Atmospheres of Belonging. The Aesthetic Qualities of the Japanese Installation "wasted" on (in) Fertility and American Videoblogs (vlogs) about IVF on YouTube

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### Abstract

The Japanese installation "wasted" (2009) by Tomoko Mukaiyama is a remarkable work of art on the theme of (in)fertility orchestrating an atmosphere of affectivity through a cathedral-like space out of thousands of white dresses. In a similar way American video blogs (vlogs) about IVF on YouTube orchestrate aesthetic- affective atmospheres valuating ontological and emotional relatedness in a biotech century that understands life as unique and yet modifiable. Existing research on narratives of IVF experience (Kato and Sleeboom Faulkner 2011) suggest that reproductive technologies in Japan advances without taking the feelings and ontological valuations of the reproductively challenged into consideration. This paper argues that the Japanese and American sociocultural understandings of the fertility projects as essential individualistic and rational pursuits of relatedness that echo the understanding of the body and life in terms of reproduction technology converge. All though the installation of Mukaiyama and vlogs on experiences with IVF seemingly reflect a distinctly idiosyncratic experience project, the aesthetic - affective orchestration presuppose a shared bodily being in relation - an appeal for recognition through affectivity exemplifying an intersubjective orientation. The world of Mukaiyama's installation and the American vlogs lifts the individual stories to the universal whereby, I argue, a possibility arises to understand how individuals oscillate between involving and detaching elements responding to the paradoxical ways life is understood in the biotech century as both unique and modifiable. Through the orchestration of atmospheres of belonging, an active bodily and critical emotional engagement in emotional and ontological significance of the body is enabled.

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### Introduction

In the biotech century the continuous developments in the realms of reproduction technology fuel a perception of the human life as molecular and the body as fragmentary influencing on how pursuits of fertility are perceived. Kato and Sleeboom Faulkner points to how pursuits of fertility in America and Japan are discussed as essentially individualistic and rational (Kato and Sleeboom Falkner, 2011: 444). The individualized and differentiated fertility treatments reflect a movement from optimization of the infertile body as normalization project to a hedonistic spun customization, proliferating an array of new bioethical concerns and issues of belonging greatly influenced by assisted reproduction. Neglected in the discussions of perceptions of the human body in a biotech century, Kato and Sleeboom Falkner argues, is how individuals ontological valuations of embryo defines their attitude towards fragments of their bodies involved by assisted reproduction (Kato and Sleeboom Falkner, 2011: 444). Following this perspective I want to propose, that what is at stake in wasted and the vlogs of Silvia and Peter are orchestrations of belonging that centers on the a valuation of the human body and emotions as shared points of reference, that in turn define how they tune atmospheres of belonging. In the following I will discuss two expressions of (in) fertility, where atmospheres of belonging are orchestrated through which an active and critical engagement in emotional and ontological significance of the body is enabled. The first work discussed is the installation Wasted by Japanese artist Tomoko Mukaiyama from 2009, the other is a video blog (vlog) produced, populated and distributed by Silvia and Peter (2009) an American couple expressing their experiences with in vitro fertilization; IVF. Silvia and Peter's vlogs seemingly reflect a distinctly self-referential experience project but presupposes, as I will argue, a shared bodily being in relation as key point of reference. This enables the viewer to involve themselves in the strange and vet familiar fertility project mediated. While the same premise is at stake in Mukaiyama's installation it is not conditioned by intimate close ups. Through the abstract cathedral-like space out of thousands of white dresses (in)fertility is presented in an unrecognizable form with no place despite the gigantic and excessive space for individual and personal experiences or narrations of (in) fertility. But it is, as I will argue, precisely the abstraction that allows for a breakaway from existing perceptions of (in) fertility. The affective disorientation caused by the abstraction allows for individual experiences to elicit. In both the vlog and wasted atmospheres of belonging are orchestrated, which address and reflect the dialectics of involving and detaching elements of experiences with (in) fertility responding to the paradoxical ways life is understood in the biotech century.

