COYOTE WALKS
A RELATIONAL AND NARRATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR AN EMERGENT PRACTICE

By

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ABSTRACT

This practice based research is grounded in multi-day walking and camping activities guided by procedures which alter the ways I perceive and participate with my more-than-human surroundings. From these walks emerge animations, installations, oral presentations, as well as virtual and material objects which draw relations between humans, animals, plants, landscapes, and other entities: A creek visited during a walk spawns a carved series of stones, and a story about the birth of a child. The research practice can be understood as a relational network that is dispersed across time, place and medium. The network can also be read as a narrative, where an understanding of the practice becomes more complex as each object is discovered and incorporated into the larger story.

The work attempts to understand the world through sensorial experience, indigenous ways of knowing, and Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. From these embodied perspectives, relationality and respectfulness emerge as dominant themes in the creation of the work. This narrative-relational structure acts as a reflexive framework that guide the form and content of art objects, and gives meaning to the work in a gallery space. The utility of the framework is expanded, tested and reinforced by drawing on fellow artists including Duane Linklater's *Decommission* and Valère Costes' *Tortue.*

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A special note of appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Randy Lee Cutler, whose counsel and friendship extends far beyond the limits of this thesis project.

DEDICATION

For Alicia Margaret Palmquist Hansen

And Olin Ala’suinu White

A NOTE ON MI'KMAQ REFERENCES

I was raised in a white and upper-middle class household, and grew up with rumours that my mother's side of the family, from Newfoundland (Ktaqamkuk), was partly Mi'kmaq. In 2011, when a relative verified this Mi'kmaq lineage, I began to research our heritage in more depth. By spending time with relatives and community members and hearing their stories, and by sharing research with other Ktaqamkuk Mi'kmaq, I am discovering an alternate family history that entangles Mi'kmaq and European colonial ways of being. The Mi'kmaq histories in my family's community are mostly lost or re-interpreted as European settler narratives to avoid racist exclusion and violence, but some vestiges of the culture still remain in the family's oral history, food-gathering methods, and value systems. Throughout the Mi'kmaq regions of Ktaqamkuk, the culture was similarly brought near extinction through a lack of acknowledgement by federal and provincial governments[1], and through assimilation by "intermarriage and the acquisition of the majority population's material culture traits." (Lawrence, "Real Indians" 76).

In the Mi'kmaq culture, storytelling is a primary form of knowledge transmission, where "topics of governance, family life, belief, systems, economy, medicine, science, and leisure activities […] are integrated into a single narrative" (Johnson 1). When I described my despair to a fellow Mi'kmaw at the Newfoundland Mi'kmaq losing their local stories, he passed on the words of an elder, who said, "The stories are never lost - they're still in the land, waiting to be found" (Davis). The artworks I am engaged in can be read as an emergent means of telling the story of contemporary mixed-blood urban Mi'kmaq, which reveals suppressed cultural narratives and reflects on a displacement from local communities and the Ktaqamkuk landscape (see fig. 1). The walking and embodied activities of this art practice attempt to understand what it means for stories to be waiting in the land, in the hopes of eventually rediscovering them and passing them on.

[1] See Hanrahan for a discussion on the lasting effects of the 1949 Terms of Union between Canada and Newfoundland, which did not acknowledge a Mi'kmaq presence in the new Province. See also Lawrence, "Reclaiming Ktaqamkuk".

The insertion of Mi'kmaq teachings among Western references in this thesis offers an impression of an unstable and oscillating sense of identity that is co-emerging with this art practice. As opposed to taking up one particular cultural narrative, I am more invested in honouring a history as I understand and inhabit it within my own body. The writing and artwork of this thesis project therefore "cherishes ambiguities, multiplicities, and affinities without freezing identities" (Haraway 121), and attempts to challenge polarized racial distinctions. The hope is to leave the reader with an open-ended reading of the works that also considers how differing viewpoints can overlap and intermingle.

Fig. 1. Jay White, 2013. *Mom and Aunt Theresa Walking, Near Home Town of St. Bernard's (Fox Cove).* Digital Photograph.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF ARTISTIC RELATIONS

This practice is emerging in response to a vast constellation of past and contemporary artists, artworks, and practices. Several artists who have been highly influential to the project are recognized within the thesis, but here I wish to acknowledge several more. I work humbly from the footsteps of these artists, and maintain great respect for their work as I begin to lightly weave my own set of tracks amongst theirs.

The *Coyote Walk* project, as speculative method of research into urban wildlife, is influenced by Mark Dion's quasi-ethographic practice, particularly projects where Dion and volunteer participants act as amateur biologists and collectors. This thesis project has likewise been affected by the peripatetic and process-based work Francis Alÿs has undertaken in his adopted home of Mexico City. Through unconventional movements through urban and suburban environments, both practices attempt to interpret a place from a dislocated or foreign perspective.

The project is also indebted to many indigenous artists whose work is a performed or material testimonial to particular ways of knowing, and a political, personal and spiritual assertion of identity. The performance-based works of Anishnabe artist Rebecca Belmore are simultaneously art and sacred ritual, and a project like *Speaking to their Mother* has become integrated in meaningful ceremonies that allow and amplify the re-emergence of indigenous voices. While many of my works are not performed publicly, they also function as a highly personal re-discovery of sprit walks and other ceremonies practiced by my Mi'kmaq ancestors.

This thesis project looks towards the ways that media and narrative strategies can relate people to invisible geographies. Dirk Fleischmann and Amy Balkin's work demonstrate ways of illuminating areas that lie outside of human awareness. In *myforestfarm,* Fleischmann, a German artist based in South Korea, invites people to invest in a remote Filipino fruit farm. The remote section of jungle that is the subject of the work is represented on a website which only shows closeup photos of the jungle farm, and describes the economic relationships between *myforestfarm* and other projects. Fleischmann describes his practice as a business conglomerate, but in a personal

conversation he also spoke about the interrelationships between the works as generating a "long tail of narrative" (Fleischmann) that maintains the life of the entire practice-as-project.

San Francisco-based artist Amy Balkin is faced with similar formal concerns by attempting to unveil the unseen effects of industrial waste in California. The project *Invisible-5* involves a series of downloadable audio files that are meant to be listened to while traveling down the I-5 highway in California. In *Invisible-5,* we hear the voices of low-income residents of communities living alongside this highway, who discuss their ongoing fight to lead healthy lives in an area polluted with "pesticide drift, hazardous waste dumping and incineration, groundwater contamination, oil extraction, and large-scale dairying" (Balkin). Balkin reveals the complexity of these marginalized spaces, and underscores an urgent need to expose and confront the ecologically deleterious activities that occur within them.

1. Introduction – A Relational Framework

This thesis illustrates a framework for an art practice, which makes use of ephemeral elements (performance, walking, and oral storytelling), participatory and collaborative methods, sculptural objects, audio-visual media, and locative technologies. It describes the connections between these elements and myself as an embodied artist-researcher, in order to articulate a network of relationships that can be expanded to include the recipient of the work. As the framework of the art practice emerges, it presents themes of respect, relational accountability, and narration that also implicate the viewer. These themes are used to better understand how the work, which often involves solitary walks, can engage with an audience.

The artwork is not defined by the media that is used, but by modes of social engagement that are dispersed over time. A project often begins with multi-day walks in urban, suburban, rural and wilderness environments, and approaches ecological concerns by adopting the participatory methods of ethnographers and animal behaviorists. This practice is aligned with an emergent practice that art critic Grant Kester defines in his e-flux article, “The Device Laid Bare” as “a new area of dialogical artistic practice” that is “frequently collaborative in nature”, and which “is driven by a common desire to establish new relationships between artistic practice and other fields of knowledge production, from urbanism to environmentalism, from experimental education to participatory design.”

