

Making Kin: Subverting Ocularcentrism Through Sympoiesis and Tentacular Thinking

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## Abstract

This thesis argues that interspecies kinship, termed ‘making kin’ after Donna Haraway – counters the humanist underpinnings of ocularcentrism within contemporary art and visual culture. Ocularcentrism, the prioritization of sight over all other senses, stems from the legacy of European humanism and its corresponding system of sensory hierarchies. Within the humanist worldview, sight acts as a lens through which objective reality can be discerned, devoid of emotion, cultural difference, or subjectivity. However, truth is never universal, and historically the humanist definition of ‘humanity’ has been limited to a Eurocentric ideal. Making kin acts in opposition to this legacy of exclusion. Through the dual logics of “tentacular thinking” and “sympoiesis” making kin seeks to extend empathy and care across gender, race, and biological boundaries. This effort to bridge difference functions in opposition to the exclusionary politics of ocularcentrism and the humanistic worldview. Examining the work of three artist-led collectives (The Institute of Queer Ecology, BUSH gallery, and the South Asian Visual Arts Centre, specifically their collaboration with Christina Battle titled, *Ishtar’s International Network of Feral Gardens*) I will critique how their practices subvert the ocularcentric paradigm through embodied acts of kinship with the non-human world.

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## Introduction

The humanist worldview prioritizes a certain set of values and ethics: objectivity, rationality, and above all else – human conscience. While these values imply that all humans are equal, they also function to discredit the validity of cultural difference and alternative methods for perceiving the world. Ocularcentrism, the prioritization of sight over all other senses, derives from the humanist worldview. The sensory hierarchy that facilitates ocularcentrism can be linked to an extensive history of humanism and its corresponding aesthetic frameworks - the philosophical foundations of which have inflicted very real, material consequences upon diverse people and non-human beings.

Ocularcentrism represents a set of values and politics derived from Western colonization, specifically the rise of Renaissance humanism and its reverence for sight as an indicator of objective reality. Humanism aims to unite humankind on the presumption that all people possess an equal ability to observe through sight. Visual observation thus represents a lens through which objective reality can be discerned, devoid of emotion, cultural difference, or individual subjectivity. However, truth is never universal, and as a result the humanist conception of human experience and objective reality have been quite limited. The humanist worldview that places sight at the pinnacle of a hierarchy of senses represents a distinctively Eurocentric conception of a world divided into objects and subjects. Rather than being *of* the world, humanists argue that subjects observe external reality at a distance. This presumption fails to account for the inherent diversity of human experience, and the inter-relationships between humans and other species. The implicit result is that alternative, non-Western modes of experience are relegated to the rank of a sub-human Other.

This thesis argues that interspecies kinship, termed ‘making kin’ after Donna Haraway, counters the humanist underpinnings of ocularcentrism within contemporary art and visual culture. First outlined in her 2015 article, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin” and later in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016) Haraway defines making kin with non-human species as a form of inter-planetary feminism:

Feminists of our time have been leaders in unraveling the supposed natural necessity of ties between sex and gender, race and sex, race and nation, class and race, gender and morphology, sex and reproduction, and reproduction and composing persons. [...] If there is to be multispecies ecojustice, which can also embrace diverse human people, it is high time that feminists exercise leadership in imagination, theory, and action to unravel the ties of both genealogy and kin, and kin and species.<sup>1</sup>

As she argues, kin-based relationships with the non-human world represents a fundamental necessity for feminism – a need to not only look beyond fixed conceptions of gender and race, but also species. A dominant feature of making kin is collaboration, which Haraway describes using the dual logics of “sympoiesis” and “tentacular thinking.”<sup>2</sup> Both terms refer to non-hierarchical, symbiotic partnerships that thrive in flux rather than order. Through these logics Haraway encourages the expansion of kinship beyond the human species as a means to disrupt the sociocultural inequities that segregate diverse human people and non-human beings. By exploring these multispecies relations through flux as methodology, making kin successfully counters the humanist values of cultural homogenization, objective reality, and rational order. The intention to express empathy and care across gendered, racial, and biological boundaries functions in opposition to the limited conceptions of human experience that ocularcentrism and the humanistic worldview have sought to promote.

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<sup>1</sup> Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” 3.

<sup>2</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, 31, 33.

I will analyse the work of three independent collectives (The Institute of Queer Ecology, BUSH gallery, and the South Asian Visual Arts Centre, commonly referred to as SAVAC) to examine how their practices exemplify embodied forms of kinship with the non-human world as alternatives to humanism and the ocularcentric paradigm. Each collective offers distinctive approaches to making kin as both an aesthetic and social practice. With artworks ranging from an online virtual commune, to a published magazine, to an international garden network, the collectives make kin through divergent material, aesthetic, and social approaches. This diversity emphasizes that making kin serves as an ideological framework rather than a fixed set of political or aesthetic practices, as ocularcentrism often denotes. While the collectives do not self-identify within this framework, interpreting their practices through the theoretical lens of making kin illustrates the capacity for interspecies kinship to creatively disrupt dominant artistic presentation models and introduce non-hierarchical forms of collaboration.

Discussing the work of the collectives in three separate case studies, I will apply the following thematic questions to my critiques: What are the lingering effects of humanism, and how can they be addressed? How have contemporary artists critiqued and offered alternatives to humanism? Can artistic critiques of humanism yield anything of significance in the real world? Drawing from these questions, I will demonstrate how implicating the body in multi-sensory artistic engagement with the land can serve as a methodology for making kin, in opposition to ocularcentrism and the associated humanist values of objectivity, rationalism, and the division between human and non-human beings.

By discussing artistic practices that offer alternatives to the humanist ocularcentric paradigm, I intend to highlight a small component of a much deeper issue: I propose that ocularcentrism and its associated values of control have much greater consequences beyond the

world of art. Donna Haraway envisions making kin as an antidote to the Anthropocene, our current epoch of widespread, human-inflicted environmental degradation. With this thesis I will demonstrate that in addition to remediating Anthropocentric damage to the material environment, making kin serves as a useful framework for inciting aesthetic alternatives to ocularcentrism. The enmeshment of nature and culture, science and aesthetics, and theory and materiality represents a necessary turn towards interdisciplinarity within the humanities. An example of that interdisciplinary turn, making kin seeks to engender an appreciation for the flux and disorder that characterize interspecies confluence – in direct opposition to humanist order.

### Research Methodology

This thesis required extensive theoretical research using primary scholarly resources within the fields of Humanism, New Materialism, Posthumanism, Ecofeminism, Critical Race Studies, and Biopolitics. Additionally I turned to select texts within the genres of fictocriticism, poetry, and *chosisme* to examine how embodiment could be conveyed through language rather than imagery – an adjacent topic to the critique of ocularcentrism within mainstream artistic practice.

Secondary sources such as online reviews of artworks and press relating to The Institute of Queer Ecology, BUSH gallery, and SAVAC were consulted – though sparingly, for general information regarding the collectives’ practices and the public reception of their work. The collectives’ websites proved to be valuable sources for archived magazines, press releases, and other ephemera. Alongside their social media accounts, I was able to establish a clear understanding of how the collectives engage with the public through their online platforms. Digital accessibility proved to be fundamental in ensuring that I was able to conduct research from home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the heart of this thesis lies a critique of humanist order. Objective reality, rationalism, human universalism, and cultural homogeneity define the humanist worldview. In order to delve into an interdisciplinary analysis of how this worldview has permeated mainstream artistic practice through the sense of sight, it proved necessary to question the limitations of how humanism defines human experience. One of the primary limitations lies in the division between human and non-human species. Donna Haraway’s theory of “making kin” seeks to foster unity across both cultural and species divisions. By engaging in the associated logics of “tentacular thinking” and “sympoiesis,” making kin underscores the inherent flux that defines earthly relations in opposition to the humanist values of rationalism and order. This interdisciplinary,



non-hierarchical, entangled, and chaotic outlook on the relations between nature, culture, and species proved to be the most useful approach to critiquing humanism and the ocularcentric paradigm within the arts.

