien

*A reflection on the reading and conversation by director Lara Khaldi and Fransisca Khamis Giacoman, on the subject of buried objects in Palestine. The event took place on 28 February 2025 as part of the exhibition My Garden's Boundaries are the Horizon, hosted by the collective To See the Inability to See – artists Arefeh Riahi, Martín La Roche Contreras and Maartje Fliervoet. This piece is written by Sophie Soobramanien, an artist, filmmaker and the public programme producer at de Appel.*

I was thinking about writing a text, something to contribute to this periodical. Something that draws from and expands on de Appel's programme, to build our own discourse around the thematics that are important to us. We discuss having a glossary, highlighting and outlining key ideas. The word for this issue is *compost*. I find this out later. I'm happy, as I had already decided to write about a burial.

It is the 22nd of July 2025, and the de Appel team has a writing workshop with Taylor le Melle. *How can we embed what we want to say in the format we want to write?* Taylor brought three texts to help us think through form, tone, affordances and creative misuse. Extracts from Caroline Lavine's *Forms*, Toni Cade Bambara's *Gorilla, My Love* and *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner. We do an exercise where we write the content of one using the form of the other: the preface of *Gorilla, My Love* (personal, emotive, connected, high tempo) as a list by the character Cash in *As I Lay Dying* (detached, measured, pathological, precise). As another exercise, we collectively note as many writing 'forms' as we can think of:

Journal entries, texts, emails, reminders, inventories, birthday cards, footnotes, artist statements, apologies...

It grew into a very long list. (lists...)

Taylor asks us to think about the use and misuse of these forms, the way these containers for writing afford different potentialities. In Lavine's *Forms*, a fork is a fork; it stabs and scoops, but through creative misuse, it can also be used to jimmy open a door. A stuck door. How could this premise help us with our writing? In the misuse of forms, what secrets can emerge?

On the 28th of February 2025, a group of people came together at de Appel and committed to a communal burial.<sup>1</sup> The attendees brought objects with them that held different personal significance.

The invitation for a burial was extended by Francisca Khamis<sup>2</sup> and de Appel, within the context of *My Garden's Boundaries Are the Horizon*, an exhibition by Arefeh Riahi, Martín La Roche Contreras and Maartje Fliervoet. The exhibition and public programme were an expansion and unfolding of the artists' publication project of the same name. Throughout the duration of the show, different aspects of the work were activated with the help of others. An essay by Lara Khaldi, artistic director of de Appel, on secret archives and fugitive objects in Palestine, had been cited in the publication and became the starting point for the event and collective conversation with Khamis.

The event began with a reading of an extract from the publication that spoke of the potential of all containers to hold secrets. It echoes the idea that more secrets will be generated in spaces where there is greater control, such as in archives and oppressive state regimes.

Lara's essay talked about the citizen secrets buried all over the city of Ramallah. Political pamphlets, communiques for collective action, said to be buried in the alleys and back walls of buildings, having been thrown into deep holes and wet concrete during the first Intifada.

Where the distribution and disposal of such materials became a perilous process of avoiding capture by the Israeli state. The only way to remove the archive was to make an archive. On this, Francisca and Lara spoke about the significance of the underground and the burial in the Palestinian imaginary, which has weighed heavily since the Nakba. About how many things were buried during this event catastrophe of forcible exile – holding with them the promise of return to the land, the hope of the right person finding it, and, in the time between these moments, the resistance being kept alive.

The audience was invited to place their contributions on a table and, if desired, they could share the stories of their objects.

Now, I'm looking at my attempts of the writing exercises scrawled on the paper, considering if I'll share them with the group. We're discussing Cash's list of reasons why he made his mother's coffin on the bevel. Taylor asks what a misuse of a burial could be.

I start thinking about composting and burial as it connects to writing (and creative) practice. Both suggest that disappearance isn't an ending, but a transformation.

Composting feels to be a hot topic in the cultural world as of late, especially as it intersects with digital technologies. My friend Shreya keeps sending me Instagram posts for open calls about compost computers and growing e-waste. There is a call for sustainable alternatives to big tech, how to do the de-growth. We're both a little confused about what the words mean. How does one ground the cloud? Or make systems that undo the harm of data centres whilst still doing the work of data centres? Planting a tree for every meme posted, making outfits for sims out of e-waste? Still, the calls make sense to me when watching the mechanics of 'techno-libertarian warfare'<sup>3</sup> and live-streamed genocide unfold before us with mind-blowing impunity, and our own growing complicity and insurmountable grief at the apathy and inhumanity of the proliferating systems we actively operate in and fuel.

