

Please... Touch the Grass: An Exhibition of Site-Responsive Sculptures
Journeying Between Thresholds of Virtual and Real

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Abstract

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Please... Touch the Grass is an exhibition at the OCAD University Graduate Gallery at 205 Richmond St. West of three new sculptures and a site-responsive set of walls dividing the gallery into distinct zones. The exhibition –along with extra–exhibition materials and supporting narratives– explores how reality is constructed between the virtual and physical, the inseparability of the two, and the unseen labour which goes into their construction.

In the first gallery zone are *Directional Shielding* – three sculptures evoking a cable meandering through the space– and *Cutscene 1* – a scattered field of cardboard Nintendo controllers, set down mid-action and indefinitely abandoned by their players. Across the plastic turf threshold in the second zone of the gallery is *Joycon Drift* – a driftwood log suspended over a polygonal patch of sand, pointing towards the outside.

The artworks combine manufacturing and building materials (cardboard pulp forming, extruded foam insulation, microcrystalline wax) with materials indexical of outdoor leisure (driftwood, turf grass, polymer sand). Together the works' material and referent choices complicate boundaries of *natureculture* –Donna Haraway's term for the inextricability of nature and culture. Influenced by contemporary sculpture artists, such as Catherine Telford-Keogh and Lotus Kang, the work is grounded in techniques of material shifting, interplay of referent and abstraction, and manipulating the flow of the gallery space.

Analysis of iterative studio process, objectives, and the artworks themselves are framed by three key texts: Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Sarah Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), and Donna Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2016).

The metaphor of grass is considered as a field where bodies in play self–organise, how the lawn presents a boundary space to be negotiated among neighbours, and as grass outfields of city parks representing a zone of co-negotiated social agreements. Subjects of play, labour, outdoor recreation, and digital content consumption are informed by the artists' memories and lived experiences. Narrative segments throughout the paper further illustrate themes present in the work through the authors' formative memories of family, the internet and gaming, bumping up against permissions/access, and shifting landscapes.

Keywords

Materiality, site-responsive, installation, affect, digital fabrication, boundary objects, outdoor lifestyle.

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Contents

List of Figures and Illustrations	5
Introduction:	7
Touching Grass	7
Studio Practice	13
Artworks, Site-Responses	23
Directional Shielding	23
Cutscene 1	28
Joycon Drift	35
Exhibition Design	41
Conclusions:	44
Reflections	48
Appendix A: Latex Tapestries works	50
Appendix B: Exhibition Documentation	51
Works Cited	54

List of Figures and Illustrations

<i>Figure 1 Please... Touch the Grass exhibition flyer.</i>	8
<i>Figure 2 Exhibition threshold view from the second zone. The hardboard wall and plastic turf grass threshold with Joycon Drift in the foreground.</i>	11
<i>Figure 3 Floorplan of Please... Touch The Grass exhibition</i>	12
<i>Figure 4 Surface Tension (2021)</i>	13
<i>Figure 5 Alpine (2023)</i>	13
<i>Figure 6 Setting paths to test various swept curves in Fusion 360, April 2024</i>	19
<i>Figure 7 view from April 2024 Fusion 360 file called "various joints and intersections v15"</i>	19
<i>Figure 8 August 2024 work "Another Diversion" resulting from my new understanding of applying the sweep function to use of a router table.</i>	20
<i>Figure 9 Directional Shielding installed at Please... Touch the Grass exhibition. Image credit: Ge Lu, with permission.</i>	23
<i>Figure 10 Cutscene 1, installed at Please... Touch the Grass exhibition.</i>	29
<i>Figure 11 Detail image of Cutscene 1</i>	30
<i>Figure 12 Cutscene 1 studio detail</i>	30
<i>Figure 13 Interior image of Lotus Kang's Receiver-Transmitter (Butterfly). Taken by author during visit.</i>	33
<i>Figure 14 Evening view of Joycon Drift installed at Please... Touch the Grass exhibition.</i>	36
<i>Figure 15 Detail of the midday light interacting with Joycon Drift Image from: Ge Lu, with permission.</i>	38
<i>Figure 16 Image of Catherine Telford Keogh's Carriers (Gravity Fed). Image taken by author.</i>	42
<i>Figure 17 The tip of Directional Shielding comes into the second space through the wall panel closest to Joycon Drift's artwork statement (left)</i>	47
<i>Figure 18 The tip of Directional Shielding comes into the second space through the wall panel closest to Joycon Drift's artwork statement (left)</i>	47

<i>Figure 19 Foul (2022)</i>	<i>50</i>
<i>Figure 20 The Windup (2022)</i>	<i>50</i>
<i>Figure 21 Directional Shielding</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>Figure 22 Directional Shielding Detail</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>Figure 23 Directional Shielding Detail</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>Figure 24 Directional Shielding with Cutscene 1 visible in background</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>Figure 25 Cutscene 1</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>Figure 26 Cutscene 1 Detail</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>Figure 27 Cutscene 1 Detail</i>	<i>52</i>
<i>Figure 28 Cutscene 1 Detail</i>	<i>52</i>
<i>Figure 29 Exhibition threshold from the second zone. Joycon Drift on left</i>	<i>52</i>
<i>Figure 30 Joycon Drift</i>	<i>52</i>
<i>Figure 31 Joycon Drift</i>	<i>52</i>
<i>Figure 32 Joycon Drift detail</i>	<i>52</i>
<i>Figure 33 Joycon Drift</i>	<i>53</i>
<i>Figure 34 Joycon Drift in foreground, Directional Shielding centre background</i>	<i>53</i>
<i>Figure 35 Detail of Directional Shielding emerging through partition wall</i>	<i>53</i>
<i>Figure 36 The plastic turf grass</i>	<i>53</i>

Introduction:

Touching Grass

“Go touch grass” is a colloquial phrase that is used by the chronically online to shut down each others’ arguments when debating something in the digital sphere. I can’t point to the exact emergence of the phrase, but it does ooze with the energy of the wild wild west that was present in the message boards of the nineteen-nineties world wide web that I remember well. These worlds are marked by an unstable social logic when it comes to rules of engagement¹. Anecdotally, those who are blissfully free from over-engagement with online discourses tend not have any strong response elicited from the phrase. If grass is a familiar part of the scenery of the everyday, then the proposition may not be particularly loaded.

My thesis title “Please... Touch the Grass” draws from the instructional “please *do not* touch the grass”, with the “...” both implying and omitting the existence of the “*do not*.” The full phrase is seen on the type of sign that might be found on a manicured lawn of a corporatized space, or a curmudgeonly household in the neighbourhood. Prevalence, connotations, and reactions all have a regional specificity. Memory from my particular childhood in Toronto is that we were to learn from our parents to stay off of people’s lawns as common manners. A sign placed on a freshly growing sensitive patch of grass was deterrent—via invited consideration. On the other hand, a permanent sign on an established lawn telling neighbours to keep of of mature grass would demarcate the owners as acting from a place of confrontation. To the posting homeowners perhaps this is their demand to be respected by unruly neighbourhood kids and pets. Everyone finds their position on the small details of the everyday.

¹ With “Rules of engagement” here I am not pointing to a specific term, but rather the cluster of presupposed norms which one bring to an encounter, creating their perception of a shared social contract on appropriate behaviour to engage with others and/in the space.

Signs deterring grass-touchers come in various aesthetic sensibilities. In designing the flyer for my thesis exhibition, I drew inspiration from signs available for purchase from online distribution companies like Amazon and Wayfair which blend iconography of lush healthy grass with a cursive *please*. These features offer a relational sentiment between the sign and the viewer before getting down to business with a firm (but not sharp!) “keep off the grass” message. Soft lines abound in these signs, indexical of curbside conversations between neighbours.



Figure 1 Please... Touch the Grass exhibition flyer.

On the exhibition flyer I supplement the textual “...” with a visible override of the sign’s “do not”, creating a double negation which shifts the standard text from an order against into an invitation to join. This manufactured invitation hopefully remains with the viewer as they navigate the exhibition. As they move among the artworks, I want the positioning, scaling, textures and other qualities of the objects to interact with the space itself to create these invitational moments assisting the viewer in their navigational

choices.

Grass Diamonds

The lawn is a space to be tended to: by the adults of the house as they fulfill daily upkeep of the home, by the kids of the home learning to care for space as part of the chores, or perhaps by an enterprising third party – an entrepreneurial neighbourhood kid, property managers, or labouring adults who form landscaping crews. In the areas of Toronto that I first lived, the “French Lawn” was very in style, a manicured square of monocultural grass with a neatly delineated separation for gardens. More common downtown according to peoples’ sensibilities and the reality of postage-stamp-sized lots are full-yard gardens of low-maintenance, often native plants in lieu of manicured monoculture. When my mom was growing up in Peterborough, Ontario in the 1950s and 60s, she tells me that clover lawns (green but requiring little maintenance) were popular. In 2022, Las Vegas banned non-functional lawns in many areas² as their state of ongoing drought sees the water levels of the Colorado River continue to drop. In areas of Muskoka on the Canadian Shield, cottages and houses are built on the bare rock, with the pockets of wild grasses springing forth where soil has accumulated in the crags of the shield. On a childhood boat tour of the Everglades of Florida, families looked out at the tall Sawgrass as our guide described how its toothed edges would cut through your legs and arms if you were unlucky enough to be made to labour on the land. We would return from those trips to the Greater Toronto Area where my sister and I each played baseball.

