



# Performance Research

## A Journal of the Performing Arts

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: [www.tandfonline.com/journals/rprs20](http://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rprs20)

## Unpacking and Enveloping

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To cite this article: Leonie Persyn (2023) Unpacking and Enveloping, Performance Research, 28:8, 24-33, DOI: [10.1080/13528165.2023.2385238](https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2023.2385238)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2023.2385238>



Published online: 12 Nov 2024.



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# Unpacking and Enveloping

## Béatrice Balcou activating the fragile, the intimate and the vulnerable

LEONIE PERSYN

Intimacy poses a question of scale that links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective. (Berlant 1998: 283)

*Cette oeuvre avait une taille parfait, elle tenait dans l'espace de mes bras.* (Balcou 2021: 57)

Throughout this article, I will place two works by Béatrice Balcou (born 1976, France) in dialogue with each other. Balcou is a transdisciplinary artist from France based in Brussels. In her earlier works (2013–20), she mainly makes use of performative strategies to create 'secular rituals' (Balcou 2023) by incorporating the works of other artists. Her rituals are an 'invitation to take time' (ibid.). Although in her later work the performative strategies become less important, the overarching methodology of giving profound attention to what is mostly overlooked remains present throughout her artistic practice. Time and again this methodology takes form in different gestures of packing and unpacking, and aims at generating an 'oscillati[on] between states of dormancy ... and of public display' (298).

In 2020, as a result of her residency at Le Centre international de recherche sur le verre et les arts plastiques (the International Research Centre for Glass and Plastic Arts) in Marseille, Balcou created and presented a series of works entitled *Containers* (2020). On her website, Balcou introduces *Containers* as follows:

*Containers* are industrially manufactured glasses with their base and stem cut off, i.e., just the bowl. This intervention aims to use the bowl, thereby discretely transforming it. Béatrice Balcou has inserted mounted insects into these glasses known as 'museophages' or 'heritage insects'. They were collected by Fabien Fohrer, an entomologist who studies their behaviour at the Centre Interregional de Conservation et de Restauration pour le Patrimoine (CICRP) laboratories in Marseilles.

These insects live in museums and consume artworks: they dig tunnels through painting frames or wooden sculptures, they consume the animal

adhesives used in certain works and constitute a population that hungers for culture. If you are what you eat, then these are the true aesthetes or, alternately, walking encyclopaedias. The mounted insects are held in bell jars, sealed with thin, blown glass lenses. Balcou provides mausolea for the unwanted insects, disrupting our relationship with them. (Balcou 2023)

In industrially created glasses, she shows a variety of museophages. Little insects that burrow through artworks and eat them from the inside out are conservators' biggest nightmare, but here, in their transparent shells, they no longer only appear dangerous. While looking at this work several questions cross my mind: What can be learned from those small creatures that so many people detest? What would they say if they could speak? And what is Balcou proposing here? Stunned by their tiny cadavers, answers evade me, but my mind is catapulted to an earlier encounter with Balcou's work. During an internship at the Performatik Festival in 2015 I attended *Cérémonie Sans Titre #05* (Untitled Ceremony #05), a performance in which Balcou unpacked and packed a sixteenth-century wooden bust of Saint John at the Don Verboven Exquisite Objects gallery in Brussels. I remember with razor-sharp accuracy how, while looking at the museophages in *Containers* (2020), I was struck and moved by the fragility of the completely perforated wooden chestpiece of Saint John, which I encountered in years prior during *Cérémonie Sans Titre #05* (Untitled Ceremony #05). By unpacking this bust, Balcou revealed to her audience how she – through her meticulous gestures – allowed the delicate gesture of the other, the museophage, to appear. In this article, I explore how Balcou's artistic strategies of enveloping and (un)packing activate an invisible and complex structure of intimate relationships and thus allow the fragile, the intimate and the vulnerable to resist, persist

and flourish within the current field of arts.

