

**Being Among:  
Reassembled parts of an incomplete machine**

by

Judith McNaughton

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## Abstract

Through practice-based and theoretical research, I consider relationships of connection and separation between objects, other living things, and myself against the backdrop of Western capitalist culture. Inspired by the practice-based research model of Graeme Sullivan, and Sarat Maharaj's vision of the "contraption for generating knowledge," I animate digital and kinetic assemblages as automated contraptions of inquiry (Maharaj 42). My practice employs a metonymic approach, activating the resonance of materiality and affect in order to draw the viewer toward alternate perceptions.

Jean Baudrillard's theory of consumption, and Agamben's critique of anthropocentric systems of human/non-human separation inform the social context for my research. The thesis includes literary and visual art examples of ways cultural productions can shed light on conceptual dualities in Western society. Franz Kafka's story *Metamorphosis* and Alan Rath's sculptural assemblage *Hound* each portrays an implied fluidity between the human and non-human body. Mark Dion's work brings into question the borders between nature and human culture, challenging our perceptions of such categories by repositioning the order of things (Thompson 46).

The artworks—*Boxette*, *Gidget Flying*, and *Mothlung*—produced during my practice based research, use empathy, humour, and occasionally unease to draw the viewer toward a slightly altered perception of the relationship between humans and the things around us. My inquiry questions exclusions in Western ontology that have separated humans from non-humans. It reimagines these relationships not as subjects to objects, but as beings among beings, in hope of edging us toward more thoughtful relationships with the other things and beings of the world.

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## Preface

The area that I undertook to examine could be viewed alternately as nowhere and everywhere. It began with an inner twinge, which upon examination unfolded into a questioning of my place in relationship to the things around me. It is an intriguing path that curiosity revealed when given permission to cast its glow onto the intimate, yet not altogether knowable, entanglements with the things of everyday life.



Fig. 1. Photo of objects in Judith McNaughton's studio, 2012

Photo by Judith McNaughton. Used by permission of the artist.

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## 1 Introduction

In this exploration, including both practice-based and theoretical research, I consider relationships of connection and separation between objects, other living things, and myself, within the backdrop of Western capitalist culture. Situated as contemporary assemblage, my practice-based research employs digital and kinetic animation in the endeavour of automating contraptions, which become both object and actant of inquiry. The endeavour is infused with a narrative and metonymic approach, invoking materiality and affect as tools in reimagining coexistence. The artwork contraptions enlist empathy, humour and at times unease in attempts to draw the viewer into alternate perspectives. This thesis project is an invitation to interrogate ways visual art might explore unknown borders between the human and non-human, animate and inanimate, self and other—and what it might mean to inhabit territories in-between.

Within the thesis, certain cultural productions serve as examples of ways that literary and visual arts can question dualities and shed light on effects of societal influences made invisible through familiarity. Franz Kafka's story *Metamorphosis* and Alan Rath's sculptural assemblage *Hound* both portray a figurative image of implied fluidity between the human and non-human body. Through arcane visual critique, mimicking techniques of natural science, Mark Dion brings into question separations between nature and human culture (Thompson 46).

This practice-based inquiry has been informed by the theoretical writings of Giorgio Agamben, Jean Baudrillard and Gilles Deleuze, among others. Agamben critiques the system of exclusions existing in Western culture as the “anthropological machine,” an anthropocentric optic produced for the recognition of the human as separate from the non-human (Agamben 26). Historically based on the human capacity for language, the premise of the anthropological machine is built on internal contradictions that must be continuously attended to by re-articulating the conditions for exclusion (Agamben 38). Agamben's critique has inspired the model of a dysfunctional machine that I use in my research as an imaginative framework for considering my experience of disconnect from the things and beings around me. I attribute my experience of disconnect, in part, to the dynamics of consumer culture. Within the Western humanist construct, humans take on the role of subject to the objects around them, objects that are placed into an economy of utility—as things to be consumed (Agamben 75). Jean Baudrillard's theory of consumption expands on these relationships. He posits that objects have become signifiers for a field of associations other than the original utility by which we would have experienced them, and that these associations

are manipulated to feed the consumption cycle. As the humanist construct continues to distinguish human from non-human, consumer from consumed, humans appear to become ever more removed from our own animality and materiality (Baudrillard 217). In the writings of Deleuze I encounter an alternative to the dualist conceptual paradigm. He presents a *plane of immanence* in which polarities dissipate into states of *becoming*, one thing into another, inhabiting the spaces between (*What is Philosophy* 35).

