Metaphysical Gravity

By

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A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University

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in

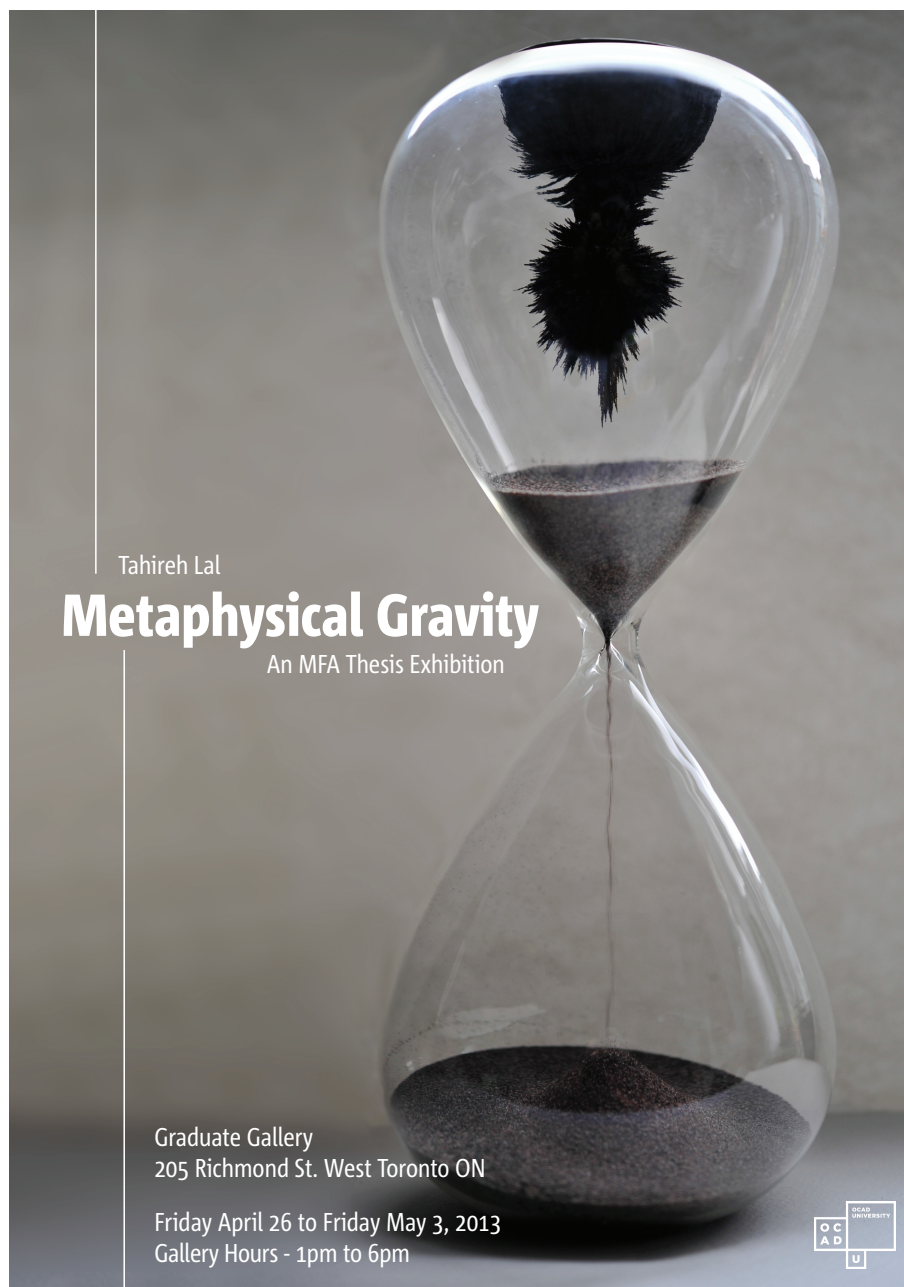Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design

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205 Richmond Street W.

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Tahireh Lal

Metaphysical Gravity

An MFA Thesis Exhibition

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Gallery Hours - 1pm to 6pm

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Metaphysical Gravity

Master of Fine Arts, 2013

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Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design

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Abstract

     Metaphysical Gravity is an art exhibition that uses movement and stasis in sculpture, video and audio to reflect on the condition of contemporary mobility. This is addressed through a self-reflexive art practice that is informed by auto-ethnographic reflection supported by interviews. The concept of affect and its relationship to memory and the body is explored and illustrated with insights on the shifting nature of home within migration. The adaptation process emerges as a negotiation of familiarity and strangeness. The studio practice engages these relationships through explorations of sand, magnetism and speech. The artwork generated manifests material and temporal behaviors that speak to the simultaneity of movement and stasis. The assertion that mobility is afforded by the coexistence of stasis and dynamism, familiarity and unfamiliarity is derived from a key principle of the mobilities paradigm: any mobility has its immobile counterpart.

Acknowledgements

I thank OCAD University for giving me the opportunity to study here.

Dedication

To my mother and father.

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Introduction

Metaphysical Gravity is an interdisciplinary art project and support paper that uses kinetic sculpture, video, audio and installation to explore the concept of mobility. Modern personal geographies are often multi-sited, influenced by experiences of relocation. My project explores the tensions that stem from contemporary mobile existence.

My personal geography has recently been redefined by relocating to Toronto to study at OCAD University on a scholarship available to students from India. The opportunity to migrate for my education has allowed me to engage deeply with a new place and culture, leading me to think about the implications of mobile existence and what it means to be mobile.

Metaphysical Gravity addresses this subject through both practice and research. The research questions that started this work were:

1. In what ways does an auto-ethnographic study unpack the contemporary mobile condition?

2. How is the idea of home understood in the context of mobility?

3. What insight does my studio practice offer in the contemplation of home as a mobile entity?

Propelled by both the art work and an assessment of our current times, there have been several shifts in modes of thinking and theoretical investigation

over the course of this project. While the questions stated helped begin this work, the artwork produced addresses a different more general set of ideas that stem from the original questions. The research questions that the work ultimately addresses are:

1. In what ways can my self-reflexive art practice address the contemporary mobile condition?

2. How is affect understood in the context of contemporary mobile constructs of home?

3. What insight can the exhibition *Metaphysical Gravity* and its use of sand and magnetism offer in the contemplation of stability and instability, the familiar and unfamiliar?

