Host & Compost

by

Gizem Candan

A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Criticism & Curatorial Practice

Ignite Gallery, OCAD University, March 2 - 6
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Abstract

Host & Compost (March 2 – 6, 2024) is a material-based curatorial research and thesis exhibition that presents two Toronto-based artists, Leeay Aikawa and Sara Maston, at Ignite Gallery. The artists employ various artistic mediums, including painting, sculpture, and installation, to create artworks exploring concepts such as compost, decomposition, being host to non-humans, life, death, and rebirth. Through tangible and metaphysical aspects of composting, the exhibition aims to build fresh dialogues between visitors and decomposers. This research investigates life inside compost piles while seeing it as a metaphor for further investigation through art and philosophy.

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Host & Compost was presented on the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples.

I dedicate this thesis to co-existing life on Earth.

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Preface

Host & Compost is a public exhibition (March 2 – 6, 2024) that presents two Toronto-based artists, Leeay Aikawa and Sara Maston, and research paper (comprising of a curatorial essay and a support paper) presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Criticism & Curatorial Practice.

The *Compost & Host* thesis research was supported by the Canada Graduate Scholarships – Master's (CGS M), the Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS), and OCAD U Graduate Student Project and Travel Grant. Artist fees, installation and marketing costs were supported by the OCAD University Graduate Studies exhibition stipend.

Curatorial Essay

Host & Compost

By Gizem Candan

"Nietzsche has expressed that very beautifully: 'You shall become friends of the immediate things.' And the immediate things are this earth, this life." -C. G. Jung¹

A compost pile is home to multitudes of life. In any compost system, one may encounter earthworms, bacteria, fungi, fungus gnats, or other small busy insects. Despite decomposition being a fundamental part of life, people in the city do not often think about it. That is why most people's first impression of compost systems may evoke images of damp and foul-smelling heaps. The exhibition, *Host & Compost*, brings subtle non-human life through decayed organic matter into the gallery evoking fresh dialogue between humans and non-humans by *hosting*. In fact, most people would be satisfied to harvest a juicy tomato, or dig up a golden potato, yet few are comfortable burying their unpleasant food scraps in the little decomposers' unknown habitats. *Host & Compost* aims to ease the viewer's discomfort and encourage them to acknowledge that our funky waste is nutrition for soil, and an essential part of the life cycle of organic matter on Earth. Compost can be considered as "living" or "once-living" organic matter that has broken down [died]. *Host & Compost* invites the viewer to encounter decomposers while we celebrate

¹ C.G. (Carl Gustav) Jung, "Nature Was Once Fully Spirit and Matter" in *The Earth has a soul: C.G. Jung On Nature, Technology & Modern Life*, ed. Meredith Sabini (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2016), 86.

² John D. Morris, "Does Organic Mean Living?," February 1, 2007. https://www.icr.org/article/does-organic-mean-living.

tangible and spiritual transformation. The exhibition focuses not only on food waste but all organic matter—including humans—that will eventually decompose. People often underestimate the proximity of decomposers to us, and the potential of *co-creating* a new perspective on life with our intimate surroundings. We may not directly observe decomposers, but thinking of hosting them in our kitchen, food, garden, and even in our own bodies may change how we perceive the world. They are truly everywhere, waiting for their moment to shine. Let us celebrate their presence with some compost cake and compost tea.

Host & Compost explores the practical and inner potential of decomposition through a variety of artistic mediums including sculpture, installation, and painting by two contemporary artists based in Toronto, Leeay Aikawa and Sara Maston. Aikawa uses natural, discarded, and gifted materials, observes symbiotic relationships between humans and non-humans. Since "soil represents life on earth," she often uses it in her practice as a tool to unite with non-human others. Maston, through her multidisciplinary practice, focuses on how animals perceive the world, and explores the interconnectedness of different life forms and their alternative life worlds. Both artists explore the natural world—animals, trees, seeds, grass, soil, mud, lakes, holes, rain, and many more—and bring their knowledge and experiences into the studio to create art.

On our first studio visit, the artists were given some compost from my vermicompost system, which I keep in my small apartment, to get a tangible first sensation of the material. Throughout our conversations and continued studio visits, *compost* started to expand into different ideas such as being a host, hospitality, life, and death. *Host & Compost* invites artists to

³ Satish Kumar, "Soil, Soul and Society." The Ecologist, December 7, 2012. https://theecologist.org/2012/dec/07/soil-soul-and-society.

interpret the cycle of birth and death through their unique perspectives. Timothy Morton describes "living data" in this way in his book, *Being Ecological* (2018), as thinking ecologically, experiencing nature without "human tools," and engaging directly with our surroundings. He writes: "So your scientific view of things, up close with a hammer and a camera, doesn't mean you're 'seeing' nature; you are still interpreting it with human tools and a human's touch. Thinking in an ecological way means letting go of this idea of nature." He argues that human interpretation of nature should not narrow our perception of what is going on around and beyond us. Instead, each of our encounters with the non-human world should deepen our relationships with our surroundings, allowing us to experience the world holistically.

The artworks in *Host & Compost* show the viewer the possibilities of the "experiential" and trusting their senses when connecting with nature.⁵ My aim is to create first encounters with compost for the viewer, and those already familiar are welcome to further their holistic relationship with it. This perspective encourages the audience to embrace life and death within compost. The artworks in the exhibition do not directly address the scientific process of composting or its benefits for the environment. Instead, the artists employ the material to build new concepts based on their experiences with hosting decay and non-human lifeforms such as microorganisms. Aikawa and Maston present models for hosting non-human life through their artworks that involve the generosity of compost. Among the reflections they offer to the viewer are the subtle transformation of organic matter into compost, and how the process of decay

⁴ Timothy Morton, "Introduction: Not Another Information Dump" in *Being Ecological*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2018), 34.

⁵ Ibid., 35.

embodies *the cycle of life*—encompassing death and rebirth. The exhibition creates a space where audience members can embrace the interaction between human and non-human life forms.

Sara Maston's installation, *Digging and Pile* (2024), offers an extraordinary experience to the viewer, *a hole* in the middle of a compost *pile*. Maston cleverly digs a hole in the pile positioning a painting in it, inviting visitors into a world of decay. Maston revitalizes the potential life beneath soil through the act of digging a hole—one of the most enjoyable parts of composting. The hole refers to a gate (an opening) to the other world. This opening is typically considered above terra (in the air) for souls to pass through to reach the afterlife. However, Maston's piece has a different connotation. The hole can be experienced as a portal to a realm beneath our feet, where non-human life-forms exist: "Gates stand between here and there, between the known and the unknown." In other words, she gives symbolic *birth* to non-human life through her action, and this symbiotic *co-dependency* becomes the first step of our own physical and spiritual transformation. Maston invites our decomposer friends into the compost party through the portal, and the painting placed inside the pile stands for a glimpse of our first encounter with them.

