

SPRINGS

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DEADLY AFFAIRS: AN ART EXHIBITION ABOUT TOXICITY

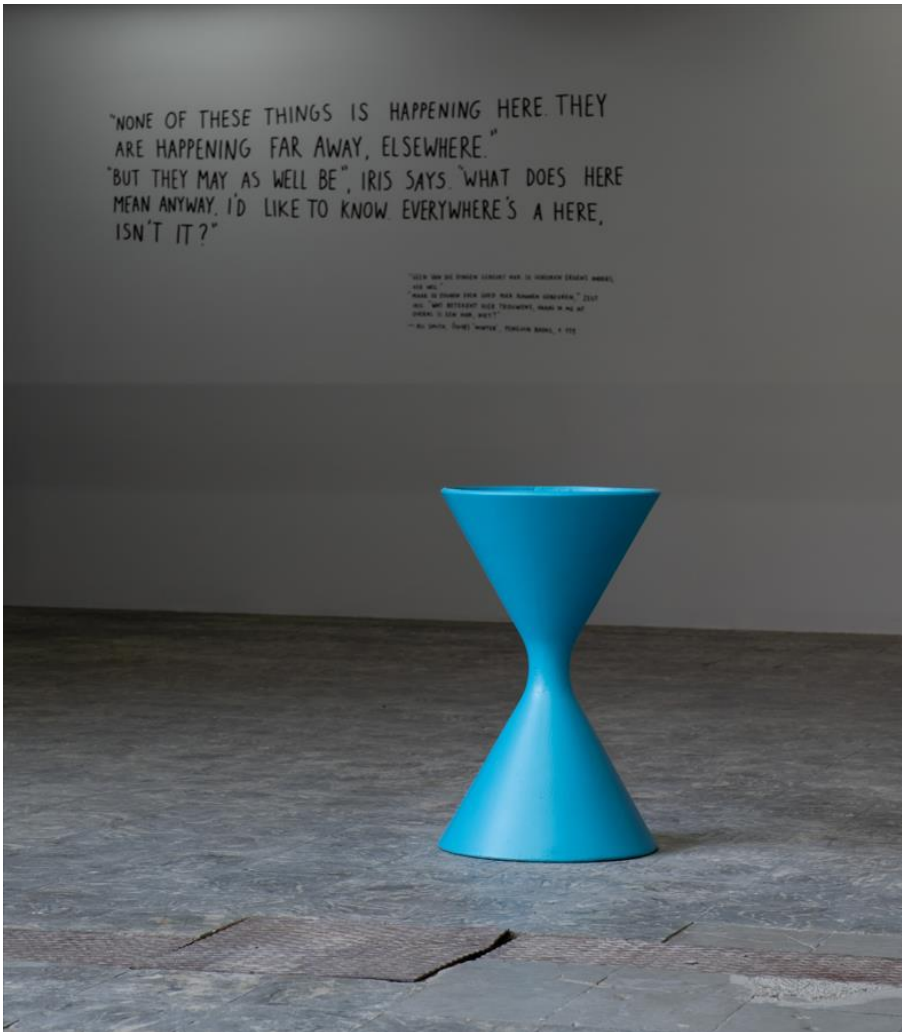
Antonia Alampi

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Sometime in 2018 I joined a tour of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. Guided by art historian Ingrid Greenfield, it highlighted the role of trade between Africa and Europe in the stylistic development of the Renaissance.¹ An unexpected debate ensued about the color white. It revolved around the fact that white's association with purity, sanctity, and innocence is a predominantly (yet not exclusively) Western cultural attribute. In many other cultures, white represents the opposite.



Franziska Pierwoss, *Biasca, Balconia and Diabolo*, 2019, *Deadly Affairs* (23 March–30 June 2019), Kunsthal Extra City, Antwerp. © 2019 Tomas Uyttendaele. All rights reserved. This image has been cropped.

Once I was home, my mother—an artist with a deep knowledge of painting—handed me Victoria Finlay's *Color: A Natural History of the Palette*. White, of course, has carried different meanings throughout history, and still does. In China and Japan, for example, white represents sickness, death, and funerals.² Writing about white's cultural significance would lead me off track, but the reason I mention it is that it led me to something else: most pigments artists have historically used have had a toxic component, with white pigment one of the most poisonous. Hence white's association with death turns out to be most apt. I was not entirely surprised. It was something I intuitively felt due to the headaches I get after breathing in oil pigments. However, some effects still astonished me.