These theoretical writings provide a social context and language with which to discuss concepts arising in my practice-based research: conditions of disconnect from my surroundings, and the imagined paradigms in which such disconnects would not exist. These writings support the personal, intuitive perceptions of the world motivating my practical inquiry, and stimulate a more articulate response in visual form.

This thesis essay is divided into six chapters including introduction and conclusion. Chapter two “Mechanisms of Research” includes four parts. The first, part 2.1 “Questions of connection and separation,” describes my personal impetus for the line of inquiry. In part 2.2, the artworks *Gidget Flying* and *Boxette* are introduced for reference in discussions of the research practice. Part 2.3 “The intercessor contraption” proposes forms of inquiry appropriate for an investigation privileging the unknown, including models of practice-based research in the writings of Graeme Sullivan and Sarat Maharaj. Finally, part 2.4 “Reassembling the parts” situates the practical research as contemporary assemblage favouring narrative and metonymic sensibility. My practice is contextualized within contemporary and historical art references, including the relationship of the artworks to Dada and Surrealism, and to the dynamics of chance. The method and methodology of the practice is followed through collecting, reflecting, assembling and re-animating.

Chapter three highlights the practice-based research model of “Research Contraptions” in three sections. In section 3.1 “The automaton *Boxette* as intercessor contraption,” the motion of the animated sculpture *Boxette* is the subject of reflection, through a consideration of motion, materiality, and duration. Section 3.2 “The implied body of Alan Rath’s *Hound*” puts forward artist Alan Rath’s 1990 mixed media video sculpture *Hound* as a fantastical implied body constituted of objects and apparatuses. Section 3.3 “The failed unity of *Gidget* and the TV monitor,” considers the transcendent aspirations of the stop motion character *Gidget*, as it attempts to escape the black box TV monitor, by flapping its bony appendages.

Chapter four takes a closer look at the human-centric perspective in the “Anthropological Machine.” First, in section 4.1, through the lens of collection and classification as seen in the works of artist Mark Dion. In section 4.2, implications of the societal apparatus are imagined in the non-human bodies of Kafka’s story *Metamorphosis*. And in section 4.3, elements of the social apparatus are viewed through the framework of consumption as defined by Jean Baudrillard; he poses consumption as an active form of relationship to objects and society (Baudrillard 217).

Chapter five introduces *Mothlung*, the final artwork in my practice-based research, discussed in the context of Deleuze’s concepts of becoming and pure immanence (*What is Philosophy* 35). The installation *Mothlung* attempts to draw attention to our materiality in the context of our surroundings—in hope of presenting the human and non-human on a more horizontal plane. The conclusion reflects on my practice-based research, what new awareness and understandings have been generated, and what new questions have arisen from these.

The arc of the thesis essay is a speculative journey exploring, and perhaps coming to terms with, sensations of disconnect within the context of contemporary consumer society. My point of entry is the process of building automated contraptions assembled from pieces of the world in a metonymic attempt to understand, and perhaps move beyond, the disconnect. In the process I invite the viewer to join in a closer examination of the borders between human and non-human, through the lens of materiality and affect.

## 2 Mechanisms of Research

### 2.1 Questions of connection and separation

Having begun my art training as a ceramic artist, I have become highly attuned to the artistic elements of function, form, and materiality in my studio practice. This materiality manifests itself in the way that clay retains a memory of each action upon it through dents, seams and cracks, and the flow of glazes in the kiln reacting to shape, heat and specific chemical proportions. Previous to entering the MAA program, my art practice was creating ceramic objects, responding to conditions of my time and place through sculptures and public murals. An impetus to entering the program was a change that took place in my practice, in part due to an unexpected experience during a walk through the neighborhood of my new home. I came across an old family-run grocery store that, due to the competition of encroaching big box stores, had been converted into a massive consignment store for used goods. Upon entering the building I was overwhelmed by the scale and implications of what I saw. The room was the size of a skating rink. Where there had been a fresh butcher display, bakery, and pharmacy section, now there were row upon row of meticulously arranged objects, both functional and decorative (see figure 2).



Fig. 2. Photos of consignment store, photos by Judith McNaughton, 2013

Photo by Judith McNaughton. Used by permission of the artist.