Maston's installation, in this sense, encourages the viewer to stay grounded while physically opening a space in the dirt. In the middle of the forest, there may be a vast complex of life hidden beneath a rock. If one picks it up, they will see the potential life in the soil beneath it.

Maston's bodily action of digging in the compost pile reveals the potential of mind through labor

⁶ J. E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, trans. Jack Sage (London: Routledge, 1971), 149.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ami Ronnberg, and Kathleen Martin (Eds), *The book of symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* (Köln: Taschen, 2010), 558.

of movement. When hands get dirtier, the mind becomes clearer. This tangible experience with compost helps liberate our inner chaos. Digging, layering, and connecting with non-human others shifts our attention from self-centeredness to an awareness of interspecies coexistence. It is a way of storytelling through compost as medium, celebrating dirt, and encouraging care for our surroundings. Maston pushes the dirt from the center out to the edges, the scent of compost spreading through her nose. Her whole body is engaged in a complete sensory process. Maston's tilling of compost with her hands while letting dirt collect under her fingernails becomes a performance for reconnecting with the non-human world through her physical labor.

Maston's compost cake, cast from a real cake and candies, extends the artwork by being placed next to the compost pile. The (human) host prepares the ideal environment in the compost bin and waits until the others arrive—microorganisms, earthworms, and other beneficial insects. The artist welcomes the decomposers as they enter the space, the cake sculpture acts as an offering of hospitality. When it comes to composting, what we give the Earth is our discarded scraps, such as spoiled food, leftovers, and indigestible substances like gum or bones. This offering is a request to cure our waste, turning it into nutrients for the soil. It is essential for life on the planet that we acknowledge our everyday exchanges with other non-human life. In this context, the show serves as a reminder for the viewer to be more intentional in their everyday actions as Maston's offering to our guests is not human leftovers, but a heart-shaped cake, topped with icing and candy.

Alongside Maston's *Compost Cake*, the artist Leeay Aikawa contributes to the theme of offerings and welcomes decomposers into the gallery with her compost tea sculpture, *Spring Now (snail)* (2024). During the exhibition, Aikawa brews a handful of compost in a tea bag. The

process transforms water into a "living liquid" through the introduction of beneficial microorganisms. This work aims to create not only a chemical transformation but also a spiritual metamorphosis. According to Carl G. Jung, the "matter" is an inanimate, passive, and solely "intellectual concept" that has no significance for humans on a psychological or spiritual level. Jung states that "Nature is not matter only, she is also spirit." As a complex system, nature constantly transforms from one form to another. Through complex sculptures, Aikawa presents a stage of *transmutation* in nature, that can be seen in decomposition. She is inspired by the tangible and spiritual *alchemy* that contemporary compost practice provides. When thinking ecologically, physical actions taken to heal our environment and reshape our connection with nature are crucial. Jung states that "cosmic salvation" can only be achieved by saving both human and non-human worlds together. Making compost is not alchemy in the traditional sense, which transforms lead into gold; rather it is an alchemical process involving conscious human participation and labor. It helps us transform our leftovers and bodies into nutrients while directing our essence toward nature.

When the viewer moves from Maston's installation towards Aikawa's sculptures, they will see that the artist uses soil for her artistic practice as a complex formation—as soil contains compost. Soil has great significance for the artist as the final stage of healing organic matter, including human and non-human life and consciousness. Alongside this generous offering to

⁹ "Beneficial Microbial Compost Tea" CannaCon, July 18, 2018. https://cannacon.org/beneficial-microbial-compost-tea/

¹⁰ Jung, The Earth Has a Soul, 85.

¹¹ Ibid., 80.

¹² Ibid., 87.

non-human beings in soil, *Spring Now (snail)* also represents non-humans' dwelling. In this piece, a snail shell provides a home for microorganisms brewing in compost tea. Its spiral shape signifies "growth" that continues beyond tangible life, and enters the state of consciousness for humans, leading to "awakening." Aikawa's use of the spiral in this manner encourages visitors to seek moments of physical and emotional touch with non-humans and heal their inner selves through positioning their presence in nature. Her sculpture enriches the sensory experience of visitors and extends a warm welcome by offering them a cup of tea.

After enjoying birth and life in the exhibition, the viewer comes to the last stage of transformation of mind and body with Aikawa's sculpture *Funeral of the Bee*. The artist engenders concepts like generosity, care for the environment, and "divine wisdom" with the use of the bee, since it promotes creation and transformation. ¹⁴ In fact, Aikawa's bee appears dead in the show, placed over a pine needle bed constructed from organic materials. She uses symbolism to illustrate the cycle of life, death and rebirth. The dead bee in decomposition evokes the final stage of alchemy. The body is born, lives, decomposes and "supports new life." ¹⁵ The (human) body in this sense functions as a host itself. After death, it welcomes insects and bacteria through the body, feeds them and lets them live. This transformation from human to soil repositions the human within a wider ecological context. Hosting allows one to be in connection with the *other*.

As the host of the compost system, this exhibition aims to celebrate and honor the final [living] product (compost) by hosting a compost party. Decomposition is not the end but a new

¹³ Ami Ronnberg, and Kathleen Martin, *The book of symbols*, 718-720.

¹⁴ Ibid., 228-230.

¹⁵ Ibid., 764.

beginning, and thus calls for celebration. The significance of thinking holistically across numerous events evokes Deleuze's concept of the "zone of indiscernibility." This ontological theory is that the overlapping relationship of animals and humans "...is never a combination of forms, but rather the common fact: the common fact of man and animal." We become Aikawa's dead bee the moment we are aware of our own mortality. We do not transform into the dead bee; instead, we share a commonality with one another. In holding space to grieve the bee, we welcome her to become a part of human society. We should not be terrified by the state of indiscernibility. Rather, it reminds us of the interconnectedness of all things and the ways in which they overlap and are composed in various interactions. The main reason for our fear of the dark comes from our mortality. David Abram describes this sense of vulnerability, writing that: "Modern humanity is crippled by a fear of its own animality, and of the animate earth that sustains us." ¹⁸ According to Abram, like animals, "we are both eaters and eaten." ¹⁹ Although it seems like a dichotomy at first, it is the way life flows through one another and occasionally overlaps. We get touched in return when we touch the other. ²⁰ This reciprocal relationship between us, as humans, and nature does not need to happen immediately. We first host the pile and after death, the pile hosts us. Life will continue thriving in every corner and crevice; within

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 19-24.

