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# Epitaphic Readings

## Diagrams as (re)incarnations

VICTORIA SHARPLES

The structural formula of a chemical compound is a shorthand, diagrammatic representation of a molecular structure, showing how atoms can be arranged in two dimensions of space. Often named Kekulé structures after August Kekulé, an early architect of structural arrangements in organic chemistry, these diagrams put forward a geometry of relations, enumerated through lines, symbols, vertices and patterns (Rocke 1981). While suggestive of something substantial, the diagram often functions in the planular, and is therefore *skeletal*. For scientists, skeletal structures are not altogether representative of chemical constitutions, but of chemical arrangements (Hepler-Smith 2015). That is, they are analogous with formulas, not respective forms themselves.

From this perspective, there is a severance of contextual placement, but not, I argue, of performative function. As a presupposition to this construct, it seems that skeletal structures can be read as compositions and translations, but not as epitaphs or reincarnations. For this article, I classify epitaphs as short poems and laconic elegies, and reincarnations as *re*-compositions of matter. Following Giles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's premise that the diagram constructs something 'yet to come' (2013a: 164), this article presents skeletal structures as epitaphic readings, as accounts of something passed and further to this as matter *re*-incarnate.

Beyond the skeletal structures, this article considers the 'afterlife' of *Ash* (2018–20), an interdisciplinary mail art project performed by human and non-human participants across Nepal and the UK, on which this article builds.<sup>1</sup> For *Ash*, three pieces of Nepalese Lokta paper were placed on the surface of the sacred and contaminated Bagmati River downstream from Pashupatinath Temple: an open-pyre cremation site in Kathmandu. While the function of cremation is to spiritually cleanse bodies, to

secure a compatible rebirth, the process itself is ecologically harmful (Hadders 2017). *Ash* leaned into this unease and sought to unpack dialogues that met at the intersection of pollution and purification practices.<sup>2</sup> Once dried, participatory artists Sagar Manandhar and Pratima Thakali from Kathmandu University School of Arts, and Nepali musician Anil Shahi, sent their paper contributions in the mail to the UK, using their closest postal service. In an email exchange about participating in *Ash*, Manandhar shared conversations they had had with their late grandfather about a clear and pure Bagmati, and how the present condition of the river was far from what it had been. For Manandhar, this was cause for supporting the project, along with concerns of human activities that may have contributed to this.

On arrival, the substrates were chemically analysed using Gas Chromatography–Mass Spectrometry (GC–MS): an analytical approach for forensic substance identification. From a methodological perspective, following field and laboratory operations, this analysis was underpinned by 'forensic' and 'investigative aesthetics' (Weizman 2012, 2021) – in particular, by the way the substrates acted as sorbents, holding onto permeable and secreted matter, and in relation to the analysis that recorded and transcribed this surface exchange, presenting it as evidence. In our exchange, Manandhar also shared their interest in what could be seen and unseen on the substrates, providing further basis for the study. The analysis was carried out by participatory scientist Karl Heaton in the Department of Chemistry at the University of York. For elucidation, GC–MS is the synergetic partnering of two microanalytical processes, where Gas–Chromatography (GC) separates chemical compounds found in a sample by time, and Mass–Spectrometry (MS) supports the identification of separated compounds according

<sup>1</sup> This project formed part of my practice-led PhD, completed in 2021.

<sup>2</sup> These concerns are further outlined in Dia Maijadh Yonzon's and K. C. Ojaswi's 'Right to freedom of religion and right to clean environment: A case of Bagmati River, Pashupatinath Temple' (2019), Rojisha Poudel and Mina Devi Uprety's 'Traditional and modern practices of cremation: Significance and challenges' (2017), Hans Hadders' 'Establishment of electric crematorium in Nepal: Continuity, changes and challenges' (2018) and Raj Kumar's *Clean Water is not Holy Water: Complexity of restoring water quality in the Pashupati-Aryaghat segment of the upper Bagmati River Basin* (2010).

to their mass-to-charge fraction ( $m/z$ ). This mass-to-charge fraction signals the chemical's *intensity*. Here, the measure of *intensity* can be read within the milieu of 'microperformativity', calling attention to organic and machinic agencies beyond the human body (Hauser 2006, 2014). In partnership, GC-MS provides a chromatogram and mass spectrum of a given sample, where graphic lines and spectra patterns function as signatures to elucidate the structures of the present molecules (Sparkman *et al.* 2011). Following the analysis, the findings were sent to me by Heaton in iterations of numerical, graphic and diagrammatic arrangements. But for the purpose of this article, I primarily focus on the diagrammatic arrangements, which *are* the skeletal structures.

