

DON'T LET'S GO: PREEMPTIVE GRIEF, A WORLD, AND OTHERS

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Abstract

This paper is written to accompany my MFA thesis exhibition, *the work of holding and exiting*, which took place April 10 - May 6, 2023 at shell projects, 13 Mansfield Avenue, Toronto, Canada. The exhibition consisted of lumen prints (a sort of photogram gone wrong), sculptures made from found and discarded materials, and elusive feelings that floated through the space. This paper, “Don’t Let’s Go: Preemptive Grief, A World, and Others” is in a symbiotic relationship with *the work of holding and exiting*. The paper supplements, is informed by, and informs the work. Grieving the climate crisis can feel diffuse, confusing, and hopeless. The works explored this nebulous grieving through affective means. Artworks that are both abject and beautiful were assembled together in shell projects in a way that asked the viewer to be in intimate relation. The works and the paper search for a more-than-human collectivity. Many of the moments, theorists, and beings that have brought these works into fruition find themselves here in the space of this paper: a reflection, an experimentation, a hand reaching out to the audience; this paper cannot quite go it alone, enmeshed and yet different from the work in the gallery.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iii
List of Figures	iv
Acknowledgements & Positioning I	v
Introduction	1
A New Story	3
Being Object, (A/O)bject-Beings	5
An Old Story	12
UNIMIN	15
Positioning II	18
End of a World	20
Positioning III	25
Words, A Container	26
Bibliography	29
Appendix A: Exhibition Documentation Images	31

List of Figures

1: <i>Water Bottle</i> , Fehn Foss, resin coated paper, 2020	4
2: Process image of snow melting on darkroom paper, Fehn Foss, York University, 2022	7
3: Process image of snow melting on darkroom paper, Fehn Foss, York University, 2022	7
4: Process image of snow melting on darkroom paper, Fehn Foss, York University, 2022	7
5: Process image of snow melting on darkroom paper, Fehn Foss, York University, 2022	7
6: <i>Untitled (Cindy-Lou Who)</i> , Fehn Foss, cheesecloth and paper pulp, 2022	10
7: Family snapshots of the artist taken by her mother, Krista Foss, 2000	12
8: Family snapshots of the artist taken by her mother, Krista Foss, 2000	12
9: Installation view of <i>Unperceived and Imperceptible Yet Indispensable</i> , 2022	15
10: Installation view of <i>Unperceived and Imperceptible Yet Indispensable</i> , 2022	16
11: Installation view of <i>Unperceived and Imperceptible Yet Indispensable</i> , 2022	16
12: @decolonial.meme.queens, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/Ck68HJIvsc3/	22

Acknowledgements & Positioning I

To land:

I live by the lip of Lake Ontario in Toronto. These names come from Indigenous languages: Ontarí:io, a Huron word for “large lake”¹ and Tsí-Tkaron:to, a Kanien’kehá:ka word for “where the trees are standing in the water.”² On the mornings that I head to York University, I wait for the 504 bus and look across the road to the lake.

Every day, the lake is a different colour:

slate grey, turquoise, lapis lazuli,

a weedy green, pitch black.

There are things that I can claim with conviction—others are tough pills to swallow but swallow them I must. I am of settler-colonial ancestry when settler is defined as Chelsea Vowel, Métis writer and lawyer, puts it: “non-Indigenous peoples living in Canada who form the European-descended sociopolitical majority.”³ My hometown of Hamilton is situated on the traditional territories of the Erie, Neutral, Wendat, Haudenosaunee, and Mississauga nations. Hamilton and Toronto both reside on land that is part of the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant between the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Chippewa, Wendat, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit. The wampum agreement is to peaceably share and tend to this land.⁴

How, as a settler, can I envision caring for this land? What is my relationship to this place?

¹ Jeff Gray, “A defining moment for tkaronto,” *The Globe and Mail*, 17 Oct. 2003, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/a-defining-moment-for-tkaronto/article18432992/>.

² “Guidance for Honouring the Land and Ancestors Through Land Acknowledgements,” PDF created by Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), 24 June 2022. <https://www.camh.ca/-/media/files/camh-landacknowledgements-2022.pdf>.

³ Ashleigh-Rae Thomas, “Who Is a Settler, According to Indigenous and Black Scholars,” VICE Canada, 15 Feb. 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/gyajj4/who-is-a-settler-according-to-indigenous-and-black-scholars>.

⁴ “Land Acknowledgement,” City of Hamilton, 17 Sept. 2022, <https://www.hamilton.ca/people-programs/equity-diversity-inclusion/indigenous-relations/land-acknowledgment>.

As a cis/het/white woman, I benefit from a dominant, conglomerate white culture that enforces white supremacist, colonial, capitalist, and heteropatriarchal norms. I also do not benefit from these things as they ignite fear in my heart, anytime my body, identity, or mind steps

out of line

—or anytime I think about what type of future we all might have to live in, should things continue as they are.

Toronto resides on the lands of the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Chippewa, and Wendat. Hamilton and Toronto are both covered by treaties with the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and the Crown.⁵ As I write this, the Mississaugas of the Credit are planning to mount legal action against Doug Ford's provincial government regarding its move to build along Ontario's Greenbelt: a vital and *currently* protected area of farmland, wetlands, and watersheds—life-giving ecosystems. This will cause immense environmental damage, be in treaty violation, and do nothing to solve the housing crisis that large urban centres like Toronto are facing.⁶ This land continues to be cared for and protected by many First Nations. Since time immemorial.

How can I take seriously my responsibility to amplify Indigenous voices?

I believe in decolonial, anticapitalist, queer, and antiracist frameworks and am indebted to the activists, thinkers, and artists who do the heavy-lifting to change how academic institutions and dominant socio-cultural spaces operate. My thesis exhibition and support paper deal with the emotional and material implications of experiencing the climate crisis from my western perspective. I continue to work through my complicated and deep love for this place that I call home. Thank you to Turtle Island for raising and teaching me.

⁵ Treaty no. 3 for Hamilton and Treaty no.13 for Toronto.

⁶ 7 400 acres of the Greenbelt are at risk. "Environment Town Hall," webinar from MPP Bhutla Karpoche, Toronto, Canada, 2 February 2022.