To compost is to put aside, to make fallow, to allow what feels like waste or excess to ripen into future nutrients. Abandoned fragments, forgotten notes, or misused forms can become a fertile bed for later growth. Does a burial similarly complicate the idea of finality? It is clear the many socio-cultural contexts around the act resist any one interpretation. But can we say that to bury an object, or even a text, to make a secret of them, commits to time beyond one's own and trust that what disappears may return in a different, ungovernable form?

Post-event, I'm flipping through the object contracts (the contracts made for 28/02/25 between Francisca, de Appel Archive and lender) and descriptions to pick some I'd like to write about. Some feel stickier than others, connecting more with my ideas for this text. Taylor had brought their copy of the book *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner, a book about the extensive journey undertaken for the burial of a woman, mapped through the voices of those affected.

Lorena Solís Bravo brought a shell, titled *a spiral of being*. Lorena had written of their objects story and significance: *“Shells are often found in graves, as an item that travels to the afterlife together with the deceased. And this shell contains a spiral, a spiral of being, being between the inside and the outside. The being of a spiral time where the past, present and future are in constant relation with each other, always present and in movement. A spiral time being buried means not the end of something but its continuation.”*<sup>4</sup>

Maartje Fliervloet brought a USB stick. My mind fills with imagery of digital compost, and I’m reminded of the open calls from Shreya. The USB stick *“contains screenshots from a [illegible] construction made by my son. He built 2 apartments under a glass dome. The apartments and the dome appeared to him in a dream. One of the apartments is for my son and me, and the other for him and his father. It helps us to overcome the distance between us and the longing for each other.”*<sup>5</sup> During the event, Maartje mentioned that she and her son had been trying to meet in their dreams. They discovered they both dream of homes so they focus on this before going to sleep, using a technique from Daniel Godimez-Nivón.

These objects formally became a part of de Appel’s archive. Soon they will be buried in a plot of Khamis’s ancestral land in Al-Makhrou, Palestine. Within their stated and signed contracts, these objects will remain in the conditions of the soil of Al-Makhrou. In its humidity, depth and temperature, with the ‘archive location’ listed as geographical coordinates. Forever tying a part of de Appel’s Archive to this piece of land that’s been in Khamis’s family for years. Within Area C, under Israeli Military control, the land is at constant threat of illegal annexation. In Area C, you cannot build as Palestinians, but illegal Israeli settlements are regularly and increasingly built there.

*I think about the historic spirals of imperial land grabbing and mass displacement...*

This contractual binding was premised on an inherent lack of control and the uncontainable promise of return. Bound together, Francisca and Lara asked, how can we pass through this being a performance, or a performative act that merely signifies an intention? How are we activated and moved to act by the responsibility of this shared burial?

The burial of our objects in Al-Makhrou makes possible the return of them, it commits to and invests in a time that isn’t ours to hold, a time where Palestine isn’t subject to genocidal forces. It is up to us to keep the spirit of resistance alive between now and the moment these objects are unearthed. It resists the defunctionalising of them, the removal of them from the practice of life. (Works of art are the corpses of objects. *In art museums, objects are kept and put on display after their death: after they have been defunctionalised, removed from the practice of life.*<sup>6</sup>)

By being and living in the Netherlands, we are complicit in this genocide<sup>7</sup>, and all the land we walk on here is built on colonial history. Today, at this very moment, the Netherlands is still supporting the export of F-35 fighter jets to Israel via a ‘carve out’<sup>8</sup>, so as not to disrupt lucrative global supply chains, despite their serious breaches of international law.<sup>9</sup>

Maria Nolla brought a match box: *“A box of long matches which are good to start a fire to cook in. Or to burn it all down.”* I imagine the digital material intangibly composting on USBs in our drawers, and the heat, smell and acrid taste of live fires started to trigger a reset.