In the city some of the baseball diamonds are so small that airborne home runs don’t exist. If you hit the ball beyond the outfield at Trinity Bellwoods Park for instance

² “Understanding Laws and Ordinances.” Exclusions apply to the law such as the grass of single family homes and public parks.

and it lands on the pedestrian path or in the trees surrounding the dog bowl, it's so close to the infield that you only get to run to second base. If instead the ball hits the grass in the outfield and the other team's fielders miss it, you can run to your hearts content, *especially* if it then rolls over the path and down into the dog bowl. Those are the rules by the recreational league that I play with, but there are no refs or umpires, so the onus is on each team to look out for these things and get each other on the same page.

Grass diamonds in neighbourhoods everywhere are home to these scenes. To walk onto the pitch is to accept that there is a new way of moving, it is game time (or training time). As with the rules of engagement in the digital sphere, the way that locals (and visitors) play even a predefined game like baseball or soccer will adapt to various factors. Like the way that size and shape of Trinity Bellwoods park informs the no-dog-bowl-home-runs as long as everyone's paying attention rule. Or perhaps to fit the collectively decided desires and abilities of participants on the field, the players can control the scope of the game area by making ad hoc goal posts with jackets, hats, or cones, thus limiting the amount of running required. Each space provided (on grass or online) influences the unique implicit (or explicit) rules of engagement constructed among users.

All of the richness of myth that comes with these ubiquitous monocultural patches of plants that exist in an odd threshold category of its own — usually not horticulture, or herb, but also not vegetable— inform my *Please... Touch the Grass* thesis exhibition from the new art objects themselves to spatial design.

Exhibition, 205 Richmond Street West

The exhibition portion of *Please... Touch the Grass*³ comprises of three works

³ The exhibition ran from March 21st-24th, 2025 at OCAD University's Graduate Gallery at 205 Richmond Street West, Toronto, Canada. Exhibition opening was March 21st from 6pm-8pm.

across two distinct zones dividing the gallery via temporary hardboard walls. These constructed zones toy with permitting visitor access to the view and natural light of the space's large windows. The first space of the gallery holds *Directional Shielding* (three sculptures evoking a cable meandering through the space) and *Cutscene 1* (a scattered field of cardboard Nintendo controllers, set down mid-action and indefinitely abandoned by their players). Upon crossing the walled threshold of the exhibition by treading on the turf, the viewer finds the second space of the gallery with *Joycon Drift* (a driftwood log suspended over a polygonal patch of sand, pointing towards the outside) foregrounded in the space against the backgrounded view of the Duncan St. and Richmond St. West outside. These works explore how reality is constructed between the virtual and physical, the inseparability of the two, and finally what possibilities spring forth when the unforeseen is welcomed into everyday life.



Figure 2 Exhibition threshold view from the second zone. The hardboard wall and plastic turf grass threshold with Joycon Drift in the foreground.

The combination of manufacturing and building materials (cardboard pulp forming, extruded foam insulation) and materials indexical of an outdoor leisure lifestyle (driftwood, turf grass, polymer sand) complicate boundaries of nature and culture,

thinking along *natureculture*⁴ (Donna Haraway's term for the inextricability of nature and culture). Influenced by contemporary sculpture artists such as Catherine Telford-Keogh and Lotus Kang, my new work is grounded in techniques of material shifting, interplay of referent and abstraction, and alteration of the viewer's possible flows through the gallery space via the inclusion of the larger exhibition structures.

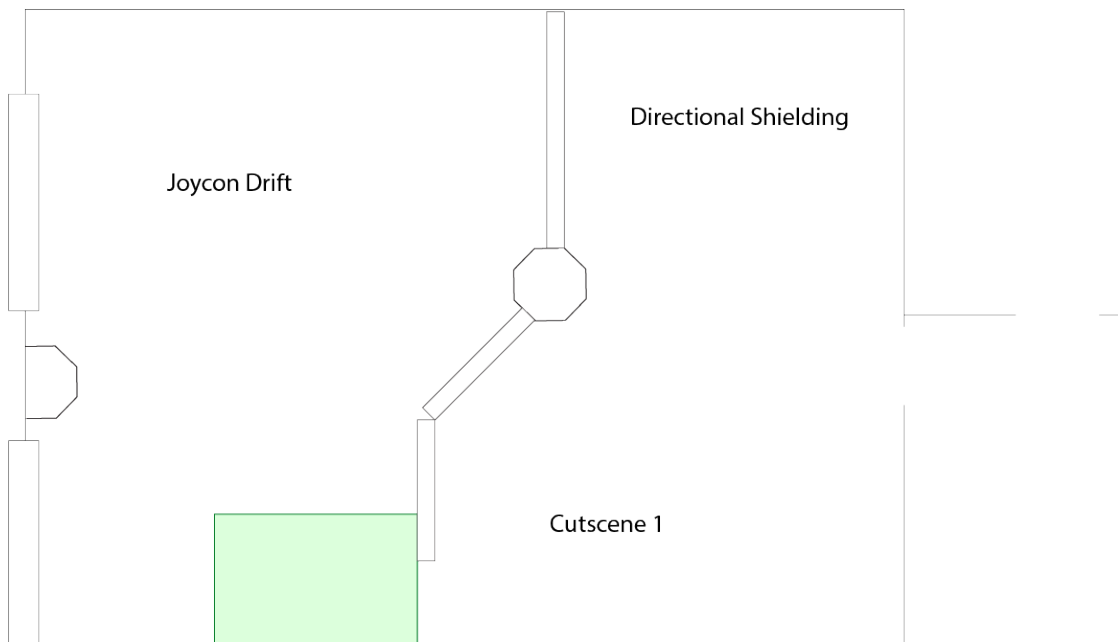


Figure 3 Floorplan of Please... Touch The Grass exhibition

These works are inspired by the sites in which I have been immersed throughout my life by exploring the shifting hierarchies in play on grass fields, the incubational gaming and online space, and the shores of Georgian Bay which are so tied up in recreation and labour for me.

Please.. Touch the Grass, synthesizes these concepts and locations into an

⁴ Haraway, Donna. "The Companion Species Manifesto DOGS, PEOPLE, AND SIGNIFICANT OTHERNESS." In *Manifestly Haraway*, 91–198. Posthumanities 37. Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2016.

exploration of the time following a users' recognition of their own *cruelly optimistic*⁵ habits, as they try to restructure their approach and balance.

Studio Practice

These thesis investigations are in some ways a continuation and in others a departure from my existing artistic practice. In recent years leading up to starting the Interdisciplinary Art, Media, and Design program at OCAD U, my work was concerned with ephemerality of materials and the heightening tension around proximity between



Figure 4 Surface Tension (2021)



Figure 5 Alpine (2023)

bodies. My *Latex Tapestries* experimental printmaking series (2020-2023) was

⁵ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. The concept of *cruel optimism* as put forth by Lauren Berlant in her book of the same name, whereby one's attachments optimistic habits - regardless of whether they might have once been beneficial - begin to work against the person's flourishing. Optimism here refers to one's attachment to an object of desire, or rather the "cluster of promises" which we associate with that person, thing, object as being able to make for us and deliver on. Berlant considers all attachments optimistic in their anticipation of the delivery of these clusters of promises (Berlant, 24). Within the context of this paper and my thesis research, I am considering both the promises of virtual engagement (video games, fabrication practices) and the pastoral fantasy of a life (and studio practice) completely unplugged from the virtual.

made by impressing colour pencil and newsprint ink in-between layers of a latex rubber sheet [see appendix A]. Working with a collection of newspaper Sports Sections from Toronto Star accumulated during a period without home internet access, the *Latex Tapestries* explored the role of spectatorship in nationhood as well as the barriers to touch in proximity required as a collective over this time.

Latex has been a recurring material for much of my work beyond this series [see *Figure 3: Surface Tension (2021)*] due to its skin-like qualities which will change and harden or deteriorate over time along with its paradoxes as an organic material that is so tied up with industrial processes and extraction that it is often presumed to be synthetic. Deep investigations into the expressive qualities of unconventional materials have been a driver of my practice, another example being use of casein and whey protein supplement powders in sculpture and painting. Protein powders that are sold as fitness bulking supplements have provided a conceptual entry into how the body and consumption are tied together with my *Protein Paintings* series (2023) [see *Figure 4: Alpine (2023)*]. This series uses chocolate and vanilla flavoured whey protein bound in painting medium to produce works on wood panel. Much of the focus of my practice over the years before entering the IAMD program had been squarely on pushing material uses as a means of working through an understanding of the (then) present moment.

I find such material exploration important in adding an element of discovery to my practice that I not only find gratifying but allows me to place my practice within a longer artistic timeline than a straightforward studio-to-gallery-to-collector pipeline. To the field of art history, I see part of the utility of such exploratory practices as to expanding the toolkit I can use to present the worlds of viewers back to them in new ways to open new layers of meaning. In the case of my use of latex, this was an engagement with the sudden emphasis placed on barrier objects such as rubber gloves in the public's lives from the recent CoVID-19 pandemic. For protein powder, this was the supplement so wrapped up in contemporary online fitness influencer culture and

wellness fads, where formation of the body, belonging, and consumer marketing collide.