The three case studies represent alternatives to mainstream artistic practice. As independent collectives, The Institute of Queer Ecology, BUSH gallery, and SAVAC facilitate creative projects that look beyond the conventional standards of large institutions and the symbol of the white cube gallery. The white cube represents modernist conceptions of neutral design; plain white walls produce a clinical aesthetic and a sense of segregation between the physical space of the gallery and the artworks themselves. The result is that the artworks become isolated and revered like sacred objects – regarded at a distance. Within this model, sight overrides alternative forms of sensory engagement. By operating outside of the white cube, the collectives approach art with a different set of values. The three collectives treat art as unfolding processes of multi-sensory engagement through the implementation of land-based artistic pedagogy, durational projects, and community programs and exhibitions designed to unfold in unexpected ways through public participation. By refusing to define their projects according to predetermined goals and modes of sensory participation, the collectives encourage alternatives to the white cube prioritization of sight and its reverence for art as static, precious objects. The Institute of Queer Ecology, BUSH gallery, and SAVAC were selected for their particular abilities to subvert white cube ocularcentrism through conscientious acts of care towards the non-human world. This trend among all three demonstrates that making kin serves as both pedagogy and artistic methodology. The collectives put the principles of making kin to practice through the development of aesthetic alternatives to the ocularcentric paradigm.

## Literature Review

Much research has been conducted into humanism and its implicit cultural biases, but few scholars have connected the humanist worldview to ocularcentrism specifically. Even fewer have gone on to connect ocularcentrism and its humanist underpinnings to a set of exclusionary politics enacted within mainstream artistic practice. However, critiquing ocularcentrism requires a deeper analysis into how the humanist reverence for sight overrides or discredits alternative sensory and material relationships to the world. Humanism touts the values of human exceptionalism and universal equality, at the risk of conflating both cultural and embodied forms of difference. This raises the question of how the humanist ocularcentric paradigm has directly shaped dominant cultural, aesthetic, embodied, and material conceptions of humanity in relation to the non-human world. This question has been interrogated, albeit separately, within the fields of New Materialism, Ecofeminism, Critical Race Studies, Digital Theory, and Posthumanism. Yet the fact that so few have sought to unite these areas of inquiry in direct relation to the arts represents a major absence within the humanities and contemporary art criticism.

Donna Haraway's "making kin" serves as one of the most useful methodologies for engaging in interdisciplinary analysis of the role of ocularcentrism within contemporary art. Articulated within "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin" (2015) and *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016) making kin seeks to break down the sociocultural and biological boundaries that segregate diverse human people and non-human beings. Through the logics of "tentacular thinking" and "sympoiesis" she highlights how cultural forms of segregation such as racism and sexism directly affect the material composition of the world and its many species. However, her argument remains for the most part theoretical. Stacy Alaimo offers a more tangible take on the relationship between culture and

materiality through the theoretical framework of “trans-corporeality.”<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, N. Katherine Hayles brings to light how Enlightenment (and implicitly humanist) conceptions of subjectivity have dissolved in the new posthuman age.<sup>4</sup> In conjunction with Jane Bennett’s exploration of “vibrant matter” and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s theoretical construct of the rhizome, these six scholars illustrate the capacity for New Materialism and Posthumanism to initiate interdisciplinary analyses of how human subjectivity is shaped in accordance with the material non-human world – in opposition to the humanist separation of mind and body.<sup>5</sup>

One of the reasons why the humanist worldview has remained so engrained within Western conscience stems from the vast generalizations that it makes regarding human experience. Contemporary humanist scholar Andrew Copson and feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva both argue that the humanist value of cultural homogenization serves as a sign of human progress. Copson argues that all humans possess an equal ability to perceive the world rationally and empirically, and that this removed outlook facilitates the perception of a universal, objective reality.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile Kristeva argues that through European globalization, humanism has the capacity to transcend geographical borders and cultural difference in the name of universal equality.<sup>7</sup> As these very different sources demonstrate, the humanist worldview is malleable – and therefore easily adopted by diverse scholastic circles as a common denominator for humanity. This assumption reduces the depth of human experience and imposes a singular conception of reality.

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<sup>3</sup> Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*.

<sup>5</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*; Deleuze, Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

<sup>6</sup> Copson, “What is Humanism?” 7-8.

<sup>7</sup> Kristeva, “Ten Principles for Twenty-First-Century Humanism,” 281.

The humanist imposition of a universal human experience correlates to the conflation of sight and objectivity within Western science and art history. For Hito Steyerl and Meghan H. Glick this conflation has had severely detrimental effects and points to a history of humanist ocularcentrism functioning as a form of white supremacy. For Steyerl, linear perspective within Western art history serves as a form of visual colonization of the observable environment. She states that neoliberal society has since shifted beyond linear perspective towards vertical perspective – a newfound “God’s-eye view” seen through satellite imaging, surveillance cameras, and computer screens. She argues that this shift marks a new form of totalitarian control in the era of late-capitalism and digitality.<sup>8</sup> Meghan H. Glick accounts how the eugenics movement of the 1920’s implemented photography to denote a relationship between gorillas and Blackness, a means to impose species and racial hierarchizations in direct correspondence with how gorillas engaged with the visual apparatus of the camera.<sup>9</sup> Both scholars articulate how ocularcentrism has been permeated by exclusionary politics and colonial values of domination towards the non-white races, non-human beings, and natural environment. However, this discussion remains all but lost within mainstream artistic practice and criticism. Few scholars in the humanities have delved into the exclusionary politics of ocularcentrism to further interrogate how these values imbue sight and visuality in the arts.

Literary representations of embodiment produce an interesting tension between ocular engagement (seeing and reading text) and the comparatively non-ocular experience of inhabiting a body (conveyed through linguistic representation). This offers useful opportunities to explore the intersections of body and sight, and body and subjectivity. *Jealousy* by Alain Robbe-Grillet, *The Box Man* by Kobo Abe, Bhanu Kapil’s fictocritical work *Ban en Banlieue*, and Alexis

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<sup>8</sup> Steyerl, “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective.”

<sup>9</sup> Glick, *Infrahumanisms: Science, Culture, and the Making of Modern Non/Personhood*, 56-81.

Pauline Gumbs's narrative poetry *M Archive: After the End of the World* each demonstrate the capacity for literature to convey embodied alternatives to the ocularcentric paradigm – and emphasize how materiality shapes subjective experience. *Jealousy* and *The Box Man* emphasize the role of objects in directly shaping the protagonists' subjective experiences of reality.<sup>10</sup> Both novels portray reality as pluralistic and in a constant state of flux in correspondence with the material world. *M Archive: After the End of the World* and *Ban en Banlieue* foreground the non-white body as a locus for healing systemic traumas inflicted by white supremacy, patriarchy, and the Anthropocene.<sup>11</sup> Each of the works dissect the relationship between materiality and subjectivity, and individual embodiment and systemic alterity through the use of language. In doing so, they offer alternatives to ocular imagery and the humanist delineation of sight and objectivity.

The singular reality that humanism proclaims represents an inability (or refusal) to acknowledge the fact that not all lives are equal. While humanism aims to unite humanity under a common ethic of equality, this aspiration fails to account for the systemic inequities that consistently deem certain lives to be more worthy than others. Paul B. Preciado and Achille Mbembe help to elucidate how systemic injustices coincide with biopolitical difference and the state regulation of bodies. Preciado conducts a deep dive into the history of the North American pharmaceutical industry and its capitalist control mechanisms – all while transitioning from female to male through experimental testosterone use in an intentional effort to subvert the state regulation of hormones.<sup>12</sup> Mbembe draws from the scholarship of Michel Foucault to engage in a theoretical critique of racism as *biopower*, the right to decide who lives or dies, as dictated by

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<sup>10</sup> Abe, *The Box Man*; Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy*.

<sup>11</sup> Gumbs, *M Archive: After the End of the World*; Kapil, *Ban en Banlieue*.

<sup>12</sup> Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*.

sovereign authorities.<sup>13</sup> Interrogating the biopolitical ethics that hold sway over people's lived realities reframes the humanist narrative that all lives are inherently equal. This shift brings to focus the humanist ideological biases that implicitly judge certain individuals to be more human (and therefore more worthy of life) than others.

In order to engage with the foundational problems posed by humanism within contemporary art and visual culture, it is necessary to engage in interdisciplinary analysis of aesthetics, critical theory, and the imposition of humanist order upon the non-human world. Through this research it becomes apparent that the limited definition of humanity that humanism promotes represents one of the worldview's greatest inequities. Making kin breaks free from this legacy in post-structuralist flux – a chaotic alternative to humanist rationalism. Informed by the logics of tentacular thinking and sympoiesis, making kin illustrates the capacity for human experience to extend beyond the limitations of humanist subjectivity and its associated ocularcentric aesthetic paradigm. Instead, it offers new models for living equitably in interspecies flux.

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<sup>13</sup> Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 66.

Chapter 1: The Institute of Queer Ecology – H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.