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The greatest of white pigments, one that was used in illustrious paintings spanning time and geography—from the ancient Chinese, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman empires to the Tuscan Renaissance, Flemish painters, and up until a few decades ago—had a core of lead: a highly toxic metal and a strong poison found in the Earth’s crust.³ Lead white is a carbonate of lead, produced by its reaction with acids. Its poisoning includes brain damage, from memory problems to irritability, as well as headaches, constipation, and sterility. It can result in “anemia, seizures, coma, or death,” particularly with prolonged exposure.⁴ Because of its low melting point, lead is malleable, ductile, found in great quantities, and relatively cheap.

Artists from across the world have used white lead pigment for multiple purposes, from making primers for canvases and mixing other colors to refining delicate details. Later lead white became a mass-produced paint used for buildings, cars, ships, and more. But one of its most deadly uses was when it was mixed to produce makeup. Common since ancient Egypt, white lead makeup was employed by Roman women and Japanese geishas, among others, until the nineteenth century.

The initial effects of this poisonous substance matched historical beauty parameters in particular regions; it made women pale, ethereal, like some sort of supernatural (whiter than white) spirit.



Adrien Tirtiaux, *Toxic Tales*, 2019, *Deadly Affairs* (23 March–30 June 2019), Kunsthall Extra City, Antwerp. © 2019 Tomas Uyttendaele. All rights reserved.

By the time women realized the effects—after they had stopped sleeping, their skin started to show signs of damage and their bodies began to host blue spots, they suffered from constipation, were unable to eat and had lost substantial weight, experienced kidney collapse, and developed various psychic disorders—they would be at death's door.

This pigment's poisonous effects have been known since at least the Roman Empire. Pliny the Elder included lead white in his *Natural History*.⁵ Despite this, it was only over the course of the twentieth century that its legal distribution in the West ended.⁶ However, it is still sold on the global black market, including in European cities like Antwerp.



Francis Cotes, *The Countess of Coventry*, 1760.
Wikimedia Commons. Public domain.

The argument for its prolonged use was that nothing else could bless artworks with the same effect: the bright tonality and reflective capacity, the light and shine. The counterpart to the inimitable gleam of this particular white is that it has heavily intoxicated (if not killed) not only a myriad of artists, but also the quasi-enslaved people, assistants, and later interns working in their studios, on construction sites, and wherever the pigments were produced.

In essence, the people most affected by the toxic fumes are the lowest-wage workers hired to produce large amounts of pigment, the ones exposed to it the longest: "Lead white was made by the poor and poisoned the poor."⁷ In 1780, Monsieur Courtois and Louis-Bernard Guyton de Moreau embarked on finding an alternative and discovered a less harmful pigment made of barium sulfate (later named *blanc fixe*). But the problem remained: most artists kept using lead because barium white was too expensive and its effect was not the same.

I wonder whether the obsession with lead, the almost erotic attraction to the poisonous white, has more to do with the seductive quality of the toxic substance or with an artistic urge for prestige in which the final outcome is more important than any material consequences its making might imply.

Furthermore, the beautiful light effects of these artworks are transitory. There is no agreement whether lead white is the reason many old paintings have deteriorated into darker colors, but this is a possibility.⁸ The deterioration of lead white as a color becomes a good metaphor for something else that defines toxicity, namely, the unknown qualities of its performance. Its forms and agency can neither be pinned down nor anticipated. It is hard to grasp and easy to spread. Its dissemination is violent and lethal, yet slow and unspectacular, which makes it difficult to draw direct links between source and consequence and to hold anyone accountable. It produces cancers and physical and psychological malformations, contaminates water and land, and kills animals and plants.

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This violence is slow and not everyone can afford to protect themselves from it. The threat of unemployment or famine makes it difficult for many to be concerned about its deferred harms. This delay also conceals the cause; since the toxic can go unnoticed, it is hard to identify. Just like the story of artists and the low-wage workers they employ in their studios, there is always someone else in a different and weaker economic, social, or legal position that bears toxicity's heaviest burden.

Given that the toxic is impossible to contain, we are left with one option: We can embrace, understand, and engage with its presence on a broader scale.