## **Atmospheres**

Atmosphere<sup>ii</sup> is an expansion of the classic concept of aesthetics and offers insight into how the everyday production of atmospheres and the qualities of products condition the way we perceive ourselves, others, and the world as the German philosopher Gernot Böhme (1995) has put it. It is an aesthetics that is concerned with the description of the dialectical connection between the qualities of our surroundings and our emotional state as a general condition for our valuation of what we experience. In order to address to aspects of aestheticization of everyday life we must according to Böhme focus on the

production of atmospheres *and* their affective experience quality, thus atmosphere refers to what is aesthetically relevant; that what is sensed. The aesthetic contains our norms and values in a concrete sensuously form (Böhme, 1995: 31)

Atmospheres, Böhme argues, implicitly contains a perception of something; it is orchestrated in order to cause a specific reaction, although it remains difficult to trace the specific object of affectivity (Böhme, 1995:21). This lack of transparency has led to a discrediting of the experience of aestheticization as hedonistic, superficial, and beautification; a seduction which by definition has been viewed as manipulative. However seduction and orchestration of atmospheres are key elements of perception; through fascination we invest our attention and the quality of this experience is valued. Through the aesthetic value attached to the orchestration of surroundings/experiences, we invest us in these. The aesthetic object fascinates us in ways that evoke fascination influencing on how we organize our lives. Atmospheres thus are characterized by a dynamics of power between individuals need for being present in surroundings that makes them feel at ease and through this presence to affect the surroundings/ set the atmosphere. Individuals are actively involved in the orchestration of experience qualities. The concept of Atmosphere in this regard opens for a sensibility towards the conditions we live under, hereunder but not limited to the manipulation and power of these elements.

Swedish media theorist André Jansson (2002) explores the intersections of cultural products, communities, practices, and particular how people interpret and evaluate transformations in the representational sphere. Consume, he argues, is communication, and hence not about a products functional value, but instead the image provided/identified with the product. To emphasize the process of how individuals disassemble, transform, and give new meaning to their experience/consume he suggests the terms encoding, decoding, and re-encoding (Jansson 2002, 19). He is particular interested in the dynamic of signification and interpretation stressing how it results in a reflexive accumulation, where people orient themselves towards simulations creating an image culture. Their endless re-encodings creates the illusion of a direct experience. Hence the re-encodings are anti-aesthetic in so far as they are make- believe or second natures; they do not refer to an original concrete experience, but are fragments transformed into new meaning. Jansson points to, how classical aesthetic distinctions such as taste, lifestyle and consume must be abandoned in order to capture the new genealogies and topologies characterizing the polyrhythmic aspects of contemporary image culture.

Both Jansson and Böhme focus on the production of mediated consumption/ atmospheres and its connection to the good life; our valuation of atmospheres. They address how the interrelation between the generation of experience qualities and their economic value is problematic, in the sense that this relation affects us in specific ways; consumption. Jansson and Böhme however also address how individuals play a crucial part in the production of atmospheres as actively involved in the encoding, decoding and reencoding of experiences.

The American theorist Sianne Ngai (2005) argues along the lines of Böhme for an extension of the concept of aesthetics. She notes, that we need to take the trivial feelings

such as envy, irritation, paranoia, and fear of exclusion into consideration as these emotions also attune our bodies and influence on our experiences and perceptions of ourselves, others, and the world. The affective orchestration in this regard not only relates to pleasure, wants and needs but also ugly feelings which according to Ngai's Adorno inspired arguments fuel the capitalistic system of production. Arguing that dysphoric feelings (Ngai 2005: 11) are the fuel the capitalist society runs on, echoes Lauren Berlant's (2011) notion that contemporary society is characterized by "Cruel Optimism" (Berlant, 2011: 3). The focal point of Berlant (2011) and Ngai (2005) is how our relations to the world is understood as opportunities, possibilities and chances but does not necessarily result in them (Ngai, 2005:4). Taking the trivial feelings into account poses the possibility of addressing the role of ugly feelings in the setting of atmospheres pointing to, Ngai notes, their role in the aestheticization of life as understood in terms of Berlant as a cruel optimism.

