

Inviting the Outside In
An Exhibition of Mixed Media Installation
by
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ABSTRACT

My research investigates the conceptual relationships between humans and non-humans by examining material properties through sense-based artistic processes.

Inviting the Outside In focuses the interactions between plant-based dyes and substrates of wood and plaster, within the context of a large installation. I explore what it means to allow an artwork to accumulate according to the inherent material tendencies of the assembled non-human elements, and I draw on Tim Ingold's notion "itinerant material unfolding" to describe this methodology. This project's theoretical framework includes Vital Materialism, Queer Phenomenology, Object Oriented Ontology, and Object Oriented Feminism. I look to Eva Hesse's work as a model of experimental studio practice, and I contextualize my thematic interest in ecology by looking to site-specific artists like Walter de Maria, Mel Chin, Agnes Dene, and Kath Fries. I consider how sensibilities associated with large-scale work can be reflected in smaller, more intimate studio-based practices.

Land Acknowledgement

This thesis paper discusses the ways in which my creative practice has brought me into an intimate relationship with the wild plants that grow around Toronto. Working with local plants as part of my research has increased my sense of belonging to this region; I have come to know it better through the slow work of my hands. As a person of settler ancestry who has been fortunate to experience such a strong sense of place, I want to acknowledge the first peoples of this land. I am very grateful to live and work as a guest in the ancestral and traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the New Credit, the Haudenosaunee, the Anishinaabe, and the Huron-Wendat. I would like to acknowledge all of the first peoples who are the original owners and custodians of the lands now known as Toronto.

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I would also like to thank my extended family: Anne and Bruce McCallum for your love and your ongoing faith in my work, and for offering me an upbringing rich with exposure to wildness and beauty. Thank you to my brothers, Martin and Fraser McCallum for your insights and your generous hearts; and to Rebekkah, Juliet, and Thomas for your warm hospitality and your appreciation of life's simple pleasures. You are all a great source of inspiration in my life.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The exhibition that I discuss in this document is an artistic exploration of what it means to “invite the outside in.” In concrete terms, it is a show of artefacts from my work (in plaster, wood, metal, and textiles) that bear traces of natural dyes made from plants that are native to the ecology of Ontario. These objects are installed in the OCAD University Graduate Gallery in, on, and around precarious wooden structures that resemble shelves and scaffolding. Together, these artefacts and structures are placed in the gallery in ways that I hope remind us that encountering the space both a physical and a visual experience: it is a field of phenomenological encounter. By focusing our perceptions on a variety of humble shapes and objects distributed throughout a large space, I want to bring the background of our awareness to the fore, allowing “mere environment” to become a curious or uncanny presence that must be acknowledged. This project began with a personal question: as an artist, how could I find a sense of belonging in a new urban ecosystem? It has now evolved into a wider study of how “learning through making” orients me in relation to the material and non-human forces of both place and practice. By consciously adapting my studio techniques to actively consider their relationship with non-human things, I have come to new forms of knowledge that are grounded in my lived-experience. I have developed a methodology that puts change at the heart of my work. As an exhibition, *Inviting the Outside In* asks viewers to contemplate how material realities are co-created by human and non-human agencies. The body of work is the accumulation of gestures, traces, propositions, and echoes, each of which offers a unique chance to contemplate the non-human agencies that are central to this artistic process.

Scope of Research:

Inviting the Outside In is an extended meditation on how artistic process and material investigation inform my approach to art-making. It is also a consideration of the ways that we are in relation with all forms of material agency, whether living or nonliving, human or non-human. The project is the result of my sustained engagement, over eight months of studio-based-inquiry, with three research questions that I have developed out of these concerns:

1. How can an artist effectively bring ephemeral materials into the gallery, so that their subtle, changing qualities are still evident?
2. How can the gallery's focus be expanded to make space for the "material agency" of non-human things?
3. What is the relationship between the non-human environment and the human-centric spaces of the institutional art world—studios, galleries, and educational settings in particular?

The first and second of these questions focus on my own artistic practice as a studio-based artist exhibiting in conventional "white-cube" galleries. I address them at length in this paper, exploring what successful techniques for engaging with ephemeral materials look like in my work, and investigating best-practices for acknowledging material agency in studio-based research. The third question is the broadest, and rather than attempt to answer it in a short paper, I have instead sketched the most important facets of the conversation in "Appendix 1: Future Research." I nonetheless include the question here

because through my exploration of material agency in studio practice, I have begun to ask larger questions about the role of artists and galleries in changing social behavior.

To respond to these research questions, I have developed a methodology that articulates how material experimentation is a core tenant of my work. In my practice, process is as important as outcome, and the artworks that appear in the gallery are in fact “artefacts”; that is, they are the “result of investigative procedures” and their significance lies in the way that they are documents of that process (Oxford). Building on my own innate tendencies, I have looked to artistic role models to help me develop this methodology, including Eva Hesse and Kath Fries, whose studio experiments allowed them to arrive at new sculptural forms and material juxtapositions. I have also integrated anthropologist Tim Ingold's concept of “itineration” into my work, which gives me a way of looking at artistic creation that is process-based and sensitive to material tendencies. I have adopted the phrases “material agency” and “non-human agencies” from theorist Jane Bennet, to describe what it means to acknowledge the inherent “self-organizing” capacities of non-human and non-living things (Bennet 2010, 34). To formulate my own “best-practices” around these collaborations with material agencies, I have looked to critical theorists who resist what I call “dominance paradigms”—systems of thought that centre subjects over objects and favour certain subjects over others. I have embraced theorists who offer collaborative inter-related worldviews instead: these include Jane Bennet and Tim Ingold, as well Sarah Ahmed and Katherine Behar, and to a lesser extent, Graham Harman.

The three questions that I raise—about ephemeral materials, material agency in the gallery, and the relationship of art to the non-human—are connected by my belief

that studio practice is a form of sense-based learning and knowledge creation. I argue that studio practice and gallery exhibition can be undertaken in ways that are collaborative and relational, bringing artists and audiences into closer relationships with their own senses and with the other objects, agencies, and phenomena that inhabit our world.

CHAPTER 2: PROCESS

Dislocated Site-specific Art



Figure 1 (left): Goldenrod growing wild
(all images by Kirstie McCallum)



Figure 2: (right) Sumac blossoms used in a dye bath

In 2017, as a new inhabitant of Toronto, I did not have a clear “sense of place” in the city. I did not know its weather patterns, its landscapes and geography, or much about its non-human ambiance, beyond the immediate sensory overwhelm of tall buildings, street traffic and infrastructure designed to serve human crowds. I began trying to develop that personal sense of “locatedness” by orienting myself in relation to the land. I hiked the ravines looking for familiar signs of life, especially in the plants that grow there. I was raised in Prince Edward Island and some of my earliest memories (which form my sense of identity) involve learning the names of the plants around our farm. Over time language and sense-experience merged, so that to see became to know: *clover, violet, birch, spruce ... sweet, delicate, papery, prickly ... bright chlorophyll smells and the deep scent of loam*. My hope, in turning to the plants of the Greater

Toronto Area for a sense of place, was that by learning the local flora I would establish an experiential knowledge similar to that of my early childhood, and that it would allow me in some small sense to belong to this new place.

In 2018, as August rolled into September, I biked 15, 20, 30k, looping up and down the ravine trails that follow the Don River. I discovered graffiti-covered overpasses, trestle bridges, and stony beaches; there were cool, shadowy hollows where damp air rises up, and sweltering heat-traps where black tar suffocates the soil. I found just one place along the route where you can't hear the 401 highway at all. All along the route, I saw bees in the goldenrod flowers and birds in the sumac trees, feeding-up for winter. Goldenrod and staghorn sumac are two common plants native to Ontario. Often thought of as weeds, they thrive in open spaces and frequently show up in roadside ditches and vacant lots. Along the edges of the 401, the land is blanketed in shades of deep yellow and earthy red.

While I wandered along these borderlands, where urban constructs and landscape merge, I was questioning where to take my art practice. I have a long-standing interest in ecology, and in fragile, unstable, "ephemeral" materials. These interests were converging in a growing curiosity about site-specific art, but my lack of enduring relationships with this place seemed to foreclose such a move on my part. Not only would it be difficult to choose a site amongst unfamiliar places, I felt it was too early in my relationship with Toronto to pursue such a project. I risked rushing things and making overly presumptuous gestures, merely "acting the artist" by dropping in to claim special insights at a location, without having developed authentic knowledge through long devotion to the place. Instead, what I drew on was my pre-existing knowledge of

simple bushcraft. Through my mother and other teachers, I have picked up basic knowledge about how the wild plants in different regions can be eaten in salads, made into teas, used for dyes, and sometimes used for simple medicine. Through my reading, and my father's career in sustainable forestry, I've learned the principles of respectful harvest: never take too much of one plant from one site; gather just a little for your use and leave the majority to renew itself or feed the wildlife. I decided that while (for the time being) I could not take on the vast logistical and ethical responsibility of a site-specific work, I would explore how "weeds" that I gathered during urban foraging walks could be distilled and introduced into my studio practice. This decision has been significant: it has allowed me consider what it means to engage in periodic focused encounters with the land and what it means when impermanent things are integrated into artistic spaces and discourses.