To People:

<i>Kristyn Wong Tam</i>	<i>Inspire me</i>
<i>Sol Mamakwa</i>	<i>to be a better</i>
<i>Paul Taylor</i>	<i>citizen in Toronto.</i>
<i>Jeremy Dutcher</i>	<i>Teach me about the</i>
<i>Shelley Niro</i>	<i>powerful impact that art</i>
<i>Eve Tagny</i>	<i>can have when activism is paired with</i>
<i>A Tribe Called Red</i>	<i>a powerful, antiracist and/or decolonial aesthetic sensibility.</i>
<i>Robin Wall Kimmerer</i>	<i>Have deeply informed the</i>
<i>Fred Moten</i>	<i>way this paper has</i>
<i>Michelle Murphy</i>	<i>taken shape.</i>

Sharing works from three different provinces and two different countries, I want to thank my Zoom art group: Alessandra Abballe, Erika DeFreitas, Ailene de Vries, and Julia Nemfield. From multiple locations we were able to create a virtual environment that was supportive and generative. Without our monthly virtual meetings throughout the pandemic, this project would never have been born.

Thank you to my phenomenal committee members: Marissa Largo, Nina Levitt, and Gabriel Levine. Your feedback and support improved this project immeasurably. Thank you to all the professors, artists, and peers who took the time to do studio visits with me. Thank you to Robyn Cumming for that very first push. To my cohort and friends I have made during this degree: it has been an honour to go through this process alongside you all. Thank you for the laughter, community, conversations, gym sessions, and food. Thank you to my Lotus Muay Thai community. Our gym provides me with an integral place to be in my body. It is a space of trust and compassion and I am thankful everyday that Lotus exists. My aunt Anne, uncle Bill, and cousin Nora live around the corner from me and continuously provide support in all manner of

ways. To my mother, Krista: her talent, smarts, and love is something that I aspire to match every single day and there is not much I could do without her.

It has finally gotten cold.

*The sun has returned, blasting
the snow a dazzling white.*

*Like a banshee, the air hovering just
above the lake is a cloud full of icy droplets,
howling and dancing.*

I am in awe, a little excited but afraid to move closer. My ears are burning.

There is a fifteen year-old husky sleeping in the other room as I write. Butters and I love those cold but sunny winter days; they keep our internal fires going. I am thankful for our interspecies companionship. Finally, thank you to my partner Cory. It is not feasible to write it all down what you do for me. Thank you for being my teammate through and through.

To funding:

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Woven throughout the rest of this paper is an expanded consideration of my positionality and some other ways in which it has brought me here, to York University, to my material collaborators, and to this body of work. My position feels sticky, strange, and in-motion. But it felt important that I begin by letting you know these things, and by giving thanks to these people, places, and beings.

Introduction

*Alterlife embraces impure and damaged forms of life, pessimistically acknowledging ongoing violence, living within and against the worlds technoscience helped make.*⁷

- Michelle Murphy

Over the past two years of my Master's of Fine Arts (MFA) degree at York University, I have concluded more than a few applications, presentations, and essays with the above quote by Murphy. This quote reminds me that hope can be found through clear-eyed engagement with the horrors of our present time—not simply by grasping onto a militant optimism, but by truly seeing the world for what it is, yet believing in actions that can create hopeful and alternate outcomes. My thesis, *the work of holding and exiting*, and this accompanying paper, “Don’t Let’s Go: Preemptive Grief, A World, and Others,” continuously point their bows toward hopeful, different, abject futures, and themselves act as events of non-compliance, as slices in the continuum that are uncanny, leading to the telling of new stories.⁸ By embracing the abject, the discarded, the damaged things and beings, we can make a slow exit from capitalism while pessimistically acknowledging that we are living within its clutches.

Experiencing the impending-ongoing climate crisis has left many with what I have started to call *preemptive grief*: mourning for losses that feel inevitable, on the horizon, and already past.⁹

Albeit a lofty goal, I work with the world around me to interrogate feelings of dislocation, fear, grief, and harm perpetuated by late-capitalism¹⁰—and I call on the surrounding materials in my

⁷ Michelle Murphy, “Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations,” *Cultural Anthology* 32, no. 4 (2017): 500, <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca32.4.02>.

⁸ On hopeful futures, see Nicholas Leonard, “The Arts and New Materialism: A Call to Stewardship Through Mercy, Grace, and Hope,” *Humanities* 9, no. 3 (2020): 18, <https://doi.org/10.3390/h9030084>.

⁹ I must give thanks to my mother for coming up with this term as we edited an earlier application for my project.

¹⁰ On the effects of late-capitalism, see Lucy Lippard, “Effects of Landscape on Cultural Geography,” Wendy Wersch Memorial Lecture Series (lecture, Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, MB, October 26, 2008), accessed through MAWA website, <https://mawa.ca/videos/lucy-lippard-effects-of-landscape-on-cultural-geography>.

life to help me work through these concerns. By researching a transversal connection between the environment, our bodies, and synthetic materials as parts of a hybrid future—one where these seemingly contradictory subjects are enmeshed—I have been asking through this project: *how can art be a part of the conversation to create an ethically engaged future in collaboration with material and land while also contending with grief?* The driving factors behind this body of work stem from a range of emotions I felt regarding the urgency of the climate crisis and trying to visualise how my own/our future will look.

In the following sections, I will talk about the artworks themselves. The very material reality of them is important; my intuitive pull towards materials is coupled by theoretical rationale, which, alongside the pleasure and challenge of writing, is what this support paper is about. In the first section “A New Story,” I start with how the project began and the new avenues it opened up for me. “Being Object, (A/O)bject-Beings,” follows and is an opportunity for me to think deeply about and put a name to my choices around my medium (waste items, gifted supplies, scavenged materials). “An Old Story,” shares a memory of a strong pull towards objects. “UNIMIN” looks at some works in progress exhibited in the fall of 2022. A tendril lifts upwards and points back to the unfinished work of positioning, as I revisit the personal history and identity that lives behind the project, unearthing an understanding of how it all fits together in “Positioning II.” The section “End of a World,” looks at mine and perhaps “our” relationship with grief, its presence in the artworks, and its larger socio-political implications. A final section on positionality, “Positioning III” hopes to wrap up (in a messy, leaky, withheld, and incomplete sort of way) the locating of myself alongside this project. Finally, as a recalcitrant sort of conclusion, “Words, A Container ” addresses the importance of reading and learning, my love of grappling with unfamiliar ideas through words, and how things continue on at the end of this exhibition, paper, and degree. The end is the beginning of where I am now.

