

Erasure and Epoché: Phenomenological Strategies for Thinking in and with Devastation

Abstract

In this essay, I present a phenomenological approach to knowing, learning from, and teaching with what I call ‘orphaned matter’—that is, images, objects or artefacts that are commonly regarded as ‘mute’, deactivated, or redundant because the meanings that accompanied their creation and journey into the present have been erased. Here, research is not directed towards the reconstruction of those lost contexts. Instead, counter-intuitively, researchers honour the gaps and losses that have occurred, however catastrophic, and work with what remains so that alternate insights, situated in the present for the sake of a different future, might begin to reveal themselves. Phenomenology is particularly well suited in this regard because, with its embrace of epoché, a profound openness to erasure is methodologically central to it. Epoché (or phenomenological reduction, and more broadly the suspension of judgement) sets in motion an investigative attitude in which researchers seek to have their inherited habits of thought—their presumptions—illuminated and where necessary disposed of. Notably, this occurs through the agencies of the phenomenon under investigation as it progressively reveals itself, on its own terms, as far as this is possible.

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Figure 1. Ikat and other Southeast Asian textiles on display in the Goldsmiths Textile Collection's Constance Howard Gallery on 21 February 2019
Photo: Jorella Andrews. Reproduced with permission

How Might We Learn With Loss?

How might we most productively come to know, learn from, and teach with what I will call 'orphaned matter'? That is, with images, objects or artefacts that are commonly regarded as 'mute', deactivated, or redundant because the contextualising meanings that accompanied their creation and journey into the present have been lost? Take, for example, an almost forgotten archive of 43 objects from Southeast Asia with which I have recently become acquainted. They count among the 4,000 or so textile, print and related objects that are stored in the Goldsmiths (University of London) Textile Collection (GTC)—a research and teaching collection that was inaugurated in the 1980s by the radical embroiderers and teachers, Constance Howard and Audrey Walker.¹ The Southeast Asian collection consists mainly of clothing (several produced by the Hmong people, an ethnic minority group living transnationally in Southern China, Vietnam, Laos, and Northern Thailand with many now having emigrated to North America and Canada), fragments of clothing such as ribbons, apron strings, and panels, several (Hmong) cushion covers—one showing villagers fleeing from soldiers, crossing a river, and reaching the safety of a camp—and ceremonial items including three rolls of Ikat, ceremonial textiles from Borneo, created through an extraordinarily complex set of weaving and dyeing techniques.² In most cases, records exist indicating broadly where these varied items have come from and what they are, or were originally, used for. But details of their provenance, and accounts of how they traversed the globe to become part of a small university collection in Southeast London, are generally unknown. As such, they might justly be described as dislocated, diasporic objects, objects that might be judged to have lost their sense of history, biography, and voice. And yet they are compelling. When they were collectively brought out of their seclusion during a recent workshop—unpacked, unwrapped, unfurled, laid out (Figure 1)—we asked ourselves how we might best begin to work with them. My hope was that we might do so in a way that respected their facticity, materiality and specific modes of self-showing here and now. I didn't want to find myself speaking for them.³

A second, globally-reported scenario marked by erasure—with which I am acquainted only at a distance—(not, of course, the most recent) is also worth referencing at this point: the catastrophic losses to Brazilian culture, science, memory and learning which occurred on Sunday, 2 September 2018, when the Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro was devastated by fire. Its archive of around 20 million items was almost entirely obliterated. Included were records of indigenous South American languages which are no longer spoken and priceless fossils (although the Lucia fossil—the skull of a woman who lived 11,500 years ago in Brazil—is believed to have been recovered) as well as ancient Egyptian, Greco-Roman and other irreplaceable objects from around the globe many of which, of course, were accumulated and transported under European colonisation. Here, not only are we dealing with material that is now irretrievably lost (an appeal has gone out to scholarly communities and to the general public for reproductions of photographic or any other records of the now-destroyed materials and their modes of display). We are also dealing with individuals and communities, for whom these materials were experienced as crucial in terms of heritage, self-understanding and identity. In relation to these losses, these persons too might be described as finding themselves in an orphaned state.