Studio Objectives

During this IAMD thesis journey, I developed two studio objectives to guide the course of my practice-based research. Objective one: I wanted to begin to bring virtual tools back into my practice after making the intentional choice to go fully analog (or rather, fully by hand) during my undergraduate studies. To be clear, this objective is about making physical and static (though with animacy) art in the gallery space – not to rely on digital displays or electronic components but to bring the virtual back into the conceptualization and making of the work. Objective two: I wanted to expand my toolkit of sculptural-conceptual strategies informed by the contemporary artists whose works have impacted me as a viewer, namely by Lotus Kang with strategies of material shifting and Catherine Telford-Keogh by working with nesting exhibition structures to create cascading sets of object relations.

Objective one comes as a return to embracing *some* virtuality after severing it from my practice during my Bachelor of Fine Art studies. That severing meant leaving behind the virtual tools I was skilled and enamoured with: 3d modelling environments, photo editing software, electronics, any manner of non-analog production techniques. This occurred as I was finally reconciling with the false promises of the virtual which I had long clung to as well as awakening to the conceptual implications of material and production choices that comes with exposure to artists and thinkers engaged with the animacy of objects. The clean cut was an important tactic for me to avoid falling back on comfortable solutions when faced with artistic challenges. Restricting the use of comfortable virtual tools at the time meant trading in easy workarounds for growth.

The writing of Lauren Berlant (b. 1957, d. 2021) in her book *Cruel Optimism* (2011) perfectly illustrates why this studio *Objective One* was - and is - important to me:

A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially.

Acknowledging the *cruel optimism* in my practice informed my first objective. The severing at the time was essential to my development as an artist. But the act that once allowed for my flourishing as an artist has since become a comfort of its own, and I could sense myself over idealising the analog, the by-hand. Thus *Please... Touch the Grass* (as a whole project, paper and exhibition) marks a return to the now and holds both the virtual and the real together, mapping this dynamic into a physical experience for the viewer.

And objective two - to expand my toolkit of sculptural/conceptual strategies - is informed by my experience as a viewer witnessing the impact of contemporary artwork in the gallery. The goal is to take lessons from significant installation work I've seen recently and figure out what about those works felt so successful in order to fold them into my practice in my own way. This objective points to my general excitement as of late about artists working in the sculptural field who are foregrounding material agency and complicating conventional ideas of space and temporality in their works.

The two artworks that I am looking to closely in the scope of this thesis paper are Lotus Kang's *Receiver Transmitter (Butterfly)* (2025) — a greenhouse-as-bedroom scene dotted with aluminum snacks, a bed, and a sheet of roll — and Catherine Telford Keogh's *Carriers (Gravity-Fed)* (2024) — an Amazon shipping warehouse conveyor belt carrying glass bins full of toxic sludge and garbage from the Gowanus Canal. ⁶ Both of these

⁶ For more artists along these lines whose work came up in my research but could not be included in the scope of this paper, see: Eddie Rodolfo Aparicio, *Paloma Blanca Deja Volar (English: White Dove Let Us*

works were commissioned for and exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art's (MoCA) second triennial exhibition, *Greater Toronto Art 24* (or *GTA 24*) (2025). *GTA 24* covered works by 25 artists intergenerationally who have connections to the area. The exhibition blended recent works and new commissions with works spanning back to the 1960s.⁷ The triennial – which I was drawn to from familiarity and excitement about the works of several of the participating artists⁸ – ended up being profoundly motivating for my practice. I have chosen to focus in on these two new works by Kang and Telford Keogh as dual north stars in the vision of my approaches to form and material while working through the themes of the virtual and real in which I am so deeply entrenched.

After my first triennial visit, I purchased a membership to the MoCA and would come back over the summer of 2024 to visit the works. I would sometimes come with fellow artists in tow, and other times with printed chapters and sections of Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*. Visiting with the texts allowed me to co-read them with the artworks so that through the text I could better understand the art and vice-versa.

The works of *Please... Touch the Grass* came into being against the background of visiting the writings of Lauren Berlant (*Cruel Optimism*), Donna Haraway ("The Companion Species Manifesto[...]"), and Sara Ahmed (*Queer Phenomenology*). As the subject matter of the work - navigation of the thresholds between real and virtual, interior and exterior, while holding the value and limitations of each - came into clearer view, Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* became the central text. Revisiting *Cruel Optimism* also gave me insight into the underpinnings of the two objective shifts in my practice that I have come to the IAMD program to work through. With objective one, reintegrating

Fly); Kevin Beasley, *On Time: For Benjamin Banneker and Peter Hill an English Movement*; Elena Damiani, *Unfoldings (I-IV)*; Jes Fan, *Fragrant Harbour*; Julien Fisher, *Still Waiting*; Joel Kuennen, *The Vital Flow of Material (Elective Affinities)*; and Anicka Yi, *The Possibility of an Island III (in Contact Lens Aquarium Series)*.

⁷ Wong, Haynes, and Touq, *Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto, Greater Toronto Art 2024 (Catalogue)*.

⁸ Catherine Telford Keogh, Jes Fan, Oreka James, Tim Whiten, and Timothy Yanick Hunter.

some virtuality into my process, I've found a hybrid hands on/digital workflow to be quite gratifying in my everyday artistic practice. The virtual space, digital tools, are once again a place to safely iterate, simulating ideas and processes with the goal of eventually bringing them to physical workflows and space.

To illustrate this impact: I spent time working in Autodesk Fusion 360 software which guides the user towards working from technical sketches along various planes and then building out objects from these sketches by applying various operations like sweeps, extrusions and lofts, each of which has a real world counterpart. This way of working helped me better understand the physical constraints of the concept without expending excess material or time. Life doesn't have or need a universal undo button but here the option to undo was beneficial. The sweep function which I eventually came to embrace, for instance, mirrors real techniques like running plaster molding in home renovations and construction where the tradesperson applies wet plaster to the site and literally sweeps a cut-out profile over the wet medium, creating spans of molding in situ. Or, in the case of *Directional Shielding*, the swept profile is a 1 inch round-over router bit turning flat forms into tubes.

Being able to move between the digital iterations and thinking about the physical processes that the operations are based on allowed me understand why the program wouldn't simply bend to my will and magically produce an object of which I had a loose vision of in my head. I had to envision sweeping a plaster profile around an impossibly tight corner. Perhaps instead of trying to do it in one sweep, I should do two spans separately and bring them together with miter cuts or a joining piece [see *Figures 5 through 7* for process images].

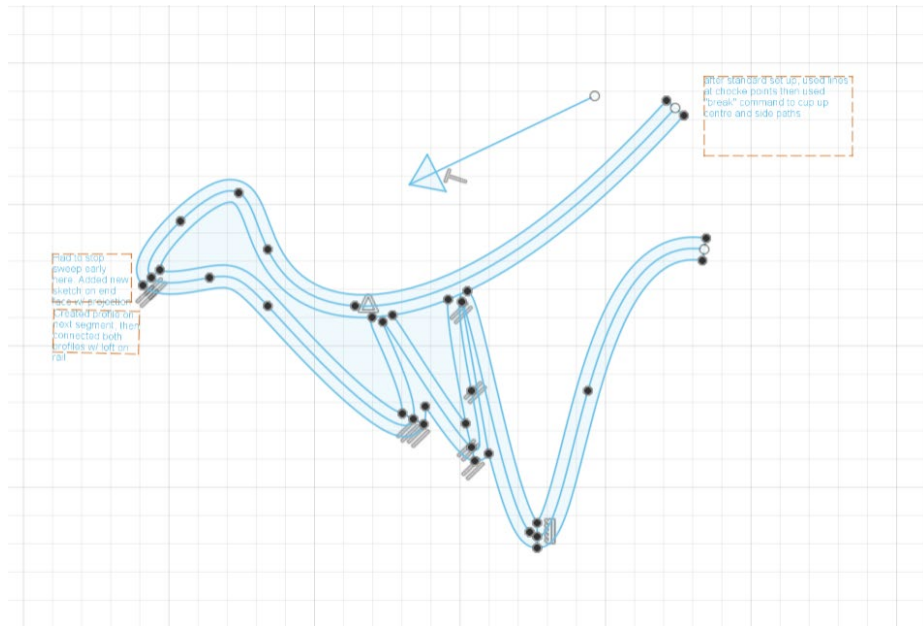


Figure 6 Setting paths to test various swept curves in Fusion 360, April 2024

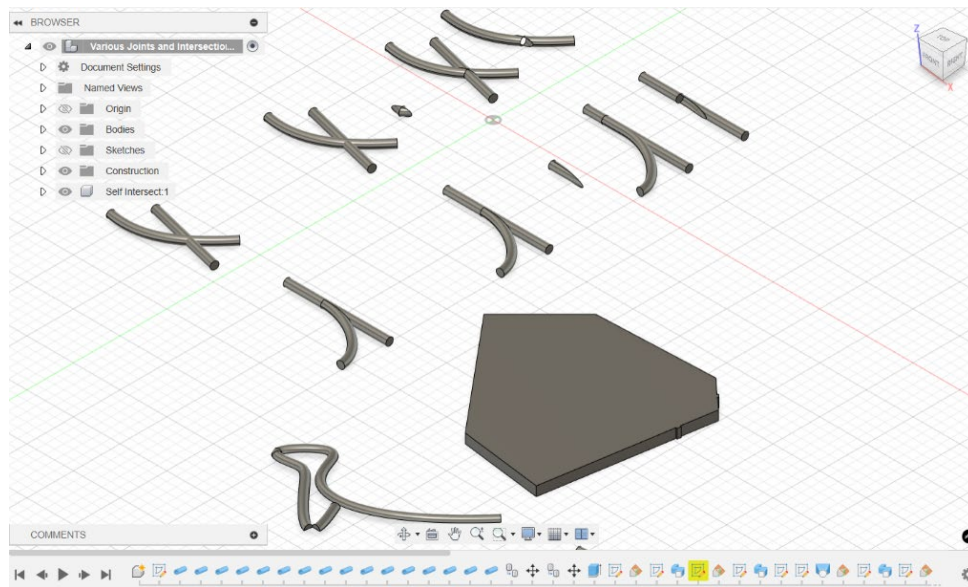


Figure 7 view from April 2024 Fusion 360 file called "various joints and intersections v15"



Figure 8 August 2024 work "Another Diversion" resulting from my new understanding of applying the sweep function to use of a router table.

