

**From Site to Place and Back and Forth:
Towards a Fluid Methodology**

By

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Abstract

Site-specific art practices are becoming increasingly prevalent. This observation draws on the amount of recent literature devoted to the subject and its popularity as locus for biennials. However, several authors note that a clarification of the term and its meaning are necessary (Kwon 2, Cartiere *Re/Placing* 43). For example, one may associate site-specificity as art related to the topography of the site, and regard place-specificity art as work that use the topography as well as addressing social contexts (Lippard *Lure* 275-281, Cartiere *Re/Placing* 43).

Through a critical literature review and sited artistic practice, this thesis examines the role of place-specificity within site-specific art, the use of relocation of a work as a method, and the reconciliation of the lyrical and the critical in art productions, in an attempt to construct a methodological framework adapted to my location. I first introduce the context of the research: living in a small, remote locality. Proposed methods to conduct research while living in Northern Canada are outlined: they include a phenomenological experience of place, the use of water as an art medium, and practice-led research. I then define in more detail site-specificity and place-specificity, and offer examples of both practices utilizing artists' works engaging with water as a medium: Andy Goldsworthy, the Snow Show, and Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison. Analysis of these works furthers inquiry on environmental art practices, the romantic impulse, and relevant spatiotemporal theories, notably drawn from human geography. Non-representational theories, a subgenre of human geography, are considered as an alternative framework to view "natural" sites and their unfolding. Subsequently, the thesis focus is examined through the creation of new sited works, produced in the community of Fort Simpson, Northwest Territories, and Vancouver, British Columbia. Finally, a discussion tying the theoretical research and artistic practice ensues.

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Dedication

à Rachel

Introduction

This thesis project stems from an artistic practice already rooted in the creation of outdoor installations, making site-specific practices the emphasis for research. Moreover, such processes appear increasingly significant in the world of art, evidenced by the popular media attention devoted to it as well as its prevalent use amongst artists. In addition, a growing research literature can be found on the subject, due to the overlap of site-specificity onto similar genres such as installation art, public art, situation, community-based art, or New Genre Public Art. Recently, Matthew Ngui, the artistic director of the Singapore Biennial 2011, contended that no less than fifty percent of the works presented were site-specific (Singapore Biennial 2011 Open House). He stated:

As an artist, I prefer to work in a site-specific manner, where art engages in some way with the site's history, socio-cultural identity and physical space. This is not uncommon amongst artists where their art processes often engage deeply with the respective environments, producing works that are grounded and relevant to these sites. It is this engagement in all its possibilities that I hope to explore with Singapore Biennale. (ibid.)

His statement and artistic direction clearly posit site-specific art works as current and relevant. However, there is a debate over the terms, definition, and aims of site-specific art. Although some artists and authors (Ngui, Labelle and Ehrlich) still see the term "site-specific" as viable and able to keep up with current and future practices, others argue that the practice and models should be redefined and remodeled (Kwon 2, Doherty *Situation* 13). The term itself seems inadequate to describe and encompass the range of artistic practices revolving around a site or a place¹. Alternative terms and related fields have been

¹ There are several reasons why site-specificity as a genre is problematic in describing art works. The term, by moving away from specificity, has gone through several transformations and adaptations: site-determined, site-related, site-conscious, site-oriented, site-responsive (Kwon 1), or away from the site: community-specific, context-specific, debate-specific (Kwon 2). In doing so, it has lost its meaning and potency. Art historian Miwon Kwon considers no longer usable such an expression: the associated artistic practice became obsolete "partly due to the conceptual limitations of existing models of site-specificity itself such an expression: the associated artistic practice became obsolete "partly due to the conceptual limitations of existing "site-specific" has changed over time and will continue to do so, the term leads to confusion due to the lack of consensus over its current definition. It is often

developed (community-based art, place-specific art, New Genre Public Art, activist art, situation, dialogical art, Robert Irwin's classification of site-specific art, relational aesthetics, installation art, participation, etc.). Some would note that Ngui's approach is not site-specific but rather place-specific. Others, rejecting the term² while embracing the art practice, propose new ways of conceiving site-specific art. According to curator Claire Doherty, this type of art, which she reframes under the concept of situation, is perfectly suited to address contemporary contexts and conditions³. Doherty views 'situation' as a relevant concept embodying the recent shift in artistic practice where the studio or experimenting ground becomes situated in public space. She argues the 'rhetoric of place' is increasingly relevant in curatorial practices such as biennials, and not necessarily as means of revealing a place's identity or providing the locus for touristic stopovers (*Situation* 13). Rather, projects should be encouraged to embrace the mutability of places, and take various forms, such as short or long-term residencies, interdisciplinary collaborative practices, and critical platforms to name a few (*Location*). In this context, dislocations or the 'wrong place' act as an impetus to explore the contradictions of places, and move away from the permanency or stillness of 'fixed' site (*Situation* 13). Made famous by Richard Serra's controversial removal of work in a public plaza⁴, the notion of a fixed location for site-specific works is currently revised, as suggested by Doherty.

Doherty's *situation* is acutely suited to inform my practice. Finding ways to deal with the relocation of a work is particularly relevant for several reasons, illustrated by the video *Chiseled Opening in the Mackenzie River*. Created outdoors in subzero conditions in a remote area in northern Canada, the work was only seen by myself when completed

used to describe works created at a location, no matter what aspects of the site or place have been considered.

2 At the onset of the research, I coined the expression "Locus Praxis" to guide the direction of the thesis. I used an open-ended locution with the aim to keep its possibilities wide-ranging. The expression was not proposed to replace site-specificity. Rather, it helped imagine what site-specificity could mean.

3 For more information on her theorization of situation, see Doherty: 2004, 2008, 2009.

4 There is a long-standing association of site with a fixed location, due notably to late 1960s Land Art practices and made famous by Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* produced in 1981. The large steel plate site-specific sculpture, commissioned for a public plaza, received criticism because it disrupted social flow and interactions, and many feared it would attract vandalism (Crimp in Doherty 128-131). When debates occurred over its relocation, Richard Serra declared: "to remove the work is to destroy the work" (qtd. in Doherty 129). Serra's *Tilted Arc*'s controversial case illustrates the complex relation between artists, publics, public funding agencies, policies, and decision-making processes when art is sited in public places. For an authoritative account, see H. Senie. Alternatively, artists have exported works from one site to another. For example, Richard Long removed stones from his ventures and created circular installations in museums.

although three passers-by stopped and chatted while I was chiseling the ice. In order to reach a wider audience, the work was documented in video. In this video, ice fog shrouds the frozen Mackenzie River. An opening in the river revealed the hidden motion of the river. The video captured the cyclical movement of a directional flow. Seen as a pulse, random waves merged into an attunement. The oscillation made apparent how both the creation of the temporary opening, and time itself are human constructs. The simplicity of the work



Fig. 1 Lavoie, Nathalie. Chiseled Opening in the Mackenzie River, 2011. Top: Video still. Bottom: projection in Nenagh, Ireland, 9 February 2012. Photograph by Harald Turek. Used by permission of the artist.

relied on its minimalist intervention: a reductive installation. However, here the medium was a sheet of ice, seventy centimeters thick, and spanning for more than a thousand kilometers. Although the work was initially site-specific, the video enabled the presentation of the phenomena I had witnessed on the river. Shown during *Switch*, a contemporary video art screening in the streets of Nenagh, Ireland (fig. 1), the relocation of the winter event in an urban setting created intriguing connections between the elements of the place. For example, the white traffic circle echoed the circular pulsating hole as both suggest different rhythms using the same shape. Such an experiment revealed the fruitful use of relocation.

Another recurring theme in site-specific literature points to the predicament faced by the traveling artist. With ease of mobility, sponsoring agencies, and the flourishing of international art biennials, artists' responses to nomadic situations are pushed to the forefront (Meyer 10). Issues of global art markets, locality, and sensible responses to places come into play in complex intermingling ways. Art historian James Meyer distinguishes two main trends in art production involving the artist-traveler: one, lyrical, the other, critical (11). The lyrical approach, typified by a desire to seek and communicate the every day in visual or other sensual pleasures, can be seen in the works of Richard Long (lines made by walking) or Rirkrit Tiravanija (prepared Thai meals). Usually preconceived and reiterated at various locations, these works tend to portray the artist as a romantic Bohemian, traveling and engaging poetically with locations (12). Conversely, artists adopting a critical approach will use the travel opportunity to address current social conditions through the creation of art works promoting discursive practices. For example, Christian Philip Muller's illegal border crossings *Eight Hikes Across the Austrian Border* (1993), created for the Venice Biennial, raise issues of immigration, displacement, and asylum-seeking, relevant topics in the post-colonial era. Meyer suggests the critical approach is better suited to nomadic interventions because such an anti-aesthetic reflects more effectively post-modernism and contemporary conditions (11-12). Moreover, one may suggest the possibility of reconciling the lyrical and the critical, as neither exists alone. Muller's illegal crossings start from a lyrical action, his own movement, to be in turn presented as a comment on immigration policies and refugee status. Even local productions can benefit from such insights.

Although art biennials provide traveling and exhibiting opportunities, remote locations such as Northern Canada also attract a growing number of artists. For example, each year since 2009, the organization Arctic Circle has offered artistic residencies to approximately twenty

artists aboard a sailing vessel in the Arctic Ocean. The lure of the North seems self-evident. Possible reasons for this appeal may include a fascination for the seemingly pristine remote environment, the polar area known for its dramatic temperature change due to global warming, sublime ice formation, and aboriginal cultural lifestyle and knowledge. With increased melting in the Arctic Ocean, the North also stands as an important geopolitical location facing seabed territory and resource ownership disputes amongst countries sharing the maritime boundaries. Most often though, representations of the North by contemporary artists perpetuate the stereotypical portrayal of landscapes by emphasizing their striking beauty, ice, and emptiness (Triscott: 23). As a permanent resident in Northern Canada for the past fifteen years and an artist creating mostly outdoor site or place-specific works, it becomes imperative to consider methods and methodology for the creation of art works in my particular location.

