

# felt/felt

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## **Abstract**

This paper parallels the series of artworks in my thesis exhibition entitled *felt/felt*, wherein large-scale industrial felt sculptures explore a relationship between sensorial bodily experience and psychological state. The artworks use space and form, with a particular interest in solitude, slowness, and sensory perception, to engender a gradual shift in consciousness through physiological engagement. I use processes such as wrapping, binding, and hanging, working with industrial felt's disposition and navigating between asserting rigour and relinquishing control to develop form. The geometries that arise have a certain minimal formal austerity while embracing felt's subtle yet irrepressible unruliness. There is a conversation between material, form, and experience in each of these sculptures. This paper fleshes out the significance of materiality, formal language, methodology, experiential impetus, and contemporary urgency to this body of work.

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## **Introduction**

My sculptural investigations address the relationship between bodily experience and psychological changes of state. My research questions the nature and role of consciousness-shifting, mindful experience in a secular, fast-paced context, with a lens towards how space and form can precipitate such experience. In investigating the affect of spatial and formal mechanisms on states of consciousness, I take particular interest in solitude, slowness, and sensory perception. The result is a body of sculptural work using industrial felt as a medium that seeks to engender a gradual shift in psychological state through physiological engagement of the human body.

This thesis consists of two components: a solo exhibition at Gales Gallery at York University, and this written document, a thesis support paper accompanying the exhibition. This paper develops six key areas of investigation. Firstly, it describes the complementary gallery exhibition. It then fleshes out the significance of materiality, formal language, and methodology to the artworks in this exhibition. Subsequently it delves into the experiential impetus behind this sculptural work, and lastly probes at the contemporary relevance of such experiential drive.

## **In the Gallery: Form, Experience, and Industrial Felt**

Upon entering Gales Gallery, one encounters a series of five sizeable sculptural works made of industrial felt. Taken together, they fill the white cube gallery space with a dense wooliness, operating to subtly dampen ambient acoustics and airflow in the room. While every piece is independent, the works develop a dialogue; each sculpture has been selected for its unique formal, experiential, and material contribution to an overall conversation.

Just inside the gallery doors, the first piece a visitor is met by consists of four quasi-spherical forms, situated directly on the floor, entitled *Spheres No. 170409*. (Note that I title my artworks with a six-digit number corresponding to the date each piece was completed, in YYMMDD format. The number 170409 corresponds to the date April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017.) Each sphere is approximately 30” in diameter – created by repeatedly wrapping a felt strip around itself, progressively weaving and binding the material into its form. The four spheres range between varying shades of grey, from dark to very light. They are arranged in plan to create an implied square, with one sphere at each of the corners, and a negative space at the square’s centre. They are spaced to leave just enough room to allow passage between the spheres and crouching at the square’s centre.

Moving clockwise around the gallery, one then encounters *Enclosure No. 170419*, a bulbous sculpture of proportions reminiscent of a human body. Here, white industrial felt is frenetically rolled into small balls, which are used as building blocks and bound into rings. The rings are then layered on top of each other to create a tall column-like mass with a hollow core, with a single ball missing in the middle ring. This creates an approximately cranial-sized hole, implicitly inviting visitors to slide their head – a primary locus of sensory receptors on the human body – inside the work. The interior of this dense felt ring creates an enclosure that enables sensory deprivation,

notably muffling sound, stifling air, and blocking light.

Continuing clockwise, we encounter *Passage No. 170424*, an immersive installation. This work plays off the geometry of a square, measuring 6' by 6' in plan by 8' tall. Dark grey industrial felt strips lazily hang off of a rectilinear wooden frame. The strips increase in density as they approach the centre, opening onto a tight 18" by 18" clearing. As one navigates deeper into this work they are increasingly immersed in a density of felt, resulting in an increasing deprivation of sound and light.

This immersive installation is situated next to *Spiral No. 170412*, another dark grey work – one that is starkly simple. It is a felt spiral situated directly on the floor, created by repeatedly winding a single 3" to 6" wide strip of felt around itself to an approximately 6' diameter. The felt strip has one woolly edge that is oriented to face upwards. This circular piece can be experienced through observation or physical engagement, subtly inviting visitors to delve into its tactility through touch, and to walk, sit, and lie on its surface.

Lastly, the fifth work is an immersive installation entitled *Passage No. 160501*, created from vertically arranged white felt strips. The exterior resembles a dense monolith, measuring approximately 5' by 5' in plan by 8' tall. One side reveals an entrance, leading to a rectilinear spiral into the piece. As one enters deeper into the work, sound is increasingly muffled. Due to its scale, square geometry, sensorial experience, and immersive nature, this work is strongly in dialogue with the above-described dark grey immersive installation across the room, *Passage No. 170424*.

## **Materiality: When Matter Matters**

### *Experiential Potential of Industrial Felt*

In an uncanny linguistic overlap, the double meaning of the word *felt* encapsulates both the primary material that I use to create sculpture, and the resonance between this material and my experiential goals. *Felt* refers to a textile made by pressing wool or other suitable fibres, accompanied by the application of moisture and heat, which causes the constituent fibres to mat together and create a surface. It is also the past participle of *feel*, meaning to be aware through touch or physical sensation, to consider oneself to be in a particular state, to experience an emotion, or to be strongly affected (“Felt” 633-634). This homonym captures both the medium and the impetus behind my sculptural work.

Indeed, industrial felt is uniquely well suited to evoke poignant affective experience. I have found that this material holds the potential to be the vibrant matter, to use Jane Bennett’s term from her 2010 book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, which actively gives my sculpture form. It is a distinctive material with a strong presence and a visceral quality, embodying a certain raw honesty, a sense of ancient wisdom, and a silent strength.

Perhaps the honesty of the material relates to its utilitarian integrity; its physicality is a result of the processes that are required to bring it into existence. The felts that I use have no dyes, and are made purely from fibres (ranging from 100% to 80% wool) and water that have gone through an industrial version of the ancient felting process. And it is perhaps in part due to this age-old process that the material seems to be suggestive of a certain wisdom. The earliest known written records of felt are found in ancient Mesopotamia from the third and second millennia BC (Bunn 16), and there

is evidence to suggest it was in existence for millennia prior to that. A textile fragment identified as felt was discovered at Çatal Hüyük, a prehistoric Neolithic and Chalcolithic settlement that was abandoned before the bronze age in modern day eastern Turkey. This fragment was carbon-dated to about 5900 BC (Bunn 16). If this textile was accurately identified, it suggests that humans have lived with felt since the Stone Age.

