

What Once Was, Is All That Should Have Been

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## *What Once Was, Is All That Should Have Been*

### **Abstract**

My research paper and studio work will look at the recontextualization of three basic building materials: concrete, steel, and Wood. My research aims to provide these materials with a renewed agency that imbues them with power through visual and tactile language. My studio work will look at how these materials function via an aesthetic that will evoke a visceral experience delivered through medium and subject engagement. The physical work will seek to break the barrier between the observer/viewer and the work itself by providing a participatory experience with the pieces I have made. My paper will look at the Arte Povera movement as theorized by Italian art critic and curator Germano Celant. Adopting some of the methodologies of Arte' Povera to the theoretical writings on New Materialism, the resulting studio work will establish a visual context that supports the reiteration of the materials used. The central focal point, *The Nest*, will mark both the beginning and the end of my research and the resulting work. This sculptural element will encompass a place of birth along with a repository of the past, present, and future. The embodiment of my practice and research will work within five principles: proximity, similarity, continuity, connectedness, and closure. The works I will introduce within this paper will unpack these principles by assemblages made with new and repurposed materials and objects. The phenomenological experience with the piece has also impacted this paper as the materials have been imbued with a renewed power and agency of their own—a power that New Materialism informs.

My paper will investigate the ontological definition of certain materials and how these materials have been impacted through the works created. I will be discussing a new approach, one combined with the "vitalism"<sup>1</sup> of Jane Bennett, the writings of Diane Coole, and "imbuing the 'things' with power" of materials. As stated by Christiane Meyer-Stoll in *Che Fare?*: "They invite viewer participation, urging visitors to place themselves, as in the mirror paintings, in a situation where they become part of the work. In this respect, they offer an open-ended situation that provides a communitive structure."<sup>2</sup> The title of this paper, *What Once Was, Is All That Should Have Been*, engages one with the history of materials that have entrenched themselves in our everyday lives, such as concrete and steel. A renewed agency allows concrete and steel to break with their history by forming a more empathetic practical ethos rather than one that aligns itself with their brutalist past. With its iconic history as a symbol for an environment that has fallen victim to deforestation that seeks to harvest it for building and clears forests to allow for further development, Wood, acts as the catalyst.

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The only real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.

—Marcel Proust

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<sup>1</sup>Bennett, Jane *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, DukeUP, 2010. pp 69

<sup>2</sup> Malsch F., Meyer-Stoll, C., Pero, V., and Disch, M., editors. (*Che fare?: Arte Povera: The Historic Years*. Kehrler, 2010. pp 10

## Acknowledgments

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My wife, partner, and best friend Danielle, whatever I say will never be enough to thank you for everything you have done for our family and me. You are my inspiration; you are the breath of my life. From the mountains to the sea, there will always be you and me. Thank you.

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facet of my being. Life has been one cherished moment after another; welcoming you into this world has always been a blessing; experiencing this world with all of you has and always will be a miracle.

I wish to acknowledge the support and great love of my brother Tony, my sister Donna, and my wonderful Mother. Our Father/Husband taken from our lives to early lives forever in our hearts and is in every facet of my practice. They have been a memorable part of my life from the beginning, and I have always shared their encouragement for my practice.

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Stella, your courage and intelligence has never gone unnoticed. So keep searching, knowing that wherever you go and whatever you make your journey is the discovery and answers you seek.

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For all the support I received from York University and OCAD U. The faculty and staff at both these outstanding institutions provide an endless number of resources that make possible opportunities to explore and expand the limits of one's creative practice.

## Table of Contents

|                                                          |    |
|----------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Abstract.....                                            | ii |
| Acknowledgements.....                                    | iv |
| Table of Contents.....                                   | ix |
| Introduction.....                                        | 1  |
| Process.....                                             | 7  |
| Motivation.....                                          | 15 |
| Materials.....                                           | 16 |
| Inspiration, Influences and Things Worth Mentioning..... | 22 |
| Conclusion.....                                          | 26 |
| Site Plan.....                                           | 30 |
| Images.....                                              | 31 |
| Works Cited.....                                         | 42 |

## Introduction

Before beginning my MFA at York University, my practice was at the tail-end of a four-year process using repurposed materials. I was working with found objects from rural farms that had been abandoned. These places continue to be purchased by land developers who begin impact studies for zoning applications seeking permission to develop master-planned communities. Many of these farms line the Don Valley Parkway north of Highway 7 to Ravenshoe Side Road to Lake Simcoe in Georgina Township, north of Toronto. The abandoned farms look like time capsules with dilapidated outbuildings and discarded farm equipment slowly eroding back into the earth. My initial attraction to this body of work was mainly to do with urbanization and its relentless expansion encompassing a green space known as the Oak Ridge Moraine. While exploring these sites, I noticed vegetation beginning to envelop structures and discarded equipment. The sense of intrigue and discovery that drew me to these sites began to give way to a feeling of dystopia. At the time, I came across Sophie Fiennes's documentary on Anselm Kiefer, *Over Your Cities Grass Will Grow* (2010). I enjoyed the monumentality and the subject matter of Kiefer's work: it was a valuable body of work to reference at the time. Ultimately, I began to have more interest in plant material adaptability—how plants used every surface to take hold and climb or used a crack to take root and stabilize growth. The aesthetic of the deterioration and decay impacted my senses on a visceral level. It evoked a level of intrigue and inspiration that became the jumping-off point for my MFA.