For Böhme the critical potential of an aesthetic theory of production of atmospheres and experience quality address in terms of Ngai the naturalization of aestheticization as the only way to obtain the good life (Böhme, 1995: 37). In that sense Böhme and Ngai both note that (ugly) feelings expand and transform categories for aesthetic feelings which our surroundings set the stage for, and are characterized by being non-cathartic; they do not offer satisfaction (Ngai, 2005:6). Atmospheres of non-cathartic feelings in that regard produce and foreground the unredeemed allowing for an attunement and contagiousness appealing for recognition of this state of impasse as a shared emotional state characterizing contemporary life. In relation to the production of atmospheres in the perspective of Ngai the polyrhythmic aspects of the tuned spaces is addressed; it is not only through the affective recognizable settings we are affected but also through the moments of striking inactivity. What is produced are experience qualities of ambiguity; a state of affective disorientation that fascinates and results in involvement "in a particular emphatic way" (Ngai, 2005:12). Atmospheres of ugly feelings promote an ironic distance which the nontrivial feelings are unable to, that enables involvement in the state of impasse related to the fantasy of the good life ever unreachable.

The new aesthetics critical potential consists of a critique of the perception of how only a specific atmosphere affects us, such as Art stated by Walter Benjamin (1937) or the influence on the perception of subjectivity by the biotechnological realm argued by Nikolas Rose (2007). What is neglected is the orchestration of our everyday life and its polyrhythmic characteristics. The concept of atmosphere however also offers critical insight into the naturalization of aestheticization; and its claim as *the* perspective of the world.

Atmospheres are first and foremost phenomenological; they sharpen the senses. Humans must accordingly to Böhme be understood as bodily anchored in the world; we experience the world bodily (Böhme 1995:23). The experience of the presence of humans, objects and surroundings and the awareness of this presence points to the centrality of affect in the process of perception and their power to increase or diminish our possibilities to act and react on the organization of our life world.

Wasted and the vlogs of Silvia and Peter orchestrate atmospheres which experience qualities foreground certain imaginings of the world but also appeals to experience it from a different perspective. The affectivity of the atmosphere in the vlogs and wasted is related to their contagious ability on a bodily and emotional level, to attune the viewer/visitor to the banal and sensational bodily and emotional aspects of the (in) fertility projects mediated. The involvement in and detachment from the bodily and emotional strange and yet familiar elements is at same time presupposed and challenged by the aesthetic-affective dimension.

# Tomoko Mukaiyama's wasted

The abstract cathedral-like space of thousands of white dresses in wasted (2009) engage the visitor on a concrete aesthetic- affective level through the walk through and touch of the dresses, torn and blood soaked linen hanging at the center of the installation, and an invitation to contribute with own stories. In Waterchildren, a documentary on wasted from 2011, Tomoko Mukaiyama notes that the installation is connected to her realization of the expiration of her ability to give birth, and that the installation this way is about the ability to give life, life itself and death. Visitors are invited to actively engage with the installation by contributing their own menstruation blood to one of the 12.000 dresses and share their thoughts about the meaning of this blood. Their narratives in form of video, photos, text, poetry, objects, paintings provide inspiration for Mukaiyama's improvisations of Bach's Goldberg Variations, a way for her to connect the many individual stories brought about by the engagement with the installation; stories of oneself and others. In that sense wasted illustrates the fragmentary re-encoding, as argued by Jansson. The center of the installation where blood soaked, torn dresses hang heavily down provides the gauzy abstract work with an ontological gravity that also is reflected in the title of the work. The work is as a visitor reflects" a requiem for the life that had the potential of being born but is washed away; life ultimately lost" (Water Children, 2011).

In the documentary Water Children (2011) the work of Mukaiyama is added an informational component extending the work as an expression of an artist experience of loss to the stories of individuals and couples on meanings of (in)fertility. The installation is engaged in taking the feelings and valuations of the visitor regarding the (in) ability to give life into consideration. In Water Children (2011) the installation is taken to the village Sanga Mura<sup>iv</sup> in Japan where most residents never have visited a museum. The abstraction of the installation however is not viewed as problematic on the contrary the experience quality of the cathedral-like space aspirates through its aesthetic and affective dimension for narratives about something shared. Through tiny sparks of sign and gestures the installation attune the body of the visitor, the organic form of the installation with the gauzy, transparent, and white dresses leads the visitor further into the center of the work; from sociocultural norms, values and ideals of (in) fertility to their own experiences.