So, how could the unpacking of a museophages-eaten sculpture activate a process of unlearning (Azoulay 2019) the hostile relation (in preservational terms) to create an intimate relation? How does my encounter with this work activate and alter the relation of spectator, artwork, performer and context without defaulting to the erasure of the history between the artwork and the non-human activist, the museophage? To formulate my suggestions to these questions, I will first return to *Untitled Ceremony #05* in 2015. Based on my experience as a spectator, I explore the ceremonial qualities of the performance, allowing Balcou to reveal and (re-)activate intimate relationships from the past into the future. During this exploration, I explain how Balcou's unpacking gestures stimulate an unlearning of habitual perceptions and provide a space for looking in-between, based on fragility, intimacy and vulnerability. I then connect this unlearning and looking-in-between with my experience with *Containers*. In creating a performative space for unlearning – what could be called an in-between space – the sensuous potential of the fragile unfolds, revealing the complex entanglement of the museum and the art world as a vulnerable ecosystem that can co-house all I's and others involved.

#### UNTITLED CEREMONY #05: UNPACKING SAINT JOHN

Let me take you back to 21 March 2015. We, the spectators, gather in front of Don Verboven Exquisite Objects gallery in a neighbourhood of Brussels that, at that moment in time, I am not particularly familiar with. It has been raining all day and I feel a little uncomfortable entering the waiting room situated in a B&B next to the gallery. I feel out of place, a feeling that becomes exacerbated by the rarity of the objects on display in the gallery's window and the fact that we are not allowed to enter the space on our own. The waiting room is fully packed and the usual ticket chaos ensues. Because of the ongoing mess created by too many people gathering in a small room, the performance starts late and we do not enter the gallery until

about a quarter past four.

We walk past the window and make our way through the objects into a backroom that serves as the evening's performance space. The space is dark, covered with black curtains and a [black?] carpet, which gives it a soft and safe quality. Upon entering, triggered by the black wooden boxes positioned in a U-shape around Balcou, I am puzzled by how few we actually are. Balcou herself is dressed in black jeans with gloves protruding from her back pocket. She stands and waits patiently in silence. She looks some of the audience members in the eyes and sometimes a friendly smile appears on her face. Her calm presence feels welcoming and sets a certain tone. She informs us about the duration of the performance, which will take thirty-five minutes and kindly asks us not to take any pictures. After a brief moment of silence, she puts on the gloves, rolls a wooden box towards the middle of the floor and starts opening it. Her movements are calm, precise, delicate and efficient. None of her gestures feel superfluous or overdone.

She removes a thick piece of black foam, the first of several layers of packing materials that she will stack on a pile next to the box. As she unboxes, I hear a variety of sounds emanating from the black foam, blankets, bubblewrap, blue tape and tissue paper. They all creak, crackle and crunch a little differently. Their sounds feel amplified by the soft textures of the room. They emphasize our proximity to the box, the object and one another. Once all the loose layers of packaging have been removed from the box, about ten minutes into the performance, Balcou puts both hands inside the crate and carefully takes out a wooden bust. She supports the back of the sculpture as the torso rests in her hands. She holds the statue like you hold a newborn baby and slowly walks towards the base in the middle of the half circle created by the audience. Balcou carefully places the bust on the base, pushing the pile of packaging materials aside, and takes a seat among the audience. For ten to fifteen minutes we look at this anonymous wooden bust from the sixteenth century together. At this moment, I am confronted with a male figure I don't immediately recognize. He has a humble and even vulnerable appeal, mainly expressed by his slightly sideways glance but

even more so by the material state of the wood. The wood is completely covered with tiny holes, the figure has been eaten by a worm or insect, a museophage. The wood has a delicate texture and, in some places, the bust resembles a sand sculpture that could crumble at any moment. The porous material quality invites me to take the time to observe all of the figure's details, sensing the irregular pattern of its history.

