

Assembly Required

Rewilding Space and Education Through Continuous Adaptive Practices

Jessie Young

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Abstract

Assembly Required is an interactive artwork that urges people to look a little closer at the spaces we live in and who we share them with. This paper outlines the research and development that brought this artwork to life. Using relational aesthetics - a branch of artistic practice that creates relationships between participants in experiencing artwork - to promote ecological awareness through an engaging project. *Assembly Required* mimics natural repetitive structures of the beehive and coral reefs and breaks them down into units to be endlessly produced and reformed into new structures. Participants are invited to collaborate by making these structures through workshops and a portable kit I created at the height of Covid-19, providing a hands-on educational experience.

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Introduction

The intention of this paper is to outline the research and development in creating my thesis exhibition titled *Assembly Required*. *Assembly Required* bridges my artistic and teaching practice and desire to create accessible educational artwork with a focus on the environment. This paper follows the evolution of this artwork starting with inspiration from the noble honey bee, George Monbiot's theory of rewilding, the endless potential of multiples, and relational aesthetics as a way to create interactive and educational artwork. Using these themes, I investigate ideas of space and ecological awareness, urging people to look a little closer at the environments we live in and who we share them with.

Practice: Teaching and Art

Teacher and artist, two significant parts of my life I have always tried to bridge. I have taught for over six years now, from Canada to Germany, Italy to Thailand and back again, different subjects, different places, different students, I loved the mobility of it all. Every situation had me on my toes, finding creative ways to translate information into accessible activities and lessons for numerous age groups, places, languages and backgrounds. To meet so many incredible people who needed more than what the current curriculum had designed for them. I found that students needed a more hands-on experience with what they were learning and there were few resources to help teachers create the lessons, activities and or assignments that would help these students. As a result, I began to develop lesson plans and projects for various subjects, but wanted to produce larger collaborative projects with potential for cross-curricular applications, incorporating curriculums from multiple subjects.

I worked on this goal separately from my artistic practice, not sure at first how and if I would be able to combine the two together. The goal seemed quite distant from my art,

especially since my artwork was focusing primarily on multiples and the environment. The link came later on, but I think it is imperative to explain the process and development that got me to that point, and the exhibition that captures these endeavours.

In my artistic practice I build environments that mimic structures that we do not notice, that lie in the foundations of our cities, homes, and or landscapes. Finding inspiration in masses made of individual components I build in units endlessly producing multiples and assemble these units into new structures and forms. I am inspired by infestations such as beehives and nests that contain naturally occurring patterns or adaptive structures and that both influence and ornament architecture. The modular nature of my work allows it to be produced or built onto at anytime, anywhere, making my work mobile and adaptive.

As a result, I have become fixated on forms and structures that are made of masses of individual units that grow over time without human interference. This explains my obsession with beehives. In a project I titled *Clusters* that began during my undergraduate degree, I created an artwork that intended to mimic this process of accumulation. Using ashwood I began to make hollow wooden hexagonal tubes that were 1.5 inches in diameter and varied in length, producing as many as I could. I then found an abandoned piece of furniture, a rather ordinary dresser, and began gluing each hexagonal tube into the dresser. Over the next few days these individual hexagonal units began to come together, forming a new structure within the preexisting dresser. The added hexagons both looked beautiful but also strengthened the original structure.



Figure 1, Installation photo of *Clusters*, 2019 at Gales Gallery

In exploring the expanding potential for these pieces I began further investigate their conceptual potential, what these pieces truly were and what they could be. I needed to investigate the properties of the hexagonal structure as an architectural product created by bees. I wanted to understand these natural building blocks, where they exist, and how they change the space around them. To begin this investigation I look to the creators of this shape and structure, the noble honey bees.

The Bees & Hives

The honeybee is considered noble due to it's many positive attributes including its work ethic and industrious nature, sense of community, selflessness, and instinctual architectural skill. It is not only the bee's traits that we celebrate but also the structure and size of the hives

they create. The structure of the hive physically embodies all these attributes while they are being created and eventually when they are abandoned or removed. These outstanding structures are built unit by unit, building from individual units into larger modular clusters that can continue without end. These formations combine geometry with fluid and organic design, making these natural designs a structure to be marveled.

We can see inspiration from bees, their hive and natural elements at large in many artistic and architectural works such as those designed by Antoni Gaudí. Gaudí is known for his whimsical architectural designs that mimic natural formations, but has scaled them to impossible sizes - which is very apparent in his designs of Palácio Güell and Basílica de la Sagrada Família. It is important to see how an architect visually adopts and adapts these patterns, what is changed or distorted from the original structures of inspiration. Gaudí's design seems to maintain the modular nature of the hive within his architecture, seen in the towers of Basílica de la Sagrada Família, and following the structure of the parabolic arch¹, having each tower seem to fluidly descend, as if it is a malleable wax structure instead of stone. The ornamentation of these towers are also a direct nod to the cumulative nature of the beehive, constructed with small round stones that mimic the hexagons of a hive to build up these giant towers that feature small repeated windows, much like the empty sections of the hive awaiting honey. Gaudí has managed to successfully merge the inspiration of the beehive with the functionality and necessary elements to create the basilica.

¹ Juan Antonio Ramirez. *The Beehive Metaphor from Gaudí to Le Corbusier* (London: Reaktion, 2000), 39.



Figure 3, Detail of Sagrada Família's hive-like towers

These hive-like characteristics exist beyond the construction and design of Gaudí's buildings and were also adopted into Gaudí's working model of other construction projects such as the factory project cited by Juan Antonio Ramirez:

We were contributing to the undivided estate small quantities which, when gathered together, allowed us to build a factory and after that nobody was able to impose conditions on us. - There can be no doubt that for Gaudí and his clients, enlightened

members of the working class, the beehive exemplified all the virtues of productive labour and solidarity.²

Ramirez outlines that it is not only accumulation of units or objects, but accumulation of people, a shared purpose that brings everyone together and strengthens that purpose, which I believe can also strengthen the structure. This will be addressed further in the section “Community Involvement”.