These were the homogeneous trappings of the lower middle class. Strangely intimate when studied individually, on mass the things seemed obscenely vulnerable, like a giant room of grandmothers or babies. Each piece was commonplace and expendable, yet clearly handled with a degree of attentiveness rare in retail settings. Objects were not set out randomly, but carefully positioned by function, material, colour, and size. I felt myself being pulled through the room from object to object as if in a museum. The things resonated off each other. They seemed saturated in history and materiality, perched conspicuously in an aura of ruin, care, and hope.

This sprawling display of the detritus of one neighborhood, and the practiced care taken by this family of shopkeepers in preserving and presenting these domestic relics, impacted my sensibilities as a sculptor, and in some arcane way made me keenly aware of my own materiality among them. Similar to the way I am more aware of my own “fleshiness” when I encounter a roadkill carcass or witness an animal being born, I felt a shift in my perception of the things that share my space. In that moment I felt a kinship with those things, as though I was an extension of them, or they of me. Although the eerie feeling of kinship and extension with the things around me did not retain its intensity past that moment, the memory of it remained. It stirred questions about the nature of separation and connectedness between myself and the things around me. Things that constitute the non-human, including animals and objects, both natural and human made. I was also challenged to reconsider my approach to object making and materiality, opening myself to the possibility of using materials or processes most appropriate to the ideas being explored, rather than the materials I had become accustomed to using.

The event described is somewhat dramatic and stands out in memory as pivotal, but to be clear this was only the culminating moment in a longer process of shifting internal priorities. It was also the beginning of a course of inquiry that would become this thesis project. An investigation into the connections and separations between me and the world around me, asking in what ways visual art practices might inhabit those indeterminate borders between human and non-human, animate and inanimate, self and other? The writing and visual works making up my research employ a speculative approach to explore imagined states of being that reside in the zones between such dualities. This is an unfamiliar and potentially uncomfortable territory for those who are accustomed to being at the pinnacle of a hierarchical structure based on clear dualities. While acknowledging that there are human cultures and histories that do not posit such dualistic hierarchies (such as kincentric indigenous epistemologies), I have been educated in the Western ontology, and it is primarily this cultural history and internalized perspective that I grapple with in my research and my work.

The visual artwork of the thesis is animated assemblage, video, and digital collage made up of objects and images repurposed from my surroundings. The work often elicits empathy, humour, and at times unease in the viewer, by bringing familiar objects and images together in a way that makes them seem strange. This strategy is intended to disrupt our familiar perspective on the things around us.

## 2.2 Gidget and Boxette



Fig. 3. Judith McNaughton *Gidget Flying*, 2012 (detail)  
Stop motion animation with sheep bone & coyote fur exhibited on TV monitor.  
Used by permission of the artist.



Fig. 4. Judith McNaughton *Boxette* and *Gidget Flying*, *Interstitium* exhibition, 2012  
Liquor decanter music box, servo motors, arduino microcontrollers, sheep vertebrae and tooth, pewter swan ornament, electronic components. Photo by Minttumaari Mäntynen.  
Used by permission of the artist.

The works titled *Gidget Flying* (figure 3) and *Boxette* (figure 4) were part of the *Interstitium* exhibition in the Concourse Gallery at the Emily Carr University of Art and Design in July 2012. They are two examples of the visual art practice that will be discussed at points of this thesis. *Gidget Flying* is a stop motion film made with an assemblage of sheep bones and coyote fur. The odd creature looks a bit like roadkill temporarily reassembled and reanimated. The *Gidget* character is stylistically inspired by awkward mounting arrangements of early specimen displays and the morbid attractions of the Wunderkammer, or curiosity cabinet. The animal parts are collected on trips to the family farm on which I grew up, now run by my brother's family. The sheep and coyote parts are a combination of two creatures that exist in conflict on the farm—as consumer and consumed; their union within one character creates an internal contradiction. *Gidget's* animated motion is a wing-like flapping of bone appendages, repeatedly failing to lift off then trying again. The movements are intended to resemble the ambiguous function of a tinkerer's