The work I present in the gallery has its origin in my bodily encounters with the world outside the gallery, and my practice is both touched and transformed by those encounters. This work has strengthened my attention to the sensory details of materials: I sit with them (whether they are roots, leaves, broken chunks of plaster, or amalgams of them all) before working with them; I look at them closely, photographing them from many angles, and considering their texture, smell, shape, and other qualities. As they interact with each other in space (hanging from beams or sitting on tables) and on substrates (paper, plaster, etc.) I absorb as much information as I can, through my senses, about their changes. When mixed, some materials harden, cool, or otherwise reach a stable state. I live with them, moving them around the installation I am accumulating, testing out their expressive qualities in relation to other things. This

process is subtle and slow. I think of it as a way of listening to the non-verbal cues offered by the material, about how it “wants” to be interacted with in relation to other objects and processes. This body of work has also renewed my commitment to thinking-through the relationships between art as a contemplative and communicative practice and art as a method of catalyzing social and ecological change, and in appendix of this text, I will explore those implications further.

CHAPTER 3: BODY OF WORK

Gathering & Distillation

Inspired by my travels around the wilder places of Toronto, I gathered small amounts of wild goldenrod and sumac from backyards, parking lots, and back alleys¹, and I distilled each into a dye-bath that could be preserved. I then transferred the dye in various ways, most often by colouring cotton fabric and string or by introducing it as pigment into plaster. The artefacts that I have displayed in the OCADU Graduate Gallery express the movement of this plant-matter from



Figure 3: muslin filter with dye

one state to another and its physical and chemical re/combination with other matter. At the same time, they also retain a relationship to the outdoor places where those plants first grew. By creating natural dyes, I am drawing on long folk traditions—what I think of as “kitchen science.” Whether one is making tea, coffee, jams, or natural dyes, one engages in the same basic science, producing a chemical decoction by heating plant matter in water and passing the resulting infusion through a filter. At an even more basic level, one can filter without heating, as when purifying water with charcoal or making

¹ I consulted with urban foraging organizations around Toronto before doing this and I did not forage in parks or protected spaces. In order to offset the potential impact of my small harvest on pollinators, I have made a donation to the Toronto and Region Conservation Foundation, which monitors and restores wetlands and wildlife habitat around the GTA. In this way I have worked to make sure that this project, while involving natural harvest, is not simply extractive.

cider from whole apples. The methods can be more or less sophisticated, involving more or fewer transformative steps, but the principle is the same. This idea of distillation has become both a guiding metaphor for my intellectual explorations and a literal method of transferring my encounters with the land into my studio practice. During this process, the filter and the cone have become recurrent forms in my work, and I see them as physical manifestations of what it means to gather and distill.

Material Transfer and Ephemeral Sculptures



Figure 4: Cotton rags coloured with sumac and goldenrod dye

The term “natural dye” refers to dyes made with wild flowers, husks, bark, fungus, vegetable skins, and occasionally insects or seashells. Natural dyes are notoriously “fugitive,” meaning that their colours often change with exposure to heat or light; they can fade over time or “bleed” after washing (Furry 1935, 5). In using natural dyes, I have committed myself not only to translating my encounters with the land (soil, sun and plant life) but to water: without water life does not thrive; and without water there is no distillate.

But liquid-matter is tricky in the art gallery: if it is to be present it must somehow be contained, in vessels, or on substrates, binding with other matter and becoming (semi) solid. And so, although I would like to let materials freely express their inherent physical properties, the challenge of containment has nonetheless become a central concern in this work. To avoid imposing rigid forms on liquid, I have used cloth, string, and plaster

to receive and hold the dye. The mutable quality of the dyes has translated to the artefacts that have resulted from my experiments with dye and substrate. Each responds differently: some fabrics show stains, creases, and highlights at the folds, while others take the pigment to differing degrees, resulting in brighter or duller colours. Plaster has responded in exciting ways, expressing bright colours that subtly change over time. Three-ply cotton string resists bright colour but a round-weave cotton sash cord does not, turning vibrant yellow in goldenrod dye. Fragments of plaster soaked in sumac turn deep brownish-red, but over time a larger piece will cure and turn a lighter color.



Figure 5: variations on cone and filter forms

Figure 5 shows a plaster cone and two muslin filters that I used to strain dye-plaster. Muslin was traditionally used in British and European kitchen work to strain jams and jellies, and home recipes often call for a

muslin straining bag. I have created my own such objects, applying these domestic kitchen skills to my practice. The cloth filters introduced the cone shape into my work, a form that has since become my primary metaphor for gathering and transformation. I call the delicate objects that result from these experiments “ephemeral sculptures.” These objects are often small (human hand-sized) and fragile. In some respects, they

are “pure residue,” representing traces of an ongoing engagement with a variety of substrates that are “in conversation” with the natural dyes.

Precarious Structures



Figure 6 (left): precarious structures made from pine (studio view)



Figure 7 (right): precarious structures made from pine (installation view)

The term substrate could also be used to refer to the display structures in my work, made of pine, plywood, and occasionally aluminum (figures 6-7). However, I have separated these structures in my discussion in order to address their particular role as literal and figurative frames for the work. Where string, cloth, and plaster merge intimately with the dyes, the framing structures stand somewhat apart: supporting, elevating, and containing (or failing to contain) the more volatile elements of the work. In order to make a dye from plants, one often needs to dry the material. A drying rack, or

at least a beam to hang things from, space for air and heat to circulate, something to strain the dye-bath, and somewhere to store the ingredients: these are the structures that have been called forth in my experiments with natural dyes. The display structures that I have made from pine and plywood are assembled from scrap to meet these needs. As I built them, I asked myself: what are the minimum interventions that I must make to meet this need: how simple can I make this gesture of elevating and containing? The resulting display-structures are minimal and precarious. They can be oriented differently in each room they visit. In the OCADU Graduate Gallery, they are placed in ways that activate the “empty” space of the gallery: the lines and shapes of the precarious forms create areas of activity along asymmetrical as well as vertical and horizontal angles, drawing the eye and animating space. These shape-making structures uphold and elevate for now: today, tomorrow, maybe for years, but not indefinitely. They are objects that think about the future, and they are ready to be repurposed into new art or household furniture. They are ready to become scrap again, and return to the earth.

The Gallery



Figure 8: OCADU Graduate Gallery, February 2019

Bringing the outside into the gallery is a symbolically weighted gesture: in addition to the condensing action of the dye-bath and the containing actions of substrates and display structures, the gallery itself frames the

material within it. What once ranged through the outdoors as root, rhizome, and blossom is now contained within an anthropocentric setting. A humidity-controlled room, with sealed windows and one door, deals with flux and change in ways that are radically different from the forest or the lakeshore. Humans, human creations, economic activity, and social acts: these flow in and out of galleries, as art is marketed, performed, catalogued, and archived. Things most certainly flow and change, but such change is heavily controlled by human directives. If my studio parallels the kitchen, then the gallery is the dining room: art is presented in a state fit to be consumed and it provides a form of spiritual and intellectual nourishment through contemplation for an allotted class of (human) guests. There is nothing inherently wrong with a human-centered space like the gallery: humans survive and thrive through collective gestures of mastery and control. We are home-makers, cultivators, managers, and domesticators. We often encounter Otherness by degrees, through actions that work to make the strange

familiar: we eat things, we name things, we analyze, define, deconstruct and remake things. But in bringing the idea of an external site into the gallery, I recognise that it then becomes imperative to consider my work not only in relation to ecological movements within the arts, but also in relation to work that engages with institutional critiques of the gallery as an elite space for the art-literate. However, I do not want to lose sight of the value of the gallery, as a safe and sheltered space for intellectual, emotional, and sense-based contemplation. The urban outdoors and public realms often become “non-places²”: spaces designed to be passed through, where rest, pause, and contemplation are difficult and discouraged. They are often commercialised or privatised or heavily policed. The gallery may be a privileged and controlled space but it is also a refuge. Its walls contain the artwork, but they also turn us inward, into the imaginative vastness of our minds and our sense-perceptions.