It seems that to truly implement these aspects of design one must integrate the characteristics of the bee into practice. As seen with the work of Gaudí, artists and architects are looking for inspiration from the bees, the original architects of this modular design, combining industrial materials into the formations established and appropriated from creatures and natural occurrences that have designed these. As creatives adopt these designs and methods they are not only directly referencing the bees but they are celebrating these natural structures by reentering them into a new urban cityscape.

Rewilding the Cityscape: Space, Ecological Awareness and Adaptation

The more urban environments have become, the further they are distanced from the natural world. But by reintegrating natural elements into our constructed environments we become aware of their importance within our ecosystems and inspiration for design. In investigating Gaudí’s work, we can see the integration of natural patterns directly into the design of his buildings, putting natural elements into the city but still as human-made structures. The question remains where do the original structures that inspired them go? We see these artistic

² Ramirez, *The Beehive Metaphor from Gaudí to Le Corbusier*, 44.

interpretations of these natural structures and the idealized characteristics of their creators but the real structures are nowhere to be found.

This begs the question of who is able to use these urban spaces. Timothy Morton explains in an article titled “We Have Never Been Displaced” as a criticism on how we, as humans, have come to interpret and use space. The article as a whole explains the idea of “space” and who controls it, then how our perceptions change and adjust to the controller’s guidelines. Since we experience space mainly as human construction, being bound by human plans, human measurements, and human categorizations we then miss space as defined by others³. This could include humans removing or changing things within “their space” that affects other beings to comply or be eradicated with this anthropocentric agenda. This removal or destruction of the unnoticed and or undesirable use of space further distances nature from the city, creating a divide between humans and other creatures. Timothy Morton explains that the concept of ecological awareness and how it collapses space:

That concept (Ecological Awareness) had to do exclusively with human places. What we are coming to realize is that human places exist within and alongside thousands and thousands of nonhuman places, overlapping, intersecting, interpenetrating with “our” place⁴.

This separation of human and non-human space further distances us, humans, from the environment that surrounds us, and others that cohabitate with us. Space becomes territorial and we then risk losing an ecologically diverse environment, negatively affecting the space itself over time: “Environmental disconnection is a perennial concern of modern life: a concern that is

³ Timothy Morton. “We have never been displaced,” *Olafur Eliasson: Reality Machines*, 2015, <https://olafureliasson.net/archive/read/MDA117977/we-have-never-been-displaced-by-timothy-morton#slideshow>.

⁴ Morton, “We have never been displaced.”

constantly being re-imagined and re-discovered - a growing awareness on the diverse impacts of 'cultural severance' from the local environment and from nature more generally"⁵.

We can see instances of this when a species is completely removed from a specific geographic region. One of the best-known examples of this is the eradication of the wolf population in Yellowstone National Park. Wolves originally lived on the land that became Yellowstone National Park, when people began to move into the land they began hunting the wolves, until the last in 1920⁶. Since then the elk population grew exponentially, overgrazing the park and destroying young trees and plant life that covered the park and prevented water from aggressively eroding the land⁷. Eventually the entire landscape had changed because humans had killed all of the wolves from the space they decided to occupy. This territorial mindset and implications of cultural severance had further reach than first imagined.

What was the solution? - To bring back the wolves. In 1995 biologists released eight Canadian grey wolves into the park⁸, hoping that by bringing back what had been destroyed, the landscape would then follow, and sure enough it did. Although it is still up for debate whether the reintroduction of the wolves is the sole reason for this, after they repopulated Yellowstone it did create a "ripple of direct and indirect consequences throughout the ecosystem"⁹. With the wolves back, the elk were hunted once more, leading to an overall decrease of the elk population and change in grazing patterns (in attempts to avoid the wolves), which lead to a

⁵ Alastair Bonnett, *The Geography of Nostalgia* (Routledge: Abingdon, 2016), 49.

⁶ Tori Pagar, "1995 Reintroduction of Wolves in Yellowstone," Yellowstone National Park Trips, accessed February 27, 2020, <https://www.yellowstonepark.com/park/yellowstone-wolves-reintroduction>.

⁷ George Monbiot. *Feral: Rewilding the Land, the Sea and Human Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014) page#.

⁸ Pagar, "1995 Reintroduction of Wolves in Yellowstone."

⁹ Brodie Farquhar, "Wolf Reintroduction Changes Ecosystem in Yellowstone," Yellowstone National Park Trips, accessed February 27, 2020, <https://www.yellowstonepark.com/things-to-do/wolf-reintroduction-changes-ecosystem>.

resurgence of plant life (that was devastated by the elk), bringing back other animals to Yellowstone who depended on these plants, and so on¹⁰. This experiment brought back a more diverse ecosystem due to the reintroduction of the natural element that had been lost or destroyed; a process that was later renamed “rewilding” which can be seen as an active response to ecological awareness. Ecologist George Monbiot describes rewilding as such:

The rewilding of natural ecosystems is not an attempt to restore them to any prior state, but to permit ecological processes to resume. - It attempts to prevent animals and plants from either leaving or - if they do not live there already - entering. It seeks to manage nature as if tending to a garden. - Rewilding recognizes that nature consists not just of a collection of species but also of their ever-shifting relationships with each other and with the physical environment.”¹¹

This definition of rewilding reveals the dependence of both humans on nature and nature with humans. Continuing to use Yellowstone as an example we see that the eradication of the wolf population was due to human interference, humans moved into the park and killed the entire wolf population, it started the cascading effects that followed. Although humans had caused the initial problem they had also attempted to reverse the effects by bringing back part of the ecosystem that had disappeared, by interference. What has to be realized within the concept of rewilding is that there is no way to go back to the previous state of nature, but the strength lies in acknowledging its needs and adapting in order to prevent it from further decline.