A New Story

I found myself sitting in the basement of the house I shared with four others. Outside was cold, damp, grey, and quiet. The basement was cold, damp, grey, and quiet. When I moved into the Corso Italia neighbourhood of Toronto at the beginning of December 2019, our basement was filled with furniture from tenants-past and occupied by house centipedes. I started cleaning it out to make it a hospitable place for people to work. I set up my desk and supplies in a corner of the room and settled in. Less than four months later, one of my roommates had fled to their parents' house, another was stuck abroad due to an ill-timed trip, and the other two were holed up in their bedrooms. I hesitate to talk about the pandemic so soon into this paper, but it feels unavoidable because this project began during the pandemic. It was birthed into existence by combinations of:

terror survival privilege loneliness the different textures of silence unstructured time.

Now intimate with my own and my roommates' living habits, I became fixated on how quickly the garbage can was filling up. Trying to find a way to work through some feelings of anxiety and despair around this seemingly endless production of garbage in our little world had me straining to re-imagine my relationship to these materials. Pulling out my stash of gifted and thrifted darkroom paper, I started to create lumen prints of the waste objects I was worrying over (in my mind, momentarily diverting them from their trashcan destiny). Ghostly silhouettes appeared on the resin coated darkroom paper. Next, a flattened water bottle lying on the concrete alleyway behind the house was laid on a square of the paper (Fig. 1). Something beautiful and eerie appeared once again—a delicate, fuzzy impression that became diffuse the more I tried to focus my eyes on it.

An inkling, a lightbulb, an arrested moment.



Figure 1: *Water Bottle*, Fehn Foss, resin coated paper, 2020

Being Object, (A/O)bject-Beings

<i>boxes of darkroom paper</i>	<i>gifted</i>
<i>consumer medicine information leaflets</i>	<i>discarded</i>
<i>personal protection equipment</i>	<i>used</i>
<i>sparkly packaging for a mascara tube</i>	<i>trashed</i>
<i>plastic and foam fruit netting</i>	<i>ripped</i>
<i>an industrial sized plastic bucket</i>	<i>loaned</i>
<i>used appliances</i>	<i>purchased</i>
<i>cooled spills of bronze</i>	<i>found</i>
<i>two quartz stones</i>	<i>kept</i>

By taking waste materials seriously, I spend time with them, rejecting a hierarchy of artistic mediums and tools, experimenting with ways these unwanted materials might work together. On a microcosmic level, my studio becomes a space where experimentations for a new ecology at the edges of representation can emerge.¹¹ This new experimental framework for my art practice allows it to be a place where the (my) humanistic categorization urge sits alongside the materials' own agencies so that a levelling between the two can exist: a new storyline can be opened up.

Unknowingly at first, I had begun making lumen prints in this spirit; as the darkroom paper waited—or waded—in sunlight, spectres of the objects that sat on the paper appeared like auras. Recordings of a crumpled plastic water bottle, a dandelion, a sugar packet, or a plastic bag, seemed to waver at the edges of perception. The prints' seemingly ephemeral nature sits in contrast to the materials' very real presence. The synthetic materials that were placed on top of the darkroom paper are found on the ground, in our bloodstream, in the oceans, and packed into layers of sediment—at every level of life. Natural materials plucked from my surroundings began to mix with the mass-produced. The works look to the future as sci-fi imaginings and/or

¹¹ On the edges of representation, see Stephanie Springgay and Zophia Zaliwska, "Diagrams and Cuts: A Materialist Approach to Research-Creation," *Cultural Studies - Critical Methodologies* 15, no. 2 (2015): 139, DOI: 10.1177/1532708614562881.

back in time as recordings of things-past. A haunting: an imprint from the present reaching forwards and backwards in time.¹² Rather than a smooth digital transcoding or an endlessly reproduced image, these lumen prints are camera-less, written onto the page with sunlight and objects in order to achieve a *presence* rather than a *look*.¹³ It is something that can be touched and felt, a physical-ecological impact.

The lumen printing process creates these ghostly recordings during a *printing-out* process, in which light-sensitive paper is exposed in sunlight until imprints and colouration (in pinks, purples, and browns) on the paper become visible to the eye. Adding water speeds up the chemical process, vivifying the colours. At the heart of their beauty and array of fleshy, earthly colours is a process which uses the darkroom paper “incorrectly”: to make these works, I used photographic paper, which is meant to expose *latent*¹⁴ images using an enlarger and negatives in a darkroom. Traditionally, the paper is then immersed in chemical washes of developer, stop, and fixer. Instead, lumen prints are exposed using available light (sun or artificial light) during which the paper and the objects mingle together for minutes, hours, sometimes days. The paper is then treated with fixer—ammonium thiosulfate.¹⁵ Because no developer is used, the chemical reaction that normally breaks the bonds of exposed silver halide compounds in the paper, and creates clusters of black metallic silver, does not take place. Instead, a weak chemical reaction between the sun and the silver halides creates the pinks, purples, and brown of the prints—partial, half bonds, in the process of *becoming*. When wet from fixer and any other liquids I may have added during the prints’ exposure, the gelatin emulsion on the paper would swell and the silver halides would move further apart. But as the prints started to dry, the emulsion tightened and the image

¹² This idea of something reaching forwards and backwards in time comes from a line in the novel *Half Life* (pg. 27, 2020) by Krista Foss. It is in reference to the half-life of the Uranium isotope (U-235) that is used to make nuclear weapons.

¹³ Tess Takahashi, “After the Death of Film: Writing the Natural World in the Digital Age,” *Visible Language* 42, no. 1 (2008): 45, 59.

¹⁴ Images invisible to the naked eye until undergoing a chemical reaction with the introduction of developer.

¹⁵ “Photographic Chemicals,” *Lincoln University*, accessed September 30, 2022, <https://www.lincolnu.edu/web/environmental-health-and-safety/photographic-chemicals>.

darkened. Fixing the prints prevents the colours from fading.¹⁶ Having little control over colour and intensity, this inconsistent imperfect technique allows for happenstance and environmental factors to join in on the collective making that happens between myself and the materials. Like most people's first experience with analogue photographic printing, my lumen prints make me feel as though something otherworldly is at work. Were the objects and beings pressing themselves upon the paper or was the paper capturing them? The objects certainly were "there" on the page, at that moment, as was my hand, but what is it that is left behind?¹⁷ The images replicate, on a small scale, the ethical entanglement of our bodies, chemicals, plastics and the slow ecological processes happening through time.



Figures 2 - 5: Fehn Foss, 2022. Paper with melting snow chunks, Goldfarb Centre for Fine Arts, York University.