### *Industrial Felt in my Practice: From Inkling to Immersion*

I came across industrial felt during a 2013 artist residency at The School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York, when I took interest in creating spaces of isolation. To this end I began working with materials that provide insulation, with a preference for those derived from natural fibres. A material ubiquitously used around SVA's studios as drop cloth worked its way into my subconscious: a mottled dark grey, synthetic yet fibrous material that comes in huge sheets and was strictly off limits for use in artistic practice; it was reserved solely for maintaining cleanliness. In searching for a comparable material I attempted to use acrylic felt and roofing felt, which proved disappointing due to their plastic materiality, flimsiness, and lack of breathability. Shortly thereafter I visited Dia Beacon and experienced Joseph Beuys' 1979 work *Brazilian Fond* (Image 1), in which large flat sheets of thick industrial felt are layered into stacks. I leaned over to stick my head between the stacks, and was immediately shocked and engrossed by a distinct quiet. It was a specific muffling of sound – a unique aural deadening that I had never before experienced.

I then began to explore industrial felt, along with other insulators such as cork, sisal, latex, and rubber, to create small sculptures. This small scale exploration continued until the first semester of my MFA, at which point I was presented with the opportunity to realize a large scale felt installation for a May 2016 exhibition entitled *After Great Pain a Formal Feeling Comes*, curated

by Megan Toye (Art History PhD Candidate at York University, Intern Curator at the AGYU). Industrial felt, being derived from wool, was prohibitively expensive for me to finance in large quantities, which presented a serious obstacle to realizing a large-scale work. This predicament ultimately led to a material breakthrough, which resulted in my acquisition of large amounts of industrial felt, eventually becoming utterly immersed in the material over the course of my MFA.



Image 1: Joseph Beuys, *Brasilienfond (Brazilian Fond)*, 1979. Joseph Beuys/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, The Dia Art Foundation website, <http://www.diaart.org/collection/collection/beuys-joseph-brasilienfond-1979-1980-507>. Accessed 10 Jan. 2017.

### *Felt Offcuts and Industry Collaboration*

The aforementioned material breakthrough transpired thanks to a meaningful and unconventional arrangement with The Felt Store (TFS), the retail affiliate of Brand Felt, the sole manufacturer of this material in Canada. Typically industrial felt is sold in large sheets. The manufacturing process results in a rough edge around each sheet, where the felt comes undone and gradually transitions to un-matted wool, what I refer to as a *live edge* (Image 2). These edges are cut off such that the sheet

is sold commercially with crisp square edges. This results in an offcut, usually ranging from 2”-6” wide and anywhere from 6’ to many dozen feet long.

It is this offcut, a felt product that is not commercially available, that I use to create sculpture. Over the course of my MFA, TFS has given me approximately one tonne of industrial felt offcuts, and in exchange I have given them marketing material including photo-documentation of my artwork and process. This collaboration functions through the use of “waste” – by the fact that offcuts are a by-product. While the factory can recycle offcuts back into their process, they can also realistically offer them to me for an exchange that is something other than financial.

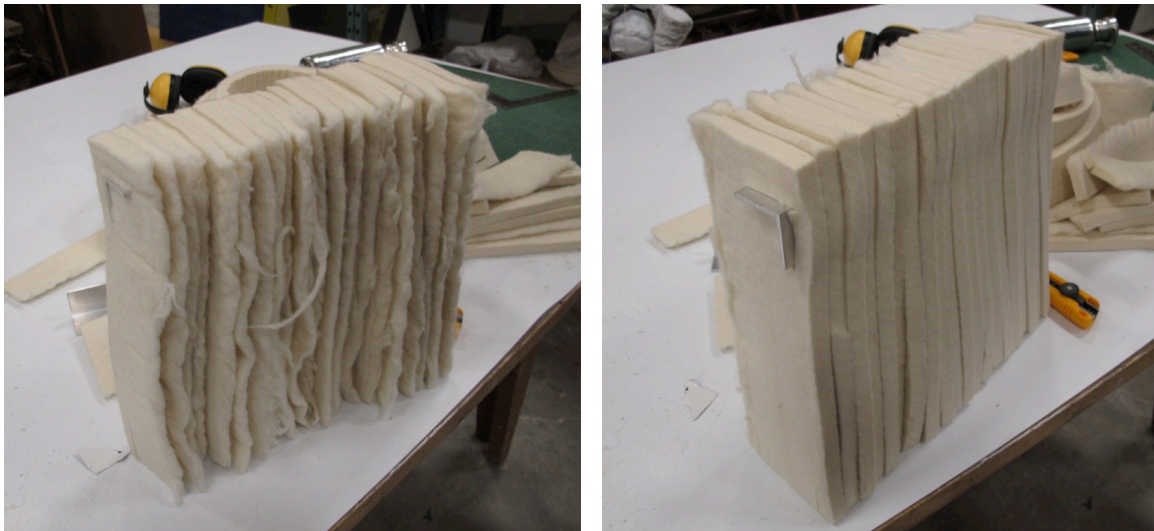


Image 2: Live edge (left) and cut edge (right) of industrial felt offcut

This opportunity to work with industry and access large quantities of material has led to my appreciation for the complexities affiliated with making sizable work. Such a massive quantity of material is deeply exciting, freeing, and represents infinite possibility. Yet it is simultaneously anxiety inducing; material possessions carry a certain physical and psychological weight, and taking on a literal tonne of material involves significant logistical challenges. Questions of transportation, space, assistants, and coordination have become essential to my practice, and



resolving such issues accounts for a significant portion of the work associated with realizing my thesis exhibition. Transporting the felt from the factory to York University began with packing every square inch of a car with hundreds of pounds of felt ten times (Image 3). To improve efficiency, I engaged an assistant and a cargo van for pickups, and have transported about 1,000lbs of additional felt to my studio in this way. Once at York the felt requires storage space; the faculty and I have coordinated make-shift storage areas to accommodate this (Image 4). The size of my thesis work relative to the size of my (already generous) studio are in constant negotiation (Image 5); in working towards the five sculptures for my thesis exhibition I have found myself pushing up against my spatial limitations on a daily basis. In developing this exhibition I have become acutely aware that effective negotiation of such logistical issues is critical to the success of this body of artwork.