I'm googling how to compost online. I find a Reddit post on r/composting asking about the time and effort it takes to achieve compost. I learn that the pace depends on the care given: turning and tending accelerates decomposition. User u/midrandom comments about being a lazy composter, they have a system. *"A big trash can with the bottom cut out and a tight fitting lid. It sits on some concrete pavers by my back door. It gets kitchen scraps and herb garden weeds, plus torn up egg cartons. I don't turn it. About twice a year I tip it over and pull whatever compost is done from the bottom."* Even with 'lazy composting', neglected scraps eventually return to soil. The transformation is not instant but relational, slow, cyclical, and collective, shaped by what we return to and what we let lie.

I realise that the thematics of this essay are confronting me with my own personal feelings around death, deterioration and decomposition. I always felt that when I go, I'm gone, and both my thinking now and then, just stops. 'We all become worm food' was always a comical saying to me that never sunk in. I'm hit by how malnourished my relation to literal earth is.

During the burial event, Lara referenced an essay from Boris Groys which reflected on every Russian regime's preservation of Lenin's corpse.<sup>10</sup> Groys notes that Lenin is displayed to prove he is truly dead and will never rise again, at least as long as the body remains visible. Only when the corpse disappears, returns to earth, could there be the possibility of resurrection.

Lara described Lenin's body, kept under highly regulated conditions, as an endless repetition of Leninism's "death". Lara highlighted Groys' idea that the often-made comparison of the museum to the graveyard is inaccurate. In the graveyard there is so much liveness. The dead are composted, can transform, ripen, sweeten and make life again, feeding stories, myths, ghosts and reawakenings. Liveness is feared in spaces that seek control. The graveyard is a place of potential and possibility, standing in direct contrast to the museum, where everything is visible and concretised, stagnated and maintained, kept outside of time. A zombification. Except here, the dead aren't walking.

In tightly controlled conditions of humidity, temperature and airflow, museum objects and Lenin's corpse are preserved not to keep them alive, but to ensure they stay definitively dead.

Lara cited a story from an archive made with friends around buried objects in Palestine.

*In 2002, during the incursions of the second Intifada, the Israeli Military was patrolling the streets for Palestinian Political Activists, a prisoner was said to have told his father from prison that he had buried weapons in their farmland some years ago. The father quickly replies, are you insane, telling me this on the phone. You know our phone is bugged. And he hangs up. A few days later, the son calls his father and asks him what happened. They were listening to your call son, the Israeli military showed up the next day and turned over all the soil looking for the weapons. The son laughed, told his father, there weren't any buried weapons, he just thought he'd help out with this season's ploughing from prison.*

In my mind, I keep circling around the linguistic containers we use to hold thought and form, their subtle yet loaded differences: the burial for control and the burying for making compost. How certain archives make fertile ground and others sentence objects to eternal deadness. As I strive to learn from the indigenous people who live with, from and of the land, resisting the colonial drives to exterminate them and their practices. Whilst being mindful not to romanticise any ideas of 'going back to your roots', but to structurally and ontologically retrace the violence of land grabbing and the imperial markings off borders and ownership.<sup>11</sup>

Lorena's shell returns to me. A spiral time where nothing ends, where everything is held in continual return.

- 1 My Garden's Boundaries Are the Horizon: Lezing en gesprek met Lara Khaldi en Francisca Khamis Giacomani - Archief - de Appel Amsterdam
- 2 Francisca Khamis Giacomani is a Chilean artist from the Palestinian diaspora, and co-ordinator of the Lumbung Practice Masters at Sandberg Institute.
- 3 Heard at an artist talk by T.J Demos - Gaza's Genocide/Ecocide, Technolibertarian Warfare, and the Seeds of Survival, 2025
- 4 From Lorena Solís Bravo's Object Contract
- 5 From Maartje Fliervloet's Object Contract
- 6 The Immortal Bodies, by Boris Groys
- 7 <https://www.somof.nl/economic-sanctions-eu-is-israel-largest-investor/>
- 8 On the "Whims of Foreign Courts"
- 9 Dutch Foreign Minister Resigns over Failed Push on Israel Sanctions - World En.tempo.co
- 10 The Immortal Bodies.doc
- 11 Saba Innab, artist talk Building as Destroying, Destroying as Building at de Appel