gadget. In fact the name *Gidget*<sup>1</sup> is a combination of the words gadget and gizmo, terms used by Baudrillard to describe our complex relationships to automated objects. The gadget is defined as “*the object that answers no need other than the need to function*” (Baudrillard 122). Eventually, the original use of an object may be forgotten altogether, replaced by a fascination with the mechanism itself. At this point the object is referred to as a gizmo, a thing without a name because its purpose is unknown. Baudrillard claims that people project their autonomy—or the autonomy of their consciousness—onto automated objects. This *Gidget* object becomes a stand in for my own consciousness (or my uncertainty of the function of my own consciousness). Placing the *Gidget* object into a monitor, and animating it to attempt and fail to take flight, is perhaps a way of putting into action this ambiguity I have about my own function and purpose (Baudrillard 120-123). For the viewer, the sad state of attempted transcendence and perpetual failure in *Gidget Flying* might bring to mind the abjection of the consumed. It could equally allude to the complex relationship we in Western society have with our own animality: having been carefully decreed above and more than the animal by the accumulated history of religious doctrine, philosophical speculation, and biological classification.

Similarly the mechanically animated assemblage *Boxette* is caught in a futile attempt to become ambulatory, which becomes a pathetic, awkward dance. *Boxette* is made with a musical liquor decanter from the second hand store I discussed earlier. The decanter has been disassembled and reassembled with other objects from the store, along with a sheep tooth crown and sheep bone feet from the family farm. The sheep parts have the affective influence of making the viewer aware of her own corporeality. Being attached to the inorganic liquor decanter, the organic parts may become an affective link between the viewer and the object. The sheep parts bring connotations of an animal that has been bred over centuries to be fleshy and placid, not resisting its place in the system of consumption. The sheep bone feet are animated to ‘dance’ to the sorrowful song of the decanter’s original music-box mechanism. Created as a signifier of luxury consumption, the object now seems a ridiculous caricature of itself. *Boxette* is a whimsical title referring to the decanter’s function, which has very little to do with being a box and much to do with fulfilling an imagined lifestyle. The “ette” suffix in the name *Boxette* makes it sound a bit precious: like a box that’s only purpose is as an object of luxury. Once taken out of the mainstream economic order (and put under the harsh lights of the consignment store), the purpose of this thing begins to appear absurd.

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<sup>1</sup> Gidget is also the name of a 1950s and 1960s novel, TV, and film character. She was a diminutive but spunky can-do gal whose nickname is a combination of “girl” and the outdated term “midget”. This isn’t the primary source of this artwork’s title; in fact I wasn’t aware of this specific character, which was slightly before my time. I was, however, aware of the small-but-spunky connotation attached to the word “gidget” (Kohner 35).

## 2.3 The intercessor contraption

The incident accounted in Chapter 2.1 “Questions of connection and separation” describes an experience of connectivity with the things around me, spurring a speculative course of inquiry into the borders between human and non-human. The form of inquiry is an artistic research process of reflecting, making, and writing in an attempt to understanding my relationship with the non-human world around me. It ventures into an irrational, non-dualistic territory privileging the unknown over the known: raising questions about what forms of inquiry could be appropriate to such a speculative investigation. For models of practice-based research I’ve referenced authors Graeme Sullivan and Sarat Maharaj.

In his book *Art practice as research*, Sullivan describes a process of research by which methods of inquiry are located *within* the visual arts practice. He begins by making a distinction between inquiry based on knowledge, with theorizing that explains *cause and effect*; and theorizing based on *understanding*, which is an adaptive form of thinking and acting, informed by experiences and encounters, that transforms our awareness (Sullivan 96). Sullivan proposes that creative practices have the potential to produce new understandings and that there exists a generative relationship between visual arts inquiry and a state of *unknowing*—as visual artists turn questions into awareness, in turn giving rise to more questions.

The expected outcome of inquiry is the creation of new knowledge, but the outcome of Sullivan’s visual art inquiry is new understanding, giving rise to more questions. This means that, in this visual art research, the new knowledge will always be incomplete as each new understanding produces more questions. So this form of inquiry functions in a zone of perpetual questioning and unknowing, while continuously creating new understanding. Despite leaving us spinning in this nether-region of unknowing, Sullivan provides assurance that we are indeed involved in research:

Although this sense of unknowing propels the imagination, there is always an element of completion as our new knowledge helps us understand things we did not know before. It is from this sense of knowing and unknowing, and how we deal with it, that visual arts practice can be described as a form of research (Sullivan 121).