We can see an example of rewilding within urban areas after the rapid decline in the bee population over the past decade. There has been an annual hive loss of 30% or higher in the United States alone¹², a concerning statistic for a crucial pollinator within North American ecosystems. Acknowledging this decline and its dire implications on our ecosystems on both a

¹⁰ Farquhar, “Wolf Reintroduction Changes Ecosystem in Yellowstone.”

¹¹ Monbiot, *Feral*, 8-9.

¹² Eliabeth Grossman, “Declining Bee Populations Pose a Threat to Global Agriculture,” Yale Environment 360, April 30, 2013, https://e360.yale.edu/features/declining_bee_populations_pose_a_threat_to_global_agriculture.

national and international level, humans are beginning to rewild the cityscape by changing our environments to better facilitate a growth in the bee population. Specifically, in Toronto, urban beekeeping has grown exponentially, spreading awareness of this issue on how to properly keep bees. With this, urban beekeeping has actually transformed areas of the city, making space for the hives to exist on roofs of buildings, parks, greenhouses and providing a space for the bees to thrive in otherwise human oriented space.

Urban rewilding does not aim at the restoration of any notional 'original nature' in urban landscapes, because it recognizes the uniqueness of urban nature shaped by enmeshed human and natural forces. Instead it attempts the integration of wild habitats throughout the city. - It would challenge perceptions of wild vegetation in cities: to make visible the culturally invisible beauty of wilderness in the city.¹³



Figure 4, Bee Hotel atop the roof of the Fairmount Royal York Hotel

The act of rewilding has made us more ecologically aware of the space that we share with other non-humans and finding creative ways to adapt to current circumstances and preserve our ecosystem. By allowing these structures and creatures to occupy the space we have deemed

¹³ Gwen Heeney, ed., *The Post-Industrial Landscape as Site for Creative Practice: Material Memory* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 98-99.

our own we can begin to counter cultural severance through rewilding and allow us a deeper connection to the space and who we share it with.

Ecological awareness is the first and vital step towards preserving our ecosystem. In doing so we then stop making decisions about the space we occupy, this space that we recognize as solely human, and begin to let other creatures and plant life have their say, to grow, to build, to habitate, to cohabitate. This is where we improve each other's designs, to enrich each other's work. To gravitate away from viewing the other inhabitants in "our space" as infestations and viewing them as essential contributors to our space and a larger part of our ecosystem.

Monbiot highlights within rewilding how wolves or large predators create a rippling effect throughout the entire ecosystem. The wolves are important, but so are the deer and the plant life that make the ecosystem. Every living thing, whether the smallest insect or the toughest weed, these are what define and enrich the places we live.

Since these plants endured the twentieth century, investigating their history helps characterize ecology in cities. As they arrived, thrived, and died, just plants contributed to the development of metropolitan landscapes by contributing to how cities felt, looked, smelled, and sounded. They influenced how people experienced growing, changing, and deteriorating cities. Moreover, the ecological dynamics created by hostility toward them continue to shape urban environments and places beyond.¹⁴

These plants, structures, and creatures define the areas we live, so why are we so quick to eradicate them or simply unaware of the absence? Noticing and integrating these designs back into the cityscape or through other practices we can begin to rewild - through ecological awareness.

¹⁴ Falck, Zachary J.S. *Weeds: An Environmental History of Metropolitan America*. University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, PA; 2010. 5.

Rewilding does not only have to apply to actively restoring wilderness, it also has the potential for much farther-reaching applications. Theorist Dolly Jørgensen explains how rewilding has been enthusiastically accepted and then appropriated for purposes other than what Monbiot had first intended. Jørgensen fears that rewilding has become a “plastic word”, a term coined by German linguist Uwe Poerksen to describe “words developed in scientific language for discrete ideas that then move into daily use and take on different meanings according to the context”¹⁵. The fear is that the word “rewilding” will lose its meaning if disconnected from its origin, but would this thwart further progress that could be made?

This idea of a flexible word I believe gives an exciting opportunity for rewilding to become a beneficial term and influence different subjects other than the scientific field. This does not mean that Monbiot’s definition of rewilding changes but expands to incorporate it into other practices. My immediate thought was for its potential applications to art and education, using art and education to positively reinforce rewilding practices. This takes time, and repetition so I once again think of the beehive.

Making Multiples

The beehive to me is a poetic and physical symbol of repetition and labour all of which I have slowly accepted and adopted into my practice. Although these concepts mimic those of the bee, they go beyond them. These instances of repetition and labour are the main focus of my work and can be applied to other formations and inspirations beyond those from the natural world. Repeated forms have always been mesmerizing to me. They are a way to push a single form past its limits and stretch it beyond a single instance. Working with repetitions forces me to make objects that are fairly simple in design that are able to be replicated in a number of

¹⁵ Jørgensen, Dolly. “Rethinking Rewilding”. 8.

mediums. I achieve this by both studying the form itself as well as the limits of the materials explored through this process, testing and experimenting with material properties on how to make each unit. It is helpful to investigate artists who evoke different properties of multiples within their artwork, mainly the potential for different forms in new spaces, the symbolic representation of invested time and labour, and the individuality of each created multiple.