Reflecting on my experience of home in migration, my methodological approach to an understanding of mobility is self-reflexive with elements of auto-ethnography. Self-reflexive practice embraces a multi pronged approach to questions that arise from subjective interests and creative intuition[1]. It draws on interpretations of empirical research attempting to offer alternative viewpoints in the consideration of the thematic at hand[2]. My

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[1] Greame Sullivan, "Art Practice as Research," in *Art Practice As Research : Inquiry in Visual Arts",* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2010), 110.
[2] Ibid.

primary research is conducted in the context of the contemporary mobile

condition, using auto-ethnography supported by interviews.

Auto-ethnography draws attention to the idea that personal stories

have resonance with a wide audience[3]. As a method it requires that personal

narrative be sufficiently contextualized allowing the work to go beyond the

realm of the private. The ways in which this can be done include accounting

for the general factors that give rise to one's personal condition.[4]

To contextualize my own experiences, I have conducted interviews

with people who identify with the mobile condition of relocating in search of

opportunity. This has broadened my understanding of mobility within

migration. My interviews took the form of semi-structured informal

conversations around the ideas of home and relocating. I approached these

interviews from an insider's perspective, often relating my own journey to

the people with whom I was in conversation[5]. The decisions made in my

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[3] Norman K. Denzin, "Interpretive Biography," in *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples and Issues,* ed. J. Gary Knowles and Andrea L. Cole, (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008), 121.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Diane Wolfe, "Situating Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork" in *Feminist Dilemas in Fieldwork,* ed. Diane Wolfe (Boulder Co: Westview Press, 1996), 34.
Wolfe talks about the ways in which a researcher's 'insider' position can be used to in fieldwork to help gather relevant information.

studio regarding execution and exhibition of work, were influenced by resonances in these conversations.

In *Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings,* the first editorial of the *Mobilities* journal, social scientists and co-founding editors, Mimi Sheller, John Urry and Kevin Hannam strongly advocate for a shift in methods of conducting research to factor in mobility as a reality of contemporary life[6]. Using strategies that they suggest, I consider how any mobility has an immobile counterpart[7]. I also consider the ways in which the body is an "affective vehicle."[8] This frames my understanding of how time, space, the digital domain, memory and the body relate to contemporary mobility.

The thesis exhibition titled '*Metaphysical Gravity*' is comprised of four discrete works – *Sifting/ Shifting*, *Sandcastles in the Air*, *The Hourglass* and *Bird: Bɜːd: Bɜːrd*. The artworks use sand, magnetism and speech to probe the complex idea of mobility. In the exhibition, the viewer is confronted with plays on time expressed through material, audio and visual media. The exhibition sets up a series of embodied encounters that challenge expected material behaviors. The works draw attention to how different manipulations of similar elements manifest both stasis and movement.

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[6] Kevin Hannam, Mary Sheller and John Urry, "Editorial, Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings," *Mobilities* 1, no.1 (2006), 1-2.
[7] Ibid.,12.
[8] Ibid., 15.

The title *Metaphysical Gravity* of the exhibition and project is derived from a quote that I first came across as graffiti on a wall in downtown Toronto. The quote is from Buckminster Fuller, an architect who spent much of his life thinking about spaces for people. The context in which I use this title is twofold. Firstly, it relates to the use of magnetism in my artwork as a force capable of inducing both movement and stasis. Secondly, it relates to the idea of mobility. The quote in entirety reads 'Love is Metaphysical Gravity'. To Fuller, love is an ongoing process of engagement with the world, "all-pervasive"[9] and "omni-inclusive"[10]. While each of us has our own origins, it is this curiosity of the world combined with accessibility to travel that has allowed mobility to become a condition of our times.

 The mobile condition I probe relates to a search for opportunity outside of one's geographical locus, and a willingness to uproot and reground oneself in pursuit of that opportunity. This is a condition of our times. While discussing the focus of the mobilities paradigm, Sheller and Urry point out, "It is not a question of privileging *a* 'mobile subjectivity', but rather of tracking the power of discourses and practices of mobility in creating both movement

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[9] Steven Sieden,"Love is Metaphysical Gravity," in *A Fuller View: Buckminster Fuller's Vision of Hope and Abundance for All* (Studio City: Divine Arts, 2011), 30.
[10]Ibid.

and stasis."[11] My work is limited to ideas on mobility that pertain to a mobility of choice. It is beyond the scope of my current project to investigate ideas relating to involuntary or forced mobilities.

In the context of transnational mobility, this project explores tensions between familiarity and unfamiliarity, slippages and stickiness, the processes of both letting go and adapting. Corroborating the ideas outlined by the mobilities paradigm, my research and studio practice infer that mobility is neither the opposite of stasis nor does it imply dynamism alone; mobility is afforded by the co-existence of stasis and dynamism.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework develops my understanding of contemporary mobility, specifically migration. Following Hannam, Sheller and Urry's ideas I understand how any mobility has its immobile counterpart[12]. I also engage the operation of affect in mobility[13]. This section

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[11] Mimi Sheller and John Urry, "The New Mobilities Paradigm," *Environment and Planning A* 38, no. 2 (2006), 211.
[12] Hannam, Sheller and Urry, "Editorial: Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings", 12.
[13] Ibid., 15.

includes auto-ethnographic reflections and material from interviews[14] that contextualize theory that is relevant to my project.