Tentacles, feelers, rhizomes, and roots; the connective webbing of all things living and non-living, human and non-human, continuously expands and decays – fluctuating in perfectly asynchronous flux. The Anthropocene, typified by widespread environmental degradation caused by human activity, has inflicted irreversible damage upon our multi-species world. The way to heal is through making kin. Donna Haraway’s conception of making interspecies kin mandates that the inter-relations between all earthly beings require careful cultivation through empathy. By extending acts of care towards all persons, human or otherwise, making kin seeks to bridge both the sociocultural and the environmental inequities that divide and segregate humans and non-human people. A radical undoing of human exceptionalism, making kin represents a need for interplanetary entanglement. Haraway expresses this need through the theoretical constructs of *sympoiesis* and *tentacular thinking*, which serve as defining logics for how making kin takes place.

The Institute of Queer Ecology (IQECO), a predominantly online collective of curators, artists, and scholars, engages with these values through a queer lens, envisioning interspecies kinship as a form of philosophical queerness. Inspired by the scholarship of Catriona Sandilands and her conception of queer ecology, IQECO promotes queerness as not only a mode of resistance to heteronormativity, but to the heteropatriarchal paradigm and its corresponding humanist foundations of order, rationalism, and species hierarchization.<sup>14</sup> Their recent program, a virtual commune produced in collaboration with the Guggenheim Museum titled, *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N. (Habitat One: Regenerative Interconnected Zone of Nurture)*, engages participants in processes of making kin through queer pedagogy and land-based artistic practices

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<sup>14</sup> “The Queer Issue,” *ECOCORE*, <https://queerecology.org/ECOCORE-The-Queer-Issue>.

– yet paradoxically, these activities are limited to the virtual sphere. By engaging participants in digital acts of collective world-building, *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N* puts Haraway’s theories of sympoiesis and tentacular thinking to practice, but the commune’s digital interface limits embodied acts of kinship to a theoretical ideal.

Founded by artist Lee Pivnik in 2017, IQECO was conceived as a means to reject normative notions of nature and culture as divided.<sup>15</sup> In particular, Pivnik sought to correct the conception that queerness defies the “natural” logics of heteronormativity. Non-heterosexual behaviour routinely occurs within many species, as discussed in the introduction of “The Queer Issue” of *ECOCORE* (2017) guest edited by IQECO:

[W]e would like to out our non-human contributors. The following is a list of animals that have been recorded exhibiting either homosexual or transgender behaviour, assembled by Bagemihl in his 1999 publishing of *Biological Exuberance*. Their vibrant and diverse existence reminds us with force that we are not alone in our queerness, but should our species continue to encroach on their habitats, we may find ourselves increasingly lonesome.<sup>16</sup>

While I hesitate to refer to these creatures as engaging in either homosexual or transgender behaviour, noting that these terms – as well as “queer” – tend to denote forms of social identification (i.e. to identify as queer, homosexual, or transgender), the fact that non-heterosexual behaviours occur outside the human species speaks to the fragility of assuming heterosexuality to be most natural. In an effort to rethink the heteronormative division between homosexuality and nature, The Institute of Queer Ecology envisions interspecies kinship as a form of queer solidarity.

Donna Haraway never foregrounds queerness in her definition of making kin, yet the intention to extend kinship beyond the limits of biological reproduction and to move out of fixed

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<sup>15</sup> Lee Pivnik, published interview, January 5, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> “The Queer Issue,” *ECOCORE*.



notions of family as genealogy can be construed as philosophically queer.<sup>17</sup> She argues that interspecies kinship requires dual processes of *sympoiesis* and *tentacular thinking*. She derives *sympoiesis* from M. Beth Dempster's Master of Environmental Studies thesis published in 1998, wherein Dempster defines sympoiesis as collectively-producing systems that functions outside fixed parameters of time and space.<sup>18</sup> This definition opposes the more common term of autopoiesis, which refers to systems that function as autonomous units. Haraway envisions making kin as a form of sympoiesis, a widespread network that extends among and between species – non-hierarchical extensions of family that transcend biological boundaries.

The intentions to express sympoietic kinship depend on what Haraway terms *tentacular thinking* and *SF*. An inherently post-structuralist methodology, tentacular thinking engages in theoretical processes of unweaving and reconfiguring the threads that connect diverse human and non-human beings, natural and manufactured environments, and culture and materiality. Haraway refers to these new structures as SF: string figures, speculative fabulation, science fiction, science fact, speculative feminism, *soin de ficelle*, and so far.<sup>19</sup> SF comprises a multifarious array of logics, possibilities, and solutions without endings – alternatives to the Anthropocene and its corresponding myth of human exceptionalism. She alludes to the processes of interconnection that tentacular thinking and SF describe through the metaphors of knotting and weaving: “The tentacular ones make attachments and detachments; they make cuts and knots; they make a difference; they weave paths and consequences but not determinisms; they are both open and knotted in some ways and not others.”<sup>20</sup> These continuous processes of

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<sup>17</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, 102.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*.

knotting, weaving, and unwinding take place within *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.* through collective world-building.

From its outset, *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.* encourages human collectivity over individualism by preventing players from identifying with their avatar. Structured like a game, participants enter as a faceless humanoid avatar; a cloud of pink mist erupts from the neck, like a quavering ball of ether where the head should be (see Appendix 1). The avatar's clothes appear to hang, as if containing nothing more substantial than air. The shoulders are slightly wider than the hips, but the figure otherwise lacks secondary sex characteristics and could pass as either male or female. However, these forms of identification remain irrelevant. The avatar serves as a catalyst for movement through the game – a utilitarian body that enables the player to enter a virtual realm from which human corporeality remains segregated. This character ambiguity acts as an introduction to the game's intentional efforts to subvert human individualism. Rather than aiming to suspend disbelief, the game deliberately foregrounds its artifice through the use of an undeveloped avatar, a figure that acts as more of a blueprint for humanity rather than representing a specific individual.

The avatar's lack of individuality gains further emphasis upon encountering other players. As an online digital commune, *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.* often hosts multiple players at once. However, all players use the same default avatar, which subverts the inherent diversity of a community. The result is eerie; a virtual space comprised of blank, not-quite-human figures. In what could be construed as a symbol for rhizomatic multiplicity, players confront identical iterations of themselves – as if each represents a rhizomatic node or fungal spore: autonomous entities but members of the same organism. This vision of connectivity permeates *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.* with players proliferating as multiple iterations of the same being. While this

lack of player individualism represents collectivity, their inability to customize the avatars to move, look, or behave as individuals illustrates a shortcoming in the game's design and pedagogical approach to making kin. Without the ability to express embodied forms of difference during gameplay, *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.* players are limited to a theoretical idea of collectivity exhibited through sameness. With the avatars, an opportunity is missed to explore "making kin" as a method for bridging differences.

This discrepancy is somewhat remediated at the gathering sites that populate the commune. The sites act like digital folders to which players upload materials relating to their themes, thereby contributing to the symbolic meaning of each site and their relevance to the players' lives outside of the game. The overall aesthetic of *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.* takes the form of a futuristic, yet rural, utopia. Set within a landscape of mountains, forest, rivers, and water, the commune takes the form of a series of brutalist, military-like bunkers, metallic domes, and geometric towers erupting from the ground like cliffs. The scattered assortment of sci-fi, futuristic structures allude to a possible future for humanity – a utopian vision of technology and the natural environment sharing space in comfortable coexistence. The game hosts several sites where players can gather in ways that reflect the game's efforts to compress virtual and physical realities. The sites include: "Stage," "Cabin," "Dock," "Campfire," "Cave," "Bath House," "Forest," "Power Plant," and "Greenhouse" (see Appendix 2). The communal space referred to as "Kitchen" (see Appendix 3) takes the form of a set of small, rounded metallic buildings, one of which playfully resembles a tomato. A beam of light erupts from the centre of the clearing on which the site's title, "Kitchen" is superimposed. Upon approaching the beam and activating a keyboard command, the player has the option to open a pop-up window. This reveals a media archive to which players can upload a range of works that relate to the kitchen theme, such as recipes and

foraging instructions. However, players have the option to interpret the theme in alternative ways; some of the uploaded media files include short stories and original artwork, including video and sound files. This practice of uploading media occurs within each of the sites that comprise the commune. The sites make no efforts to conceal their artifice. The blocky aesthetic of the computer graphics reinforce the symbolic nature of the sites, rather than intending realism. However, by uploading media, players directly contribute to each site's symbolic meanings with creative works reflective of their lives outside of the game. This process connects the sites to the players' material worlds, yet this connection remains symbolic.