¹ For more information see the GTC's website and related links: <https://www.gold.ac.uk/textile-collection/>. Accessed 10 June 2019. Items from the collection may be viewed via VADS, the online resource for visual arts <https://vads.ac.uk/collections/CHM.html>

² See for instance "How an Ikat is Made" (2012), *Youtube*

³ These items were displayed in the context of a workshop, facilitated by me (Goldsmiths) and Clare Veal and Jeffrey Say (LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore): *Using Phenomenology in Contemporary Arts Research and Pedagogy – Workshop 2*. Subtitled "Phenomenological Encounters with Non-Western and Diasporic Objects-Images-Archives-&-Artworlds (Phenomenology, Displacement and Decoloniality)," it took place on 21-23 February 2019, Goldsmiths, University of London

The modes of real and presumed muteness associated with these archives of 'orphaned matter' differ, as do the conditions that designated them as such. In the first example, at issue were processes of transfer and displacement. The objects in question were then further removed from the circuits of visibility and use by being placed safely into storage. In the second example, the impact of sudden and shocking obliteration was at issue. This brings me back to my opening question: how might we learn with, and from within, loss?

The Restorative Impulse

A prevalent assumption is that research, learning and teaching within such situations are at their most robust when they are involved in trying to recover or restore the contexts, histories and knowledges that once gave these materials meaning. Analogously, without adequate retrieval, orphaned materials are often assumed to remain in a more or less deactivated state, without the vital epistemological agency required to shape the present and the future. In this essay, I will challenge such assumptions by drawing on insights from phenomenology—a philosophical orientation that limits itself to examining the world as it offers itself to us 'in perception and in experience,' suspending or bracketing concerns with the world as it might be supposed to exist in and of itself. As such, and as already indicated, the intention will be to honour and work 'from within' the gaps and losses that present themselves, however catastrophic, without nonetheless letting loss have the last word. But first, and in order to more effectively illuminate the distinctiveness of such a phenomenological approach, I would like to reflect briefly on what is arguably the most open and speculative of restorative approaches, the creation of so-called 'object-biographies.' The website for Oxford University's Pitt-Rivers Museum includes a section introducing such biographies as one of several possible approaches to engaging afresh with its collection. "All objects have a life (or series of different lives)," we read. "All are made, bought and sold, used, treasured or discarded. Some then come into a museum where they can be involved in a number of different life-trajectories (stored, displayed, used in teaching etc). Pretty much every artefact in a museum has an interesting story of some kind that can be told about it and this part of the 'Rethinking Pitt-Rivers' website aims to tell some of those stories." In clarification, among other references, Jody Joy's 2009 essay, *Reinvigorating object-biography: reproducing the drama of object lives*, is cited: "The biography of an object should not be restricted to an historical reconstruction of its birth, life and death. Biography is relational and an object biography is comprised of the sum of the relationships that constitute it."⁴ The site then links to a growing archive of explorations of this kind.

⁴ Joy 552

Object-biographies generally begin with careful descriptions of an object's appearance followed by explorations of its materiality, construction and actual or probable use. Actual or possible dates associated with its creation, use, and entry into a given collection, are also listed along with any other available information concerning its source and provenance. Where basic information is unavailable researchers are prompted to explore more widely, looking for objects that bear apparent family resemblances and about which more may be known. Additionally, objects that are similarly constructed or thought to have had a similar use might be researched, and, with certain degrees of speculation and best-guessing, a background story is constructed. If the object is known to have been made by a particular person or

people group or within a given historical period, specific cultural, social, political, economic and other such forms of information will also often be brought into play. Thus, referencing those Hmong items in the GTC about which little is known, descriptive information gleaned from the physical items themselves might be supplemented with material gleaned from other recorded or lived sources. One such source, for instance, might be the geographer Sarah Turner's 2012 essay, *Making a Living the Hmong Way: An Actor-Oriented Livelihoods Approach to Everyday Politics and Resistance in Upland Vietnam*, which includes an examination of the production and sale of Hmong textiles. Indeed, visual documentation in the essay depicting Hmong textile traders selling their wares in Sa Pa town marketplace (Northern Vietnam) includes a range of objects that are strikingly similar to several objects held in the GTC. Local economic opportunities suggest that these were most likely made for the tourist market.⁵