In making multiples there also lies a unique opportunity for infinite possibilities in how to present these units. The more multiples that are produced, the more units there are to place within the installation, therefore the more formations are possible to occupy spaces. For example, Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds* (2010) is an artwork comprised of millions of hand painted ceramic sunflower seeds that covered the floor of the Turbine Hall in the Tate Modern¹⁶. This is the installation that most people are familiar with, but the artwork was also installed in another formation, in a large circular pile resembling the sands that settle at the bottom of an hourglass. Both installations feature multiples of the sunflower seeds but are placed in a way that adapts to the space available, whether long and shallow on their own or a room surrounded by other artwork. This versatility is one of the reasons I find multiples so intriguing.



Figure 5, Installation photo of Ai Wei Wei's *Sunflower Seeds* at the Tate Modern

¹⁶ Tate Modern. "The Unilever Series: Ai Wei Wei: Sunflower Seeds". 2010. <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series/unilever-series-ai-weiwei-sunflower-seeds>.



Figure 6, Installation photo of Ai Wei Wei's Sunflower Seeds at the Tate Modern

By adapting to the space available, each time the multiples are installed it is new and exciting. It creates more of a potential for ever mobile installations in a variety of forms, sizes and or locations.

In talking about multiples, I think it is imperative to speak first of the repetition of gestures. In creating multiples the maker is partaking in the repetition of gesture, the same series of actions over and over while making the specific objects. In doing this I think of Kelly Mark's *In and Out, 1997-2032* where Mark documents the single gesture of keeping track of her "working hours" using an old punch clock¹⁷. This simple gesture marks time itself, the documentation of when Mark has begun work to finish work each day until the age of 65, the average retirement age. Although seemingly small gestures, over time they accumulate to become much more, a documentation of a persistent routine that make up major milestones within a life, all represented through a punch hole. To Mark, the punch hole represents the invested labour and time, for me labour and time are represented through each and every unit of a multiple.



Figure 7, Installation photo of Kelly Mark's *In and Out* at Network Centre for Contemporary Art

Each handmade unit adds to the multiple, but the beautiful thing is among the hundreds and potentially thousands that are produced, each still remains an individual unit. Every subtle change in mark, residue, colour or stain contribute to each unit's identity, even if a viewer cannot decipher these differences upon first look the multiples reward those who spend the time

¹⁷ Laura Kenins, "Work in Progress," *The Coast*, May 29, 2008, http://kellymark.com/IP_InAndOut_WR2.html

and look a little closer. Rachel Whiteread is one particular artist who uses multiples as a way to create variation. Whiteread experiments with a variety of materials surrounding mold making such as resin, concrete, gypsum, and rubber; although mold making is associated with making replicas and copies, Whiteread focuses on making individual units through multiples.

Through her consistent use of the casting process she has expanded its boundaries as a sculptural method, and altered perceptions of its potential beyond that of a mere reproductive technique.¹⁸

In her earlier work *One Hundred Spaces* (1995), Whiteread made one hundred individual sculptures of the space underneath one hundred different chairs where each multiple stands as an individual. Made using molds to help the speed and accuracy of production, each multiple still remains unique, whether through colour, positioning or residue these pieces feel as though a collection of individuals, not as merely a replication. Each piece is vital to the overall artwork and the accumulation of each new unit only adds to the diversity of the installation.



Figure 8, Rachel Whiteread's *One Hundred Spaces* at the Tate Modern

¹⁸ Gallagher, Ann and Molly Donovan. *Rachel Whiteread*. Tate Publishing, London; 2017. P10

I still believe that even with such a vast range of outcomes and choices within making multiples there remains limitations when one person produces everything. I've previously outlined the incredible potential multiples possess for variety in form, individuality, visual range from colour or material, to picking up any slight changes during the making process; and it occurred to me how many more possibilities there could be if I wasn't the only one making them.

Community Involvement: An Educational Experience

In Andrew Burton's *Making Bithooras*, an exhibition that took place at the National Craft Museum in Delhi, India in the spring of 2011, he collaborated with a group of women from Ghitoni Village in the south of Delhi consisting of Panna Devi, Keso, Shiv Devi, Lakshmi, Bhagmati, Sharman, Vidya and Pushpa, who are traditional Bithooras makers¹⁹. Bithooras are temporary cow-dung fuel stores with the appearance of a small clay dwelling but made up of thousands of individually patted disks of dung arranged into a halved egg-like form featuring patterns and designs engraved into the surface. The emphasis of this exhibition is not just the collaborative properties but the importance of each individual unit that is and or will be incorporated into the larger structures. This exhibition is possible due to each person contributing hundreds to thousands of small units for one purpose. One crucial note to make is that making Bithooras is a pre-existing traditional practice that has been passed down to women through generations, preserving the tradition. Therefore we are witnessing an artist adopting a traditional practice from specific artisans from communities.

¹⁹ Heeny, *The Post-Industrial Landscape as Site for Creative Practice: Material Memory*, 106.



Figure 9, Process photo of *Making Bithooras*



Figure 9, Final installation photo of *Making Bithooras*

Reaching out to the community in which this exhibition took place helped incorporate more people into the construction of the structure so it could grow linearly, not only in size but in

acknowledgement. Having a hand directly in making provides an opportunity for people to connect to the piece, not just understanding how it is made but actively contributing to the project. There is something special about that connection that could come from any object, but by bringing people together for this can form a certain sense of kinship to each other, collectively contributing to a structure that builds on forms made by each and every person. Even if these structures are temporary, the memory of the experience persists as well as documentation of what can be achieved.

Although this exhibition is showcasing the craft, it does not allow for non-professionals to contribute or to learn and pass on this craft, which seems counterintuitive to the idea of sharing and passing down the knowledge of this craft.