Twenty minutes after entering this small black room, Balcou slowly stands up and picks up the pile of packaging materials. With the same slow, meticulous and delicate gesture – full of care – she once again wraps up the bust. Layer by layer, the humble figure disappears as it is tenderly covered. Screw by screw Balcou closes off the big black crate. Although the crate has not changed since the beginning of this ceremony, it seems as if the figure is now shining through it. She rolls the crate back to its starting position and hands a business card to each audience member. It is white. I turn it around in my hands to find the readable direction of the black letters. They indicate: 'Untitled Ceremony #05. Béatrice Balcou. Anonymous, 16th-century sculpture of Saint John, private collection, Belgium'. She asks if someone wants to say something. I don't feel the urge to talk; others do. A short conversation develops and evolves into soft applause. We all leave the room silently; I no longer feel out of place, but moved and emotionally stirred.

UNTITLED CEREMONY #05: A CEREMONY  
THAT REVEALS AND ACTIVATES  
INTIMACY

Balcou's series of ceremonies are inspired by the Japanese tea ceremony. Balcou (2018) herself is mainly interested in 'the moment where one allows to let go of control and engages in enjoying the present moment'. With her ceremonies she wants to prolong the time an audience spends with an artwork, rather than simply providing snapshots of the masterpieces. Performing the untitled ceremonies is Balcou's way of resisting the highly neoliberal and consumerist approach to art familiar to both audiences and museum institutions. By calling her performances 'ceremonies' she highlights the hospitality of the host and invites her

audience to engage in a moment that is distinct but also part of everyday museum life. Although throughout her performance Balcou's gestures are performed slowly with full attention, the most striking resemblance to the tea ceremony is the selfless intention behind the act to share a moment. According to Japanese art critic and philosopher Soetsu Yanagi, the tea ceremonies – which are in Western understanding heavily linked with the concept of *wabi-sabi* (the perfection of imperfection) and form – should instead be understood beyond this dualistic thinking as the celebration of 'the beauty of everyday life (byojotei)' (2017: 149), in which objects play a crucial role. In ceremonies, objects are 'treated with care, with something verging on respect' (9). According to Yanagi, the respectful attitude is related to the scarcity of goods, the honesty of workmanship and 'the fact that the more an object is used, the more its beauty becomes apparent' (ibid.). These ceremonial objects have the potential to activate intimacy, to deepen the relation among human, non-human and object.

Within the context of *Untitled Ceremony #05* those three attitude-defining aspects can be found in the scarcity of sixteenth-century wooden busts, the honesty of workmanship displayed by the artist/performer (which is based on the workmanship of the art handler and conservator), and the museophage's use of the artwork. I will now explore each of these aspects separately to illustrate my thesis concerning the appearance and persistence of fragility, intimacy and vulnerability.

THE SCARCITY OF GOODS: SPENDING  
TIME WITH AN ARTWORK

The scarcity of the sixteenth-century wooden bust speaks mainly through the context in which it is shown. The Don Verboven Exquisite Objects gallery is a high-end gallery popular with collectors searching for small and rare objects for their private collections. Entering this gallery and having an encounter with one of these objects feels like a privilege. This feeling is further enforced by the fact that we cannot enter the gallery on our own and that only a limited number of audience members are allowed to