Or take the Australian scholar Astri Wright's extensive 1994 examination of Ikat—of which, as noted, the GTC has three examples—which also took a restorative approach. In 'Ikat' as metaphor for 'Iban': *Women artists' creative, ritual and social powers in Borneo*, Wright described her project as "an exploration into the meaning, centrality, and anatomy of art-making in an indigenous tribal culture ... [which] due to the processes colonialism, modernisation and urbanisation ... has now largely disappeared."⁶ Having begun with careful descriptions of Ikat (which, like those in GTC, were housed thousands of miles from their place of origin), she went on to produce "a construction ... a fiction based on selections from among other people's rendered facts—scholars, colonial officials, missionaries, travellers and poets of Euro-American and Borneo backgrounds" in which she speculated, as best she could, on the possible mythical, symbolic as well as socio-political meanings of this unusual cloth-making practice.⁷ Worth noting is that subsequent to the publication of Wright's essay, scholarship on Ikat has increased, including the book, *Ties That Bind: Iban Ikat Weaving*, by the Borneo weaver and researcher Datin Amar Margaret Linggi; Linggi also founded the Tun Jugah Foundation Textile Museum & Gallery in Sarawak which is dedicated to the preservation of Ikat.⁸

Phenomenological Interventions – description, intentionality and epoché

Phenomenological approaches to research, learning and teaching also begin with description. Indeed, description is key to phenomenological method. In the words of the 20th-century French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty—I will frequently draw on his work in this essay—"the first philosophical act"⁹ involves 'describing' our (perceptual) experience of the world before presupposing it. But phenomenological method differs from the restorative approaches just outlined because rather than depart from initial descriptions of lived experience and encounter it attempts to enter into this terrain ever more deeply by exploring the structures of intentionality. Intentionality, which is again central to phenomenology, has to do with how we are directed towards that which we call the world and with how that 'world' is also experienced as being directed towards us. Intentionality may also be described in terms of its *noetic-noematic* structure. *Noesis* refers to the intentional act itself—that of perceiving or thinking, for instance—whereas *noema* refers to the intentional content, to that which is perceived or thought. Phenomenologists attend to both of these aspects. And here, perhaps, an example will be useful—a description of the first few minutes of an

⁵ Turner 413. In Turner's words: "With the opening of the uplands again to overseas independent tourists in the early 1990s, a few (initially elderly) Hmong women identified an opportunity to sell their colourful and 'exotic' cloth once more, as they had during the French colonial period. Tourists were keen to purchase 'authentic' cultural artefacts such as full pieces of embroidered hemp clothing (Michaud and Turner 2000, 2003). Hmong women grow, spin, and weave these as part of their gendered livelihood portfolios, with segments then intricately *batiked* and embroidered with motifs that have symbolic meaning for their producers (Mai Thanh Son 13, 24)"

⁶ Wright 135

⁷ My thanks to Dr. Clare Veal for drawing my attention to this source

⁸ Heppell 143-153. Details of the Tun Jugah Foundation Textile Museum & Gallery may be accessed via <http://tunjugahfoundation.org.my/textile-museum-gallery/>

⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 71

encounter with two items, two skirts, from the GTC's Southeast Asian collection (see also Figure 3). It takes the form of a list organised in the order in which the observations occurred:

A generous curve of stitched and patterned cloth
Adjacent to a still-loosely folded textile (skirt)
A discoloured edge – did it once habitually drag along the ground?
Worn? Used?
All the more obvious against that vibrant 'DayGlo' mix of shocking pink, yellow, green and black
A thin strip of vibrant blue
Lines of many variations
Stripes upon stripes
Pleats
Gatherings
A density of layered fabric
'Dayglo' versus muted, earthen tones—different qualities of radiance, absorption That strip of blue again. And a green one, nearby
My eye keeps returning to it. It is like a visual pivot, certainly a point of repeated return, and also a resting place for my eyes which otherwise dart rapidly and apparently randomly amongst the abundance of patterns presented to me
A greater sense of verticality (I think) with the skirt on the left
A language of stitches and folds—a material language that keeps my senses and my thoughts in motion and seems to exercise them
An intensity of making—all those stitches, layers, patterns; a super-abundance
A re-use of fabrics?
Programmatic, repeated patterns in the cross-stitched band of squares—mainly orange and yellow, in relative containment, alongside that undulating flow of blue
There is also what looks like more spontaneous patterning in certain bands of appliqué (in contrast to the dominant geometric forms elsewhere, these appear to be fragments of a more organically patterned printed fabric)
Other paler and less immediately obvious rectangular patches
Notice the multiple variations of zigzags across both skirts—appliquéd, literal in the form of folds, stitched ...
The care, the labour, the sheer amount of time involved
The stitching together of a thick, layered, heavy garment—for warmth? For dramatic movement? For the purposes of strengthening or repair, in places?
Geometry; geometries
Vibrancy
Intricacy
Why so much labour?
In each skirt, a dark base of printed geometric pattern that is then worked into and over
Suddenly an area of dark green/blue and black textile, intersected by two red appliqué strips, has become a point of focus for me—I hadn't paid attention to it until now
There is something atmospheric about these darker, softer colours; they have triggered memories of being embraced by calm, balmy evening air when I was on holiday somewhere hot. They also remind me of the dark luminosity often experienced at dusk.
It's another place where my senses are able to settle
Handmade; handmadeness; although some of the printed pieces of fabric might be machine-made
Running stitches contrasting with overlapping textures of cross-stitching
Imagining the sounds of making, the effort, the pricking and pressing and turning
Imagining the attention needed to keep areas of detailed cross-stitched or appliqué pattern going
Noticing where there might have been pauses for improvisation and consideration—should this patch of colour or pattern go here, or there?
Room for trial and error
Imagining tired fingers
[...]