The works in *Please... Touch the Grass* were all developed in an iterative hybrid digital/physical workflow. Over the course of their iterative development, I have been able to become increasingly use manual processes (which I consider to be done off-computer, with assistance from power tools). After all of this working-through geometry, operations, and CNC milling, the version of *Directional Shielding* installed in my thesis exhibition was made with laser cut guides for the router, enabling foam boards to be cut, shaped, and reassembled with conventional shop tools. The virtual stages – an incubation period of sorts – were an essential part of its development before it could emerge as such.

Embracing Thresholds:

To help illustrate *why* my two studio objectives are important to me, I suppose it is helpful to let the reader know about the thresholds which I've crossed in my life. I am a man who was assigned female at birth. This condition of my existence is something

that I try not to overly dwell on day-to-day, but perhaps trying to leave no trace in my public profile is another tactic which once worked for me but is holding back the flourishing of my artistic practice, at least as far as layers of legibility to the viewer, goes.

The first objective, to reincorporate digital tools into my development of physical sculptures comes from the idea that the virtual as a safe space for iteration applies not only to development in artwork: but also in identity and sense of self.

Growing up, my experiences in most public spaces including school were coloured hostility in many of the small moments of exerting myself into the world that one might otherwise take for granted. The most glaring example: any trip to relieve myself in *any* washroom – boys, girls, the single stall teacher's washroom which was physically too large for me – would result in being chastised by fellow students and teachers alike who couldn't make sense of me. These continued signals direct the body's willingness to listen to, or override its own signals with enough repetition. Discussing washroom details is not how I envision writing an academic paper, but this is to say that in order to accommodate for these moments I began to organize how I carried myself in the majority the day-to-day that schooling took up from a young age. Otherwise I found pockets of close friendships in my neighbourhood with people I could get to know and trust, but with every new potential relationship there came with it a threshold. Crossing the threshold of vulnerability of getting to know (and be known by) someone would open me to potential conflict. My interior life flourished but my external explorations of self dwindled as I figured out safe ways to navigate the world before being able to expand my trusted circle, do the comings of age that everyone goes through regardless of gender, and eventually access gender affirming medical care. Throughout this time, I was continually drawn to the internet and videogames as avenues of exploring identities unbound by the practicalities of daily life.

I remember my first time going onto the internet as if I am back in that room: My

mom and I are in the basement, and she has a CD with a new service for us to get onto the internet — which is still very novel for home use. We sit down together at our newer cream coloured computer. I don't know what to expect when we put in the disk and connect through the service, but when we get online there is a black background with vibrant text and logos. Things move very slowly on the screen, apparently, we can learn about different subjects but there isn't a lot of content. My mom is not a big tech nut but likes to keep up with the flow of culture, always thinking of where industry will go by the time my sister and I are in the workforce. We look around the browser and see what's available (not much) and she imparts the message that it is going to take a while, but a lot more information and communication is going to happen here in the future. This is where a lot of business will happen, and the generation of my sister and I will need to be computer literate to participate fully in society.

Throughout my youth, virtual spaces: online gaming and forums provided a safe distance from physical practicalities to explore my identity and sense of self. As with the exploratory safety of the virtual in my studio practice, in my young life the online provided a sort of safe incubation period. However, leaning into the theme of *cruelly optimistic* habits, any incubation period comes with an expiration date of appropriateness, where it comes time to fly the coop. Similar to my intentional parting with the virtual in my artistic practice, I have worked hard to move my virtual — or interior interchangeably from here on out — life into to the real, the exterior. From summers spent in the basement on online forums and in games, to getting back in touch with my body, real relationships with others, and getting outdoors. I've worked hard to "touch grass", as the colloquialism goes.

But as with stepping back from the over-idealization of the manual in my practice or embracing *natureculture* in new ways in my practice-based research, I've found myself considering the construction of these newer attachments to an ideal active self. Especially when these attachments become a itching mandates in the back of my mind

on how to best live a life (or fail at doing so). Perhaps to move past these lived *cruelly optimistic* habits involves embracing strengths and limitations in these areas as well.

This embrace of thresholds is the field on which *Please... Touch the Grass* is constructed.

Artworks, Site-Responses

Directional Shielding

I am in high school. We no longer have a family computer. My mom works her English-as-a-Second-Language-textbooks sales job from her home office in our apartment, in a room between the kitchen and living space. Somehow I was able to convince my parents to let me install Grand Theft Auto San Andreas on her computer, surely a pirated version, that I could play in small windows of time. One day my dad passes behind me to the kitchen right as I sneak up behind a rival gang member and slit his throat. It is decided that Grand Theft Auto is coming off my mom's computer.



*Figure 9 Directional Shielding installed at Please... Touch the Grass exhibition.
Image credit: Ge Lu, with permission.*

My installation *Directional Shielding* is a collection of three pink foam sculptures which insinuate a cable meandering through the gallery space. The foam objects have visible seams where they were glued together and are pocked with dents and scrapes and toothmarks. Layers of painters' tape in two different shades of green remain on the foam from the construction of these objects. In any decent signal-carrying cable, there are layers of "directional shielding" used to protect the transported signal from external electromagnetic interference while preventing it from straying from the cable's path. By its name, this work draws focus on the presence of external forces like a concerned parent guiding access of appropriate content for their child. This analogy speaks not only to the well-intentioned blocking of harmfully inappropriate noise entering the "signal" of one's life, but just as much to keep intended signal in — to keep the signal on the appropriate prescribed path. This work is informed by the experiences from my younger life bumping up against gender norms: an accumulation of experiences like nicks and bumps trying to contain me on a socially appropriate path.

There is an ambiguity to where the cable starts and ends: in which direction the signal travels through the object which is being protected by the proverbial, titular "directional shielding." What importance might this directionality entail and what the cable is even transmitting? The twisting movements, surface impressions, the ambiguity of origin and endpoint, and the title together ask the viewer to consider what forces (internal and external) might have shaped this object.

The Hand, Signal, Noise

A sensibility which permeates my practice (as with *Directional Shielding* and *Cutscene 1*) is the presence of *the hand* exposing its production in not only material but in mark making. In the three objects of *Directional Shielding*, this mark-making is present in the nicks and scrapes and bites as well as the ripped layers of painters tape. There is a contrast in these three objects between their structure and their finish.

Their meandering, self-supporting forms presuppose a strategy and structural understanding, but the roughness of their finish communicates a pragmatism.

My arrival at *Directional Shielding* involved much iteration and movement between the virtual and the physical to bring about its current form, including the work in 3D software to understand its paths and router sweeps. The polystyrene foam of the objects is used often in sculpture and fabrication because it can be sanded exceptionally smooth and finished⁹ in a variety of manners. However, *Directional Shielding* exists on the threshold of enough definition of form to deliver on its fundamental goals contrasted with a finish that doesn't hide its making and history—with its visible glue lines, seams, tear-outs, and any bumps and ridges from the wear of its life. As the work becomes re-assembled in future site-responsive installations, its visible history will grow. Without familiarity with the construction techniques, the viewer won't necessarily know the details of how the path is created (its origin), but the traces of a life being impressed upon are apparent.

What I have been describing along a scale of terms such as “definition” and “resolution”, David Levi Strauss (b. 1953) might categorize into “signal” and “noise”. In Strauss's conceptualization of signal and noise — building off work by Vilém Flusser as well as Leon Golub— signal refers to “desired information” and noise refers to “background interference.”¹⁰ Rather than being two discrete entities, they together make up a field (the visual field in his case) with varying signal-to-noise ratios. An audio example would be switching radio stations in your car: there is the static of an empty channel, or the pure clean sound signal of a radio station in good range, or any blended

⁹ Surface treated.

¹⁰ Strauss, “Signal to Noise.” 92 ; Shannon, “A Mathematical Theory of Communication.” Though Strauss points to the work of Flusser and Golub, signal and noise in communication were initially modeled in Claude E. Shannon's seminal text “A Mathematical Theory of Communication.” This text was groundbreaking in the field of information theory. Strauss is applying these concepts to fine art with a specific focus on painting and mixed media.

signal-to-noise ratio of the two if you are driving long distance and begin to leave the station's range, or you drive into a tunnel, or perhaps there is cross-interference from your antenna's poor *directional shielding*.