Walking, camping, carving and other bodily actions that are used in this practice are understood and experienced through an ‘embodied’ way of knowing. In the context of this thesis, embodiment “specifically refers to the bodily aspect of human cognition” (Chow 1), as it is used in the cognitive sciences and phenomenological theory. Embodied cognition is thinking by moving our bodies and using all our senses to discover and interpret the world around us. In *Walking East* (2013 - ongoing), a series of multi-day walks that head Eastwards from Vancouver, an embodied cognition becomes a dominant

way of knowing for extended periods of time: The walks softly adhere to a series of rules that delineate a route and a means of finding food, water and shelter. The following is a transcription of the *Walking East* rules:

1) Don't use a map. When I don't know which route is more Easterly, choose randomly between possible routes.
2) A route can be any linear trace created by human and/or non-human: road, sidewalk, deer trail, stream bank, ridgeline, or gully.
3) Buy and find food and water along the way, but do not stray from the random route for this purpose.
4) End the walk when I miss a meal or become exceedingly uncomfortable for any reason.[2]

The walk requires a transgression of socially acceptable behaviours, as trespassing and sleeping in public spaces are necessary to continue the walk for any length of time. These activities often require extended periods of constant adaptation, where the perceiving self must quickly respond to its environment, and where there is little time for reflective consideration. During these intensive periods of embodied cognition, there is no sense of a separate mind and body, and "the connection between intention and act becomes closer, until eventually the feeling of difference between them is almost entirely gone" (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 29). In daily life, we usually experience a condition where our mind and body seem separate: we might be thinking one thing while our body does another thing, or be completely unaware of what our mind and body are doing at all. We might only experience an embodied state for extended periods while meditating, playing music, sculpting, playing sports, or engaging in an activity that requires focus and bodily awareness.

At the turn of the last century, theorist Edmond Husserl undertook to describe an embodied way of knowing. He termed this branch of study phenomenology, which studies "as closely as possible the way the world makes itself evident to awareness, the way things first arise in our direct, sensorial experience" (qtd. in Abram 35). The

[2] *Walking East* will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 2.

phenomenological world cannot be understood solely through mental reflection and other internal processes; instead, the world emerges as we invest our senses in the plants, animals, people, landscapes, objects and phenomena that surround us. This form of cognition occurs through constant reciprocal interactions between our own sensing bodies and the particular qualities of other things. By approaching the artwork from an embodied and phenomenological perspective, then, this art practice privileges bodily participation, and relationships, as a learning method.

An embodied worldview and a phenomenological relationality that entangles humankind with other entities is a radical shift from a Western-scientific way of relating ourselves to our surroundings. Building on Husserl's ideas, philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that it is ecologically important to "return to that world that precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie, or a river is" (qtd. in Abram 36). In returning to the exploration of direct experience, it may be possible to imagine and inhabit ecocentric cosmologies, which sees people as members of a community of care that includes all constituents of the planetary ecosphere. By learning through direct and bodily interactions, and by establishing individual relations with our surroundings, we might begin to approach "an ethic whose reference point is supra-human, placing Ecosphere health before human welfare" (Rowe). An embodied and relational outlook might be better suited to this task than a Western-scientific way of knowing that privileges the intelligence of the human mind, situates other beings as lesser entities with machine-like cognitive capabilities, and which objectifies nonhuman entities as resources for human consumption. Indeed, the ecological catastrophe that we find ourselves implicated in makes the exploration of alternate ways of being an increasingly vital task.

Throughout this thesis, phenomenological and embodied perspectives are used to look more deeply into a practice that includes walking, material objects, and social engagement. Through this embodied lens, we begin to acknowledge that the intersubjective exchange between human and nonhuman bodies is as important as inter-human relationships. Although a wide range of relationships are important

to the practice, there is only space in this thesis to investigate the relationships between the artist and art object (through the process of making), the artist and the surrounding life world (through walking), and the relationship between the artist and recipient of the work (through participatory methods).

Descriptions of intersubjective encounters throughout the thesis are highlighted in italics. This is intended to present the relational nature of the practice. These descriptions are set apart in order to recognize that this process of art making remains accountable to the entities (human and non-human) that become implicated as artworks are created.

2. schoolhousecreek

The Relationship Between the Artist and the Lively Object

Fig.2. Jay White. *schoolhousecreek* (detail) 2013. Still from HD video loop.

The *schoolhousecreek* project emerged from a series of multi-day random walks that began in downtown Vancouver, called *Walking East.* During these walks, I randomly choose between human and nonhuman routes in order to travel in a general eastward direction. The direction of the walks was originally a gesture towards my ancestral home in Ktaqamkuk (Newfoundland).The rapid failure of each attempt (due to loneliness, physical discomfort, or an inability to find sufficient food and water) transformed the project into a meditation on contingencies and sensitivities, and revealed that an attentiveness towards process might be more important than reaching an ultimate destination.

An Eastward movement from Vancouver provides the potential for a route that transects urban, suburban, rural and undeveloped (wilderness) territories. Since the *Walking East* rules permit the walk to follow lines that aren't necessarily constructed by humans, the passage often deviates from practiced ways of moving through the

landscape.[3] A walk along a sidewalk might shift to the edge of a busy highway, then through a hole in a fence, along a deer trail, and alongside a stream. Time is often spent in neglected areas that exist in the interstices between privately owned urban and suburban properties. Most often, these are government-designated 'riparian zones' next to waterways, which remain undeveloped in order to provide "the blend of streambed, water, trees, shrubs and grasses" (Riparian Areas Regulation) for healthy fish habitat. Vacant lots, abandoned buildings, railway right-of-ways, road medians, and small parks also become places of refuge where one might sleep, rest or eat without risk of disruption. It does not take long to observe several categories of entities co-existing in these interstitial areas:

Firstly, one discovers discarded commercial products, including windblown plastic bags tangled into the corners of buildings, discarded diapers hanging from bushes and fast-food containers layered into the peat.

Secondly, there is a proliferation of plant and animal species. Bald eagles watch spawning salmon in a stream alongside a busy highway. Salmonberry bushes and blackberry thickets are tangled with plastic and paper. Crows scream and gather on a bulldozer, while seals leap in the nearby Fraser River, chasing salmon among the logbooms. A vacant lot is interwoven with coyote trails.

Thirdly, one finds signs of people moving through and living in these spaces. Tarps are arranged into a makeshift structure. Cardboard boxes lie under a cedar, arranged into a thin mattress to insulate against the ground. An overturned shopping cart empties sodden clothes into the brambles.

There is a sense that the agency of certain humans[4], and more-than-human species and objects are not given equal import, as they are swept together into spaces beyond the margins of urban perception. It is a disturbing manifestation of the dominance of humans

[3] See page 2 for the rules of *Walking East.*

[4] Though this thesis focusses on human relations with other-than-human entities, it is important to relate the full extent of these experiential observations, which suggest that human entities are implicated, both as the subjugators and the subjugated, in systems of dominance and oppression.

over other species and objects that I hope to draw attention to in my practice by emphasizing the presence of non-human entities, and imagining worlds that rely on an inter-reliant more-than-human community.

During two iterations of *Walking East*, I've passed by a nameless creek that captured my attention, precisely because it seems to be vanishing as it falls outside of human awareness. The creek begins in a small culvert under a highway, travels under the open sky for approximately two hundred meters, and then disappears into another culvert that leads under a processing plant. The creek likely bore salmon before the culverts were put in place, but it is obvious that salmon could no longer navigate the high culvert. A stream rendered barren by human progress has been amputated by a highway and an industrial park. At one time, the waterway may have had more meaning and more interconnections with other life-forms. Perhaps deer drank there, or people fished there. I decided to return to the creek after the *Walking East* project and stay all night to investigate it more thoroughly.

The story I tell around that evening is a part of the schoolhousecreek project. This story, along with some schoolhousecreek images, are given their own pages in the thesis, to recognize that they function as a distinct presentation of the schoolhousecreek project. This is also the first use of italics in the thesis, which acknowledges that the following text is usually told orally, as an intersubjective exchange between myself and other people. It is important to be physically present to maintain an aura of intimacy and respect around the events described in the story. 1 In writing this story, then, I recognize that something is lost in the telling. Nevertheless, I would ask the reader to understand that the story is transcribed with the utmost respect, and with the permission of my sister.

On the night that I spent at the creek, my sister, who was pregnant, called me. She was going into labour. The first of a new generation of children in our family was about to be born.