² see Augé

Dislocation and Reorientation

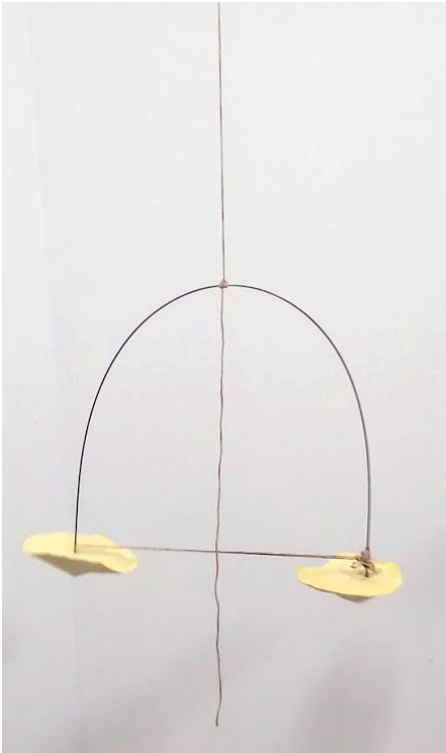


Figure 9: goldenrod-plaster, wire, and string

Inviting the Outside In is a project about movement: bodily movement on the land; gatherings from the land brought into the studio; the voyage of the artwork from studio to gallery; and the movement of art from display states into mental contemplation. Where it goes from there depends on both the human company and the material assembled: I expect that in the next year I will dismantle many of the physical objects from this exhibition. Already I've composted the organic matter from the dye baths, keeping only the liquid extract. Yet the process of gathering and filtering,

and the metaphor of the cone and funnel, will stay with me as objects of thought-sense, as I ask myself: what, exactly, have I gathered and how has it acted upon me? What have I come to know by going out to meet the land and then asking the land to transform my work? How do I keep on following the flow of what critical theorist Jane Bennett calls "vibrant matter"? In the chapters that follow, I will explore the implications of this experimental studio practice.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

My artistic practice brings physical traces of organic matter into an experimental studio-based reflection on placemaking and contemporary art. My work unfolds through a material and affective call-and-response: I am always looking to express something in the nature of the source materials, while simultaneously rising to meet the material with a subjective response of my own. The world and I meet in the work. I describe this process as intuitive, by which I mean: driven by experimentation, open to the operations of chance, and influenced by a subliminal synthesis of artistic experience and emotionally-charged, sense-based memory. In the writings of British anthropologist Tim Ingold, I have found a methodological description that harmonizes-with and enriches my own notion of intuition. I have embraced his idea of the artist as one who “travels with” the material “unfoldings” of the world, through a creative process he calls “itineration.” (Ingold 2010, 97).

In an article called “The Textility of Making,” Ingold contrasts the concepts of “iteration” with “itineration.” The former is a goal-oriented mode of creation wherein the intellect of the artist imposes a sophisticated form on inert matter. In contrast, he offers the neologism “itineration,” a term for working with the texture and innate tendencies of the material itself, so that the end-product is an expression of a subtle interaction between matter and artist. Itineration means “to follow the ways of the world as they open up” (97). It is a moment-to-moment process of discovery. Without a definitive beginning or end, it values each movement in a changing process as a (temporary) end in itself. Iteration, on the other hand, prioritises only the end product of the creative

process (97). Itineration is attentive to the material realities of making in ways that abstract iterative design is not:

[M]akers have to work in a world that does not stand still until the job is completed, and with materials that have properties of their own and are not necessarily predisposed to fall into the shapes required of them, let alone to stay in them indefinitely.... Consider, for example, the operation of splitting timber with an axe. The practised woodsman brings down the axe so that its blade enters the grain and follows a line already incorporated into the timber through its previous history of growth, when it was part of a living tree. (Ingold 94)

By favouring itineration, Ingold suggests a creative methodology that is attuned to the natural tendencies of materials. It acknowledges that, although humans might shape and prepare materials with specific end-uses in mind (like the powdered plaster or wooden planks in my own work), these materials can and do “push back” against the human will, by cracking, drying, curing, dissolving in ways that are driven by their own innate qualities.

In my own work, the notion of itineration is very much at play. Throughout my research, I have responded to the behavior of the materials I am using. The ephemeral artifacts that emerge from this process have forms that are the result of experiments where dyes and substrates meet and interact. I have documented these interactions at different stages of development because each one has its own gravitas and beauty: the work is alive in each of those moments. In the images below, I illustrate the interplay of materials through the concept of itineration, as it operates in my work.



Figure 10: installation view November 2018

Figure 10 shows an installation as a work of “precarious assemblage.” While some portions of structures and sculptures in this image are firmly secured, many are not. Various wooden stands are visible in the background. These are loosely joined and can all be taken apart and reduced to their component elements. They can be reconstructed in different ways or not at all. If necessary or desired, they can be encouraged to stop working efficiently as tools of human use. I have designed this work to be installed in a variety of ways, and I do not consider any one composition of the assemblage as more “correct” than any other. In this way, the work reflects the concept of “itineraiton” put forth by Ingold. The exhibition does not offer a permanent expression of these objects as art, but a momentary one. The assemblage develops, gathers,

disassembles and disperses. In the spirit of itineration, I think that the installation that I am showing in the OCADU Graduate Gallery is not an endpoint; it is only one way of taking stock of the work in a long series of material interactions.



Figure 11 (left): Pine box on wheels, stained with goldenrod dye

Figure 12 (right): close-up of pine box

Figures 11-12 for instance, show a wooden box on wheels: it is an inherently mobile object that is only ever temporarily at rest. The box is sealed with wax and is stained with goldenrod. My method of staining was passive: I simply filled the box with liquid dye and allowed it to slowly seep into the wood and evaporate. My aim in doing this was to allow the materials of wood and dye to interact each according to their nature. The object that now sits in the gallery bears the traces a past encounter between liquid and solid.



Figure 13 (left): Cotton string dyed with goldenrod and sumac
Figure 14 (right): Cotton rope dyed with goldenrod

I use dyed
string and rope in my
installations. Figure
13 is an example of
how I interpret the
notion of iteration.
Stains gather around
drying skeins of
string. Using the

stained substrate as a backdrop for this image, I have captured the moment-to-moment manifestations of the dye in its process of cooling and changing colour. These spontaneous patterns of behavior are as vibrant and complex as any pre-ordained form I could design and impose on a canvas or a structure. In this regard, the material world acts and I follow its flows. In the installation in the OCADU Graduate Gallery, I use this string and rope in ways that illustrate their material tendencies: I bind and suspend things using string, which draws it taut and puts it in a functional tension with other objects. I also mass rope in loose coils, as a way of letting the linear play of the rope itself become visible.

My methodology is therefore a partial answer to my first research question: How does an artist bring concerns with ephemeral organic materials into the gallery? In this exhibition, the distillation of natural dyes becomes a proxy for being on the land and encountering the fluctuating composition of plants, earth, weather so forth. The process of refining liquid out of organic matter echoes the conceptual framework in which I

situate my material explorations: I quite literally follow the material flows of this fluid substance as it is introduced into other components of my work.

CHAPTER 5: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Because my work is process-based, there is significant overlap in my practice between theory and methodology: how I make my work says a great deal about what it means and how I intend it to be understood. For this reason, I see my studio work as a highly integrated form of arts-based research and it makes little sense for me to treat theory and methodology as separate. Where I think they diverge is that theory can draw links between the intimate physical practice of making (and the concentrated mental attention this takes) and other, intertextual and interdisciplinary implications of the work. In this section, I place my artistic explorations next to the writings of several theorists in order to draw those connections

Distributed Agency

My research engages with perspectives on the non-human world that are non-hierarchical and that embrace the idea of change and transformation. In this context, critical artistic inquiry need not be framed around an autonomous human subject, but around interactions that question the boundaries between subject and object, human and non-human, self and other. I situate my practice in the interstitial zones where these concepts are constructed, questioned, and deconstructed. To contextualize these ideas, I have looked to New Materialism, Queer Theory, Object Oriented Ontology, and Object Oriented Feminism. What interests me in each of these theoretical movements is the proposition that human beings are implicated in a network of relationships with other people and with the non-human world.

I have paid particular attention to political theorist Jane Bennett's notion of "material agency." Her book *Vibrant Matter* offers a framework for thinking about why

relational approaches to material practices are important, not only for artists, but for anyone interested in rethinking dominance paradigms that place humans at the apex of evolution, at the top of the natural order of things, or as the heads of “resource management.” Bennett’s theories challenge such ideas by highlighting the interactions between humans and non-humans in every-day activities. This can be illustrated using the “agency of assemblages” as an example. Bennett writes that “an assemblage owes its agentic capacity to the vitality of the materials that constitute it [...] a congregational agency” (Bennett 2010, 34-36). Her use of the word assemblage here refers to the way that different kinds of things interact: living beings, geologic forces, political entities, social groups, etc. Bennett argues that the ability to enact change in the world (agency) is distributed across systems of human and non-human things (21).

Assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements...living throbbing confederations...not governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the outcome of the trajectory or impact of the group...never a solid block but an open-ended collective...[with] a distinctive history of formation but a finite life span. (23-24)

Like Tim Ingold, with his notion of unfolding material flows, Bennett suggests a world of interlinked flows between causes and effects, where every component of an assemblage of interconnected forces has some agency in generating consequential interactions. In some respects, Jane Bennett’s assemblage resembles the textbook notion of an ecosystem³ but she is careful to note that components of assemblages are

³ “Ecosystems are characterized by a flow of energy through food webs, production and degradation of organic matter, and transformation and cycling of nutrient elements” (Jones)

not simply synergistic parts of a whole. Rather they are “able to function in spite of the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within” (23). Bennett offers not a Gaia Theory⁴ but a “non totalizable sum” (24). I believe this disruptive notion of contradictory entangled forces is an important absorption, on her part, of the lessons of postmodernism: things are heterogeneous and entangled and cannot be reduced to the sum of their parts.