This process of collective world-building can be construed as SF stands for string figures, speculative fabulation, science fiction, science fact, speculative feminism, *soin de ficelle*, and so far.<sup>21</sup> The inherent multiplicity of SF emphasizes the necessity to look beyond fixed realities to develop new worlds:

SF is storytelling and fact telling; it is the patterning of possible worlds and possible times, material-semiotic worlds, gone, here, and yet to come. I work with string figures as a theoretical trope, a way to think with a host of companions in sympoietic threading, felting, tangling, tracking, and sorting. I work with and in SF as material-semiotic composting, as theory in the mud, as muddle.<sup>22</sup>

The material-semiotic composting that Haraway describes refers to the multi-nodal, simultaneously expanding and compressing, weaving and unweaving processes of entanglement that define the interrelationships between all species – the string figures. However, SF likewise involves speculative fabulation – telling stories and developing fictitious new worlds with the possibly to become real. By uploading media to a common archive, *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.* players engage in SF. They compress disparate locations, time zones, and living situations to develop a common narrative for Kitchen that combines the material and the symbolic. Recipes and

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<sup>21</sup> Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, 31.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

foraging instructions mesh with sound art, memes, and stories. Kitchen becomes saturated with signifiers. This process of semiotic entanglement represents the “material-semiotic composting” to which Haraway refers. Through communal practices of digital world-building, *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.* facilitates a form of tentacular thinking that encourages players to critically analyze the symbolic nature of each of the commune’s sites. They extend their tentacles across cyberspace to connect with other players and develop virtual sites composed of gathered information and experience, diverse identities, and divergent materialities.

The tentacular, rhizomatic expansion that occurs through the players’ collective contributions to the sites gains even further significance at the Stage. Stage takes the form of a wide dome, offset from the rest of the commune by a ramp that extends into a large body of water (see Appendix 4). Upon approaching the edge of the dome, the player suddenly finds themselves ensconced within its cavernous interior, standing before a suspended screen (see Appendix 5). It is here where *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.* truly bridges virtual and physical realities – a designated roster of artists, curators, and thinkers present live presentations of their work, such as artist talks, short films, and performance art. Players congregate in the shared space of the Stage to watch these performances collectively. While the performances take place within the construct of the commune, and are therefore digitally rooted, the livestreamed performances force players to engage with the material reality of their physical separation. This compression of physical and digital realities has the effect of implicating the players in a queer reproductive process that stems from their participatory role in the online performances. As observers, the players comprise a visible audience of avatars that, through their presence, facilitate the formation of kinship through gathering (non-biological but reproductive nonetheless).

Interspecies kinship receives greater emphasis at the site of the Cave, with the characterization of the land as a subjective entity. Located at the edge of the main land mass on which *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.* resides, the Cave can be accessed from an isolated stretch of beach, but otherwise remains hidden from view. Upon entering, the cavernous, darkened space overwhelms the player's screen. Tapering stalactites stretch downward like oozing icicles; stalagmites form spiking, rolling obstacles that the player must jump over (see Appendix 6). Like with the other sites at the commune, the title, "Cave" hovers within a beam of light. When activated, the beam opens to reveal a media archive of player content and the following statement from The Institute of Queer Ecology:

The Cave is a space that asks us to enter into the earth. What memories are held by the land? This is an invitation to reunite spirit and science, to consider our role in the world while standing deep inside it. [...] The Earth moves through two tidal cycles every lunar day, and the cave takes two breaths.<sup>23</sup>

This attention to uniting spirit and science, memory and land, illustrates an intention to imbue the land with feeling. This message directly opposes humanist rationalism, which denotes an objective to perceive the world from a neutral distance as an unemotive, unfeeling state of reality. Uniting spirit and science therefore refers to the idea of returning a sense of agency to the land; an invitation for the land to feel, to be subjective. Involving the player in this theoretical process by invoking them to reflect inquisitively about their place in the world "while standing deep inside it," emphasizes that all humans contribute to the Earth in symposium.<sup>24</sup> The implication that humans and the non-human world are interconnected serves as an example of interspecies kinship. However, subjectivizing the land characterizes the Earth in human terms. Rather than displacing human supremacy, the Cave's message conveys an inadvertently

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<sup>23</sup> The Institute of Queer Ecology, *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.*, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

humanist delineation of non-human life according to human corporeality. This tension illustrates the broader shortcomings of *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.*: the relationship between embodied acts of making kin and interspecies kinship as a theoretical construct remain unarticulated within the digital interface of the commune.

*H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.* brings to light the timely question of how land-based practices can (or should) seek to make interspecies kin in the digital age. *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.* represents the values and theoretical components of making kin, but remains limited in how it engages the body in these practices. The commune serves as a digitally accessible alternative to physically gathering, but digital spaces dramatically limit multi-sensory engagement, and foreground sight as the dominant mode of perception.<sup>25</sup> As a result, *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.* remains a product of ocularcentrism, a visual world in which multi-sensory interaction only occurs through the players' uploaded media. Sound files, foraging instructions, and recipes all serve as examples of non-visual forms of engagement, but are only accessible through *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.*'s visual interface. However, these contributions represent a turn towards making kin outside the digital space of the commune in an act of bridging materiality and digitality. For The Institute of Queer Ecology this bridge represents a fundamental step towards breaking free from heteronormative conceptions of queerness as unnatural, and implicitly the humanist separation of nature and culture. By enabling players to participate in symbolic world-building, *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.* reinforces the Institute's message. Compressing nature and artifice, embodied and virtual realities, *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.* seeks to make kin as a form of intermedial queer solidarity. *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.* therefore succeeds in introducing new possibilities for making kin in the digital age, but ultimately remains limited by its ocularity. Through collective world-building, sympoiesis, and tentacular thinking,

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<sup>25</sup> Not including VR and AR. However, these technologies are still in their infancy, and whether they will be applied to community-oriented artistic practice (and to what ends) remains to be seen.

*H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.* offers space for theoretically making kin, but embodied acts of nurture toward the non-human world remain limited to the players' creative interventions.



## Chapter 2: BUSH gallery – Site/ation

Land-based artistic practices work in collaboration with the land as an active, agentic, fluctuating force. At the intersection of land and artistic intervention sits BUSH gallery – a collaborative and shifting trans-conceptual gallery hosted on the property of Tania Willard, the traditional territories of the Secwepemc First Nation. In 2014 Willard offered the use of her land to the New BC Indian Art and Welfare Society Collective to create #BUSH (see Appendix 7), an artwork described as “a land intervention.”<sup>26</sup> #BUSH depicts a stark field in the middle of an otherwise lush, forested landscape, a patch of barren ground marked with neon orange surveyor’s paint in the shape of an oversized hashtag. The bright, synthetic colouring of the paint sharply contrasts with the calm, muted tones of the earth, conveying an impression of violent debasement. #BUSH serves as an example of the BUSH gallery pedagogy: by foregrounding the land as a site for critical discussion and material engagement, BUSH gallery seeks to address the legacy of white settler-colonialism within Western artistic practice. Drawing parallels to the use of surveyor’s paint to divide and segment the land (often at the expense of Indigenous communities) the hashtag also references the use of social media within mainstream artistic practice. Social media platforms such as Instagram predicate on ocular pleasure through the dispensation of images and videos. #BUSH raises the question of how the materiality of the land can incite alternative sensory experiences to the ocularcentric paradigm. BUSH gallery conveys that land-based engagement is subject to shifting with the material landscape. For BUSH gallery, making kin with the non-human world is simultaneously ephemeral and material, in constant flux across diverse iterations of time and space.

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<sup>26</sup> “#BUSH,” Tania Willard (website), accessed March 28, 2020, <https://www.taniawillard.ca/images/bush>.

This variable connection to the land forms the conceptual foundations of all BUSH gallery projects, and raises the question of how BUSH gallery's pedagogy can be sustained outside Willard's property and the broader Secwepemc territories. This problem serves as the thematic foundation of "Site/ation" a 2018 issue of *C Magazine* guest edited by Willard and Peter Morin of BUSH gallery. The title alone conveys a tension between situatedness and departure by combining site (site specificity) and citation (referencing, extraction, appropriation, transplantation). How can land-based pedagogy be enacted off the land? Are these pedagogies fixed to specific geographic locations? "Site/ation" addresses these disparities through acts of artistic intervention that bring the magazine's structure, narrative, and medium specificity into flux. Trans-conceptuality, a term repeatedly implemented throughout the issue, denotes the interwoven threads of corporeality and ephemerality that define BUSH gallery's practices. While land-based work implies a fixation or rootedness to the land, "Site/ation" foregrounds land-based practices that transcend fixed environments by engaging artistic participants in embodied acts of kinship towards the land – regardless of location. By treating "Site/ation" as an artwork unto itself, this case study will analyse several written pieces contained within the issue as contributing works of performance art: "Storymancy" by Peter Morin and Tania Willard, "Sovereign Capitals" by Maria Hupfield and Jason Lujan, and "Architecture of the Bush" by Toby Katrine Lawrence. These works engage the reader in embodied acts of kinship with the land without being tied to the location of BUSH gallery itself.