Considered holy by Hindus and Buddhists, the polluted Bagmati River flows through Pashupatinath Temple, which was built for the godhead Shiva (known as 'The Destroyer'). Located on either side of the riverbank, and connected by a series of bridges, Pashupatinath is held by many as one of the most sacred sites on the Indian subcontinent. To the West of the temple, cremation pyres and ghats can be found, with steps leading down to the water's edge. Here, relatives and the deceased are prepared for cremation; the water used for washing and bathing, to spiritually cleanse their bodies.

■ Figure 1. *Ash* (2018–20). Field Research. South East of Pashupatinath Temple, Kathmandu, Nepal. Photographer: Victoria Sharples



A S H ( 2 0 1 8 - 2 0 )

*Ash* began with a written score, and a set of laconic instructions. Printed on the back of a postcard, they read:

*Ash* is an international mail art project in which three pieces of Lokta paper are placed on the surface of the sacred and contaminated Bagmati River; downstream from Pashupatinath Temple. Each participant may perform the action of placing their piece of Lokta paper against the surface of the

water. Once the paper has dried, each participant may send their contribution to the UK using their closest postal service.

The Pashupatinath–Bagmati site was chosen early on in the project, following my stay at Kopan Monastery, a school in the Gelug practice of Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism, and home to a monastic community. Here, I studied the *Dharma* (the ethics and teachings of Gautama Buddha) and meditated on *samsāra* 'reincarnation', as a beginningless cycle and transmigration of form (Oestigaard 2005). I also carried out field research along the river, and saw cremation practised at Pashupatinath. Once in the UK, I invited artists to participate in the project: to place the substrates on the surface of the water.

For *Ash*, participants were provided a diagrammatic score outlining three skeleton-like rectangles, suggestive of the pieces of paper. Following in the rubric of Conceptual and Fluxus strategies, the accompanying annotations were propositional and 'allographic', and provided some parameters for the permeation of the substrate (Harren 2020: 29). That is, they were iterative rather than singular or 'autographic' and allowed *Ash* to oscillate between a conceptual and concrete instantiation. Similar to sheet music as a dialectical medium, the scores are purposefully schematic, and allow alternative renditions to take place in their wake. That is, not unlike George Brecht's Event scores, they are available for continual *re*-composition.<sup>3</sup> As Natilee Harren puts it, a work facilitated by a score can 'remain in-becoming, forever as yet' (12). That is, they can be reincarnated with each new rendition to form, as suggested by Deleuze and Guattari, 'a new signified, which will in turn extricate itself' (2013a: 131).

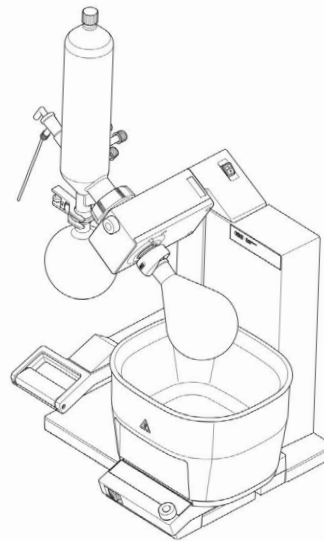
In '557 BC–AD 70: On several regimes of signs' (2013a) Deleuze and Guattari explicate the potentiality of signs in relation to semiotics, which I read as analogous to the score. They note: 'signs form an infinite network, but the network of signs is infinitely circular. The statement survives its object, the name survives its owner' (131). Here, the premise of survival assimilates with Fluxus sensibilities on the condition of singular authorship. Like Brecht's Events, the *Ash* scores are compatible to the Fluxus programme, which was, with reference to George Maciunas's

writing on the subject, all for ‘egolessness’ with the aim of rescinding the authorship of pieces (Phillpot and Hendricks 1988: 12). For *Ash*, the use of the mail system, as strategically used by Brecht, was also put into practice allowing the scores to be performed without the presence of the author. This allowed the scores to be internationally exchanged, translated and unmediated across the postal network.