Bennett’s assemblage is also not necessarily defined by the presence or absence of biological organisms; in her theory of vital materialism, all matter—living and nonliving—has agentic capacity. As an example of this, she tells the story of a 2003 electrical grid failure:

The electrical power grid offers a good example of an assemblage.... The elements of the assemblage work together although their coordination does not rise to the level of an organism.... while they include humans and their (social, legal, linguistic) constructions, [they] also include some powerful nonhumans: electrons, trees, wind, and fire, electromagnetic fields... [vital materialism is] a theory of action and responsibility that crosses the human-non-human divide.
(Bennet 24)

Bennet’s example of a particular power grid, and the complex set of interactions that resulted in its 2003 blackout, is useful because it not only addresses human social constructs (the legalities of running a power grid) and non-human components; it also resists drawing a boundary between living and nonliving. Bennet wants to “think beyond

⁴ The Gaia Hypothesis originates with James Lovelock. See Stolz for a concise description of the theory.

the life-matter binary, the dominant organizational principle of adult experience.” (20). In this (always shifting) assemblage, humans, electrons, and trees all play a role in the interactive system. For an artist working both in and out of the gallery, the question of life and non-life is significant. While my work often uses organic matter, I also use metals, minerals, glues, plastics, power tools, and digital cameras. In Bennett’s system of thought we may still acknowledge such matter as having agency; as having flows, force, and consequences.

Bennett’s use of the term “assemblage” is intriguing for a studio-based artist. I find myself tempted to map this concept onto the use of the word assemblage in art history, as a term for the three-dimensional juxtaposition of found and fabricated objects (Tate-a n.d.). Yet, I think Bennett’s concept challenges notions of artistic agency in ways that make it important not to collapse the distinction between an artistic assemblage and a vital materialist one. If the ability to trigger change in the world (i.e. agency) is distributed across systems of human and non-human things, does this displace the centrality of the artist as the generator of the artwork? If an assemblage can be any assortment of interacting forces, does any deliberate work of art need be created, or is art entirely a matter of reading experiences according to art-historical norms? Does the vital materialist notion of assemblage necessarily subsume the older artistic definition, rendering it obsolete? I think that Bennett’s notion of assemblage offers a valuable expansion of the term, as the processes of making heterogeneous agentic entanglements visible.

In one reading, the vital materialist framework de-emphasises the importance of the artwork: it becomes a human social construct that is entangled with the agencies of

its material, conceptual, and social components. The will of the artist might be simply one more confounding energy flowing through an impossibly complex (and never wholly visible) assemblage that includes arts institutions and discourses but extends beyond them as well. Yet re-contextualizing art as part of the wider flow of life and phenomena, vital materialism supports a socially-engaged view of art that sees it as always already embedded in social, political, and material networks. This wider interpretation of the term assemblage includes not only the visible components of a work of artistic installation (aka an artistic assemblage), but also the intangible components: the conceptual systems in which it is embedded; its temporal lifespan as material that is produced, preserved, and maybe at some point deaccessioned and discarded; its legal status as artifact and commercial product, its biochemical composition; its cultural and political significance, and so on. These are compelling ideas, and in the chapters that follow I will consider how vital materialist readings of assemblage can reinforce the relationships between the networks of agency within and outside of the art gallery.

The notion of assemblage that I discuss, via Bennett, suggests that organisms and forces intersect, combine, and generate change while also interacting with human-made systems, whether these are physical, social, or conceptual. Taken together, the ideas of heterogeneous assemblages (Bennett) and itinerant material flows (Ingold) pose challenges to philosophical systems that favour hard boundaries between concepts and things, or those that insist on hierarchical notions of active subjects and passive objects. Ingold and Bennet both insist that such forms of categorical certainty are illusory. In my work, the physical process of refining liquid out of organic matter has offered me a practice-based point of entry into these questions. I follow the itinerant

material flows of this substance as it is introduced into other components of my work. The challenges around exhibiting artwork that uses liquid dyes, plaster, and other changing, impermanent material assemblages, raises larger questions about the gallery as a space of containment and control, or even as the proper site for material investigations that recognise the creative agency of matter itself. In this way, my initial action of using natural dyes as a proxy for being on the land has led me to deep philosophical questions about the relationship between process-based creative practice, the material agencies involved in the work, and the ways that the work is understood, as either an individual artistic investigation or as a collaborative interaction between multiple creative agencies, both human and non-human.

CHAPTER 6: LITERATURE REVIEW

Critiques of Human Exceptionalism

A creative process that acknowledges material agency contributes to ethical conversations that are current in many strands of critical theory. In my research I have explored a number of conversations related to post-humanism, object studies, and phenomenology: these include Queer Phenomenology, Object Oriented Ontology, and Object Oriented Feminisms. Each of these theoretical movements is complex, but they share a tendency to explicitly or implicitly challenge anthropocentrism. They invite us to expand our conceptual frameworks to include experiences and things that are different from ourselves in both simple and profound ways.

For example, Sarah Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, and Others* explores how binary pairs, such as self-versus-other, domestic versus foreign, white versus racialized or straight versus queer, operate as organizing concepts that reinforce hierarchies of social privilege and favor white, heteronormative worldviews. Her work decentres this narrow definition of the human subject, by giving voice to all that is counter to the norm: the queer, the racialized, and exoticized—broadly speaking, the “other,” which is any person whose life experience is recognised only in contrast with the fuller agency of the normative subject (the straight white male). While Ahmed is concerned with expanding human subjecthood to include those for whom social empowerment has been denied, her methods (which involve deconstructive questioning and the expansion of conceptual frameworks) open up the tradition of phenomenology to new ways of thinking that are more inclusive and less self-certain than its traditions imply. This expansive approach to thinking about sense-perception is one that I believe

can deepen conversations about material agency. The tools that she uses to show how racial privilege operates in institutional spaces can be used to show how many of the conceptual frameworks coming out of Western philosophical traditions also privilege and “naturalize” viewpoints that are anthropocentric.

Ahmed writes within a phenomenological tradition, which is concerned with how we come to know and understand the world around us, through reflection on our sense-perceptions. For this reason, I think that there is great potential to consider how her work can be understood as a methodology. I see parallels in her thinking to Ingold’s itineration. For example, she writes that: “we do not know where some paths may take us: risking departure from the straight and narrow, makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer” (Ahmed 2006b, 554). Ahmed investigates how social behaviors are normalized through repetition and reinforcement, and she suggests that by breaking with the norm (“queering” it) we can create new modes of social organization. I think this is an important idea for political action around ecological crisis, and it is my suggestion that by queering object studies, we can open ourselves to the expressions, desires, and directives of the non-human world, whether other organic life (plants and animals) or a geologic or inorganic material. These questions are significant to my body of artistic work, in which I respond to the material qualities of things in order to organize an installation.

Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) refers to several associated theories that share the view that material things have qualities that are fundamentally imperceptible to the human senses and the human mind. Of these theorists, I have found Graham Harman’s writing on the “withdrawnness” of things to be important to my thinking about material

agency. Harman and his colleagues place themselves in a philosophical lineage that grapples with fundamental impossibility of knowing “things as they are.”⁵ They argue that any attempt to get to the essence of phenomena simply generates more modes of human conceptualization that further distance us from the things we are attempting to know. The impact of this philosophy on art has been a deliberate turn away from designing displays for human experience in favour of art that foregrounds the mysterious unknowability of things (Kerr 2019). In my work I try to foreground the strangeness of things: allowing rope to hang in a tangled mass, or letting plaster fragment and fall from a plinth, is a way of reminding both myself and the viewer that these materials are acting “for their own sake” as much as for any reason related to my human artistic ambitions.

I include such obscure (even mundane) broken objects in my work because they generate affective responses in me, yet, when it comes to definitive meanings, their simple presence is simultaneously both meaningful and opaque. I find the small fragments, accidental asymmetries, or unusual material juxtapositions of my own work very satisfying, because they catch my attention and unsettle many of my own expectations of what a finished artwork should look like. Taken together, these fragments, shapes, and artefacts echo each other visually and in their material composition, further working on my senses to create the perception that there is a “visual language” at play in the installation. Yet none of these objects are actually a language, and who can really say what the broken corner of a plaster panel means? Cracks and breakages, like flexibility, rigidity, weight, or colour, are material properties

⁵ This is their Kantian and Heideggerian lineage. For further discussion see Behar.

that gather meaning in the human context of the artwork, but these qualitative expressions are only one aspect what the works do, as material agents in the world. In this way, the artworks are opaque, or to use Harman's term, they are fundamentally withdrawn.

Object Oriented Ontology levels the conceptual playing field in ways that are similar to Jane Bennett's concept of material agency: a stone, a human, and a highway are each equally mysterious and incomprehensible; we perceive a limited view of them based on our own needs and the sensory information we receive from them. This leveling is provocative because it forces us, readers of philosophy and art audiences, to think about the boundaries of our own perception. However, a critique that is often leveled against OOO is that its obsession with objecthood comes from a place of considerable human privilege: only people who feel very secure in their rights as human subjects can entertain the idea that perhaps we are all mere ciphers to one another, unknowable and objectlike in our individual perception of reality. People who are socially marginalized may not find such thought-exercises useful to the practical struggle to expand their social rights. From this point of view, using OOO to underscore the ethical importance of respecting non-humans seems to come at the cost of foreclosing necessary conversations about human rights.