attend the ceremony. This limitedness of the audience allows Balcou to establish a small-scale set-up and diminish the distance with this object of value. Although this seems a rather futile aspect of the dramaturgy of *Untitled Ceremonies*, it is key in allowing the audience to spend time observing the bust's details and the gestures performed by Balcou. Only for such a small group can Balcou bring this object from the depot of the collection to the stage, from its private home to an audience. The reduced distance also ensures the audience's attention is fixed on the object and the gestures. Supported by the low incentive character of the space, its black curtains and soft appeal, the shortened distance makes this shift in attention from the rush of daily life towards the object and its experience easier. It makes distraction almost impossible, which increases the sense of curiosity when the object appears without packaging for the first time. Due to the small group and the kind of object on display, this moment feels like a secret encounter, a blind date. The first appearance is destabilizing; the sideways glance of the figure makes me feel uncomfortable but simultaneously eager to continue observing and getting to know this object better. For more than thirty minutes I watched its unpacking, its posture and its material quality, and only at the end, when I received the business card, was the figure introduced to me as Saint John. By suspending this introduction, Balcou temporarily undoes the bust's historical references to a specific religious figure. Consequently, she provides space for sensible knowledge, composed of individual and material storylines concerning the object rather than the depiction of a religious figure. Due to this suspension, I sense the importance of the slightly tilted head and the sideways glance, but it is only while writing this article that I can grasp it. To my astonishment, I found out that during the last supper, Saint John – the beloved apostle, the patron of love, friendship and loyalty – tilted his head and glanced sideways while leaning in towards Christ to ask who betrayed him. His position expresses his close and proximate connection to others and the burning question of the betrayer or infiltrator. But why does this position trigger a certain sense of vulnerability in my experience with the

bust? According to Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero vulnerability is understood in physical and corporeal terms. It appears in a human condition in which it is the relation to the other that counts, that allows an ontology of linkage and dependence to come to the fore (2009: 21). It is clear that the other in my experience of the bust of Saint John is not Christ or one of the apostles. But whom or what is that other then? According to philosopher Marlies De Munck vulnerability resides 'where life and transience meet' (De Munck and Gielen 2022: 45), which is heavily intertwined with the revelation that what is at stake is that fragility is proof of connectivity. To explore who that other (in my experience with the bust) is and understand this vulnerability better, I will take a closer look at both the bust's fragility and the strategies of unpacking and (re)wrapping in revealing this fragility.

#### THE USE OF THE OBJECT: CONSUMING SAINT JOHN

Fragility is a material quality connected to the feasibility of breaking. Something that breaks easily is characterized as fragile. Fragile materiality can take a lot of different forms, from a smooth glass surface to a frayed textile. In this case, the fragility of the wooden bust of Saint John appears in the dense and textured pattern of tiny holes that reveal that over the centuries the wood has been penetrated and eaten. The pattern highlights the inherent porosity of the wood, and its ability to break or be hollowed. According to geographer Paul C. Adams a texture like the one in the pattern of the bust 'provides a glimpse of the processes, structures, and histories that went into its making' (Adams *et al.* 2001: xiii). The main storyline of the penetrated wood tells the story of the intimate relation between the museophage and the object. On the one hand, the pattern allows the audience to sense the need and eagerness of the museophage to consume this work, but, on the other, it also shows the human hand of a conservator or restorer, who called an end to this consummation. The tension between both reveals the conditions, contexts and circumstances in which the bust has spent time.

For the audience, the pattern functions as a trace that triggers the sensibility for the connections among the human, the nonhuman other, the object and their changing relations in these circumstances and over time. Due to the hint of consumption embedded in the bust's material surface, the pattern, and more specifically the museophage in creating it, also highlights the fragility of the art world in a neoliberal consumerist logic. On a conceptual level, it makes the danger of being hollowed out from the inside perceptible.

In *Untitled Ceremony #05*, I consume the artwork by looking. From my earlier description and the previous reflection on the pattern, it must by now be clear that my [?] looking is haptic. My 'eyes ... function like organs of touch' (Marks 2000: 162); through them I feel the pattern's texture, as if I were gliding my hands over it. Through my visual experience of the bust, a 'combination of tactile, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive functions' (ibid.) is triggered. These haptic qualities of my gaze, and especially the skimming of the surface, are crucial to explaining the evolution of my encounter with the bust of Saint John. By caressing the porous surface with my eyes, I sense how the object could have resolved over time and how it did not receive the care it should have. I am confronted with a finiteness I recognize in my own human condition through which I attribute a self to the bust. It is exactly through this attribution of a self that fragility evolves to vulnerability because, in my perception, the wooden object becomes a body. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero, philosopher Ann V. Murphy states that there is 'a wide spectrum of responses [to a vulnerable body], from violence and disavowal to care and nurture' (2011: 578). In my experience, the bust of Saint John embodies this ambivalence because, through Balcou's careful gestures, the tiny wounds from previous harm become perceptible. This is of course considered from a human perspective where the scale of the relation between the woodworm and the bust is microscopic. This scale ensures that the tiny wounds only become visible to the human eye when an advanced state of decay is reached. But from the woodworm's perspective, their relationship with the wooden