For artist and curator Cameron Cartiere, a clarification of the term site-specificity and its meaning are necessary. Too often, the terms are used interchangeably (*Re/Placing* 43), as exemplified with Ngui's quote earlier. She distinguishes site-specificity as art related to the topography of the site, and proposes place-specificity to encompass work that use the topography as well as addressing social contexts. Although numerous other terms have been suggested to replace site-specificity, I selected these two expressions as core concepts on which to build my research and work: they represent the most open definitions of what it means to create at a site. On one hand, the site is characterized by its physiology, material composition, topography, and dynamic environmental processes (site). On the other hand, embedded in the site are memories, histories, intentions, and human agency (place).

Place-specific practices require the artist to engage with social aspects of the site. Contemporary discourse seems to promote a similar critical approach as described by Meyer, positively assessing works that are rather place-specific. It is also art historian Miwon Kwon's opinion that site-oriented practices should address the uneven conditions and heterogeneity of people and places, maintain a relational sensibility to the place, thus making local encounters into long-term commitments, and "transform passing intimacies into indelible, unretractable social marks" in order to avoid these practices becoming travel itineraries, one place after another (166).

Inspired by my past practice and new inquiry on site-specificity, the thesis project aims to define methods and elaborate a methodology suited to the creation of outdoor works in a remote, Northern location in Canada. What is the role of place-specificity within site-specific works? How is this demonstrated in my work, specifically in relationship to working in the North? Can the lyrical and the critical be reconciled? Can the relocation of a work, rather than becoming a travel itinerary, suggest insightful connections between places?

In part one, I introduce the context of the research and proposed methods. They include the Mackenzie River as locus for artistic production, a phenomenological experience of place, the use of water as an art medium, and practice-led research. In part two, I define in more detail site-specificity and place-specificity, and offer examples of both practices utilizing artists' work engaging with water as a medium: Andy Goldsworthy, the *Snow Show*, and Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison. Analysis of these works furthers examination on environmental art practices, the romantic impulse, and relevant spatiotemporal theories, notably drawn from human geography. Non-representational theories, a subgenre of human geography, are considered as an alternative framework to view "natural" sites and their unfolding. Part three examines new sited works, produced in the community of Fort Simpson, Northwest Territories, and Vancouver, British Columbia. Finally, in part four, a discussion tying the theoretical research and artistic practice ensues, and future inquiry is suggested.



Fig. 2 Lavoie, Nathalie. Five views of the Mackenzie River in Fort Simpson, 2010-2012. Digital photographs. Used by permission of the artist.

Part 1: Context and Methods

I live in Fort Simpson, a remote village with a population of 1200 in the Northwest Territories situated at the confluence of two great water streams: the Mackenzie and Liard Rivers. Of all the geological features found in the region, the Mackenzie River is the one that draws all my senses and inspires me. The longest river in Canada, it stretches from Great Slave Lake to the Beaufort Sea (Arctic Ocean). In Fort Simpson, an average volume of ten thousand cubic meters rushes down its path every second (the equivalent of five 40-foot sea freight containers). The river is the center around which history has been organized: early migration from Asia, pre-contact, Dene, European exploration, trade and modern development.

To the Dene people, one of the aboriginal groups living by its shores for several millennia, the Mackenzie River is known as Dehcho: the Big River. I subscribe to that appellation. The river existed long before Alexander Mackenzie “discovered” it. My acknowledgement of its local name takes into consideration the people that have resided by the river for much longer than the explorer, who came here over the summer of 1789. As told by local elder John Tsetso, the Dene have their own view of how the river came to be (89-90). To clumsily paraphrase, the legend recounts how the “Mackenzie” was made. Long ago, when bow and arrows were still being used, a strange event occurred: after a long winter, spring finally came, but soon to be replaced by winter again. Everything froze. Everything became covered in snow. People and animals grew hungry. Winter continued for days until the great Master pondered over a solution: create a big river for people to drink from, fish, and travel on. The Master threw a giant ball of dried meat that rolled and rolled. The ball increased in size as it rolled while leaving out meat on its carved path. People gathered the meat and eventually, the path filled with water from the melting snow. Not only does this creation story emphasize the central role of the river in the Dene culture, one may imagine its legacy as it was told across numerous generations.

Since establishing my dwelling on its bank in 2006 in Fort Simpson, the river has replaced my television. However, more than a mere background or source of light entertainment, the river, which I can see from two large windows in the living room, holds an unending fascination and appeal. It informs me of subtle light effects and weather changes, and of what kinds of activities are possible through the seasons. The photographs on figure 2, taken a few meters from where I live, depict various views and seasonal aspects of the river. When home, I may glance at the river more than a hundred times, daily, consciously or not. Numerous great events provide each year their share of excitement. The first walk across the river, in late November, by my neighbor who establishes the winter trail on the river, is one of utmost joy. It signals the stability of the river as a ground for transport and winter activities for the next four months, including artistic ones for me. The last walk is equally informative, as dark patches appear in early spring. Break-up is ultimately the most celebrated event involving the river. Occurring usually in early May, the force of the river is revealed through its massive chunks of ice rushing and colliding each other. It is the time the community congregates, sharing awe and excitement. It is also a time when the village is under threat of flooding, which occurs when ice blocks accumulate at a distant river-bend, forming a barrage, and resulting in water rise. There were such events forcing evacuation in 1963 and 1989. In 2007, I sat on my front step through a very long spring evening, regarding the jammed ice and frigid waters lapping the roadside, waiting for the river to claim my house. It relented. Over the years, I experienced the river in multiple ways. Apart from observing its details from my living room window, I swim in it, kayak on it (once all the way down to Inuvik, a month-long journey covering approximately one thousand kilometers), bathe in it, drink its water, and extinguish fires with it. From the river there is more to be learned, I am certain.

Running through the profoundly still Dehcho Valley, where there is little wind all year long, the river lays in sharp contrast to its surroundings: it is the only movement. Moreover, it is massive and constant. From a distance, the scale and power of the movement are not visible. From a closer perspective, one can feel the turbulence and power of the river: the sheer mass of churning water, silt and gravel moving. In the winter, these qualities disappear beneath the ice.

Surrounded by this expanse of water, in its fluid and solid states, I am compelled to go to the river, explore its qualities, and create art works that interact with it, making my



Fig. 3 Lavoie, Nathalie. Water survey, 2010. Installation view /Photograph. Used by permission of the artist.

own movement. Such a phenomenological approach to the river finds resonance in human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's preferred experiential mode to gain insight on space and place. Through sensation, perception, and conception, one experiences space mentally and emotionally (8). "Experience thus implies the ability to learn from what one has undergone. To experience is to learn, it means acting on the given and creating out of the given" (9). In other words, experiencing a place builds understanding; the more complex the sensory involvement, the deeper the understanding, and through the experience of multiple places, complex insights are discovered. Experiential cognition takes place by moving and engaging with space. From a child's perspective, movements allow the playful experimentation of a space (25). The concept of movement, observed in my surroundings, as well as my own, underpins the creative process in specific locations. I endeavor to

explore spatial environments, observe, move, and create movement.

While accompanying the Water Survey of Canada team on a river assessment outing, I had the opportunity to observe simultaneously both frozen and fluid states as the surveyors drilled holes through its nearly one meter-thick ice cover. On a chilly mid-December day, where temperatures hovered around -25 degrees Celsius, I packed a few of my favorite materials (thread, sewn polyethylene pouches, and thumbtacks) and visited every hole. After three hours of assembling pouches and thread to the surveyors' sticks, I only managed to interact with twelve of the holes (half of them). Meticulous work involving bare hands could no longer be sustained as cold and darkness settled in. I trudged back slowly, warming myself in the process. Later that evening, I returned with my spouse to take photographs. Not owning an external flash for my camera, I had to rely on the snowmobile's headlight to direct light at the installations. When idling, the snowmobile's headlight would become dimmer, so to get a stronger light, we had to press on the accelerator, forcefully enough to increase the light, but not so much as to move the machine. One result is shown on figure 3, where nearby ice plates were tested to capture and redirect light. Interacting with the river in novel ways, experimenting with its frozen and fluid states, and adapting tools to use the water artistically, led to an increase awareness of its possibilities. Water as a medium became an enabling constraint.

Several authors allude to the post-medium situation of contemporary art (Krauss, Hesler, Buskirk). Indeed, categories such as painting, sculpture, and photography are no longer the authoritative referents to discuss subject matter and medium conventions (Buskirk 112). New methods favoring installation, duration, participation or even ephemerality cannot readily be integrated in these traditional medium-based categories (Buskirk 163-165). Moreover, medium is increasingly selected by artists according to its relevance for the meaning of a work. Thus, artworks are examined "not through simplifying questions of medium, but through exploring artists' methodologies" (Heiser). In other words, motives behind selected methods in an artistic production, including medium choice, contribute to the conceptual development and reception of the work. More than an arbitrary decision, a particular material will emphasize or downplay a concept. For example, an architectural construction will create a different impression whether it is made of concrete or ephemeral materials.

Alternatively, artists may want to use a medium as a constraint to explore its possibilities, and stimulate creativity through limitation: an enabling constraint⁵. Literary critic Katharine Hayles believes

“constraints act in dynamic conjunction with metaphoric language to articulate the rich possibilities of distributed cognitive systems that include human and nonhuman actors. Neither completely constrained nor entirely free, we act within these systems with partial agency amid local specificities that help to determine our behavior, even as our behavior also helps to configure the system. We are never only conscious subjects, for distributed cognition take place throughout the body as well as without; we are never only texts, for we exist as embodied entities in physical contexts too complex to be reduced to semiotic codes; and we never act with complete agency, just as we are never completely without agency. (158)

In my work, the study of the river brings forth all sorts of observations, reactions, historical investigation, and human activity. The river setting itself, and its water in particular, as limiting constraints, become a collaborative source. In return, through metaphors, questions, and the creation of art works, I make sense of the responses in a feedback loop process.