¹⁷ Ibid., 20.

¹⁸ David Abram, Becoming animal: An earthly cosmology (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2011), 69.

¹⁹ Ibid., 63.

²⁰ Ibid.

and without us. This exhibition is calling to recognize what matters, valuing all the unavoidable moments where life forms come into connection.

But overall, why would we consider composting as hosting? Composting is an organic breakdown that is maintained by humans, as it requires ongoing human labor and care.

Regardless of the way we choose to compost, we dedicate space to host and welcome non-human species. The (human) host must accurately and intentionally prepare the ingredients to activate the natural process. The host has the ideal opportunity to extend hospitality to non-human life with this simple activity that may be done over any surface or in any container including concrete or plastic. This intimate connection to the non-human *others* (decomposers) requires ethical consideration between humans and their surroundings. The exhibition goes beyond the question: What does it mean to be the initiator of a gathering for non-human life forms; to be the host of the compost pile? What ethics do we define around the compost system since it holds subtle natural non-human networks? Composting in this sense should be considered as a process of *healing* and *restoring*. Life can flourish anywhere if effective conditions exist. In the exhibition, composting serves as a metaphor for reconnecting with nature, a bridge between the natural world and human civilization.

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Embracing, making, digging, dying, birth and rebirth encourage us to continue to be present within a complex system with non-human others through the catastrophe. In fact, our obsession, as humans in the city, with being clean, uncontaminated, and safe from outsiders—especially germs and insects—mostly keeps us away from perceiving the complex spectrum of life. We find it easier to imagine non-human life in wild nature, including animals, plants, and fungi, as a distant, isolated and seemingly sterilized environment of the *city*. In this regard, can

we examine the state of neurosis and anxiety caused by the inability of human beings to position themselves in encounters with non-human others? What effects do we experience when we are isolated from nature? How do we rebuild what has been destroyed and how do we become *resilient*? Everyone could find their own way to contribute to the environment rather than merely witness what is happening around us. As Karen Houle remarks in the beginning of her article, "Farm as Ethics" we are all activists since we are all active beings who never stop action-ing. ²¹ Our actions could be anything; gardening, cooking, researching, making, writing, reading, listening, embracing, touching, digging, or loving. In this sense, composting may be seen as a quintessential action of encouraging "small hope" against climate precarity and healing the mind. ²² This exhibition invites visitors to wander around compost, smell the fresh earth, reflect on the climate crisis, and to consider themselves once more as a part of nature.

Traditional ways of composting require human labor, getting everyone's hands dirty regardless of their ability, and getting into contact with bacteria and insects. As such, acknowledging the need for coexistence with non-humans and reflecting on the destruction caused by humans are likewise laborious engagements. Besides, an individual's ability to employ their labor to create and restore could potentially be seen as a form of climate resilience. Digging holes again is different from excavating for modern human's excessive consumption. The main purpose of this action from this perspective is to repair what has been damaged, which mainly includes our perception of the environment.

²¹ Amish Morrell and Diane Borsato (Eds), *Outdoor School: Contemporary Environmental Art* (Madeira Park, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 2021), 89.

²² Sarah Jaquette Ray, *A Field Guide To Climate Anxiety: How To Keep Your Cool On A Warming Planet* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020), 66-69.

Decomposers in the soil devour life to replenish it. The metaphor of composting challenges our obsession with preserving everything including ourselves. *Host & Compost* renames decay as a metaphor for liberation. Liberation comes from our physical and inner transformation. The promise of composting goes beyond its tangible form and represents restoring and repairing what has been damaged. It occurs through freeing our isolated bodies, touching the outside world while being touched, and embracing our vulnerability in the darkest moments. In this sense, the artists, Leeay Aikawa and Sara Maston invite visitors to reconsider human interaction with decomposers and decay and to reconnect once again. Their work describes the point at which we contact the other and merge with it. This consciousness of seeing life as being everywhere invites us to celebrate our presence in nature, have small exchanges with our surroundings, and care for the environment, the community, and the mind.

Support Paper

Introduction

Composting is one of the greatest ways to combat climate crisis. It prevents food waste from going to landfills and producing greenhouse gases. Our individual action of composting not just benefits soil health but also promotes better connection between humans and non-humans. My compost journey started in a small plastic container with a couple of hundred Red Wiggler worms in my one-bedroom apartment during the pandemic, and as of today I have thousands of them living with me and helping to reduce my food waste. Taking care of your compost system has anti-depressant effects. It allows you to stay grounded and mindful of the present moment as you interact with your organic waste and decomposers. You may come across a new life form in or around your compost pile. This may be a bug visiting your compost, pepper seeds from yesterday's dinner that have sprouted, or mold growing within it due to the moist environment. The composition of diverse life in your compost pile changes every day.

Living in human-dominated cities, being isolated from diverse life—such as most wildlife, animals, plants, mushrooms, rich soil, clean air, clean water and all the beauty of nature—and experiencing the loss of biodiversity in nature gives us stress in many ways.²³ We lose not just physical connection with our surroundings but also spiritual connection. It may be difficult for people to feel empathy for non-human others and grieve the lost. Hence this research seeks ways to reconnect nature from starting to explore our immediate surroundings. In the book,

²³ Britt Wray, *Generation Dread: Finding Purpose in an Age of Climate Crisis* (Toronto, ON: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2022), 54-57.

A *Field Guide to Climate Anxiety* (2020), Sarah Jaquette Ray writes that "The key to happiness is not pleasure or the absence of discomfort, but a sense of purpose."²⁴ Finding small purposes in our lives to care for the environment may help reduce our stress. Composting in this sense encourages me to find and embrace life beyond the concrete of the city. It helps me to welcome the non-human world into my living space and to dig out the potential life beneath the soil when I am outside. Compost is generous. It is a portal for humans to enter the non-human world in a small but effective way.