Initially, I explored my mobile condition as nomadism, with ideas drawn from the book *A Thousand Plateaus* by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. They explore philosophical nomadism and posit 'smooth' and 'striated' space as oppositional modes of being. According to Deleuze and Guattari, 'smooth' space is a space of mobility and the nomad while 'striated' space is that of stasis and the sedentary being. The philosophical construct of nomadism as defined by Deleuze and Guattari relies heavily on the concept of continuous movement. However through my studio work and my evolving understanding of home, home was becoming increasingly about a simultaneous occupation of both smooth and striated space.

The realization that nomadism was becoming conceptually restrictive for the articulation of my ideas, led me to the mobilities paradigm. Moving beyond sedentarist and nomadic conceptualizations of place and movement, Sheller and Urry suggest that the mobilities paradigm is concerned with,

"...tracking the power of discourses and practices of mobility in creating both movement and stasis. A new mobilities paradigm delineates the context in which both sedentary and nomadic accounts of the social world operate, and it questions how that context is itself mobilized or

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[14] Please see Appendix A.

performed through   ongoing sociotechnical practices on intermittently mobile material worlds."[15]

In the mobilities paradigm, mobility is used in a comprehensive sense to include physical movement such as walking and climbing and movement augmented by technologies, bicycles and buses, cars and trains, ships and planes[16]. The scope of the mobilities paradigm is far reaching as it is intended to serve as a model of thought applicable to the several kinds of mobility operating in the world today.   For my current work I examine the condition of mobility within migration. By this I mean the conditions of relocating frequently but with enough time to engage with a new culture, including the process of adaptation.

Mobility sometimes restricts belonging[17] while home essentially connotes belonging. In one of my interviews a participant spoke of a childhood friend who has never left the vicinity of her hometown. She used the German word 'bodenstaendig' to describe her friend. There is no English equivalent to this word, but it loosely translates to all of the following -

[15] Sheller and Urry, "The New Mobilities Paradigm," 211.
[16] Sheller and Urry, "The New Mobilities Paradigm, 212.
[17] Ranjit Hoskote, "Nemo/ No-man/ Nomad: Collegial Reflections on the Raqs Media Collective," (2004), Raqs media collective, http://www.raqsmediacollective.net/print.aspx?type=on&catid=2&slideno=2 (accessed June 10, 2012).

autochthonous[18], local, down-home, down-to-earth, indigenous, native,

rooted to the soil[19]. The interviewee, who has lived in several countries said

that she could neither use 'bodenstaendig' to describe her own condition nor

could she identify with its opposite. This conversation emphasizes the

tension that is felt when trying to articulate what it means to have multiple

notions of local that influence one's identity.

The mobilities paradigm challenges notions of both spatiality and

temporality by drawing attention to the fact that contemporary networks

collapse space-time separations. In one of the interviews a professional who

has relocated from Australia, poetically alludes to this. She recalls talking to

her family via Skype one summer evening when the sun was still up at 8pm

in Toronto. Her family was eating breakfast and midway through the

conversation all of them took a moment to look at the sun. They felt a deeper

sense of connection simply by looking at the sun, at the same moment, even

though they were the same distance apart and in different time zones. The

connectivity afforded by the internet and mobile phones allows for the ability

to be in several places at once. Being online or plugged into networks enables

an engagement with several activities in different spatial and temporal loci.

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[18] Autochthonous means indigenous or native.
[19] Leo.org, "Results for bodenstaendig",
dict.leo.org/ende?lp=ende&lang=en&searchLoc=0&cmpType=relaxed&sectH
dr=on&spellToler=&search=bodenstaendig (accessed January 11, 2013).

The mobilities paradigm is significantly concerned with immobility. Any mobility has its immobile counterpart[20]. For example the immobile coaxial cables or signal towers of communication systems allow for mobile devices[21]. This system is particularly relevant in the case of a mobile construction of home where the digital domain makes it easier to maintain ties with the home that one leaves. The digital extension of human faculties is now the common experience of anyone who owns a home computer and participates in urban social exchange. Further, the mobilities paradigm acknowledges the ability of the digital domain to allow a person to be present in more that one place at a time. E-mail, Facebook, Skype, Google+, the increasing ubiquity of the Internet and access to makes it easier to prevent complete separation from any place or person. The immobile infrastructure of communication systems allows home to 'stick' to the mobile subject by way of the digital.

There are also material ways in which a place can stay with the mobile subject. For instance, in the last seven years through my various apartments in various cities, two objects on my bedside table have remained constant - a framed photograph of my sisters, and a wire bicycle toy my

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[20] Hannam, Sheller and Urry, "Editorial: Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings," 12.
[21] Ibid.

father bought me outside an art gallery in Mumbai; clearly objects of

sentimental value. The feeling of familiarity they give me is the potential I

have imbued them with. As Hannam, Sheller and Urry explain,

> "There are hybrid systems, 'materialities and mobilites' that combine objects, technologies, socialities and affects out of which distinct places are produced and reproduced. Crucial to the recognition of the materialities of mobilities is the recentering of the corporeal body as an affective vehicle through which we sense place and movement, and construct emotional geographies."[22]

More specifically, the sense of comfort the objects on my bedside table give

me, is the *affective* potential with which I have imbued them.

   Affect has been theorized in several ways[23], for my current work I

understand affect in the context of being a pre-emotional state, illustrated by

the ways in which 'home' has the capacity to change and shift within the

context of migration. My comprehension of affect is derived from the work of

political theorist, writer and philosopher, Brian Massumi. By reflecting on

how the body as a physical entity simultaneously moves and feels, he posits

that affect stems from corporeality and operates in the virtual domain; affect

occupies the space between stasis and movement[24]. Deriving from

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[22]Ibid., 15.

[23] Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, "Introduction," *The Affect Theory Reader,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 16.

[24] Brian Massumi, "Concrete is as Concrete Doesn't," *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 44.

Massumi's work, mobility scholars David Conradson and Deirdre Mckay

investigate affect in the context of transnational migration. They deduce that

"affect emerges through embodied encounter"[25]. Affect can be understood as

somatic knowledge[26] or the knowledge of the body that is attentive to ways

in which a situation is interpreted.