In addition to a self-imposed constraint, water as the critical medium resonates in multiple ways. First, the local community now and throughout its pre and post-contact history is organized around the river and the state changes of water (transport through seasons, seasonal activities and locations). Second, water allows art to exist without imposing itself permanently on the site and local community, an issue with some importance in a post-colonial era. Notwithstanding this material consideration, openness to other artistic methods prevails in order to respond appropriately to chance opportunities.

Combining my artistic exploration of the river and inquiry into site-specificity, I create works; this practice-led method supports the thesis project. Using artistic production along with theoretical investigation is commonly referred to as art research, an open-ended expression emerging from the recent consideration of art as a legitimate method for conducting research. Indeed, there is little consensus in the academic world regarding how art-based research should be defined, applied, and evaluated (Smith xii). Sympathetic to a fluid method resisting the ossification of definitions and aims, I side with art theorist Sarat

5 Enabling constraint as a method is thoroughly defined in Manning and Massumi (2010).

Maharaj who views art research as a mix of unwieldy, unorganized possibilities: processes, experimentation, thinking-doing (39). The privileged method of art research: a combination of a priori and experiential knowledge, reflection, and synthesis, in an ongoing cycle, befits the aspiration of searching for the not-yet-known. In the context of academic writing and art production (practice-led research), one is to believe, the exegesis and art production should address the same research focus (Schilo and van Loon).

Part 2: Site and Place

With methods determined, this section surveys a few selected examples of site-specific and place-specific works involving water, then examines spatial theory as well as the critique of site-specificity as romantic gesture, and offers an alternative framework to view “natural” sites and their unfolding via non-representational theories.

The appeal of creating art directly in outdoor locations is nothing new. One could trace the use of specific sites for cultural productions and events through archeological evidence. Cave paintings, burial practices, and architectural monuments abound in prehistoric and Neolithic accounts (Lippard *Overlay*). However, the current use of “site” finds its origin in the 1960s and 1970s through the work of minimalist and earthwork artists (Suderburg 4). As such, the movement sought to demonstrate that the site, either inside or outside the gallery space, should be regarded as an integral component of the experience of a work. Therefore, art works located in sites respond to the physical realities of the site, be they natural or industrial (Suderburg 4). Early site-specific works generally tended to be lyrical and self-referential, located at a fixed site, and responding to the topography of the site. Works by Richard Long, Robert Smithson, and Ana Mendieta exemplify such practice.

A recent venue exemplifying site-specificity (one might even call it climate-specificity) was the *Snow Show*, a 2005 festival in Finland showcasing architecture-inclined snow and ice structures. It offered numerous examples of the versatility of the medium in large-scale constructions. Organized over three years by curator Lance Fung, the *Snow Show* presented the audience a rare opportunity to experience the prowess, both conceptually and aesthetically, of a medium not usually associated with art or architecture: water. Working with water in all states⁶ at subzero temperatures, each team, composed of an artist

⁶ Although one can easily picture solid states of water in subzero conditions, both liquid and gaseous forms occur. A liquid state is possible because, in moving water, only the surface will freeze; also, large volumes of water, such as lakes, may take several days to freeze. Gaseous because snow or ice can go directly from solid to gaseous, a process known as sublimation.

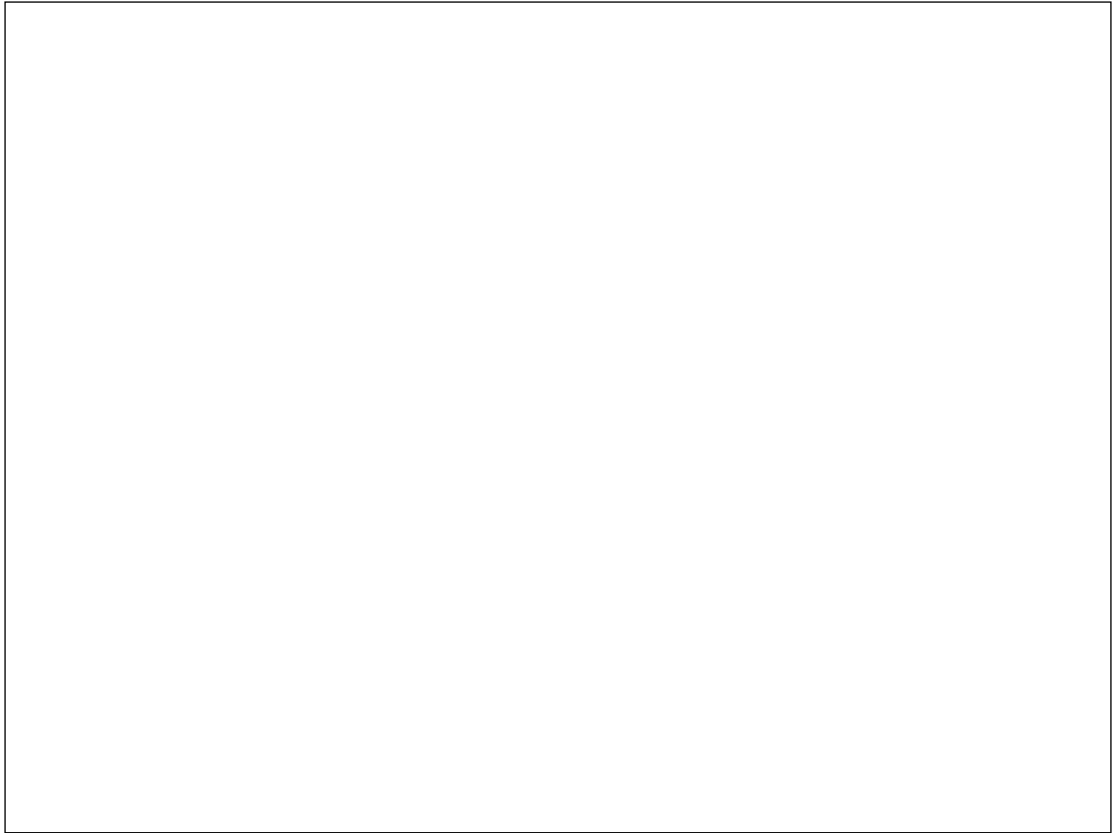


Figure 4 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.
Neto, Ernesto & Ocean North. Frozen Void, 2004. Installation view.

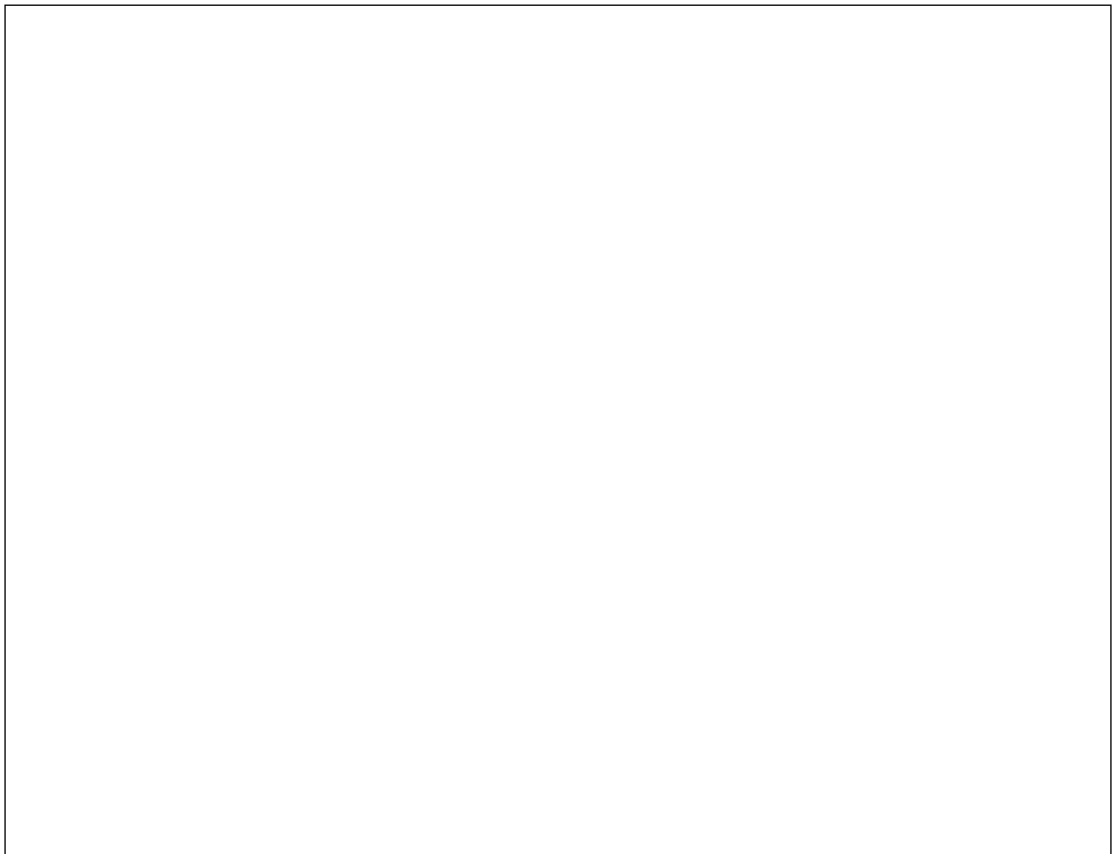


Figure 5 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.
Smith, Kiki & Lebbeus Woods. Skypool, 2004, Installation view.

and an architecture firm, conceived a structure for the event. There were rules: structure to be no higher than nine meters, a maximum surface area of 1000 square feet, and water content of at least eighty percent. Methods ranged from compacted snow, cast ice, harvested ice from a lake, and experimental processes, each presenting its own potential and technical difficulties.