"Site/ation" opens with the BUSH gallery manifesto, a piece that sets the intention for the magazine and creates a direct connection between corporeal embodiment and land-based Indigenous pedagogy. The manifesto's opening paragraph outlines BUSH gallery's intention to

critically rethink Indigenous and Western knowledge systems through flux, embodiment, and the land:

To be trans-conceptual is to reposition ideas born within Indigenous and western epistemological conditions. A trans-conceptual space requires you to be in a constant state of flux – never settling, like the flow of water in a river.<sup>27</sup>

Trans-conceptual flux is described as analogous to a river’s flowing water: fluctuating, undulating, and in constant motion. By invoking this analogy the manifesto draws a clear relationship between BUSH gallery’s theoretical modalities (trans-conceptuality, critiquing Indigenous and Western epistemological conditions) and the material foundations of these concepts as they exist within the natural landscape. However, the manifesto also conveys that the enmeshment of theory and matter transcends beyond the land; trans-conceptual flux manifests within the body, making each and every person part of the land.

The manifesto further reinforces this trans-conceptual flux by denying BUSH gallery a singular identity; instead BUSH gallery is represented as pluralistic and connected to all land: “BUSH gallery is idea(s), place(s), story(ies), mood(s), artist(s), farmer(s), fighter(s), kid(s), the four-legged, the fish, the birds and the bugs, the stars and the water that makes us all.”<sup>28</sup> This theme of multiplicity features in both Donna Haraway’s conception of “making kin” and Stacy Alaimo’s theory of trans-corporeality. Haraway describes making kin through the theoretical frameworks of sympoiesis and tentacular thinking, both of which describe non-hierarchical, rhizomatic models of information transfer between species.<sup>29</sup> Sympoiesis and tentacular thinking imply an embodied relationship to the land, but primarily serve as defining logics – conceptual theoretical frameworks. Stacy Alaimo’s theory of trans-corporeality functions along the same

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<sup>27</sup> “Site/ation,” *C Magazine*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, 31.

logics, but with greater intention to isolate specific movements between material bodies in order to trace the joint relationships between culture and the physical environment. Alaimo refers to this approach as a “trans-corporeal ethics”:

[The] ethical space of trans-corporeality is never an elsewhere but is always already here, in whatever compromised, ever-catalyzing form. A nearly unrecognizable sort of ethics emerges – one that demands that we inquire about all of the substances that surround us, those for which we may be somewhat responsible, those that may harm us, those that may harm others, and those that we suspect we do not know enough about. A trans-corporeal ethics calls us to somehow find ways of navigating through the simultaneously material, economic, and cultural systems that are so harmful to the living world and yet so difficult to contest or transform.<sup>30</sup>

BUSH gallery’s trans-conceptual practice can be interpreted as an amalgamation of trans-corporeality and making kin. BUSH gallery is characterized as an impersonal entity – a vast array of ideas, stories, people, and diverse non-human beings. But by emphasizing that this web of entangled matter comprises all of us, and not just BUSH gallery, the gallery subverts the impersonal and enters the subject: we are all BUSH gallery. This collapse of individuality/multiplicity, subject/object, and material/ephemeral alludes to the theoretical webbing that tentacular thinking and sympoietic systems represent, while also honing in on the specific material enmeshments that occur between humans and non-human entities, as Alaimo’s trans-corporeal ethics would intend.

Peter Morin and Tania Willard’s co-authored piece, “Storymancy” similarly reconfigures the division between BUSH gallery and the subject by involving the reader in a form of land-based performance that transcends fixed locations. Ironically deemed a “book review,” the piece deliberately rejects conventional forms of Western literary criticism. One of the most notable rejections lies in the fact that “Storymancy” is framed as a practice, something to be enacted with any book, rather than a specific book under review. The piece commences with three instructions

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<sup>30</sup> Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, 18.

on how to practice “Storymancy” that give agency to the reader and help facilitate an intimate, embodied relationship to a book of the reader’s choosing:

1. You find the “right” book. Hold this book in both hands. Calm yourself. Calm your mind. Create harmonic resonance with your body, the book and the land.
2. Next, locate your question. Ask this question out loud with intention. For example, “Vine Deloria, Jr., Vine Deloria, Jr., Vine Deloria, Jr., will we continue to build knowledges?” Close your eyes while asking the question.
3. Leaf through the pages of the book with your eyes closed. Stop on the page that feels right. Move your hand over the page. Stop your hand where it feels right on the page. And read the word, sentence, paragraph to infer meaning or find your answer.<sup>31</sup>

Following these instructions, which act more like suggestions due to their flexibility, “Storymancy” documents a series of questions that Morin and Willard pose to their individually chosen books – and the answers that the books provide in response. The questions are at once existential (“What is Indigenous art?”) and specific to BUSH gallery (“How is BUSH gallery interrogating western colonial spaces?”), which raises the question of how the books could provide adequate answers, especially when chosen at random (not discounting intuition, however).<sup>32</sup> This discrepancy forms the basis of “Storymancy’s” decolonial approach to literary criticism. In opposition to the Western academic tradition which prioritizes the role of the critic as an objective intellectual authority, “Storymancy” defies these conventions through appropriation. Isolated passages of the selected texts are interpreted according to personal criteria rather than read and judged objectively. The body becomes implicated in this process – grasping the book in both hands, mindfully uniting the body to the book’s intellectual and material energies, connecting to the land, invoking voice through speech, shutting the eyes, and finally, flipping through the pages until it feels right to stop. In this instance, the reader and book

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<sup>31</sup> “Site/ation,” *C Magazine*, 67.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*; *Ibid*, 68.

possesses equal agency. Political theorist and philosopher, Jane Bennett, proposes that all things (human and non-human, animate and inanimate) are united by a “vital materiality,” an intrinsic material agency and unpredictability defined by the presence of matter.<sup>33</sup> “Storymancy” encourages the reader to engage with the book as an intellectual, agentic being unto itself. By cultivating embodied practices of reading that show respect for the book-object as both an intellectual and material being, “Storymancy” encourages the reader to acknowledge the vital materiality that runs through all things – connecting the book, reader, and land in processes of tentacular weaving.

Functioning more like performance art than conventional literary criticism, “Storymancy” can be interpreted as an iteration of BUSH gallery’s trans-conceptual artistic practice. Displacing the critic from a place of intellectual authority and imparting agency upon the reader (and book) effectively shifts the reader into the role of the artist. The reader enacts “Storymancy” in their own space, with their own books, in their own meditative fashion. The entanglements of book and reader, land and book – body, land, and creative/intellectual medium, connect the reader to BUSH gallery despite their physical separation. The trans-conceptuality of BUSH therefore transgresses geographic and regional boundaries; “Storymancy” connects all land and people in processes of tentacular weaving across time and space.

Similar processes of tentacular weaving take place in “Sovereign Capitals” by Maria Hupfield and Jason Lujan, which implicates the reader’s body in an ongoing, unfolding artistic exhibition. Referred to as an “open exhibition model,” “Sovereign Capitals” stems from Maria Hupfield and Jason Lujan’s collaborative practice, *Native Art Department International*.<sup>34</sup> Together they produce exhibitions, screenings, and events in alternative formats to conventional

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<sup>33</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, xvi.

<sup>34</sup> “Site/ation,” *C Magazine*, 53.

institutional models. The institutional language of the collective's title serves the ironic purpose of legitimizing their shared expertise while simultaneously seeking to subvert the prevailing institutional standard of pigeonholing Indigenous artistic practices.<sup>35</sup> *Sovereign Capitals* takes the form of a series of four creative prompts. Printed in white text against a benign beige-toned landscape of ocean and mountains, the prompt titled, "Natural Element" directly encourages the reader to identify with the body of a non-human being in a shared moment of mindfulness.

Natural Element

Move to a safe outdoor location.

In a comfortable position close your eyes.

Breath [sic.] deeply down to your toes.

Imagine a line running through your body along your spine and out the top of your head.

Adjust your body in proximity with a non-human living being for direct contact.

While connected with your eyes closed listen to your surroundings for several breaths.

