For the Swiss-Canadian artist-researcher, writer and teacher of visual culture Susan Schuppli, based in London, research-based practices in the field of contemporary art always depart from contemporaneity emerging from the inscription of global-complex infrastructures into local-environmental struggles for life. Often, Schuppli’s art-research projects render visible an unwantedly intimate implicatedness, a *malaise colonial*, deeply pressuring local communities in geographic distance from ongoing asymmetries of power. The urgency for art beyond representation, reportage or the ethnographic trap of “giving voice” demands from the artist to leave art as we know it: Art must change its methods and reason if it shall release its potentiality of change through creativity beyond critique confronting a world of ever more increasing injustice caused by war, colonialism and division. Susan Schuppli’s recent collaborative inquiry into the irreconcilable damage done to the Drang-Drung Glacier in Ladakh, caused by global warming, is one of various precise situations that Schuppli decided to choose for testing art itself.
This portrait, thus, shall report from a conversation—a catching up between colleagues and intellectual friends in art/academia—few weeks ago in mid-October 2021: Susan Schuppli talked about her long-time prepared fieldwork to the Drang-Drung Glacier in the Himalayas in the Zanskar region of Ladakh in the North of India. Due to covid19, the travel had to be postponed several times. This also had an impact on composing a non-hierarchical team, which Schuppli set up in close collaboration with a former student of the Center for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths Faiza Ahmad Khan as well as glaciologist Dr. Farooq Azam and Jigmet Singge & Kunzang Deachen of the Local Futures NGO in Ladakh. Over several weeks, Schuppli camped in the mountains where she and the team installed ice sensors and also organized listening sessions with local villagers from Lakshow. Another fifty mountain villages in Ladakh are experiencing extreme water shortages, one of which Kulum has been abandoned as a consequence of glacial recession caused by the global climate catastrophe. As glaciers disappear there are now climate refugees in the Himalayas. In collaboration with scientist-technicians using purpose-built hydrophones, the participants spent time at Drang-Drung Glacier to hear and to listen to the sonic vibrations resonating deep from within the ice. Listening here is a form of a situated learning—not only about and with glacial matter as media-agents reporting about the anthropogenic violence caused by human activities through an environmental racism of companies and people in the so-called global North. Schuppli does not arrive in the Zanskar region of Ladakh as the artist from London who wants to help, organize or develop. Instead, following Schuppli’s logic of mobilizing art-research projects to operate as “investigative proxies,” as she proposes already in her ground-breaking book Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence, the role of art is to create conditions in which science bridges with society, or, “when science must be an invitation to the practice of experience” as Schuppli poignantly proposed to engender a different way of synthesizing knowledge: the Ladakh-women’s practices fostering family life amidst increased water scarcity, the song collector Padma Shri Morup Namgyal in Leh carrying the memory of 1.300 songs that resonate with/in the inhabitation of the landscape by the villagers observing the glacier, the water and the mountains for generations that all bring substantial knowledge as research evidencing the planetary meltdown as a life-threateningly situation in the everyday; the scientist provides a techno-infrastructure for monitoring the climate change observed through the knowledge/perspective of the villagers, and not the other way around. To put it differently, the villager is as much as a glaciologist and a scientist as s/he is a survivor of the ongoing ecocide. Instead of departing from a thesis either to be evidenced or solved—as it is common in academic research or NGO’s action plans—Schuppli’s situated practice begins in the middle from a networked constellation for which the stakes of doing research still need to be defined through the process itself.

Schuppli’s advanced practice follows quasi-logically her own formation as an artist: After studying textile design and media arts in Ontario, Vancouver and San Diego, instigating a profound experience in haptic making with materials including cloth and chemistry as a form of learning, she participated in the Whitney Independent Study Program before concluding her doctoral research at the then-newly founded Centre for Research Architecture and co-founding the Forensic Architecture research agency, both at Goldsmiths. Regarding the urgency to listen closely to hours-long recordings constitutive for the ICTY (International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia) Court Records, or to the comprehensive datasets of reported casualties (fatalities and
injuries) from drone strikes in Pakistan including what it means to live under the constant sonic menace of drones as addressed in Uneasy Listening (2016), or developing a grammar for visualizing the geological, meteorological, and hydrological appearances of nuclear evidence secreted within the molecular arrangement of matter as proposed in the video-trilogy Trace Evidence (2014), Schuppli’s capacity of departing from a contemporary problematic at the limits of art/justice proposes to re-situate art-research as an interconnected fabric crossing science, law, matter, technology and public statement. In this context, Schuppli’s seminal 392-pages Material Witness marks a landmark of imaginative methodologies in the field of visual cultures as well as media studies and activism profoundly contributing to what has been called the “forensic turn.” Her most recent collaboration in Ladakh, though, appears to extend artistic experimentation from scalability across the global-local-continuum into a cross-dimensional sociability constituting research as a network of practices bridging life, society, technology and art towards a situated civil science confronting infrastructures of planetary injustice.

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