Pictured above are some process shots of snow chunks slowly melting on top of darkroom paper (Figs. 2 - 5). The snow chunks were gathered in the winter of 2021-22 just outside the Goldfarb Centre for Fine Arts (GCFA) on York University's campus, where my studio space was located. The snow melted in stages, leaving a residue of rings recorded on the paper, interpreting time. The beauty of the prints' colours is a difficult beauty, one that is not easily digested; it is something which evokes grief in the name of glacial melting, disappearances, ecological changes. Rather than a straight documentation through timelapse video or sequential

¹⁶ Thank you to Dr. Mike Robinson for spending time with me on Zoom, explaining the chemical and physical nature of what happens when the lumen prints are made.

¹⁷ Takahashi, Tess. "After the Death of Film," 48-49.

photography, the snow chunks and their melting was recorded in an abstract way, impressing upon us the stickiness of trying to represent “...critical historical, political, and cultural [and ecological] events through the iconic image alone.”¹⁸

The snow lumen prints remind me of tree rings recording years of growth, or fossils evidencing bygone eras: an archaeology and paradigmatology of human and non-human beings.¹⁹ Like artists Marilyn Arsem and David Hammons (and their projects *Oceans Rising*, 2008, and *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, 1983, respectively), my work with these snow chunks looks at water (in its solid form) as a type of durational object, something that can invite contemplation as it evidences time. Another artist who works with ice is Olafur Eliasson, whose giant pieces of arctic ice slowly melted in the middle of Paris. The amount of money and resources needed to make a project like Eliasson’s tarnishes the message. Arsem’s *Oceans Rising*, like my snow melt prints, requires little expense to an already exhausted ecosystem but compels a durational focus and close-looking from the viewer. Likewise, Hammons’ *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* evokes an uncanny awareness of location by creating something remarkable in an unremarkable space (the playful selling of snowballs on a street corner) and by creating a collective spark between himself, the environment and his neighbours.²⁰ The importance of a project’s scale matters.²¹

Another material I have been using for this project alongside the lumen prints is a form of papier-maché. I would soak shredded fibres and blend them into a chunky slurry. I poured this mixture through cheesecloth, and collected heavy lumps of water-logged pulp in my hand, squeezing as cloudy water oozed from between my fingers, rolled down my wrist, and dripped into the sink. The first time I did this, as my fingers loosened their grip on the pulp, I realised I had something new sitting in the palm of my hand. Greyish-purple and speckled, there sat a strange and knobbly

¹⁸ Tess Takahashi, “After the Death of Film,” 46.

¹⁹ On paradigms see Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method* (New York: Zone Books, 2009), 32.

²⁰ On uncanny awarenesses, see Christina Sharpe, “Alison Saar, the Alchemist.” *Hyperallergic*, November 20, 2020, <https://hyperallergic.com/602562/alison-saar-the-alchemist/>.

²¹ On project scale, see Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 101-102.

artefact—a sort of sci-fi relic. This pulp, in its journey through a myriad of applications, had become an entirely new entity—a vertebrae or fossil—something wildly different and much more physical than the lumen prints. Yet the lumen prints and the clenched bits of paper pulp speak to one another in a new language, one I can only just feel calling to me, trying to enunciate itself.²² By working with these materials in my practice, I began to understand these strange objects (as scholars Stephanie Springgay and Zofia Zaliwska put it) “...as living matter that is abstract and always in movement...[that creates] an agential cut [that] puts the [artist-researcher] constantly in a situation of not being able to entirely differentiate between something seen and recognized and something felt but not actualized.”²³ With the lumen prints and paper-pulp sculptures, I take the material as living matter, something to create meaning alongside and to listen to and feel out.

By using refuse, I want to face head-on the material fact of waste production, those objects sold to us as consumers, and reconsider them in new ways. I want to bring them out of the endless cycle of waste production and hear their potential vibrancy.²⁴ Together with the lumen prints, the paper-pulp objects are made from everyday, castaway materials asking to be reconsidered. I have become a gatherer, experiencing, embodying, and living with an acute awareness tuned toward the agential possibility of the things around me.

Adapted from a journal entry: At the painter's sink in the MFA studio area, I poured watery pulp through cheesecloth. Delicately lifting up each corner of the cloth, a heavy pulpy mass collected into the middle, creating a bindle-like bundle. Carrying it in one hand up the stairs, I returned to my studio and tied the bundle closed with a solitary shoelace. I hung it up to dry on a metal pipe going across the top of my studio space. A strange demolition ball-like pendulum of pulp drip-dropped excess liquid into a plastic bucket beneath it.

²² On object enunciations see Jane Bennett, “Powers of the Hoard: Artistry and Agency in a World of Vibrant Matter,” Vera List Center for Art and Politics (lecture, The New School, New York, NY, September 27, 2011). Accessed on Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q607Ni23QjA&t=3s>.

²³ Springgay and Zaliwska, “Diagrams and Cuts,” 144.

²⁴ Bennett, “Powers of the Hoard,” lecture.



Figure 6: *Untitled (Cindy-Lou Who)*, Fehn Foss, cheesecloth and paper pulp, 2022.

A week later I arrived at the studio to find a very light, very stiff new object. I had been expecting to take the pulp mass out of the cheesecloth, but the cheesecloth made itself crucial to the charge of the piece. Removed from the shoelace, the cheesecloth now stood straight up, reinforced by bits of dried paper-pulp. It was stiff, alert, and feather-light as it reached up towards me from the palm of my hand. As I had worried about what this pulp-bag should be, it showed me what it was.

When making this work, I did not have a set goal in mind, only an urge—and that, plus the time it takes to ask questions differently, was what was required. The object (Fig. 6) became a conjectural, hypothetical statement.²⁵ The object became a filled recipient.²⁶ The object pulsed and made its presence known. Extending into the future of my practice, I am interested in building an ecology of materials and interactions that identify as elements in a continuous flow of relationships coming-together or breaking-apart, reforming elsewhere, rather than as singular, autonomous units. Reality has become blobby.²⁷ In this amorphous, oozing reality, every thing and every being is in dialogue. And if every being is in a conversation of some sort, then my studio and the gallery space, the paper and the rest of my life form an ongoing event: a never-ending informal speculative practice in the spirit of what cultural theorists Fred Moten and Stefano Harney envision as *study, a study, studying*.

together, all the pieces converse, and
together we are studying, we are
in a space of *incessant and irreversible intellectuality*²⁸
intertwined, and this continues
outside of the studio space
as the pieces begin to converse with
visitors who come to consider them.

²⁵ On Loveless' ideas of what research-creation can be see the "Conclusion" to *How to Make Art at the End of the World*, 97-107.