Image 3: One felt shipment from The Felt Store to York University



Image 4: Provisional industrial felt storage space at York University



Image 5: Ellen Bleiwas' studio at York University



## *Poignant Material Properties*

Through sustained hands-on and literary research I have come to know industrial felt intimately; this process has revealed the fact that it is a material with great depth and infinite variability. Latent potentialities exist within the material without its immediately expressing such potential. Thus, one cannot exhaustively catalogue its properties, rather with patience and exploration they continue to reveal themselves over time. As someone who has strong tendencies towards cataloguing, coming to accept this aspect of felt's nature has been a challenge. In seeking to work with its disposition I draw upon Keller Easterling's unpacking of this notion, describing:

Disposition is a familiar but nuanced word best understood by using it. Acquiring that understanding is similar to the way disposition itself operates. (...) The latent potential is expressed as a quotient of action that exists without the need for the actual movement or event. Disposition locates activity not in movement, but in relationship or relative position. (...) Disposition, as the unfolding relationship between potentials, resists science and codification in favor of art or practice. (251)

This understanding of disposition resonates with the nature of industrial felt; holding latent potential that unfolds through relationships, resisting codification, and coming to be "best understood by using it". Through experimentation over time, I have teased out certain qualities of industrial felt that have become vital in my work.

Firstly, industrial felt is an insulator, lending itself beautifully to the creation of spaces of solitude. I draw upon this in almost all of my work. *Passage No. 160501* uses felt walls as insulation to progressively isolate a visitor as they move deeper into the piece; *Enclosure No. 170419* creates an

insulated boundary surrounding the sensory receptors of one's head; *Passage No. 170424* uses hanging felt as an insulator to increasingly surround a visitor.

Industrial felt can be remarkably substantial. Especially at its greater thicknesses, in the approximately 1" range, there is a strangeness to this solid, dense, uniform slab of compressed fibres. It is soft and malleable, yet simultaneously sufficiently rigid to hold its form and maintain its geometry. The thickness and substantiality of the material enables it to operate as both a surface and a structure. Of the five sculptures in my thesis exhibition, three are constructed of only this material, the industrial felt employed in such a way so as to be self-supporting. This is achieved through simple gestures, using the combined malleability and rigidity of the material to bind itself into forms, in *Spheres No. 170409* as spheres, in *Enclosure No. 170419* as building blocks, and in *Spiral No. 170412* as a compressed spiral.

The felt offcuts that I work with have additional key properties that are specific to this particular felt product. Firstly, they come in long narrow strips. These strips uniquely lend themselves to hanging (utilized in *Passage No. 170424*), and binding and wrapping (seen in *Spheres No. 170409*). Secondly, most offcuts have one cut edge and one live edge. The woolly, unfurling live edge offers unique potential. It contrasts the industrial aesthetic of the cut edge, referencing back to the living animal from which the wool comes. I have used this contrast between cut edge and live edge as an unexpected element heightening a sense of interiority in *Passage No. 160501*, aligning all cut edges on the exterior of the sculpture, and all live edges on the interior. And lastly, there is great amount of unpredictability in the offcuts. This fact has presented a unique challenge, which has pushed me to rethink the way I work; this is elaborated upon under the *Methods and Methodologies* section below.

Industrial felt is a material that embodies numerous ostensible dualities. There is a tension between the familiarity and foreignness of the material; familiar in part due to its resemblance to thin acrylic “felt”, but foreign in its composition, thickness, density, visible fibres, sensorial affect, and quantity. There is also a tension between its soft malleability and quasi-solid rigidity, and between its welcoming comfort and its sombre austerity. In my sculptures I use this space between familiarity and the unusual, between comfort and austerity, to heighten awareness through an oscillating between assurance and discomfort.

### *Sensorial Qualities*

In my sculpture I draw upon industrial felt’s highly specific and affective sensorial qualities, including its tactile, acoustic, and olfactory properties. I employ these material qualities in combination with forms that enable bodily engagement, seeking to facilitate physiological and ultimately visceral experience.

While the gallery context is generally considered to be a hands-off space unless otherwise specified, felt is a highly tactile material that begs to be touched. I do not explicitly state that touching my sculpture is permitted, but rather conceive of their forms to encourage touch regardless of perceived gallery-context expectations. While observing visitors interact with *Passage No. 160501*, I noticed unsure individuals refraining from touching the outside of the sculpture, but sneaking a caress once they were in the interior, inadvertently causing the felt to bulge and announce their action.

The texture that this material imparts onto my sculptures is unusual. It could be described as something between a luscious duvet and rough sand paper: soft, warm, and a beacon of comfort,

yet slightly abrasive, with the odd sharp fibrous protrusion. From the perspective of the maker, this tension between comfort and abrasiveness is heightened when working with felt. Spending hundreds of hours working with my hands in the studio, the material can be calming, grounding, and luscious. But it is also an irritant; by the end of a day, fibres have seeped into my apparel and become trapped between my clothes and skin, creating intrusive subtle itchy specks all over my body. I wear gloves to prevent my hands from becoming irritated, but felt is a true absorptive material; despite containing lanolin, even with gloves it is extremely drying on my skin.

Acoustically, my sculptures draw upon felt's capacity to uniquely deaden sound. In creating works that explore the experiential potential of solitude and sensory deprivation, this property is invaluable. I am particularly interested in acoustics created through pure materiality and geometry, and a gradual increase in acoustic muffling as a visitor enters deeper into a piece. This progressive dampening can be experienced in the immersive installations *Passage No. 160501* and *Passage No. 170424*.

While in a subtle way, my sculpture also draws upon industrial felt's distinct olfactory quality. The smell is unique: an unmistakable complex scent that evokes a wet sheep, with a woolly lanolin base and a simultaneously wet and burnt undertone. It has a certain raw bodily quality of fur or hair. While these resemblances create familiarity, and on a level engender a sense of comfort, there is something off-putting – even disgusting and oppressive – about felt's odour. A significant amount of industrial felt faintly imbues a room with its aroma; my studio has smelled of felt for months. In close proximity to the material, for example surrounded by the tight enclosure of *Passage No. 170424* or *Enclosure No. 170419*, the smell is palpable. Unlike the visual aspects of sculpture, smell inescapably invades the senses, with particles being taken up through one's breath into the nose, mouth, and body.

## **Form: Developing a Language**

My art practice draws upon a series of key recurring forms which, taken together, develop a formal language. In part this language serves to engender the experiences that I seek to create, yet formalist concerns are of critical importance to my sculptural work beyond their experiential implications. There is a conversation between form and experience in each of my works. The sculptures in my thesis exhibition show that elements of this formal language include shapes such as circles, squares, spheres, and spirals; passages including tunnels, holes, portals, and oculi; and spatial tropes such as enclosure, verticality, and axuality.

The circle is a predominant form in this exhibition; three of the five sculptures are based on this geometry. *Spheres No. 170409* draws heavily on this form. Here, a repetitive process of wrapping and binding wrangles felt into geometric order, exploring the tension between rigid geometry and mercurial material. In plan, the four circles come together in a square to invoke a relationship between these two Euclidean geometries.