For example, Ernesto Neto and Ocean North's *Frozen Void* (fig. 4) simulated a bubble trapped in ice, a microcosm scaled up to allow visitors to experience being inside a bubble. The concept required use of ice-casting methods. However, freezing a large volume of water proved very time consuming: the structure was still being constructed at the press opening. One work did not even survive the opening. Anish Kapoor and Future Systems' *Red Solid* collapsed prematurely due to the integrated light system's heat and a last-minute colour spraying technique (Young).

Rather than imposing itself as a colossal structure, Kiki Smith and Lebbeus Woods' *Skypool* (fig. 5) consisted of a pool of frozen layers embedded with lights and steel figures. Situated at ground level, visitors were invited to walk or skate on the surface. The team considered the work's changing nature over time: "an open cavity that makes itself apparent for a time then erases itself back into the land" (Smith qtd. in Lance: 202). Architect Lebbeus Woods adds: "By day, the figures are shadows in the dark ice. By night, the ice glows and the figures are illuminated, though darkly ... Now the ice is melting ... Little by little (the figures) emerge from the melting ice ... The figures rest on the bottom of the empty pools. Then the pools are filled with earth (qtd. in Lance: 202).

Organized in a northern climate around the medium of water, the *Snow Show* was an oddity, one of marvel. It differentiated itself from other snow festivals (where one can admire carved ice dragons and the like) with its impressive list of contemporary artists and architects. Curator Mary Jane Jacob defines the media of snow and ice as "outrageously exciting, unfamiliar, and transitory: the quintessential media to command focused activity" (qtd. in Fung 4). Fluid, always changing, malleable but never completely under control, its qualities truly lend themselves to the exploration of time and space (ibid). Unsurprisingly, many teams had to deal with changing circumstances and unexpected outcomes, and adapt their plans accordingly. The struggles involved in producing the works are testimony to artists' unfamiliarity with the material.

For those who could not attend the show, a comprehensive catalogue edited by Fung provides a mediated experience to the event. Unfortunately, photographs do not fully communicate the physical sensation of extreme cold and wind, scale, and a sense of place. Nevertheless, it offers a glimpse into what was achieved by the *Snow Show*. As it is the case for my practice, remote and ephemeral installations are rarely experienced directly by anyone other than the artist. Thus, since the work is not initially produced for an institutional setting, a translation is required to reach an audience. Photography and video are widely accepted modes of documentation. The artist may consider alternative representation methods: publications (print or web-based), reenactment, dramatization, and more. In this process of translation, something is inevitably lost. Alternatively, aesthetic and timely documentation of the work may present their most striking appearance.

All works created at the *Snow Show* are examples of site-specific production. They made use of local materials responding to local weather. Although they expressed astute concepts and made engaging structures, for the most part, they did not take into account the past or present use of the site, local traditions, narratives or cultural influences⁷.

In contrast to such a single event, the entire career of British artist Andy Goldsworthy focuses directly on the natural environment. He creates intricate sculptures and installations using sticks, pebbles, earth, trees, branches, snow, ice, feathers, and any other found objects he deems adequate. He mostly uses his hands as tools and natural materials to stitch together leaves and branches, sometimes even using spit to hold them together. Although most of his work is created in Scotland, he travelled and created in-situ in different parts of the world: North Pole, Japan, and Arizona to name a few. Typical works created in the 1980s include balanced rocks, harmonious arrangement of leaves, grass or sticks, and snow block formations (fig. 6). These ephemeral works are captured with the camera before they collapse or decay. He is best known for the stunning photographs of his natural creations often presented in coffee-table books, something for which he has long been criticized for (Hubbard 2007). He describes nature as

“intensely beautiful and at the same time very unnerving, and at times deeply frightening. You feel it as soon as you go out to the land, where everywhere you go things are dead, decaying, fallen down, growing, alive. There’s this incredible vigour and energy and

⁷ An exception may be found in the teams of Robert Barry and Hollmen-Reuter-Sandman and Ernesto Neto and Ocean North with their inspiration from the Finnish tradition of frozen ice lanterns.

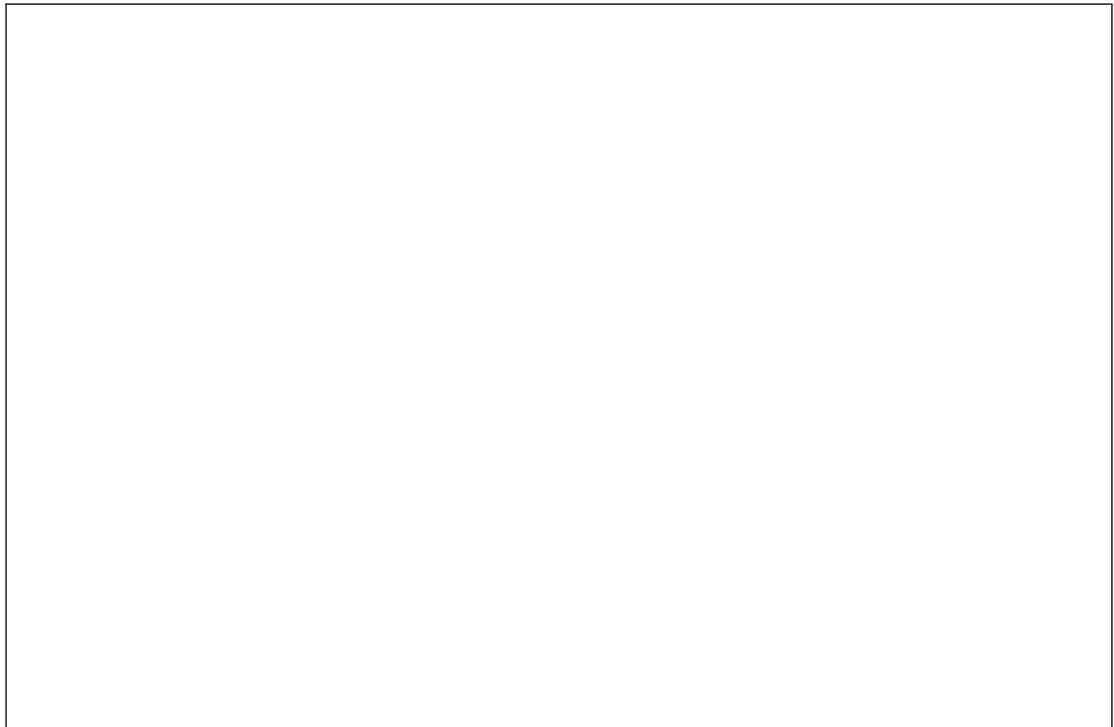


Figure 6 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.
Goldsworthy, Andy. Touching North, 1989. Photograph by Julian Calder.

life. And it's sometimes very difficult to deal with. I would hope that I don't have a kind of romantic view of nature. I do feel the beauty of it, for sure. But it's a beauty that's underwritten by extreme feelings." (qtd. in Thornes 403-404).

Indeed, any artist working with natural materials in their original settings faces the risk of being labeled 'romantic'. Unfortunately, this appellation usually resonates negatively. Natural, remote settings or art utilizing unprocessed materials in their original location brings to mind an imaginary lost instinctive sense: an illusive return to nature.

In both cases, the works are dependent almost exclusively on the morphology of the site and properties of the materials used. In the *Snow Show*, unfamiliarity with the properties of the medium made the actual outcomes unpredictable. In Goldsworthy's case, the available materials themselves are uncertain in advance of his arrival at a site. The results are uniquely attuned to the dynamic processes of each site. While worthwhile, the approach may neglect the social dimension of space.

Space is not a scientific object removed from ideology and politics; it has always been political and strategic. If space has an air of neutrality and indifference with regard to its contents and thus seems to be "purely" formal, the epitome of rational abstraction, it is precisely because it has been occupied and used, and has already been the focus of past

processes whose traces are not always evident on the landscape. Space has been shaped and molded from historical and natural elements, but this has been a political process. Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideologies (Lefebvre qtd. in Soja 210).

This “air of neutrality and indifference” Lefebvre alludes to might be what is at odds in sited artistic practices which do not explicitly refer to the social context of their production. To be and to create somewhere is contingent on power relationships: the ability to move, the privilege of living in a certain area or country, the freedom to create.

In addition to the physical attributes of a site, a place-specific work considers its social aspects. It includes layers of human histories and memories, and intertwines the personal and the political through time. It is a landscape inscribed with marks bearing current or past historical narratives, as well as possible future marks (Lippard *Lure* 7). Place-specific art practices thus consider the land, history, and culture via public art or photography, in an attempt to “recover the geographical imagination” (ibid. 14).

Human geographer Doreen Massey probed the concept of space for many decades, seeking to reconceptualize it and make it relevant for social theory and political discourse. She suggests time has long figured as the dominant concept underpinning human experience and history. In her view, both concepts should be seen interrelated. She posits space as “the product of interrelations” and acknowledges space “as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality” (9).

She advocates for a theory of space taking into account the “coexistence of others with their own trajectories and their stories to tell” (11). By presenting a unified view of space and time, she hopes to infer to both, a sense of becoming, the playing out of multiplicities in a spatiotemporal context:

“If time is to be open to a future of the new then space cannot be equated with the closures and horizontalities of representation. More generally, if time is to be open then space must be open too. Conceptualizing space as open, multiple and relational, unfinished and always becoming, is a prerequisite for history to be open and thus a prerequisite, too, for the possibility of politics” (Massey: 59).