My interest in the topic was sparked when I first consciously experienced the toxic, namely in the waters of the village where I grew up in Calabria, Italy. A region where spectacular views of the sea, sophisticated Mediterranean cuisine, magical sunsets, and a culture of hospitality constitute a "reality" that for decades has been more imagined than lived. A surface behind which lie some of the most tragic and deadly experiences of toxic waste dumps in the sea, of contamination of water and lands (and much more where toxicity may also act as a metaphor). This is thanks to the festering collaboration between organized crime, state corruption, and administrative inefficiency that has made vast areas of Calabria a sort of laboratory of malfeasance: the "mother-house" of a criminal organization known as the Ndrangheta. A group at the same time archaic in its rituals and in the violence it practices and modern in managing and hiding supply and distribution of the most substantial trafficking on a planetary scale—from toxic waste (radioactive waste, pollutants of all kinds, electrodomestics, pharmaceutical residues, etc.) to drugs and weapons.

I am now a curator and an art historian. My work has always been driven by understanding and using the arts as a space where questions, contradictions, and the many aspects determining the complex reality in which we live can be made visible, audible, and sensed, without resolution nor clear conclusions. A space where both grounded and versatile research and a great degree of speculative imagination manifest themselves via sensual experiences, where technical and scientific aspects join cultural and spiritual ones. This is why the subject of toxicity and its two core natures—its concealment behind charming surfaces and its slow unpredictable course of action that is almost impossible to trace linearly—seemed to call for artists to engage with it.

Deadly Affairs was an exhibition at Extra City Kunsthall in Antwerp. Here the story of lead white played a central role in creating a kind of infrastructure or framing narrative that brought art and toxicity closer together. It was the first public outcome of the collective *Toxic Commons*, which includes the founder Caroline Ektander, Simone Müller, and "Hazardous Travels: Ghost Acres and the Global Waste Economy" at the Rachel Carson Center—a group determined to increasingly attract public attention to the fundamental environmental injustices and global inequalities at the core of the toxic. The aim is to do so via the power of storytelling, yet beyond the authority of the written word and through the creation of experiences punctuated by images (moving and still), sounds, narratives, and fiction. Artists and people from different walks of life engaged the public in many experiences of toxicity, using different means to tell stories that may never be shared otherwise, stories colored with the many details of life and its emotions, stories without any "critical distance."



Various artists, *toxiThropea.sunset*, 2019, *Deadly Affairs* (23 March-30 June 2019), Kunsthall Extra City, Antwerp. © 2019 Tomas Uyttendaele. All rights reserved.

Deadly Affairs aimed to dissect how the unequal distribution of environmental catastrophes is intertwined with capitalism, imperialism, and race. We used the tropes of toxic trades and destruction to untangle the complex conditions that make its violence possible, and above all legally, socially, and culturally acceptable. At the heart of the exhibition were these malevolent processes of “normalization.” We tried to emphasize how local populations often accept hazardous and toxic industrial endeavors in exchange for promises to solve unemployment and poverty. Valentino Bellini, in collaboration with Eileen Quinn, addressed this by [merging investigative journalism, archival materials, interviews, and photographs](#) related to the disastrous history of the petrochemical area of Syracuse in Sicily, and what remains of it in the environment, in human bodies, and in memories.

All That Perishes at the Edge of Land by filmmaker Hira Nabi zooms in on the experience of workers at a shipwrecking site in Gadani, Pakistan, by highlighting how the toxic by-products of industrialization do not disappear. Instead, someone, somewhere, probably with few alternatives, will dismantle and dump them, and become subject to contamination. This beautiful film is not about the many legal facts that make this process possible. Instead, it is about the stories the workers have to tell, including the conscious responsibility they take in doing a job that ultimately someone, somewhere, will have to perform. Because every ship one day goes somewhere to die, and someone will have to take care of it.



Trailer of *All That Perishes at the Edge of Land*. Directed by Hira Nabi, 2019, 30 min. <https://vimeo.com/480723810>.

Jessika Khazrik made a work based on an experience of a toxic waste quarry three minutes from the Beirut house where she grew up, a site known for the presence of “blue barrels”: visible yet anonymous elements of the landscape, whose presence can also be witnessed elsewhere in the city and country. Only when the acrid smell began to leak was the alarm raised that led to the discovery that the famous blue barrels contained toxic waste—most likely the result of an agreement between the Italian mafia and the Lebanese Forces. Here, as often is the case, thanks to a “deficit of social attention” (perhaps due to the same reasons that can be found in Calabria), various forces led to the situation, including voluntary ignorance; underestimating the danger of the phenomenon; the will (to a large extent probably unaware) to postpone toxic effects because of more pressing priorities; and, of course, state and corporate corruption engaged in covering up the reality in exchange for liquid assets.