Within this exhibition I prioritize a strong signal in the foundational forms of the objects while embracing the noise which comes through in my daily studio engagements with the objects. This allows *the hand*¹¹ to remain visible producing much more lively, animated results than if the noise were reduced entirely. During exhibition visits, several viewers told me that they wanted to pick up the foam objects of Directional Shielding: the presence of the hand invited their own.

Given Lines

The twisting movements, surface impressions, the ambiguity of origin versus endpoint, and the title of *Directional Shielding* all together open up a host of questions for the viewer on what forces (internal and external) might have shaped these objects into the lines that they are. *Queer Phenomenology* as a framework gives insight on all matters of lines — straight lines, slanted lines, boundary lines disciplinary lines, lifelines, heterosexual, queer lines, etc. When thinking through the lines of *Directional Shielding* I want to point to Ahmed's concepts of *given* lines that she sets up in conjunction with inheritances and reproduction during the introduction to Queer Phenomenology.

To begin, inheritances are "the lines that we are given as our point of arrival into familial and social space".¹² This is to say that we inherit paths by way of norms, which we can follow in order to arrive into the promised spaces of social or familial status. And in turn these inheritances come with "the demand that we return the gift of the line

¹¹ Strauss, "Signal to Noise." 92

¹² Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology Orientations, Objects, Others*. 16-17

by extending that line” — this extension is reproduction.¹³ These normative lines which we are offered by default are *given* to us.¹⁴ The colloquialism to say that something is “a given” is to say that is taken for granted as the default. At its core, my *Please... Touch the Grass* thesis exhibition is a field inviting audiences to renegotiate the *givens* of daily life. In the exhibition signage this is expressed in questioning the standard directives of “touch grass” or “do not touch grass”. In the case of *Directional Shielding*, this is expressed in the questions present in the work’s title and in the disappearance of one of the objects into the wall dividing the gallery, which can only be accessed by the viewer by leaving behind these works and continuing their journey elsewhere into the second space. There is a second tapered tip of *Directional Shielding* poking through the wall in the second space near the exhibition text for *Joycon Drift*. [See Figure 17]

The questions conjured by this work’s title can include where directives come from. Throughout the everyday one finds themselves surrounded and implicated in such given lines. Direction can come from a sign (“do not touch the grass”) directing our behaviour with the promised payoff of avoiding the ire of property management. Or they come from a household object directing us towards worlds saturated with the implied proposition of inheriting power and agency upon mastering the controls such as a tv remote, a videogame controller. Or it can come from family member pointing us to invest our attention to skills that will benefit our future selves in the job market of in social relations, such as my mother showing me the internet for the first time.

Directions are something that one gives and is given. And a directive such as “touch grass”, is as much about the how to go as much as the where to go. Do not simply arrive at grass, *exist in a way which allows you to arrive at the grass*.¹⁵ Sara Ahmed is looking at all manners of lines and directions, and spatial relations that make

¹³ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology Orientations, Objects, Others*. 16-17

¹⁴ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology Orientations, Objects, Others*. 16-17

¹⁵ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology Orientations, Objects, Others*. 16-17

up one's *orientation* in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), in specific regards to what makes a line straight (heteronormative) or gives it a slant (queer). One looks to guidance to others for their "how", their path. A path more commonly trodden is more apparent and more easily invested in (with a return socially promised if a path is followed).

The sculptures of *Directional Shielding* come together implicitly as an animate cable, bouncing through the space. The objects are solid in their embodiment of the paths they take, but their rigid insulation bodies show the marks of wear, traces from their life span. The level to which its definition of form and unpolished resolution of details are carried forward in the exhibition in dialogue with the molded cardboard pulp of the next work in the exhibition, *Cutscene 1*.

Cutscene 1

My friend and I play The Legend of Zelda, Majora's Mask in his basement after school. The moon is growing in the sky on a collision course with the village. The player has 3 in-game days to save the world... but can reset the clock to Day One so long as they make it back to the town's clocktower before the looming moon - with its massive grin and wide bloodshot eyes - crashes into the world destroying it. The game exudes anxiety.

Cutscene 1 is a scattered field of cardboard gaming controllers appearing as if set down mid-action and indefinitely abandoned by their players. The controllers are out in a scatter: not lined up with any precision perfectly but each obviously placed with some degree of care. Ready at attention and waiting longingly for action which may or may never come.

In this way each controller is a ghost, stuck in an indefinite pause. It is as if their unseen human extensions were at the height of gameplay when "dinner" was called from upstairs. Perhaps every spare second of time was milked before they had to pause, not



Figure 10 *Cutscene 1*, installed at *Please... Touch the Grass* exhibition.

shutting down gameplay but setting their controllers down in stasis to come back to them, anticipating the time they could pick back up on the action. The controllers' memory slots — the outlet in the bottom where a user can plug a "memory card" to save states long term — are deteriorating. The action of placing the controller down is an attempt to preserve the state of things by leaving the scenario running in the background, but we don't know if or when the action will be picked up and resumed. Dynamics, states, can all change while the bodies are out. "Animated Suspension"¹⁶. A sudden absence.

The "animated suspension" — rather than suspended animation — which these objects are evoking comes from a phrase Berlant uses to describe a situation of endless present one finds themselves in times of precarity at an impasse¹⁷ experienced

¹⁶ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. 195-196.

¹⁷ Impasse as put forth by Berlant: usually "designates a time of dithering from which someone or some situation cannot move forward. [...] The impasse is a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands

as a highly charged, endless present. In watching the engagement of viewers with the works in the gallery space, people expressed the desire to pick up and interact with the artworks while acknowledging that they don't want to damage them. In addition to people's desire to pick up the foam objects of *Directional Shielding*, viewers also talked of wanting to feel the cardboard controllers of *Cutscene 1*, to grab and assess the driftwood of *Joycon Drift* as if it were a stick that they find on a walk, or two people mentioned wanting to step on the sand tiles of *Joycon Drift*. From such reactions it seems that the objects elicited an animacy which at the same time exists in a



Figure 11 Detail image of Cutscene 1



Figure 12 Cutscene 1 studio detail

suspension. People's desire to grab the objects seemed restricted by the social conventions of the art gallery setting and the works' status as art objects.

This piece is named after a break in the action in video games where the player is no longer in control of their character but must watch a cinematic scene (a cutscene) to

both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things, maintain one's sea legs"

receive additional information about the plot of the game. Sometimes skippable, cutscenes often exhibit a massive increase in graphical quality due to the lower real-time processing demands of a pre-rendered cinematic versus interactive gameplay. In the cardboard controllers of *Cutscene 1*, this shift in graphical quality is mirrored within the objects themselves — similar to that seen in *Directional Shielding*. The curves, edges, screw holes in the form are rendered from a high polygon (higher quality) 3D printed mold closely mimicking the real thing. But in the course of bringing the objects to the viewer via cardboard casting, the objects have lost some of their fidelity through bumps from the mold's drainage mesh, pulpy edges, and the seam demarcating top and bottom, inside and out as found in egg cartons.

This shift in a cutscene's quality can be a moment of spectacle in its high resolution yet presents a jarring inverse effect of drawing attention to the game's graphical shortcomings when regular gameplay resumes. For these cardboard objects, their volumes, curves, and lines can make them resemble the real thing when taking in the whole scene. But a closer inspection might give the viewer this contrast-induced experience of a jarring drop in resolution.

These three-pronged controllers are not an exercise in hostile-design-as-social-commentary, but modelled after the actual peripheral design for the Nintendo 64 (N64) which was a major market player in the home gaming console market from 1996-2002¹⁸. These are N64 controllers that have those shapely round grips to fit perfectly in all three of your hands. Though my family never owned an N64, countless hours of my young life growing up were spent in friends' basements after school playing multiplayer (up to 4) games. Or more often than not hours would be spent watching while everyone else took turns participating via the controllers-at-hand. Each of my friends whose families had purchase multiple controllers would have the obligatory spare third or

¹⁸ Svenson, "Nintendo 64 Frenzy.". 28.

fourth whose joystick had a “drift” from overuse. “Drift” meant it would register a persistent low hum of directional movement thus making gameplay harder while requiring the non-host player to adjust their point of orientation and play at a disadvantage.

The Nintendo peripherals which form *Cutscene 1* take these household objects and defamiliarize them by shifting the material from plastic and electronics to cardboard. The cardboard pulp textures (soft yet gritty, curvaceous while having edge definition) keeps the piece in unity with the atmosphere of the gallery space and exhibition on first glance. As the dissonance between form and material becomes more apparent to the viewer, this sense of unfamiliarity might beckon them to investigate the scene more closely.

Material Shifting, Lotus Kang

Lotus Kang’s Receiver Transmitter (Butterfly) was staged at the Auto BLDG at 158 Sterling Road as part of the MoCA GTA 24 triennial. Many of Kangs recent works in prior to *Receiver Transmitter (Butterfly)* have featured an interplay between large sheets of unfixed photo exposure paper and their surroundings as the sheets hung from aluminum joists in site-responsive installations. *Receiver Transmitter...* sets a scene within a greenhouse — a “not fully inside, not fully outside, a peripheral, marginal, in-between space”¹⁹ — aligning with one of the spaces large windows. The greenhouse emulates a bedroom for the titular butterfly, where it lives surrounded by its objects of desire and consumption. It is an intimate scene of what the butterfly spends their time

and attention on. Kang presents lotus tubers and seeds, kelp knots, apple slices, adzuki beans and other foodstuffs as aluminum cast objects dotting and cluttering the

¹⁹ Kang et al., *In Cascades* - Lotus Laurie Kang.

space. By presenting one referent of form, from the range of foodstuffs wrapped up in memory, familial ties, cultural meaning from her upbringing as a daughter of immigrant parents- and defamiliarizing it in a different material (aluminum), these two concepts to bump up against each allowing their convergent and divergent zones of meaning to open up for the viewer.

