

I

Invisibleⁱ

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The words *visible* and *vision* both come from the Latin root *videre*, “to see”. In this sense, when Haraway tells us that vision is always situated,¹ there is an implication that (in)visibility is also always situated.² Invisibility has two modes; that is “unable to be seen, either by nature or because concealed (or) treated as if unable to be seen”.³ Central to this definition is the interplay between what is physically hidden from view and what is systematically rendered invisible through our situated ways of knowing (epistemology) and being (ontology) in the world.

The material flows of everyday life are multiple and complex, extending through both space (connecting bodies and locations) and time (between the past, present and future). This epistemological and ontological grounding in the world often sinks into the background, becoming the infrastructure of daily life, discreetly linking the extraction and excretion of our consumption to invisible shadow places.

In spite of the inherently “sunken” nature of infrastructure (the term derived from the Latin *infra*, meaning *below*), “[s]litting (sighting) boundaries is a risky practice”.⁴ Through the process of situating, sight transitions from the background to the foreground. That which is rendered background infrastructure sets the political stakes of material flows, as it is dependent on one’s collective situatedness in relation to the system. Are you someone the infrastructural system services? Or are you the outsider that is excluded from the system as a form of boundary making?⁵

Furthermore, the system is never stable, its parts are always corruptible and in constant need of maintenance through the continuous performance of labour⁶ and materials co-creating the system. As Plumwood (building upon Ehrenreich’s terminology) states, dematerialization only indicates “the process of becoming more out of touch with the material conditions (including ecological conditions) that support or enable our lives”.⁷ In proposing that we care for our shadow places marked by extraction, pollution and waste, Plumwood calls for these sites of extraction and excretion to be (re)turned to a line of sight, to become visible as a first step in re-establishing responsible relations.⁸

¹ Haraway, “Situated Knowledges.”

² This observation is also picked up in relation to infrastructure in the work of Carse and Larkin, following on from Star and Ruhleder. See Carse, “Nature as Infrastructure”; Larkin, “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure”; Star and Ruhleder, “Steps Toward an Ecology of Infrastructure.”

³ *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 11th ed., 748.

⁴ Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” 595.

⁵ Star, “Power, Technology and the Phenomenology of Conventions”; Anzaldúa, *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*; Lea, *Policy: Indigeneity and the Unruly Logics of Intervention*.

⁶ “Maintenance is a drag; it takes all the fucking time (lit.)” (Ukeles, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!*). Whose time and sight (site) is maintenance work taking?

⁷ Plumwood, “Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling,” 141.

⁸ Plumwood, “Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling.”

The “out of sight (site), out of mind” ways in which we relate to waste can be interrupted through blockages within a system of flows; fatbergs are one such blockage. A fatberg is a compendium of what we have *flushed away*, an accumulation of fats, greases, oils, hair and plastics, such as Q-tips, condoms and tampons and other miscellaneous and non-compliant materialities within the sewer system. These materialities come together to form blockages that must be removed, lest our sewers back up into the streets. Through forming a blockage, the fatberg makes itself visible and in the spectacle of its extraction it becomes seen.

In September 2017, during a routine check of the sewers in Whitechapel London, a fatberg was found. The Whitechapel Fatberg was historic and unprecedented due to its “monstrousness”, weighing the equivalent of “11 double decker buses and stretching the length of two football pitches”.⁹ The fatberg, as a blockage within a system of flow, was extracted and destroyed; however, part of the fatberg remains, preserved for the 2018 *Fatberg!* exhibit at the Museum of London. Fatbergs can store pathogens or viruses found in the sewer; for those reasons, care and protective measures must be taken when performing the labour of removing, handling, preserving or displaying this material. Since its public exhibit, the fatberg has become both the most accessibly viewed item in the collection, being available to view on 24-hour FatCam livestream (fig.1), and one of the most difficult to visit, as the fatberg is classified as a biohazard. Through its preservation, the surviving piece of the Whitechapel Fatberg becomes a useful model to *think with* in terms of what it renders visible and also what it hides.



Figure 1. FatCam screenshot taken January 28, 2021 (Museum of London, 2018).

Positioning the Fatberg as a model is an experiment in “thinking with”.¹⁰ Models help us sense the world; to see beyond the visible or attempt to rescale worldly phenomena so that disparately situated effects can become visible. As a model, the exhibited fatberg allows the public to be implicit in its creation, to perceive and engage a “monstrously” sized waste object. The model was not static; as an experiment, the working model evolved and changed over time. Its materiality repeatedly settled and unsettled itself – hatching flies, sweating

⁹ Taylor, “‘Total monster’: fatberg blocks London sewage system.”

¹⁰ Haraway, “Staying with the trouble for multispecies environmental justice.”; Ballesteros, “Spongy Aquifers, Messy Publics.”

and growing mould – while securely kept within a double-walled Perspex box. Models can make processes visible by providing a different “imaginary”. The reacting fatberg allows for an understanding of the liveliness of the materials in the sewer. In this way, the model is used to think with the dynamics of that which is imperceptible, to render visible the invisible, and to make the entangled waste relations conceivable through the process of representation. Ultimately, the preserved fatberg offers the extended ability to render visible and “flush... up to consciousness”¹¹ what has been flushed away.

Because the model works at the level of extraction and abstraction, there will always be inherent tensions between thinking with the model and thinking with situated and place-based knowledges. Necessarily, all knowledge involves a level of translation, and the construction of ways of knowing and seeing are interwoven and implicated in the becoming of, and the ethical stakes of, the world.¹² The fatberg as a model, while removed from the sewer, helps us attune to the waste-scapes that persist and form beyond our everyday vision. The model also reveals the stakes of the labour that is performed to keep the sewers flowing and provokes consideration of the workers’ bodies performing this labour as we encounter the contained risks of the object removed. The exhibited piece of the Whitechapel Fatberg offers a mode of attunement – albeit only through the sense of sight, the preserved fatberg illustrates the blind spots in our vision by bringing the invisible into view. It also illustrates how visibility and invisibility are situated in terms of exposure to our discards. In being visible, the fatberg elicits a response creating new attachments and responsible relations in the world. Essentially, the sight of the fatberg troubles the idea of “away” as a placeless, invisible location, illustrating that our discards are never far from view.

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¹¹ Ukeles, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!*

¹² Barad’s ethico-onto-epistemology influences this thinking. See Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

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ⁱ Duncan, Elizabeth. “Invisible.” *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2021).

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