In one of the interviews a participant speaks of the association certain

landscapes and the feeling of breeze have with the idea of home. She explains

that this association comes from the windy landscape of her childhood. This

illustrates how an embodied encounter, not associated with a place of

dwelling, generates a certain feeling of home. It indicates that the essence the

idea of home is the association with feelings familiarity. This is what I think

of as the affective state of home, or home as affect.

In her essay *Home and Away,* contemporary cultural theorist, Sara

Ahmed explains the relationship between affect and familiarity in the context

of home from her position as transnational migrant[27]. Ahmed pointedly notes

that "the question of home and being at home can only be addressed by

considering the questions of affect: being at home is a matter of how one feels

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[25] David Conradson and Diedre Mckay, "Translocal Subjectivities: Mobility Connection, Emotion," *Mobilities* 2, no.2 (2007), 170 .
[26] Ibid.
[27] Sara Ahmed, "Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2 no.3 (1999), 341.

or how one fails to feel"[28]. The specific feeling under consideration is one of familiarity. Familiarity comes from a permeation of the senses by the local environment, its sounds, sights, smells and textures[29]. So familiarity stems from embodied encounter and therefore is associated with affect.

My experience of migration has included pulls from my old environment that I wasn't prepared for. Through the interviews conducted for my research, the more I engaged with people who have migrated, the more I realized the push/pull of home is very common and strongly related to what is familiar. An interviewee recounted how on one particularly stressful day, not being able to find Australian cheese in the supermarket caused her to finally give in to her emotions and have a minor outburst. This incident illustrates the comfort one seeks in things that are familiar and the effect that an absence of that familiarity can have.

The experience of migration is a negotiation of the pushes and pulls from both new environment and old. This is illustrated by the idea of comfort food that is associated with what is familiar. I have always had an interest in food and so my main household chores growing up were to help grocery shop and cook. Consequently, these tasks help me anchor my sense of home in a 'new' environment. During my time in Canada, engaging with

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[28] Ahmed, "Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement," 341.
[29] Ibid.

local markets and foods has changed my dietary habits. While this stems from convenience and practicality, it also helps me appreciate what a locality has to offer. In addition to a meal of rice and 'daal'[30], fresh arugula salad now features equally prominently on my list of comfort foods. My research helps theorize this acquisition of familiarity, and articulates how I am comfortable with the push/pull forces of old and new environments - they must coexist.

One way in which the locally familiar travels is through accents in speech. Accents are identifiable as being from a specific locality both within and across countries. In my art work this notion of familiarity associated with the local is explored through speech in the piece *Bird : Bɜːd : Bɜːrd*.

The process of becoming familiar is a process of adaptation, which happens over *time*. Over time, the experiences of a new environment become associated with home. In the introduction to the compilation of essays*, Uprootings/ Regroundings*, Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castañeda, Anne-Marie Fortier and Mimi Sheller suggest that home as "affect is tied to the temporality of home"[31]. Transnational migration involves both spatial and temporal dislocations[32], living in the present while *"creating* both past and

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[30] 'Daal' is a North Indian preparation of lentils.
[31] Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castañeda, Anne-Marie Fortier and Mimi Sheller, "Introduction" in *Uprootings/Regroundings* ed. Sara Ahmed and Claudia Castañeda and Anne-Marie Fortier and Mimi Sheller (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 9.
[32] Ibid.

future"[33]. This is explored in the artwork; the time-based nature of the pieces themselves creates destabilization and tension in the viewing experience.

The construct of contemporaneity helps probe this temporality. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee who have authored the book, *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* suggest that, "one of the most striking features of contemporaneity is the coexistence of very distinct senses of time, of what it is to exist now, to be in place, and to act, in relation to imagined histories and possible futures."[34] Contemporaneity calls for an investigation into the history of a moment both spatially and temporally to ascertain its affective significance. It is concerned with the slippages and stickiness of time. It probes how subjective lived experience informs the comprehension of present situations, thereby bringing memory to the fore. Thus temporality is linked to memory. Contemporaneity's question is 'what is stuck to a moment?

My own understanding of memory is strongly influenced by Chris Marker's film, *Sans Soleil. Sans Soleil* is a travelogue in which the protagonist creates video letters as he explores new places and makes sense of them

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[33] Ibid.
[34] Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Smith "Preface," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity,* ed. Terry Smith and Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), xv.

through his experience. In a text read by the narrator, Marker's protagonist reflects, "I will have spent my life trying to understand the function of remembering, which is not the opposite of forgetting, but rather its lining. We do not remember, we rewrite memory…"[35] This poetic statement draws attention to the idea that memory is an entirely subjective fabrication. Through the lens of personal experience, each of us determines how we create our past and engage with the present. Memory and how it functions speaks to the connection between virtual and corporeal and therefore to affect and embodied encounter. Affect is a kind of memory. The conditions for affect to operate necessarily include emergence from an embodied encounter, however memory is broad ranging and includes any act of remembering regardless of how it originates.

For a large part of this process, the notion of home as a mobile entity remained central to the theorization of the work being developed. However, the implications of the work became evident once *Metaphysical Gravity* was installed. There is no literal conversation about home. The use of the idea of affect to understand experiences of migration and the mobility of home are the insights that are explored in the body of artwork which uses sand and magnetism as metaphors. Affect and its quality of 'in-betweeness', its

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[35] *Sans Soleil*, dir. Chris Marker (1983).

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relationship to embodied encounter, familiarity and unfamiliarity, movement
and stasis emerge as the broad ideas under consideration.

3. Studio Practice

My studio work has developed self-reflexively, embracing material
practice in the context of ideas gleaned from the interviews and theoretical
research. Over the last two years my work has expanded from being solely
video-based to incorporate material elements and electronics to realize
kinetic sculptures. As my work evolved I reflected on how the embodied
experience of each piece relates to my experience of mobility. The exhibition
speaks to the ways in which I understand mobility, arrived at through my
practice.