The array of forms the artist uses are both “rooted and unrooted”²⁰ in the literal sense— e.g. the root of a lotus plant versus the knots of kelp (seaweed does not have



*Figure 13 Interior image of Lotus Kang's Receiver-Transmitter (Butterfly).
Taken by author during visit.*

roots). In the metaphorical sense of these terms, Kang is working through themes of belonging, home, and transience:

I'm emphasizing this movement between rooted and unrooted, origin and no origin; they come into being together. It feels connected to a question posed by Paul Chan that has been burning in my mind for the last year: "Is there a direction home that doesn't point backward?" This question, while relevant to me as a diasporic person never feeling a true sense of home, also feels important in thinking about who names where home is, notions of place and belonging,

²⁰ Kang et al., *In Cascades - Lotus Laurie Kang*.

displacement and marginalization, and how we as a species live and behave according to borders that exclude or include at all costs.²¹

The material shifting technique used by Kang informed my approach to rendering the forms of Nintendo consoles and peripherals in cardboard.²² My past work has tended towards a formless quality in conjunction with found objects, but drawing on this technique used by Kang has allowed me to bring a stronger emphasis on form into my work while double-layering meaning from found form²³ and materiality.

The formlessness I refer to can be seen in my past series' *Latex Tapestries* (2020-2023) [see Appendix A] and *Protein Paintings* (2023) [see Figure 4], whose foci are the expressive qualities brought forth by unconventional material exploration, texture, and working with found imagery or abstract gesture (respectively). My previous work *Surface Tension* (2021) [see Figure 3] was one of a handful of instances of bringing a richer language of form into my work. In the case of *Surface Tension* this was achieved through taking found objects (hardwood dining chairs) and resurfacing them (with sheets of latex). This allowed the viewer to access the rooted cluster of concepts that come with the formal dining chairs (domesticity, familial hierarchy, and the structuring of bodies through household objects) and unroot them in a way by resurfacing and repositioning them in a way which evokes a ghostly transience.

Looking back at *Surface Tension*, I see it as a precursor to drawing on Lotus Kang's technique of the material shift. The cardboard controllers of *Cutscene 1* offers a similar movement between rooted/unrooted in their existence as both a household object and one which allows given hierarchies of the familial household to shift, to put players on top of the game's leaderboard.

²¹ Kang et al., *In Cascades - Lotus Laurie Kang*.

²² In-process iterations of *Cutscene 1* were constructed of lasercut cardboard rendering consoles into cardboard boxes, in place of pulp forming.

²³ I am distinguishing here between "found object" and "found form".

My new works - not just *Cutscene 1*, but *Joycon Drift* and the site-responsive exhibition design of *Please... Touch the Grass* together– are in dialogue with these both-and-neither dichotomies which Kang referred to as “peripheral, marginal, in-between space[s]”²⁴. These both-and-neither dichotomies include the rooted/unrooted, the origin/non-origin, virtual/physical, and the inside/outside. The three objects of *Directional Shielding* have the ambiguity of origin in their implied collective path. *Cutscene 1*’s controllers, beyond their rooted/unrooted-ness also exist as the site where the body uses physical touch to enter the game, translating their interiority into the game through physical movements of the fingers and thumbs. I am taking this consumer entertainment peripheral and re-rendering it in an encasing which might hold eggs or fill out the form of new shoes in the absence of a foot.

These forms are modeled from actual peripherals but look materially like the value-brand cardboard egg cartons from the grocery store – just enough definition of form to deliver their contents to the consumer intact (with 11/12 accuracy), but with an unpolished resolution (of texture, of edges) pulled right off the assembly line.

Joycon Drift

The family legend is that the first time I went camping I slept through a tornado. I was small enough to be in the crib. A tornado warning in the region of Lake Huron’s shores became a reality, the twister ripping through the park grounds. Some of my most fond memories growing up of summers and with my family were of camping at MacGregor Point Provincial Park. The family would hike, and my sister and I would go to the pond to catch and release frogs. We get to know the other vacationing kids, my sister always being the social initiator while I participated shyly and silently.

Over the years as puberty began, the sand of the beach started to wash into the lake. By the time the beach was all pebbles we switched to the Canadian Shield shores of Georgian Bay. Killbear Provincial Park was our new place on recommendation by family friends. The Canadian Shield, a geological feature covering about half of the country is an

²⁴ Kang et al., *In Cascades* - Lotus Laurie Kang.

ecosystem of Precambrian bedrock exposed during glacial erosion. Many of my best memories away from urban centres are tied to these landscapes.



Figure 14 Evening view of Joycon Drift installed at Please... Touch the Grass exhibition.

Joycon Drift greets the viewer while their feet graze the lush green plastic grass as they cross the exhibition's threshold. The scene evokes a sense of suspended animacy: a log of driftwood suspended delicately by thin thread above polygonal sand tiles against the backdrop downtown Toronto. The delicacy of the thread and the sand tiles take the artwork's initial promise as a stable landing point and reveals itself to be charged with a tension which threatens to be snapped apart if touched by the viewer.

Depending on time of visit, this installation will either be bathed in soft March daylight, framed by the bright outline of the window's light on the floor, or in a spare evening light. *Joycon Drift* is framed on one wall by the beautiful large windows characteristic of the industrial history of the 205 Richmond Street West building, on two sides by white gallery walls, and by the hardboard wall with its exposed studs opposite the windows. The exposed studs of the wall demarcate this second zone as a space behind (or inside of) the wall, while simultaneously opening the space to the Richmond streetscape beyond by way of the large windows. The long trunk of driftwood is tilted

upward just so, motioning a suggestion out of window towards the to the small rectangle of sky visible between buildings on Richmond Street, for any viewer positioned between the temporary wall and the work, looking towards the window. Potential sightline guides for the viewer here are the path of the driftwood, following the edges of the sand tile, or moving towards the artwork statement behind the work opposite the windows.

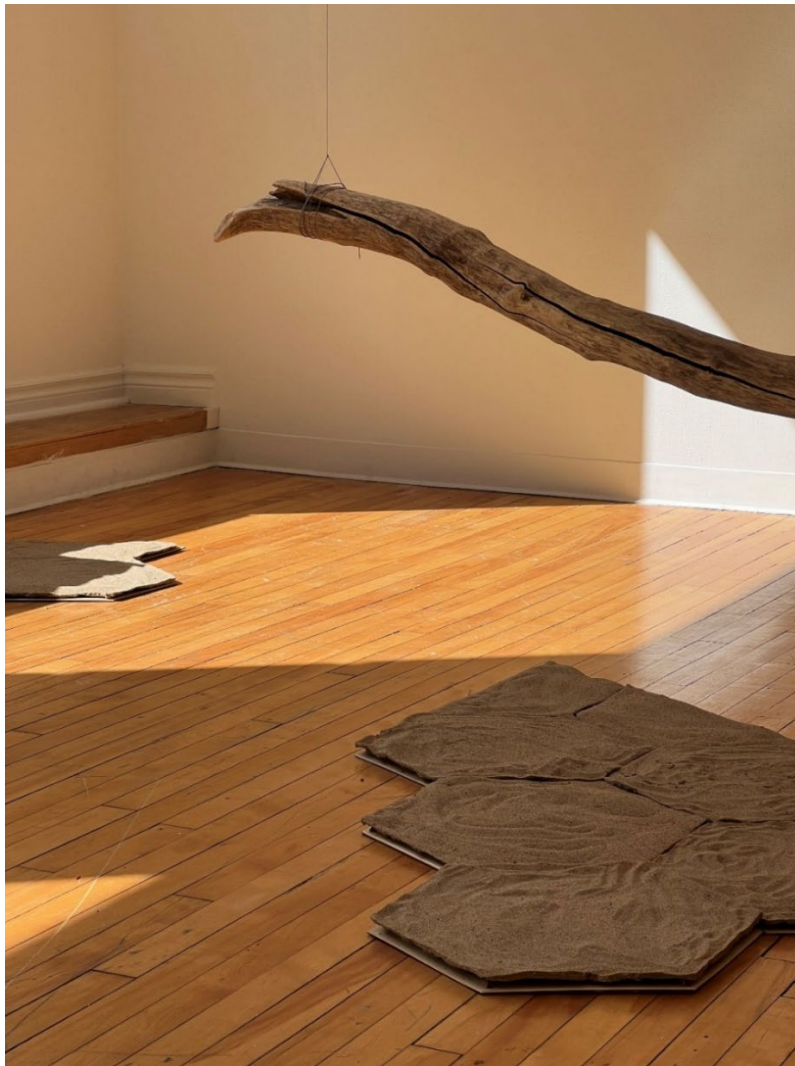
The trunk of driftwood is narrowed and smoothed by the organic digestion and gentle mechanical abrasion experienced on its journey out “at sea” on the Georgian Bay²⁵. I collected this log on a chilly winter visit to Cawaja beach, east of Penetanguishene while visiting the unwinterized cottage of friends. *Joycon Drift*’s sand tiles are about 1/3 the scale of the massive structural column in the middle of the gallery or the size of large patio tiles, just enough space to (imaginably) walk across without stepping on a crack given some coordination²⁶. From further away the sand might seem to flow together, but with a closer approach their seams reveal them to be discreet tiles. Their edges can be seen where each tile’s undulating surface drops or rises sharply where their edges touch.