²⁶ On container technologies see Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (London: Ignota Books, 2019), 29.

²⁷ On blobby reality, see Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2019), 151.

²⁸ On study, see Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (London: Minor Compositions, 2013), 110.

An Old Story

I am reminded of the day my family and I were to leave a cottage we had rented on the coast of Nova Scotia. I had spent the summer vacation collecting rocks and shells, placing them on a wooden crate by the front door. They were arranged in rows in a particular order whose rhyme or reason was felt rather than empirically accounted for by my seven year-old brain. Over the two weeks we were there I grew deeply attached to these object-beings. They were all uniquely their own, with specific resonances that had called to me. But on the day we were to leave, my mother said that I could choose only one rock; not all of them could come home and it broke my heart. I cried and sat by the window as the adults packed the car. We laugh about it now, my mother and I —she had the foresight to take some images of this scene (Figs. 7, 8) and so we have looked back at them over the years, discussing that intense connection as well as the ramifications of taking from a place as a visitor.



Figures 7, 8. Snapshots of the artist circa 2000.

An adult now, and one who has been conditioned by a certain set of societal rules, I had nearly forgotten how to feel the intensity of that feeling, the pain that I experienced at leaving the rocks and shells behind. That pull towards the rocks and shells was something real, vibrant, and can be described by recent movements in the philosophy of science as an understanding of agency as something that does not belong just to humans, but rather is manifest in reality and connects us together, affecting us as we come in contact with one another.²⁹ Noticing that the hard-to-describe pull to my materials was getting stronger as I continued to work on this project, this Nova Scotia summer memory came back to me. As I began to parse through theories of posthumanism and new materialism, the agential pull of my materials solidified in my consciousness (again).

Indigenous ontologies are crucial to acknowledge here as well, and to specifically cite Indigenous scholars in order to confront a history of erasure in the academic institution. And although the movements in the philosophy of science that I am learning about are new, they are connected to Indigenous traditions of thought that are millenia-old, whose knowledges explore and expound upon similar things. Robin Wall Kimmerer's book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants*, includes a chapter, "Learning the Grammar of Animacy" that touches upon this ontological view:

A bay is a noun only if the water is *dead*. When *bay* is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb *wiikwegamaa*—to *be* a bay—releases the water from bondage and lets it live...all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive...the language a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through all things...³⁰

Things are beings imbued with spirit in many Indigenous ontologies. This is similar to what Karen Barad calls *agential realism* when explaining this notion under the umbrella of new

²⁹ On object agency, see Jerry Lee Rosiek, Jimmy Snyder, and Scott L. Pratt, "The New Materialisms and Indigenous Theories of Non-Human Agency: Making the Case for Respectful Anti-Colonial Engagement," *Qualitative Inquiry* 26 (2020): 331-32.

³⁰ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 55.

materialism. This term rethinks ideas around agency as something not unique to humans but instead as a quality manifest in all parts of reality. This is remarkably similar to Indigenous concepts of non-human agency and a formulation of ethics that include the non-human world.³¹ As this paper ends, the learning continues. I look forward to broadening my research, as Jerry Lee Rosiek et al. call upon us to include Delora (1999b), Bungee (1984), Garrouette (2003), Marker (2018), and Atleo (2007) in “The New Materialisms and Indigenous Theories of Non-Human Agency: Making the Case for Respectful Anti-Colonial Engagement,” when exploring agent ontologies.³²

I feel nourished by everything I am reading and learning, making obsessive notes, making work, the work making me. Failure and doubt then become important friends as I continue to explore. These friends, and the materials in which they inhabit, are not valuable to an industrialised society that prioritises use, consumption, and reward. The materials I am using are flawed, faulty, abject materials that contribute to a social and political critique, embracing being in a predicament, reminding us of how much we take for granted.³³ The works have a for-nowness, they are making do, a part of a broader assemblage that emits a charge. For now. The hapticality of these objects gives us “...the feel for feeling others feeling [us]...the feel that what is to come is here.”³⁴ The hapticality of my works feels out a permanent mode of being present. They speak out, seep out from their containers, resisting permanent reattachment.

³¹ Rosiek, Snyder, and Pratt, “The New Materialisms and Indigenous Theories of Non-Human Agency,” 332.

³² Rosiek, Snyder, and Pratt, “The New Materialisms and Indigenous Theories of Non-Human Agency,” 332.

³³ On overlooked materials, see Daniel Adler, “Tainted Goods: Liz Magor’s Sculptures,” Book talk, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, March 12, 2019.

³⁴ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 97.



Figure 9: Installation view of *Unperceived and Imperceptible Yet Indispensable*, 2022

Pictured above, is a documentation image of *Unperceived and Imperceptible yet Indispensable* (UNIMIN), a two-person show that my peer Jo Yetter and I mounted in the Special Projects gallery at York University in November 2022 (Fig. 9). Serendipities presented themselves to me as the pulp-bag works began interacting with the lumen prints and together they assembled themselves as parts of a whole (Fig. 10). The pulp-bags are filled containers made from cheesecloth or plastic netting bags, keeping themselves together precariously, with faultlines and opportunities for dissolution. Together with the lumen prints—whose strange leaky markings look as though they came from the pulp-bags themselves—an unnameable, apprehensive, thrill arose. I began to see the works as agents acting together to create assemblages while retaining their original *thingness*³⁵, offering up invitations for different assemblages in the future.

³⁵ On thingness and agency, see Bennett, “The Powers of the Hoard,” lecture.



Figure 10: Installation view of a pulp-bag, *Unperceived and Imperceptible Yet Indispensable*, 2022.



Figure 11: Installation view of *Unperceived and Imperceptible Yet Indispensable*, 2022.

The assemblage installed in the corner where Jo's folded print stands highlights the unexpected relationship between Jo's work and my own (Fig. 11). We realised that the specific works we had picked out for the show, without much discussion, were along similar emotional and tonal registers. In muddy browns, simpering pinks, and dirty off-whites, these two projects created a conversation that engaged the corner and the floor, inviting all the qualities that are often frustrating about the student gallery space (paint roller marks from previous shows, bumpy plaster walls, and a strange array of light temperatures) into dialogue with one another, legitimising the mess of the space. Over the course of the exhibition, friends and mentors came to see the show. As we walked around and encountered one of the floorworks, I or my guest would bend down in a secret huddle around the work to talk alongside it. Intimate exchanges, conversing in proximity on a lower plane. From this exhibition, I learned that my works need more time in the gallery space before the show opens. The installation of the works cannot be simply thrown together in the span of a few hours. To really engage with these objects on another scale of time, I have allowed my eyes to look and look again in order to find ways forward like finding the subtle indentations of a footpath in a becoming-familiar woods. I learned this from the rushed and frenetic install of *UNIMIN*: the works need to be given time on their own scale. A few last-minute installation choices in *UNIMIN* were less successful and it was this experience that showed me that considered yet playful placements were necessary to experiment with during the installation of *the work of holding and exiting*.