Relational Art

In thinking about the modular nature of my practice and the labour and time required to produce units, I'm reminded of Gaudí's working model, and the community that was created through making an artwork. Forming community to create an artwork using knowledge or craft passed on from others, these are traits that define Relational Aesthetics. Relational Aesthetics, or relational art which I will refer to it as, are works that:

Seek to establish intersubjective encounters (be these literal or potential) in which meaning is elaborated *collectively* rather than privatized space of individual consumption. Relational art sets up situations in which viewers are not just addressed as a collective, social entity, but are actually given the wherewithal to create a community, however temporary or utopian this may be.²⁰

This is all to say that the projects center around a communal experience, giving the potential for interaction (whether it happens or not) that becomes the art instead of a specific art object.

Relational Aesthetics, or Relational Art, can then be described as a happenstance performance

²⁰ Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (October 1, 2004): 54.

art involving viewers turned participants/performers, known or unknown to them, engaging and interacting with the space together. Relational art becomes a more active, physically involved engagement with art rather than art presented in “an independent and private symbolic space”²¹ such as modern galleries. Relational art provides a space for a concept to be discussed, challenged, manipulated, dismantled or constructed and allows for play. In this way, relational art seemingly transforms space into an artist’s utopia, even if it is only temporarily.

This participatory approach allows for the artwork to become a shared experience for people engaging with the artwork and with each other. This was the gallery’s original intention according to Silke Arnold de-Simine. Arnold de-Simine explains the changing role of the gallery from a space of production and learning to a place of habitual gaze: “The museum is still considered a site of the production of knowledge and cultural sensibilities, a shared local space, but over the course of the last century it has been heavily criticized for petrifying and decontextualizing living traditions”²². This state of the gallery prevents the viewer from fully engaging with both the work and the artists, isolating the viewer from the context and history needed to fully understand its production and intention. Although this may add prestige or mystery to art objects that enter into the white cube, there is little accessibility to the knowledge or research that the work derives from, leaving viewers to their own separate interpretations rather than a shared space of knowledge, community and identity that galleries once were. Relational art attempts to dismantle this idea of what the gallery has become by bringing it back to its original intention as space dedicated to the production and passing of knowledge while building local communities through art. In a way this could be seen as rewilding the gallery and actively countering cultural severance.

²¹ Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 54.

²² Silke Arnold de-Simine, *Mediating Memory in the Museum: Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 7.

Relational artworks are commonly presented as works in progress, laboratories, construction sites, ruins, factories²³, as an area in constant flux and motion creating transient spaces that welcome human interaction and showcase this evidence. Caroline A. Jones uses the terms “laboratory” and “art factory” to describe Studio Olafur Eliasson, a well-known Berlin-based Studio that produces a variety of relational artwork. This laboratory, or studio, prides itself on the production of knowledge, collecting information from resident researchers of the studio where this knowledge then becomes materialized and turned into a tangible experience for viewers:

Eliasson’s insistence on the studio is one crucial element that his work needs to be seen in the context of research and other relations. The works fabrication, the embodied experience they require, and Eliasson’s efforts to shape his own discourse are all part of production.²⁴

In revealing the process of the artwork and refraining from hiding it’s components and time invested in creating it, viewers are able to look at the work and begin to understand how this piece came to be. Instead of marveling at a facade of work they get to see the innerworkings, giving an emphasis to the labour involved in the creation and having the process of the artwork as one of the main components.

Several artists, including myself, have gravitated towards relational aesthetics as a way to highlight the processes involved in creating artwork and sharing that with those who come to see. The following are some examples of exhibitions by artists Urs Fischer, Rikrit Tiravanija, and Scott Campbell who used relational aesthetics to showcase their practices in a new light. Fischer’s self-titled show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, 2013, invited

²³ Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 52.

²⁴ Caroline A. Jones, “The Server/User Mode: Caroline A. Jones on the Work of Olafur Eliasson,” *Artform International*, 2007, <https://olafureliasson.net/archive/read/MDA104318/the-server-user-mode-by-caroline-a-jones>.

1,500 people to drop in and sculpt clay figures that filled the open warehouse, creating an industrial sculpture garden.



Figure 11, Urs Fischer's clay sculpture garden at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art

In Tiravanija's *Untitled (Free)*, 1992 at The Paula Art Gallery in New York, he cooked Pad Thai for gallery goers.



Figure 12, Rikrit Tiravanija's *Untitled (Free)* at the Paula Art Gallery

Campbell, a tattoo artist, took over the lobby gallery at Milk Studios in New York and cut a hole in the wall that allowed a few individuals to stick their hand through to be tattooed with an undetermined design.



Figure 13, Scott Campbell's *Whole Glory* at Milk Studios

All these exhibitions are examples of relational art, and the bizarre and unconventional interactive situations that it embodies, but there remain several flaws with these exhibitions. Claire Bishop explains several issues acknowledging this idyllic nature of this model. The main issues include: the dependency on gallery space, the people who engage with the artwork, and the parameters and rules determined by galleries and other institutions on how to interact with the artwork. Even though these are decisions made by the artists when designing their exhibitions I still believe that this dependency on gallery space is where the major fault lies with relational aesthetics. Much work of relational artists, such as Urs Fischer, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Scott Campbell, bring practices that are not often exhibited within a gallery, but being seen as interactive artwork allows it access into the gallery spaces.

All the artists above are dependent on the use of recognized gallery spaces in order to show their work. Although, yes, it is art and is allowed to be viewed in a gallery space, I argue it relies too heavily on this space to provide context for these interactive performances to be distinguished as fine art. For instance, if Tiravanija cooked pad thai at a restaurant it would not have the same impact and may be regarded as an ordinary act of cooking rather than an “artistic production with an ethic of social engagement”²⁵. All other factors remain the same but without spatial contextualization we do not make the same connections. This can be applied to other relational artists including Campbell and Fischer. The space of the gallery immediately transforms any item, any gesture into art, but without these borders we may not make the same distinction. This is where the dependency is created. These spaces also limit who and how many people are allowed to experience these exhibitions, often being those who already frequent these creative spaces, making them rather exclusive. This goes directly against relational arts’ focus on community and openness.