The autobiographical impulse is not new to me. My undergraduate
thesis work was focused on the study of old home movies as a way of
investigating the history of my family. I created a portrait of my grandfather
using films that he had shot in the fifties and early sixties. My film, *These Old
Frames* captures how he negotiated his identity in the context of India in her
post-colonial infancy[36]. I had planned to do a project with another body of
home movies that belonged to doctors who had migrated to the US in the

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[36] *These Old Frames,* dir. Tahireh Lal (2008).

eighties. However, it was my own journey, rather than the journey of others, that became the focal point of my graduate work. I realized that it was futile to try and contain the work that was stemming from my own experience, to not act on the natural process of having to adapt and make sense of my new surroundings would be a lost opportunity.

One of the ways in which I engaged with new places is by walking around. The act of walking and exploring spaces is a source of constant comfort and inspiration to me. In the context of my work, walking as a conscious method is aligned with the situationist practice of dérive. Guy Debord, a pioneer of the situationist movement defines the dérive as:

"a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiences. Dérives involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll. In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there."[37]

Debord coined the term psychogeography. It is a term associated with any intentional pedestrian task aimed at developing awareness and familiarity

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[37] Guy Debord, "Theory of the Dérive," trans. Ken Knabb, *Bureau of Public Secrets,* http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/2.derive.htm (accessed March 30, 2013).

with urban terrain.[38] The dérive resonates with me because this process of drift is the way in which I have become familiar with Toronto. The dérive operates as a micro-mobility in my life and practice.

My material investigation began quite simply with a walk in Toronto. I was on one of the beaches of Toronto Island and the color variation in the sand on the shore caught my attention. The first piece I created with the sand was titled *Abundance Protected* (Figure 1). This work celebrates what I understand to be the Island community's strong sense of home. The idea that the island is in constant need of protection came out of conversations with people who have lived on the Island for years. They take on the role of safeguarding their homes and the community from municipal authorities who would like Toronto Island to be parkland only. Referring to customs I am familiar with, I use the South Indian ritual of *kolam* drawing in *Abundance Protected*, to invoke protection for Toronto Island's community. This ritual is appropriated using sand that is found on the island in place of white rice or chalk powder used in South Indian homes. I used sand that had been separated into different colors to create symbolic patterns of protection.

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[38]Jeroen Beekmans, "Trend 9: The Revival of Psychogeography," *Pop Up City,* 4 Jan. 2012,(accessed March 30, 2013).

Figure 1. *Abundance Protected*

The process of separating sand into its component colors led to the

discovery that the darkest sand could be harvested with magnets[39]. By

throwing a magnet into the sand, the darkest particles, which are composed

of iron, are drawn out and stick to the magnet forming sea urchin like organic

forms. I recalled some of my high school physics and the possibility to create

magnetic fields using electricity. Since magnetism is an invisible force, there

was potential to animate the sand in real time with invisible forces that I

could possibly direct. To me artwork using this real time relationship

between the corporeality of visible sand and virtual quality of invisible

magnetic forces had the potential to be mysterious, strange and evocative of

mooring and mobile entities. This was the basis for my material research.

Magnets have poles that allow them to attract and repulse, pull and push.

Magnetism also aligns with the idea of movement and stasis. The magnets

attract the iron particles causing them to move and then hold them still.

I did extensive research on do-it-yourself methods of creating electro-

magnets. I used patterns and circuits I found on the Internet to get this

process started. I began by creating very weak magnets with short lengths of

copper wire wound around iron nails, and went on to work on larger

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[39] April Hickox, an artist, teacher and resident of Toronto Island told me to
throw a magnet into the sand.

magnets made of a hundred meter length of enamel coated copper wire

wound around a stake for a tent. Based on an experiment by Simon Monk, a

software engineer and electronics hobbyist, I created an electro-magnet with

a magnetic field that was strong enough to attract the iron particles in the

sand[40]. I then interfaced these magnets with microcontrollers to generate

experiments to determine different behaviors and ways in which I could

create artwork. After extensive prototyping, I had a model that animated the

magnetic elements in the sand along a vertical axis. This model was the

starting point for the work developed in my studio.

The pushing and pulling behavior of the sand between the

magnets was resonant with how I had begun to feel about my familiarity with

both Toronto and Bangalore. Further the sand becomes dynamic only in the

presence of the magnetic force field and every time a magnet is activated

there is a click from the corresponding relay that switches it on resulting in a

clock-like ticking. This model resonates with the way in which affect

operates; visually the model exemplified emergent behavior stemming from

embodied encounter, through time.

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[40] Simon Monk, "Levitation Machine," in *15 Dangerously Mad Projects for the Evil Genius* (New York: McGraw- Hill, 2011), 161.

As I developed my model into artwork, the sand and its behavior, the way it falls and moves, the ways in which I needed to store it, transport it and separate it continued to inspire studio work. I intuitively followed this process to develop more artwork. This material exploration ultimately dovetailed with my investigation into the contemporary mobile condition. My studio practice took me to a point where the behavior of the sand and how I was able to manipulate it led me to conclusions regarding the simultaneity of movement and stasis.

Sand is the dominant material and visual motif in the artwork created in this project. It connotes both the nomadic and sedentary, movement and stasis. Sand also brings to mind beaches, concrete, 'the sands of time' and shifting desert dunes. These free associations are important for my current body of artwork that develops around the materiality of sand that is specific to my current location.

The pieces in my show use different technologies to manifest time-based work. Of the four pieces in the final show, three are derived from my material explorations with sand. These are, *Sifting/Shifting*, *The Hourglass* and *Sandcastles in the Air*. The fourth piece, *Bird: Bɜ:d: Bɜ:rd*, offers a direct link to the subject of mobility by using speech to highlight familiarity and

unfamiliarity. My intention with the installation of these four works is for the viewer to acknowledge the different interactions that each work requires, followed by an understanding of what the pieces have in common. Each individual work, its relationship with the other works in the exhibition, and the exhibition as a unity, speaks to the idea that dynamism and stasis coexist.

i. Sandcastles in the Air

This is the piece that was developed from the model in which two magnets animate sand along a vertical axis. The way the sand can be built up and eroded by the interaction with magnetic force is reminiscent of the ephemerality of building sandcastles on the beach. Reminded of the interview where the participant spoke of her connection to landscape, I began to view the potential of the sand to create a scape from which the 'castles' evolve.