Massey’s conceptualization enriches the interpretation of any site: not only does a site

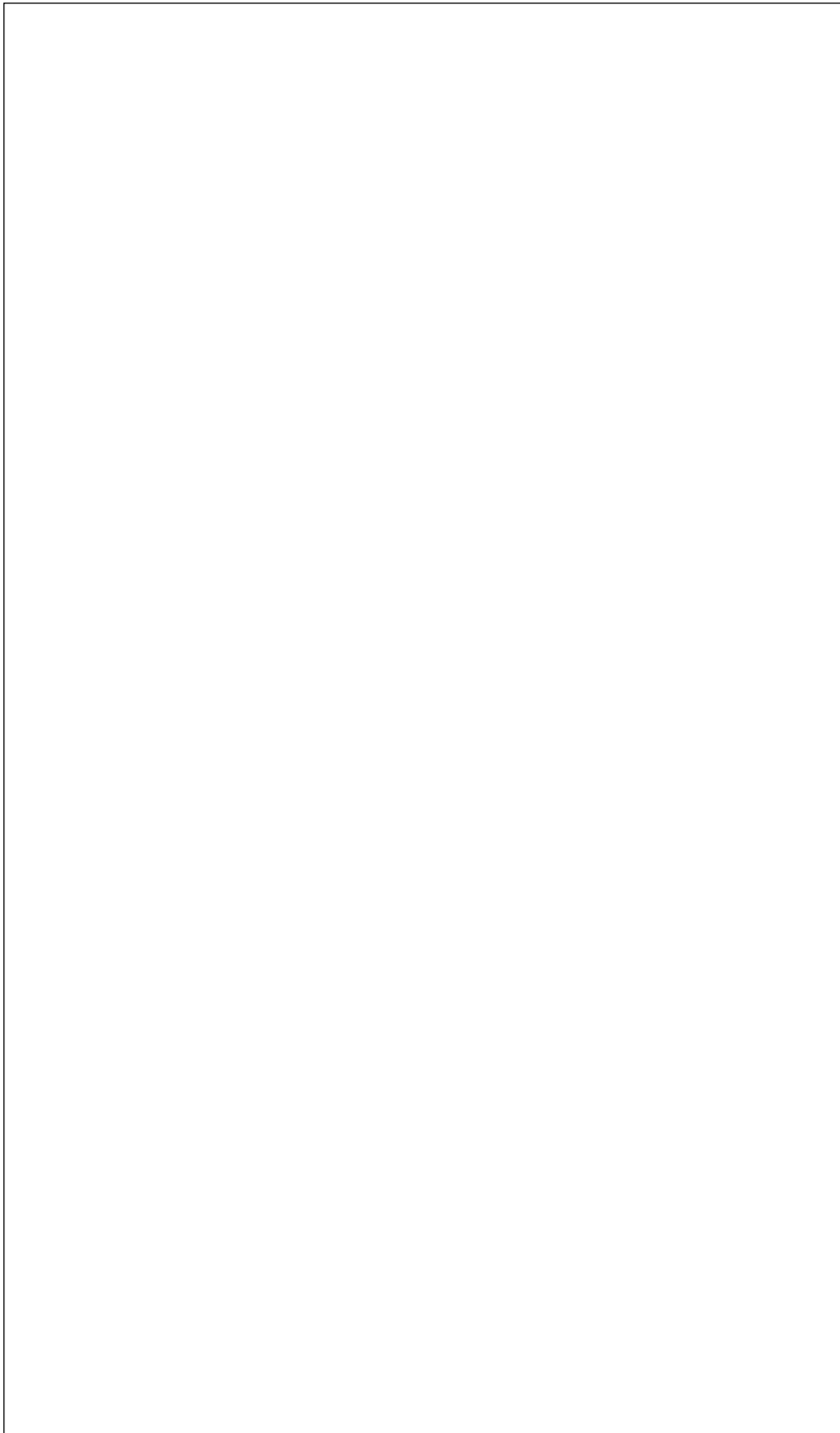


Figure 7 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.
Goldsworthy, Andy. Top: Sheep's wool/Charterhouse Square/ Mornings/21, 22 June 2000,
2000. Bottom: Ash keys/Barbican Centre, Silk Street/ Morning to Afternoon/ 21 June 2000,
2000.

change over time in a narrative sense, but multiple narratives exist simultaneously as experienced by every individual actor and human collective. In place-specific works, the integration of this social dimension utilizes the site more holistically than site-specific practices.

If earlier work by Goldsworthy were unmistakably site-specific, more recent work aims to engage directly with the audience by relocating it to the city. For example, in the summer of 2000, he installed twelve one-ton snowballs from Scotland in the streets of London (*Midsummer Snowballs*, fig. 7). As they melted, they revealed materials he trapped inside: berries, twigs, grain, straw, etc. The work is exemplary in demonstrating how Goldsworthy, known for his intricate sculptures, is shifting towards the elaboration of a more complex approach to traditional land art. By bringing the snowballs to the city, he provides an experience for urban dwellers that goes far beyond the solitary quest in nature. To Goldsworthy, the snowballs reveal processes of change and time, and initiate a dialogue between the city dwellers and nature via the snow installations (Lowenstein 38). Similarly, in his exhibition at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in 2007, he used thought-provoking materials: a dead hare and its blood, sheep-created canvases, cow dung on glass, and human hair mixed with mud applied on walls to name a few. With this exhibition, Goldsworthy was trying to restore the lost connection between the food chain and the land by using animal blood and feces in his work. He believes urban people have a limited view of the country and his work addresses the constant confrontation of death a farmer faces (Adams). These latter works by Goldsworthy are leaning towards place-specificity through relocation, providing a directly shared experience for the audience, and integrating themes such as ecology and food politics.

The collaborative duo Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison have concentrated for four decades on what is called today “ecological art”. They began at a time when conceptual or sited art were concerned with expressing ideas rather than investigating memories embedded in sites. In contrast, the duo offered an alternative to what it meant to work on specific sites while appropriating the conceptual art aesthetics (Green 103). Through small gestures, yet ambitious projects, they acted upon sites for their ecological restoration and imagined potential scenarios through documentation including texts and invented maps. The striking aspect is that each project started with a comprehensive study of the issues. They worked only in places to which they were invited so as not to appear coercive, and

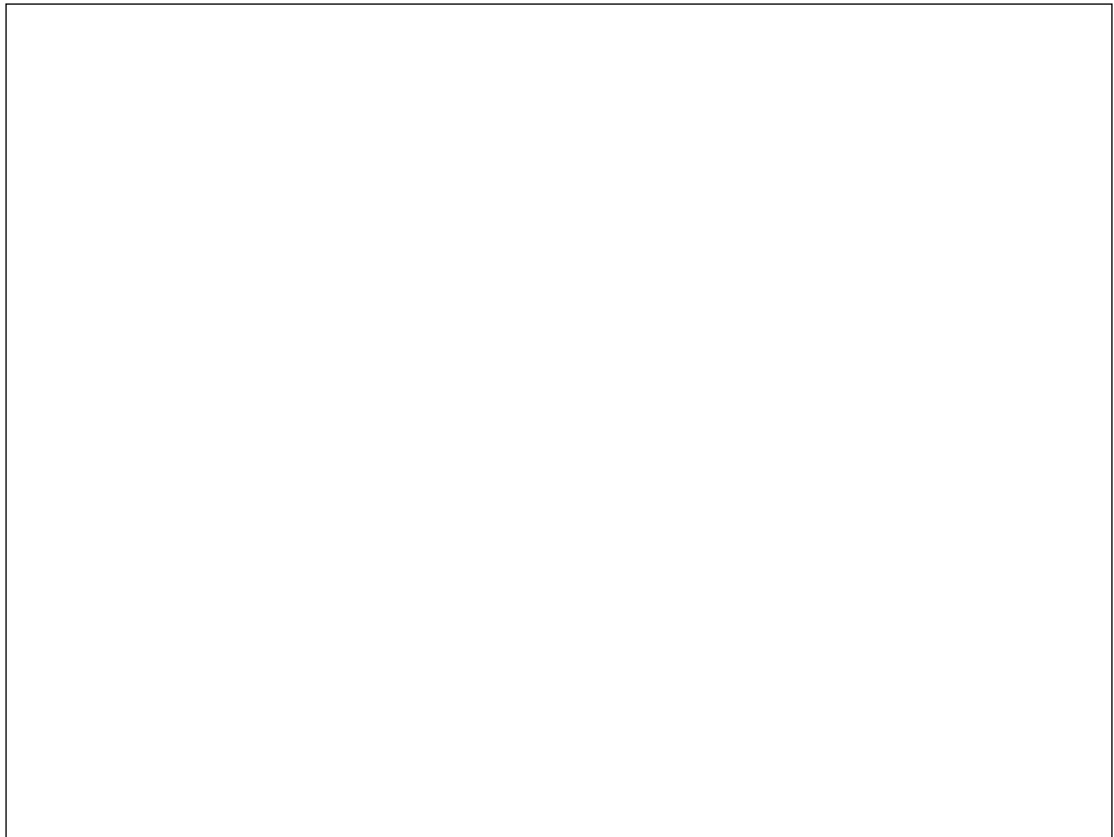


Figure 8 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.
Meyer Harrison, Helen and Newton. Santa Fe Watershed: Lessons from the Genius of Place, 2005, Installation View.

even then, although they usually proposed several potential scenarios, the plans were not necessarily executed due to the complexity of the project. Funding, urban planning policy, parochial or even national decision-making were ultimately out of their hands. Many of their works remained at the draft stage (for example Pasadena in Heartney 148-154, Yugoslavia, Tibet, in Green 116-117). Their projects demonstrate a long-term, even open-ended, commitment to place.

They describe their process as follows:

“Our work begins when we perceive an anomaly in the environment that is the result of opposing beliefs or contradictory metaphors. It is the moment when reality no longer appears seamless and the cost of belief has become outrageous that offers opportunity to create new spaces, first for the mind and thereafter in [the] everyday” (in Solnit 52).