Host & Compost, which showcases the artworks of two Toronto-based artists, Leeay
Aikawa and Sara Maston, brings life to the gallery through compost. The exhibition investigates
the ways of hosting each other as humans and decomposers. This thesis also addresses some of
the challenges and valuable encounters curators face when working with organic materials in
contemporary art. During my studio visits with the artists, we explored ways of hosting
decomposers in the gallery space and promoting a different vantage point for humans to
experience non-human worlds in the city. While the artists create sensorial experiences for
visitors that include seeing, hearing, smelling, and witnessing life growing in the gallery, the
exhibition encourages them to think about the cycle of life in a broader scope. The artists use a
variety of symbols in their work to express these concepts. The exhibition encourages the
audience to see the human body and the mind as the host and the guest.

This curatorial thesis uses theory and the arts to show how human and non-human life forms coexist. *Host & Compost* draws a subtle map that circles around the notion of *becoming*

²⁴ Ray, Ibid., 28.

and *death*. Even though the viewer does not feel the pressure to take a certain path to view the artworks, the whole experience of the exhibition is designed as a way of representing the transformation of living organisms. While discussing the cycle of life in a broader sense, the artists extend symbolic hospitality to non-human life forms in the gallery through offering cake and compost tea. Through compost, the artists create a space to celebrate *co-existence* for everyone including bacteria, insects, sprouts growing in the pile, mold in the elixir, and humans. *Host & Compost* becomes a venue to embrace the fullness of life with a compost party and funeral.

Theme, Design and Methodology

This research is grounded in the transformation of organic matter, and ways of connecting non-human *others* through compost. *Host & Compost* takes place at Ignite Gallery (East), where the viewer may enter the gallery from either side of the hallway. The didactics on the gallery wall serve as the first thing the audience sees when they enter the building through the main entrance. One of the challenges that I faced when designing the exhibition was the gallery's protocols about vinyl usage. My initial concept for wall didactics was to use organic materials such as wheat paste. Leaving behind the least amount of waste possible is significant for my curatorial practice. After the show I donated seventeen bags of composted pine mulch that we used at the gallery to the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Sustainability Initiatives (ODESI) at OCAD University for the use of the pollinator garden on campus. Except for the exhibition title and curator's and artists' names, no didactics were used on the gallery wall to prevent any distraction when experiencing the artworks. This design strategy also allowed us to limit our waste.

The way I approach composting in my practice differs from decomposition itself. This thesis explores composting through *human labor*. In the simplest way, when we bury our organic waste in soil, we wait for decomposers to arrive and eat our leftovers. For some people, this collaboration that we have with decomposers including bacteria, mold, insects, and earthworms may seem repulsive. In his book, *I Contain Multitudes* (2016), Ed Yong writes that society's

²⁵ For sustainable vinyl substitutes, the Centre for Sustainable Curating at Western University offers an excellent source. The Centre for Sustainable Curating, the Synthetic Collective, Ioana Dragomir, and Noémie Fortin, *Using the Resources at Hand: Sustainable Exhibition Design*, last modified July 2023, accessed March 15, 2024, https://sustainablecurating.ca/using-the-resources-at-hand-sustainable-exhibition-design/.

Considering "most bacteria are decomposers that return nutrients from decaying organic matter back to the world," it becomes clear that most bacteria (if not all) are vital for life on Earth, including the trillions of microbes that inhabit our guts. ²⁷ Yong explains the rest of bacteria as "parasites." He writes that "if one partner benefited at the expense of the other, it was a parasite (or a pathogen if it caused disease)," and he continues defining the difference between a parasite and beneficial bacteria by their relationships, writing that "if it benefited without affecting its host, it was a commensal. If it benefited its host, it was a mutualist. All these styles of coexistence (fall) under the rubric of symbiosis." Does that sound familiar? I see some similarities between parasites and modern humans since both harm their host in different ways. In this case, modern humans' excessive consumption of natural resources and failing to take care of their host, the biosphere. That is why *Host & Compost* focuses on the overlapping environments of humans and non-humans in the city to promote mutualistic relationships.

I consider curating as a collaborative action in which the curator is an active contributor to the creative process. Throughout this research, I had close contact with the artists and explored wisdom that compost provides both as a concept and material. Being a part of their creative journey allowed me to envision the exhibition design. *Host & Compost* in this sense explores a methodology of material-based research. I did not commission a new body of work for the show

²⁶ Ed Yong, *I Contain Multitudes: The Microbes Within Us and a Grander View of Life* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2016), 33.

²⁷ Ibid., 34.

²⁸ Ibid., 35.

but asked the artists to experiment with the same material in their own ways. During my first studio visit with the artists, I offered a handful of compost and a jar of compost tea for them to experience the material firsthand. The material itself then unfolded into different but related concepts such as hosting the non-human other, physical transformation of living organisms, and spiritual transformation of humans. Compost in this research becomes both subject and object.

Sara Maston, whose practice often involves exploring the vantage point of animals through digging holes, was asked to experiment with the compost pile and the compost itself as a material. On the other hand, Leeay Aikawa, who works with alchemy, was encouraged to work with compost tea and soil as a material when creating her work for the exhibition. They continued to experiment with the material until the last day, and the gallery at the end became their playground. As a curator, in this way I provided the artists with a hospitable environment where they could be free to explore and take risks. Composting does not promote exploitation of nature, instead it should be seen as an offering and symbol of co-creation. During the conceptualization of the exhibition, the artists and I worked with the same material concept. Their dependency on the material I provided them made it possible to keep constant the aesthetic and conceptual language of the artworks and create a cohesive experience for the viewer.

As a curator, I supported the artists throughout their creative journey and did regular studio visits to meet their needs. However, both artists worked independently, and did not witness each other's creation process. Since neither had worked with compost before this exhibition, I encouraged them to experiment, and follow their instincts when they produced their art for the show. Even though the exhibition design was pre-planned, the artists brought additional artworks to the gallery for the installation day. Having a free playground to create a

new body of work with a specific concept is a double-edged sword. There were unexpected events that happened during installation and became an important part of the show. In one of those moments, Sara Maston carried into the gallery a squirrel's nest that she had found on Toronto Island, and Leeay Aikawa brought a peanut she had spotted in High Park, where she had witnessed a squirrel bury it. Both artists unintentionally considered this event—glimpses of encountering the squirrel—as a divine moment for them to reconnect with their animal selves. Both correlated the significance of this encounter with the exhibition and brought the representative objects into the gallery.