The visible area of the animated sand in the model is one inch high and three inches across and while I initially thought that this was a constraint that needed to be overcome, my final iteration of this piece embraces this scale of height as mobility operating on a micro-scale. The process of turning the model into a component of my installation began with an attempt to allow the castles to develop in a radial spread through a sandscape. Since the

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electro-magnets need to be situated both above and below the one-inch gap

for the sand, my first experiment demanded an uncomfortable peering action

from the viewer. My attempts to digitally magnify this evolving landscape

were difficult because of the scale and lighting conditions needed to

illuminate the movement. Both microscopic cameras and cameras with

magnification lenses did not successfully capture the motion of the sand. In

addition I tried to use the live video feed as a projection on a window. This

was one element too many and most of them detracted from directing a

viewer's gaze to the motion of the sand.

  At this point I spent some time analyzing the kinetic work of

contemporary Swiss artist Pe Lang. I first encountered his work while I was

doing research on ways in which to incorporate magnets into artwork. Much

of Pe Lang's work uses magnets and simple machines to create movement.

The clean lines of his work create compelling visual language that articulates

complex ideas around chaos and chance. While my work does not deal

thematically with chaos or chance, I am drawn to the aesthetics and methods

of Pe Lang's practice. It was specifically after observing the work *Falling

Objects | nº 60 – 67*[41] (Figure 2) that I was able to arrive at a crucial decisions

[41] Pe Lang, *Falling Objects | nº 60 – 67,* 2009,
http://www.pelang.ch/installations/falling2/falling_objects2.html (accessed
March 20, 2013).

Figure 2. *Falling Objects no. 60 - 67*

regarding the execution of my piece. In his work, while each unit is structurally the same and programed to execute the same action, when the objects perform, they do so differently. He creates dynamic systems from which behaviors emerge.

Going back to my model, I observed that sand as particle matter is such that no two 'castle' formations would be the same. Emphasizing this had the potential to create an installation. I decided to execute a row of magnetic units. While the height of the unit remains at one inch, increasing length increases the visible area. The task that followed was to get the magnetic units working at the same time as economically as possible.

After much troubleshooting, prototyping and experimenting with materials and electricity a prototype was developed. The magnets are programmed to turn on sequentially; this results in an irregular and organic development of the castles from the sandscape. The electronics surrounding the narrow band of animated sand detracted from the contemplation of movement. The chunkiness of the framework housing the electronic components was the final aesthetic detail that needed to be resolved. This motivated the decision to embed this work in a wall, concealing everything but the evolving landscape.

The result of this exploration is a narrow illuminated slit in a wall (Figures 3 & 5), through which the movement of the sand is seen (Figure 6) and the multiple clicking of relays[42] behind the wall which is heard (Figure 4). Much like immobile infrastructure that allows a person to be mobile, there are many elements in this piece that needed to be perfectly in place to allow the sand to move.

The title is a play on the idiom 'castles in the air' and is a reference to the desire to be upwardly mobile. The gradually evolving castles are not fortifying battlements in corporeality but fragile entities. While anchored in terrestrial activity, *Sandcastles in the Air* refers to the battlements of the mind - the interior space of home, which, like most things in this world, takes time to build.

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[42] Electronic component that is programmed to turn the electro-magnets on and off based.
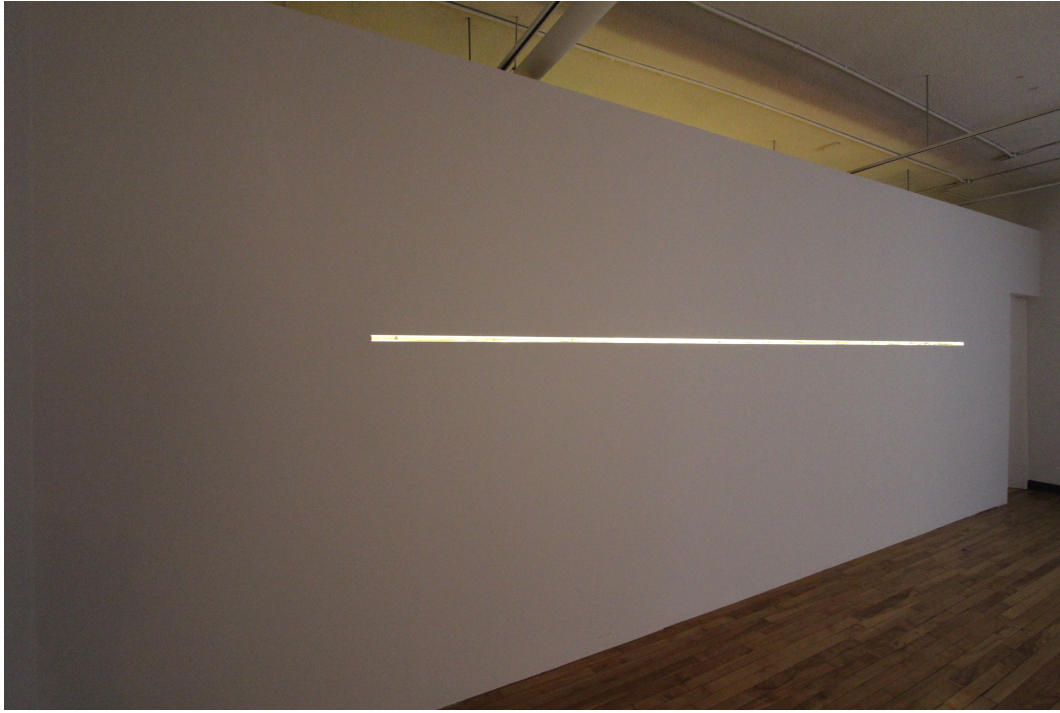
Figure 3. *Sandcastles in the Air*