When you are ready open your eyes.<sup>36</sup>

This piece subverts the conventional exhibition model by unfolding over time, without clear direction. "Natural Element" breaks free from this model by initiating durational processes of embodied connection with non-human species. Unlike conventional, self-contained exhibitions, this piece can be enacted in any outdoor space at any moment and engages multiple senses. "Natural Element" succeeds in subverting the ocularcentric paradigm by implicating the body in ongoing processes of mindful engagement with non-human species.

Toby Katrine Lawrence further articulates the importance of becoming-with the non-human world in "Architecture of the Bush," wherein she describes how the disintegration of the BUSH gallery teepee symbolizes the natural flows of interspecies flux. Lawrence describes how the teepee, a symbol of the gallery's physical connection to Tania Willard's land and the traditional Secwepemc territory, required dismantling in 2017 after a particularly severe

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<sup>35</sup> *Mercer Union*, Review of "Native Art Department International: *Bureau of Aesthetics*," <https://www.mercerunion.org/exhibitions/native-art-department-international-bureau-of-aesthetics/>.

<sup>36</sup> "Site/ation," *C Magazine*, 54.

windstorm damaged its structure.<sup>37</sup> She begins with an account from Tarah Hogue, who took part in taking down the teepee at the beginning of the 2017 BUSH gallery Writers Union retreat: “The teepee poles are so dry and have deep cracks that run almost to the core of the poles at certain points, so when we dragged them across the ground, the sound of their being dragged was amplified. The sound was like a small echo chamber, hollow and almost electronic.”<sup>38</sup> Lawrence describes how removing the teepee bore both symbolic and emotional weight, foregrounding the importance of paying heed to the impermanence of fixed structures as part of the ever-changing landscape of the land. The teepee canvas becomes repurposed, given new life as a movie screen, solar prints, and ribbons.<sup>39</sup> Lawrence’s account of this transformation underscores that BUSH gallery’s trans-conceptuality predicates on adapting to material change as part of the shifting architecture of the land; the mark of a physical structure is not required to legitimize their practice. This critique opposes the Eurocentric model of the arts institution, often marked by imposing buildings indicative of wealth and land ownership. As Lawrence concisely states, “The collective and individual actions under the auspices of BUSH gallery are the materials that form BUSH gallery. The ephemerality and the place-based conceptual space supports the fluid architecture of the teepee.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, the teepee symbolizes flux – as a product of the land, it ages and decays. Rather than marking the death of BUSH gallery, the teepee’s material degradation represents BUSH’s evolving practice.

“Architecture of the Bush” illustrates the dominant theme of flux that typifies BUSH gallery’s trans-conceptuality, and Donna Haraway’s theory of making kin. While their practice emphasizes material relationships to the land, these relationships go beyond fixed conceptions of

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.



time and place. *Site/ation* expresses these values in processes of tentacular thinking. By implicating the magazine's readers in embodied acts of kinship toward the non-human world, "Storymancy," "Sovereign Capitals," and "Architecture of the Bush" each demonstrate that making kin occurs across diverse locations, in constant states of flux and evolution. This lack of fixation denotes a level of understanding and respect for the vital materiality that runs through all things in continual flux, and consequently gives rise to non-hegemonic ways of becoming-with the world through tentacular thinking. Making kin requires this logic. BUSH gallery's trans-conceptuality therefore represents making kin as both a pedagogical and aesthetic framework. With embodied artistic interventions they present alternatives to the prevailing ocularcentric paradigm and create possibilities for both mind and body to engage with matter in constant motion.

Chapter 3: SAVAC – *Ishtar’s International Network of Feral Gardens*

Last spring at the dawn of COVID isolation, when the prospect of months without gathering still seemed relatively new and surreal, I took to joining an online collective of gardeners in the hopes that connecting through planting would bring greater purpose to the long and banal days ahead. My interest was first piqued by errant Instagram posts put out by artists and curators, covertly mentioning *Ishtar’s International Network of Feral Gardens*. Some quick searches, and I came across the program, presented by SAVAC (South Asian Visual Arts Centre) as part of their Summer 2020 socially-distanced programming. The intrigue garnered through social media proved to be integral to the efficacy of *Ishtar’s International Network of Feral Gardens* during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to the project’s broader motives to establish food sharing networks across diverse platforms of communication.

*Ishtar’s International Network of Feral Gardens* is a collaborative food sovereignty initiative curated by Edmonton-based artist, Christina Battle as part of her ongoing project, *seeds are meant to disperse* (2015).<sup>41</sup> Conceived as an alternative to capitalistic modes of food production *seeds are meant to disperse* began with Battle sharing organic seeds from her garden as either trades or gifts. In an effort to appeal to a broader public, she documented her seed sharing on social media. These online communication networks became a form of non-monetary food distribution and a way to engage the public to garden and cultivate their own crops. *Ishtar’s International Network of Feral Gardens* grew out of this program in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Implementing the same practices of seed distribution, *Ishtar’s International Network of Feral Gardens* takes the form of an ever expanding network of gardeners, arts practitioners, and creative thinkers invested in the garden as a site for social justice and community

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<sup>41</sup> “Ishtar’s International Network of Feral Gardens,” SAVAC (website), <https://www.savac.net/ishtars-international-network-feral-gardens/>.

togetherness at a time when physical gathering poses an unprecedented risk. The theme of dispersal, intrinsically a part of *seeds are meant to disperse*, defines *Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens* as a sympoietic curatorial process of “becoming-with” through collaboration. Through the utilization of social networking to laterally disseminate information, resources, and care during a time of widespread crisis, *Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens* practices dispersal as a method for making kin.

Artist-run-centre, SAVAC, hosts *Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens* as a continuation of their Summer 2020 programming, and conducts their work through sympoiesis as an intentional, political choice. Although based in Toronto, SAVAC functions as a self-proclaimed “nomadic” artist-run-centre.<sup>42</sup> Working collectively with partnership galleries and arts organizations, SAVAC lacks a fixed location. This method of program delivery acts in opposition to the conventional model of the art gallery as an autonomous unit, complete with fixed location, hierarchical division of workers, and independently curated exhibitions and programs. SAVAC seeks to subvert this model in favour of fostering cross-partnerships and non-hierarchical organizational methods. Through these sympoietic processes, SAVAC's pedagogy is defined by constant flux and evolution – tentacular weaving. In this context, sympoiesis conveys a simultaneous unity and disunity – organization and flux.

*Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens* represents this interesting paradox through the implied organization of a network meshed with the wild, unpredictability of feral gardens. This shapes the program's theme of dispersal as a mode for making kin – a chaotic, but logical practice. *Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens* began in May of 2020 with the establishment of a wide-ranging network of participants to whom Christina Battle sent seeds to

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<sup>42</sup> “Mandate,” SAVAC (website), <https://www.savac.net/about/mandate/>.

plant in their own gardens. By sharing seeds and organizing planting times around the lunar cycle, Battle was able to create a unified gardening schedule despite the participants' physical separation.<sup>43</sup> The intention was that with coordinated planting times, participants would feel emotionally connected in gardening together, while the plants would also be coordinated in growth. Dispersal also functions as a mode of program delivery among the members of *Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens*. As part of the process of signing up to join the program, I was included in a mailing list through which I had the opportunity to request seeds from Battle's garden. The mailing list illustrated the program's reliance on digital communication channels as a catalyst for material connection. By sharing her seeds, Battle enabled participants (theoretically around the world) to plant offspring of the same crop. This exemplifies the network's symbol as a community garden – despite their distance, participants would tend to the same crops growing at roughly the same rates. Interestingly, this process of unification depended on the participants' separation, as Battle's seeds would not be able to be shared as widely without the use of the internet as a tool for international outreach. Seed dispersal therefore represents a turn away from the distantiation that dispersal implies: a community garden developed out of physical displacement.