Drift, Visibility

In this second space of the exhibition the driftwood and sand rise in planes just out of sync with where expected, above the floor (the sand) and at thigh height (the driftwood). In my site-responsive installation of these, I wanted the honeycomb island to sit in dialogue with the vent risers under the windows and the log in relationship with both the windowsills and tops of the radiators. By putting the objects and room’s

²⁵ At “lake” technically, but the sentiment of being at sea is apt due to the bay’s vastness and history connected to maritime trade.

²⁶ Similarly to visitors’ reaction to the light tactility of *Directional Shielding*’s pink foam, a few people mentioned having the urge to step on the sand tiles.



*Figure 15 Detail of the midday light interacting with Joycon Drift
Image from: Ge Lu, with permission.*

features in this spatial dialogue, I hoped to expand the width of the artwork's spatial presence. These relationships serve to not only float the objects and expand their presence but also stratify the planes of the room with an unreal weightlessness. This

begins to sink the viewer gently below the ground as they move from the top of the turf towards (and below) the lifted tiles.

When I work in the realm of 3D design software this sort of gravity free, objects-left-in-place type of exploded view is where much of my time is spent. It may be easy to take for granted the sheer potential in these weightless environments, but the reality behind the viewport²⁷ is that it requires a lot of computational and human labour to create the infrastructure on which this software can run.

Something which fascinates me is the extent of the systems and labour which go into allowing for a users' digital experience. In my early twenties, I worked in a mid-sized network services department²⁸. There I gained a first-hand look into the electrical power, human labour, and computational processes required to run not only the company computers but also the cascading objects behind them. When an employee on the floor would start their shift somewhere as far away as Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, logging into their employee account might feel like a rote action located entirely on the computer in front of them. What they don't see is the databases (on a designated physical server) required to track who works at the company that can talk in the back end to records by payroll (on another server) so that when someone is hired they are automatically assigned a login, then retrieving the work orders from another server. Already the number of physical machines is growing, not to mention backups, a server room kept frigid to prevent equipment damage from overheating, etc. These are just the physical requirements not even considering the personnel, the ongoing back-end services and security processes involved to make a seemingly simple action happen.

This weightlessness in the spatial arrangement of *Joycon Drift* speaks to the virtual as the way we experience digital physics as well as the way that one's lofty, fantastical plans emerge in their mind. The object of desire floats into the minds eye,

²⁷ "Viewport" in the term in 3D design and animation software for the frame where the user can see, move among, the scene that you are working on.

²⁸ Another way of saying I.T. (Information Technology) department. Our department managed the computers, network connections, cybersecurity, etc. for our Canadian company with about 100 branches.

and all of the messy details, practical realities, and external actors fall away. *Joycon Drift* is an idealisation.

Georgian Bay

From the fall of 2021 until beginning the IAMD program in 2023 I lived about 150km north of Toronto in The Blue Mountains. This is an area of Georgian Bay along the Niagara Escarpment that is popular for all manner of outdoor recreation - skiing, golfing, sailing, hiking – and is where my parents moved for retirement. While urban life was mostly on pause after March 2020, I moved up there and found work as a landscape labourer making patios. Those years up north grew from a reprieve from the precarity of the city into an unending vibrant present. A growing uncertainty loomed as to when and if I would be able to return to the city. Despite my love for recreational visits to Georgian Bay, finally being able to return to the city and pursue my master's degree marked a moving beyond that impasse. The recentness of this time of my life has certainly informed my attachment to the framework of *Cruel Optimism*.

The materials we used to build patios were products made of stone, each made appropriate for different uses through varied granulation and processes. My days were spent moving variations of dirt, rocks, and sand around over and over until a beautiful stone patio would emerge. This system of using limited material palettes with a focus on spatial arrangements to create meaning has influenced my new works of *Please... Touch the Grass*. In the case of *Joycon Drift*, the polymer sand I used to create the honeycomb tiles are directly tied to this time – it is a product meant for filling in the gaps between patio stones. These sand tiles were constructed in advance and installed in a site-responsive arrangement in the gallery. *Directional Shielding* were made in the same site responsive way with their respective limited palettes of carboard and pink foam assembled in the gallery space.

The Blue Mountains is an area of idealised landscape, in recreation and in art.

The imagination of the region remains captured to this day by the image of the great Canadian outdoors as recognisable in the work of the Group of Seven. The group were active around the Bay and their legacy (with their vision of landscape as an idealised untouched wilderness) still reverberates through the region's visual culture today. Artists' studios dot Collingwood and surrounding areas where painters continue the tradition of techniques and subject matter explored by the Group to capture the rich almost mystical qualities of the landscape.

Like the recognition of practical systems required to create a weightless virtual environment, my experience of Georgian Bay has been as *both* a recreational playground (camping, canoeing, skiing, hiking) *and* a site of pragmatism and labour (finding work during the urban slump, helping my mother around the house). In using the driftwood found on the beaches of Georgian Bay in the *Joycon Drift* installation, I invite the viewer to consider how social conceptions of nature are constructed. Constructed in the art of the Group of Seven whose work still captures the imagination of the country today. Or in a practical example, constructed by the real labour required to make the vast field of patios, vacation homes, lawns, and other infrastructure on which vacationers can enjoy their outdoor leisure time.

Exhibition Design

Nesting Objects, Catherine Telford Keogh's Carriers (Gravity-Fed)

Like Lotus Kang's *Receiver Transmitter (Butterfly)*, Catherine Telford Keogh's piece *Carriers (Gravity-Fed)* was a site-responsive work commissioned for the GTA 24 exhibition at MoCA. I can recall the experience of first seeing *Carriers (Gravity-Fed)* ²⁹ in person: the factory-floor-turned-gallery space of the MoCA's 3rd floor provided an escape from an overcast June day. Entering the space I first encountered the work in the same

²⁹ Telford Keogh, *Carriers (Gravity-Fed)*.

way which it is often photographed to impactful effect: as an overhead package sorting conveyor running overhead the gallery floor, before spiralling down along one of the beautiful and substantial concrete pillars which define the space.



*Figure 16 Image of Catherine Telford Keogh's Carriers (Gravity Fed).
Image taken by author.*

Two elements which struck me about how Telford-Keogh created this work are her construction of nesting structures within the exhibition, and her inclusion of non-human timescales via repeated uses of certain material across various points of their lifecycle.

Structurally, the package conveyor situates the glass bins and their contents not just within the Auto BLDG, but within a greater economic system of postmodern production, online retail, and fast shipping. The glass containers all speak to each other – visually and materially similar, but each containing their own ecosystem within their contents. *Carriers...* is a nesting set of objects - of worlds contained within the work.

Unlike Telford Keogh's work which is one piece with this overarching structure, my works of *Please... Touch the Grass* exist within an overarching exhibition design where the temporary wall structures and the plastic turf partition the gallery into zones, requiring the viewer to cross the "grass" threshold. By nesting the three new exhibition works within this overarching structure (as inspired by Telford Keogh's *Carriers...*) not only are the navigational choices available to the viewer pre-set, but each of the artworks become coloured by their proximity to the physical *and* proverbial grass.

Network Architecture, Exhibition Strategy

These nesting structures that I've incorporated into the exhibition design brings the artworks into dialogue with the cascading sets of objects and labour that goes into the ideal outdoor vacation or the simplest of digital experiences. The requisite objects and labour which one might take for granted. Though there is a blurry overlapping of nomenclature in the field of Information Technology, a term which resonates with me here is "network architecture." Network architecture³⁰ is the discipline related to the strategizing (planning, organizing, designing) of the sorts of complex nesting of objects and processes required to make a network run like the one at the mid-size company that I worked for in my early twenties. This term "network architecture" resonates with me because it makes tangible (like built architecture) the ways that the underlying logic of physical systems can map similarly onto those of virtual environments, when the background logic of virtual spaces might easily be taken for granted as out of sight out of mind. The term highlights the strategic production of these experiences. This mutual strategy is something which I have been thinking with in the design of the *Please... Touch the Grass* exhibition.

For the purposes of my research, I look to *strategy* as put forth by French

³⁰ Corresponding role: network architect.

multidisciplinary scholar and Jesuit priest Michel de Certeau (b. 1925, d. 1986), specifically from his book *The Practice of Everyday Life vol. 1* (originally published in 1974). Here, De Certeau lays out a case to complicate strict top down producer-consumer models of power, instead teasing out the ways in which consumers – being renamed *users* – are secondary producers, producing their own new sets of meaning by their very engagement with the objects presented to them. In his model, there is a *strategy of production* versus *tactics of use* dynamic.

To De Certeau, strategy is “the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that become possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, and army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated. It postulates a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be managed.”³¹ The shielded cable which carries signal among networks is a conduit for transmission from strategic producer to the user, shielding the signal from outside noise barring unforeseen circumstances.³²

Conclusions:

My parents let me get the Lego Island computer game, but it is so slow on my computer it should not even be worth playing. But I keep trying to initiate my Lego pizza delivery mission while the audio stutters and images lag behind. A new image appears every five to thirty seconds. I sink many hours into the game, dreaming of potential of the game that I am not playing.