She and I exchanged a wonderful series of text messages that evening. Before I left, I decided to take a stone from the creek.

The rock sat on my shelf for several weeks. Eventually, I bought a hammer and chisel started to work with it, with my new nephew in mind.

I returned the carved stone to the creek, and took another stone. Again, I worked with it, thinking about my nephew and a growing set of relations here on the Pacific Coast.

I returned that stone to the creek as well, and took another stone. The process continues.

Fig.3. Jay White. *schoolhousecreek* (detail) 2013. Stills from HD video loop.

Different iterations of this same story have been related in oral presentations, and the project was installed in the Emily Carr Media Gallery in July 2013[5]. The installation combined video loops of the stones in a sculptural assemblage of found objects (fig. 4), and an abridged version of the repetitive stone-carving process was printed in the exhibition pamphlet. The physical installation did not tell the story of the walk, and left lingering questions about the presentation of the work in a gallery: How might objects relate the intimate details of a story without trivializing the relationships that are ingrained in the project? And might the project and the stones lose meaning without the story? [6]

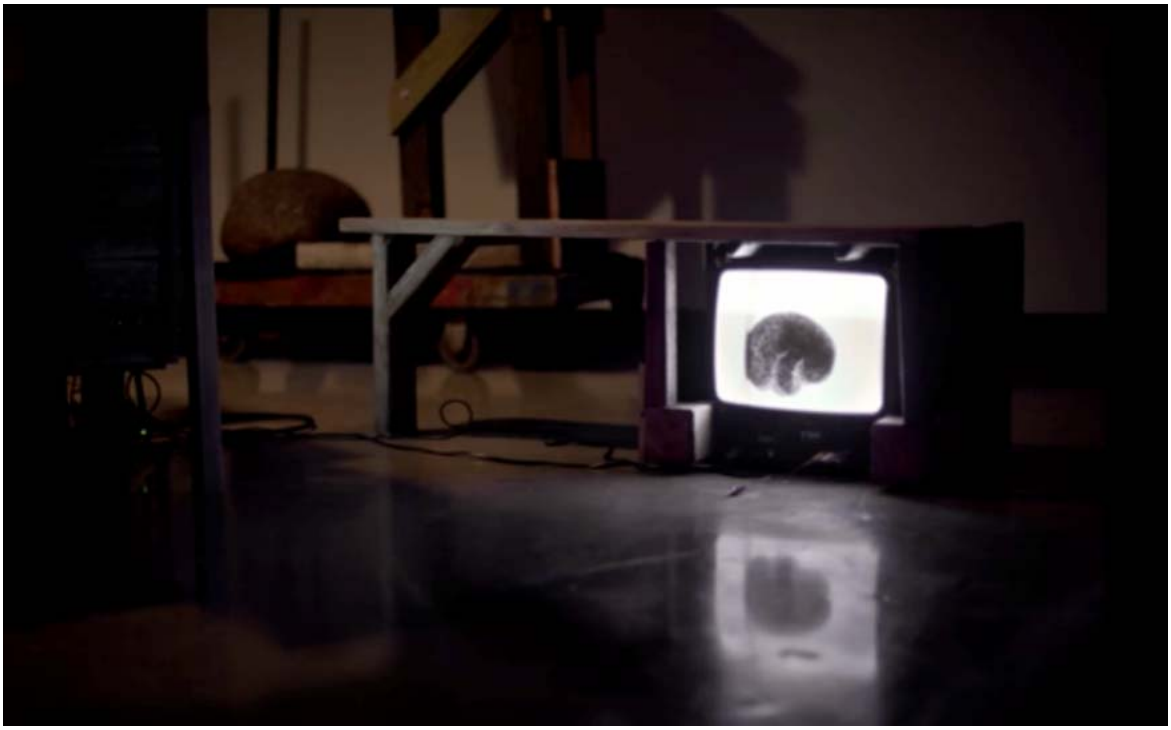


Fig. 4. Jay White. *schoolhousecreek* 2013. Two-channel video, found materials, audio.

In considering how to share the stones with a viewer, I return to an embodied perspective: Instead of imagining the stones as detached entities, it would be more consistent to the

[5] "Alteractions." July 17-22 2013, Emily Carr University

[6] After the final graduate exhibition in the Charles H. Scott Gallery, the potential implications of some of these questions have deepened. See Chapter 7.

practice to see the objects as lively participants who are brought into a network of relationships by the artwork. A reflection on the phenomenological nature of working with the stones with a hammer and chisel helps reveal the embodied ways that a human might understand a nonhuman entity like a stone. The use of italics in this reflective description acknowledges that the act of carving builds a relationship between the stone and the artist: Through the act of carving, my senses became immersed and intertwined with the materiality and forms of the object. Whereas italics previously indicated an interhuman connection, through the act of storytelling (page 7), the art of carving might be seen as an equally intimate affiliation that develops between human and material substances:

As I hold the rock, it warms to the temperature of my hand. I lose the ability to distinguish where my body ends and the stone begins. I move my fingers and the stone's roughness and hardness temporarily reveal themselves, then fade once again and merge into my fingers. As I turn the object in my hands, new forms reveal themselves, and I chip away at sections to help distinguish those shapes. From one angle a human figure becomes apparent. I'm drawn apart from the stone for a moment, and think of my nephew, who was beginning his birth while the stone was being removed from the creek. From another angle there is a mysterious half-human half-animal form. The uncarved surfaces of the stone, weathered from centuries of erosion, continually draw me back to the sights and smells of the creek.[7]

From the perspective of the sensing and thinking body, the stone is not a dead and lifeless object. By investing our senses in it, an object begins to reciprocate our attention by sharing its colours, its hardness, and its shape. Cultural ecologist David Abram draws from Merleau-Ponty to describe such encounters as relationships with "…an 'Other' which at one moment 'holds itself aloof from us' and at another moment actively 'expresses itself' directly to our senses, so that we may ultimately describe perception as a mutual interaction, an intercourse, 'a coition, so to speak, of my body with things" (Abram 55). If an embodied world can only be understood through sensory input, then objects and phenomena are constantly participating in the ways we understand

[7] This writing is based on memories of the sensation of working with the stones.

and think. The act of carving could thus be described as an intimate conversation and an unveiling of knowledge as the stone reveals itself to the carver through its changing forms and heterogeneous materiality. Certain areas resist the chisel, revealing a lack of compliance in the stone's mineral nature. Another area agrees to the wishes of the carver and falls off in a chunk which instantly transforms the overall shape and communicates new shapes, textures, and possibilities for a final form.

The mutable nature of phenomenological perception is reflected in the depiction of the stones in the *schoolhousecreek* animated video loop (fig. 4). In the animated medium, the viewer cannot lock down on a single angle of the stones and the object seems to transform as the object rotates: we observe human and animal forms, and smoother ovoid shapes that recall millennia of erosive interactions in the stream. The photos and animations are referents to the actual stones, which are re-placed in the unnamed stream, and are only experienced directly by people who might discover them by accident. The stones' physical absence from the gallery space prevents the viewer from perceiving them as immobile, inert and inanimate objects.

What emerges in *schoolhousecreek* is an interdependence between the story and the object. The sequential images animate the stone according to the conventional sense of animation as "a sequence of still images or cartoons shown in succession to produce an illusion of movement" (Chow 1). When the viewer hears the story in connection with the stones, another form of animation occurs, where the stones take on a nonhuman agency in connecting the unknown creek with the artist and his family. This form of animation is more in keeping with the Latin root of the word, *animare*, described by animation theorist Kenny Chow as literally meaning "'to fill with breath' - the act of bringing something to life or the state of being full of life" (Ibid.). Through storytelling, the stones are given meaning, and take on a liveliness that deepens the reading of the series of images.