As noted, this is a partial list of first impressions. But already different modalities of description are evident. Sometimes areas of cloth, colour or pattern are the points of focus; what they look or might feel like or how they are arranged; sometimes contrasts are noticed. Then, suddenly, there is a shift of awareness to the activity of seeing or of sensing. A good deal of explicit self-awareness is recorded; a tracking of attention that veers between the active and the responsive. Sometimes description triggers memory, feeling, imagination or speculation; sometimes questions are raised to which description alone may not be able to yield answers. There is also repeated attention on questions of making; the intensity of labour, for instance, that was so clearly involved in crafting these garments. All in all, an energetic material scene of ever evolving complexity has been opening up.

Returning now to the theme of erasure, also central to phenomenological immersion in the structures of intentionality as just described is the experience of epoché (or phenomenological reduction) which sets in motion an investigative attitude characterised, precisely, by loss. Here, researchers seek to have their pre-existing habits of thought, their presumptions, illuminated and where necessary disposed of through the agencies of the phenomenon under investigation. As a consequence, the phenomenon is increasingly released to reveal itself on its own terms, as far as this is possible. In fact, the term epoché (ἐποχή / *epokhē*) has a long history. In Hellenistic philosophy it referred to either the suspension of judgement or the withholding of assent. The Pyrrhonian philosopher Sextus Empiricus, for instance, used it to describe a state of the intellect which neither denies nor affirms, a meaning that was carried over into academic skepticism. An additional inflection to epoché for the Pyrrhonists was that such suspensions of judgement about non-evident matters had the value of inducing freedom from anxiety (*ataraxia*). In other words, here, epoché created a mental or attitudinal structure capable of pre-empting the anxiety that tends naturally to arise within contexts of uncertainty. In Stoicism the concept was and is used to describe the withholding of assent to impressions (*phantasiai*). Much later, Descartes' epistemological 'method of doubt' may also be seen as an enactment of epoché.

Where phenomenology is concerned, epoché was pointedly brought into play by Husserl in his *Ideas I* (1913),¹⁰ in alignment with his notion of the phenomenological reduction. It referred to a procedure in which a thinker systematically suspends judgement about the existence or nature of an imputed external 'world in itself', beyond experience, in order better to examine how 'the world' that is experientially available to us—the realm of phenomena—is presented to consciousness. For Merleau-Ponty, who defined consciousness as embodied, perceptual, and situated, epoché, understood as an ongoing process, was again central. Examinations of its character, including its perceptual character, and of its philosophical consequences, are consistently found within his writings from the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) onwards. In his late, unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964) for instance, albeit without explicitly naming epoché or the phenomenological reduction as such, he wrote: "It is necessary to comprehend perception as this interrogative thought which lets the perceived world be rather than posits it, before which the things form and undo themselves in a sort of gliding, beneath the yes and the no..."¹¹ He continued—and this is crucial with respect to the question of engagement with that 'mute,' 'orphaned' matter on which this this essay is focussed:

¹⁰ *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, 1931

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* 102

It is ... a question put to what does not speak. It asks of our experience of the world what the world is before it is a thing one speaks of and which is taken for granted, before it has been reduced to a set of manageable, disposable significations; it directs this question to our mute life, it addresses itself to that compound of the world and of ourselves that precedes reflection ...¹²

¹² Ibid

Using now-contemporary terminology, the decolonising potential of the phenomenological method as presented here is evident. When we are involved in what Merleau-Ponty called “that compound of the world and of ourselves that precedes reflection,” we are embedded in a relationship of open and pre-critical connection with self-showing phenomena which we experience as having the capacity to ‘undo’ what we think we know, and certainly to reposition us. As indicated, this is an ongoing process – also known as the hermeneutic circle – with no determined end in sight. Along the way, though, we do become aware of significant moments of insight and perceptual shift which we may want to dwell on and explore more deeply (Figure 2).