Object Oriented Feminism brings a critical rigour to this posthumanist OOO conversation, by deeply examining the implications of an expanded worldview that places things and people on equal footing. Moving towards a kind of "solidarity with things" should not mean abandoning real human struggles for rights and subjecthood

within human social systems. In this respect I am in agreement with Object Oriented feminist Katherine Behar:

Orienting feminism towards objects means attuning to the object world. While at first such a move may seem to risk abandoning the concerns of real human subjects (i.e., women), the object world is precisely a world of exploitation, of things ready-at-hand, to adopt Harman's Heideggerian terminology. This world of tools there for the using is the world to which women, people-of-colour, and the poor have been assigned under patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism throughout history...reorienting from feminist subjects to feminist objects puts critiques of utilitarianism, instrumentalization, and objectification in no uncertain terms...shifting a focus from feminist subjects to feminist objects extends a classic tenet of feminism, the ethic(s) of care, to promote sympathies and camaraderie with nonhuman neighbours...it is to shed...the damaging legacy of human exceptionalism. (Behar 7-8)

I agree with Behar, that feminism, post-colonialism, anti-racism, and posthumanism must meet in a resistance of instrumentalization and exploitation. Whether it is human resources or natural resources, the tendency to treat some things and beings as ends in themselves and other things and beings as tools to "extend the reach" of the first is the crux of the ethical issue that I want to explore (Ahmed 2006a, 552). By bringing together queer phenomenology and object-oriented ontology, it is not my intention to overlook the nuances of how Ahmed deconstructs white supremacy (Behar 2016, 11). Rather, my intention is to extend Ahmed's gesture of queering phenomenology into this discussion about the inherent importance, for its own sake, of the non-human world.

The exploitation of land, for instance, is a parallel and extension of the exploitation of people.

This is a brief overview of three strands of critical theory that I wish to bring into conversation with my own theoretical framework, which relies on Bennett and Ingold. Queer Phenomenology, OOO, and OOF each challenge the idea of (human) “exceptionalism,” and viewed in concert, they ask us to also acknowledge the difficulty inherent in expanding traditions of rights and values to include non-human things without lessening the value placed on human rights. In pointing towards these theories, I want to demonstrate how my studio-based research into material agency is in dialogue with critical conversations that resist the way that we look at human subjectivity as uniquely separate from other organisms and objects in the world.

The Gallery as an Open Framework

My research has involved a broad exploration of posthumanist philosophy, but I have also tried to keep a tight focus on what these larger questions mean for studio practice and for gallery exhibitions. I think of the art gallery as a place where humans and objects meet and, as such, it is important to think-through how posthuman thought can influence artistic activity in this space. It is the practical issues that arise in studio practice that have led me to consider the role of the gallery in my work. In attempting to contain volatile liquids and place them in a setting where viewers could consider them as “art objects,” I became sensitive to the ways that an art gallery could itself be viewed as a space of containment, where human perception is privileged and where objects are encouraged to become stable in their physical expression, if not their meaning. This activity seems at odds with the theoretical framework that I have developed: following

Bennett and Ingold, I am exploring material flows and interactive assemblages. OOO reminds me that “objects” cannot be defined by our limited human perceptions and Queer Phenomenology challenges institutional boundaries by exposing their subtle exclusions. How can these ideas be reconciled within a practice that is oriented towards displaying objects in an exhibition?

The answer that I have arrived at involves thinking of the gallery as part of a continuum of important sites where the artwork operates. With *Inviting the Outside In*, I have drawn on personal experiences that have to do with travelling in the Toronto ravines: this is the first site of action for me; the second site is my studio, where I have processed and distilled plant matter into dye and then have introduced it into plaster or onto string and cloth; then there are the fabrication shops of OCAD where wood or metal are cut and shaped from “raw” materials into forms of my choosing; finally there is the art gallery where these components are reassembled for general viewing. The final stage is important: this is where the work of art is shared with other people. Yet “the work” has existed and has shaped my own experience, through its dislocations, accumulations, and interactions, for many months previously. The assemblage, in Bennett’s sense of the term, has been active for many months as “an artwork” and for some time prior to that in other configurations (in other assemblages, as wild plants, as softwood lumber, as minerals, etc.). The gallery is one place where this assemblage operates but it is far from the only significant site. If iteration means flowing flows, then the thing that is defined here as “an artwork” also has a flow that is unfolding over time, and the gallery is simply one stopping point for the work.

Art critic Brian O’Doherty’s *Inside the White Cube* has informed my thinking

about the gallery as place of contemplation that is constantly shifting in relation to its contents and its place in history. He describes the stereotypical white-cube gallery as a place of uniformity and cleanliness where objects are stripped of context: “[t]he ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is “art”. Unshadowed, white, clean, artificial—the space is devoted to the technology of esthetics” (O’Doherty 1986, 15). I would argue that this “artificial” space could be described a space where matter is transformed into “objects” and where the exceptionalism of the human gaze is made paramount: at least in the classical Modernist gallery, things are staged for human eyes to look upon. O’Doherty writes, “So powerful are the perceptual fields of force within the chamber that once outside it, art can lapse into secular status. Conversely things become art in a space where powerful ideas about art focus on them” (15). In this description the gallery is a kind of looking-instrument, like a magnifying glass. It comes with its own context: by placing something in the gallery to be looked at, one places that thing in dialogue with the whole of art history—all the things and all the ways that those things have also been contemplated in such a space. In Sarah Ahmed’s terms, this space is also one that encourages particular norms of looking, making the gallery a “straightening device” that reinforces power dynamics between those that have the privilege of looking and that which is made available for looking at (Ahmed 2006b, 557).

In my work I strive to be simultaneously aware of these two ideas: first that the gallery is part of a continuum of locations where the artwork operates and secondly that the gallery is a particular kind of viewing instrument with physical and behavioral traditions that encourage close looking, contemplation, and the considered evaluation of

that which is placed inside its frame. I see a relationship between my precarious structures and the architecture of the gallery: the structures are frames within a frame, designed to further heighten the awareness of the viewer, encouraging them to pause and consider what they see at the intersection between table leg and floor, or hanging from hook or beam.

CHAPTER 7: CASE STUDIES

Because I am working in the space between the land and the gallery—between matter and object, permanence and flux—I have been influenced by a number of artists who challenge how spaces and objects are defined. Among these are Walter de Maria, Eva Hesse, and Kath Fries. My work is very different from theirs, but I have taken inspiration from how each of these artists challenges boundaries between site and gallery or studio experiment and art object.

Walter De Maria's "The New York Earth Room" (1977) is a work that challenges what belongs inside or outside of the gallery. The work is described by its custodians, the Dia Foundation, as: "an interior earth sculpture [that]...spans over 3,600 square feet" (Dia n.d.). Smell and vision are triggered by the work, and its effects escape the room in which it is contained:

As visitors approach the second-floor space where the piece is located, the scent of fresh earth wafts into the stairway, as does an eyeglass-fogging cloud of humidity, a by-product of daily waterings required to keep the dust down in the room. The stuff of the work itself is quickly apprehended. The dark, rich dirt stretches out in a relatively level plain to all the corners of the room, even into a small ante room, the full extent of which cannot be seen by the viewer. (Kastner 72)

By bringing an undifferentiated mass of soil into the room, de Maria challenges the idea that the artist is the imposer of form upon the artwork. As dirt massed within the gallery, the work challenges notions of white-cube purity and cleanliness. What normally belongs beyond the walls and windows of the gallery now lies within, and it can be

viscerally sensed through smell and humidity as much as by sight. By working on senses other than vision, it challenges the notion of a work of art as subject to the human gaze. For me, this work is a model of how a “dislocated site-specific” work can challenge what Ingold calls the iterative or “hylomorphic” world view (Ingold 2010, 92). De Maria’s work operates not as object but as atmosphere.

In a book called *Studiowork*, art critic Briony Fer addresses the smaller artworks of Eva Hesse, known as the Studio Works (1936–1970). Fer argues that Hesse’s small pieces challenge standard definitions of what is and is not a work of art, because they operate in an unstable state between model, prototype, finished work, and studio waste:

The studiowork is work without making a work, which may end up as something to look at, or may not.... these small things seem to be halfway [between]...things to make and objects to look at...[they] test the limits of our capacity to see them as meaningful.” (Fer 24)

Hesse’s studio works are significant to my thesis research because they align with the notion that I am developing (following Ingold) that the itinerant work of art is a thing in motion, and that the display of the work as a finished piece is an act of temporarily imposing boundaries around fluid and transitory things.