3. Sharing Relationships Through Story

Duane Linklater and Storytelling as Method

In understanding the use of storytelling in my practice, it is helpful to compare the stones of *schoolhousecreek* to artist Duane Linklater's 2005 Grand Jeep Cherokee in *Decommission.* In this project, Linklater utilizes a storytelling strategy to give meaning to the sandblasted shell of the Jeep, which sits in the sculpture park of the MacLaren Art Centre in Barrie Ontario. Without any context, the shell of the Jeep only carries the story of an appropriation of the Cherokee name. But the networks of relationships that the vehicle was invested within contribute significantly to the reading of the piece. It is the stories around the rusting shell that give the viewer a sense of its previous "life": In the exhibition documents, artist Tanya Linklater (Duane's partner) makes the vehicle sound like a living thing that deserves respect: she writes that "Duane told someone (…) that the Jeep was his horse," and recalls a fair where "truck beds wore Pendleton blankets, hoods were adorned in beads." When Tanya Linklater describes the Jeep as being "pulled apart and boiled down," is it easy to imagine an animal being rendered into separate parts. The viewer is given the impression that the task of preparing the object as a sculptural form to present in a gallery somehow removed the Jeep of its life force. While Linklater is Cree, this liveliness is also reflected in the Mi'kmaw language, where verb conjugations assign a level of animacy, or a spirit, to many human and nonhuman things (Sable and Francis). Moccasins, for example, are considered animate. However, once the moccasins are no longer wearable, the verb tense for the word changes and the moccasin are described as inanimate. The removal of the object from its intended use, and its detachment from an active participation in human relationships, detaches the moccasin and the vehicle from its life force.

In an artist's talk at Simon Fraser University in January 2014, Linklater described how the sculpture "didn't fit" in the gallery, and how he was unwilling to cut the object to bring it into the space. I felt the same unwillingness to present the actual stones of *schoolhousecreek* in the gallery, in order to respect the relationships surrounding them. Giving respect to the object exposes a tension between an animate thing and the gallery space, and brings attention to the devaluing of personal meanings that

might occur when an object is removed from its context and displaced for display in a museum or institution. In order to share this conflict, it is important that the viewer understands the network of relations that that object is involved in. Otherwise the tension between the animate object and the gallery space is lost, and the object's liveliness is "killed" outright.

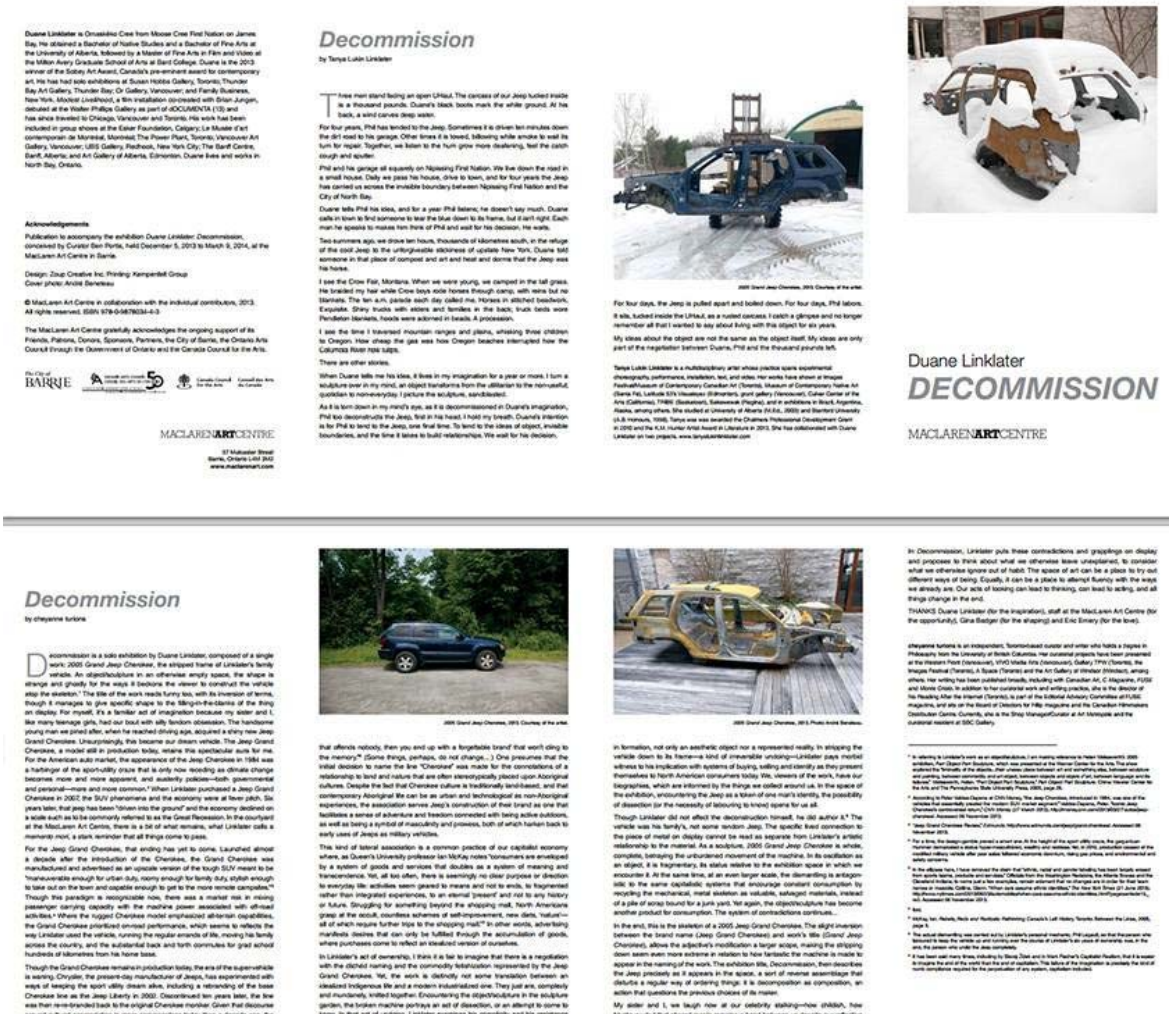


Fig.5. Duane Linklater, Tanya Lukin Linklater, cheyenne turion, *Decommission* exhibition pamphlet, 2013. Digital. Pending permission of MacLaren Art Centre.

In the case of *Decommission*, the pamphlet containing cheyenne turion's (sic) and Linklater's essays are crucial to communicating the Linklater family's investment with the object (fig. 5). With *schoolhousecreek*, and with other projects in my practice, didactic documents, informal conversations, artist talks, or exhibition

labels are all important elements in recognizing the art object is part of a complex web of relationships. These projects might best be seen as dispersive multi-sensory and multidisciplinary stories which combine actions and objects. The word 'story' acknowledges that the work will be read or revealed over time, and makes it easier to understand how an audience might receive disparate objects and activities, and internally assemble them to understand a larger meaning. A project-as-story also helps recognize that each work is in constant process. Repeated activities within a project (carving one stone after another), or repeated versions of a project (*Walking East*) might refine the telling of the story, expand the network of (human and nonhuman) participants in the project, reiterate the relationships between entities, maintain the liveliness of objects, and extend the lifespan of a project.

A project like *Decommission* can likewise be seen a multidisciplinary story that brings together the agencies of Duane, Tanya, cheyenne, Phil (the mechanic who disassembled the vehicle), the vehicle, and the institution of the gallery. This more-than-human collaboration is an *assemblage* of entities that form their own collective agency. An assemblage, as a "living, throbbing confederation" of things, is an apt description of this sort of multidisciplinary project, as "no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group" (Bennett 24). The primacy of the artist's agency is reduced and decentralized in the assemblage, as the creation of the artwork is dispersed amongst other contributions. Some constituents of the assemblage may be nonhuman entities, like a stone or a truck, which might assert an emergent agency that is only known after working alongside the entity. Each re-iteration of the project adds to, or transforms the assemblage-story, as new members are added or certain constituents take on more or less importance.

The re-telling of a story slowly unravels the complex relationships between the artworks, reveals the agency of beings, objects, materials and systems that had a hand in creating the works, and brings about an agency or potency to the overall assemblage-as-story.[8] *schoolhousecreek* has been shown as an installation, and it exists as a part of my website, but as a live assemblage of diverse entities, and as an open-ended storytelling framework,

[8] See Bennett on the agency of more-than-human assemblages.

it may still expand in unforeseen directions. The stones resting in a small creek at the base of a busy highway may one day be discovered. The project may transform as more stones are carved, as it is installed differently, and as it is presented in talks and conversations. More projects may stem off this one, or another project may emerge from *Walking East*, which, in turn, relates to and affects the reading of *schoolhousecreek*.