While these initial organizational steps functioned to create a sense of synchronicity among participants, the project was designed to unfold in unpredictable ways. Battle developed a guidebook for *seeds are meant to disperse* as well as *DISPATCHES*, a series of reports developed in conjunction with *Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens*. Both the guidebook and *DISPATCHES* exemplify dispersal as a form of evolution. Designed to convey a dialogue between the act of gardening and the sociopolitical implications of capitalist modes of

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<sup>43</sup> Battle, "Chapter One – May."

food production, both the guidebook and *DISPATCHES* evolved over the course of the spring and summer of 2020, documenting shifts in the planting seasons as well as political discourses around food sovereignty. The first chapter of the guidebook, released in May 2020, unfolds like a scroll – designed for mobile use, the document unravels as a long, continuous page of colourful text in varying tones of pink, yellow and black set against an evolving backdrop of watercolours, bold blocks of colour, and florals in a corresponding palette. Throughout the guide are emphatic instructions to engage mindfully with the act of gardening as an intentional act of decolonization. The beginning of the document (or the top of the page, as it were) includes an illustration of a flower set against a splotchy background of orange, pink, and yellow hues (see Appendix 8). Superimposed against the flower and coloured background appears a phrase that repeats eight times in bold, italicized, shadowed capitals: “SLOW DOWN.” The emphatic nature of this busy graphic conveys a playfulness despite its overwhelming command. The importance of slowing down becomes apparent in the next segment of the chapter. A pink text box appears beneath the repeated lettering with the following instructions: “As you get ready to begin – whether your garden is indoors, on a patio, or in a backyard – sit in your space at three different times of the day and take note of how the sun passes.”<sup>44</sup> This attention to mindfulness repeats throughout this chapter of the guidebook, emphasizing the importance of gardening as an intentional act of interspecies connection. Battle even includes an invitation to participate in an iteration of Yoko Ono’s 1961 instructional work of performance art, *PAINTING FOR THE WIND*: “On the full moon of May 7<sup>th</sup>, let’s perform Yoko Ono’s *PAINTING FOR THE WIND* together. ‘Cut a hole in a bag filled with seeds of any kind and place the bag where there is wind.’”<sup>45</sup> These participatory elements appear throughout the guidebook and encourage participants to engage with their own

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

gardens in mindful and physically connected ways. The guidebook thereby conveys the importance of embodied connections to the land. In combination with the shared seeds from Battle's garden, implicating the body in multi-sensory relationships to the land creates a sense of shared corporeality; the segregated bodies of participants combine through acts of nurture.

*DISPATCHES* serves the more overtly political purpose of articulating the importance of small-scale agriculture as a counter to capitalist modes of food production. Referred to as “timely reports,” *DISPATCHES* are PDF files containing articles, videos, charities, and various other links and resources relating to food sovereignty as a social justice issue.<sup>46</sup> The three reports published so far bear the following titles, indicating their separate themes: *Dispatch 001: Food Apartheid*, *Dispatch 002: Migrant Workers in Agriculture*, and *Dispatch 003: Urban Agriculture as Protest*. *Dispatch 003* begins with a short introductory paragraph outlining the importance of BIPOC communities cultivating their own food, particularly within urban environments.<sup>47</sup> Lack of resources, land, and money can make access to nutritious food difficult to come by among racialized, working-class communities living in urban centres. Like with the guidebook, *Dispatch 003* emphasizes that slowing down and tending to the land represent deliberate acts of resistance to capitalistic food inequities:

When competing with multinational corporations and city development strategies, the struggle to access land for urban agriculture is an act of resistance in itself. In North America, Black activists have led the way for creating urban gardens as a necessity for community building and establishing agency over their own food system, free of capitalist restraints. [...] Our work together on *Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens* is rooted in a slow and meditative process, and it reminds us that sometimes the most effective forms of resistance are persistent, gradual and contemplative.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> “Ishtar’s International Network of Feral Gardens,” SAVAC (website), <https://www.savac.net/ishtars-international-network-feral-gardens/>.

<sup>47</sup> Battle, “Dispatch 003 – Urban Agriculture as Protest,” SAVAC (website), [https://www.savac.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/FINAL\\_Dispatches-003.pdf](https://www.savac.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/FINAL_Dispatches-003.pdf).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

Resistance as a slow, durational act represents an embodied connection to plant growth. Rather than framing food sovereignty in exclusively human terms, this attention to longevity foregrounds the vital interdependence of humans and non-human beings in collaborative acts of resistance. In reference to the broader themes of *Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens*, the feral garden represents durational processes of interspecies collaboration. Longevity and mindfulness act in radical resistance to capitalistic constructs of time and fast-paced food production.

*DISPATCHES* and the guidebook illustrate the theme of sympoiesis through their treatment of embodied connections to nature as indicative of a broader political message about food sovereignty. In *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010) Stacy Alaimo defines her theory of trans-corporeality in sympoietic terms. She critically examines how environmental materiality (at both the micro and macro level), points to broader sociopolitical dilemmas that typify the Anthropocene.

What ethical or political positions emerge from the movement across human and more-than-human flesh? Perhaps the most palpable trans-corporeal substance is food, since eating transforms plants and animals into human flesh. While eating may seem a straightforward activity, peculiar material agencies may reveal themselves during the route from dirt to mouth.<sup>49</sup>

For Alaimo food represents one of the most evident indicators of how environmental materiality directly affects human subjectivity and physical wellness. Her theory of trans-corporeality, the relationship between social and material realities, could be interpreted a method for articulating that all bodies are in constant states of dispersal across these multiple iterations of reality.<sup>50</sup> This state of flux defines *Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens* and its message of dispersal as sympoiesis – and therefore consequently a mode for making kin. The processes of

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<sup>49</sup> Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, 12.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

dispersal that *DISPATCHES* and the guidebook engage, in conjunction with seed sharing, online engagement, and the participants' engagement in tending to a symbolically shared garden all contribute to the political underpinnings of gardening as a mindful act. *Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens* engages participants in the trans-corporeal ethics of bonding body, mind, and politics in combined acts of resistance to capitalism. This practice of inwardly reflecting as a deliberate, political act, represents a form of trans-corporeal dispersal in which participants come together in shared acts of resistance by paying heed to the diverse forms of embodiment that constitute their individual realities.

Gardening therefore becomes a form of anti-capitalist trans-corporeal resistance and making kin occurs by way of these resistant processes. Sharing food and political resources occurs in tandem with deliberate acts of care towards the land. Each action becomes united in its anti-capitalistic purpose and through the intentional expression of empathy towards both human and non-human participants – equal contributors to the sympoietic process of gardening. By extending care across diverse material bodies and subjects through the dispersal of seeds, social networking, the guidebook, and *DISPATCHES*, *Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens* practices making kin as an exercise in trans-corporeal dispersal.



## Conclusion

The Institute of Queer Ecology, BUSH gallery, and SAVAC each express kinship towards the non-human world as acts of resistance to the lingering effects of humanism, the outcomes of which include the segregation of humans and non-human species and the imposition of a singular “objective” reality based on sight: the ocularcentric aesthetic paradigm. Embodied acts of nurture towards the non-human world uproot these values by implicating the body in multi-sensory experiences that evoke the dual logics of tentacular thinking and sympoiesis. Both logics convey processes of “becoming-with” nature that connect human subjectivity to the non-human material world. This conflation of the subject and materiality embraces the flux that defines interspecies kinship.

As the three case studies demonstrate, collectivity, activism, embodiment, and the development of critical pedagogy serve as primary modalities for interrogating humanist politics of exclusion. The Institute of Queer Ecology engages in these practices through *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.* but falls short of offering alternatives to ocularcentrism, given the predominantly visual format of its interface. However, by involving participants in collective world-building at each of the game’s sites, *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.* encourages players to think beyond the digital to consider the sites as symbols of the players’ combined material relationships to the land. This inclusion of materiality (albeit symbolic) alludes to *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.*’s efforts to subvert ocularcentrism within the digital sphere.

BUSH gallery and SAVAC similarly foreground community participation as a form of world-building, but emphasize the capacity for embodied relationships to the land to take place across diverse conceptions of time and space. In a paradox that negates the necessity for land-based pedagogy to remain fixed to specific geographic or spatial locations, *Site/ation* and

*Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens* involve community participants in mindful, embodied interactions with the land despite their physical separation. Time takes on non-linear dimensions in these forms of land-based engagement due to the projects' open-ended, durational, and shifting structures. In "Sovereign Capitals" participants take part in an "open exhibition model" designed to change each time they engage with the project in a perpetual state of evolution.<sup>51</sup> "Storymancy" similarly facilitates evolving processes of reading that foreground the role of both the reader and the book as joint material and intelligent beings in constant flux. "Architecture of the Bush" emphasizes that BUSH gallery itself, as a trans-conceptual artistic practice, is subject to continual shifts in conjunction with the land. *Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens* changes with each participant's engagement and the natural cycle of the seasons. Without specific end-goals, the projects subvert conventional linear conceptions of progress and temporal teleology. Involving participants across diverse spatio-temporalities, *Site/ation* and *Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens* enact land-based pedagogy as embodied flux.