Positioning II

My mother's upbringing can probably be best described as middle class—my grandfather worked at an ad agency and made a salary comfortable enough that my grandmother was a stay-at-home mom. My grandfather came to Canada from Norway after WWII. My grandmother's family is more mysterious, but I am pretty sure both of her parents were born in Canada. Neither of my grandparents went to college or university. Both had unresolved traumas they brought into their home that affected the way they raised their kids, making my mother's childhood complex. After being invited to leave the house at seventeen, she was working while finishing high school and then her undergraduate degree.³⁶ When my mother found out she was pregnant at twenty-nine³⁷, she had recently ended her relationship with my biological father and decided to keep this news to herself.³⁸ Her sister suggested she get an abortion, but my mother made the terrifying decision to keep me (luckily it was hers to make, rather than one forced onto her by draconian laws). When I was born, we were piss-poor. In an essay titled, "Falling; Fallen" my mother—an established writer of fiction and creative non-fiction—speaks about these early days:

When I was thirty, alone with a new baby and carrying my one working light bulb in the pocket of my bathrobe from room to room, I was effaced but wingless, suffering the self-conscious notion that I too had fallen, not only off the shiny pedestal of my own possibility but also the ideal of parenthood. This seemed especially true when I found myself swiping rolls of toilet paper from café washrooms, shoving them into the baby bag.³⁹

Despite our struggles, my mother surrounded me with the fierce love of aunts, uncles, and friends who gave me the fullest beginning to life. And by the time I was six, we had moved from Hamilton to Toronto, my mother had a job at the Globe and Mail as a journalist, and had married. In the middle of high school, I asked my mother to try and locate my biological father.

³⁶ Although the middle of five children, my mother was the first person in her family to go to university.

³⁷ The same age that I am now, as I write this paper.

³⁸ There is more here but it is not mine to tell.

³⁹ Krista Foss, "Falling; Fallen," ed. Dana Hansen, *The Humber Literary Review* 1, vol. 2 (2015): 40.

Our first meeting went well. Next, I was welcomed with a family party: suddenly I had new cousins, aunts, grandparents, and a half-sister. Things seemed deliciously idyllic. But families are containers, and they hold everything—the good, the bad, the boring. I began to learn the complexities of his life. A year after I met my biological father, my mother and her husband divorced. At seventeen, it felt like so much was happening, and I was unable to properly digest it all.

Amid my undergraduate studies, my mother's sister (her confidante, her best friend) died. After a little over a decade of us trying to get to know each other and always coming up short, my biological father was diagnosed with lung cancer, fought hard for two years, then passed away. I write this as the two-year mark of his death slides closer and closer to me. Grief is heavy, ugly, angry; it is always there asking to be dealt with. Grief can be dangerous if it is weaponised, it can be used as something we wield so as not to take responsibility for our own actions. Grief holds onto the past, strangles the present, and clouds the future. But grief can also be a hammock, cradling us. Grief is a close friend of mine, though I wish she would go away.

End of a World

Natalie Loveless' "Conclusion" to *Art at the End of the World* quotes American political theorist Jodi Dean: "Climate change tethers us to a perspective that oscillates between the impossible and the inevitable, already and not yet, everywhere but not here, not quite."⁴⁰ This resonated with an idea already beginning to flesh itself out in works I made before my MFA— works that examined *preemptive grief*: a mourning for loss in the process of happening and for changes yet to come. I believe that we are witnessing the end of "a world under petrochemical colonial capitalism and anthropocentric humanism."⁴¹ I am unsure what the ruins will look like, nor do I know what shape the re-building will take. During precarious times, I find myself seeking a return to steady ground. Reading Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* helped me realise that a reframing was needed: perhaps sturdy footing is the outlier, while change, unreliability, precarity, and loss is the constant. A rewiring of what I expect to be experiencing is needed.⁴² If pain, uncertainty, and work are the only true constants in life, then we can relax and stop avoiding these conditions, learning to appreciate moments of ease as fleeting, special.⁴³ Perhaps the contamination of stability by precarity is necessary. Letting grief act as a reminder that we love and are connected to our environment and the beings in it is the push that moves us forward, and hopefully my works contain this messy mixture of feelings. I think the artworks persist and emote in this way—as tired beings full of mourning and full of hope. The materials I have chosen to use are obstinate: they are problematic and will not be going away anytime soon. Waste persists, and it is something I am invested in learning to work with as a material fact, as something that can slowly and subtly change our story. And hopefully together we will call out to others, and collect a "we" that is hopeful, in agreement, in disagreement, but here to tackle the project of surviving together. Like philosopher and feminist

⁴⁰ Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World*, 97.

⁴¹ Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World*, 99.

⁴² Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 20.

⁴³ On some level, these are things I have known a long time, but the succinct list comes from Jonah Hill's documentary, *Stutz*, on Hill's therapist, Phil Stutz.

theoretician Rosi Braidotti's hypothesis for what posthumanism could be, I look to discover who that "we" is and how to keep it rooted in collectivity, open-endedness, and equity.⁴⁴ I believe that beginning to acknowledge certain materials and objects is a good start.

So, what do "we" do with all this precarity in all its variability and injustice? As beings on this planet—some facing more life-threatening experiences of the climate crisis and the violence of capitalist industry than others—how do "we" collect ourselves and move forward into a new space of becoming, forming futures together? How do "I" face the vastness of living now, in this epoch? Looking to the mundane, finding meaning in our daily practices, getting familiar with the seemingly banal surroundings in our lives is a good place to start as we move into a partial healing: a living in/with loss, pessimistically acknowledging ongoing harm while staying away from cynicism, resisting grasping at the nearest technofix or a soothing sense of denial.⁴⁵ Let us embrace the banal and engage in the collective and variable "we"—the hypocritical, contradictory, yet loving, fierce, and alive, "we".