The exhibition starts with Sara Maston's compost pile by bringing decomposers into the gallery. For installing her piece, *Pile* (2024), Maston brought her dog to help with the action of digging. The artist carefully made every decision about the pile while also allowing spontaneity. Maston's holes in the pile represent portals for non-human life forms to enter our sterile living space. Even though the unknown beneath the earth may be associated with gloom and our mortality, Maston's moist and healthy compost pile brought life into the gallery when things started to grow from it. The audience was then able to explore the unpredictable nature of the dark and get a close-up look and see sprouts emerging from the darkness.

As a symbol of death, Leeay Aikawa, performed a funeral for a bee in the gallery.

Aikawa's bee, which is placed on a foraged pine needle bed, dies slowly during the exhibition.

This artwork does not just represent the corporal death of animals including human animals, but also creates a space for the viewer to grieve for the non-human other. The artist showed her outstanding sculpting skills with this art piece and organized a humble funeral for the closing reception. During the event, Aikawa handed a basket of flowers to the audience and asked them

to leave a single flower beside the dying bee. This participatory action enriches the feeling of care for the other and helps the viewer to be part of the artwork with a creative response. At the end of the exhibition, we were left with a beautiful bouquet of flowers surrounding the sculpture of the dead bee.

Literature Review

Host & Compost focuses mainly on art, ecology and philosophy around the physical and conceptual organic material of compost. This literature review examines interconnected nature as a holistic entity and how human animals position themselves as part of the whole. Bruno Latour in his book, We Have Never Been Modern (1993), argues what modernity is in terms of our positionality in nature. He writes: "Modernity is often defined in terms of humanism, either as a way of saluting the birth of 'man' or as a way of announcing his death. But this habit itself is modern, because it remains asymmetrical. It overlooks the simultaneous birth of 'nonhumanity'..." Even though Latour specifically refers to modernity in his writing, his argument still holds relevance in contemporary society. This viewpoint of nature, as separated from society, may seem like the primary cause of the climate crisis as well as our neurotic ways of living in a climate catastrophe.

Latour's graphic of "Purification and Translation" (See Figure 1) shows us the states of "purification" and "hybridization" between human and non-human nature. ³⁰ He argues that if this purification, between nature and society, gets separated from the co-existence of life between living organisms, "we are truly modern." However, according to Latour, this separation of humans and nature never truly happened. *Host & Compost* reshapes this dichotomy Latour addresses in his text and examines it within the context of compost in society. Because if

²⁹ Bruno Latour, *We have never been modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10-13.

³⁰ Ibid.. 11.

³¹ Ibid., 11.

we consider decomposition as happening in every area of life including our bodies, we have never been in the state of "purification."

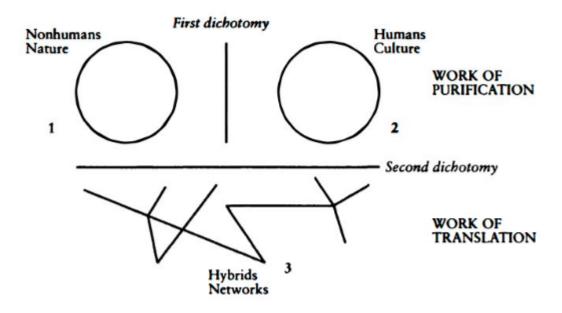


Figure 1.1 Purification and translation

Figure 1. Bruno Latour, We have never been modern, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 11.

In this context, *Host & Compost* investigates the interconnectedness of nature that we can call *symbiosis*. The symbiotic perspective, perceiving life forms as intertwined at a cellular level has been growing in popularity in recent years. David Abram describes the reciprocal relationship between humans and non-human others in his book, *Becoming Animal* (2011). He writes that "in a thoroughly palpable sense, we are born of this planet, our attentive bodies coevolved in rich and intimate rapport with the other bodily forms-animals, plants, mountains,

rivers-that compose the shifting flesh of this breathing world."³² Abram explains "human animality" with following words, "Becoming earth. Becoming animal. Becoming, in this manner, fully human."³³ As humans interact with the animate world, they begin to co-create. Abram's way of placing human animals in nature in his works, *Becoming Animal* (2011) and *The Spell of the Sensuous* (2017), grounds this research by showing how we can perceive our surroundings through our senses.

All this literature helps us reconnect with our immediate surroundings. Decay in this sense is a notable example that we cannot be isolated from. When we recreate Latour's graphic of "Purification and Translation," (See Figure 1) the concept of compost should be the *intersection* of nature and society which is demonstrated in the second graphic (See Figure 2).³⁴ Composting in any area of life connects us to non-human life forms. This practice can be done in one of the most inhospitable environments for them: the city. For instance, a compost pile can become home to life in a gallery space. Remember, tiny green sprouts began growing on their own, when Maston's compost pile was left in the gallery for a week during the exhibition. A similar case also happened to Aikawa's *Elixir* (2024). In a couple of days, the organic waste that she placed in her artwork began to grow mold. *Host & Compost* thus shows overlapping vantage points of animals, plants, and decay through art and compost.

³² Abram, Becoming Animal, 78.

³³ Ibid., 3.

³⁴ See Figure 1 and 2.

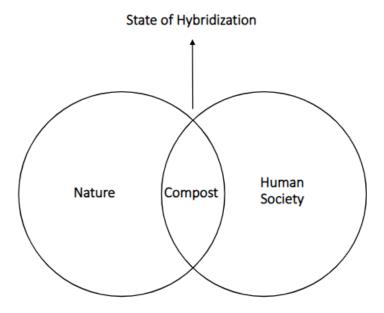


Figure 2. A graphic of State of Hybridization inspired by Bruno Latour's graphic "Purification and Transformation", Gizem Candan, 2024.

The main objective of this research is to use compost for hosting decomposers. Donna J. Haraway describes "sympoiesis" in her book, *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), as simply as "making-with."³⁵ She continues, writing that "critters do not precede their relatings; they make each other through semiotic material involution, out of the beings of previous such entanglements."³⁶ Therefore, there is no stable connection between the host and the guest. Haraway uses the term "holobiont to mean symbiotic assemblages,"³⁷ Their relationship constantly changes; the host becomes guest, and the guest turns into host at one point. Haraway's

³⁵ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 58.

³⁶ Ibid., 60.

³⁷ Ibid.

perspective on seeing richness in the living world serves as an essential source of inspiration for this research. She emphasizes the significance of bacteria for life on Earth; "To be animal is to become-with bacteria." In this instance, the bacteria that inhabit the human body becomes the *symbiont* and the body itself becomes the host. When the body decomposes, the opposite happens: it gets eaten and decomposers begin to host the body. *Host & Compost* presents this duality in life.