A successful project was conceived over five years from 2003 to 2008 at Santa Fe, where local residents worried about the draining issues of the Santa Fe River (Meyer Harrison &

Harrison). Through closer investigation, the issue appeared not to be the lack of water but the inability of the surrounding soil to retain moisture. What ensued was further work with Hispanics, Native Americans, and “Anglos like ourselves” as well as experts in engineering and permaculture (ibid.). Several proposals to address the issues were presented at the Santa Fe Art Institute in the exhibition *Santa Fe Watershed: Lessons from the genius of a place*. They included a 70-foot long aerial photograph, maps, drawings, text, video stories, and sculptural elements representing the Tewa water symbols, the aboriginal story of water (fig. 8). Some of the considerations proposed for restoring the watershed’s soil to retain moisture were adopted as policy and enacted by the city of Santa Fe.

Space is always political. It is never neutral or devoid of conflicts. Detractors of land art practices may frown at beautiful or lyrical expressions set in landscapes. The Harrisons have opened up time and space by examining ecological issues, understanding what caused the deterioration of sites, investigating its past, and restoring, if only through imaginary maps, a balance. What would it mean to restore the historical balance of a site?⁸ Dissatisfied with the self-referential quality of conceptual art at the time, they committed to study and improve sites. Their projects can be seen as foreshadowing ideals found in the writing of Suzy Gablik, and works by Agnes Denes and Mel Chin. If one imagines a spectrum of environmental art, the Harrisons occupy the place-specific extremity, Goldsworthy has moved from site-specific towards the middle, and the *Snow Show* occupies the extremity of site-specificity.

Most often, critique aimed at recent environmental art points to its adherence to beliefs and values purported by Romantic ideals. In a foreword to John K. Grande’s *Art Nature Dialogue: Interviews with Environmental Artists*, writer Edward Lucie Smith admits “despite the claims to practicality made by a number of ecological and land artists, the kind of art chronicled here is essentially a manifestation of the romantic impulse” (xi). This statement refers to the pursuit of a transcendental connection with nature: the wild, the remote or the sublime. Similarly, there is a consistent view that “postmodern theory relegates nature to the junk heap of outmoded concepts” (Heartney 141). In Brian Wallis words: “Such is the case with Land Art, which, although flamboyantly boosted in the heady, back-to-the-earth 1960s, has since largely fallen off the map of canonical art histories” (Wallis and Kastner

8 American artist Matthew Buckingham provides numerous examples of works exploring such theme. See, for example, *Six Grandfathers, Paha Sapa, in the Year 502,002 C.E.*

23).

An aspect that should not be overlooked is the role institutions (museums, critics, journals) play in moderating art, through a process of inclusion and exclusion. A salient example is illustrated with Goldsworthy's career, spanning nearly over forty years. Until recently, he has received little attention from Tate, the contemporary art authority in Great Britain, for being too much of a craftsperson (Lowenstein 38). However, a recent Watercolour exhibition (2011) included Goldsworthy's work: marks created by a melting snowball with embedded red pigment. For the occasion, Tate produced a short video on the artist (Tateshots). His slow integration by Tate is symptomatic of what Cartiere and Willis view as a problem faced by public art: its lack of recognition as a fine art discipline (1).

Can one find any critical stance in the production of art in natural sites such as Goldsworthy's early works? The answer is not so clearly demonstrable. As John K. Grande notes, "a walk in the woods or in a park produces innumerable stimuli, and our senses capture all of this, whether consciously or unconsciously" (xv). He also points to the legacy of modernism and postmodernism in art, arguing it is "one of environmental deprivation and segregation of arts activity from nature" (xvi). He remains hopeful though, observing that a growing number of art exhibitions and symposia explore art and nature themes (ibid.). In essence, isolation from the romantic aspect is itself political, and therefore potentially place-specific.

Goldsworthy himself portrays a humble attitude towards nature in this regard:

"I'm not an artist born full of things I want to express. I'm empty, hungry, wanting to know more. That's my true self; and my art is a way of learning, in which instincts guide best. It is also very physical—I need the shock of touch, the resistance of place, materials and weather, the earth as my source. It is collaboration, a meeting point between my own and earth's nature" (qtd. in Thornes 404).

In my own practice in northern Canada, I also find my surroundings to be inspirational places for creation. Moreover, my remote location makes conventional presentation of work (exhibition in gallery, for example) challenging and often impossible. Utilizing the site simultaneously as a studio space, a place of experimentation and discovery, and an exhibition space, serves my predicament. Finally, the concept of co-creation needs not

rely exclusively on other human beings: non-human contributors may participate in the becoming of a place. This was made apparent in a concurrent project entitled *Cold Field Lab*, consisting of a self-initiated residency on the Mackenzie River. The project included the construction of a snow dwelling (quinzee), living in it, and observing and reacting to the environment, anticipating that the area would provide material for a more spontaneous artwork.

During the first night, a scene of struggle and death occurred just one kilometer away from our shelter. Four wolves ambushed and attacked a young caribou. I did not hear anything. I returned to document the patterns of eating habits by wolves and ravens, observing how the scene had changed from the previous day. On my last visit, all that was left were a few small bone fragments and hair tufts scattered in the snow (fig. 9). As such, this project finds much resonance with Goldsworthy's views on nature.

In contrast, the Harrisons avoided to some degree the romantic categorization by choosing an ecological path, one that was critical from its onset. However, their imaginary maps and scenarios, and attempts to meliorate sites modified by human activity, may still be regarded as an effort to restore places to their initial conditions, a romantic idea itself. Are there any



Fig. 9 Lavoie, Nathalie. *Cold Field Lab Residency*, 2012. Found Installation. Used by permission of the artist.

alternative views of nature beside the “romantic” one?

As discussed earlier, art prompted by the physical engagement of the artist with a natural site tends to be regarded as following a romantic tradition, the default way of conceiving “nature” when it is used as raw material on site. However, our fascination with all things natural is apparent in the plethora of works utilizing its elements and displayed in a gallery or museum: a reconstructed tree, a taxidermied horse, a plant illuminated by an artwork⁹. The museum provides a perfectly suitable space for discussing our relation with nature: outdoors in wilderness is less so. The romantic tradition tends to connote artworks sited outdoors: the wilder the site, the more romantic it is labeled. However, the problem with all utopian ideas such as romanticism is that they make one unwilling to compromise: nature is pure but made impure by the presence of people. It ignores the dynamic of change embedded in any area. Divisions between categories, realms, or ecosystems are not so clear. Northern Canada is the penultimate example of a location imbued with such connotation: a region seemingly unspoiled by human activity. However, to imagine a state before humans, “a pristine” state, is simply to refer to an archaic era. Humans are part of nature and ecosystems, and transform the land, in often non-obvious ways. There is a huge range of different interrelations that go beyond the simplistic view of ‘romantic’.

In search for an alternative conception of nature and the material world, I turn to recent human geography’s non-representational theories. Although a thorough investigation of these theories¹⁰ is beyond the scope of the thesis project, a brief description may indicate paths for future research and provide fertile ground for sited productions. Similarly to Massey’s conception of space based on interrelations, non-representational theories approach the dynamic configuration of all entities (living, non-living, affects) through thought-in action: “thought is placed in action and action is placed in the world” (Anderson and Harrison 11). Thinking processes occur through embodied and environmental practical contingencies, affinities and habits:

This means that humans are envisioned in constant relations of modification and reciprocity with their environs, action being understood not as a one way street running from the actor to the acted upon, from the active to the passive or mind to matter, but as a relational

9 *After Nature* exhibition at the New Museum, New York, in 2008. Artists mentioned: Zoe Leonard, Maurizio Cattelan, Allora & Calzadilla, Jenny Holzer.

10 For more information on non-representational theories, see Thrift. Anderson and Harrison’s introduction provides an excellent overview. Tim Creswell’s critical review of Anderson and Harrison’s book is illuminating.

phenomena incessantly looping back and regulating itself through feedback phenomena such as proprioception, resistance, balance, rhythm and tone; put simply, all action is interaction. (ibid. 7)

Relational understanding of the world should include non-human entities. Otherwise, it recreates “the divides between inside and outside, meaning and world, subject and site” (ibid. 12). It may also reinforce the distinction between nature and culture. In order to focus on the site and its unfolding, this approach requires the researcher to minimize a priori influences and let things happen:

In the taking-place of practices, things and events there is no room for hidden forces, no room for universal transcendentals or first principles. And so even representations become understood as presentations; as things and events they enact worlds, rather than being simple go-betweens tasked with re-presenting some pre-existing order or force. In their taking-place they have an expressive power as active interventions in the co-fabrication of worlds. (ibid.: 14)

Such approach also encourages the “proliferation of diverse relations and a strong sense that the resulting orders are open, provisional, achievements” (ibid. 15). The prescription would be to pay attention to, and engage through actions with all elements of place, living, and non-living, human, and non-human, with the goal being to create dynamic relations between elements found therein. These relationships are evident in *The Book of Dene*, a repository of Dene traditions and beliefs recorded by priest Emile Petitot at the end of the twentieth century. Such tales combine the environment, family relationships, hardship, survival themes, everyday experiences, and fantastic animal encounters to expound the values and traditions of their aboriginal culture.

Non-representational theories and aboriginal conception of place, time, and nature are modes favoring a holistic view of human agency within nature. They point the way for all site-based research, not only for human geography but both site and place-specific art as well. Space is dynamic, a set of relations continually in flux. Thus the boundary between site-specific and place-specific art becomes less easily delineated as theoretical conceptions are revisited.

Part 3: From Site to Place

The river is the greatest example of a site in flux. It is not only in motion; it changes course; it changes state seasonally; and its moving components, from clay bed and sand bars to shores and the water itself, illustrate a wide range of changing states contemporaneously. Using the river, the following examples of my work represent practice-led research to further delineate a methodology adapted to my location.