I came across a meme (Fig. 12) whose text summed up a painful and true sentiment: "can't believe white people experienced the concept of grieving land and future generations for the first time ever and they're calling it Climate Anxiety." Braidotti acknowledges this point head-on, reminding me that even in the midst of trying to take stock of the direness of the climate crisis, I must resist centering whiteness:

We need energizing projects that express generative narratives and do not wallow in the rhetoric of the crisis. Especially when the crisis is to a certain extent the lament of white European cultures feeling vulnerable after they have become aware of how anthropogenic global risks are likely to affect them. They need to develop some decolonial perspectives.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2019), 2.

⁴⁵ On partial healing, see Donna Haraway, "Making Oddkin: Storytelling for Earthly Survival," Wilbur L. Cross Medal Ceremony (lecture, Yale University, New Haven, CT, October 23, 2017). Accessed on Youtube, <https://youtu.be/z-iEnSztKu8>.

⁴⁶ Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 69.

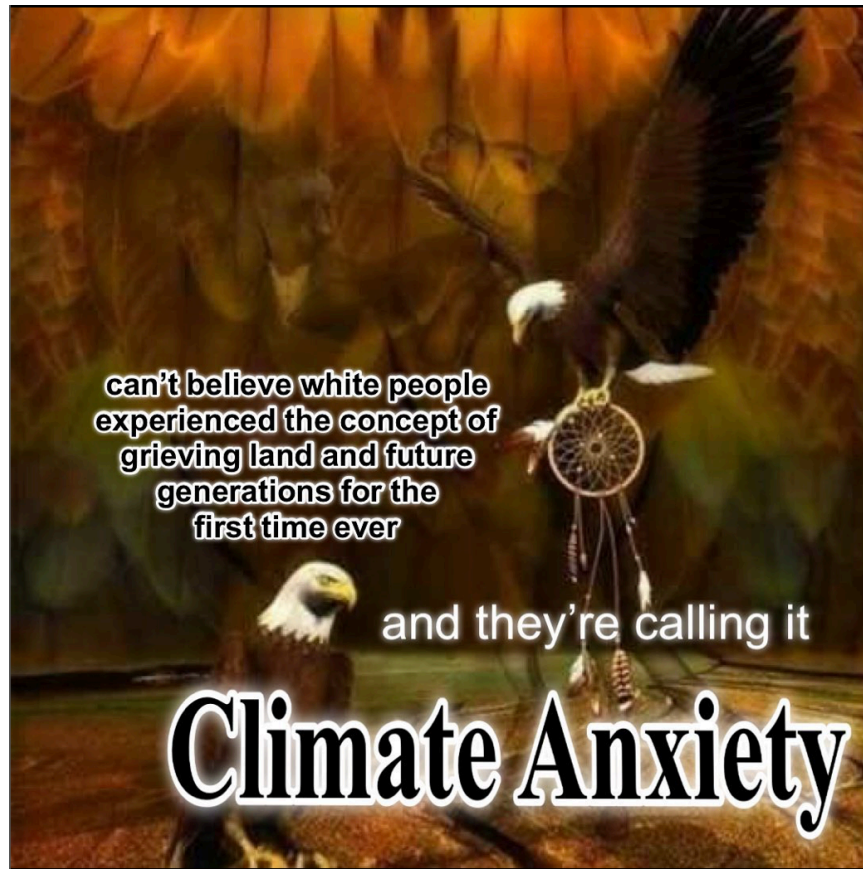


Figure 12: A meme from the Instagram account @decolonial.meme.queens.

Braidotti also uses this challenge to white people when thinking about the climate crisis as a way to re-frame our fears into something more productive by using a posthuman framework—and to remember that that deep sense of dread that I am feeling right now is not on the same register, nor is it a new sentiment for many IBPOC folks and for those in the Global South.

out of season flooding, extended wildfire seasons, stronger and slower hurricanes, glacial melting, unseasonably warm winter, old growth logging, rainforest destruction, the murder of Indigenous activists and black activists, it goes on and on and on and on and on and on and where and who and how and why and seeing and hearing and reading about others experiencing others walking around with dread others not having children others seeing their children die actual specific events or diffuse grief of when will the other shoe drop—

A concerted, collaborative, and gargantuan effort is required on the part of many, by our collective “we”—and even in this collective effort it may not be justly implemented. When it comes to recognising the extent to which industrialism and capitalism have wreaked havoc, practising new ways of looking at the world are in order. I start with grief as something that can be reframed as generative, as something that reminds me of my enmeshed and collaborative existence in this world. Rather than seeing grief as a pollutant to happiness, perhaps it is the right kind of contaminant: the one which urges us to reorganise our priorities.

Feminist scholar Ann Cvetkovich uses the idea of *acedia*—spiritual sloth or apathy—as a way to recontextualise depression in our contemporary (western) landscape as something normal to feel when everything around you seems as though it is shrouded in doom. Understanding our collective *acedia*-grief as shared and structural rather than individual and unique will allow us new ways of building the future together, a way forward that recognises the imbricated nature of our lives.⁴⁷ Alongside her activism, Cvetkovich uses “...daily routines of self-care and of moving the body—swimming, yoga, dinner with friends, visits to the dentists, or just getting out of bed in the morning—[as] modest forms of transformations...[that] are nonetheless meaningful.”⁴⁸ These small, and perhaps insulated acts, still have the potential to move our bodies, remove our minds from an economy of attention, and help us to reset our frame of reference. They are not the final step but they could be a first step. Using whatever method we need to unhook ourselves from the constricting hold of despair, it might be possible to move ourselves outwards and away from the diffuse nature of a western, wealthy-ish grief and into uncanny and liberatory action. The objects I make look to use transformative affects in order to care for myself as I reach out to other human and non-human beings through the works. The artworks and I are experimenting with how we can take our banal existences and reach outwards in a broader way: how are we ethically entangled with others? Through a careful titration of individual transformations, intellectual theories, and direct social actions, we can spread ourselves outward and find those unknown futures.

⁴⁷ Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: a public feeling* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012), 105-06.

⁴⁸ Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 79-80.

Using scopic pleasure and disgust, my abject little objects and mournful-beautiful prints are invested in communicating with others, as partially autonomous entities, as slow and on-going events that remain through time, to co-create a buildup of community.⁴⁹ In this paper, I have begun cultivating a collective ethico-political⁵⁰-restful-research-creational practice. These research-creational aspirations are in parallel to Indigenous knowledge traditions which refuse the binary of knowing/being or epistemology/ontology to instead understand them as simultaneous, intertwined, and feeding one another.⁵¹ In *the work of holding and exiting*, human and non-human beings connected together through grief as well as through joy, remind us of the potential of shared affects. As artists we hope it can be extended through thingness.