object is vital and almost parasitic. The worm needs the wood to remain alive. The bust is the worm's ideal home or host because it provides food and shelter. The dependency of the worm is high but not mutual. Through touch, the larva finds the softest parts of the bust and drills its way through. The larva has an intimate knowledge of the wooden Saint John that remains inaccessible to humans. From the perspective of a human outsider, especially in an art context, we tend to label this relation and the survival of the larva as violent or harmful because they put collections, constructions and artefacts at risk. These relationships threaten the conservation of wooden objects while their presence highlights the fragility of the art world built by humans. But from the larva's perspective, it is the conservator who is preventing the larva from taking care of itself, which can be labelled as a violent intrusion into the worm's ecosystem. Through this small perspective switch, it becomes clear that both violence and care are indicators of an intimate relationship. Both combine objective knowledge with affective dimensions, which causes us to question different ranges of attachment and scale 'that links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective' (Berlant 1998: 283). It is precisely this simultaneity of the different scales embedded in my experience with the bust of Saint John that I would call intimate because it connects the I to the (more)-than-other. It allows the delicate gesture of the appearance of the other, in this case the museophage.

#### THE WORKMANSHIP OF BALCOU: THE STRATEGY OF UNPACKING

Balcou's delicate and precise gestures of unpacking and rewrapping enabled me to engage with a change of scale, making it possible for me to experience a range of affective dimensions that touch upon different forms of ecological entanglement. Balcou's unpacking and rewrapping is not the enthusiastic unpacking of a child but can instead be defined as a skillful engagement with the functioning and context of an artwork through delicate and precise gestures. Her vocabulary of gestures is rooted in

the practice of art handling, the workmanship of the art handler and conservator who install and wrap artworks before and after their public appearance. This vocabulary embeds the museum's private and invisible everyday gestures in a performative context. Although Balcou does not utter any words as she unpacks, she communicates with her audience through sparsely but intentionally selected and executed gestures. The gesture must be understood here as a 'visible emanation of an invisible corporal genesis [that] carries the full intensity of the whole body ... an utterance situating the event in the evolution of the human community' (Loupe 2010: 73). According to cultural theorist Lauren Berlant 'communication with the sparsest of signs and gestures' (1998: 281), in an eloquent and brief manner, means intimating or activating intimacy. This activation through gestures must be understood as a sensible utterance of 'an aspiration for a narrative about something shared' (ibid.). Bridging the thinking of Berlant and Loupe with my experience of *Untitled Ceremony #05*, the gestures of Balcou hint towards a possible evolution in how we look upon that which the human and non-human (the museophage) can share.

Although the art handler vocabulary that Balcou employs is largely unknown to the audience, the gestures of (un)packing a fragile gift is something that everyone, whether age 2 or 99, has embodied knowledge of. This highlights that the accuracy of Balcou's gestures means that she knows the object well and that it isn't the first time she has carried and unpacked it. She is never surprised by its weight, she knows exactly where the package is sealed and even while packed she can distinguish the front from the back and the top from the bottom. When she holds the package and, later in the performance, the bust, like a newborn baby, you can tell from the support of her posture that she knows exactly where the weakest points of the wood are situated. The caution with which she executes each gesture reveals that Balcou doesn't own the object but only takes care of it for a limited period. In comparison to the conservator, she does not intrude on the worm's ecosystem. On the contrary, she makes those previous intimate relationships she isn't part of