This way Mukaiyama on the level of abstraction addresses the sociocultural understanding of pursuits of /loss of fertility. The many layers of anonymous, neutral,

assembly line dresses exemplifies the understandings of the pursuit of infertility as strange rational project and the body as a commodity. The abstraction displays our powerlessness regarding the biotechnological and bio-economic powers at play; their organization of contemporary lives. Thus the form and content at the same time detaches the visitor from other perspectives on (in) fertility than those discussed in Japan, but also involves the visitor in those discussions. With the transparent assembly line dresses Mukaiyama draws attention to the fantasy of the transparent as well as transformable body, a body that can be identified, isolated, manipulated, mobilized and recombined as noted by Nikolas Rose (Rose 2007). The installation also addresses this understanding of the body in terms of the location in Japans rural area Sanga Mura. Mura; one of the three types of waste, and waste reduction are key concepts in the Japanese industry, which focus on profitability through waste reduction (Taiichi, 1988: 18). This approach is implemented in Toyota's Production System (TPS) and aligns with the biomedical and technological perception of the body of great economic value.

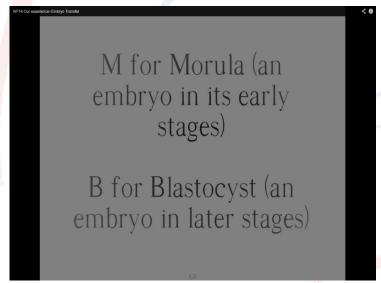
At the center of *Wasted* the natural function state of the body is put forward: it's (in) ability to produce life. Framed by the assembly line dresses the installation at the same time addresses the commodification of the body; the perception, that the life washed away is one of bio economic value and hence unexploited. By adding gravity through the blood soaked dresses, Mukaiyama makes the invisible visible, anchoring the visitor ontologically, which seems to reflect Roses notion, that we are not becoming less biological but more (Rose 2007:20). Centering the (in) ability to produce life could exemplify a concern for dehumanization; a concern of how the body's ability to produce life in Japan is understood and approached. Through the title and abstraction an atmosphere of belonging is orchestrated, an attunement of ugly feelings that addresses the sociocultural discussions or non-discussed issues, as pointed out by Kato and Sleeboom Falkner (2011). The aesthetic qualities of the installation in that sense foreground certain imaginings of the world but also appeals to experience it from a different perspective nuancing understandings of individuals' valuation of the body in a biotech century. In terms of Böhme the atmosphere of wasted creates a sensibility towards how the biotech industry influences the conditions we live under; their power to define life.

The visitor is involved by *wasted* in the sociocultural norms, values and ideals about (in) fertility actively engaging them in the paradoxical ways life is understood as both unique and modifiable. The orchestration in *wasted* not only touches upon how people in Japan attach cultural meaning to their blood, eggs and embryos. What is enabled through the abstraction is a different connectivity; an involvement facilitated by the sparest of signs and gestures that also appeals to a recognition of the body as a shared condition and a valuation of this joint experience. Thus through the continuous alternation between the objective and subjective features of the installation; an unstable narrative, the affectively disoriented and confused visitor is forced into motion. By the unknown and unfamiliar space they are forced to address the ambiguousness of their experience that extends to the conditions of their life world. Ugly feelings elicited by the engagement with the installation, create an ironic distance to the life conditions of the biotech century as noted by Ngai (2005: 3). The aim of this ironic distance is not to encourage political resistance, but to address the suspension of redemption as a condition of contemporary life. What is addressed is in terms of Berlant (2011) the cruel optimism characterizing the way

individuals' pursuit the good life- here fertility. In other words, wasted addresses how these feelings fuel the aestheticization of everyday life and the biotechnological perception of the body. The atmosphere of wasted involves the visitor in their own experience in relation to the many facets of belonging in a biotech century. What is revealed through wasted is the centrality of affect in the process of perception and how the atmosphere functions as catalysts for a conscience of a shared being in the world endowed on particular level (the fragmented body/embryos) as on a universal level (the body as a shared reference) stirring peoples course. The Atmosphere of belonging in wasted reveals the significance of the body and emotions in the circulation of symbols and affective appeals in an era mostly understood as individualistic orientated and contentious.

## The vlogs of Silvia and Peter

Opposed to *wasted* the tuned spaces; atmospheres in play in *the vlog of Silvia and Peter* seem at a first glance more informational and cognitive than aesthetic-affective (III.3).