My choice to look at my MFA research through the lens of New Materialism was preordained. An intrinsic attachment to building materials, physical labour, and the proletariat's

life run through generations of my family, farmers living on the outskirts of San Donato Val Comino, a small Italian community. When I was a child, no older than three or four, the discarded remnants of home-building became my medium for creativity. From the detritus arose a cacophony of bits and pieces, fragments that became mediums, puzzle pieces that became "works" through the practice of assemblage when armed with imagination and intuitive repurposing. I was unaware at the time of how working with materials was impacting my sensory development. The textures and scents of the materials were impinging themselves permanently on me, both physically and psychologically. Although unaware of my relationship with materials, the phenomenology that led to exploration and creativity was speaking directly to New Materialism. The visceral feeling that the works seek to excavate from the observer by engaging the affect is triggered in our bodies through the subconscious. Theorist-philosopher Brian Massumi calls this "galvanic response in the skin" when "the skin is faster than the word."<sup>3</sup> The feeling of affect is undeniable; it is instinctive and intuitive. What once was, is all that should have been.

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<sup>3</sup> Massumi, Brian. "The Autonomy of Affect," in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, DukeUP, 2002, pp. 86.

When beginning work on *The Nest* (2020), I was inspired by a case study from the architecture firm HOK inspired by a hornets' Nest. The conceptual sketch below is from Michael Pawlyn's book, *Biomimicry in Architecture*.

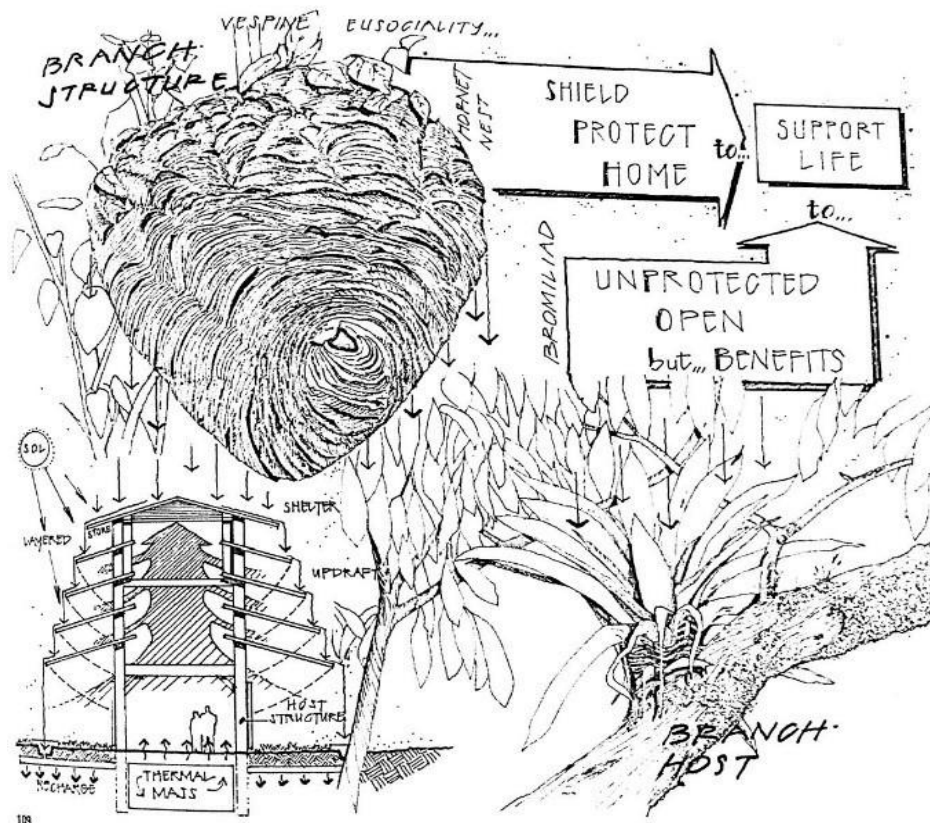


Figure 1 HOK Architects concept sketch

Biomimicry a field of design that models itself on biological forms and entities. The hornet's Nest became a jumping-off point for my MFA practice. *The Nest* is the focal point. It represents a beginning, middle, and end in one form.



*Figure 2 The Nest 2020*

*The Nest* conjures up different reactions from people. It also harbors a sense of mystery and intrigue, inviting the viewer to explore the complete form in the round. It is a mass, and a body made constructively in line with many other species on earth. The main body comprises a vertebra constructed from multiple stacked canvas stretchers, surrounded by a skeleton constructed from branches, and skin of layered burlap covered by cement parging. The innards are only visible through the reflection of the mirror located at the base. The mirror is a critical element for the exploration of the work by the viewer. Also, the key is the symbolic way in



which the mirror is a component of the self-referential element of the work. Exposing the inside to the outside is an expository move that reveals the work's fragility, which would not be possible should the viewer not have access to the internal construction of *The Nest*. The jute rope holds the Nest suspended from the cross members of the cube frame. The weight of the of the centre body of *The Nest* pulls the framework tighter while at the same time increasing the tension of the jute rope on the main body. Phenomenologically *The Nest* conveys a sort of mysticism when experienced for the first time. It is intriguingly inviting, sympathetically waiting for the viewer to approach. It embraces itself under the weight of its own body. Weightless, while at that same time pulling towards the ground. The longer you are in its presence, the more mystery will wane, and the connection will begin to manifest. The Nest is the beginning, and the end is the consummate whole. The assemblage of materials brought together through gathering, repurposing, and recontextualizing building materials comprise a centrepiece that functions in three different iterations within one work: a place of rest repository of the past and a rebirth. *The Nest* will be completed by a performance whereby the canvases from previous work will be burned beneath the opening, lining the inside with smoke. The Nest will become a sarcophagus, a funerary repository collecting the smoke and ash of previous work into the body of new work.