The circle is a poignant form that has been used by humans for millennia. British artist Richard Long has used this form extensively. In an interview with Long, art historian and curator Mario Codognato notes that “circles in most cultures are the symbolic representation of the fundamental elements of nature, like the sun or the moon, of the divine, of the recurring of time, of infinity” (Long et al.), and asks why Long has used circles so often. Long replies that circles:

are timeless, universal, understandable and easy to make. I am interested in the emotional power of simple images. (...) I made my first circle in 1966 without a thought, although in hindsight I know it is potent for all of the reasons you

describe. A circle is beautiful, powerful, but also neutral and abstract. (...) A circle suits the anonymous but man-made character of my work. My ideas can be expressed better without the artistic clutter of idiosyncratic, invented shapes. (Long et al.)

This resonates with the reasons that I gravitate towards the circle as a form in my practice. It is a simple, universal, abstract geometry that eliminates idiosyncratic clutter and speaks with powerful clarity. It is emotionally powerful, lending well to the anonymous yet man made nature of my sculptures.



Image 6: Richard Long, *Berlin Circle*, Hamburger Bahnhof Berlin, 2011. Photo: Steve Jackson. <http://www.richardlong.org/Exhibitions/dec11exupdate/berlcircl.html>. Accessed 10 Jan. 2017.

The tunnel is another central form in this body of work – a void surrounded by an enclosure. This includes both vertical tunnels leading to light, and horizontal tunnels functioning as passageways.



The interior negative spaces of both *Enclosure No. 170419* and *Passage No. 170424* are essentially vertical tunnels that a visitor can enter. In *Enclosure No. 170419*, once a visitor ducks into the hole in the white industrial felt ring, their head is enclosed in such a tunnel. Their view to the immediate context is cut off, with an opening above. This opening is a round-framed view upward, or an oculus. The relationship between the ring and the oculus create a dialogue between horizontal restricted enclosure and vertical space.

The square is the base geometry for the two immersive installations in this exhibition, *Passage No. 160501* and *Passage No. 170424*. In both works, a square plan has been extruded to a rectilinear form. The rigid corners of the square serve as an important counterpoint to the circular works, in a way acting as anchor points. This square geometry echoes the architectural form of the gallery, a rectangular floor plan with four walls and four corners. Inside both works, the felt encloses a visitor below a rectangular oculus framing an upward view.



Image 7: Upward view inside *Passage No. 160501*. Photo: Eva Kolcze

## Methods and Methodology: Asserting and Relinquishing Control

Over the course of my MFA my methodology has undergone a significant shift. The sculptures in my thesis exhibition are evidence to this – one of which was created prior to this shift, four of which were made after. During the first year of my MFA, I primarily worked using a system of in depth planning, followed by executing my predetermined plans. This way of working is deeply informed by my prior architectural training, where one designs a building through a set of drawings and models, and passes this predetermined design along to a contractor to be executed. I was working in a similar way, essentially passing my plans off to myself to execute.

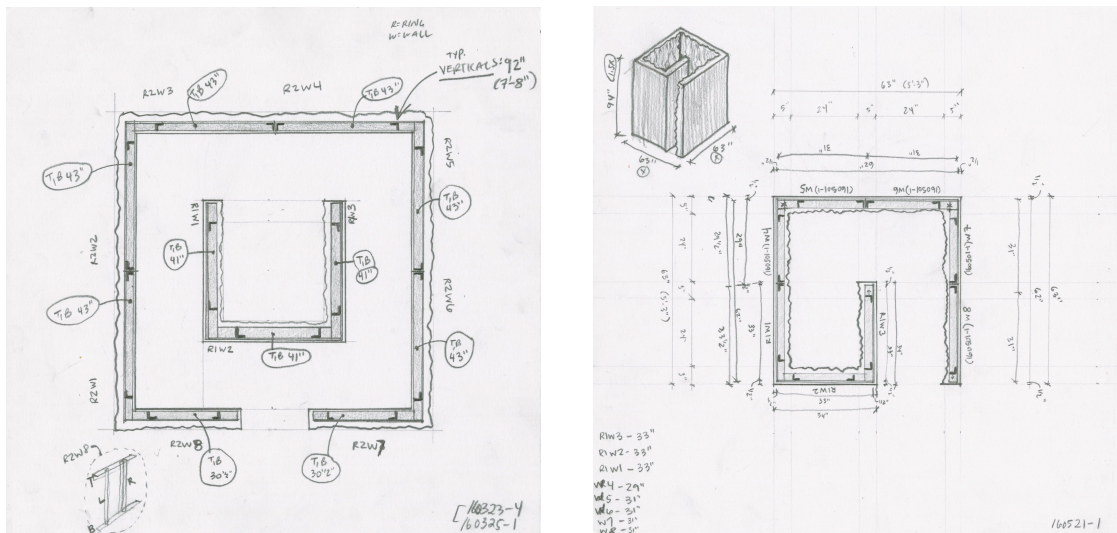


Image 8: Plans for *Passage No. 160501*

As I came to the end of the first year of this MFA, three important things happened that culminated in a methodological shift. Firstly, I realized *Passage No. 160501* for the May 2016 exhibition *After Great Pain a Formal Feeling Comes*, which was my first opportunity to finally realize an immersive work at its intended scale. And although this was in many ways a starting point, it also functioned as a conclusion of sorts – an execution of a work that I had long sought to realize. While the result strengthened my resolve to work towards certain experiential goals, and enabled me to

quickly jump to working at a large scale, it also liberated me from obsessing over a long-held goal. This brought a freedom, curiosity, and strong desire to push beyond my established ways of working. Secondly, at this time I wrote a paper entitled *Under the Microscope: A self-analysis of artistic methodology through the lens of artwork Passage No. 160501* for the *Methods in Practice-Based Research* graduate seminar led by Professor Barbara Balfour. This functioned as a self-psychoanalysis of sorts, probing to develop a greater consciousness of my otherwise subconscious methods. This consciousness in turn enabled me to think critically about my methodology, and identify areas that could benefit from being pushed further.

Thirdly, by the end of the first year of my MFA I had accumulated a significant amount of industrial felt offcuts and, as alluded to in the *Materiality* section, had come to learn how infinitely varied and unpredictable they are. To be specific, I can ask for an approximate thickness, colour, and compositional range, yet I never know exactly what the material will be like until I've taken possession of it. While most offcuts have one live edge, some are cut on both sides. Some strips are densely felted in an almost solid mass, while others are fluffy. There are offcuts that must be close to 60' long, while others are short and stubby. Some are cut to a wide 6" or 8", others a narrow 1" or 2" width. The only consistency is unpredictability. I have come to embrace this challenge, modifying my methodology and sculptural outcomes in response to this immensely varied material. Industrial felt offcuts have pushed me into an invaluable productive relinquishing of control.