Fer explicitly discusses Hesse’s use of glass display cases to create boundaries, gravitas, and meaning around these small amorphous works:

When things are put in a glass case it tends to make you look at them differently: like a frame, it forces you to look, maybe harder, according to another set of habits...we are almost forced to look at a lot of stuff that would normally be

overlooked.... Placing them in a case sets them apart from all the other potential things that might have been included. (Fer 84-86)

This question of how the display structures frame small unassuming objects is something that I have taken up in my own work, as I seek to display the traces and fragments of my own studio explorations. The precarious structures that I have assembled for *Inviting the Outside In* serve a function similar to Hesse's display cases: they help to locate small, humble objects in space, guiding the viewer and encouraging closer examination of something that might otherwise be overlooked. Unlike a glass case, however, my display structures are open to the forces of the world.

Kath Fries is a contemporary artist whose recent PhD research (2017) on "sentient matter flows" echoes many of the concerns I raise in my own work. Her artwork "Divest" (2014-2017) consists of multiple versions of the same work. At three different sites she installed tiny, finger-sized "polyps," or hollow cylinders, made of beeswax. These clusters of hundreds of pale, asymmetrical forms resembled infestations of insect nests. With this work, Fries engaged in an extended exploration of beeswax, and in so doing found a tactile way of engaging with the material tendencies of the substance. Over time she found that her inclination to physically manipulate this malleable material led her to make artistic gestures that inadvertently echoed how bees construct parts of their hives. What she learned was that the malleability of the material itself leads to certain interactions with it:

Although I did not initially realise I was mimicking the honeybees' building methods, now I am even more intrigued at the way in which the materiality of the beeswax influenced how I worked with it, one of the interbeing mysteries of

sentient matter-flow. It seems almost as though there was a message hidden within my co-creative conversation with the beeswax that led me to these repetitive forms. (Fries 57)

In this work, Fries engages in an open-ended exploration of material that is aligned with the idea of itineration: she warmed and shaped the beeswax against her hands and explored what this manipulation could offer by way of new information about the material. She discovered that the physical properties of the wax (that it is malleable, lending itself to small hollow forms, but not ductile, preventing the formation of long strings or planes) favoured certain (cylindrical) forms but not others: we could say she discovered what the bees already knew.

In naming the work “Divest” Fries acknowledges that she is in conversation with other organisms in this work:

The beeswax itself has been divested, or stolen, from the bee’s hive, then reconfigured in the exhibition space, suggesting an unwanted insect or crustacean invasion of a human-purposed space. The installations quietly question our accustomed hostility to such nonhuman adaptability, and our human-exceptionalist infliction of extensive habitat loss on so many creatures while we reshape the earth to suit ourselves. (Fries 58)

Like me, Fries is concerned with questioning and transgressing the separation between categories of human and non-human. She deliberately places her delicate sculptures in the windowsills and corners of galleries, or along the walls and beams of industrial sites, in order to remind us that divisions between the outdoor environment and the indoor domestic, or natural and the manufactured spaces, are artificial;

Walter de Maria, Eva Hesse, and Kath Fries challenge the idea of the art object as a complete and self-contained thing, by emphasizing the unformed, the incomplete, and the fragile nature of their own artworks. De Maria's "New York Earth Room" is interesting because it collapses the distance between outside (as a place of non-human forces weather, dirt, living things, and "environment") and inside (the human-centred space). Hesse's small works, on the other hand, offer a context through which I can consider my own ephemeral works as having significance because of their nature as traces of past processes. Fries' extended material explorations suggest collaboration with the non-human, and her subtle multi-site interventions invite us to imagine galleries and exhibitions as porous environments where different materials and organisms simultaneously make use of the space to their own ends. In these ways, Hesse, de Maria, and Fries are artists whose "powerful ideas about art" I want to deliberately allude to, as I bring the results of my own practice into the "perceptual field" of the art gallery (O'Doherty 1986, 15).

CHAPTER 8: OUTCOMES

How does an artist bring concerns with ephemeral organic materials into the gallery? My effort to answer this question has led me to use plant-based dyes as a way of retaining a trace of something living and transitory in my work. In pursuing this idea, I entered into an extended material exploration, using experimental studio-based research processes. The outcomes of this research are the most fragile, flexible, and delicate components of my work: plaster accumulations, dyed rags, rope, and muslin filters encrusted with pigment. Conceptually, this work led me to consider how every component in the process, from the soil where the goldenrod plant grew, to its dried leaves, to its water-based decoction, to its trace on plaster, was an agent in the making of the work. Stated more strongly, the work is a residual effect of the interaction between these many agencies. By developing this method of “collaborating” with non-human matter, I have found ways to de-emphasize (though by no means eliminate) my power “over” the materials and I have foregrounded the “material flows” of the non-human components of my work. In this way my practice negotiates between the human and non-human, attempting to open up a contemplative opportunity where we, limited though we are by our very humanity (as I think the OOO philosophers would say), can try to imagine our way into a closer relationship with non-human things. From this point of view, the fragmentary, delicate artworks I produce are physical aids to contemplation and sensory tools for expanding our perception to include non-human beings.

How can the human-centric focus of the gallery be expanded through an artistic practice that acknowledges material agency? I have developed two strategies for reconciling the contradiction I see in trying to acknowledge (and even defer) to material

agency while working inside a human institutional construct: the first is to consider how display structures—frames, plinths, shelves, etc.—can be physically challenged as whole or discrete objects: by building precarious, temporary, and mobile structures I seek to subvert the idea that these framing devices have any permanent authority over their more ephemeral “contents.” The second has been to examine the idea of the gallery as a site of temporary dis/placement—a deliberate space of pause and containment—where questions about what does or does not belong inside the gallery (and why this is believed to be so) can be examined closely. The resulting body of work is a constellation of related sites and tools for viewing and a multitude of semi-permanent objects that can be encountered through those sites and tools. As an exhibition, *Inviting the Outside In* asks viewers to contemplate how material realities are co-created by human and non-human agencies. This body of work is the accumulation of gestures, traces, propositions, and echoes, each of which offers a unique chance to contemplate the non-human agencies that are central to this artistic process.

The significance of this project for my practice lies in the establishment of a methodology and theoretical framework that connect physical and sense-based maker practices to knowledge-generation, by bringing artistic process into dialogue with concepts from art history and critical theory. As I have developed the body of work that is *Inviting the Outside In*, I have also developed language to describe how the work has come to be, language that bridges that gap between physical activity and concept. Thinking of this work as “dislocated site-specific art” has allowed me explore how the historic concepts of land art, process art, and artistic assemblage can be brought into conversation with Bennett’s idea of “distributed agency” and her own critical concept of

“assemblage.” This juxtaposition of artistic methods and political theory has allowed me to begin to think-through how a contemplative, inward-looking artistic practice like my own can nonetheless engage with topics of wide socio-political significance, such as ecological renewal, through respect for material agency. I have begun to see my practice in light of the language I have developed for it: as a process of gathering and distilling that is both metaphoric and literal, and as a deep engagement with material transfer, where the original material that inspires artistic investigation is not extinguished or reified through representation, but is instead retained through trace artefacts. The ephemeral sculptures and precarious structures of this body of work will undoubtedly stay with my practice, as artistic techniques that bear further exploration: I will continue to examine how physical and conceptual space meet in the artefacts of artistic practice.

The theoretical context for this work that I have discussed in my literature review is also rich terrain for further exploration. I am convinced that studio-based practices have much to offer to ethical discourses that seek to subvert social hierarchies and human exceptionalism in order expand the ethics of non-human/human engagement. In a book called *Against Purity: living ethically in compromised times*, Ontario activist-philosopher Alexis Shotwell writes:

An anti-oppression approach might start on the level of the epistemic but it always leads towards action in the world, to speculative ontological commitments to different futures...our purpose is to make sure that something that *deserves a future* has one...to move beyond the epistemic and into the ontic. (Shotwell 196)

I believe that artistic practice is one method of bringing speculative futures into being: art-making is often imaginative, communicative, and sensual. This capacity to merge

thought, feeling, and physicality can bring ideas out of a purely hypothetical, discursive space into the realm of lived experience. From this perspective, the art gallery is a tool for what I have called “dislocation and reorientation”: it is a contingent “framing device” that can bring new ideas to light, allowing audiences to encounter ideas as fact and potential realities as art objects. In this way “different futures” can start to emerge through artistic practice.

Exhibiting *Inviting the Outside In* at the OCADU Graduate Gallery has given me my first chance to test the audience-impact of this research project. I anticipate that sensory engagement will be central to this experience: foremost, will be the contrast between the precarious structures and the mysterious fragile forms. I expect these objects to pique curiosity and to invite interpretation. In formulating responses to these objects, audiences will rely on their own sense perceptions, past experiences, material and formal resemblances, and their own affective reactions to the work. New interpretations of the art (aka new knowledge, or new “hypotheses of meaning”) will emerge from these individual perceptions. The objects that audiences encounter don't have definitive “meanings” and in that sense they resist interpretation (OOO withdrawal) but they generate possibilities based on their material and spatial juxtapositions. Viewers will piece together the meanings they associate with organic materials, plaster forms, raw wood, and the gallery environment, arriving at an interpretive position towards the work. In this way the exhibition will generate a small spatial/conceptual field of new knowledge for audiences.