The skeletal internal framework of the Nest is made from Wood that is pliable due to moisture-wicking from the damp forest floor. Working with branches in scale with my height allowed me to work in synchronicity with the Wood. As I pressed on the Wood, it would sometimes resist, causing me to change direction with the piece until it gave way and I could interweave it with another branch. In his essay in *Che Fare?* Giuseppe Penone described Wood

and the interest and intrigue it provides: "That's what is always surprising about Wood, that you can rediscover the form, the memory, a memory of a tree. You find it in the structure of the Wood." <sup>4</sup> Wood always carries its history—the rings, the bark. It is a tactile, written history exposed in every layer. Penone puts it so eloquently—a fallen tree branch gives so much of its history, its demise. When interweaving the branches, they began forming a skeletal framework. As I pressed my body against the branches, they resisted and pushed back, coming alive, I could feel gentle creaking, slight cracking. The sound and resistance would cause me to move the branches to the point of least resistance. The work began to guide me; the branches worked autonomously; my body became a steering mechanism. Tucking one branch within the grasp of another, the push and pull strengthened and tightened the form. *The Nest* was becoming a material collaboration. An assemblage.

The Nest's repurposed stretchers form the internal workings from top to bottom, like stacked vertebrae, acting as a spine. The vertebrae became an inspiration for another work, *Spinal Tap* (2020), made from repurposed Cor-Ten Steel rods, old clay bricks, a found tree branch with a roughly sewn hemlock base wrapped in military canvas. *Spinal Tap* references the body, focusing on the vertebrae with a visual connection to the ground through the Cor-Ten Steel rods. The work conveys a fragility that echoes that precariousness within the delicate balance of nature and the body's central nervous system.

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<sup>4</sup> Malsch F., Meyer-Stoll, C., Pero, V., & Disch, M., editors. *Che fare?: Arte Povera: The Historic Years*, Kehrler, 2010.pp 237.

## Process

The process methodology begins with intentionality, with what I want the material to convey from a visual perspective. My actions attempt to bring out the potentiality of the material. What can this material do beyond its original intention or functional role related to concrete and steel? My position is to break the material from its stigma, its brutalist history. Using artistic devices such as assemblage and participatory involvement of the viewer, the traditional conventions associated with the visual art experience will give way to a new type of materialism, imbuing the materials previously associated with stripping and, leveling, and deracinating ecosystems with an agency of power and aesthetic value.

The inclusivity of materials associated with an inert quality needs to be treated and looked at differently. The anthropocentric viewpoint needs to be re-evaluated. As Coole mentions here:

There is increasing agreement here that all bodies, including those of animals (and perhaps certain machines, too), evince certain capacities for the agency. As a consequence, the human species, and the qualities of self-reflection, self-awareness, and rationality traditionally used to distinguish it from the rest of nature, may now seem little more than contingent and provisional forms or processes within a broader evolutionary or cosmic productivity.<sup>5</sup>

A change in humanity's mindset will affect the potentiality of new materialism to change material usage and manifest itself in the material agency. Therefore, that materials become both subject and medium is imperative.

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<sup>5</sup> Coole, D. H.) *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Duke UP, 2010.pp 20.

One-to-one scale in relation to my own body is of paramount importance. This scale allows the physicality of the process to leave its mark on my body at the end of a studio practice. At the end of a full day in the studio, the soreness of the day's work settles into my body. I take this opportunity to reflect on my practice and write about the work, summarizing my experience with the piece I am working on, both physically and mentally.

*My practice becomes our experience.* The process, the journey, brings the work to a place where it can be witnessed, and more importantly, experienced; the applied heuristic methodology impacts the viewer. What is seen invites exploration and investigation. This experience enables the viewer to discover something in the work that unearths something in themselves. Some of these discoveries, or memories, can be articulated, although that is not important. The work invites touch, resulting in a haptic occurrence where two bodies meet and connect. Participatory involvement is a validation for the work. The cycle complete, the whole is realized, the gestalt takes hold.

As a starting point, I look first at nature, beginning with forms constructed to protect, nurture, transport. Next, my practice changes the material impact by assembling pieces that work together by creating a reiteration of something recognizable in nature, either an object or an action.

Proust so eloquently describes the impact of material as an object in his essay *Remembrance of Things Past*:

"The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some

material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect." <sup>6</sup>

To engage affect scent is a critical component in my practice and an integral part of how the final works will be presented. Upon entering a space or site, the experience begins with the smell. The essence of space impacts the viewer as the body changes as the surroundings envelop the body. It is for this reason; I chose to display the works in a forest setting.

As Penone states:

The perfume of a trunk, of a fallen tree, is the odor of its corpse. We live surrounded by the perfume of tree corpses. The wooden objects that surround us, the *boiserie* that welcome us with their warmth and comfortable perfume, reveal the sections of the body of dead trees, felled, harpooned, skinned, sawn. <sup>7</sup>

We have an intrinsic bond with Wood, a material source for heat, food, and shelter. Humans have long felt an obligation to defend their territory, curb the exploitation, honour its contribution to our survival. The perfume of the trunk that Penone writes about is present when we walk on a trail or open a window in our car while driving through the countryside. The scent of growth emitted from a forest, its vitality stretching from the ground, exists within each

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<sup>6</sup> Proust, Marcel, and John Sturrock. In Search of Lost Time. London: Penguin, 2003. Print. pp.42.