I spent the first semester of the second year of my MFA immersed deeply in an intuitive methodology, engaging directly with the material, listening to it and teasing out its disposition through an exploratory, non-teleological process. This was a crucial shift in enabling me to move beyond my long established 'plan and execute' methodology. It has directed me towards a more responsive relationship with my material, and has given rise to new forms and techniques.





Image 9: End of first year MFA: Process of realizing *Passage No. 160501*



Image 10: End of second year MFA: Process of developing *Passage No. 170424*

The one work in my thesis exhibition that was created prior to this shift is *Passage No. 160501*. This artwork was developed through a process of planning using drawings and models, and then executing these plans. It relies upon a hidden aluminium frame as structural support, and uses felt that is cut with precision, meticulously ordered along its frame.

Three of the works that come after this shift, *Spheres No. 170409*, *Spiral No. 170412*, and *Enclosure No. 170419*, were created by direct engagement with my material. These did not involve a design then execute methodology – they were developed with immediacy in their sculptural form without prior planning. They are all made completely of industrial felt, using its own rigidity to support itself without relying on a complementary structural system. In *Spiral No. 170412* this relies on spiralling felt around itself, and in both *Spheres No. 170409* and *Enclosure No. 170419* I have developed a method of binding felt into solid dense spheres.

This process of creating bound spherical masses has become ubiquitous in my practice. It arose unexpectedly out of trying to create felt densities for an entirely unrelated reason: in an attempt to clear some space in my studio, I began rolling felt around itself, striving to consolidate the material into less space. In doing so I noticed the result was intriguing, and quickly saw that it was also structurally practical (it does not require a secondary support system), experientially resonant (the spheres create density, exaggerating the insulating and acoustic properties of the material), and formally expressive (as a geometrical form that arises directly out of the process of its making). This wrapping and binding the felt also embraces the great unpredictability of the offcuts; regardless of the width, thickness, density, presence of a live edge, or length, the material can be bound into a sphere.



Image 11: Preliminary felt spheres in Ellen Bleiwas' studio

There is a certain intuitiveness to wrapping a long strip into a sphere, and it is a process that can be seen in numerous instances. Sheila Hicks has used wrapping beautifully in her work (Image 12); surprisingly, this also initially arose out of a practical need to compact material:

In 1964, when I was leaving Mexico, and I had to pack compactly because I had accumulated many things... I began compacting in the packing. It seemed to me the way to get them all stuffed into one little wooden Mexican chest would (be to) wrap them. As I started to wrap them it was intriguing to be able to add colors and threads and thoughts and memories together. (...) I am not unusual in doing that. I've noticed through the years other people doing the same thing. So it must be a tendency that people have. (Hicks)



To me it is critical that this sphere is solid. The centre of the sphere cannot be falsified or filled with another material, as the form must honestly express the process through which it arose. Additionally, it is not just the aesthetic quality of the wrapped form that I am interested in, but rather the entirety of the nature of a solid felt sphere; its surprising heaviness, its scent, and the relationship between its density and its effects as an insulator.



Image 12: Sheila Hicks, *Grand Boules*, 2009, linen, cotton, synthetic raffia, metallic fibre, courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York. Photo: Jason Wyche. <http://kios.org/post/sheila-hicks-material-voices-opens-joslyn-art-museum-june-5th>. Accessed 10 Jan. 2017.

The fourth work in my thesis exhibition that came after this methodological shift is *Passage No. 170424*. This immersive piece draws upon the methods and material sensitivity gleaned through developing the above three sculptures, and due to its scale merges this process with methods of planning through drawing and models. It relies on a frame to create its structure, also in part due to its scale, but unlike the other immersive work in this exhibition (*Passage No. 160501*), its wood frame is not hidden. It is visible and integrated into the sculpture in a way that embraces its presence. Although developed through a process of planning, *Passage No. 170424* relinquishes control over its material, accounting for great variation and embracing a certain messiness.

## **Impetus: Human Experience**

The impetus behind my art practice is, at its core, experiential. My work is driven by a desire to enable a certain foundational experience. The elusive nature of such an experience, much like the nature of industrial felt, can be appreciated in referring back to Keller Easterling's notion of disposition. We recall her description, stating "disposition, as the unfolding relationship between potentials, resists... codification in favour of... practice", noting that an entity's disposition is "best understood by using it". Similarly, the nature of the foundational experience that my work strives to engender requires an unfolding that is best understood through examples. In developing this understanding, I draw upon my encounters with such experiences – what I call *weeping moments*, and the notion of the *haptic conceptual*.

### *Weeping Moments*

My initial awareness of the power of form to precipitate profound experience came through architecture. I have a decade long background in this discipline, having previously earned a Bachelor of Science in Architecture in 2007, and a Master of Architecture in 2010. This cultivated my deep appreciation for the experiential potential of space, which continues to underlie my artistic practice. Ricardo Castro, an Associate Professor at McGill University with whom I studied as an undergraduate student, referred to gut-wrenching spatial experiences as *weeping moments* – experiences that are viscerally overwhelming, at times to the point of triggering tears.

I have experienced weeping moments in select instances over the years. This has occurred with notable frequency at ancient sacred architectural sites, all of which share certain material, formal,



and experiential similarities. I will unpack one such encounter to gain insight into how ancient sacred architecture has informed my sculptural practice and the experiences that I seek to create.

Memorably, my first experience of a weeping moment caught me at a beehive tomb built around 1250 BC, the Treasury of Atreus in Mycenae, Greece (Image 13, 14). I approached this structure from a dirt road that ran perpendicular to its entrance, such that walking towards it I saw only a large hill. As I grew closer I began to see signs of a protrusion, and suddenly, at a right angle to my stride, an imposing pathway unapologetically cut straight into the side of the hill. This pathway was long and axial; a rigid and powerful rectilinear geometry flanked by huge stones penetrating an otherwise organic and unsuspecting landscape. It formed a strong perspectival view abutted by a tall stone wall with two stark geometrical openings: a vertically oriented rectangle serving as a massive door, and directly above that a large triangle. Behind these openings was darkness, hinting at an interior space beyond.