readable for the audience, silently sharing her care and intimate trajectory with the object. Consequently, through her careful and attentive gestures of unpacking, she not only invites and allows the audience to encounter the bust of Saint John but also to experience different scales and contemporaneities of encounters/intimacies at the same time as establishing a new, intimate relation with her audience. Although philosopher Gaston Bachelard states that 'intimacy hides from view' (2014 [1958]: 109), the silence in which Balcou executes the gestures and the low-stimulus environment leaves her no room to hide. On the contrary, Balcou's attention and attentiveness invite the audience to engage in a dynamic process of negotiation with their distraction. Only in the moment that Balcou feels there is a balance between her attention on the object and the attention of the audience for the object does she leave the bust on the base and sit down with the audience. This means that she disappears while the audience's and the bust's appearance flourishes. Consequently, Balcou not only takes care of the object with her gestures but also guides her audience through the quest of attending, a quest that heavily depends on Balcou's timing, her sense of when the audience is ready to be touched by the wooden bust's fragility and past relation with the museophage. Balcou's sense of timing, her feeling for when the audience is ready and full of attention, resonates with De Munck's definition of fragility as 'letting the casing burst open at the right time' (De Munck and Gielen 2022: 44). In other words, with her ceremonial gestures of unpacking, Balcou prepares the situation and relationship she has with the object and with the audience to open up. She invites the audience to allow the sensible that has the potential to reveal how fragility and the invisible relational complexity can take root.

#### A WORKMANSHIP IN FRAGILITY: THE ACTIVATION OF THE INTIMATE BY UNDOING WHAT WE KNOW

In the previous section, *Untitled Ceremony #05* helped me understand fragility beyond its material aspects. Through the unpacking, I became part of a sensible encounter where the

different relationships with the wooden bust lead to an energetic field of attentiveness and where the intimate allows the sensible 'to take on a charge' (Berlant 1998: 287). In other words, the unpacking moves us to the edge of meaning and destabilizes relations as they existed before this encounter. Here, destabilizing should be understood as

decentralizing where the event takes place ... [as] creating a space of particular attention ... where the inside is outside is inside ... where we do not know yet where we are, so we attend to what is there, and encounter one another, with a curious open gaze. (Božić and Willms 2017: 231)

According to artists Andrea Božić and Julia Willms, such a bursting open of the situation and the destabilization that comes from the opening of these fragile and intimate relations provides us with the ability to 'undo what we know ... , to look in-between and divide our attention' (2017: 228–9). They define the in-between as a negative space between objects and humans, which allows a different kind of looking because we do not have a word (229) for such a space. The in-between in *Untitled Ceremony* comes from the intersection of object, performer, audience and their various trajectories and functions in institutional art contexts. I start to look differently at this intersection because of Balcou's intentional, but unconventionally slow and attentive, unpacking of the artwork. This deliberate creation of a centre of attention makes the gesture of unpacking intentional and affective. The audience adopts her attention, understood in the phenomenological reading of George Home-Cook, as 'a dynamic and polymorphous sphere' (Home-Cook 2015: 41), which includes distraction. When I look in-between during this particular ceremony, I engage in an act of attending or being in attendance. This attendance ensures that my undoing is not a not doing, but rather a kind of unknowing, because according to George Home-Cook, attending requires 'to make an effort, to do something, to stretch ourselves' (1). In *Untitled Ceremonies #05* I stretch myself towards the unknown, without getting to know it. I see the intersection, I see the object, the other(s), their trajectories and contexts. I can touch upon it and I am touched by it, but it does not become fully

known to me. The decentralization at stake in *Untitled Ceremony #05* equals a re-localization of the event from the creation and presentation of something new towards reactivating what others, be it the art handlers, museophages or the artists, have already done.