<sup>7</sup> Penone, Giuseppe. Giuseppe Penone: Writings 1968-2008. Bologna: Commune di Bologna, 2009. Print. pp 99.

species, reaching upward and stretching broadly, embracing the open air. In my practice, the tree needs to still be present in the Wood. Its body, either in whole or in part, gives it a dual identity of both object and material. The history of Wood has been at the centre of what Deleuze and Guattari identify as "production, distribution, and consumption."<sup>8</sup> Clear-cutting and deforestation have always been at the centre of the politicized history of Wood. The tree has become the symbolic image at the centre of the polarizing subject of climate change. Wood, in my practice, is the catalyst, a material that I like to use as close to its natural form as possible.

Remnants of a tree's former self are critical when assembling works, with leaves, branches, trunk, and roots left as close to their natural state as possible, and the root used as a grounding icon, symbolizing a return to the earth.

Author Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing describes what smell can do to both people and animals as a motivator for food and money in her book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*:

What is the story of a smell? Not an ethnography of smell, but the story of the smell itself, wafting into the nostrils of people and animals, and even impressing the roots of plants and the membranes of soil bacteria? The smell draws us into the entangled threads of memory and possibility. Matsutake guides not just me but many others. Moved by the smell, people and animals across the northern hemisphere brave wild terrain searching for it. Deer select matsutake over other mushroom choices. Bears turn over logs and excavate ditches, searching for them.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Deleuze, G., Guattari, F., Foucault, M., Seem, M., Lane, H. R., & Hurley, R.). *Anti-Oedipus*. Penguin Books, 2009. pp 26.

<sup>9</sup> Lowenhaupt, Tsing, Anna. Interlude.: Smelling." *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, by Princeton UP, 2015, pp. 45–53. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvc77bcc.9](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvc77bcc.9). Accessed 27 Feb. 202

The sense of smell directly impacts affect; it can bring comfort, fear, or familiarity of space before describing what is happening through conscious thought or articulating it with words. Thus, as a setting for my thesis show, it became an essential part of the process to find a space that had the setting, topography, and vegetation that would fill the space with a scent of nature, of a dominating presence of Wood in every stage of its existence, Wood becoming the catalyst for the new materialist approach for the finished works.

As Tsing writes: How does a gathering become a "happening," that is, greater than a sum of its parts? <sup>10</sup>

The *happening* is achieved when the viewer is also the participant, bringing all the works together in a participatory experience. The interaction with the works brings out the vitality and agency of the materials used to do the works. The storm of activity through affect is triggered through the bodies and in the subconscious of the participants. Theorist-philosopher Brian Massumi calls this a "galvanic response in the skin"—when the feeling of affect is undeniable; it is instinctive and intuitive. "the skin is faster than the word." <sup>11</sup>

Working on a one-to-one scale:

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<sup>10</sup> Lowenhaupt, Tsing, Anna. "Contamination as Collaboration." *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, PrincetonUP, , 2015, pp. 27–35. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvc77bcc.7](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvc77bcc.7). Accessed 27 Feb. 2021

<sup>11</sup> Massumi Brian. "The Autonomy of Affect," in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Duke UP, 2002. pp. 23-45.

I took inspiration from Pollack when asked why he works off the easel and on large-scale canvases.

"On the floor, I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting. " <sup>12</sup>

My practice needs to be an immersive process. Most notable is the scale. I work on a scale of one-to-one ratio with my body. The size makes it possible for me to feel at one with the work as I work through a piece, responding more to the material properties, guiding my actions instinctively as material push and pull, as they resist and push back against me physically. The results have an impact on the senses, the playing field of affect. Ultimately, what my paper will address and bring forth in its subject matter is a renewed ethos towards concrete, Wood, and steel. One that recognizes that when these materials are provided, an agency recontextualizes their meaning and value based on the subject matter they are representing.

My interest in the deterioration decay had much to do with the resulting aesthetic. These images impacted my senses on a visceral level invoking a level of intrigue and inspiration. This exposure turned out to be a jumping-off point for my MFA, and as a result, my practice began to focus more intently on building materials.

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<sup>12</sup> Naifeh, Steven, and Gregory W. Smith. *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*. C.N. Potter, 1989..



Bringing materials together as an assemblage began their recontextualization that would culminate into a "happening," as Tsing calls it, Wood being the catalyst, the binder. The etymology of the word Wood brings us to the Italian word *legna*, "that which is to gather."<sup>13</sup> The gathering that turns into a happening. An assemblage that becomes a final work—sculptures that are part of an installation in which the viewer is a participant—becomes a gathering that turns into a happening.

As Giles Deleuze writes, adaptation for survival exists in nature as an autonomous living thing moving within an "event" acting on the observing body through a sense of feeling rather than a cognitive interpretation through spoken language or thought.<sup>14</sup> It is important to unpack this a bit further. Deleuze refers to the moment something is happening that dissects the past and the future related to the subject, either alive or inert. It is still a body that is inaction or being acted upon. Bringing this together with the "happening" and the participatory nature of the viewer engaging with a body of work manifests itself into a happening. The assemblage is complete.

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<sup>13</sup> Lignum: Etymology dictionary. (n.d.). Retrieved February 27, 2021, from <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=lignum>

<sup>14</sup> Deleuze, G., Guattari, F., Foucault, M., Seem, M., Lane, H. R., & Hurley, R. *Anti-Oedipus* Penguin Books, 2009.