⁴⁹ On artworks and time, see Dan Karlholm, "Reassembling the Artwork: The Relevance of Assemblage Theory for Art Studies," *Tahiti* 10, no. 4 (2020): 7. <https://doi.org/10.23995/tht.103177>.

⁵⁰ On ethico-political practice, see Gabriel Levine, *Art and Tradition in a Time of Uprisings* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2020), 217.

⁵¹ Rosiek, Snyder, and Pratt, "The New Materialisms and Indigenous Theories of Non-Human Agency," 338.

Positioning III

When the pandemic hit, when things slowed down, grief caught up with me on many fronts. A scalable feeling, grief contracts to pinpoint the loss of something small like a favourite pair of socks; or it expands, creating a mist about a person's head or a city or a country's sky, cloudy, pervasive, persistent. In a house full of roommates, in a city constantly at war with its unhoused population, in a country in denial about its genocide of Indigenous peoples, and in a body never quite given enough rest, I felt weighed down. But I also began to take the much needed time to figure out what it is I should be working on. Although these issues are not new, the pandemic has had the grim honour of highlighting systemic disparities in even more stark contrast, has slowed many lives down, and from that has further encouraged many to look deeply at the ways in which we participate in a white supremacist culture, including myself. As my world slowed down, many griefs poured into one another. I felt these losses heavy on my shoulders spilling into the shame of not doing enough to fight against the injustices happening in my own community, spilling into the grief for a planet that I so love that is slowly being destroyed, spilling into the uncertainty of what a pandemic is. Heavy, everything, heavy. However, grief and mourning, in all its bodily vulnerability and sometimes desperately interior experience, has the potential to lead us to the collective and can be a source of resilience. Mourning reminds us that we are connected and affected by one another, a part of each other socially and in an embodied way. In grief, we give ourselves over to the reality that we are dependent on each other.⁵² I looked down at the floor, at the material in the garbage cans, and at the darkroom paper piled up beside my desk and began to make.

⁵² Judith Butler quoted in Levine, *Art and Tradition in a Time of Uprisings*, 110.

Words, A Container

*A book holds words. Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us.*⁵³

- Ursula K. Le Guin

During my first year of graduate study at York University, I experienced a new level of reading and writing—the texts began to feel like a place where I could make a home, get nestled into my practice, and convene with people smarter than myself. Note-taking and journaling are an integral, near-obsessive part of my practice. Writing is a (sort of) daily habit with the ability to subtly transform, as a way to unstick myself from despair through an ordinary, everyday act. Journaling, an often gendered form of writing, is one that does not have to be forcibly analysed as a coherent, impenetrable whole: the entries stay connected yet semi-autonomous, together, without the shiny finish of an academic paper.⁵⁴ Through the written format of this academic paper, I have constructed something that lives in asynchronous chunks too, flowing together here and there, doubling back, fragmentary. In relation to the exhibition, the paper is a partially whole being, living alongside the artworks, created in support of the exhibition, almost able to go it alone but not quite: a string of particular words in particular relation to one another.

The ideas in this paper are not finished—I have only just begun to think about them! This paper is a rehearsal, it is a space for me to explore my artworks and ideas in another channel. The text hopes to be a social space where my own ideas and the ideas of others are conversing, and the reader comes along as well, and little microbes on the keyboard and my fingers rub together. And we brush against one another and we begin to study here, together—it is ongoing, unfinished, flawed.⁵⁵ What I hope for next is something brighter, but I am not convinced yet that that will be the case. I think a reorientation of how we do what we do at all scales of existence is necessary: a

⁵³ Le Guin, *Carrier Bag Theory*, 34.

⁵⁴ Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 76.

⁵⁵ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 108-109.

“more-than-human social justice.”⁵⁶ Art with an “activist impulse”⁵⁷ and beauty in all its uncanny forms.

Alongside time in the studio, I think about how my life and how my work can further engage in collective actions. The relation of the personal and the political allows us to deepen our ability to understand each other and to join in collective struggle.⁵⁸ By asking the viewers to consider their own bodies in relation to the artworks and/or this paper, the work will provide space for the viewer to hold grief, to come apart, and to be held. The desire for my practice to contribute collectively is real and runs deep within the work. By using my art practice to assist in transformative world-building, I care for myself too—in a way that goes beyond neoliberal notions of self-care.⁵⁹ The challenge is to maintain some elements of “my practice” while also engaging in something broader than that: a practice that is pluralist and is “directly involved with the creation and sustaining of diverse forms of life.”⁶⁰

I have recently begun to imagine a future where we think about things differently, where we refuse to answer the question being asked of us on the very basis of the terms of the question.⁶¹ In Jenny Odell’s *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, she writes that this type of refusal produces a “third space...an almost magical exit to another frame of reference.”⁶² When we are presented with “yes” or “no” situations within structures that want us to maintain specific, controlled, and expected outcomes, “it takes work, and *will*, to keep answering

⁵⁶ Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 9.

⁵⁷ Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World*, 101.

⁵⁸ On collective struggle, see Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021), 272-273.

⁵⁹ Levine, *Art and Tradition in a Time of Uprisings*, 201.

⁶⁰ Marcus Boon and Gabriel Levine, eds., *Practice* (London: Whitechapel Gallery and Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018), 21.

⁶¹ Odell, *How to Do Nothing*, 69-77.

⁶² Odell, *How to Do Nothing*, 69.

something else.”⁶³ As artists, we have the potential to create things and spaces where contemplation can be fostered and where inattention can be held at bay for a little while.⁶⁴ So I return to my own question: *how can art be a part of the conversation to create an ethically engaged future in collaboration with material and land while also contending with grief?* And refuse it, unlocking a third space. Things look differently at the end of the paper than they did at the beginning. The question I had originally set for the work could never have been answered as such: it is in a language too solutions-oriented, too human, too white. The work now begins with embodying the act of refusing the question as it has been offered to us (to me, by another me).

I hope that what you have read or seen or felt
or responded to or intuited
can be a part of the contaminated and diverse assemblage
of the future—one that rejects linear progress and grows
out of the tough earth of capitalistic ruins

exiting, forever in exile.

⁶³ Odell, *How to Do Nothing*, 72.

⁶⁴ Odell, *How to Do Nothing*, 6.

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Appendix A: Exhibition Documentation Images

the work of holding and exiting
shell projects, 13 Mansfield Ave (back alley), Toronto, ON, Canada
Images by Stephen Attong, 2023