Cultural theorist Ariella Azoulay denominates 'a withdrawal from the new' (2019: 16) as a sign of unlearning, as an opening towards 'engaging with those relegated to the "past" ... as potential companions ... with whom entering (or not entering) the archive or the museum could be imagined and experienced as a form of cocitizenship' (ibid.). When looking through the lens of Azoulay to *Untitled Ceremony #05*, the museophage is the one relegated to the past, the infiltrator. By making the intimate relation of the museophage with the wooden bust sensible, Balcou prepares the audience for the possibility of the museum's 'reclaiming nondestructive modes of sharing the world' (26), which she further explores in *Containers*.

Once she makes this sensible proposition to her audience, Balcou carefully and attentively wraps the bust again, leaving her audience in this state of sensibility and destabilization, of not knowing but sensing. While looking at how Balcou wraps the bust in several layers of protective material and how she closes the crate, I sense how I won't forget about the encounter. To my astonishment I experience a coexistence of the macroscopic, namely the relation between the art institution, the art-handler, the artist, and the audience, which are all embedded in Balcou's gestures, and the microscopic – being the fragility of the object established by the museophage. While the traces of the past intimate relationship between the museophage and the object sustains and remains sensible. With the experience of this coexistence, I sense the art world is a fragile ecosystem threatened by challenges regarding conservation, material fragility and a consumerist attitude. The least that can be concluded from this is that Balcou's workmanship is defined as workmanship in fragility, intimacy and vulnerability.

CONTAINERS, A SUSPENDED FACE-  
TO-FACE ENCOUNTER WITH THE  
MUSEOPHAGE

In retrospect, I can say that what I experienced during *Untitled Ceremonies* can be defined as a connectivity averse to progressive temporality and successive ‘timelines [that] ensure that events, objects, and people’ are in their ‘right place’ (Azoulay 2019: 168). In other words, what I experienced during the unpacking and especially during the rewinding were not ‘grandiose motions forward, but rather [a] need [for] slowed-down spaces for repairing, providing reparations and reviving ... [for] arrangements ungoverned by man’ (31). To understand what such a space could look like, I need to undo and unlearn further. I need to look beyond *Untitled Ceremony #05* and into *Containers*, a more recent work by Balcou, to discern what happened in-between both experiences. I discovered this work only when planning on writing about *Untitled Ceremonies*. While slowly scrolling through the close-up photographs of this work, I suddenly stood face to face with that unknown other from one of the relationships I sensed in my experience of the unpacking of Saint John, the museophage.

Now eight years after that initial encounter with the non-human other of *Untitled Ceremony #05*, I see how Balcou enveloped similar others in glass shells, as if she were presenting them to me through a variety of magnifying glasses that are carefully selected to show off their beauty and specificity. From the titles under the photos, I distil that none of the museophages I encounter here is the one that ate that particular bust of Saint John. Nevertheless, the only thing I can think of is that we have finally met, an utterance meaning as much as I have the feeling I know you.

Contrary to what Balcou describes, I don’t have the feeling that *Containers* is disrupting my relationship with the museophage. On the contrary, I have the feeling it is deepening what I already sensed during *Untitled Ceremony #05*. From this small text it becomes very clear that by enveloping the museophages in a sealed glass environment, Balcou once more deploys the technique of a conservator.