The narrative style of this practice involves a open-ended expansiveness and the overlapping use of multiple methods of storytelling. As iterative and growing processes, the projects have a strong affinity to Trinh T. Minh-Ha's invocation of her own story, in "Woman, Native, Other":

> "The story never stops beginning or ending. It appears headless and bottomless for it is built on differences. Its (in)finitude subverts every notion of completeness and its frame remains a non-totalizable one. The differences it brings about are differences not only in structure, in the play of structures and of surfaces, but also in timbre and in silence. […] The story circulates like a gift; an empty gift which anybody can lay claim to by filling it to taste yet can never truly possess. A gift built on multiplicity. One that stays inexhaustible within its own limits" (Minh-Ha 2)

These words reflect a processual approach where multiple iterations or repeated actions prioritize a respect for an audience and a building of relationships. The stories have a "non-totalizable" frame in that one work branches off another, the work evolves with each installation, and where retellings might reveal new aspects of the story. Most tellings are left with space or "silence" for the reader to insert their own meanings. The stories are not lectures, but unrestricted propositions that respect individual subjectivities, and allow for any number of readings. A project like *schoolhousecreek* might also reveal aspects of itself over long periods of time, as the work is viewed online, and later through a presentation, or through a gallery installation. The project-as-story may be read differently depending on which parts the viewer is exposed to.

4. Coyote Walk

The Artist with the Environment

Coyote Walk is a multi-day walk that has taken place twice in the City of Vancouver. The walk is defined by a set of parameters that alters the places I would normally enter, and changes the ways I would normally act. This shift in behaviour results in a different perception of the urban environment.

Before each iteration of *Coyote Walk* begins, the rules of the walk are distributed to potential participants as a formal invite printed on a card. In phrasing the rules as an invitation, the artwork proposes a relationship between the recipient of the invitation card and myself.

> Dear Friends,
>
> You are cordially invited to take part in this walk as a tracker, photographer, and/or videographer.
>
> The rules for the walk are as follows:
>
> 1) Beginning on the evening of April 4, and for up to three days after, I will move through the city according to a route that obeys a logic known only to myself.
>
> (2) The walk ends sooner than the three-day limit if I enter a situation where a human could conceivably chase and capture me.
>
> (3) I am wearing a tracking device which transmits my location at half-hour intervals. You may download a smart phone application that will allow you to track me. You have the role of finding me and documenting my passage through photography and/or video.
>
> (4) You are not exempt from rule (2) - that is, it is possible for you to end the walk by getting too close. However, you are responsible for leaving me in peace. You should not attempt to end the walk, should respect my privacy, and try not to disturb me. I am putting my trust in you.

To prevent the walk from ending prematurely, I anticipated that it would be necessary to apply a new set of behaviours that lay outside of socially scripted urban activities. Since coyotes are large animals who thrive in urban environments while remaining largely undetected, their strategies were adopted as a method of staying out of the sight of other humans: I walked at night along railway lines, back alleys, parks, and golf courses, and camped during the day in difficult-to-access places. (See figure 6, a photograph taken by participant Chris Huggins, who arose early in the morning to document the course of the previous night's passage).

Fig.6.Chris Huggins, *Untitled*, 2013. Digital Photograph. Used by permission of Chris Huggins.

In order to move without making my presence known, I found myself adjusting to previously ignored features of the landscape. Areas of shadow emerged as places to slow down and to relax without being seen. Brightly lit areas became spaces to watch carefully and avoid if possible, and came to acquire an affect of discomfort and anxiety. At first, this way of negotiating the city felt extremely foreign, and I would take breaks in hidden areas to take a rest from the effort required to re-orient to this strikingly changed geography. But in a matter of hours, I found myself acclimatized to the adjusted landscape, and discovered a more easeful way of thinking and moving, where

sensing and reacting felt almost simultaneous. In this embodied state, the mind is no longer wandering separately from the activities of the body, and there is "a certain condition that phenomenologically feels neither purely mental nor purely physical; it is, rather, a specific kind of mind-body unity"(Varela, Thompson and Rosch 29). An embodied understanding of the city occurred not solely in the mind, but through bodily movement in relation to the environment. The inherited concept of a separation between the perceiving self and the world seemed to disappear, as observation moved closer towards action.

A recollection of *Coyote Walk* illustrates the ways I understand an embodied and phenomenological mode of perception. The following observations are an attempt to harmonize memories of the project with observations that were dictated into an audio recorder during the walks. This italicized description acknowledges an entangled interrelation between the environment and the moving self:

The body changes its stride and steps sideways into a shadow. A moment later, I see my form has become as unlit as the pavement under my feet. I realize there is another kind of intelligence that caused the body to conceal itself in the darkness. I again witness this cognition when I find myself stopped alongside a hedge, and observe, after-the-fact, that my body decided to wait in the last pool of shadow before a long stretch of lit road.

At times, the concept of a body, or of a self, disappears completely, and an understanding of the world becomes a fleeting series of sensations:
darkness nearby
tree sap smells
prickly
edge of spruce branch
soothing cool mist

I lose awareness of a sense of self and become a shifting animal that can only be defined by its movements: scurrying through damp grass cut short, finding concealment and shelter under the protective boughs of a low cedar.

The architecture of buildings, the details of parked vehicles and the gridlike design of the city fall out of awareness. Another softer geography emerges, mapped in contours of sound and luminance, movements in lit windows, gradations of shadow, a quiet conversation at the end of the alley.

The suddenness and extreme brightness of motion-activated security lights stand out in this topology of light and dark. Their shocking luminance arrests an immersive sensorial engagement with the surroundings, and rapidly triggers a detached reflection on my form as being visually separated from the alley. Since these surveillance technologies are specifically placed to dissuade potential transgressors, I became conscious of how I might be viewed by others as an intruder or an outsider. In order to avoid the unsettling effects of the motion detectors, my senses quickly became attuned to their particular shapes, and the likely places they would be attached to a building. Before long, their previously inconspicuous forms were one of the most dominant features of the landscape, and it became very easy to avoid them.

The ascendancy of security lights and gradations of luminance in my perception of the urban landscape is one of innumerable unexpected discoveries that have occurred during *Coyote Walk* and other process-based walks. An adjusted behaviour brings attention to very different parts of the environment, to such an extent that the entire world seems to change. This is particularly noticeable when I am behaving differently for extended periods of time, for example, when napping in a hedge for several hours while the tracking device charges in a nearby electrical socket. During these periods, there is a protracted interplay between unfamiliar sensorial stimuli and unaccustomed bodily responses that can only be described as an altered perception and changed sense of self. These periods of altered perception are often accompanied by feelings of loneliness, discomfort, and an unnerving sense of detachment from conventional social structures. The walks deliver an intense participatory learning that enmeshes a person in relations with their environment, and delivers an experiential knowledge that cannot take place from reading a book, or by hearing about another person's actions. However, the revelatory shifts in awareness do not occur simply by walking through the alleys at night: it is the changed behaviour, the need to hide from people that shifts a sense of self, and alters the perception of the urban landscape.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold draws from phenomenological theory to show how action and perception are interconnected. He theorizes that "ways of acting in the world are also ways of seeing it" (9), and argues that one's world is not "imaginatively 'constructed', in myth, religion, [or] in ceremony" (9). Instead, the ways we act in the world determine what features of the landscape we attune ourselves to. This participatory understanding of the world is different from a Western-scientific perspective that is based in detached conceptual thought and reproducible experiments. An embodied way of knowing is "not in the mind but in the world, and its significance lies in the relational context of our engagement with the constituents of that world" (55). The knowledge of the world is read by our bodies through actions and interactions.