²⁵ “Rirkrit Tiravanija,” The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, accessed February 19, 2020, <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/rirkrit-tiravanija>.

Theorist Nicolas Bourriaud explains the model of relational art to be a “microtopia” that is “predicated on the exclusion of those who hinder or prevent it’s realization”²⁶. In my view this is another fault, that the “utopian” idea must be maintained, meaning all participants must completely accept and engage, for this piece to be successful. This leaves no room for constructive criticism, debate or spontaneity and censors a participant’s reactions in order to preserve the microtopia. This is where I see relational art as stale, part of a scripted event with restrictive responses, not the organic experience that was intended.

After reviewing the pros and cons it’s clear to see that relational art has good intentions but remains flawed due to institutional dependencies and exclusive tendencies. However, I believe that it seems to be the strongest candidate to rewild modern galleries as a space of knowledge production and community building. By breaking away from these defined spaces I believe it could thrive as a new form of educational experience and collaborative artwork, that is what I am attempting to do with my exhibition *Assembly Required*.

Implications of Covid-19

Adaptability has become a core of my practice and of this exhibition in many ways. Having to adapt to the outline of the Master’s program, writing styles, deadlines, criticisms and most of all, unpredictable circumstances.

For two years I had been working on developing an installation using the wooden hexagonal tubes that were intended to be completely interactive and educational, allowing participants to engage directly with material while learning about the project and collaborating with others in installing and creating work which I facilitated. I had planned to channel my

²⁶ Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 68.

practice into relational aesthetics, as a stream of fully interactive artwork that merges art with other practices to provide a unique and educational experience, turning the gallery space from a space I felt distanced viewers from the work into a space where viewers turn into participants and makers.

With the emergence of Covid-19 and the quick closure of non-essential facilities and buildings and immediate recommendations to isolate ourselves and remain distanced for the foreseeable future, the idea of creating a participatory hands-on artwork quickly became an impossibility. Though in unpredictable times it is necessary to adapt to change and put my practice into practice.

Having been isolated from my studio and materials I began to search for new ways to create within the confines of my one-bedroom apartment and a fire escape. With restriction of space and access to materials I began to draw, something I had not done for a very long time, but found myself more interested by the paper rather than the drawing. The paper I had ranged in size, colour, weight, thinness, thickness, opacity, strength, feel; it felt sculptural, so I began to sculpt. I would make one shape using a simple gesture such as rolling, folding, crumpling, pinching, twisting, etc., and then repeat that shape multiple times before attaching them together, forming a little cluster. They were so natural looking, reminding me of corals and their boundless shapes and sizes and how the paper seemed to mimic these qualities.

I wanted to push the individuality of each coral and be more environmentally conscious, thinking back to actively becoming more ecologically aware of where this purchased paper was coming from. So I taught myself how to make paper from used or recycled paper and materials that I had on hand. The technique, which I learned from a friend, was relatively simple; gather paper, tear to bits, soak in water, blend, add to a bin with water, dip in a stretched screen, lift it

out and leave to dry, a simple repetitive process. I then began to create my own paper using paper found within my apartment, finding old notes, bills, packaging, drawings, etc. The paper became a reflection of myself, past things in my life being repurposed into my current artwork. My favourite part of the paper was seeing how different each paper was, variations of colour, texture, opacity, little flecks of paper that hadn't blended with the rest, a few words that survived the blend, no two were ever alike, becoming the perfect material to make multiple individual and unique corals.



Figure 14, Process of making a coral sculpture and the final sculpture



Figure 15, Contributed coral sculptures from various participants

Continuing to make paper and corals I began to hone my technique and simplify it, making clear and concise instructions with the intention to pass on this craft to others. I wanted

to bring relational aesthetics into this artwork and get back to teaching, something I missed dearly. I wanted others to be able to participate in this artwork, firstly to have an educational and creative activity to do in the safety of their homes, where most time was being spent due to recommendations for social isolation. Secondly I wanted to increase the potential of both the paper and the corals by inviting people to bring their individuality into making a cluster of multiples that became an individual coral unit.

It only occurred to me then that this new artwork could be my new thesis exhibition. It is then that the new idea, a more mobile and adaptive artwork took form to which I named *Assembly Required*.

Assembly Required

Assembly Required consists of 2 artworks, *Reef(assembly required)* and *Hive(assembly required)*, both working together to embody my research and practice.

Reef(assembly required) is an ongoing large-scale interactive installation made of hundreds of paper coral sculptures. These sculptures are meticulously made using recycled, handmade paper to make each coral completely unique. Each coral is made by making multiples of one shape or gesture that are grouped together to create one coral cluster. These corals can take a multitude of forms and grow to any size, creating an endless potential of forms before coming together to create a reef of individual corals made by myself and those who have participated.

This project both adapts to space and to the current restraints due to Covid-19, aiming to bring people together during a time of isolation through art and education. I designed this project

so it can be done remotely, creating a portable kit containing everything needed to participate that can be delivered to your door.



Figure 16, "Coral Kit" contents

The kit includes five handmade screens, a bowl, a pair of scissors, a hot glue gun, a pack of glue sticks directions for the participant to make their own recycled paper and prompts on how to turn that paper, or any paper for that matter, into their very own coral sculpture. The prompts describing how to make the coral sculptures are intentionally vague, leaving them open to interpretation and allowing for a larger potential of forms and sculptures to be created. Once the participant has made their paper and coral sculptures they are instructed to repack the kit and notify me so I may collect the kit along with coral sculpture to add it to the growing reef amongst the other accumulated sculptures produced by other participants and myself. After the sculpture and kit is collected, it is disinfected thoroughly before being delivered to a new participant. This mobile project and travelling kit has made it possible to still engage with people and make relational artwork even in isolation.