Figure 4. *Sandcastles in the Air,* structural and installation detail

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Figure5. *Sandcastles in the Air*

Figure 6. *Sandcastles in the Air,* detail

ii. Bird : Bɜːd : Bɜːrd

Bird : Bɜːd : Bɜːrd is an audio piece that uses phonetics to reflect on familiarity and unfamiliarity. This work stems from my own experience. My spoken English has an Indian accent and very often words that I speak and hear get misunderstood resulting in conversations taking on tangential meaning. For example the words 'latent' and 'laden', 'rootless' and 'ruthless', 'bird' and 'boat' have at times been interchanged in conversations. The way I pronounce certain words has changed to be more comprehensible to those in my immediate surroundings. My accent is somewhat hybridized when I say 'thanks' and 'coffee' and other words I use everyday. The hybridization of my accent is part of the same adaptive process that I have dealt with in understanding how to change food habits or modes of dressing in a different cultural atmosphere with different climatic conditions.

People from different cultural backgrounds enunciate the word 'bird' differently. I have collected several of these enunciations to form the basis of this sound work. In the final audio work, the sound bytes are arranged to draw attention to the various accents on the word 'bird'. To the listener, based on the way they enunciate the word 'bird' some sound bytes will sound more familiar than others. The lesser-known accents may be indecipherable.

This work emphasizes the differences that can undermine an effort to communicate simply and clearly.

The choice to use the word 'bird' was intentional. It relates to the theme of mobility as it connotes freedom of flight and movement that is not limited by boundaries.

This piece is intended to mirror the environment that is urban Toronto. The work draws attention to awkward situations where no one is to blame. It invites the viewer to think of how what is familiar to them could become unfamiliar and how that very same entity could be familiar or unfamiliar to someone else. The work is a lighthearted take on adjusting to life in a multicultural city. The adaptive process in migration includes dealing with some amount of awkwardness that is overcome by retaining a commitment to openness.

iii. The Hourglass

The Hourglass (Figure 7) is a play on time. An hourglass rotates on a motor. One bulb of the hourglass fills and empties as it is supposed to. In the second bulb however, sand remains suspended preventing a complete passage of material from one bulb to the next. The hourglass is no longer a precise counter or measure of linear time. Using the familiar object of an hourglass the artistic intervention involves using magnetic sand and a

column of magnets in one bulb. The sand is quite literally stuck in one bulb of the hourglass.

The method of making this piece involved extensive prototyping to determine the behavior of the hourglass and rotating motion. This process was difficult due to my limited experience in both material fabrication and electronics. Wood and metal models were taken forward to generate a prototype. I had extensive help from people who are experts with ceramics, glass, metalworking and electronics. These artists helped me fabricate prototypes and understand how best to work with sand, glass and metal to obtain the desired results.

Unlike *Sandcastles in the Air* where each 'castle' builds up differently due to the magnetic forces, in this work, the magnetic forces hold particles still. A single unit conveys this stillness.

Time often feels expanded when one experiences new and unfamiliar environments, causing a disruption in the way the brain perceives lived time as opposed to the perception of clock time[43]. This work plays with the synthesis of different registers of time. Like the framework of

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[43] Burkhard Bilger, "The Possibilian: What a brush with death taught David Eagleman about the mysteries of time and the brain,"*The New Yorker*, 25 Apr. 2011, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/04/25/110425fa_fact_bilger (accessed 20 March, 2013).

Figure 7. The Hourglass

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contemporaneity, this work asks, 'what is stuck to a moment?' Within the context of stasis and dynamism in home and mobility, 'The Hourglass' is a visual exploration of slippages and stickiness, the processes of both letting go and adapting.

iv. Sifting/Shifting

Sifting/Shifting is a dual screen video projection. While fabricating the hourglass, I realized that the sand from the beach was too coarse to flow smoothly through the aperture between the bulbs of the hourglass. This led me to acquire a ceramicists' glaze screen to sift the sand and separate out particles that would move easily between the bulbs. The motion of the sand in the sifting process caught my videographer eye and formed the basis for the final piece to be executed in this project. This piece juxtaposes two videos. One shows the constant motion of the sifting process; the other displays the calm precision of the particles that filter through. The piece speaks to the idea of the simultaneity of the constant agitation of mobility and its accompanying settling process. By allowing for both chaotic motion and quiet percolation the no longer 'new' environment ultimately becomes familiar.
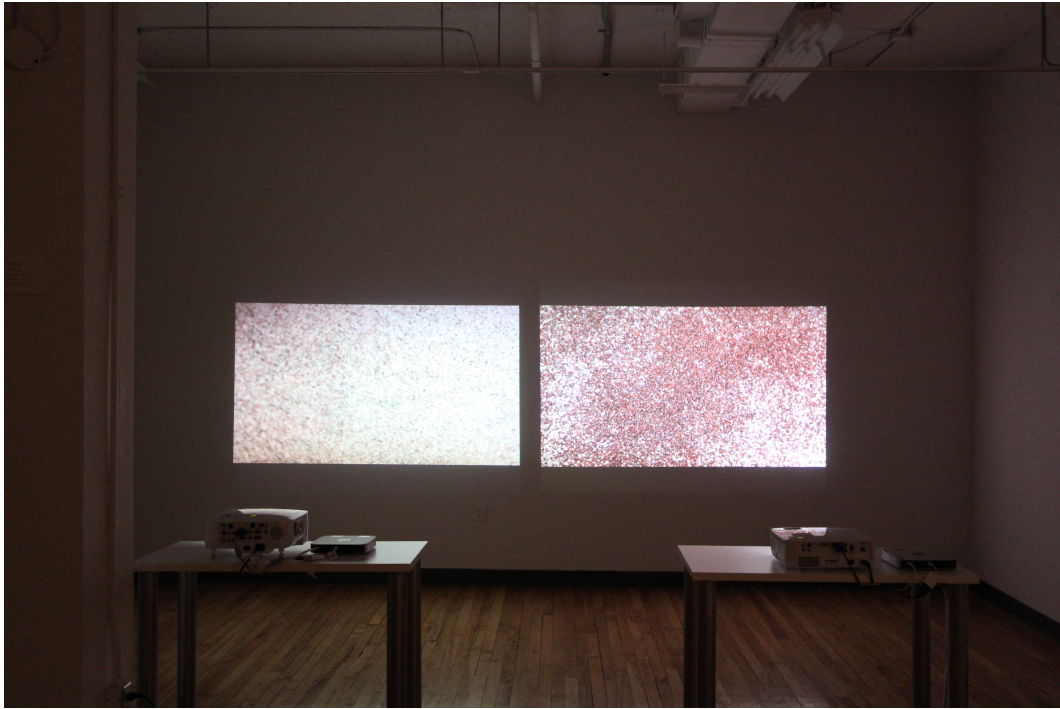
Figure 8. *Sifting/Shifting*