## Motivation

In *All, That is Solid Melts into Air*; Marshall Berman uses several literary texts from the past as a framework to investigate examples of the modern world in the twentieth century, one of these being the reconstruction of Paris, France during the Napoleonic era. As he mentions here,

The final demise as being noted in abandoned developments: From abandoned New England mill towns to ravaged strip-mined Appalachian, to the South Bronx to the love canal insatiable development has left spectacular devastation in its wake. The shovels that made Faust feel alive and that made the last sound heard as he died have become giant earthmovers capped with dynamite.<sup>15</sup>

The implications of the onslaught of modernity were accurately depicted using "The Faustian man," a story in which man sells his soul to the devil in exchange for a life of monetary gain. I felt a personal connection to this text. The moments of feeling alive and present were depleted in my career. A studio practice that had gone stagnate, a career that lost its appeal, an addiction that drowned my spirit. It was a return to the familiarity of construction materials and looking at building developments surrounding my neighborhood that caused a paradigm shift in my habits and a reassessment of my life. I turned to my studio practice with the same energy and curiosity I had as a child. The intentionality of modern time is put to the analytical test by Marshall Berman.

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<sup>15</sup> Berman, Marshall. *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: the Experience of Modernity*, Verso, 2010.

As of 2021, more than a year of living in a pandemic demonstrates how quickly our very existence can be comprised or eradicated. It brings to light the consequences of human impact on the world, which has tipped the earth towards a new epoch called the Anthropocene, moving out of the Holocene, an epoch in which both temperature and moisture levels on earth worked together in a healthy cycle that allowed for an ecosystem to be created and sustained for over 12,000 years. Empirical evidence through the work of scientists and environmentalists has shown us the dangers and consequences of our habits. Jane Bennett, who authored *Vibrant Matter*, adds Bruno Latour's term "actant," a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman. She states that objects are "alive" because they have efficacy. Bennett quotes Latour as he describes actants as a series of relationships between living and non-living matter. The series of relationships impacts how we process materials, what we do with them, and what they do to us. <sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke UP, 2010

## Materials

Cor-ten Steel: It is also referred to as weathered steel because of its raw aesthetic of patina and rust and its high strength and rigidity.<sup>17</sup> Cor-ten has been the predominant material used by contemporary artist Richard Serra, whose minimalist monolith creations have become a recognizable feature in cities the world over. One of the most famous public art pieces using the weather-resistant steel material is *Angel of the North* (1998) by sculptor Anthony Gormley, located in Gateshead, Tyne and Wear, England. Gormley used a total of 400 tons of Cor-ten Steel for both its structural properties and as a tribute to the colliery workers who mined coal through a labyrinth of underground mazes. The artists and work that I have referenced fit the narrative for Cor-ten steel, often associated with industrialization, which gave rise to working-class physical workers, many of whom were displaced by the influx of mechanized farming, which in turn forced migration from rural to urban centres that offered opportunities for employment in factories.<sup>17</sup>

The new materialist approach will create an updated ontology that will create concepts, grouping, and steel associations.<sup>18</sup> Research and development push the boundaries of what steel can do in terms of strength and durability. As a symbol of the industrial era, steel and iron

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<sup>17</sup> McLean John. "History of Western Civilization II" in Effects of the Agriculture Revolution I History of Western Civilization II, Courses. Lumen learning.com/sunny-hcc-worldhistory2/chapter/effects-of-the-agriculture-revolution/.

<sup>18</sup> Bupesh Raja, V.K et al. "Corrosion Resistance of Corten Steel – A Review," *Materials Today : Proceedings* 2021: n. pag. Web.

have been closely associated with human innovation and advancement. However, this comes with peril and exploitation of the physical worker.

The thriving communities that were closely associated with mega steel production as a result of the industrial revolution now make up what is called the Rust Belt. This area stretches through several US states and into southern Ontario to the city of Hamilton. Steel's history commands attention and makes for a valuable ally in developing a new ontology that allows for steel to be imbued with the power of agency that draws attention to the impact of "development, prosperity and technological advancement"—words, terms, and phrases that are codified with underlying issues that cause environmental impact leaving behind a wasteland of industrial detritus. Abandoned steel mills and factories such as the Bethlehem Steel plant located in Pennsylvania stand as a stark reminder of the impact of globalization.

Concrete: Highly compressive strength but a significantly lower tensile strength. During the curing process, the high heat of hydration comes from a chemical reaction between portland cement and sand, and water. Portland comes from heating limestone and clay materials-minerals to form clinker.<sup>19</sup> It's important to note that concrete is a curing process and not drying. Curing is a process that takes twenty-eight days, which allows the bonding agents to harden as the water evaporates from the mixture thoroughly. Concrete's history has links back to Ancient Rome. The Roman Pantheon, built-in 128 AD, remains the largest nonreinforced

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<sup>19</sup> Goho Alexandra. "Concrete Nation" in *Science News*, vol. 167, no. 1, 2005, pp. 7–11. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/4015970](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4015970) accessed Feb 8 2021.pg 8

concrete structure built to this day. Triumphal arches from the same era were made possible with the invention of Roman concrete. Today, concrete remains the most used material in construction: by volume in weight, it is used more than steel, wood, and plastics combined.

<sup>20</sup>Numerous buildings that dominate skylines are a visual sign of prosperity and economic health in cosmopolitan cities. In my practice, concrete acts as an epidermal layer, encasement of protection, a skin that is applied in different viscosities.