Water survey, 2010

In order to explore unknown avenues and discover new methods and concepts, in December 2010, I asked the Canada Water Survey team if I could tag along when they measure the frozen Mackenzie River. They drilled twenty-three holes through the ice at intervals across the river to monitor the depth of the river, thickness of ice, and velocity of the current beneath it. Before the holes froze, I created small water installations interacting with the surveyors' sticks and drilled holes (fig. 10). The resulting work allowed play, improvisation, and responses to emerging qualities. Although the work was site-specific, the spontaneous exploration of the site acted as a bridge to two other works (*Chiseled Opening in the Mackenzie River*, *An attempt to measure duration with water*). Without free play, these ideas would not have occurred to me.

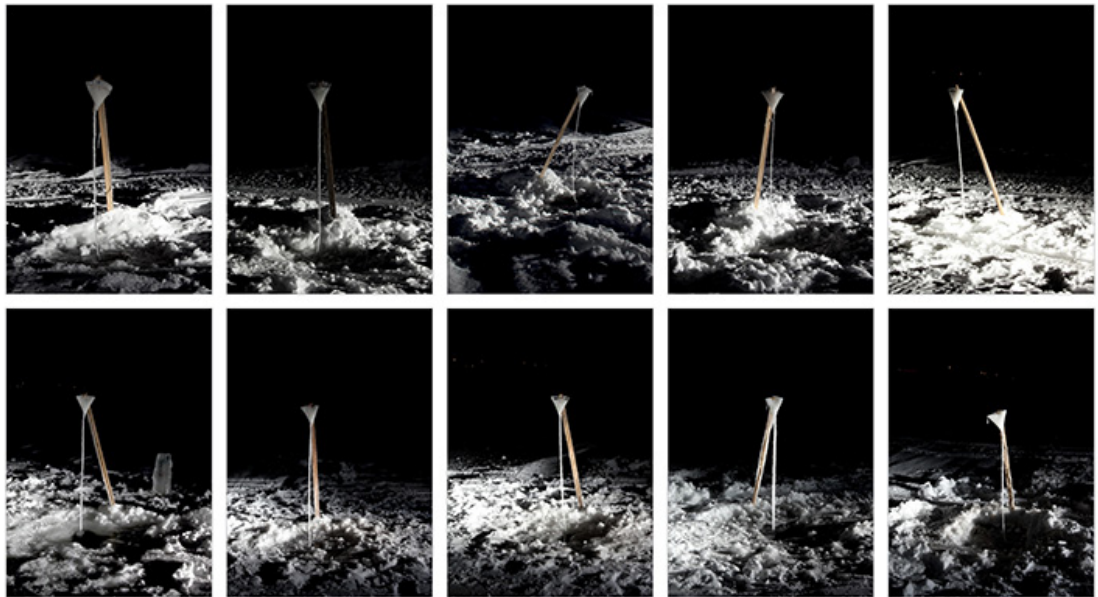


Fig. 10 Lavoie, Nathalie. *Water survey*, 2010. Installation view /Photographs. Used by permission of the artist.

An Attempt to Measure Duration With Water, 2011

In the earlier work *Water Survey*, I realized I was exploring the concept of time by creating pouches that let water out. Ancient water clocks used containers to measure time: a ceramic urn with an opening at the bottom let water out. Once the urn is empty, a certain lapse of time has passed. The idea of duration became obvious in my frozen versions.

The river is commonly used as a metaphor to illustrate time. Continuous, progressing in a linear fashion, the river flows in one direction. What happens though, when the river hides beneath a thick sheet of ice? The frozen river slows processes or paces we cannot immediately perceive. The subsequent work, *An attempt to measure duration with water* (fig. 11), was a winter site-specific installation in the middle of the river. Analogous to ancient water clocks, it utilized the river water to measure time. From a chiseled hole, the



Fig. 11 Lavoie, Nathalie. *An attempt to measure duration with water (night)*, 2011. Photograph. Used by permission of the artist.

water was manually supplied to the structure: a tripod formed of elder bush limbs nesting a polyethylene pouch, roughly 1.70 meter high. The movement (clock mechanism) was simple: holes at the bottom let the water out. The emptying of the pouch indicated a given lapse of time. However, much of the water froze before the clock could empty (fig. 12). In the same way that modern perception of prehistoric versus historic time is distorted in favor of the colonial period, the water clock distorts the perception of time as measured by water's flow. Furthermore, similar to lesser contemporary acknowledgement of deeper time, the river's movement in the winter is usually not apparent, but the water clock briefly revealed this hidden flow. The clock was produced at night to take advantage of the nadir of cold. Brief hours of pale winter sunlight at this high latitude yield to lengthy brooding darkness. Curiously coincidental, the word for measured time in the local Dene dialect (South Slavey) is "sahtzee". It is literally translated as "the sun's heart" (Norwegian). The winter clock was refined through the improvement of the structure and handmade tools. The third time I activated the night clock, I loaded my pack with twelve liters of hot water to thaw it, tools, camera equipment, and walked to the middle of the river. At times, moonlight shining on the white landscape provided sufficient light. Heavily clothed and weighed



Fig. 12 Lavoie, Nathalie. An attempt to measure duration with water (day), 2011. Photograph. Used by permission of the artist.

down with equipment, I took a shortcut by sliding down the hill, and after fifteen minutes of slowly treading on the uneven, sometimes soft surface, I uncovered the hole kept slightly unfrozen with cardboard and snow insulation. A few taps with the end of the ladle cracked the thin, frozen surface. Next followed a choreography of filling the clock, poking the pouch, modifying the camera's angle and location, adjusting the remote control with bare fingers,



Fig. 13 Lavoie, Nathalie. handmade poking tool and laddle, 2011. Documentation photographs. Used by permission of the artist.

and stalking around the clock with the flash. A distant, stumbling, dark figure periodically punctuated by flash against the moonlit ice must have presented an enigmatic sight.

When working with an unconventional medium, self-made tools (fig. 13) must often be invented. Moreover, with limited access to supplies (the main store carries available commodities from lettuce to snowmobiles), one must use what is at hand and adapt it to the climatic conditions. Clumsy and sodden, mittens could never hold the needle required to pierce the clock's pouch, but they could hold a stout branch with needle affixed. A ladle was similarly fashioned joining a branch and a pot. Both tools were made more robust through use: layers of ice reinforced the existing joints. Such do-it-yourself strategies spring from necessity: further instances of enabling constraints.

A Temporary Redirection of the Mackenzie River Westward Into the Pacific Ocean, 2011

A Temporary Redirection of the Mackenzie River Westward Into the Pacific Ocean (fig. 14) continued a thought process started in the earlier work discussed above. It also represented an adapted reiteration of the work in a new location, Vancouver. When I considered bringing the water clock to Vancouver during the summer, initially I could not see the purpose of such move. This conundrum led to an investigation of how I could conceptually explain the relocation. How does the translocation of a work influence its meaning?

In 1789, financed by the North West Company and accompanied by local guides, the explorer Alexander Mackenzie canoed the river hoping to reach the Pacific Ocean, and open a lucrative trade route to the East. His journal was my connection to his time and thoughts. When his explorations revealed the river did not lead to the Pacific, he apparently named it “Disappointment River” (Moring 16).

His perceptions became the impetus for my work. Furthering the concept of measured time, I brought a jerry can containing the water and poured it into the Salish Sea neighboring the Pacific Ocean. Temporarily, for approximately two minutes, the northern flow of

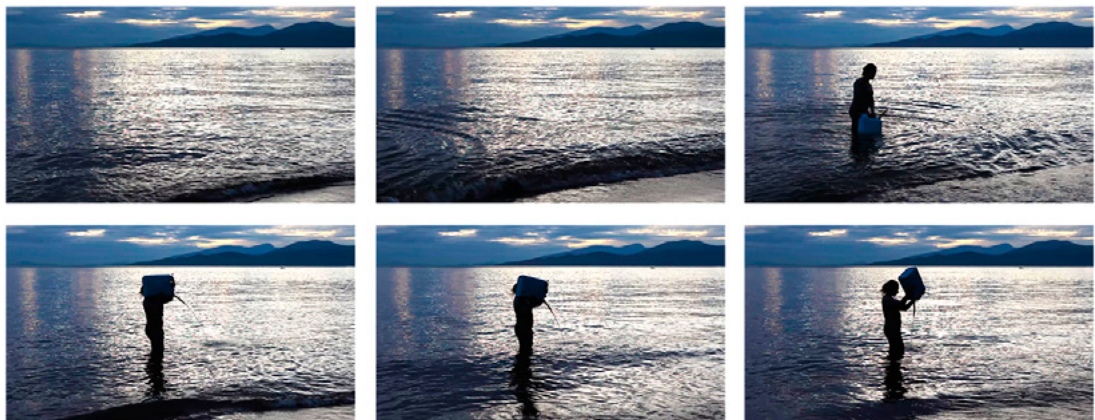


Fig. 14 Lavoie, Nathalie. *A temporary redirection of the Mackenzie River westward Into the Pacific Ocean*, 2011. Video stills. Used by permission of the artist.

the Mackenzie was directed west; temporarily, assuaging Mackenzie's anguish, and fulfilling the promise of the river. The performance made concrete the tremendous hope and subsequent dashing of the same of the explorer and the company that backed him. Whether the performance can lessen the disappointment of the river's direction or bring new appreciation for the Mackenzie as it is, rather than as its namesake had hoped it to be, is left for the audience to decide.

The redirection of the river also makes reference to redirection as a trick used by magicians to divert attention and take advantage of the shortcomings of human vision and awareness. A redirection can stand as a metaphor to illustrate deception, and also to examine the meaning of a name. In the case of the river, the redirection is threefold: Mackenzie considered it his prerogative to rename the Dehcho "Disappointment River", only to have his choice of appellation superseded by his own name.