This literature review demonstrates how diverse life is on Earth, and how diverse are the intersections of life forms. Many scholars continue to focus on ecology and our coexistence with other living forms. All these critical perspectives on holistic nature supported me while I conceptualized the exhibition. *Host & Compost* thus presents small exchanges between hosts and guests and offers an opportunity for viewers to become aware of their intimate surroundings.

³⁸ Ibid., 65.

Exhibition Review

Host & Compost evolved from the small vermicompost system that I have been keeping in my apartment. Since the day my partner and I built a compost bin with a several handfuls of earthworms, coco coir, water and our food waste (one of the most important ingredients because we needed to feed our guests), this practice became an important part of my life. It continues to fascinate me to see how easy it was to bring non-human life to our living spaces. Even though vermicomposting is a straightforward practice, I know many people who failed to maintain their compost systems and killed quite a few hundred earthworms. Taking care of it is just as crucial as building it. That is why this research is inspired by living material, *compost*, and hosting it in our isolated habitats in the city.

In addition to being inspired by my compost bin for this curatorial research, I also encountered New York-based artist Walter De Maria's massive sculpture, *The New York Earth Room* (1977), where it still stays open to the public from Wednesday to Sunday.³⁹ This spectacular artwork has contained 280,000 lbs. of dirt on the second floor of a building in New York for over forty-five years. But how could this sculpture survive for so long? Someone needs to take care of it. Kyle Chayka, in his article, writes about his experience with the artwork and his conversations with the artist-curator, Bill Dilworth, who looks after De Maria's dirt.⁴⁰

Dilworth is at pains to keep it stable, watering and raking the earth (the same organic material installed forty years ago) on a weekly basis. "It's very much a Zen garden. You maintain it and nothing grows," he said. In fact, mushrooms and grass have sprouted, large dragonflies have hatched from subterranean nests, and

³⁹ Walter De Maria, *The New York Earth Room*, Dia Art Foundation, 1977.

⁴⁰ Kyle Chayka, "The Unchanging, Ever-Changing: Earth Room," *The Paris Review,* November 2, 2017, accessed March 15, 2024.

a visitor even once threw a can of black beans on the dirt. Vigorous raking takes care of most intruders. Yet the context of the work is always shifting. As Bill says, "The Earth Room is meant to be unchanging; nevertheless it evolves."⁴¹

In fact, there are great similarities between *The New York Earth Room* and Sara Maston's installation, *Pile* (2024). Even though Maston's compost pile was a smaller-scale project containing only 790 lbs. of composted pine mulch, it was still in need of daily care. This way of curating poses some challenges. Working with organic materials requires time and dedication. During the exhibition, I took care of Maston's compost pile the same way Dilworth did for De Maria's *Earth Room*, without aiming for any particular result, and gave it a spray of water each morning before the gallery opened to the public. Sprouts started to show up and this spontaneous event brought life to the gallery. Both the artists and I welcomed and witnessed how the artwork changed during the exhibition.

Another similarity between De Maria's *The New York Earth Room* and *Host & Compost* is that they both are presented in a *white cube* venue. This concept of white gallery walls with generous lighting continues in present-day exhibition-making. However, there are numerous alternatives to white cube gallery exhibitions, including projects like North Bay's Ice Follies Biennial, held on frozen Lake Nipissing, or Between Pheasants Contemporary, which uses a pheasant coop, or exhibitions held in other public and semi-public non-gallery spaces, that encourage novel forms of art practice and audience engagement. The environment in which the artwork is exhibited influences work that can be made for it, and the spectator's overall experience.

⁴¹ Chayka, Ibid.

Curator Iwona Blazwick explains a history of exhibition-making in her essay, *Temple / White Cube / Laboratory* (2006). One of the examples she gives is Donald Judd's 1970 solo exhibition at Whitechapel Art Gallery in London, which she writes: "... exemplified the jettisoning of the plinth and the use of the floor not only as a support for the work, but as a new field of making and experience. 42" She continues: "The floor is the stage, the blank canvas activated both by the work and by the spectator. 43" This subtle strategy of the white cube gallery in most cases outlines the borders of the artwork and enforces limits defined by the floor and the walls. The physical differences between exhibition venues would not only affect the appearance of site-specific installations but also the kinds of artworks that can be presented there. Like Donald Judd's show at Whitechapel, some of the artworks in *Host & Compost* occupied the gallery floor as part of the overall exhibition design.

The curator's role becomes significant at this point as an "exhibition-maker." The curator not only takes on the role of decision-maker by forming or restricting the artwork's presentation – such as by offering the gallery floor as part of the exhibition – but also serves as a collaborator who provides a theme, material for their creative production, and a context for presentation. In her essay, *Who Cares? Understanding the role of the Curator Today*, Kate

⁴² Iwona Blazwick, "Temple/White Cube/Laboratory" in *What Makes a Great Exhibition?*, ed. Paula Marincola (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, 2006), 128.

⁴³ Ibid, 128.

⁴⁴ Kate Fowle describes how the role of the curator has evolved over the years from being a civil servant to one that takes care of artworks, artists and the public. She discusses further exhibition-making models in history and review how the curator's new practice becomes both flexible and vulnerable after the 1950s when artists became more involved with exhibition-making. See Kate Fowle, "Who Cares? Understanding the Role of the Curator" in *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating*, Rand, S. and Kouris, H. (Eds) (New York, NY: apexart, 2007), 26-35.

Fowle describes some of the work curators do to shape the development and presentation of artworks:

... actively engaging with art and artists is central to practice... This requires a kind of creative "maintenance," as opposed to Foucault's "care," as it involves supporting the seeds of ideas, sustaining dialogues, forming and reforming opinions, and continuously updating research. It could also be said that exhibitions are not the first, or only, concern of the curator. Increasingly the role includes producing commissioned temporary artworks, facilitating residencies, editing artist-books, and organizing one-time events.⁴⁵

As an artist-curator, I understand the importance of a multidisciplinary curatorial approach to contemporary exhibition design. This does not imply that curators take creative credit for the artworks, but rather they are involved in the process, supporting artists and engaging with the public. Being a supportive curator also entails being a great host.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 33.