I was immediately struck, and found myself aligning my position with the pathway's central axis. I swiftly sketched this powerful perspective, seeking to grasp and internalize what was before me. I then walked the pathway, penetrating into the earth with my own body through an open tunnel that had been dug three millennia earlier. I approached the rectangular opening, and crossed through this framed threshold into a monumental, vast interior: a subterranean void that is circular in plan with a massive dome enclosure, excavated into the earth of the hill. This expansive, empty interior was completely enclosed by large stones, the only exception being the rectangular and triangular openings at the entrance through which light poured in. As my body moved through this space, my state of mind was altered. The passageway slicing into the hill acted as a tunnel between states of existence; a transitional space leading from a quotidian mortal world to a sacred space, a monumental enclosure containing vast emptiness.



Image 13: Treasury of Atreus, Exterior. Photo: Ken Russell Salvador. Photo: commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Treasury\_of\_Atreus\_Mycenae.jpg. Accessed 10 Jan. 2017.



Image 14: Treasury of Atreus, Interior. Photo: www.pinterest.com/pin/102597697738977265/. Accessed 10 Jan 2017.

This spatial experience informs my sensibilities and resonates strongly with my sculptural practice on numerous levels. Geometrically, I employ similarly simple Euclidian shapes, drawing on the stark power of the circle, square, and rectangle. The geometrical openings in the Treasury of Atreus echo the oculi in my sculptural work. Colouristically, while there is debate regarding the original colour schemes of ancient architecture from this time period, the ruins as I experienced them are monochromatic, their colour coming only from the light yellow of the stone itself. Similarly, I work monochromatically; and much like the stone, any colour in my work is inherent to the felt's materiality itself. Materially, the heaviness of the stone of this ancient architecture resonates with the weightiness of the thick industrial felt in my sculptural work. Both stone blocks and industrial felt are naturally derived and minimally processed materials, stone quarried from the earth and cut by hand, wool sheered from sheep and felted using pressure and water. Both the Treasury of Atreus and my sculptural works, while operating at exponentially different scales, are simultaneously monumental and humble in nature. This unusual combination arises out of a commanding scale and formal austerity, merged with unostentatious material integrity, basic geometries, and a certain minimalism that embraces simple powerful gesture and eschews superfluous ornament.

The weeping moment that the Treasury of Atreus precipitated grew from my *viscerally experiencing* this structure; its transformative power was communicated through a holistic embodied, lived, and contextualized experience. My sculptural work seeks to operate in a similar vein – rooted in visceral experience, and driven by an impetus to precipitate consciousness-shifting affective occurrences. In both the Treasury of Atreus and my sculptural work, this shift in state is evoked by physiological engagement of the human body with space and form. Passageways and enclosures are elemental in both cases. In the Treasury of Atreus, one walks through an open tunnel slicing into a hill, gradually becoming increasingly removed from the sensory stimulation of the quotidian world, finally leading to an enclosed interior space. This space is a void; the destination

is in fact empty. In my sculptural work I use gradual passage to lead to enclosure. One enters deeper and deeper into the work physically through passage of the body, sensorially through increasing insulation and sensory deprivation, and psychologically, triggered by this shift in physiological situation. This can be seen in *Passage No. 160501* and *Passage No. 170424*, both immersive works that a visitor gradually penetrates, finally leading to an ostensible destination – an empty enclosure containing nothing but a confrontation with oneself.

### *The Haptic Conceptual*

In creating sculpture that seeks to provoke reflection on the nature of one's selfhood through physiological and sensory experience, the notion of the *haptic conceptual* is fertile ground. Canadian philosopher Mark Kingwell coined this term in response to Iris Häussler's 2006 artwork *The Legacies of Joseph Wagenbach*, a now legendary immersive installation inside a Toronto house. He introduced the concept stating that this artwork "is an example of what we might label haptic conceptual art: the art of ideas that functions by way of immersion, even ravishment" (Kingwell, "The Legacies of Joseph Wagenbach"). Kingwell further developed upon this definition in a 2006 discussion at the Goethe-Institut Toronto, stating:

If you like we have almost a new category of art, the *haptic conceptual*, where the experience is profoundly physical and moving, where you feel it in your body, and it is at the same time a conceptual piece, a piece which forces one to reflect on the nature of art, the nature of one's experience of art, and finally, maybe most deeply, the nature of one's selfhood. (Kingwell, "Statement for Panel Discussion")

It is precisely in this way that my sculptural work seeks to operate, employing physiological experience that one feels in their body to trigger a shift in consciousness and depth of reflection. The sculptures in my thesis exhibition grow from this thrust. It is perhaps the two immersive works, *Passage No. 160501* and *Passage No. 170424*, that speak most directly to this notion of “the art of ideas that functions by way of immersion”. In both cases, an individual can enter and become completely subsumed by the work, walking through industrial felt to a tight interior space sized to accommodate only one person. This compact enclosure lends itself to solitude, which is heightened by the insulating nature of the material. This solitude in a highly tactile immersive form in turn lends itself to both a haptic experience that is profoundly physical, and a conceptual experience triggering reflection at a foundational level.

Two years after Kingwell developed the notion of the *haptic conceptual* in relation to Iris Häussler’s work, she realized a subsequent project, *He Named Her Amber*, at The Grange within the Art Gallery of Ontario. In a note given to visitors, Häussler referred back to this concept, and furthered it in stating:

It (the artwork) provides a participatory sense of discovery. This principal has been called *haptic conceptual art*, a practice that deals with deep questions of the human condition, but initiates them through direct experience, rather than through theoretical discourse. (100)

The notion of initiating deep questions of the human condition through direct experience resonates strongly with my practice. My sculptures reveal themselves through active exploration, only implicitly suggesting interaction, inviting individuals to engage as desired. As in Häussler’s work, my sculptures seek to initiate deep questions of the human condition through this direct experience.



In reflecting upon the haptic conceptual, I think of the work of Richard Serra, an artist who has had a profound impact on my sculptural sensibilities. I find his large steel sculptures function along the lines of Kingwell's definition of the haptic conceptual, operating as deeply moving and physical experiences that invoke a reflection upon the nature of art, one's experience of art, and one's selfhood. This can be seen at a monumental scale in *The Matter of Time*, a series of eight weathering steel sculptures on permanent display at the Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa (Image 15). These forms read as powerful minimalist gestures, commanding in their stark geometries and overwhelming material uniformity. Each sculpture is dominating in scale and can be explored by walking, oftentimes leading to a sense of disorientation. Much like at the Treasury of Atreus, my experience of navigating this work was visceral and profoundly physical; I found myself acutely aware of my own body and the space around me. This heightened physical sensitivity provoked a depth of reflection and self-awareness. Although I did not call it by this name at the time, I was experiencing the haptic conceptual in Serra's work. This experience was deeply informative, and resonates with the impetus behind my art practice to this day.