Figure 17, Producing paper using the “Coral Kit”

Each coral sculpture I received was completely unique and better than I could’ve imagined. Each coral was made up of multiple individual units put together into a coral cluster, even if one was made using the same technique, size, shape or colour would vary making each a complete individual.

I moved from studio space and gallery in Toronto to my family home in Russell, Ontario, and here was where the exhibition would take place. It came to me like a fever dream (not Covid I assure you), I needed a space to infest, a space that I could access at any time, a space where I could hold workshops, where people could come and interact, to participate, and I thought of home. Home, where I had not taught before. Home, where there was a spacious backyard where people could come even with Covid-19 restrictions. Home, where there was a lonely shed waiting to be infested. From losing all access to facilities including my studio and a gallery space to adapting and becoming more mobile this artwork was now possible.

I developed a lesson plan following the same process used within the kits, but instead of remote participation I opened my home to friends and family who could come and join in. I scheduled small groups over two weeks where I held daily workshops. Each workshop commenced following the lesson plan seen below.

Homemade Paper and Coral Making Lesson	
Teacher: Jessie Young Subject: Art	Grade: 3-12 Time: 2 classes, 90min each, 180min total
LEARNING EXPECTATIONS: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the concept “Ecological Awareness” and its implications within this artwork • For participants to make their own paper • For participants to make their own coral sculptures using repetitive forms 	
SUCCESS CRITERIA/EVALUATION <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants are able to explain what “Ecological Awareness” is • Participants have followed the Paper Making instructions and made a minimum of 5 full sheets of paper without tearing • Participants have created a minimum of 1 3-dimensional coral cluster made using 1 repeated shape or action. 	
LEARNING GOALS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To learn about “Ecological Awareness” and space • To learn about form through repetition and shape • To learn about collaboration and working with other participants • To learn about our carbon footprint when making and a new way to recycle 	

Instruction	
Day 1 30min	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Take participants outside and walk around and note down things that they see, whether written or just in their head. Once everyone has found at least five things, come back together and have everyone list a few things. 2. Introduce the concept of “Ecological Awareness”: <p><i>Ecological Awareness is the act of noticing those that share space with you and understanding the impact of our actions on the ecosystem around us.</i></p> <p><i>In raising awareness of creatures and formations that share the spaces we live in we can begin to preserve our diverse ecosystem</i></p> 3. Ask again for everyone to look and see again if there were things that were missed, draw specific attention to creatures, weeds, nests, burrows that may be found in the area everyone

	<p>is in. Then return to instruction space.</p> <p>4. Introduce <i>Reef (assembly required)</i>:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">About this Project</p> <p><i>Reef (Assembly Required)</i> aims to bring people together during a time of isolation through art and education. I designed this project to fit into a kit that can be delivered straight to your door, with everything you need to be able to participate. Once you have completed the activity you can put all the items back into the kit where I collect, clean and then pass it onto someone new, so more people can continue to contribute.</p> <p>This kit contains an activity to learn how to make your own recycled paper, and directions on how to turn that paper or any paper into an individual coral sculpture that will be a part of the larger collaborative artwork. After you have made your coral sculpture(s) you have the opportunity to donate it to the large-scale installation among other corals sculpture(s) created by other people. This contribution will help build a reef of unique, personalized corals.</p>
50min	<p>More information and inspiration can be found at http://jesyoung.ca/reef.html.</p>
10min	<p>5. Show examples of corals made by others, whether found on the website or some made that are on hand. Explore the variety of shapes and forms</p> <p>6. Hand out “Paper Making Directions” & “Clean and Remove Paper from Screens” instructions so everyone is able to read along</p> <p>7. Paper Making Demo: Read through and demonstrate each step. Pause between steps so students can follow along</p> <p>8. While homemade paper is set aside to dry, empty and clean bins</p>
Day 2	
15min	<p>1. Hand out “Removing Paper from Screen” instructions, read through and demonstrate each step</p> <p>2. Allow participants to remove paper from screens, help if needed</p> <p>3. Put away screens, keeping handmade paper on tables</p>
60min	<p>4. Coral Making Demo: Read through and demonstrate process of making 1 coral sculpture</p> <p>5. Work period</p> <p>6. Clean up, participants can then take home the “Coral Kit” with the rest of their homemade paper and current coral sculptures to finish</p>
15min	<p>7. Note to participants to return Coral Kit and created sculptures when finished to contribute to the final installation</p>

Paper Making Instructions
<p>1. Collect any gloss-free paper throughout your home. Types of paper include:</p> <p>Paper to be recycled</p> <p>Cardboard boxes and packaging</p>

Tags, receipts

Confetti, tissue paper

Paper towel, toilet paper, or cardboard rolls

And for added fun: Dried flowers & leaves (use this as an addition, not the whole mixture!)

2. Cut or tear the paper into confetti-sized pieces and toss into the bowl
3. Once the bowl is loosely filled with paper, pour warm water over top until paper is completely covered. If you want to colour your paper add some dye into the bowl!
4. Leave aside for 8+ hours
5. After 8+ hours pour the bowl of paper and water into a blender and add one half bowl of water.
6. Blend on high speed until the mixture is the consistency of a thick smoothie (if it is too lumpy add some more water until you reach this consistency)
7. Pour the blended mixture into the bin (making sure to empty it first!)
8. Add water until it reaches the fill line (located on the side of the bin)
9. Stir the mixture briefly with your hand
10. Take a screen and dip it into the bin, leveling it under the water
11. Allow the water to settle, and slowly lift the screen out of the bin, keeping it level, there should be a thin layer of the blended mixture on top of the screen ***Are there gaps in the screen? Does it feel too thin? Too thick? Not sure? Dip the screen back into the bin and try again.*
12. Let the screen drip over the bin for a few seconds
13. When ready, place somewhere the screen can lay flat and drip to dry such as:
 - Outside in the sun
 - in a bathtub/ shower
 - or back into the bin once drained and dried
- **They can also be stacked on top of each other to save space*
14. Repeat steps 9-12 on remaining screens
15. Leave until dry to the touch. Depending on where it is drying this may take more or less time.