Finally, my research into material agency points to future opportunities to revisit the interdisciplinary space between art history and political theory. For instance,

Bennett's theory of distributed agency offers a valuable expansion of the artistic term "assemblage," suggesting an approach to studio-based research that would involve making agentic entanglements visible through the work of art. In my research, I have attempted to do so through the ideas of material transfer and displacement, which highlight how physical traces of plant matter move through a series of different sites-of-intervention. This expanded notion of artistic assemblage has many important precedents in art history, from Joseph Beuys' notion of "social sculpture," which emerged in the 1960s and drew on Western art history, emphasising the relationship everyday actions and art; to contemporary Cuban performance artist Tania Bruguera's concept of "art útil" (useful art), which uses art as a tool for social intervention, drawing on Latin American traditions; to recent critical writing about the distinctions between land art and ecological art, exploring the need for a deep engagement with ecological science in art (Montagnino 2018, Tate-b, Valentine 2017). As I move forward with my own artistic practice, I will be using these theories to expand and critique my own work, and I will be looking at art in these movements from the perspective of material agency.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Inviting the Outside In is a unique project that weaves together personal experience, academic research, and studio art in ways that are new to my practice. It has been a long and complex journey from the question of belonging in place to this discussion of expanded social and ecological art practices. And while the objects that I display in the gallery are often fragile, this labour of art-making has been dense and

robust; I would compare it to the complexity of soil itself, which from a distance seems like a compact mass, but if examined closely is a dynamic aggregate of humus, sand, clay, leaf-stem-root particles, inorganic fragments, minerals, chemicals, living organisms, water, air, microbes and so on. *Inviting the Outside In* is a vibrant assemblage, a nurturing substrate from which my creative practice will continue to grow and evolve.

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APPENDIX A: FUTURE RESEARCH

Inviting the Outside In is an extended meditation on how artistic process and material investigation inform my approach to art-making. The project explores the interplay between physical encounters with the “outside” by moving materials from outdoor sites into the “inside” spaces of the studio and the gallery. My work traces the way that those materials are dislocated and relocated through different artistic interventions, and it asks what do each of those transformative movements mean—for my understanding of the material and for my understanding of the ethics of artistic engagement with the non-human world.

In this way, my work raises questions about the significance of “artistic gestures,” questioning the meaning behind what we put in the gallery and how we treat it when it is there. The body of my paper focuses on studio practice and the immediate outcomes of my research into this subject, looking at how ephemeral materials can be shown in states of transition in an exhibition setting. However, I feel that there is a lacuna in the body of this paper: some of the deep ethical questions that it raises, about the relationship of art to environmental ethics, cannot be answered in a short discussion paper focused on personal practice. For this reason, I want to reintroduce my third research question in this appendix, as an acknowledgement of the possible directions in which I could take my future research, asking “what is the relationship between the non-human environment and the human-centric spaces of the institutional art world—studios, galleries, and educational settings in particular?” For me, this question implies an approach to being in the world that takes account of the ways that we are in relation with all forms of agency, whether living or nonliving, human or non-human.

The question is of profound importance to me in relation to philosophical, artistic, and ecological concerns: to me, the deep flaw in the capitalist worldview under which we live is an unwillingness or inability to truly recognise and value interdependency, mutuality, co-creation, collaboration, and universal agency in both things and people. By asking how the art world and ecology can be connected, I am asking how art can contribute to creating new worldviews that value these things. I believe that the research behind *Inviting the Outside In* suggests one possible answer: we need worldviews that are rigorously intersubjective and that gently puncture the boundaries that Western traditions draw around the normative human subject. As I emerge from this MFA project, I begin to catch sight of further paths of exploration that have been generated by this investigation and that might allow me to revisit these larger overarching questions. In this final segment of this paper, I will outline those future considerations.

Defining Art as “Ecological” and “Transformative”

Throughout this project, ecological science and environmental activism have hovered in the back of my mind, as areas of discourse towards which my work can be oriented. My attention has been especially captured by an article that appeared in *Hyperallergic* (an online art and culture magazine) in 2017, called “How Can Ecological Artists Move Beyond Aesthetic Gestures?” The title is a provocation that begs further questions: how are ecological art and aesthetic gesture defined? Why do we need to move beyond the latter and what does that look like? For Valentine, the crux of the issue lies in how artists have historically treated their relationship to the land:

Land artworks are typically aesthetic interventions forced onto the environment by artists with little to no deep understanding (geologic, ecologic, botanic, etc.) of the materials they are using. Instead, artists who make these works favor aesthetic, surface-level intervention...there are [other] artists — perhaps ecological artists is a better term — who are dealing with the complexities of an ecology beyond...hollow aesthetic gestures (Valentine).

Valentine argues that, given the profound ecological crises that are looming on our horizons, we cannot afford to deal in superficialities when it comes to thinking about the future of the Earth and the systems that support life as we know it. He suggests that for art to be relevant to conversations about ecology and climate crisis, it should engage deeply with the agencies (as Jane Bennet would put it) of ecological systems: their complex interactions, component elements, and systemic behaviors. He goes on to name several artists whom he feels address their relationship to land in deep, ecologically transformative ways. Among his examples are Agnes Denes' "Tree Mountain" (1992–96) and Mel Chin's "Revival Field" (1991). Both works assemble a variety of agencies into a single "work." In Denes' piece "a hill [has been] planted with 11,000 trees, each from one person, which will be protected for 400 years" (Valentine 2017). Valentine points out that not only is Denes harnessing the natural behavior of living organisms in this work, she is also harnessing the power of the human legal system to designate the site as "protected" for a timespan beyond that of any one human being. In this way her piece deeply considers the relationship between tree growth and human culture. Similarly, Chin's "Revival Field" is an artistic intervention on the land that works to remediate soil contamination using living plants: "[it is] a

replicated field test using special hyperaccumulator plants to extract heavy metals from contaminated soil” (“Revival Field”). In both works, the artist’s intervention on the land is not simply cosmetic (reshaping the appearance of the site); these works activate the transformative, interactive potential of living organisms, scientific methods, and social and political constructs.

Valentine’s demand that art engage deeply with ecological processes is important because he asks us to push the boundary of what art can do, by considering its active participation in ecological and social transformation. Art is often described as “transformative,” and this notion can include the subtle and the personally transformative as well as socially educational work. Yet, I think that when an artist has the ambition to engage with enormous subjects like global climate change, or deforestation, or land exploitation, or ocean pollution, there are hard, honest questions about the effectiveness of representational or awareness-raising work. In a time when collective global action is needed⁶, is “highlighting the problem” enough of a call to action? What if artworks could actively contribute to solutions, as Valentine suggests that Denes and Chin do? These questions are current in contemporary Canadian and international arts circles. For instance, Edward Burtynsky, the Canadian artist known for high detail, high gloss photographs of industrial waste sites, has been praised for shedding light on the damage that industrial extraction does to the land, but he is often also criticized for “preaching to the choir”; “beautifying the damage”; and feeding into “ecological despair,” by depicting an overwhelming extractive reality with unrelenting grimness—perhaps inadvertently inuring us to what we see (Vaughn 2011). For

⁶ See IPCC report 2018

Valentine, Burtynsky's work might rest too easily in an aesthetic space, by focusing our attention on looking with detachment or overwhelm, rather than acting with immediacy and impact. I think that Valentine also has a valid point when he says (some) land art, while significant for its aesthetic considerations, is superficial in its engagement with ecology⁷: even a quick online search of the work of Bulgarian land artists and art-stars Christo and Jean-Claude, known for wrapping large swaths of land and buildings in fabric, will generate a multitude of stories of environmental protests, as well as legal controversies led by communities who felt invaded by the works ("Christo's Controversial Art" 2010). In contrast to these works, Valentine is asking for a deeper, more collaborative notion of what transformation looks like: the art in his examples transforms through physical, chemical, legal, social, and behavioral gestures, while working under the umbrella of artistic practice. Valentine's understanding of ecological art is similar to the idea of "art útil" developed by Cuban installation and performance artist Tania Bruguera who: "promotes the idea of art as a process that should have real effect in society as part of everyday life, rather than a rarefied spectator experience" (Tate-b n.d.). In an interview, Bruguera says: "I always say that art is a rehearsal, but a rehearsal that creates the seed to do it again later because it has been made possible" (Wallis 2015, 32). This understanding of art sees it as a way to create space for alternate social and political (and I will add ecological) realities, by actively attempting to embody those alternatives through artistic action. I think that the way Valentine views Denes and Chin would fall under this definition of "art útil," in that their works model forward-looking, materially transformative ideas of human/non-human interaction. The

⁷ For a scholarly discussion of Christo and Jean Claude's aesthetic concerns with "Over the River," see Munsen.

artists consider multiple agencies in their work while demonstrating how to be in a sustainable relationship with the land.