#### GC – MS

When I received the substrates, swathes of grey and brown marks permeated their surface. As the Bagmati is used for death care, economic and sanitation purposes, the stains could have been anything from cremation particles, industrial waste, to faecal bacteria. For the GC–MS analysis, the paper substrates were reduced in chemical solutions using a GYRO-ROCKER STR9 (a gyroscopic plate used to blend the solute), and placed in a Rotavapor R-300 heating bath, allowing the solution to reduce in volume through the process of entropy and evaporation. It seemed appropriate to use a destructive approach with reference to Shiva (*The Destroyer*), and to pull together sacred-scientific discourses for a discursive-diffractive approach (Barad 2007, 2003). The samples were then analysed using machinic apparatus: an AccuTOF GCx-plus alongside an Agilent 7890B to produce a series of chromatograms and mass spectrum patterns.

The findings were printed onto pieces of paper, and quantifiably enumerate the composite structure of the substrate’s materiality, inseparable from matter present on their surface through their permeation, transportation and analysis. Here, I refer to the placement of the substrates on the Bagmati, and to their postage, shipping and human-handling, an approach that allowed human pathogens, skin cells and ‘air miles’ to imperceptibly accumulate on their surface. During the analysis, Heaton noted that some contaminants could be caused by the apparatus, or from residual matter if the machines had not been carefully cleaned before the assessment. Here, the apparatuses are recognized as conditional: accretive and agentive, offering a reading of the substrates



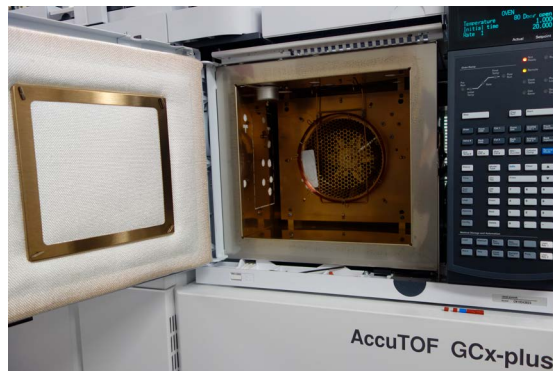
■ Figure 2. Operation Manual (Original) Rotavapor® R-300 11593738, Publication date: 03.2022. Diagram: Buchi



■ Figure 3. *Ash* (2018–20). GC–MS Laboratory Work with Karl Heaton at the University of York, UK. GYRO-ROCKER STR9. Photographer: Victoria Sharples



■ Figure 4. *Ash* (2018–20). GC–MS Laboratory Work with Karl Heaton at the University of York, UK. Photographer: Victoria Sharples



■ Figure 5. *Ash* (2018–20). GC–MS Laboratory Work with Karl Heaton at the University of York, UK. AccuTOF GCx-plus. Photographer: Victoria Sharples

<sup>4</sup> These can be found in: paper, human sebum, cerebrospinal fluids, urine, faeces, sweat, milk, soap, toothpaste, detergent, candles, butter, soybeans, palm oil, amaranth seed, rice bran, wheat germ, black pepper, pesticides, animal feed, textile and leather dyes, synthetic fibres, petroleum and construction materials.

<sup>5</sup> In practice, these are suggestive of *Fluxus* editions, appropriate given the mail art approaches used in the production of *Ash* and contain the *Ash* scores and instructions, the GC-MS readings and a piece of Nepalese Lokta paper.

■ Figure 7. Right: *Ash* (2018–20). Publication for Post. Photographer: Victoria Sharples.