Coyote Walk, and this entire practice is premised on the idea of finding other "relational contexts" of engagement, in order to glean stories from the world through changed activities and the acquisition of new skills and sensitivities. The altered perception that takes place on process-based walks is a crucial part of the research practice. The walks provide a wealth of knowledge that can be passed on as stories of their own. The stories come about through art-making that actively reflects on the embodied experience.

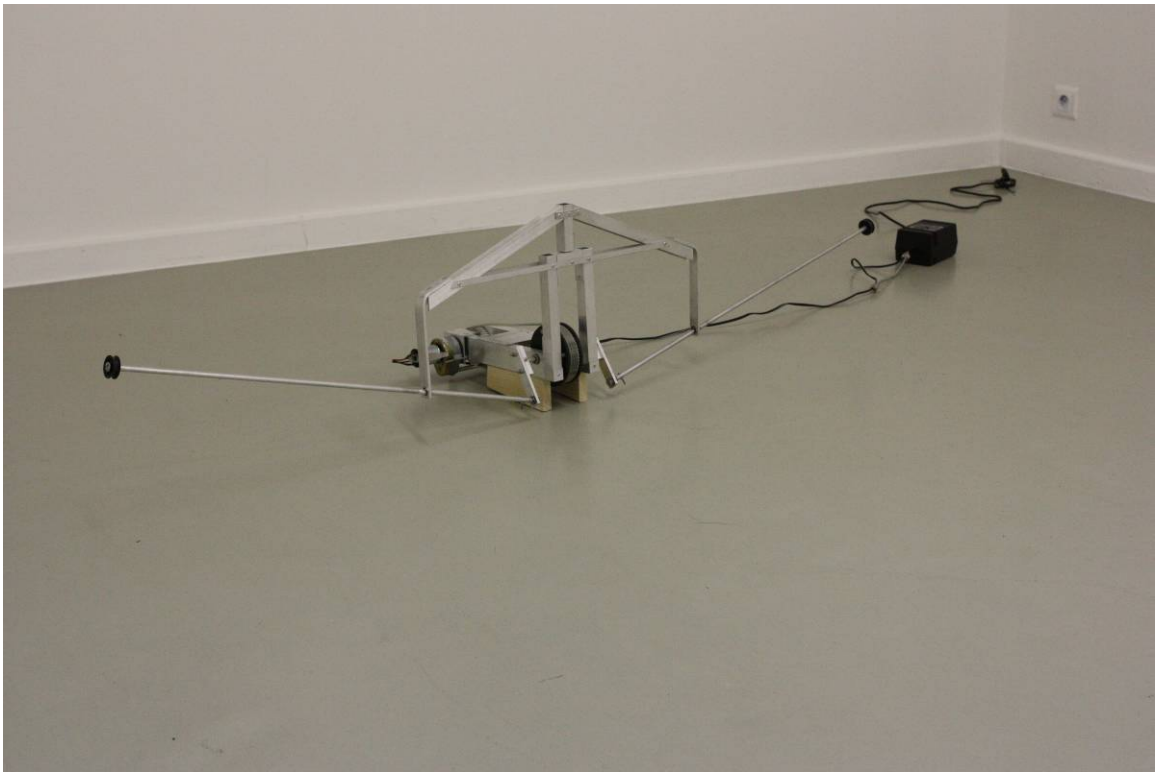
5. From the Walk to Physical Objects

Valère Costes and Experiential Research

While walking, and when reflecting on the walks, a question continually arises: how should these experiences be represented? Questions of form and content follow. What materials and methods should be used to portray an ephemeral and personal activity? How can the reading of the work remain open-ended, but also relate particular details about the walk?

These ongoing questions put my practice in conversation with French artist Valère Costes, who appears to approach a similar problem in his own work. Costes' projects often begin with multi-day camping expeditions in wilderness areas of tropical countries (Navarro). When he returns home from these journeys, he creates sculptural machines that replicate the movements of entities or phenomena that he encountered at the site of his research. In *Tortue (Tortoise)* (2005), a simple device evokes the painfully slow movement of a tortoise as it pulls itself across the ground (fig. 7). Other projects mechanize the effect of rainfall on still water (*Dark Rain* 2012*)*, or the swaying of tall grass in the wind (*Table des Vents* 2005).

As with my practice, there are two steps to Costes' art-making process: The first is an open-ended research period in a remote or inaccessible area that invites the opportunity for sensorial encounters with other entities. The second is studio work that reflects on particular moments that stand out in his memory. In Costes' work, a single repetitive movement is a kind of sculptural synecdoche that might represent a particular animal, or an extended encounter, or the entire experience of a journey to a distant country. In the case of *Tortue,* the form of the turtle is reduced to a pair of aluminum poles, but the angles of the poles and the lurching movement of the sculpture strongly reference the actual animal. The object establishes a resonance between the artwork and the gallery, and an imagined tortoise in its own surroundings. The simple form of the work leaves room to imagine Costes' initial research, where he presumably discovered a tortoise and observed it for a period of time.



Fig,7. Valère Costes, *Tortue*, 2005. Aluminum and Motor, 100 x 60 x 30 cm.

In other projects, Costes draws on this same method of transposing an embodied observation into an institutional and urban space. The sculptures are poetic reflections that don't over-represent his original experiences. As a three-dimensional moving object, the sculpture allows for a multi sensory reading, which might reference Costes' original embodied encounter with a tortoise. The observer can move around the object, listen to the sounds of the motor, and observe in the mechanism's changing shape and position as it moves across the floor.

At the same time, there is a melancholy liveliness to the object's purposeless movements and in the sparse mechanical composition of the robot. The sculpture does not attempt to reproduce a complex living thing, but displays a congregation of cold materials that reflects on the distance between the gallery and the actual tortoise and its natural habitat. The tortoise-as-machine is a cyborg entity that reflects on a world that is not pure

"nature"[9], and where humans are "a collective giant that […] has become the main geological force shaping the Earth" (Latour, "Gaia" 3). Costes's work comments on this alteration of the world, through the exclusive use of processed metals and machines that are the result of industrial human practices. However, it seems that his process also implicates him in problematic more-than-human means of relating, by using a quasi-scientific and colonial method of travelling to supposedly remote and 'savage' areas to bring back samples of an exotic Other. *Tortue* might point out damaging more-than-human relationships, but it seems to propagate a perspective of Western-human domination, appropriation and classification without being critical of this fact. In reading about Costes' work, I have found no evidence that he presents documents that reflect on the potential interference of his own research, or of his imposition in human and non-human cultures and ecosystems that are physically remote from his usual place of living.

This may not be the focus of Costes' work, but it indicates an important difference between *Tortue* and *Coyote Walk*. The latter project begins with open-ended research, and aims to communicate the complex relationships that might have taken place between the artist and other-than-human subjects during the walk. While both projects might problematize human-based ecological change, *Coyote Walk* attempts to suggest a more equitable relationship with our environment by being receptive to other beings that the project might interfere with. An example of this is in the first iteration of the walk, where my adjusted behaviours brought me into increasing contact with actual coyotes. Eventually I realized that the project was intruding on coyote territory, and might force them to change their own behaviours to avoid me. The hard-and-fast rules of the project threatened to inhibit accountability towards the coyotes. Instead of potentially interrupting the activities of these animals, I decided to break the rules and end the walk prematurely.

Perhaps, then, if a question in my practice is "how to represent an experience," the answer might be, "in a way that respects relationships." The process of art-making in this practice is a continual act of assessing each relationship in the framework in order to remain accountable to the landscapes, animals, plants, objects and people that are

[9] See Latour, *Modern* and Haraway 149-181

involved. In constantly remaining aware of these relationships, it might be possible to maintain a level of compassion, care and conviviality in the work. In this sort of project, the rules become a malleable material that evolves through playful awareness. They remain open and receptive to change as the ethics of lived experience interact with the pre-set ideas of a project.