Embodiment therefore takes on multiple dimensions. As the case studies demonstrate, embodied relations transcend the Western convention of dividing the body into five distinctive senses. Although grounded in materiality, embodiment connects to diverse and fluctuating conceptions of subjectivity – and consequently evades identification in fixed terms. The three case studies each underscore the extent to which individual subjectivity connects to the land and its multispecies inhabitants in processes of sympoiesis and tentacular weaving. Through unconventional exhibition models, community engagement, and multi-sensory artistic practices

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<sup>51</sup> "Sovereign Capitals" in "Site/ation," *C Magazine*, 53.

they successfully subvert the humanist worldview and offer alternatives to the prevailing culture of ocularcentrism within mainstream artistic practice.

While this departure from humanism illustrates a promising future for equitable artistic practice, it also illustrates a need for interdisciplinarity between the arts, humanities, and science studies. Haraway foresees making kin as a call to a more environmentally sustainable future, but as the case studies demonstrate, the principles that inform this theory also serve to incite alternative multi-sensory artistic engagements outside the limitations of ocularcentrism. An equally political and aesthetic measure, making kin implicates both mind and body in multi-sensory aesthetic experiences that incite an appreciation for flux. This flux then becomes a form of radical resistance. In opposition to the humanist values of order, cultural homogeneity, and ocular objective reality, the inherent flux of making kin creates new possibilities for cross-cultural and interspecies kin to thrive in tentacular chaos.

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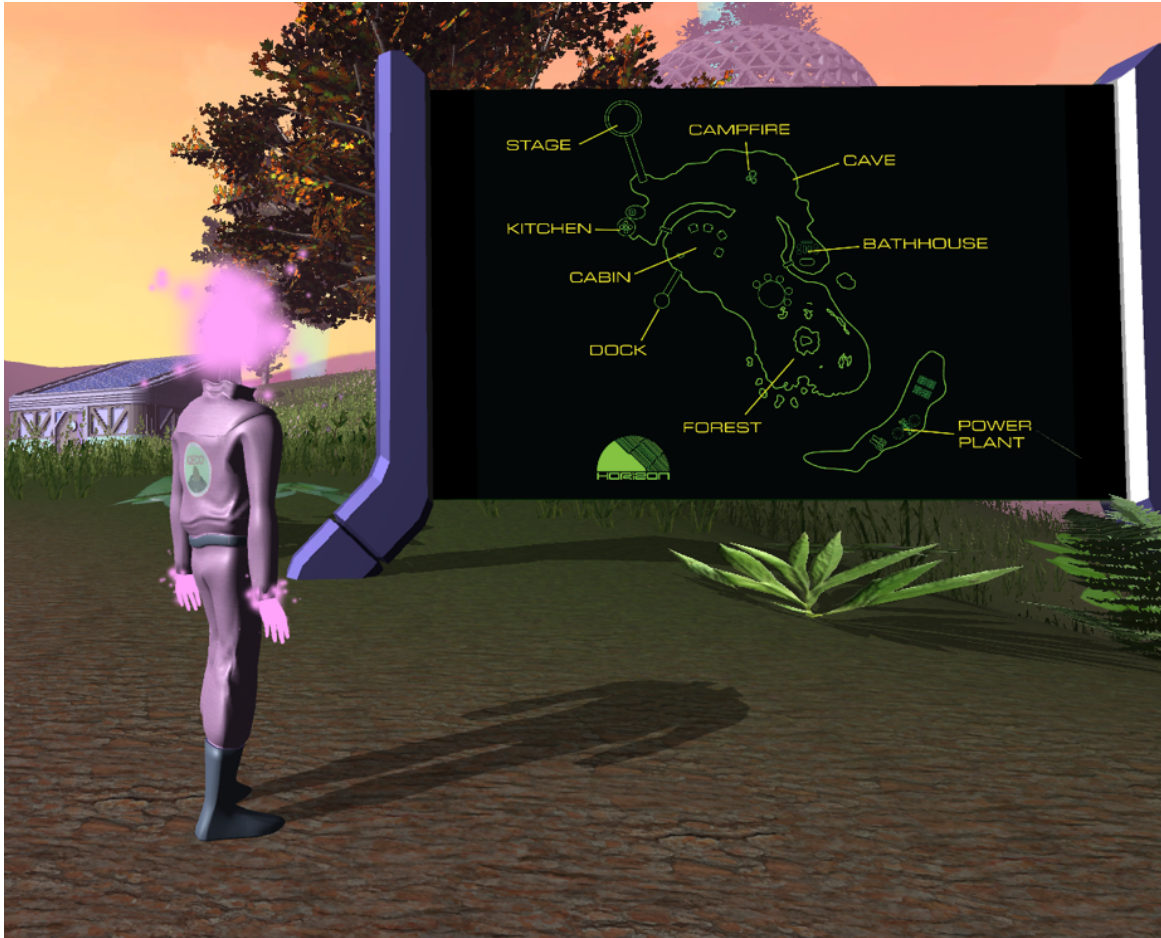
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Appendix

Appendix 1: Screenshot, *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.*, digital commune, The Institute of Queer Ecology, 2021



Appendix 2: Screenshot, *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.*, digital commune, The Institute of Queer Ecology, 2021



Appendix 3: Screenshot, *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.*, digital commune, The Institute of Queer Ecology, 2021



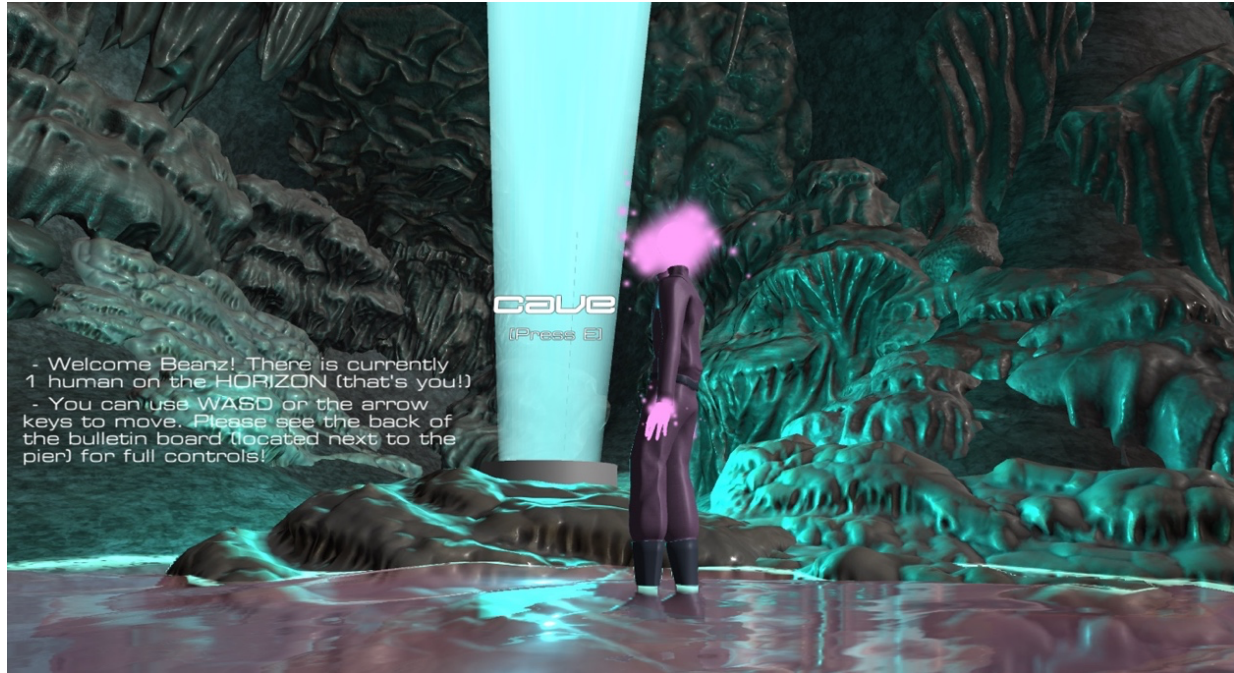
Appendix 4: Screenshot, *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.*, digital commune, The Institute of Queer Ecology, 2021



Appendix 5: Screenshot, *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.*, digital commune, The Institute of Queer Ecology, 2021



Appendix 6: Screenshot, *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.*, digital commune, The Institute of Queer Ecology, 2021



Appendix 7: Screenshot, #*BUSH*, land marking spray paint on land, New BC Indian Art and Welfare Society Collective, 2014. [www.taniawillard.ca](http://www.taniawillard.ca)



Appendix 8: Screenshot, Guidebook distributed by Christina Battle, “Chapter One – May.” *Ishtar’s International Network of Feral Gardens*, Summer 2020. <https://savac.net/ishtars-international-network-feral-gardens/>