This seems a particularly appropriate research paradox for an art practice committed to a speculative exploration of unknown borders, questioning conceptual paradigms that place humans above and separate from non-human. Such a theorizing project would be difficult to prove with a linear, cause and effect model of inquiry—particularly when the problem calls for a new way of living with unknowing. This generative model of inquiry sounds like a self-perpetuating form of

knowledge generator, which leads me to an inspired vision of research put forth by Sarat Maharaj in his essay “Unfinishable Sketch of ‘An Unknowable Object in 4D’: Scenes of Artistic Research.” Regarding artistic research, Maharaj states:

...it is better grasped as a contraption for generating knowledge—not simply for transmitting already-made information of a known ‘object of study’. It is roughly modeled on the artist’s workspace—an ‘indeterminate’ zone not articulated by rigid 3D coordinates. It is a scene of maceration—a mixing of scraps of percept, feeling and concept, subjectivity affect and object, without knowing what might happen. To call this ‘bricolage or assemblage’ is no more than a short-life nickname for what should remain nameless (42).

This is an imaginative model of research that I look to in my visual art practice. It refers to a “contraption for generating knowledge” mixing and repurposing scraps, placing them in proximity to each other to understand how it affects their meaning. There is a hint of independence to this model, a sense of something that does its work slightly outside the control of the artist-researcher, something that—if we must name what should remain nameless—would be called artwork or *assemblage*. Maharaj’s description also brings to mind Deleuze and Guattari’s *conceptual personae*<sup>2</sup>: which is described as an *intercessor* carrying out movements within parameters set out by the philosopher; an actant playing out the paradox, such as the “I” in Descartes’ *cogito sum* “I think therefore I am.” For the purposes of my practice-based research, this *intercessor* would take the form of a contraption, an assemblage reanimated to act out some task or function in pursuit of a new understanding or greater awareness.

If I apply such a course of inquiry in my studio practice, what form would it take? What kind of contraption or machine might I build as the intercessor? What parts would be used? What understanding or awareness might emerge? This intercessor contraption approach to research reflects the methodological processes chosen in my studio practice: collecting, reflecting, assembling and re-animating.

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<sup>2</sup> Conceptual personae in *What is Philosophy?* By Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (63, 64).

## 2.4 Reassembling the parts - collecting, reflecting, assembling, re-animating

My studio research practice was initiated from a state of disconnect, manifested as a sensation of corporeal isolation. A sort of craving for physical and spiritual connection to a world I know I am a part of, but with which I rarely experience a sense of connection. As an embodied being, I crave meaningful interaction with my surroundings – watching, searching, touching, collecting, understanding, fabricating, ingesting – and I know that as an integral part of this world, I will someday dissipate back into the whole. Most of my physical interactions are not with the natural world but with computer screens, concrete, and other mass-produced objects. In part these interactions fulfill physical requirements, but often they play out a commercial fiction that insists I consume in a perpetual cycle of purchase and discard, the reward seeming to be ever more purchases (Baudrillard 173).

This shallow, nonsensical pattern of interaction leaves me feeling a lack of connection. In response to these feelings I collect and build constructions out of the things around me—objects or parts of animals that have been used and discarded—in an attempt to make meaningful connection with the world, or at least the parts I interact with. This is a way for me to make meaning within a system that defies logic. Through this process, the illogic I perceive around me is manifest in the assembling of objects, causing them to appear strange.

### Assemblage

For the purposes of this thesis essay, I use the term assemblage to represent ideas drawn from three sources: First, the Maharaj practice-based research model of the *contraption for generating knowledge* roughly based on the artists' studio, involving a “mixing of scraps of percept, feeling and concept, subjectivity affect and object” (Maharaj 42).

Second, the art historical definition including the works of Marcel Duchamp and the Dadaists, Surrealist objects, the combines of Robert Rauschenberg, as well as contemporary assemblage. William Seitz, curator of the seminal 1961 exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*, applies the term juxtaposition to the use of pre-made parts or entire objects that retain their identities while functioning within a single work (Hoptman 133).

The third idea of assemblage is borrowed from the Deleuze and Guattari concept of assemblage, describing how bodies affect each other with the potential of *becoming* – in which the street enters into composition with the horse and the dying rat with the air, a singularity in which subject and object dissolve (*A Thousand Plateaus* 262-263).