Ill.3 Frame grab from Silvia and Peters vlog. IVF 14-Our Experience ~Embryo Transfer

The storyline structure of thoughts on being reproductively challenged, preliminary thoughts on hormone injections (drugs, shots, and emotional distress), examinations and scans in fertility clinics, egg retrieval procedures, embryo transfers, the two week wait, and the results of their treatments is orchestrated in order to address a belonging along the lines of Rose's (2007) argument about new bio-socialites arising. The specificity of attunement by referencing the biotechnological and biomedical perception of the body as an object which can be transformed into a series of distinct and discrete objects inform other couples struggling with the ability to conceive searching for emotional relatedness and support (Kaliarnta, Nihlén-Fahlquist, and Roeser, 2012). In vlog *IVF 14-Our Experience* ~*Embryo Transfer (Ill.4&5)* Silvia and Peter convey their ugly feelings of being a small subject in the system of assisted reproduction by expressing their irritation of not being understood in relation to their ontological valuation of their embryos. This

discrepancy converges with Japanese debates on similar matters as noted by Kato and Sleeboom Falkner (2011).



Ill.4& 5: Frame grab from IVF 14-Our Experience ~Embryo Transfer

Ugly feelings in this regard play a crucial role in the orchestration of atmospheres of belonging to a specific experience community; individuals undergoing in vitro fertilization. But addressing ugly feelings also spur to a critical involvement in how they in their pursuit of fertility are subjected to the biotechnological- and medical perception of the body as an object. The aestheticization of the body in terms of optimization echo a contemporary sociocultural tendency to orchestrate life, hence the attunement is not limited to others trying to conceive but expresses a notion of a general shared life condition. Extending the experiences with IVF into vlogs on YouTube seem to underline aspects of the fertility project as a matter of self-realization, a pursuit of an individual want, need and passion for kinship. The orchestration of ugly feelings and reflection on their position in the system of assisted reproduction in this regard not only involves the viewer but also Silvia and Peter themselves reflecting their struggle with their fertility project in relation to sociocultural concerns over the ways fertility is pursued.

In *IVF 11- Our experience* ~*Egg retrieval* making a baby is expressed as uncomplicated, quick and smooth, as Silvia in the car outside the fertility clinic just before having an embryo transfer says: "So this film is so that we can show our kids how to make a baby. We're going to go make a baby now." IVF, as the new natural way of making a baby echo Francois Ewald's notion that nature (the fertile body) no longer serves a sacred objectivity (Ewald, 1993). In *IVF 14-Our Experience* ~*Embryo Transfer* Silvia and Peter's experience is expressed through complicated medical terms and a picture of petri dish showing "their babies", exemplifying an understanding of the body and life in terms of reproduction technology. However the former statement also illustrates a reflection on the sensational experience of optimizing the body's ability to conceive, whereby expressing an involvement in the consequences of the optimization in terms of the recognizable features the statements contains. What Silvia reveals is an awareness of the potential uncanny and unfamiliar features of optimization by way of egg retrieval procedures. Consequently it is not the optimization what is commented, but the fact that they are on their way in to make a baby - something quite familiar.

Orchestrations of the everyday life, and close visual encounters of the couple in emotional distress and pain, add gravity to the fertility project mediated countering the optimization of the infertile body letting space, time, and modality characterizing the everyday at the fore. In front of a transportable camera or webcam infertile couples talk and move around in their home, cars and clinical surroundings before, during and after the IVF treatments. In *IVF 16- Our Experience ~Beta level* (Ill. 6) a photograph from everyday life of a meatloaf sets the stage for involvement. The haptic quality of the meatloaf affectively involves the viewer in the state of Silvia's post injected butt.



Ill.6: Frame grab IVF 16- Our Experience ~Beta level

These intimate insights into the everyday life through recognizable repetitions; a cyclic temporality exemplified by a birthday, meal. Repetitions of spaces; cars, home, clinics, and the modality of rituals and routines of the everyday are intensified in order to dismantle the strangeness of the energy invested in the pursuit of fertility; the financial costs, emotional distress, physical pain, and procedures related to assisted reproduction. Everyday life as noted by Rita Felski is characterized by a concentration of emotional energy; a belonging so profound that it functions as an extension of ourselves. The experiences with IVF as Silvia notes in *IVF 14-Our Experience ~Embryo Transfer* are both fascinating and repulsive as Silvia comments on a cake resembling a butt with 31 needle marks and a syringe: "It is cute in a twisted way." (Ill. 7)