In their essay *On Reflexive Interpretation: The Play of Interpretive Levels,* theorists Mats Alvesson and Kaj Skoldberg draw attention to the idea that creative practice benefits from setting in place a permeable framework in which ideas and levels of interpretation are constantly allowed to interact and play off of each other[44]. A significant aspect of this method is the ability for the resultant work to be read in several ways, breaking away from a frame of reference[45]. In my studio the work with sand and magnetism was developed in solitude, keeping in mind the context of mobility, home as a mobile entity and conversations with kindred mobile subjects. This process resulted in the exhibition *Metaphysical Gravity* comprised of metaphoric abstractions of time and affect, movement and stasis that go beyond the realm of subjective mobile experiences.

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[44] Mats Alvesson and Kaj Skoldberg, "On Reflexive Interpretation: the play of interpretive levels," *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2000), 254.
[45] Ibid.,246.

Figure 9. *Metaphysical Gravity,* **gallery view**

Figure 10. *Metaphysical Gravity,* **gallery view**

4.Conclusion

I began this process with the intention of understanding what it means to be mobile in the world today. The experience of the world is becoming more and more mediated by technology. By collapsing space and time, these mediations change the dynamics of 'home' and 'away'. Through interviews with people who identify as mobile subjects and by paying attention to my personal experience of transnational migration, the notion that stability and instability can be simultaneous conditions emerged. The co-occurrence of oppositional forces as a condition of mobile experience was supported by my research of the mobilities paradigm. My artwork emphasizes the coexistence of stasis and dynamism within everyday life. My material investigations seek to create tensions that illustrate this duality.

The condition of transnational migration can draw attention to affect as a subliminal entity that operates in the quotidian. This happens through a perception of absence, because certain familiar embodied encounters no longer exist in a new environment. Adaptation is the process by which new encounters become familiar.

The exhibition *Metaphysical Gravity* draws attention to the process of adaptation through the manipulation of familiar objects and durational engagement. Although familiar, sand, the hourglass and speech are initially

made strange by kinetic motion, magnetism and phonetics. Time as a durational element is present in all of these works. And it is *through* time that the viewer's connection to the works shifts from being one of strangeness to one of familiarity. This is a process of adaptation that the viewer undergoes when they experience the works in the exhibition.

In her essay *Getting Down to the Nitty Gritty,* social scientist Kristen Luker writes about how a researcher's work includes connecting the dots so as to "bump things up a level of generality."[46] From my subjective negotiation of home to contemplating ideas of affect, familiarity, movement and stasis my artwork attempts to do this. It offers the viewer ideas to be considered through their own lens, allowing readings of the work that have little to do with my experience. While this does not diminish the origins of the work, it does allow the work to be accessible to a diverse audience. I consider this to be one of the most successful aspects of the work.

Developing work in the context of these ideas has cemented a shift that I have been making in my practice. From working purely in the context of time-based media, my methods have expanded to include sculpture and kinetic movement. Artist Marla Hlady calls this "*material* time-based

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[46] Kristin Luker, "Getting Down to the Nitty Gritty," *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008) 134.

practice"[47]. By this I mean that I have made things move physically, in real time and in front of a viewer. I am excited by the artistic potential of articulating ideas in this way and will continue to implement this process in my artwork.

Metaphysical Gravity began as a contemplation of the complexity of mobile subjectivity and arrived at a position that articulates the coexistence of stability and instability in everyday life. The impulse to understand the broader implications of subjective experience is one of the driving factors in my production of artwork. Since my body of work has consistently developed along the lines of self-reflexivity influenced by auto-ethnographic insight, I think it likely that my work will continue to grow in this way.

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[47] Marla Hlady, Artist studio visit for "Introduction to Mechanics for Artists," OCAD University, 12 March 2013.

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Appendix A

The interviews conducted for this project were done under the aegis of the Ontario College of Art Research Ethics Board. I have left the interviews anonymous to protect the privacy of the people that participated in this project.

I would like to offer the reader some insight into my interviewing process. Twelve people who currently live in Toronto were interviewed for this research. All of them identify with a mobile condition of choice in search of opportunity. I previously referred this as a 'nomadism of choice' relating to a search for opportunity. This research was conducted at a time when I thought nomadism was the most relevant theoretical framework for my research. Consequently the questions that I had framed related to this idea. The questions were:

1. How long have you lived in Toronto?
2. Do you think of Toronto as home?
3. In what ways do you consider yourself a nomad?
4. How do your ideas on being a nomad relate to your ideas of home?
5. How would you explain your understanding of the concept of "home" (or of being a nomad)?
6. What criteria/elements do you include in your understanding of what constitutes 'home' (or being a nomad)?

The interviews ranged from twenty minutes to an hour long. They were semi-structured, which means that though I had questions, I did not follow a strict format. I encouraged the participants to talk about whatever they felt was appropriate to the topic. Anecdotes from the interviews are woven into the text of my document particularly the theoretical framework section.