The Dadaists and Surrealists, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, used the strategy of making the familiar strange through assemblage of everyday objects. In the 1960s, Robert Rauschenberg and the neo-avant-garde used the strategy again. In her 2007 essay “Going to pieces in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” Laura Hoptman claims that, like these previous iterations, contemporary assemblage responds to the issues of the time—but now specifically to late-capitalist anxieties. Contemporary anxieties are produced, in part, by a lack of confidence in the dominant systems and ontologies. There is a perception that these have contributed to global crises of sustainability, global warming, unethical resource distribution, and a sense of helplessness in the face of overwhelming information without trusted contextualization. According to Hoptman, contemporary assemblage artists tend to employ artistic processes favouring *narrative* and a *metonymic* sensibility. Historically the use of chance had been prominent in the practice of assemblage. Chance may enter the art practice at various stages in the process: the manner of creation, the materials, the form, and in the function or purpose of the artwork. It was integral to the work of the Dadaists, the Surrealists, as well as the combines of Robert Rauschenberg. For all of these artists, objects were used as the materials and content, making the familiar mysterious through the unexpected juxtaposition of unrelated objects (Hoptman 128, 129).

William Seitz, curator of the 1961 exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*<sup>3</sup>, defined juxtaposition as the use of pre-made parts or entire objects that retain their identities while functioning within a single work—so that each part has the dual oscillating identity of being read as the thing it is while participating in the meaning of the whole. Despite being visually related, the intent behind juxtapositions in contemporary work is slightly different than the juxtapositions of earlier assemblage. Rather than acting as an unbiased document of the artist’s observation, contemporary assemblage displays more of the artist’s bias and subjective position. This may appear as a kind of narrative within the composition, and is often meant as sharp criticism of a cultural moment (Hoptman 133).

Central to the meaning and purpose of the art practice is the specific way that chance is used. The *gap* between intention and outcome becomes crucial to the meaning of chance in the practice: it creates an unpredictable space between the artist’s intent and what becomes the viewer experience (Iversen 12). How does chance do this? Why might artists choose to set up such a gap in their practice? Perhaps because art-making would be a barren activity if our purposes resulted only in predicted and predictable consequences: if we were completely transparent to ourselves, or if our

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<sup>3</sup> New York Museum of Modern Art

intentions always resulted in expected outcomes. So how do artists interrupt their own intentional activities? Author Margaret Iversen refers to this strategy as an “interference apparatus.” This is a mechanism that artists use to loosen control and introduce an element of chance into the practice (Iversen 24, 25).

When referring to Surrealist artists, George Brecht makes a distinction between two kinds of chance processes: one a result of consciously unknown causes, and another resulting from mechanical operations that bypass the artist’s agency. For the Surrealist research artist, the unconscious can become an interference apparatus. In life, unconscious interference manifests in slips of the tongue or mistakes that interrupt intent. Surrealist artists access the unconscious through methodological techniques such as automatism, including automatic writing or drawing (Brecht 35, 36).

Surrealist automatic methods evade conscious thought so that art images have their source in deeper-than-conscious areas of the mind. Though many Surrealist methods may not be considered technically random, as bias exists in human choices even when one is unconscious of it, these methods have allowed the Surrealists to loosen conscious control and engage unexpected mental processes of association (Brecht 41).

Lacan, following Freud, located an internal split in the subject’s relation to language, by which language precedes the self and exceeds its control (Iversen 24). For Lacan, language too could be an interference apparatus. The linguistic operation of metonymy<sup>4</sup> connects one signifier to another in a way analogous to the unconscious, allowing meaning to “emerge from the combination of ideas inferred between contiguous signifiers in play”<sup>5</sup> (Paliyenko 31). For instance a glove may become a metonym for the hand, for sensations of touch or holding. In my practice, metonymy has an important role, acting as an interference apparatus between intent and outcome. The specific associations that the objects hold for the viewer, and the meanings they produce in combination, carry enough *chance* to create a gap between intent and outcome in the artistic practice. The reception of the work is unpredictable because of the variable associations viewers bring to the objects.

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Ryland speaks of metonymy as a dynamic network of associations, in her PHD thesis titled “Resisting Metaphors: A metonymic approach to the study of creativity and cognition in art analysis and practice.”