Conclusion

Host & Compost is a compost-oriented exhibition featuring two artists, Leeay Aikawa and Sara Maston, working around the concepts of decay, transformation of the body and the mind, being host, and guest. The exhibition challenges the formal white cube presentation by bringing organic matter into the gallery. Host & Compost turns the gallery into a playground for the artists to experiment with decay and reflect on organic transformations across life, dominating the gallery floor alongside the walls. The reciprocity between the host and guest manifests itself through fostering new growth in Maston's compost pile, inviting the artists to experiment with organic materials such as compost, soil, kitchen waste, or pine needles, and lastly hosting visitors in the gallery. Each artwork is rich in symbolism, representing birth, life, death, and rebirth.

Besides the gallery becoming a site for experimentation for the artists, *Host & Compost* also offers its audience an opportunity to reimagine their relationship to death and decay through Aikawa's sculpture, *Funeral of the Bee*, which includes a participatory funeral held during the closing reception. The artworks in the exhibition offer a glimpse of decomposition and unification between life forms on Earth that inspire the viewer to pay attention to their everyday encounters with non-human life in the city. The exhibition further illustrates the tension between organic and artificial in the gallery.

Host & Compost articulates the coexistence of humans and non-humans as an essence of life. It invites the viewer to co-create, instead of only consuming, by encouraging them to see other potential life forms in their intimate surroundings continue to flourish in every possible corner. It is worth being aware of those small encounters with others, including compost, pine needles, microorganisms, earthworms, mold, sprouts, water, air, any kind of body on Earth and

many more that I cannot count. Let us care, pay attention to potential overlaps with any life form, and be a good host.

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Appendix A: Exhibition Documentation



Figure 3. Wall Didactics of *Host & Compost*, 2024, Ignite Gallery.

The exhibition title is designed by Murathan Biliktü. Photography by Jessann Reece.

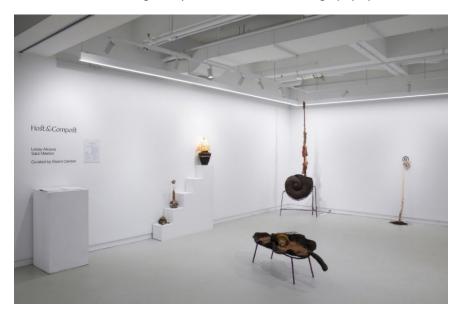


Figure 4. Installation view of Host & Compost, 2024, Ignite Gallery.



Figure 5. Leeay Aikawa, *Funeral of the Bee*, 2024, soil, turmeric and marigold dyed pine needles, stems of maple leaf, bee wax, clay, paper, stained glass, metal, bronze, found object, rubber, cellulose paste, synthetic polymer paint mixed with soil, Ignite Gallery.

Photography by Jessann Reece.



Figure 6. Installation view of *Host & Compost*, 2024, Ignite Gallery.



Figure 7. Leeay Aikawa, *Untitled*, 2024, a peanut that a squirrel hid in the ground, wood, wasp nest, Ignite Gallery.

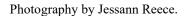
Photography by Jessann Reece.



Figure 8. Leeay Aikawa, *Elixir*, 2024, found Alchemical flask, coffee grinds, sprinkle of cat ashes, eggshells, avocado skins, avocado pits, pistachio shells, bell pepper skins, mushroom, crab claw, artist's hair, Ignite Gallery.



Figure 9. Leeay Aikawa, *Light from the oldest place*, 2024, bell pepper skins, soil, leek root, acorns, acorn caps, tissue paper, iron wire, found object, Ignite Gallery. Aikawa used bell pepper skins for the head of the lamp, and because of the ephemeral nature of the organic pigments, they started to fade during the exhibition.



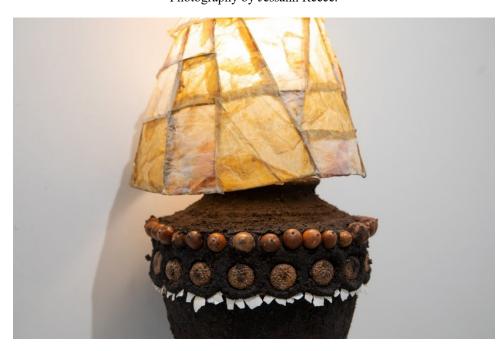
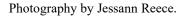


Figure 10. Leeay Aikawa, Detail shot of *Light from the oldest place,* 2024, bell pepper skins, soil, leek root, acorns, acorn caps, tissue paper, iron wire, found object, Ignite Gallery.



Figure 11. Leeay Aikawa, *Spring Now (snail)*, 2024, soil, compost, clay, metal, paper, cellulose, synthetic polymer mixed with soil, rubber, microcrystalline wax, artist's stockings, burs, Ignite Gallery.



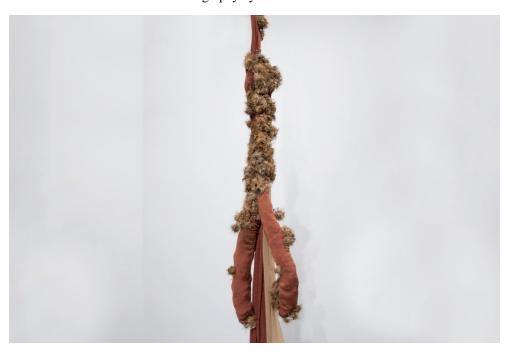


Figure 12. Leeay Aikawa, Detail shot of *Spring Now (snail)*, 2024, compost, artist's stockings, burs, Ignite Gallery.

Photography by Jessann Reece.



Figure 13. Leeay Aikawa, Detail shot of *Spring Now (snail)*, 2024, soil, compost, clay, metal, paper, cellulose, synthetic polymer mixed with soil, rubber, microcrystalline wax, artist's stockings, Ignite Gallery. This photo shows an interior view of Aikawa's sculpture, which contains compost tea.



Figure 14. Leeay Aikawa, *Untitled*, 2024, wood, found object, oyster shells, acorns, Ignite Gallery.

Photography by Jessann Reece.



Figure 15. Installation view of *Host & Compost,* 2024, Ignite Gallery.

Photography by Jessann Reece.



Figure 16. Sara Maston, *Eggs at night*, 2024, oil and acrylic on canvas, Ignite Gallery.

Photography by Jessann Reece.



Figure 17. Sara Maston, Detail shot of *Pile*, 2024, squirrel nest, Ignite Gallery.



Figure 18. Sara Maston, Detail shot of *Pile*, 2024, acrylic, plaster, latex, Ignite Gallery.

Photography by Jessann Reece.