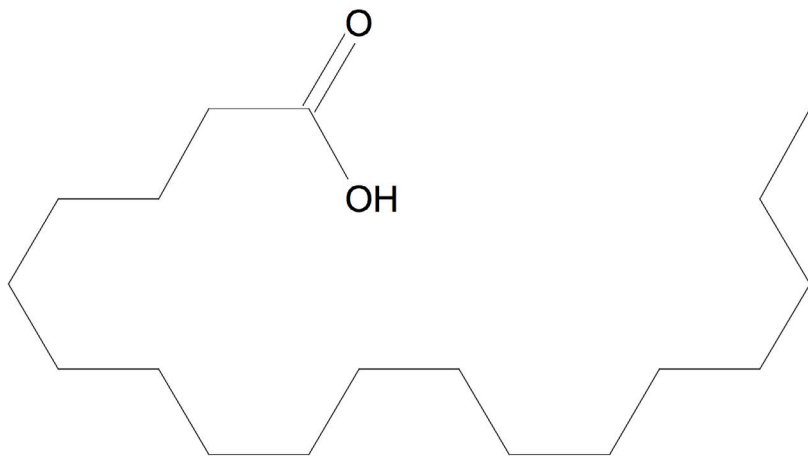
incalculable from their machinic constitution. For this, I refer to Karen Barad’s ‘intra-action’ (2007), which assumes an appropriate and mediating discourse, where causality, accuracy and systems of representation are rigorously questioned. That is, where matter (organic and machinic) are recognized as participants in, and constitutive of, practices, scientific or otherwise.

Through the GC-MS analysis, the following substances were found:

octadecanoic acid ( $C_{18}H_{36}O_2$ )  
 acetic acid ( $C_2H_4O_2$ )  
 propionic acid ( $C_3H_6O_2$ )  
 glycerin ( $C_3H_8O_3$ )  
 hexadecenoic acid ( $C_{17}H_{34}O_2$ )  
 n-hexadecenoic acid ( $C_{16}H_{32}O_2$ )  
 1-octadecanol ( $C_{18}H_{38}O$ )  
 squalene ( $C_{30}H_{50}$ )  
 16-hentriacontanone ( $C_{31}H_{62}O$ )  
 18-pentatriacontanone ( $C_{35}H_{70}O$ )<sup>4</sup>

These were enumerated as condensed molecular formulas (that is,  $C_{18}H_{36}O_2$ ), and as skeletal structures. In the transcription of skeletal structures, carbon atoms (C) are assumed at the intersection or corner of each pair of lines, and at the terminal end of each line proper. Hydrogen atoms (H) are removed from skeleton structures, unless attached to oxygen (O). For example, octadecanoic acid ( $C_{18}H_{36}O_2$ ) reads as (fig.6): Here, oxygen (O) is sharing two pairs of electrons as seen by the parallel lines, and the present hydroxide (OH) (an oxygen and hydrogen atom)

■ Figure 6. Below: *Ash* (2018–20). GC-MS Readings. Octadecanoic acid ( $C_{18}H_{36}O_2$ ). Diagram: Victoria Sharples.



is held together by a single covalent.

For the identification of the chemical arrangements, the GC-MS analysis was followed by a digital search in the NIST Mass Spectral Library (a database and search programme run by the National Institute of Standards and Technology). This database is managed by the Mass Spectrometry Data Center, a Group in the Biomolecular Measurement Division, and is continually contributed to by academic, industry and governmental partners. These contributions provide a comprehensive source of reference data to be used in the identification of chemical structures. Following the GC-MS analysis, the findings were published as part of a paper edition, and shipped to readers through the mail.<sup>5</sup>



#### SKELETAL STRUCTURES AND STRATIFICATION

On paper, the skeletal structures show the arrangement of the molecular formulas, not respective forms themselves. That is, they function in the planular, where the flatness of the paper substrates provides an analogy for their skeletal condition, and the horizontality of the performed permeation (where the surface of the water and paper met) was methodologically diagrammatic. That is, the placement of the substrates was purposeful in its reference to diagrammatic constitutions, which are, I argue, *infra-thin* (Duchamp and Matisse 1983). Here, Marcel Duchamp’s neologism provides a name for something n-dimensional and micropoetic: the potentiality of the diagram (the skeletal structures and the permeation) to perform something substantial and insubstantial



together, cutting across assumed separations (Tucker 2008: 67).