<sup>5</sup> Quoting: Ragland-Sullivan, Ellie. *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986. Print. (250)

My practice bears similarities to the Dada and Surrealist approaches in using chance as an element of the methodology. The emphasis in my practice is less on attempting to use chance in an unbiased manner, more on acknowledging my subjective position and critical proximity when organising the materials (Hoptman 133). Chance does come into play at various points in my process: in finding the raw materials; in the resonance between parts that unexpectedly appears when they are placed in proximity to each other during collecting and assembling; and certainly in the variety of associations that the viewers bring with them to the works.

### Finding the parts

I situate my practice as contemporary assemblage: using existing objects, or images of existing objects, in my artwork. The human-made objects repurposed in my studio practice are mainly found in the local consignment store described in Chapter 2.1, the animal parts are collected from the family farm run by my brother, or from road-kill carcasses. While chance is primary in finding the assemblage parts from my surroundings, either by accident or during specific scouting excursions, selecting and assembling are also the result of reflection. The found objects populate the studio until unique characteristics and associations of the things<sup>6</sup> become apparent to me. Objects<sup>7</sup> are placed in proximity to each other and combined together to see how this changes, enhances, or amplifies their nature, before the items become integrated into an artwork. For instance, the sculpture *Boxette* began as a liquor decanter music box. It seemed an unnecessarily ornate and sad thing when I came across it in the consignment store. The pewter swan ornament was added to the decanter to accentuate the ornate aspect, and the sheep tooth pinnacle to elevate its ostentatious vulnerability (see figure 5).

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<sup>6</sup> Specific use of the terms *thing* and *object* becomes important in this discussion. Lorraine Daston, author of the book *Things That Speak*, gives a philosophical context to the terms: “The ‘thing’ must, Heidegger insists, be sharply distinguished from the Kantian ‘object’ (*Gegenstand*), the latter being the product of ideas and representations of the thing. The thing, by contrast, is ‘self-sufficient’” (Daston 16).

<sup>7</sup> In an interview, author Bruno Latour described the distinction between an *object* and *thing*: “Things are not objects. In fact, things are precisely the opposite of objects. When we are focused on things, we are actually also focused on ourselves. When I am focusing on the attachment of this coffee cup, I am actually getting back to myself quite fast, as well as to the entire history of Italian coffee-making, the people who are harvesting the coffee, etc. This cup of coffee is an assembly” (*Decoding the Collective Experiment*).



Fig. 5. Judith McNaughton *Boxette* (detail) 2012

Liquor decanter music box, servo motors, arduino microcontrollers, sheep vertebrae and tooth, pewter swan ornament, brass chain, electronic components. Photo by Kai Mushens. Used by permission of the artist.

### Reflecting

I have referred to the process of assembling as using narrative, but this is not a direct metaphorical or allegorical relationship between the parts or within the whole of the assemblage. The placement of the parts is deliberate and precise, but their relationship is the result of metonymic aspects. This difference is subtle but important to understanding the way parts are arranged in relation to each other and how meaning is developed for the viewer. The parts are placed in proximity such that their materials, histories, forms, and mythical associations resonate across and with each other. Meanings in the assemblage emerge from these resonating affects, building on the proximal combination of parts and associations these create for the viewer.

Metonymy<sup>8</sup> differs from metaphor, which seeks resemblance in a unidirectional way—a binding of two domains. In contrast, metonymy is a force of conceptual spreading between domains. Rather than binding two things as similar, the meaning of a thing expands into a more complex conceptual structure or field of associations (Ryland 27). For instance through the lens of *metaphor* a sheep tooth may become a visual representative for biting or mastication, but in *metonymy* it becomes a stand in for the corporeal presence of the beast itself. While viewing the tooth, I may have a sensation of what it would feel like to chew with it, making me aware of my own teeth, my experiences of consuming and perhaps even the corporeal vulnerability of being consumed by another. Rather than a single narrative link, in metonymy the associations are

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<sup>8</sup> Metonymy is generally known as a figurative device. In cognitive semantics it is described in terms of domains: “While metaphor involves ‘seeing one thing in terms of another’, metonymy in language arises only from associations between concepts that are closely related in human experience” (Allan 12).

expansive, encompassing the implications of many contingent associations. Metonymy works in ways that affect the non-verbal experience of things, taking us to places that engage our sensate memories. UK artist and educationalist Susan Ryland<sup>9</sup>, explains it in this way:

Metonymy theory offers an aesthetic of the dynamic in-between, deploying connective, sensory knowledge across material and discursive conventions, in which one thing becomes another, moving through histories, myths, images, practices and politics. Metonymy theory can be used to examine the detail of difference, thereby providing access to knowledge previously hidden or unattainable... This approach not only enables boundaries to shift, but has movement as its *raison d'être* (Ryland 15).