I download The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind, but it is so slow on my refurbished laptop that it is not even worth trying.

³¹ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. 1. 35-36

³² Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. 4.

I download The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, but it is so slow on my refurbished desktop that it is not even worth trying.

I bring out some old games during March break in high school. I try to beat gauntlet legends, but the game shuts down whenever I try to enter one door. There is a scratch on the disc cutting off that level. It is not even worth trying, but I keep trying a million ways.

“Touch grass” begins as a virtual sentiment that points to a physical site. The upfront instructions given to “Please... ~~Do Not~~ Touch the Grass” set viewers’ expectations on what’s to come in the exhibition space along with how to engage with what they do find (physically or conceptually). Expect grass, tactility, perhaps more signs. The phrasing creates a visible omission, implying a layering of instructions and of meanings. For all the focus on grass in setting the tone, there is ultimately only a small amount of “grass” in the actual exhibition. Like the grass baseball diamonds of the city where space limits the ideal of the in-air home run— my exhibition creates a field on which the audience is invited to renegotiate *the givens of daily life*³³. A space where to walk onto the field is to accept that there is a new way of moving; it is game time (or training time). *Cutscene 1, Directional Shielding*, and the driftwood beach of *Joycon Drift* all exist in their contrast to the grass which we are supposed to focus our efforts on ~~not~~ touching, causin this directive to tug at the back of the visitors’ mind while elsewhere engaged.

Each of my new works has built-in appropriate and inappropriate uses afforded to them³⁴: *Directional Shielding* by name disinvents external forces like a concerned

³³ As per Sara Ahmed’s the presupposed, normative lines promising inherited payoff, introduced in *Directional Shielding* section.

³⁴ Gibson, “The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception, Eight: The Theory of Affordances.” Gibson describes affordance as what an object (or environment) “offers... provides or furnishes, either for good or for ill” to an animal. I am using the term here to think about the sets of potential uses for the objects I have made which emerge from their unique qualities. For example, the ability to pick up and swing around *Directional Shielding* is one of its affordances.

parent guiding access of appropriate content for their child. Just as much as blocking inappropriate “noise”, this speaks to well-intentioned prevention of the “signal” from straying during an incubational stage of development (as in dialogue the the given lines and impertinences of Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology*). The experiences I had in my younger life not fitting into gender norms worked like this: an accumulation of experiences like nicks and bumps inadvertently trying to contain me on a socially appropriate (not very smooth) path.

The Nintendo 64 controllers of *Cutscene 1* express in their form an appropriate use for three handed gameplay. Their cardboard clamshell construction evokes egg cartons: which are in themselves somewhat flimsy but when an egg is correctly positioned inside the carton a tremendous weight can be supported by virtue of the eggshell’s arches. Any shifting force or misuse, however, threatens to crack the shell.

The honeycomb sand tiles of *Joycon Drift* create a scene stripped of gravity and partitioning the shorelines of Lake Huron and Georgian Bay. For the viewer who crosses the exhibition’s plastic grass threshold, the promise of the artwork as a stable landing point reveals itself to be charged with a tension which threatens to be snapped apart if touched by the viewer. This practical reality against the virtual weightless of the work speaks to my intention for *Joycon Drift* to serve as a meditation on the practicalities (systems, labour) involved in creating idealised experiences on land.

This nesting set of objects and spaces speak to each other as inspired by Catherine Telford Keogh’s *Carriers (Gravity-Fed)*. Through my exhibition design, I hope to offer visitors choices to experience unfoldings of the space as they move among my works. The viewer is presented with an impasse in the separation of spaces, by the hardboard walls and the plastic turf on the ground at the through point. Any viewer who choses to “touch the grass” can then emerge into the second space where *Joycon Drift* promises a calm sandy landing pad (where on second thought, the tension of the potential snap of the sand and of the string may dawn on the viewer). Then, as they try

to find their conceptual footing, their attention can be drawn along the driftwood, out the window at the one patch of sky visible among the buildings of Richmond Street West. Or it can turn to the small, tapered tip of one of the *Directional Shielding* paths, offering a second endpoint to its collectively implied path. From my time spent in the space during the opening and showing guests throughout the exhibition's run, visitors tended to gravitate more toward the pink tip of *Directional Shielding* than to the scene outside of the gallery.



Figure 17 The tip of *Directional Shielding* comes into the second space through the wall panel closest to Joycon Drift's artwork statement (left)



Figure 18 The tip of *Directional Shielding* comes into the second space through the wall panel closest to Joycon Drift's artwork statement (left)

Cutscene 1 and *Directional Shielding* are modes of delivery with no content: hollow cardboard clamshell containers, the controller with no memory card, no game cartridge, the cable merely alluding to but not carrying a signal. But the absence of the signal opens up room for the viewer to project their own backgrounds into the objects – or, in the nesting set of objects.

Cutscene 1's scattered field of cardboard Nintendo controllers, set down mid-action and indefinitely abandoned by their players. *Directional Shielding's* cable flexing through

the space. *Joycon Drift*'s suspended driftwood log over a polygonal sand island, calm on the surface but with a baseline state of ready-to-snap. These works are meditations on the background processes that make up the field on which we can live our daily lives.

Reflections

In the course of creating this thesis exhibition, I brought virtual tools back into my practice after intentionally working fully analog for some time. The impact of this virtuality on the viewer is in traces of the virtual found in the work via a sense of weightlessness and the faceting (of surfaces) which comes as an artifact from digital tools. I also expanded my toolkit of sculptural-conceptual strategies to include material shifting and nesting exhibition structures — as seen in the work of Lotus Kang and Catherine Telford-Keogh respectively. Doing this has been about opening newer layers of meaning for the viewer to access in single objects. Neither readymade controller or egg carton, the objects of *Cutscene 1* for example, are imperfect hybrid objects that intensify the meanings of material and found forms through their through contrasts and seams. As well, the novelty of their hybridity paired with their imperfections give these objects a playful air which hopefully evokes a sense of delight the viewer, interrupting their sense of everyday.

My three works in the site-responsive installation of *Please... Touch the Grass* are inspired by the sites in which I have been immersed in across my life and the stages which they represent: shifting hierarchies in play on grass fields, the incubational spaces of gaming and online, and the shores of Georgian Bay so tied up in recreation *and* labour for me. The goal of these works has been to embrace movement between the thresholds which mark my life as someone who is male but was assigned female at birth, who is from the city and the country, and who has at times overridealized both being extremely online *and* extremely offline. Because encounters in the physical and online worlds are each charged in different ways, as viewers of *Please... Touch the Grass*

move through the exhibition I invite them to question the ways in which each side of these dichotomies are idealized *and* formative *and* have their own important roles.

Appendix A: Latex Tapestries works



Figure 19 Foul (2022)



Figure 20 The Windup (2022)

Appendix B: Exhibition Documentation



Figure 21 Directional Shielding



Figure 24 Directional Shielding with Cutscene 1 visible in background

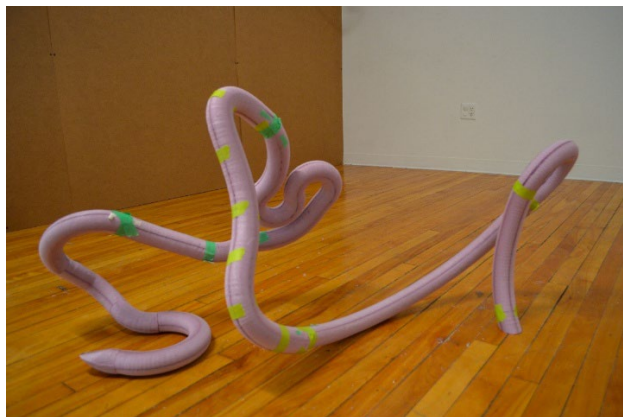


Figure 22 Directional Shielding Detail



Figure 25 Cutscene 1



Figure 23 Directional Shielding Detail

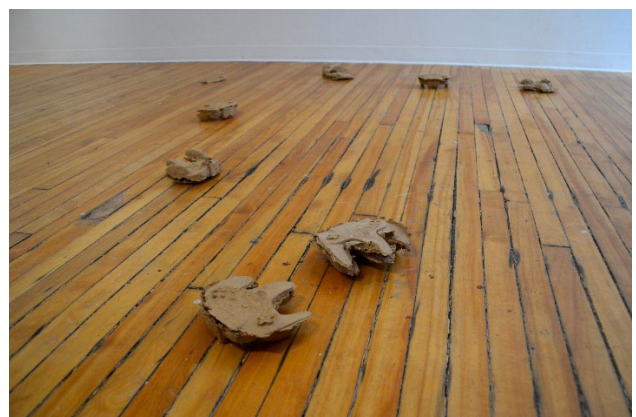


Figure 26 Cutscene 1 Detail



Figure 27 Cutscene 1 Detail



Figure 30 Joycon Drift



Figure 28 Cutscene 1 Detail



Figure 31 Joycon Drift



Figure 29 Exhibition threshold from the second zone. Joycon Drift on left



Figure 32 Joycon Drift detail



Figure 33 Joycon Drift



Figure 36 The plastic turf grass



Figure 34 Joycon Drift in foreground, Directional Shielding centre background



Figure 35 Detail of Directional Shielding emerging through partition wall

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