But, unlike *Untitled Ceremony #05*, a different

reason informs the intention of the conservator. Instead of using this technique to exclude the museophage, Balcou actively deploys it to – post-mortem – rehouse the museophage into the museum. Because of this difference in intention, I deliberately opt for the word ‘envelopment’ here, which according to cultural geographer Derek P. McCormack ‘denote[s] a process of fabrication through which the folding of a membrane of some kind generates something within an atmospheric milieu with the capacity to sense variation in that milieu’ (2018: 5). Although – strictly speaking – a glass surface can’t be labelled as a membrane because it is a non-breathing material, the glass shells nevertheless feel like membranes due to their transparent enveloping quality and my proximity to the museophage. McCormack’s understanding suggests that by creating these glass mausoleums, as Balcou names them, the artist creates small spaces of repair through which she engages in ‘a process by which entities [in this case the museophage] emerge within a milieu from which [in our human/macroscopic understanding] they differ without becoming discontinuous’ (ibid.). The glass mausoleums are a first step towards bringing the museophage back to the world of the museum, while acknowledging its beauty and intimate knowledge and without neglecting power dynamics and dangers from and for all those involved. The glass envelopment informs a gesture of repair or rehousing that can only be done post-mortem. This illustrates how the museophage’s strength reveals both its own biggest fragility and that of the museum. And it is the fragility of the museum that is especially of interest to Balcou’s work.

Fragility must be understood here as in line with De Munck’s understanding, which connects fragility to touch, and because of this connection the fragile becomes a strength to sustain. De Munck explains and explores her take on the fragile by using the metaphor of the husk and the chestnut, which, according to her, perfectly symbolizes the interconnection of fragility, touch and strength. She writes:

If the chestnut is to become a tree, it will have to permit itself to be touched. If it is to live, it will have to open up sooner or later. But the husk hesitates.

So, I wait as well. And gradually I realize that its strength does not lie in its spikes, but in its fragility. It's all a matter of timing. If it bursts open in time, it can take root. If it remains closed, it will die inside. Before my eyes, the chestnut hesitates; to touch or be touched? (De Munck and Gielen 2022: 7)

Within the context of my experiences of Balcou's work, it is especially the role of the husk that interests me. Because of the hesitation and the importance of the husk to be touched and to 'follow shapes of change' (McCormack 2018: 5), I recognize the museum's fragility that Balcou and the sensuous encounters with the museophage identify. Looking at two works and my experiences with these works reveals how Balcou asks the museum institute: are you ready to be touched, to burst open, so that those who have been neglected, dominated or excluded can take root again and you can transform into an ecosystem that shows its complexity and fragility from the inside out?

The hesitation of the museum not only shows in the museophage, which symbolizes an institute that is not ready to be touched, but also in the fact that to make this call, Balcou must use strategies that are at work within the museum. This means that if it can be touched it will only be from the inside out. In the case of *Containers*, these strategies are not restricted to the gestures Balcou borrows from the conservator and the art handler, but also hints at strategies of display and curation. The belly of everyday objects like wine glasses, which Balcou herself calls mausolea, reference the glass display boxes in which objects or artworks are shown, a reference that hints towards the object's value. But due to the particular choice of the word of mausoleum, Balcou also hints at the fact that the museum itself is often called a mausoleum, in the sense that it is extracting works and objects from their original function, turning them into dead materials.

The glass displays in *Containers* do not extract the museophages from their original function but re-house them in their original context. The glass mausolea utter Balcou's care and respect for the museophages and, through their transparency, they make it possible for the audience to engage in a face-to-face encounter and recall the sensuous and intimate knowledge

from previous experiences of encounters with the museophages or with the artworks these insects have been with (which is, in the case of *Containers*, indicated in the title).

On the one hand, the use of various strategies from the museum's daily functioning help Balcou call upon the institute to be touched and open to transformation. On the other, the enveloping and unpacking trigger both the artist and the audience to enable and activate the hesitation of the institute by becoming receptive to a sensuous or intimate knowledge away from the dominant perspective.

To accept these invitations from Balcou, one must be willing to look in-between, from different perspectives over a longer period and sensuously engage with these different perspectives. By looking in-between and dividing one's attention between different works and experiences, Balcou's work reveals the complexity of the museum and the art world as a vulnerable and complex ecosystem that can co-house all selves and others involved. It activates a complex structure of intimate relationships and acknowledges different forms of intimate and sensuous forms of knowledge production.

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EDITED BY LAURA CULL Ó MAOILEARCA AND FLORENCE FITZGERALD-ALLSOPP

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