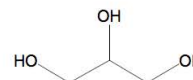
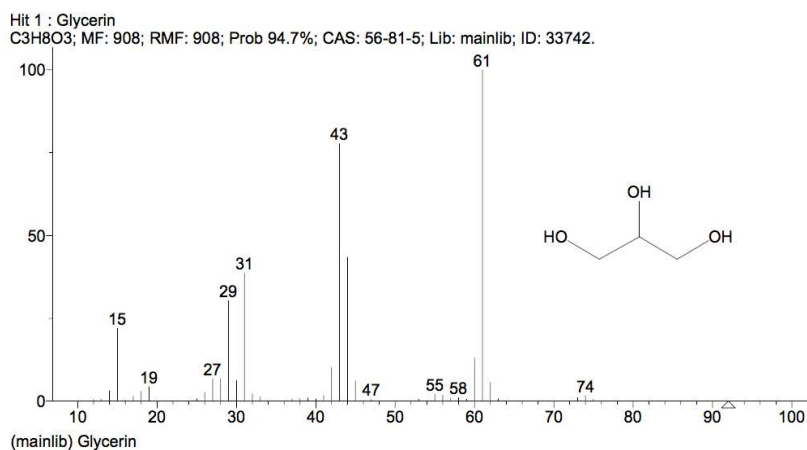
For Duchamp, the intra-thin is an adjective that functions as a substantive, and may only be understood through a series of examples. In Duchamp's *Notes* (Duchamp and Matisse 1983) examples are provided that account for the n-dimensional plane between interior conditional relations. As put by Juan Antonio Ramírez, the intra-thin provides a poetic alternative to the measurement of matter, removed from the precise physico-chemical apparatus of the hard technological sciences (1998: 194). In *Ash*, the infra-thin accommodates for permeability: the infinitesimal plane of separation between the surface of the water and paper (Gould 2000). But it also accounts for the permeability of the GC-MS readings, that are inseparable from the machinic, and the composition of the enumerated. With the substrates permeable to the skin-like surface of the Bagmati, which carries the remains of human bodies, the plane of separation between the human and non-human, the scientific and spiritual, becomes slight, almost *infra-thin*. For me, Barad's intra-action may be read alongside Duchamp's infra-thin, where the infra-thin accounts for something membrane-like, inciting the condition of a shared (and incalculable) residuality, and Barad's intra-action confounds hermetic assumptions of scientific objectivity (2007). Together, they assume an ontological position where Cartesian binaries fold.

In '10,000 BC: The geology of morals (who does the Earth think it is?)' (2013b), Deleuze and Guattari call attention to a relative dimensional plane, permeated by intensities and transitory particles. For Deleuze and Guattari, this plane is composed of substances that are structurally formulated. In this milieu, the process of giving form to matter is articulated as a process of *stratification* (47). Like the Duchampian intra-thin, and Barad's intra-action, the DeleuzoGuattarian plane does not seem to close the space between the substantive and stratigraphic, but attempts to open up the many possibilities of its diagrammatic function. That is, the performativity of the diagram to assimilate across normative binaries: the concrete and conceptual, substantial and

insubstantial, machinic and biologic (164). For *Ash*, I also add the human and non-human, the breathing and cremated, the sacred and contaminated. In relation to the GC-MS readings, the skeletal structures (printed from the apparatus onto pieces of paper) evidence this permeable plane, and explicate the performative *intensities of Ash*.

In my reading of Deleuze and Guattari, the premise of stratification seems further applicable to the GC-MS readings, where the

■ Figure 8. *Ash* (2018-20). GC-MS Readings. Glycerin (C<sub>3</sub>H<sub>8</sub>O<sub>3</sub>). Diagram: Victoria Sharples



Name: Glycerin  
Formula: C<sub>3</sub>H<sub>8</sub>O<sub>3</sub>  
MW: 92 Exact Mass: 92.047344 CAS#: 56-81-5 NIST#: 118748 ID#: 33742 DB: mainlib  
Other DBs: Fine, TSCA, RTECS, USP, HODOC, NIH, EINECS, IRDB  
Contributor: NIST Mass Spectrometry Data Center, 1990.  
Related CAS#: 29796-42-7; 37228-54-9; 75398-78-6; 78630-16-7; 8013-25-0  
InChIKey: PEDCQBHVIMGVHV-UHFFFAOYSA-N Non-stereo