Figure 19. Sara Maston, Detail shot of *Pile*, 2024, acrylic, plaster, latex, compost, ostrich egg, Ignite Gallery.

Photography by Jessann Reece.



Figure 20. Sara Maston, Detail shot of *Pile*, 2024, acrylic, plaster, latex, compost, Ignite Gallery.

Photography by Jessann Reece.



Figure 21. Sara Maston, Detail shot of *Pile*, 2024, canvas and acrylic, Ignite Gallery. This photo shows the live sprout that showed up on Maston's installation during the exhibition.



Figure 22. Sara Maston, Detail shot of *Pile*, 2024, plaster, latex, compost, Ignite Gallery.

Photography by Jessann Reece.



Figure 23. Installation view of *Host & Compost,* 2024, Ignite Gallery.

Photography by Jessann Reece.



Figure 24. Sara Maston, *Untitled*, 2024, shells, latex, plaster, plastic mesh, epoxy, Ignite Gallery.

Photography by Jessann Reece.

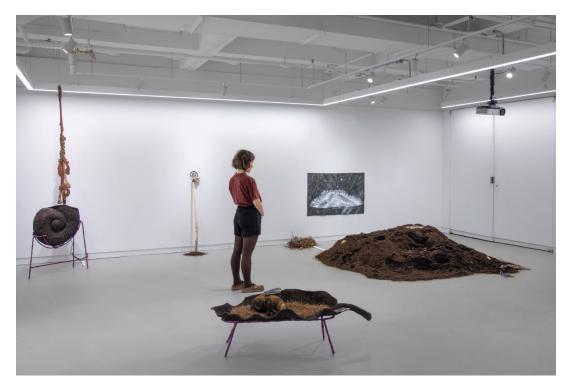


Figure 25. Installation view of *Host & Compost,* 2024, Ignite Gallery. This photo shows the scales of the artworks.

Photography by Jessann Reece.

Work in Progress Images



Figure 26. Sara Maston, Work in progress view of *Pile, Host & Compost,* 2024, Ignite Gallery. Maston works on her installation in this photo and digs a hole to place her painting inside.

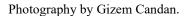




Figure 27. Sara Maston, Work in progress view of *Pile, Host & Compost,* 2024, Ignite Gallery. Maston's dog helps her build a compost pile.



Figure 28. Leeay Aikawa, Work in progress view of *Light from the oldest place, Host & Compost,* 2024, Ignite Gallery. Aikawa uses bell pepper skins and tissue paper to make the head of the lamp.

Photography by Leeay Aikawa.

Floor Plan

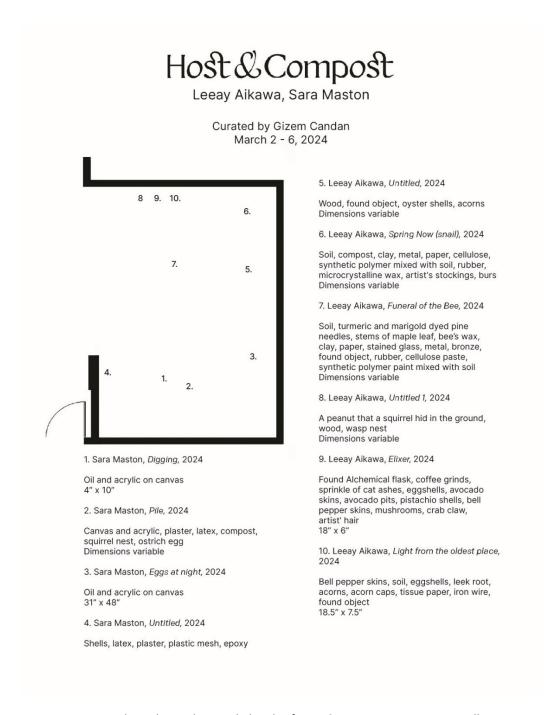


Figure 29. Floor plan and artwork details of *Host & Compost*, 2024, Ignite Gallery.

The layout was designed by Gizem Candan. The exhibition title was designed by Murathan Biliktü.

Closing Reception



Figure 30. Leeay Aikawa, *Funeral of the Bee*, 2024, soil, turmeric and marigold dyed pine needles, stems of maple leaf, bee wax, clay, paper, stained glass, metal, bronze, found object, rubber, cellulose paste, synthetic polymer paint mixed with soil, flowers, Ignite Gallery. At the closing reception, Aikawa arranged a symbolic funeral and offered visitors fresh flowers to place around her sculpture.

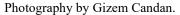




Figure 31. View from the closing reception, *Host & Compost*, 2024.

Promotional Material



Figure 32. The exhibition poster of *Host & Compost*, 2024.

The poster was designed by Murathan Biliktü.



Figure 33. Invitation cards for *Host & Compost*, 2024. The cards were made by Leeay Aikawa. The front page is covered with soil, and the back page shows the exhibition details, handwritten by Gizem Candan.

Appendix B: Artist Biographies

Leeay Aikawa

Leeay Aikawa is an interdisciplinary artist who explores the trinity between 'making,' 'knowing,' and 'being,' while merging spiritual and art practice. She employs methodologies such as collage, foraging, non-linear narrative, season and weather-based improvisation, from an eco-spiritualist framework to approach oneness in an increasingly dividing world.

She received her Interdisciplinary Master's in Art and BDes in Illustration both from OCAD University. Her work has been exhibited at Patel Brown Gallery; Xpace Cultural Centre; Artist Project; Ignite Gallery; Hearth Garage; Gibraltar Point; The J Spot, Toronto; and Between Pheasants Contemporary, Kerns Township. She was also hosted by Paradise Air (Matsudo, Japan) in 2019 as an artist in residence and selected by MOCA for their Mentorship Program in 2020. Aikawa lives and works in Toronto/T'karonto.

Sara Maston

Sara Maston is an interdisciplinary artist who explores the vantage point of animals such as insects, single-celled organisms, domestic horses, birds and rodents. Her work takes the form of ceramics, paintings, and textile installations to articulate parallel life worlds that are indicative of a distant ancestor's sense of physicality or distinct rhythm of nature.

Maston holds an MFA from York University and an MI in Information Science from the University of Toronto with a specialization in Environmental Studies. Her work has been exhibited at the plumb; Art Museum; Daniel Faria Gallery; Susan Hobbs Gallery; Hearth Garage; Gibraltar Point; Xpace Cultural Centre, Toronto; and Bonavista Biennale, The Bonavista Peninsula. Maston lives and works in Toronto/T'karonto.