Where *An attempt to measure duration with water* dealt with the concept of duration, *A Temporary Redirection of the Mackenzie River Westward Into the Pacific Ocean*, in addition, engaged with history by revealing an historical anecdote. The work suggested an imaginary timespace by fusing anachronous events, the explorer's narrative, and my own movement. What was initially a site-specific work metamorphosed into a more complex work, place-specific.

However, it certainly is a challenge for artists to go "beyond the reactive function of much activist art" (Lippard *Situation* 156). Such investigation would make connections visible, provide alternative non-dominant culture readings of a place, "expose the social agendas that formed the land, to reinstate the mythical and cultural dimensions of 'public experience', and reveal "the ideological relationships and historical constructions of place" (ibid.). Historian Lucy Lippard advocates for a "place ethic", one that "demands a respect for a place that is rooted more deeply than an aesthetic version of the "tourist gaze" (*Lure* 278-281).

Ideally, my work would have been presented along other interpretations of the Mackenzie River. Collaborative and participative works had indeed been envisaged to become integral

to the thesis project¹¹. I realized such projects could not be completed within the thesis timeframe. However, my permanent residency in Fort Simpson may bring future occasions. Nevertheless, from previous experience living in several northern communities (Dene, Cree, Inuit) for the past fifteen years, I have constructed my own ethical understanding of places. Firstly, although sharing and disseminating knowledge is widely recognized as a common, positive, and empowering practice, the ownership and representation of oral traditional knowledge remains a delicate subject. This comes to no surprise in communities where significant cultural loss occurred through residential schooling. A local Inuit initiative such as Isuma Film Productions in Igloolik is a leading example of cultural production and ownership. Furthermore, an elder once told me he received stories from his grandparents as a gift, and subsequently, the right to retell these stories. Earlier discussed in the introduction, John Tsetso's tale of the creation of the river stands as an alternative history to Mackenzie's. Even though Tsetso's story is recorded bearing his name, the legend belongs to all Dene people. I do not have any authority over the legend. At the Charles Scott Gallery where my video was presented, a didactic panel informed the audience of Mackenzie's exploration and naming of the river "disappointment". The choice to present Mackenzie and his disappointment was a way to expose the explorer to scrutiny and external criticism. I own no right to muse on the Dene's river creation story. As a humble guest on this land, to expose my hosts' most sacred story is to risk the crime of discourtesy. In sum, my own lyrical displacement of water opened up a wide range of critical discourse.

By engaging with history and creating a space for what Lippard calls "a geographical imagination", places that can only exist as thought experiments, the work divulged what was invisible. *A Temporary Redirection of the Mackenzie River Westward Into the Pacific Ocean*, not simply as a realized work, but also as a lengthily process of historical research, repeated and future experimentation, becomes an invitation to consider a complex set of issues: the colonial expansion and exploration, economic development, toponymy (the process by which we name places), and the story of pre-contact Dene and the Dehcho River. Within art history, this work also is in dialogue with precursors who poured liquids in Vancouver: Robert Smithson's *Glue Pour* in 1969. Without the historical anecdote, the work continues to hold meaning: it touches on the ecological impact of pouring foreign liquids in the ocean,

11 Although such practice encourages the decentering of established art and cultural production and display, access to audience and modes of representation must be thoughtfully examined (Clifford 62). Notwithstanding the best of intentions, cultural representations are always integrated in a larger context of networks of power and communication.

invasive species, ecological disasters, and the hybridization of two bodies of water.

Meniscus Series, 2012

This creation of hybridity is also explored in the *Meniscus* series (fig. 15) in which both bodies of water, the Mackenzie and the Pacific, are seen merging on a microscopic scale. The two iterations, depicting the same idea, become metaphors for witnessing the formation of hybridity. The series attempts to make visible the transformation, capturing with photographs the moment at which it is most noticeable but not quantitatively nor qualitatively measurable.

Where both previous works sited on the river and the ocean derived meaning from their physical locations, the *Meniscus* series transforms these experiences into an abstract generalization. At this point, it may not be necessary to mention the provenance of the waters used to produce the photographs.



Fig. 15 Lavoie, Untitled 08 from the Meniscus Series, 37.5 x 50.5 inches, 2012. Photograph. Used by permission of the artist.

Spurred by a short residency at 4-D Labs at Simon Fraser University, the *Meniscus* series borrows simple scientific tools, methods, and terminology. Measurements of liquids are read by aligning the meniscus against graduated lines. Here, a body of water dropped into another one disrupts the meniscus and makes it impossible to read the measurement. There are also consequences regarding the nature of both liquids, before and after. As the two mix, although the same components exist materially, the transformation, such as dilution and concentration, alters the solutions in a process that is simultaneously creative and destructive. The series hinges on Lavoisier's principle of conservation of mass and matter: nothing loses itself, nothing creates itself, everything transforms itself¹².

12 My translation. The most common translation "Nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed" omits the reflexive verb found in the original French statement: "... car rien ne se crée, ni dans les opérations de l'art, ni dans celles de la nature, et l'on peut poser en principe que, dans toute opération, il y a une égale quantité de matière avant et après l'opération; que la qualité et la quantité des principes est la même, et qu'il n'y a que des changements, des modifications" (Antoine Lavoisier, in Wit: 101)

Presentation at Charles H. Scott Gallery, 2012

The decision to show *Meniscus* prints and *A Temporary Redirection of the Mackenzie River Westward Into the Pacific Ocean* through photographs and video side by side was prompted by a discussion with artist Jin-Me Yoon. Jin-Me proposed that photographs alone would fail to communicate the dynamic processes behind the realization of the final products. The presented works inverted the scale of the actual processes: three *Meniscus* photographs were printed on a large scale, whereas the video was shown on the small screen of an iPad. Looped, the video was edited with its last half seamlessly going backward, and the poured water flowed back slowly into the container. The discontinuity or even disconnect between one's everyday perceptions and levels of hidden existence and meaning was thus reinforced. Simultaneously, the continuity between the themes explored in the two works was expressed by the renaming of the combined works to the single appellation, *A Temporary Redirection of the Mackenzie River Westward Into the Pacific Ocean*.



Fig. 16 Lavoie, Nathalie. *A temporary redirection of the Mackenzie River westward Into the Pacific Ocean*, 2012. Installation View. Used by permission of the artist.

Part 4: Towards a Fluid Methodology

Examination of site-specific and place-specific works reveals its utility to my practice. In other words, a work can be both genres contemporaneously and sequentially: art work exist as site-specific only in one context, but is place-specific in another context; and during production, site-specificity may precede place-specificity as sociopolitical themes reveal themselves through longer term exploration of a site. Examination of artistic theory and practice, including my own practice, reveals two aspects of its utility. First, the techniques and concepts developed through site-specific works, such as methods of manipulating water developed in the *Snow Show*, are directly transferable to creation of place-specific work. Second, a longer-term commitment to one site enables the skills, observation, and methodology to develop, resulting in more complex work, such as *Santa Fe Watershed* by the Harrisons. Furthermore, in the context of a career rather than a work, a long-term commitment to explore sites may develop intuitively towards place-specific practices, as is the case with Goldsworthy. My own works encapsulate the above. My early work, such as *Water Survey* was instrumental in developing the techniques specific to water in a cold setting. My commitment to the Dehcho River has resulted in a cascade of increasingly holistic works. Seen over the course of several years, most works are initiated by site-specific exploration and expand into place-specific territory. The applicability of site-specific practice for contemporary artists in general and for myself as an artist in a remote setting has never been greater. The few works presented in this thesis merely reveal a cursory exploration of the river's potential collaboration. Several initiatives will become annual: the self-initiated residency *Cold Field Lab* and the *Water Survey* series, for instance.

This paper has tried to illuminate a possible method of extending site-specific art to place-specific art, while at the same time preserving the former within the latter. With methodological tools developed around the site, river, and water, future work may extend in scope by developing participative projects in the community. This year, my interest for the river resulted in an enthralling teaching assignment to grade twelve students: Experiential

Science - Freshwater Systems. Specifically designed to fuse local and traditional knowledge with science, the course covers geological structures, limnology, and ecological management of freshwater systems. I am embarking on this journey with excitement and a desire to learn.

Furthermore, future research will attempt to extend place-specificity to include non-living and non-human entities, and question the threshold at which one work becomes place-specific through the study of non-representational theories. For example, when an artist creates a site-specific work, there is a common perception that if the work does not engage with people; it is neither political, historical, but is self-referential. However, if one accepts non-human and non-living assemblages, then the work may be regarded differently. As Massey stated, sites have multiple simultaneous trajectories; and this concept can be expanded by the consideration that not all of these trajectories are human. The movement towards place-specific art reflects the desire to express the existence of a wider constituency, wider in political diversity and also deeper in time. In order for this expansion to continue, future research would be well advised to consider the trajectories of the non-human elements.

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Appendix A

Audio-Visual Documentation

All files are titled Lavoie _Nathalie and numbered

Folder 1 - Photographs

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|---------|---|
| 01 - 12 | <i>Water Survey, 2010.</i> |
| 13 | <i>An attempt to measure duration with water (night), 2011.</i> |
| 14 | <i>An attempt to measure duration with water (day), 2011.</i> |
| 15 - 17 | <i>Untitled 08, 09, 13 from the Meniscus Series, 2012.</i> |
| 18 | <i>A Temporary Redirection of the Mackenzie River Westward Into the Pacific Ocean, 2012. Installation view at Charles H. Scott Gallery.</i> |

Folder 2 - Video

- | | |
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| 19 | <i>A Temporary Redirection of the Mackenzie River Westward Into the Pacific Ocean, 2012.</i> |
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