The hermeneutic/decolonising circle in phenomenological research



Figure 2. Diagram representing one way of articulating the decolonising effects of the ‘hermeneutic circle.’
Image: Jorella Andrews

Here, attempts to research, learn and teach within scenes of erasure are positioned far from the intention to salvage or reconstitute lost meaning, whether through forensic or fictional/fictioning means. On the contrary, a doubled scene of erasure is opened up and extended in which the researcher, learner or teacher are themselves implicated. Crucially, this scene of doubled erasure is not experienced as detrimental to knowledge but as its pre-requisite.

This brings me to an explicit discussion of a further dimension of phenomenological epoché. It is crucial since it provides a basis for becoming sensitised to what is, or so I argue, the irrepressible agency of ‘orphaned’ and mute matter within, and for, the context of the present. It is the notion of the ‘I can’ (which Merleau-Ponty adopted from Edmund Husserl) as that which fundamentally structures the perceived world. “Everything I see,” wrote Merleau-Ponty in *Eye and Mind* (1961), “is in principle within my reach, at least within reach of my sight, and is marked upon the map of the ‘I can.’” “Each of these two maps is complete,” he added. “The visible world and the world of my

motor projects are each total parts of the same Being.”¹³ Here, though, Merleau-Ponty should not be misunderstood. ‘Complete’ does not mean ‘hermetically sealed’ and in a state of finality, in which there is nothing new to be learned or done. Instead he is describing an always still open relational whole characterised by a range of ‘self-directed’ capacities and agencies; a paradoxical scenario in which epoché, precisely because of its embrace of loss and lack as crucial for learning, releases awareness of the world’s irreducible agency. I will develop this idea in what follows.

¹³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception* 162

‘Orphaned’ matter, the painter’s question, and Merleau-Ponty’s ‘I can’

“... to philosophise is to seek, and this is to imply that there are things to see and to say. Well, today we no longer seek. We ‘return’ to one or the other of our traditions and ‘defend’ it.”—Merleau-Ponty.¹⁴

¹⁴ *In Praise of Philosophy* 41



Figure 3. Details of two Hmong wrap skirts on display in the Goldsmiths Textile Collection’s Constance Howard Gallery on 21 February 2019
Photo: Jorella Andrews. Reproduced with permission

As already indicated, my aim in this essay is not to undermine scholarly attempts at retrieving lost context and meaning within scenarios marked by erasure. Rather, I wish to propose an additional and alternate approach that moves not from a devastated present to a lost past but, operating outside of a logic of melancholy, across different trajectories of the present with an eye to the future. Here, the aim is to stay with the remains and to ask how, if we will let them, objects affected by erasure may function as teachers out of their particular qualities of what-ness, here-ness, and now-ness. How might ‘these’ aspects of their being ‘be allowed’ to take on new meaning, legacy and agency, provoking us to see, think and act differently and to reach out into the not-yet-known? At issue here is their capacity to inaugurate these new possibilities in concrete, material ways.

Again, epoché is vital. Certain assumptions about learning, and about the nature of productive learning environments, must be relinquished. In Merleau-Ponty’s terms, the schoolmaster’s question must become the painter’s question.¹⁵ Recalling our earlier discussions, this is a mode of questioning which again addresses ‘what does not speak’, our ‘mute life’, and “that compound of the world and of ourselves that precedes reflection.”¹⁶ It is also a mode of learning in which the conventional roles of the interrogator and the interrogated are reversed. The painter’s question is:

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception* 167

¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* 102

... not a question asked of someone who doesn't know by someone who knows — the schoolmaster's question. The question comes from one who does not know, and it is addressed to a vision, a seeing, which knows everything and which we do not make, for it makes itself in us ... The painter lives in fascination. The actions most proper to him — those gestures, those paths which he alone can trace and which will be revelations to others (because the others do not lack what he lacks or in the same way) — to him they seem to emanate from the things themselves, like the patterns of the constellations. Inevitably the roles between him and the visible are reversed. That is why so many painters have said that things look at them.¹⁷

¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception* 167

It is here, within these reversals, that the experience of 'I can,' referenced earlier, comes into play; the 'I can' is discovered to be internal to, and emergent within, the *noetic-noematic* structure of intentionality. This is illuminated in *Eye and Mind*. In the context of developing his understanding of painterly questioning, Merleau-Ponty wrote that painters "know" the world by "lending" or "donating" their bodies to it, enabling a deeply felt experience of communicative exchange to take place.¹⁸ His aim here was also to present a counter-argument to a dominant conception of vision as an "operation of thought."¹⁹ Thus, he defined it instead as an operation of "the actual body," which is "an intertwining of vision and movement."²⁰ While this might be experienced in part as a relinquishment, as involving a certain loss of self, it may also be perceived and experienced differently, in terms of change, extension and enrichment. In any case, the world towards which this body is directed is not some rationalist construct, some ideation or idealisation. Rather such bodily modes of perception are directed towards, and navigate, what Merleau-Ponty described as those two intertwining or overlapping maps of the 'I can' in which two centres may be found, one in the visible world and the other in our motor projects. It is clear therefore that several agencies, human and non-human, are at work here. Indeed, it is from this lived experience of bodily donation that we are able to understand and accept that the scope of the self-showing world expands far beyond human aspirations and intentions. More than that, as Kaja Silverman puts it in her book *World Spectators* (2000), citing Hannah Arendt: "It is . . . not the perceiving subject but rather the perceptual object which plays the initiating role in this scopic transaction . . . When we look at other creatures and things . . . it is also in response to their very precise solicitations to us to do so."²¹

¹⁸ Ibid 162

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

To summarise then—and, yet without wishing to present a set of reductive protocols —phenomenological contributions to engaging within sites and scenes of loss in as enlivening a manner as possible might be seen to constitute at least four (inter-related) moments:

1. Activating and being activated by perception and description as ways of drawing near and learning to attend to the as-yet unarticulated possibilities of mute being.
2. Activating and being activated by the intentional structure of perception understood, following Merleau-Ponty, as a "compound of the world and of ourselves that precedes reflection," that is, as an *internally-related*, pre-critical form of communication.²²
3. Activating and being activated by epoché as core to intentionally in order to create space for the things to self-show, as far as this is possible.

²¹ Silverman 129. I explore this point in my book *Showing Off! A Philosophy of Image*. See pages 173, 174, 182, 190 and 195

²² Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* 102

4. 4) Activating and being activated by the 'I can'—which is itself illuminated and activated by epoché—this 'I can' again being understood as an intercorporeal, 'compound' phenomenon. Here, as Merleau-Ponty wrote of Cézanne: “The landscape thinks itself in me ... and I am its consciousness.”²³

²³ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* 17

Reflecting back on that partial, descriptive, pre-explanatory investigation of portions of Southeast Asian textiles from the GTC, it is clear that all of these moments, or dynamics, are present in embryonic form. On the one hand, though, it is true that this terrain—while materially detailed, intricate and ever-evolving, as well as inevitably personal and situated (what might someone else's list have itemised?)—is perhaps also fairly abstract and formal even if also emotive and thought-provoking. As such, we might question the value of these experiences as compared to the specific, even if often also relatively speculative, social, historical, economic, political and cultural values that featured in the restorative approaches referenced earlier. But on the other hand, as already argued, the phenomenological strategies presented here are not intended to stand alone or replace those other approaches. They provide alternative modes of awareness and are critically useful for their capacity to keep openness in play. As such, they disrupt general tendencies for investigation and problem-solving to be approached (or mis-approached) reductively, through what is already thought to be known. Phenomenology, rather than position the investigator's potential as central, brings the wider realm of material intelligence—materiality's 'I know' and 'I can'—into perceptual and conceptual range. And, when it comes to thinking and responding within cultural scenes indelibly marked by erasure, phenomenology offers structures and strategies in which – albeit perhaps too-uncomfortably slowly and incompletely – rather than feeling overwhelmed by loss we begin to feel overwhelmed by how much is still here; despite everything, the world is experienced as information rich and resource-full. But it takes time for this to come to awareness and in the most devastated of conditions such time-making will most often appear non-viable. But it is precisely here that Merleau-Ponty's self-showing “compound of the world and of ourselves that precedes reflection” might most beneficially be allowed to declare its agencies and propositions and gradually become more broadly communicable. A very small contribution to the development of the work begun in this essay therefore will be a series of phenomenological investigations of the 'orphaned' Southeast Asian items in the GTC, ideally involving a diversity of differently situated participants and stakeholders. Where such investigations might lead must, of course, remain an open question for now.

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