The exhibition traces similarities with the much more widely-known case of asbestos. Daniel Lambo and Franziska Pierwoss address its deadly politics and endemic presence. Both artists, in very different ways, analyzed and brought to the fore the conditions that facilitate its migration from Europe towards the Global South, and the threats that company workers and consumers alike have been consciously subjected to.



Trailer of *Breathless*. Directed by Daniel Lambo, 2018. <https://vimeo.com/263848494>.

The exhibition's architecture—both a sculptural intervention and a support structure—was conceived and designed by artist and architect Adrien Tirtiaux and took the story of lead white as its guiding principle. It centered around a cement wall that cut through the space, revealing the toxic's problem of visibility and the divide between what is seen and what is not. It also represented a divide between who or what is deemed valuable enough to be kept at a safe distance from the toxic, and who or what is forced to live in close proximity to it. This divide is real, but also illusory, as everything takes place within a set of entangled relations and because toxic dissemination is ultimately impossible to contain.

With their capacity of imagining the world otherwise, artists find ways to react to catastrophes, even if not through direct scientific or legal solutions. For example, the collective Don't Follow the Wind presented a fragment of their ongoing exhibition inside the restricted Fukushima exclusion zone, creating a symbolic space of hope between the area and the residents who have been separated from their homes and community. Here is a world where essential resources are depleted, and human survival is uncertain.

Just as in the example of lead white pigment and makeup, of this "whiter than white" effect so much characterized by the desire to reach an incomparable "beauty" that secretly (for some) walks alongside death, artists within this exhibition told complex stories of human-induced invisible proximity with poison. By the creation of a sensual and emotional set of experiences in space, *Deadly Affairs* shared urgent stories of the toxic that could be felt before being completely understood. To borrow Audre Lorde's words: "The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free."⁹ Those dreams have to be nurtured. Poetry and art, as Lorde suggests, can chart the revolutionary demand of such dreams. "Our children cannot dream unless they live, they cannot live unless they are nourished, and who else will feed them the real food without which their dreams will be no different from ours? 'If you want us to change the world someday, we at least have to live long enough to grow up!' shouts the child."¹⁰



Various artists, *toxiThropea.sunset*, 2019, *Deadly Affairs* (23 March–30 June 2019), Kunsthal Extra City, Antwerp. © 2019 Tomas Uyttendaele. All rights reserved.

Notes

- ¹ The tour was part of “Black Archive Alliance”: an initiative to document African diaspora in Tuscany.
- ² Victoria Finlay, *Color: A Natural History of the Palette* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2003), 108.
- ³ This account is based on Finlay’s chapter “White.” As she summarizes, it is a “cumulative toxicant that affects multiple body systems . . . it is distributed to the brain, liver, kidney and bones. It is stored in the teeth and bones, where it accumulates over time. . . . Its widespread use has resulted in extensive environmental contamination, human exposure and significant public health problems in many parts of the world.” Finlay, *Color*, 108–33.
- ⁴ World Health Organization, “Lead Poisoning and Health,” September 2016, <https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/lead-poisoning-and-health>.
- ⁵ Louise Cilliers and Francois Retief, “Lead Poisoning and the Downfall of Rome: Reality or Myth?,” in *Toxicology in Antiquity*, vol. 1, *History of Toxicology and Environmental Health*, ed. Philip Wexler, 221–79 (London: Academic Press, 2014), 221.
- ⁶ The International Labour Conference on Lead White in Geneva in 1921 adopted the White Lead Convention, which led to the prohibition of the use of white lead in indoor painting in several countries. It is only since the 1994 Basel Convention that lead white for pigments has been prohibited in certain quantities in the European Union.
- ⁷ Finlay, *Color*, 123.
- ⁸ Marine Cotte et al., “Lead Soaps in Paintings: Friends or Foes?,” *Studies in Conservation* 62, no. 1 (2016): 2–23.
- ⁹ Audre Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (Madrid: Silver Press, 2017), 9.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.



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