Concrete has a brutalist reputation that has led to idioms such as "concrete jungle" to describe visible pollution of numerous buildings that push the upper limits of height; skyscrapers quickly became a symbol of capitalist prosperity. Nevertheless, the cosmopolitan city is not complete without a skyline littered with modern architecture.

In my practice, I have worked to develop a more organic approach to concrete by brushing and trowelling the material on various supporting mediums. Most notably, on burlap to create a visual aesthetic that reads more organic while shedding concrete's harsh, cold appearance. As a result, the finished surface's appearance in work like *The Nest* creates an empathetic reaction rather than the cold starkness generally associated with concrete.

Wood, warmth, softness—trees are the icons of nature. But, unfortunately, forests have been at the centre of a bitter dispute amongst the forestry companies, the cutters and loggers,

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<sup>20</sup> Goho Alexandra. "Concrete Nation" in *Science News*, vol. 167, no. 1, 2005, pp. 7–11. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/4015970](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4015970) accessed Feb 8 2021.pg 10

and environmental groups. In the early '90s, deforestation became front and centre in the long-standing battle between environmentalists and global forestry companies, as documented by Michael Dietrich's *The Final Forest*.

Staged on the Olympic Peninsula in north-west Washington state, the battle to save old-growth forest pitted environmentalists against corporations. The Spotted Owl became famous as a symbol of hope and living species, worth protecting thousands of acres to maintain a healthy habitat. A group of workers called The Cutters was brought into the fold. Cutters were responsible for cutting gigantic cedar and hemlock perched along steep slopes and unnavigable terrain.

A dangerous, physically demanding vocation, cutters suffered debilitating injuries, and multiple lives were lost. Enticed by good pay, cutters were often a generation-to-generation trade handed down mostly from father to son. Like coal miners and steel mill workers, these people comprised a working-class of physical workers—the proletariat of the nineteenth through the twentieth century that proved invaluable to the thoroughly entrenched corporations in the advancement of industrialization. The frustrations of the community of environmentalists were echoed in the words of Mitch Friedman, founder of Conservation Northwest: "We've fouled it up,"... "We've throttled evolution. There isn't enough habitat, and at the same time we're changing the climate. Somethings got to give".<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Dietrich, William. *The Final Forest: The Battle for the Last Great Trees of the Pacific Northwest* Penguin Books, 1993.

Change is always a challenge when dealing with people who have been exploited and used up in harvesting materials like lumber and asking them to change their lifestyle immediately. "The people have been brought up to believe they are here for resource extraction . . . Now you realize it's not a black and white issue but rather grey, which turns it all into mush." <sup>22</sup> So says Kirk Ralston, fishery biologist.

Arte Povera artist Giuseppe Penone on wood:

"That's what is always surprising about Wood, that you can rediscover the form, the memory, a memory of a tree. You find it in the structure of the Wood. Wood always carries its history – the rings – the bark it is a tactile, written history exposed in every layer."

Wood has long been associated with ecology and nature. In the form of a tree, it represents an icon of nature. An image of a tree, even as a silhouette, conjures up a life, beauty, nature. It is this lineage of Wood, this legacy, to which humanity owes a deep debt. The decision to incorporate Wood in my practice closest to its original state is an homage to a material that comes from rooting to the earth while reaching for the sky.

Burlap's primary function is for the transportation and protection of goods. In the landscape industry, where the burlap for this project was repurposed, burlap is used for protecting a tree's root system during transportation to transplant from a farm to the place of

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<sup>22</sup> Malsch F., Meyer-Stoll, C., Pero, V., & Disch, M.,) *Che fare?: Arte Povera: The Historic Years*, Kehrer, 2010.



installation. Repurposing burlap is essential for imbuing this material with a renewed agency. Its function in making The Nest is to mummify the Nest, protecting, holding, giving the form strength, and a tactile surface to apply the encasement of concrete cement. Burlap has a strong sensory impact on me; it has always conjured up feelings and thoughts of preservation and protection. In one form or another, burlap has always had a utilitarian function. Mexican artist Diego Rivera's painting, *The Flower Carrier* (1935), shows a burlap wrapping used to secure a flower-filled basket on a farmhand's back.



Figure 2.2 *The Flower Carrier*, Diego Rivera, 1935.

Burlap or Hessian fabric has a historical association with farming, crop cultivation, and shipping. The material is used for making gunny sacks (commonly called potato sacks), for shipping coffee beans, grains, and commonly used dry goods. The burlap used in all my work is repurposed, carrying the marks and scents from its previous use. It is the historical memory of burlap usage and the history of the material brought into the assemblage to capture the ethos of the new materialism and agency.

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If I have seen further than others, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.

—Isaac Newton

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### Inspiration, Influences, and Things Worth Mentioning

"The 570-foot stack . . . dropped down a few feet and then seemed to hesitate before beginning its slow, elegant arc to the ground . . . cheers rose from the delighted crowd." <sup>23</sup>

The bringing down of the High Bridge Coal Plant smokestack in St. Paul, Minnesota, was a symbol of change. The smokestack represented a monument of industrialization—the iconography of the times. The people who were the most impacted by the rapid expansion of industries like coal were families forced to survive as working poor. So the felling of the stacks represented a time of change. The coming to an end of the exploitation of workers forced to work in less than desirable conditions for substandard pay. Today organizations and advocacy groups are taking similar action by bringing down monuments around the world that have ties to slavery and colonialism.