I have raised this discussion of the implications of ecological art, in this “future research” section of my paper, because the discussion is both significant to my practice and yet outside the scope of the current exhibition. The question that emerges from Valentine’s article is: what is the function of art in relation to ecological problems and our collective future? This is not a question that *Inviting the Outside In* proposes to answer. However, I think that my exhibition enters this conversation in alignment with Valentine’s idea of ecological art, as is evidenced both in my pursuit of a close interaction with plant life, and in the artwork’s context within a discussion about material agency. My exhibition attempts to foreground what I have above called the consequential interactions between plants, plaster, cloth, wood, the studio as a physical site, the gallery as a social construct, and myself as one of several agents in the work. In this way, the work attempts to embody a way out of contradictions and challenges that I encountered in my research. Where the works of Chin and Denes attempt to restore vibrancy to particular landscapes, my project is about asking the land to work upon me, by way of the tools of my practice. My work does not solve an identifiable ecological challenge (like carbon sequestration or cadmium poisoning, dealt with by Denes and Chin respectively) but it works on the problem of relationality: how do we make space for, witness, listen to, and interact in communication with elements and organisms that do not speak or even evidence consciousness in ways that humans can recognise? I argue that we do so by inviting them to act upon us, in our creative practices and in our human centric-spaces.

In future work I would like to take up the challenge proposed by writer Ben Valentine, to move beyond narrow definitions of the aesthetic into a deep consideration of how artistic practice is part of a larger negotiation between human and non-human forces in the world. For me this means engaging in the kind of artistic practice that rises and falls from view; like art útil, it will be novel art today and matter-of-fact tomorrow, and it may collapse the boundaries between contemplative art and functional design, or between metaphor and practical action.

Aesthetic Gesture and Art History

Where I strongly differ from Valentine is in my definition of “aesthetic gesture,” and here I want to devote some space to the concerns in my work that I think fall under this term. For Valentine, an aesthetic gesture is an artistic intervention designed to impress an audience and sell art. He critiques the majority of land artists for “favor[ing] aesthetic, surface-level intervention, which documents well for exhibition” (Valentine). Elsewhere he takes issue with what he perceives as the narrowness of an artworld perspective:

Understanding and parsing the nuanced ways humans experience space (phenomenology) is invaluable for thinking about our experience of the environment, but only as far as we extend those thoughts beyond an art context. If art is to be relevant to the environment, it cannot remain only in an art context or in dialogue with art history. (Valentine)

I wholeheartedly agree with Valentine that there is value in bringing critical art practices into dialogue with geology, water rights, colonialism, plastic pollution, and climate justice

(to name a few concerns that he feels are not addressed by Land Art). However, I think that he does not give credit to the depth of meaning that can be found in “aesthetic gesture.”

Behind his definition of aesthetics (as superficial) there is a long ongoing discussion within art, art history, and philosophy about the role of taste, judgement, sensual pleasure, and beauty in the creation and critical reception of contemporary art. A 2009 collection of essays called *Rediscovering Aesthetics*, which includes writings by philosophers, art critics, and contemporary artists, reminds us of the possible depth of engagement and multitude of ways that we can define aesthetics:

Aesthetics has no single definition or subject matter. It is taken to mean simply “philosophy of art”... it also invokes general questions of beauty and taste (an approach that has come under attack for its alleged reliance on the socio-politically problematic notion of “pure” aesthetic judgements); and it also refers to various types of “sensuous” experiences... such as experiences of the ugly, the disgusting, and so on... one also hears of an “aestheticization” of entire cultural domains, such as religion or politics... [this] seeming lack of ‘substance,’ combined with stereotypical ideas about its preoccupation with subjective taste and ineffable emotions, to some suggests nonrigorous reflection and uncritical value judgement. (Halsall et. al. 2009, 2)

I raise the history of aesthetics not to answer the question of how one “should” define it in relation to this long-standing debate about its seeming subjectivity, but to offer context for how I would like to define the word in my own work. For me “aesthetics” is a useful term for referring to the tactics used by artists to make art. I would like to

recuperate aesthetics in my own vocabulary as a methodological tool: how things present themselves to perception is a fundamental concern in my work. My discussions in the body of this paper, of OOO and material agency, are rooted in the idea that things matter (ethically) above-and-beyond how they appear to human perception, but my artistic project has been to find ways of framing and reframing our perception, using installation and sculpture (i.e. artistic methods), so that these elusive depths are at least subliminally present in the work. In the context of my work, aesthetics means the use of artistic practice as a way of bringing human attention to something, whether that thing is a material trace, a philosophical concept, or a social norm.

I also want to define the idea of an aesthetic “gesture.” I think of a physical “gesture” as a fleeting thing: for example, the use of body-language to non-verbally indicate meaning during the flow of conversation. In an artistic context, I think of gesture as a similarly fluid proposition: a communicative statement made through artistic methods that suggests possible (maybe provocative) interpretations on the part of a viewer. In both cases, I would argue that “gesture” is about suggesting meaning rather than rigorously defining it. For this reason, I associate gesture with notions of contemplation (reflecting on meaning and perception) as well as with ideas of impermanence and instability; for me a gesture would be suggestive, always open to new interpretations and deconstructions. This interpretation of the term helps me to describe my work as a suggestive framework, a field of perception, in which certain kinds of ideas about objects and material agency can rise to the surface, both for me as the artist and for viewers of the work when they visit the gallery. My aesthetic gesture in *Inviting the Outside In* is the careful framing and reframing of material objects, such that

their uniqueness and sensual properties can give rise to questions, emotions, and interpretive opportunities in the viewer. This is the significance of aesthetic gesture; it is, for me, a method of engagement that is multi-sensory, intellectual, physical, poetic, contemplative and active. It embraces difficulties of perception and tangles with them; it transcends paradox yet sits within it. Like all agentic assemblages, such art is both more and less than the sum of its parts; its outcomes are a non-totalizable sum.

Ephemeral and Precarious Art

As I developed this body of work, certain terminology accumulated around it: I have repeatedly written above about “ephemeral sculptures” and “precarious structures.” I have discovered that this language has particular resonance within art-historical discourses. In *Almost Nothing: observations on precarious practices in contemporary art*, Anna Dezeuze follows artist Thomas Hirschhorn, drawing a distinction between the ephemeral and the precarious that I find extremely interesting in light of my own relationship to these terms. She quotes Hirschhorn, writing that “‘The term “ephemeral” comes from nature’... whereas the ‘precarious’ concerns human actions and decisions” (Dezeuze 2017, 1). She goes on to distinguish between art that engages with the “cyclical regularity of natural phenomena or the ineluctable logic of geological shifts and the laws of physics” and art that engages with the “precarious temporalities [that] tend to coincide... with the ebb and flows of anonymous pedestrian traffic, cycles of waste and consumption, rhythms of work and exhaustion” (3). I think that Dezeuze rightly draws attention to the way that different notions of temporality and agency may be at play in the work of an artist engaged with natural cycles, as compared to one who deals with human behavior. Human timelines are relatively swift

compared to those of geology, but they are slow compared to those of the fruit fly. Moreover, human time cycles may be moved by psychological impulses quite different from the chemical or physical interactions of the land. In Dezeuze's distinction between the ephemeral and the precarious, I find useful language with which to explore the nuances that might distinguish human and nonhuman concerns in art. Learning, through Dezeuze, that this language of precarity has particular meaning in relation to the practices of past artists has alerted me to avenues of future research that I can undertake as I develop my own practice. My own interest, however, lies in the overlap between these things; it is for that reason that I earlier stressed that Jane Bennett's idea of assemblage includes both human and non-human components⁸. I think that such forces are inherently intermingled, regardless of whether one labels one's interest as aesthetic, ecological, or social. As humans living in the age of the Anthropocene (a time when human behavior impacts even global geologic systems), I think it is important that we consider ourselves as "things." We are not minds alone, as the Cartesian tradition suggests. We are organisms who eat and modify and build and (pro)create and eliminate (waste) and die. We are bodies and chemicals. We too are "things"; our gut flora are agentic assemblages and our minds are bundles of neurons. In this context, I think art traditions of the ephemeral and the precarious can hold a mirror to the fragility and idiosyncrasies of our intersubjective beings in ways that raise these facts to the level of consciousness, and perhaps motivate us to act in collaborative ways for the betterment of our collective futures—or not; the choice to act is ours, but the consequences (the agentic repercussions) are not.

⁸ Critical theorist Elizabeth Povinelli explores the delicate boundary between the living and the non-living in *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*.

Concluding Thoughts

The extended reflection on materiality and exhibition that is *Inviting the Outside In* has led me to consider of the role of the artist in engaging creatively with eco-politics while working in and around conventional studios and galleries. The body of work that I have developed questions its own relationship with its sites of material origin and its place of rest in the gallery. I believe this is a valuable tension in my work. I look forward to digging more deeply into the implications of material agency and ecological entanglement, through future site-specific explorations. I also believe that the art gallery can be a valuable tool for close-looking and contemplation in this context. A call for ecologically transformative art does not have to mean a full departure from anthropocentric spaces. It can also mean a thoughtful engagement with how these spaces of human domesticity and interiority can be brought into meaningful dialogue with the social and ecological spaces outside their doors.

APPENDIX B: Location of Additional Images

Additional images of my work as it was installed at in the OCADU Graduate Gallery, from April 22-30, 2019, are available on the OCADU Digital Repository