Image 15: Richard Serra, *The Matter of Time*, 1994-2005, Eight sculptures, weathering steel, variable dimensions, Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa. Photo: [www.guggenheim.org/artwork/21794](http://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/21794). Accessed 15 Feb 2017.

## Contemporary Urgency: The Power of Disjuncture

In considering the nature of experience that my practice seeks to engender, it is crucial to question why this experience might matter; what its relevance is, and how it contributes to and dialogues with its time. It seems to me that, while there is an underlying timelessness to this line of inquiry in its foundational experiential drive, there is simultaneously timeliness in the way aspects of this work relate and critically respond to the contemporary context. Specifically, certain aspects of my practice take a position that runs counter to its time – and it is precisely in this way that the work holds a contemporary urgency. In considering this relationship between a certain otherness and the contemporary, let us draw upon Giorgio Agamben.

In his 2007 text *What is the Contemporary*, Giorgio Agamben refutes the idea that “contemporary” could be synonymous with “current”. He draws upon Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations* (1874), in which Nietzsche situates his claim for contemporariness through his disconnection and “out-of-jointness” with the present, suggesting that to be *contemporary* is in fact to be *untimely* (10). As Agamben puts it, “those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands.” (11). This leads him to a definition of the contemporary, stating:

Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism. Those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect, are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it; they are not able to firmly hold their gaze on it. (11)

For Agamben, the contemporary is not simply the present. Rather, true contemporaneity resides in the capacity to gaze back at one's epoch, despite being inevitably immersed in it. This does not occur through perfect synchronization with one's time; in fact that uniformity prohibits one's gaze. Rather, the capacity to see one's time is enabled by critical distance, a vantage point that arises out of rupture, an out-of-jointness. Contemporaneity resides in adhering to one's time through a disjunction from that time.

Boris Groys speaks to this subject in his 2009 text *Comrades of Time*, articulating a similar perspective in a productively illustrative way:

To be con-temporary does not necessarily mean to be present, to be here-and-now; it means to be “with time” rather than “in time.” “Con-temporary” in German is “zeitgenössisch.” As Genosse means “comrade,” to be con-temporary – zeitgenössisch – can thus be understood as being a “comrade of time” – as collaborating with time, helping time when it has problems, when it has difficulties. (6)

This beautiful, simple image of the contemporary as a *comrade* of time – being *with* time rather than *in* time, and helping it when it has difficulties – poignantly illustrates a nuanced definition of the contemporary, beyond simply being in the present. A disjuncture from time is a comrade to time, its assistance arising from the perspective that an out-of-jointness brings. In a very practical way, the contemporary – a comrade of time – can assist the present through disjuncture, which in turn could precipitate critical dialogue and provide the foundations for change.



I recurrently find disjuncture to be at the core of the relationship between my sculptural work and its time. Key aspects of my practice take a position running counter to the predominant current, including its tactility and physicality, and its temporality.

As we established through the haptic conceptual, profound physical experience is a core element of my work. Currently, we are living through an age of digital revolution. Quotidian experiences that once invoked bodily engagement are increasingly digitized, spanning the gamut of activities including working, socializing, shopping, reading, and relaxing. This entails a shift in the way people engage with the world, and the role of physical experience. For example, drafting digitally entails sitting in one position at a desk, staring at a screen and moving only the eyes and a hand on a mouse; all drawing tools and surfaces are contained within that screen. Tactility and smell are eliminated, with all information existing as pixels behind glass. Drafting on paper is an embodied experience, involving the entire body in physically reaching parts of a sheet of paper or grabbing for tools; drawing a single line can engage one's entire torso in a twist. The tactility of the paper and one's drawing tools is ever-present, and one may even smell their ink or paper. To be clear, I do not recount this difference with nostalgia. Rather, I specifically seek to point out that one implication of mass digitization, in its current state, is a decrease in bodily movement, the prioritization of the visual, and an elimination of tactile and olfactory information. This mode of engagement nullifies the notion of embodied experience. It is in light of this digital era that the highly tactile and physical nature of my work operates from a position of disjuncture. The work begs to be physically engaged with: walked through, touched, and smelled. Rooted in visceral experience, my sculptures speak to the power of the embodied and the haptic. They nudge visitors towards a consciousness of this power through experiencing it in a concentrated context.

Temporality is another vital locus of this disjunction between my practice and its current context. In a culture that is predominantly oriented towards speed, my sculpture hinges upon slowness. As Lutz Koepnick reflects in the opening paragraph to his 2014 book *On Slowness: Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary*:

It has become commonplace to say that our age of electronic networks, global transactions, and rapid transportation technologies causes many to suffer from too much speed in their lives. We cook, eat, drink, and grow up too fast, it is claimed. We have become unable to enjoy the prolonged pleasures of a good story, a thoughtful conversation, or an intricate musical composition. Sex no longer relies on artful games of erotic suspension and delayed fulfilment. (...) Life is faster today than it has ever been before, it is concluded, but in accumulating ever more impressions, events, and stimulations we end up with ever less – less substance, less depth, less meaning, less freedom, less spontaneity. (18-17 pages (15 min) left in chapter - Introduction). (Note that this citation replicates Koepnick's pagination system, numbering according to the pages and minutes left in each chapter.)

In no uncertain terms, this is a scathing account of speed as the current dominant temporality. In response, Koepnick comes to propose an alternative: a nuanced definition of slowness. Slowness is considered on its own terms, not as the inverse of speed, but as a mode of being in its own right. It is an approach to temporality that arises in relation to its time, yet is simultaneously anachronistic with respect to the time. And indeed Koepnick explicitly states that it is his ambition to define slowness as a strategy of the contemporary, and specifies that by contemporary he does not mean a simple dual rejection of modernism and postmodernism. Instead, he calls upon Agamben's definition for the contemporary, and situates his definition of slowness in relation to it:

Echoing Agamben's notion of contemporaneousness, this book presents slowness as the most appropriate means in order to be at once timely and untimely today.

Slowness enables us to engage with today's culture of speed and radical simultaneity without submitting to or being washed over by the present's accelerated dynamics. (12 pages (10 min) left in chapter - Introduction)

Slowness in my practice operates in a similar way – not as the inverse of speed, but as a mode of being in its own right, simultaneously timely and untimely with the temporality of the present.

Slowness can be experienced most strongly in my sculptures as one enters them. As a visitor goes deeper and deeper into a space, along with a gradual shift in physiological situation, psychological state, and sensory information comes a gradual shift in temporality. One instance in which I have experienced this is walking into *Passage No. 160501*. As I approached the piece from the exterior I found my stride slowed when I became close enough to the material to recognize the variation on its surface. As I entered and walked towards its centre, my pace decreased drastically and progressively as I moved deeper into the work. This experience is not unique; observing visitors interact with the piece I noticed a similar slowing down in numerous instances.