Humans evolving from a nomadic lifestyle to an agrarian culture gave little reason to travel to find food. When we began to grow and harvest plants that were not native to the land,

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<sup>23</sup> Freese, Barbara. *Coal: A Human History Basic Books*, a Member of the Perseus Books Group, 2016.

a paradigm shift changed the way we live. Thus, the rampant proliferation of expansion and harvesting began to have a disparaging impact on the planet. Professor Roy Hinman Holmes has pointed out; farming was the only significant industry that had withstood the transforming forces of the industrial and social revolution of the nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup>

## Arte Povera

Germano Celant, art critic and curator who resided in Genoa, was considered the spokesperson for Arte Povera and credited with giving the movement its namesake. The essay by Celant, "Arte Povera: Notes on a guerilla war," is considered the seminal text that launched Arte Povera as a recognized force in the European art scene. The essay was part of the catalogue for Arte Povera – *Im Spazio*' at Galleria al Bersteca Genoa (1967).<sup>25</sup> Celant's principles and methodologies for Arte Povera were used to gather together artists throughout Italy and bring them together for the show in Genoa. Some of Celant's earlier works involved the bringing together of Science and Art, termed as Arte programmata, which translates to program-based art, Gestalt-based art.<sup>25</sup> My practice adopts some of the science of nature, hornets' nests, and beeswax. Celant's manifesto, if you will, for Arte Povera would evolve to take an opposing stance to the American Pop Art movement. The two polarizing movements immersed themselves in

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<sup>24</sup> McWilliams , Carey. "Farms into Factories: Our Agricultural Revolution," in *The Antioch Review*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1941, pp. 406–431. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/4608849](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4608849). Accessed 23 Feb. 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Christoy -Bakargiev, C. *Arte povera*. Phaidon, 2014.

differing representations of socioeconomic themed works. Arte Povera's use of material and themes shed light on a more critical view of human behavior and our actions' subsequent results.

Pop Art glorified the mundane daily objects and comic strip panels being singled out as one art piece. When Celant wrote "impoverishing signs to their archetypes and in paradigmatic use of all elements of life as a new alphabet for the arts. " <sup>26</sup>I found this message was tied closely to the tenets of New Materialism. As Celant put it, Arte Povera launched into the "guerilla war" because a revolution was needed for attention to be given. A work that transcends time validates the piece's timelessness; by resonating with today's audience, it tells us that we are still dealing with the same issues that Arte Povera sought to expose back in the late '60s.

Arte Povera's methodology brings to art and art Installations: accessibility, relatability, and accountability. Post-Structuralist theory in which language and words are codes that don't necessarily connect with the physical world. Language develops cognitive bias, which tends to compartmentalize thought and interpretation. The works must be experienced phenomenologically rather than be indoctrinated through words and text. As mentioned earlier, Author Christina Meyer-Stoll described this process for Arte Povera: "They invite viewer participation, urging visitors to place themselves, as in the mirror paintings, in a situation where they become part of the work. In this respect, they offer an open-ended situation that provides

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<sup>26</sup> Christov-Bakargiev, C. *Arte povera*. Phaidon, 2014

a communitive structure." <sup>27</sup>

The process takes on a predominately intuitive approach with a simple premise to start by creating the physical work first. The outcome is formless shapes, objects, or sculptures that bend, twist, or flow based on the material's structural rigidity or viscosity. The second part of the work is what I refer to as *writing back in*, which describes doing the work and speaking to the work context in its present iteration, both it is meaning and intent.

My practice produces work that impacts the viewer both as an immersive experience and an effect on the human sensory condition by inviting the viewer to look and touch and feel the work. The participatory experience is an invitation to the viewer that makes the work relevant within the space in which it is being viewed. The viewer interaction is an integral way to experience the work and also empower the viewer as a contributor. By interacting with the pieces, the viewer becomes an agent of change; this allows the work to break free from the gallery and move into the public space.

The participatory feel is critical in the make-up of Arte' Povera. The inclusivity of the viewer engagement that I seek to encourage with the way my works are displayed and experienced. By interacting with the pieces, the viewer becomes an agent of change; this allows the work to break free from the gallery and move into the public space. Artists like Robert Smithson to Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer, who were credited as the pioneers of Land Art,

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<sup>27</sup> Malsch, F., Meyer-Stoll, C., Pero, V., & Disch, M.. *Che fare?: Arte Povera: The Historic Years*, Kehrer, 2010.

operated through a similar lens.<sup>28</sup>

The artists believed that works that used the land needed to be experienced in the places they were made for the viewer to gain the whole experience.

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<sup>28</sup> Summitridge Pictures. "Troublemakers: The Story of Land Art." Vimeo, May 21, 2020, [vimeo.com/ondemand/landartfilm/421267538](https://vimeo.com/ondemand/landartfilm/421267538). Accessed January 16 2021

## Conclusion

"The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society."

As Marx mentions above, the instruments of production have become the virtual spaces we are forced to inhabit. These spaces are becoming our society, our world. Our private places have been infiltrated through several devices that channel their way into every facet of our lives. Algorithms are the virtual highways that steer us towards oblivion. They dictate purchasing habits, political allegiances, human rights, and gender equality, all susceptible to the onslaught of information brought through bias and conjecture directed by agenda-driven policies that leave most of the population in a state of entropy, with feelings of dystopia. The virtual space has never been "all that is solid" that Marx refers to in the Communist Manifesto (from which Marshall Berman borrowed the title of his book *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*). The virtual space is invisible, which makes it impervious to being seen then blocked. New Materialism comes face-to-face with the virtual world, acting on the senses by recontextualizing the function of the material world and giving the agency the power it has to initiate change. The next epoch from the Holocene to Anthropocene is the New Materialists' space, which seeks to engage materials in a new facet of seeing and observing, and participating in the works being shown. Using a haptic approach will create a sensory impact that will break down the traditional biases against these materials, thus invoking a vitalism within the material agency.