Congrats! You have just made your own recycled paper!

Cleaning and Removing Paper from Screen Instructions

To Clean Bin

When your screens have been dipped and are off drying you can clean the bin! You can:

1. Over a drain or outside you can take the bin and pour the water out over the "strainer", this will catch the rest of the paper pulp so it doesn't clog your drains or end up outside (If the bin is heavy ask for help to lift or tip!)
2. Whatever is left in the strainer can be tossed or used to make more paper!
3. To use immediately, add back into the bin and repeat steps 8-13
4. To use later, place into the bowl and top with water. Leave up to 2 days

Removing Paper from Screen

1. Lightly press and or rub against the back of the screen, this separates your paper from the screen
2. Turn to the front and begin to slowly peel the paper off the screen, if you are worried about tearing flatten your hand and gently wiggle it between the paper and screen until they separate

VOILA! You just made recycled paper!

Coral Making Instructions

Making Corals

The coral sculptures are made by making multiple similar shapes using repetitive actions. Each coral cluster is made of these individual units that are then combined together to make a single cluster. These clusters may start small, but can grow to any size and adapt to any space or structure, however you choose to make them! When making your corals remember that these are your sculptures, so get creative and feel free to experiment!

When your corals are made make sure to send photos to jesyoung.art@gmail.com to add your coral to the collection.

How to Make a Coral Cluster

1. Choose what paper you would like to use; this can be any paper and does not have to be your homemade paper
2. Plug in your glue gun and have your glue sticks ready
3. Make a shape or choose a gesture that you are able to repeat multiple times with the paper, such as:
 - Tearing the paper into strips or pieces
 - Folding the paper into various shapes
 - Rolling the paper into different sizes
 - Crumpling pieces of the paper
 - Puncturing the paper
 - Cutting the paper
 - Kneading the paper
 - Weaving the paper
4. Once you have chosen your shape/gesture begin producing many of these units. They can vary in size but keep to your shape/gesture
5. When you have a good handful of units made it time to start assembling
6. Take a unit and add a pea-sized amount of glue and attach it to another unit, hold for a few seconds while the glue cools down and repeat
7. Repeat until the cluster is the shape and size you're happy with!
8. Want to make another? Choose a new shape or gesture and repeat

Thank you for participating!



Figure 18-20, Workshop photos



Figure 21-23, Workshop participants, produced paper

Once participants have completed the workshop and made their coral sculpture using the “Coral Kit”, I retrieve them, collecting all the coral sculptures and bringing them to the shed, the site of the installation. All coral sculptures were then unpacked and spread out, allowing me to see all the variations and begin the installation process. The process itself was done rather intuitively; I wanted the corals to look organic like the structures they were inspired by. I began hanging pieces of chicken wire to mimic mounds of rock deposits, a structure for the coral sculptures to be placed onto. Then papier mache, using the handmade paper, was draped onto the chicken wire helping distinguish these forms and make them appear as though a landscape. After the papier mache dried I began to install the coral sculptures. One by one each coral sculpture was intuitively added into the shed, there were no blueprints or plans, but arranged thoughtfully to highlight each of their unique properties. I considered how to put together groupings of variations in colour, form and size, making sure that each sculpture found its place within the installation. During the exhibition paper and coral making workshops continued, so more people would be able to participate and continue to add to this growing artwork without end.

Hive(assembly required) is found outside of the shed, adorning the structure with the hexagon sculptures as a nod to how my thesis exhibition had transformed over time and to show the origin of this artwork. Similar to coral sculptures on the inside, the individual hexagons and the hexagon clusters were arranged intuitively to mimic a growing infestation slowly engulfing the shed. From the inside to the outside, this artwork acknowledges the building blocks of our ecosystems, and that through collaboration and education we can become more ecologically aware, share space and create a better more diverse ecosystem.



Figure 24-27, Installation process, forming chicken wire and laying out contributed coral sculptures



Figure 28, Installation process



Figure 29-30, Installation photos of *Assembly Required*, 2020



Figure 31-32, Installation photos of *Assembly Required*, 2020



Figure 33-35, Installation photos of *Assembly Required*, 2020



Figure 36-37, Installation photos of *Assembly Required*, 2020



Figure 38, Installation photos of *Assembly Required*, 2020



Figure 39-40, Installation photos of *Assembly Required*, 2020



Figure 41, Making paper and coral sculptures during the exhibition of *Assembly Required*, 2020

Conclusion

Founded in relational aesthetics, *Assembly Required* focuses on creating an opportunity to learn about ecological awareness, rewilding, and our use of space through a collaborative exhibition. By making workshops and portable kits, this artwork can reach more people, opening accessibility to a variety of age groups even during a pandemic. This artwork aims to provide a hands-on approach and a positive art education experience while being environmentally friendly.

Assembly Required intends to acknowledge a declining, unnoticed or ignored crucial part of our ecosystem and bring them back into human dominated space. Even though these may not be deemed the most “desirable” structures and they encroach on “our” space, they are vital to the ecosystem, and deserve space to build into, and we depend on it. By imitating the

repetitive nature of these formation, structures and plant life and focusing on overlooked or often removed/eradicated lifeforms we can become more ecologically aware and begin to prevent or even reverse cultural severance through this acknowledgment.



Figure 42, Detail of *Assembly Required*, 2020

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