The story that describes how *Coyote Walk* ended is too complicated to present in a simple sculpture. Even in written form, the information might come across as overly didactic, or restrict the reading of a material installation. This is where it helps to understand the overall project of *Coyote Walk* as a large an open-ended story that could be encountered in difference places and at different time and using diverse media, in the same way as *schoolhousecreek.* Each aspect of the project would deliver an understanding of the work, and a different angle on the overall story: *Coyote Walk* on my public website reveals a collection of documents from each walk; an artist's talk gives more information about the actual interactions with coyotes; an installation reveals the rules of the walk, and simultaneously blurs the line between artist and coyote. In understanding participatory and durational works like this, Kester suggests that it might be necessary for critics to embrace "new research methodologies and […] a field-based approach, in which the critic inhabits the site of practice for an extended period of time, paying special attention to the discursive, haptic, and social conditions of space, and the temporal rhythms of the processes that unfold there." Similarly, a participant or viewer of *Coyote Walk* might only understand the entirety of the project by taking the time to discover an accumulation of different readings of the project. The idea of a relational / narrative framework as project therefore opens up the possibility for each iteration of the work to deliver a simple concept, and still allows for the examination of larger ideas through diverse iterations of the project. From this perspective, Costes' methods become relevant in my own practice when they carry the potential of being read alongside gallery documents, didactic texts, oral presentations, and participatory involvement.

6.Coyote Walk and Participation

The Artist - Participant Relationship

Coyote Walk and *schoolhousecreek* combine physical objects with performative or participatory elements. In this chapter, participation is investigated as a relationship between the artist and the recipient of the work. This takes a different perspective on the walks from the previous chapter: Here the walk is not viewed as embodied research between myself and the environment but as a performance that is read by a participant or recipient of the work.

In "The Archive and the Repertoire, Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas", Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor discusses objects and performances as two different types of knowledge, where objects can be seen as an archive of knowledge that exists in "documents, maps, bones, videos and film and anything else resistant to change" (Cornejo). Oral storytelling, walks, and participatory projects, on the other hand, are part of a repertoire of transitory knowledge that "enacts embodied memory […] and includes ephemeral acts thought of as non-reproducible knowledge" (Ibid.). In my practice, presentations and oral recounting become reproducible systems of knowledge through a repetition of performances that relay the "embodied memory" of the walks. As presentations and walks accumulate, they can be seen as a repertoire of gestures that work towards a more-than-human relationality.

In *Coyote Walk,* invitation cards and participant Chris Huggins' photographs (fig. 6) function as an archive of objects which provide a skeleton for transitory activities to build around. These elements are used as support material in oral retellings of walk, and also function as mnemonic devices that remind me of the story during presentations. To say that walks and oral stories are a repertoire reinforces the idea that portions of the project reside as a catalogue of knowledge and potentiality in my own body. Furthermore, the notion of a performed repertoire acknowledges that each project is an ongoing process of

(sometimes nested)[10] iterations and refinements that retells relationships and attempts to build new ones.

Participation in *Coyote Walk* begins with a set of rules that asks people to take the role of tracking me and documenting my passage through photography and/or video. It invites a power relationship where I might be under the surveillance of participants who know my position through GPS tracking technologies. At the same time, the participant is asked to leave me in peace, to respect my privacy, and try not to disturb me. I act as an intermediary into the more-than-human world by leading viewers into embodied encounters with interstitial urban spaces. By mediating between the nonhuman object of investigation, a boundary is created between the viewer and actual nonhuman entities, which recognizes the animals' needs of privacy and space. This boundary also hints at the tension inherent in dealing with nonhuman animals, where a level of respect does not necessarily necessitate intimacy with the being. The lack of a human or coyote subject in the photos taken by Chris Huggins (e.g. fig 8) presents the idea that, in relations with other entities, it might be important to acknowledge and celebrate the unknown.

In May, 2014, a video installation of *Coyote Walk* was presented at the "Interactive Futures" symposium at Emily Carr University. In the video, Chris Huggins' photographs are overlaid with the rules of the walk. The rules were slightly rephrased, so it was possible to imagine that an animal or the artist could be the subject of the walk (fig.8). By remaining outside the frame of the photographs, I am not captured as a fixed image, and can perform the role of an intermediary that might transform from one entity to the next in the viewers' imaginations. Here, the idea of becoming a coyote has an affinity to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming-animal, which "is not a question of resemblance […], nor is it a question of a symbolic metaphor." (273) It is the acquisition of a common set of attributes, in the perception of the viewer, that makes a human become animal. By moving, hidden, in urban terrain, by taking on a nocturnal activity cycle, and by allowing myself to be tracked and photographed as a biologist would an animal, I begin to enter a "zone of proximity of the animal," (273) where the idea of coyote becomes infused with the idea of a human.

[10] The ongoing carvings of s*choolhousecreek* are a series of actions nested in the *Walking East* series, for example.

Figure 8. *Coyote Walk* installation details, 2014. Digital Stills from HD Video.

In the same way that the rules encourages me to participate with my surroundings in a different way, the project invites the viewer to engage in an embodied experience of their own, to consider what it means to track and observe another being, and to encounter interstitial areas where they might not normally enter. The participant is left to make their own observations about the entities that exist in these spaces, and to possibly adjust their own perception of the urban environment. They are asked to invest

all their senses, to move their body, and to observe carefully using their own cameras as a tool. The participatory nature of *Coyote Walk* means that this story-project becomes especially open-ended as the project honours other human subjectivities in reading and interpreting the walk. The participants are given the license to create photographs and video, which might become major features of the project. Their artistic production de-centres the priority of the artist and brings a spirit of collaboration and togetherness into the making of the work. Instead of one-way flow of information, the project becomes a conversation between the walker, the participant, the urban landscape.

7. Coyote Walking – Hiding in Plain Sight

Reflections on the Thesis Exhibition

This thesis set out to describe how different modes of engagement relate to each other in my work. Participation in walks, material objects, and photographic and textual documents are described through a lens of embodiment, storytelling and relationality in order to bring them into something like a coherent practice. While it has been helpful to articulate a consistent methodology to this work, the reader should not assume that the written thesis can resolve the differences between these methods of presenting a work. As I prepared to exhibit in the Charles H. Scott Gallery at Emily Carr University, it became increasingly difficult to conceive of a presentation that would cogently relate *Coyote Walk* through a combination of photographic documents, didactic texts and found materials. On the one hand, the photographs and rules of the walk represented the *Coyote Walk* project in a straightforward and descriptive manner. On the other hand, the weathered wood and stones solicited a bodily and sensorial engagement with the materials, and sought to communicate a more experiential narrative. Instead of resolving these differences, the *Coyote Walk* installation offered different ways of presenting the project. The result was a two-sided wall, where the descriptive narrative was separated from a more experiential translation of the work (see fig. 9).