Ill.:7 Frame grab from IVF 14-Our Experience~ Embryo Transfer

The cuteness/ harmlessness of the birthday cake is added a twist of unfamiliarity creating an affective disorientation allowing for an involvement in this feeling of ambiguity. The experience qualities of the polyrhythmic aspects of the atmosphere sharpen the senses. Through this sharpening a possibility arises to reflect on how our preoccupation with the concrete and particular (the body as unique) or transformation and negotiation (the modifiable body) affects the perception of everyday life as something generally shared. Rita Felski points out that everyday life often is understood as non-magical and antimiraculous but in Silvia and Peter's vlogs the experience quality of the everyday atmosphere makes the unseen and unnoticed aspects of the fertility projects visible. Through the magical intensification of the atmosphere an attunement is facilitating an expression of Silvia and Peter's valuation of this general shared spatial-temporal modality; an intersubjective orientation.

Thus in *IVF 14-Our Experience ~Embryo* Transfer the music from the film Willy Wonka, "A world of pure imagination" performed by Gene Wilder, appeals to our imagination and shared bodily being in relation; an appeal by way of affectivity to "Take a breath, count to three. Come with me and you'll be, in a world of pure imagination, take a look and you'll see into your imagination." The aesthetic affective effects disrupt the conventional perceptions of fertility projects and vlogs with the sparest of signs and gestures; a breath. They nuance the perception of fertility projects and vlogs offering the viewer a wider range of and intensive affective- aesthetic experiences of belonging, the valuation of an ontological and emotional relatedness in a sociocultural setting predominantly focusing on commodification and cultural transformation.

### Belonging in a biotech century

Silvia and Peter's vlogs and Tomoko Mukaiyama's installation wasted's many facet touch on how belonging in Japanese and American sociocultural setting is transformed by the perception of the human life as molecular. Both Silvia and Peters vlogs and Wasted are powerful atmospheric lenses through which the formation and development of individuals as actively involved in how they in the pursuit of fertility express a detachment from the body - objectifying it in order to become fertile. But they also express an involvement in the consequences of this objectification in relation to notions of a related being in the world- the body as shared point of reference. The aestheticaffective qualities of the vlogs of Silvia and Peter and the installation wasted in this regard function as contemporary catalysts for a conscience of a shared being in the world. The mediations nuance how issues of belonging in a biotech century not only relates to commodification of the fragmentary body, or how this fragmentation in a mediated form spurs cultural, political, and social transformation of kinship. The atmospheres of the *vlog* and wasted on an aesthetic affective level touch on this concern, and foreground ontological and emotional relatedness. Neither Silvia and Peter or Mukaiyama challenge nature, hybridize man, or conform to a narrow cultural ideal- the natural fertile body. On the contrary it is a valuation of the body and emotions as shared points of reference that are expressed through orchestrations of atmospheres. It is through aesthetically and affective tiny sparks and gestures the sense of how individuals perceive belonging in a biotech century is sharpened.

### **Notes**

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>i</sup> In light of the private content the authors of the vlog featuring this paper are made anonymous. The vlog is part of a larger sum of video blogs that in sum represent the material of my PhD. research.

Gernot Böhme notes that the specific concept used in his argument for a new aesthetics (Neue Ästhetik) of Atmosphere is related to Walter Benjamin's concept of Aura as discussed in his Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit, 1936 and Herman Schmitz's concept of Atmosphere in Herman Schmitz: Gefühle als Atmosphären und das affektive Betroffensein von ihnen, 1994

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## Vlogs

Silvia and Peter, 2009, US, located 24. May 2013:

IVF 2- Our experience ~First Lupron Injection

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIP5UGSvsd4&feature=channel&list=UL

IVF 11- Our experience ~ Egg retrieval

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SH6nW9yicX8&feature=channel&list=UL

IVF 14- Our experience ~Embryo Transfer

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxnHzvRKi3A&feature=relmfu

IVF 16- Our Experience ~Beta level

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ah HSvfIQzw

### Film

Water Children a film by A film by Aliona van der Horst, Netherlands, 2011

## Installation

Wasted by Tomoko Mukaiyama, 2009. Located 24. May 2013 http://tomoko.nl/index.php?id=60