This shift in temporality arises out of material and formal qualities of my sculptures. Materially, the soft, dense, insulating quality of the industrial felt has a certain decelerating affect. This is in part due to its acoustic muffling; the resultant deadening of sound engenders a sense of slowness, perhaps due to the decrease in sensory stimulation. The felt also stills air, resulting in a subtly oppressive thickness to each breath. It is a warming material, both psychologically and literally. My felt-filled studio is perceptibly less cool than the corridor just outside, and there is a warming

effect inside the thick felt enclosures of my sculptures. Felt's tactility also contributes to this slowing down, tempting a visitor to pause for a touch, and furthering slowness through strangeness, with its unusual combination of plush softness and abrasive fibres. The quantity of felt in my thesis exhibition and its overwhelming uniformity also affect one's sense of temporality. The monochrome sculptures are made from dozens or hundreds of similar strips of felt, creating large swaths of tonal fields, resulting in rhythmic repetition that comes together to form a uniform singularity. There is a trance-inducing quality to this repetition, and stillness to this uniformity.

Certain formal aspects of the sculptures reinforce this sense of slowness. The enclosures and pathways are tight spaces, oftentimes just large enough to allow one body to enter. This tightness necessitates slowness, as it is physically unfeasible to navigate quickly in a constricted space. Engaging with the sculptures inevitably leads to empty space, in this way removing any destination-driven goal from the work, with the "destination" being the passage itself. This non-teleological space gives way to non-teleological time; the time one spends in the piece is not "productive"; it is not goal driven. This space for unproductive time engenders a certain slowness that is out-of-joint with speed-culture's notion of time as productivity driven. As Groys describes, "under the conditions of our contemporary productivity-oriented civilization, time does indeed have problems when it is perceived as being unproductive" (6-7).

These material and formal facets of my sculptural practice engender a temporality of slowness in my work. In turn, this enables a heightened presence, awareness, and reflection. Combined with a strong haptic presence, the work confronts a visitor with potential alternatives to the predominant temporality and physicality of our time. In this way, slowness and tactility in my sculpture function as comrades of time, operating through disjuncture to, as Groys puts it, help the present when it has difficulties.

## Final Remarks

The exhibition *felt/felt* presents a series of interrelated sculptures, with each work contributing distinct material, formal, and experiential elements to an overall conversation. In this paper, I have examined how the works collectively explore a relationship between sensorial bodily experience and psychological state, shaping space and form to engender a shift in consciousness through physiological engagement.

This body of work has drawn upon the experiential potential of industrial felt, intimately exploring its disposition and utilizing its affective properties. The sculptures in this exhibition embody the visceral, insulating, tactile, and acoustic qualities imparted by their materiality. The felt's unpredictability has resulted in a generative negotiation between asserting and relinquishing control in the work, embracing inherent messiness while executing repetitive actions until process generates form. The forms that have arisen are based upon the simple stark geometries of circle and square, and have a certain minimal austerity in tension with the untamed felt.

The material, processes, and forms in this work are guided by an impetus to invoke a certain foundational experience. I have described this in relation to Mark Kingwell's notion of the haptic conceptual – provoking reflection on the nature of one's selfhood through physiological experience – and the weeping moment, using the Treasury of Atreus as an example. The temporality of slowness contributes to this experience, heightening presence and awareness.

On a final note, while these remarks recapitulate key insights, they are not intended to function as a conclusion per se. Instead of demarcating an end that neatly closes this body of work, they are offered as points from which to open up the work up, inviting further exploration.

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## Appendix A: Installation Images



Image 16: Installation view of exhibition *felt/felt*. Photo: Eva Kolcze



Image 17: Installation view of *Spiral No.170412*. Photo: Eva Kolcze





Image 18: Installation view of *Enclosure No. 170419* (left), and *Passage no. 170424* (right). Photo: Eva Kolcze

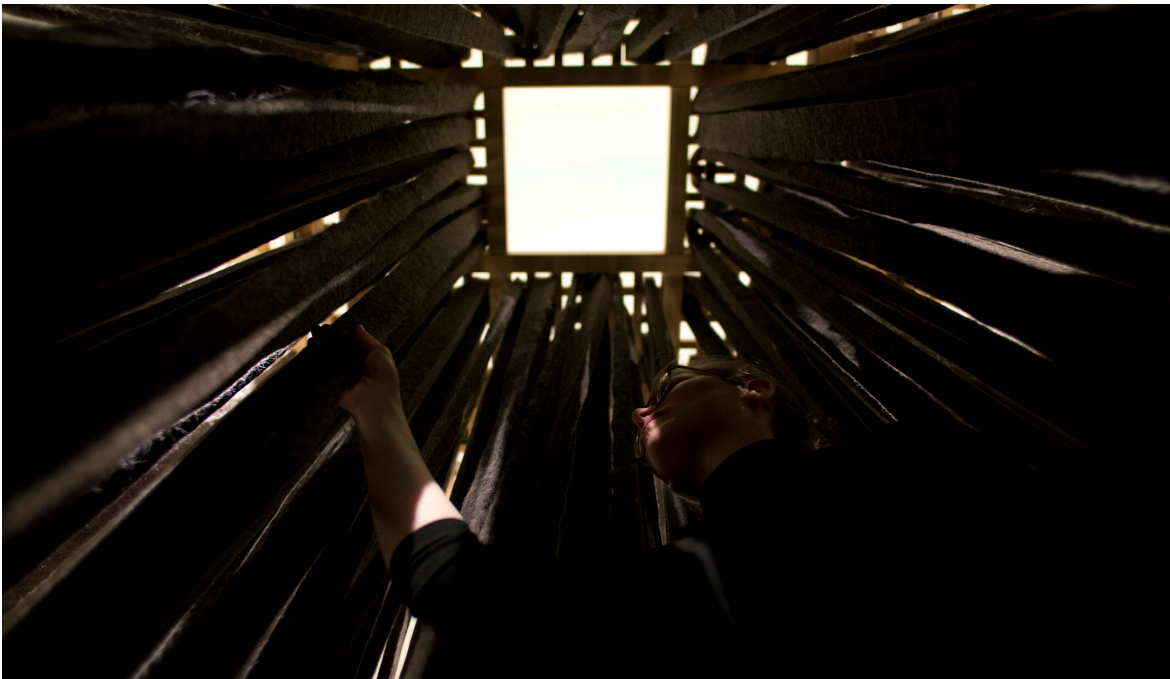


Image 19: Upward view inside *Passage No. 170424*. Photo: Eva Kolcze