10 largest peaks:

61 999	43 777	44 433	31 387	29 304
15 220	60 130	42 102	27 68	28 68

40 m/z Values and Intensities:

12 5	13 5	14 30	15 220	16 3
17 14	18 29	19 43	25 6	26 26
27 68	28 68	29 304	30 61	31 387
32 21	33 13	37 6	38 7	39 8
40 6	41 16	42 102	43 777	44 433
45 61	47 6	53 5	55 22	56 17

skeletal structures elucidate the *intensities* of the present chemicals according to their mass-to-charge fraction (m/z). For Deleuze and Guattari: 'Intensity is nothing other than continuity itself. It is a way of talking about movement, development, becoming, without subordinating these primary processes to the discrete and quantifiable' (cited in Adkins 2015: 16). In *Ash*, however, the skeletal structures *are* the causal outcome of preserving such intensities through the process of quantitation and therefore, I argue, function like *epitaphs*, making that which has passed present, through the recital of their reading. Following Deleuze's and Guattari's premise that the diagram constructs something 'yet to come' (2013a: 164), the *Ash* skeletal structures account for that which has passed, and pay close attention to the performative *intensities* of cremated matter.

#### EPITAPHS AND REINCARNATIONS

In approach and presentation, the *Ash* GC-MS readings make reference to Craig Dworkin's 'fact poems', enumerated in *Twelve Erroneous Displacements and a Fact* (2016). In this, Dworkin reverse-engineers the material composition of the poem and the material on which the poem is published. In brief, it provides a *de*-constructive meditation on the materiality and formal presentation of matter through language. For example, *Handspun Tibetan Wool...* features 'a rug, hand-knotted on a loom using traditional methods by weavers in Pokhara ... Nepal, using Himalayan wool, Chinese silk and Swiss Clariant dyes' (Morris 2016: 24). It reads:

Proprietary dye indexed to ARS colour pom reference 076 [reflecting Acid Red 315 (C<sub>20</sub>H<sub>19</sub>N<sub>3</sub>Na<sub>2</sub>O<sub>10</sub>S<sub>3</sub>) RED RSNI (C<sub>37</sub>H<sub>30</sub>N<sub>4</sub>O<sub>10</sub>S<sub>3</sub>.2Na) and Yellow S2GL (C<sub>34</sub>H<sub>25</sub>CrN<sub>8</sub>O<sub>6</sub>) with unseen wash residues of acetic acid (C<sub>4</sub>H<sub>4</sub>O<sub>2</sub>) and glower salt (Na<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>)] over and against a proprietary dye indexed to ARS colour pom reference 498 [reflecting Grey SBL (C<sub>34</sub>H<sub>18</sub>CrN<sub>8</sub>O<sub>26</sub>S<sub>6</sub>.H<sub>6</sub>Na) Red 6B (C<sub>24</sub>H<sub>30</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub>N<sub>2</sub>) Yellow 2GL (C<sub>34</sub>H<sub>25</sub>CrN<sub>8</sub>O<sub>6</sub>) with unseen wash residues of acetic acid (C<sub>4</sub>H<sub>4</sub>O<sub>2</sub>) and glower salt (Na<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>)] imbued with affinity to high-sulfur alpha-keratin protein [arginine (C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>14</sub>N<sub>4</sub>O<sub>2</sub>): 19.1%; serine (C<sub>3</sub>H<sub>7</sub>NO<sub>3</sub>): 7.3%; glutamate (C<sub>5</sub>H<sub>9</sub>NO<sub>4</sub>): 6.73%; glycine (C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>5</sub>NO<sub>2</sub>): 6.29%; leucine (C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>13</sub>NO<sub>2</sub>): 5.85%; threonine (C<sub>4</sub>H<sub>9</sub>NO<sub>3</sub>):