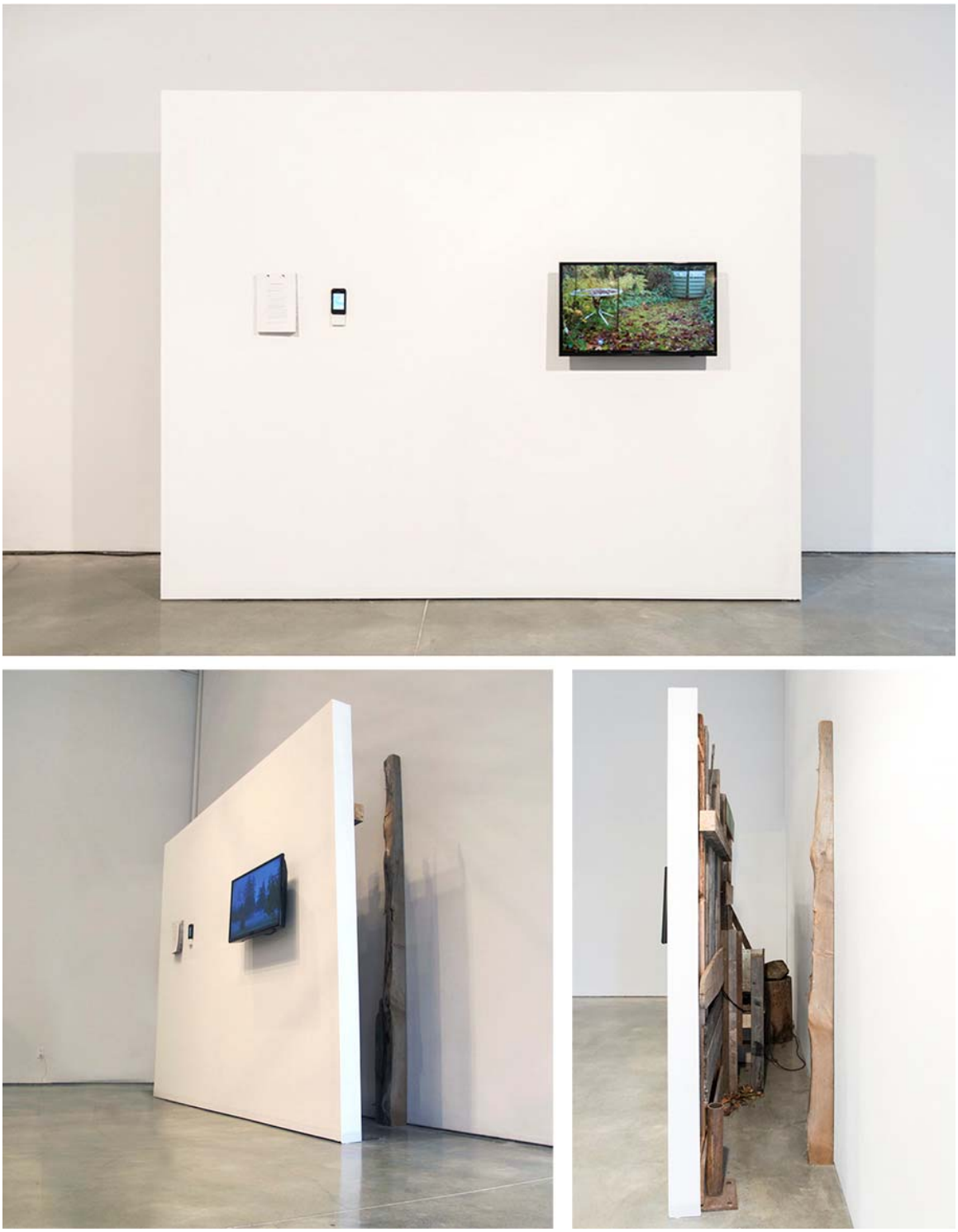


Fig. 9. Jay White. *Coyote Walk* 2014. Smartphone, found wood, detritus, single channel video.

On the front side of the wall, the rules of the walk were presented alongside participant Chris Huggins' photographs and an animated representation of the smartphone tracking application. This side of the wall described the walk as a conceptual work that allowed audience participation through GPS and photographic technologies. The reverse side exposed a provisional-looking supporting structure made of weathered wood. Dead leaves and other detritus were swept into the corners of the wall, and rocks and boulders held the wall in place. The tactile and visual qualities of these materials hinted at years of exposure to sun and weather that could not occur inside the temporary and physically constrained gallery exhibition. Viewers were challenged to enter the narrow passageway behind the wall, and may have become more aware of their own body's response to the work's facture. Whereas the front side of the wall portioned the walk into disparate technological and descriptive components, the reverse side asked people to engage with the objects by moving and experiencing sensations in their bodies.

At the beginning of this thesis project, these differences seemed too contradictory to co-exist in one installation. However, the differences and contrasts between them, and the ways they interact, is becoming a productive line of inquiry that I now see as central to my practice. It no longer seems necessary to unite these narrative modes or even conceive of them as discrete from each other.

By maintaining differences between storytelling, material objects, descriptive texts, and the walks themselves, the work can recognize that a walking project, and the entirety of the experience of a walk, will never be fully described, represented or framed. It is necessary to maintain the differences in order to appreciate that an object, an oral story, or a document, offers its own way of telling. A single project becomes a dispersion of narrative strategies that describe multiple facets of the project, and simultaneously experiments with potential modes of presentation and engagement.

During the exhibition, very few people physically negotiated the space behind wall. Perhaps the white-painted drywall and conventionally mounted monitor and smartphone signified a standard gallery presentation, and lulled viewers into habituated viewing tendencies that did not encourage them to explore the reverse side of the wall.
This is a thrilling discovery, as it raises the possibility of creating interior spaces

that correspond to the disregarded liminal spaces that are the focus of my outdoor work. In the same way that perception and participation becomes habitual in exterior spaces, it seems that many people bring a specific set of behaviours to observing work in a gallery that makes it possible to construct a space that is hidden in plain sight. The creation of an overlooked space in *Coyote Walk*, raises the possibility of revealing stories not just through walking, but by navigating and generating underrepresented interstitial spaces through studio work.

As I reflect on the last two years of research, a question arises: Why have these spaces, both inside and outside the gallery, become a familiar and comfortable place to occupy and work within? I often think of the words of an Ojibwe Elder when I shared the story of *Coyote Walk* with him. He said, "Looking a coyote in the eye is like looking in a mirror. You are looking at yourself." (Bain)

I wonder: Is the investigation of these hidden and transitional places and the elusive entities therein, simultaneously reflecting on the conflation of worldviews and identities that lie concealed in my own body? If that is so, then these interstitial spaces become zones of potentiality, where real and imagined entities and sensations can overlap, and where meanings and identities become indistinct and furtive. All this produces a mysterious more-than-human Commons where people, plants, animals, discarded objects, and my own affinities can intersect. I now see the *schoolhousecreek* installation as a first attempt at constructing a place where complex family histories can find form: documents of the carved icon of my nephew were intermingled with intimate objects and strange pieces of furniture whose purposes were uncertain (see fig.10). Whereas the *Coyote Walk* installation had a hidden space that was only a meter wide, I realize that the wall could be longer, or move further into the gallery. Or perhaps the wall could be eliminated altogether, providing more room for mysterious and hidden stories to joyfully reveal themselves.

Fig. 10. Jay White. *schoolhousecreek* 2013. Two-channel video, found materials, audio.

The thesis project has opened up questions about the use of imaging technologies in an embodied practice. On a walk, photography detaches and distracts from participatory encounter, but these tools are entangled in contemporary life, and a necessary part of a contemporary visual arts practice. In upcoming investigations of unseen urban areas, I am making use of infrared cameras and motion detection sensors. These devices seem particularly appropriate, as they re-appropriate and reverse the view of the surveillance technologies that are often encountered during my walks.[11] Surveillance tools allow for the remote observation of hidden spaces, and the limited spectral range of infrared cameras help maintain a mysterious and indistinct affect, by simultaneously obscuring what they reveal (see fig. 11) Whereas some artists use surveillance technologies to

[11] As an example, see page 20 for a description of the effect of motion-sensing security lights during *Coyote Walk.*

subvert and draw attention to the military-industrial complex, my projects look towards structures of dominance and control that implicate a more-than-human field of subjects.[12]

Fig. 11. Jay White. *Passing-Between Place: Hole in Fence 01*. 2014. Still from infrared video.

[12] Artists Trevor Paglen and Charles Stankievich, extensively deal with surveillance technologies in their practice.

8. Walking Back Home

Reverberating throughout this thesis project are the words of the Mi'kmaq elder, who said that stories were not lost, but remained in the landscape, waiting to be found. I began the thesis wondering what it meant for stories to be waiting in the land, and how they might be uncovered. [13] It seems that the answer lies in participating with the land and its denizens. I have realized that the process of story-finding is quite simple - through walks and encounters in liminal and hidden places, stories will inevitably reveal themselves. The more important question that emerges is "What kinds of stories should we tell, and how do we tell them?" Through the work in this thesis project, I have learned that the ways we perceive the world depend on the ways we participate with our environment.[14] The way we see the world is also the way we consciously inhabit the world. These decisions about being-in-the-world have become an important part of the practice. To reveal the proper story requires a constant exercise of inhabiting a set of values, and of appreciating and honouring the constant and reciprocal exchange with a more-than-human lifeworld. It now seems appropriate to bring these practices to my mother's home community and to the landscape surrounding it. I feel ready to rediscover stories that have been forgotten or hidden there, so they might be passed on to others.

[13] See page vii.
[14] See page 21.

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