The completed works are about sharing—much more than just sharing ideas or thoughts, but supporting a view or presenting an argument. Sharing is the catalyst that leads to a participatory experience resulting in collaboration with the viewer/audience. The immersive experience is impacted by the visceral impression created by the works, affect being a predominant reaction within the viewer. Change can only happen through participation, collaboration with one another. The inclusivity of all matter from the inert to the active is a direction that has guided my practice over the last two years through the research and development of this paper and my studio work. My completed works have been placed within a natural setting. The finished works will be installed at 8009 Concession 3 in Uxbridge, Ontario, a tree farm and maple syrup operation.

Pieces will be installed along a walking path through forests of both coniferous and deciduous trees. *Being the focal point, the Nest* will be displayed at a central meeting area where an old canvas will be burned throughout. As the smoke billows into the open air, *The Nest* will be transformed from a place of birth to a place of rest. A sarcophagus that breaths smoke with lined innards of ash and soot brings the past works into a collaboration with a work that exists in the present. The inert materials become active in a performance that is being both witnessed and documented. The operational transformation from a nest to a sarcophagus imbues the material



with agentic power—a power in the materials that have recontextualized their meaning and role in a postmodern existence.

A body of work results from a collective experience where people and works come together in a gathering that turns into a 'happening' to borrow from Anna Tsing. Material agency the New Materialism understands that matter makes up all things, and that matter is a connection between all things. How we interact and perceive those materials requires a new purpose that guides the morality and ethics of our collective ethos to protect, preserve and sustain.

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The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second-best time is now.

—Chinese Proverb

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## Site Plan – MFA Show May 31, 2021

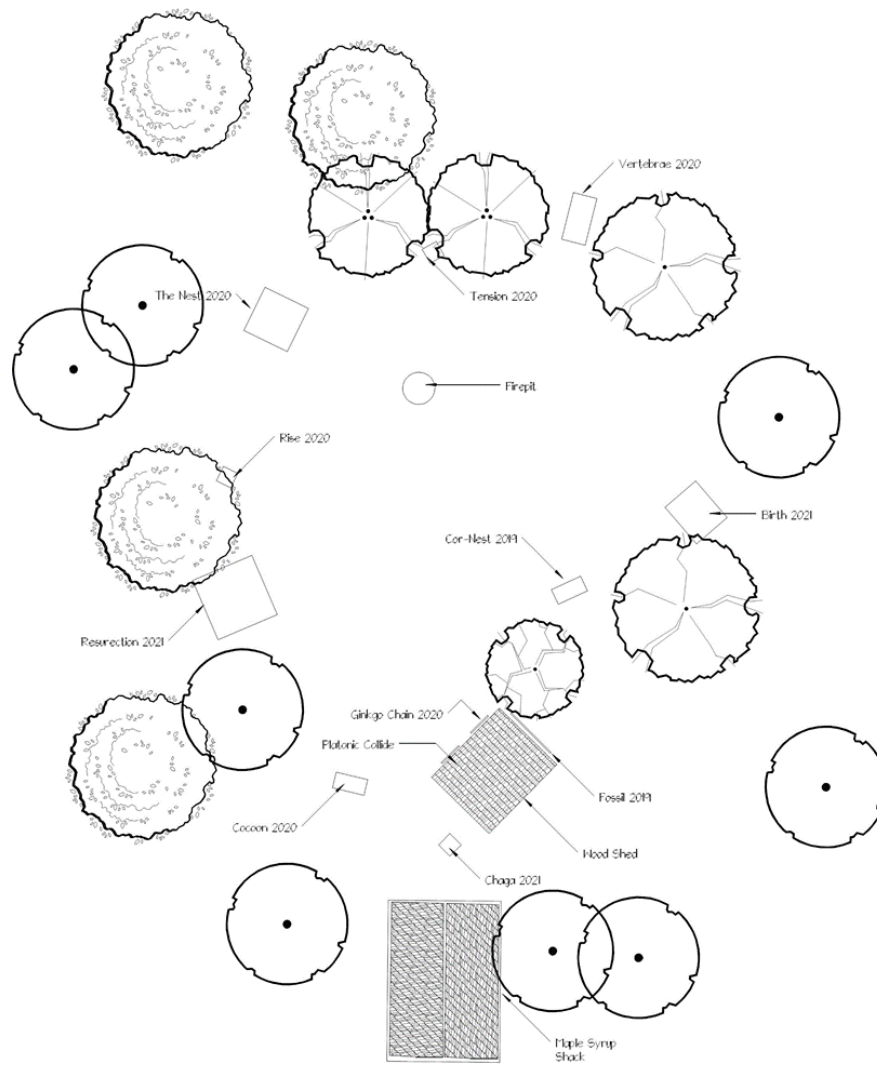




Figure 3- Nest 2020





*Figure 4 Birth 2021*





Figure 5 Fossil 2019



Figure 6 Chaga 2021





*Figure 7 - Resurrection*





*Figure 8 - Cocoon 2020*





*Figure 9 - Tension*





*Figure 10 - Rise*





Figure 11 - Vertebrae 2020





*Figure 12 - Platonic Collide*





Figure 13 - Ginkgo Chain





Figure 14 Cor- Nest

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