5.12%; proline (C<sub>5</sub>H<sub>9</sub>NO<sub>2</sub>): 5.05%; aspartic acid (C<sub>4</sub>H<sub>7</sub>NO<sub>2</sub>): 4.38%; valine (C<sub>5</sub>H<sub>11</sub>NO<sub>2</sub>): 4.16%; alanine (C<sub>3</sub>H<sub>7</sub>NO<sub>2</sub>): 4.12%; lysine (C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>13</sub>N<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>): 3.92%; tryptophan (C<sub>11</sub>H<sub>12</sub>N<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>): .82%; methionine (C<sub>5</sub>H<sub>11</sub>NO<sub>2</sub>S): .32%; with losses across classes due to hydrolysis] crosslinked in disulphide and isopeptide bonds with salt-bridged carboxyl and amino side-chain interactions, polluted by traces of desiccated suint, dissolved unwashed potash salts, remnant lipid films, and miscellaneous mineral-matter contaminants. (Dworkin 2016)

Like Dworkin, the GC-MS readings are *de*-constructive, preserving quantifiable information, and assume an elegiac approach. And yet, the *Ash* paper's continual *re*-composition (from paper substrates, chemical solutions to the skeletal structures) suggests an incarnation of matter, the readings returning to a place of presence through iterations of numerical, graphic and diagrammatic information.

Through the intersection of organic chemistry and Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, this conclusive section puts forward my argument for epitaphic readings and diagrams as reincarnations in *Ash*. For *Ash*, there has been an eclipsing conversation between the GC-MS analysis and cremation practices at Pashupatinath that found compatible perspectives, albeit nuanced, on the performativity of matter through diagrammatic readings. In particular, I refer to the inseparability of matter, following relational and agentive ontologies, and the *intensity* of performing bodies, human and non-human, as co-constituents that become, unfold and recompose together through spacetime matterings (Barad 2007). That is, there has been an attempt to unbalance reductive assumptions of matter as passive and separate, through application of performative practices and spiritual philosophies.

To begin, the use of the mail system and the premise of circularity (of sending and receiving), and of the *Ash* score's continual *re*-composition (through shared and collective authorship) is arguably comparative to the condition of reincarnation: a beginningless cycle and transmigration of form (Oestigaard 2005). The argument for reincarnation seems further plausible given that the paper substrates had



■ Figure 9. *Ash* (2018–20).  
Field Research. West of  
Pashupatinath Temple,  
Kathmandu, Nepal.  
Photographer: Victoria Sharples

to be thermally decomposed to attain sub-samples for their assessment. With reference to the analytical process, *Ash* acknowledges the residuality of destruction, as a constructive and transformative medium, and not a process of pure negation. This entropic approach is somewhat comparable to cremation practices and principle of *samsāra*, signifying the continual re-composition of matter within an interior system, where re-incarnation follows destruction, following incarnation (Hadders 2017: 4). For me, this attests to Barad’s understanding of matter as relata-within-relations, not relata-in-themselves (2003: 815), and suggestive of karmic energies, however subtle. The composition of the substrates following their permeation also attests to the microscopic presence of human particles, and accounts for the infra-thin separation between the human and non-human (Duchamp and Matisse 1983).

As the skeletal structures are the outcome of preserving such particles through the process of quantification, I further argue that the *Ash* readings function like epitaphs that, through their reading, make that which had passed

present, marking an arrival and reconstitution of matter. Given this, I propose that the skeletal structures are together epitaphic and matter *re*-incarnate. To this end, I propose this article contributes to the milieu of non-human performance and adds to normative assumptions of what live art practice is. That is, in place of human (a)liveness, this article pays close attention to the performative *intensities* of cremated matter, and uses skeletal structures to do this. Unlike Dworkin who presents a poetic *de*-construction: the material constitution of the poem and the object on which the poem is published, the *Ash* publications pull together spiritual and scientific discourses to address the *re*-constructive potentiality of destructive analytical processes. This seems significant in consideration of Shiva (*The Destroyer*) who is responsible for the cyclicity of matter, where Shiva is synonymous with the process of destruction for the purpose of creation.

*Once the body is fully cremated, ashes are swept into Bagmati, which later flows into the River Ganges. The pyre is then cooled with buckets of water and cleaned to be used again.*



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