Metonymy can bring us to places existing outside the realm of societal understandings, beyond the usually perceived relationships of things. The dynamic networks of metonymic associations activated in assemblage, create a ripe field for drawing the viewer toward rarely inhabited in-betweens. Laura Hoptman, author and curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at MOMA New York, links assemblage and metonymy to the particular societal moment:

The twenty-first century version of assemblage is particularly suited to the metonymic paradigm because not only does it incorporate pieces of the situation it describes, but each sculpture itself narrates the world ... It is not about a million-piece puzzle that is the contemporary global situation. It is a piece of that puzzle (Hoptman 138).

In Hoptman's estimation, the assemblage itself can become "a metonym of the moment it comes from," a part of the whole that in some way draws awareness to various aspects of the larger world from which it has been extracted. Through their jury-rigged stature, these assemblage works reflect a perception of the Western societal apparatus as a broken machine. Stylistic fracture, dysfunction, and failure allude to larger ideological fractures (Hoptman 138).

Reanimation – The broken machine.

Reanimation is offered as the next step in the practical research process making up my visual art practice. Once the objects collected in the studio are integrated into an assemblage, they are animated with small repetitive movements. This animation can be called *reanimation* because the pieces making up the assemblage are often parts of animals or machines that had been animate or at least functional in a previous guise: but have been deconstructed, reconstructed, and made to perform a new function.

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<sup>9</sup> Susan Ryland speaks of metonymy as a dynamic network of associations, in her PHD thesis titled "Resisting Metaphors: A metonymic approach to the study of creativity and cognition in art analysis and practice."

In his book *The System of Objects*, Jean Baudrillard analyzes people's intimate and complex relationship to their automated things. As he describes it, "behind every real object there's a dream object" (126). He asserts that people project onto automated objects their own consciousness or personhood. This implies that part of the attraction of automation goes beyond its ability to perform menial functions. In fact automation evokes a kind of transcendence:

...supra-functionality of human consciousness is, in the end, what automatism<sup>10</sup> strives to echo in the object. In a way that parallels the formal self-transcendence of the human individual, automatism aspires to be a sort of the *ne plus ultra* of the object, enabling it to transcend its function (Baudrillard 120).

In their attempts at transcendence, the assemblages in my practice perpetually fail. The artworks *Boxette*, *Gidget Flying*, and *Mothlung* all explore complexities of transcendence, and the idea that one can transcend materiality. Qualities of disconnect and futility are infused into the construction of the work, as these artworks are meant to reflect a sense of being out of sync with the ideologies and mechanisms of dominant society. A metonymic (part-of-whole) version of a dysfunctional societal apparatus is presented in the assemblages. They are made up of the detritus of consumer society and animated to perform repetitive tasks that resemble futile attempts to transcend their mechanistic, material state. Failure becomes a technique in my practice, used in enacting the dynamics I am attempting to portray, understand, or come to terms with. For instance, the dynamic of failure could reflect dilemmas or irresolvable contradictions existing in the Western ontologies and structures (Müller 202).

In fact these automated assemblages are intended to perform, on my behalf, the tasks of understanding or transcending the dysfunctions of consumer culture. Of course, as reassembled parts of the broken machine of consumer society, the automated assemblages never quite succeed in their tasks. The contraptions are restricted to their material limits. *Gidget's* movements are rickety and halting like an automaton in an out-dated Disneyland ride, perpetually failing to take flight or escape the frame of the TV monitor. *Boxette* stumbles and staggers about, never really getting enough traction to go very far. Still these automated assemblages are set in motion as a form of *conceptual personae*, or *intercessor*: the last step in building the machine of inquiry within the practice of collecting, reflecting, assembling and re-animating. Automation sets the assemblage forth to act out its task, in pursuit of some resolution within the dualistic existence of contemporary Western culture.

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<sup>10</sup> Here Baudrillard uses the term "automatism" in reference to mechanical automation rather than the Surrealist meaning of automatic techniques in art making processes.

### 3 Research Contraptions

#### 3.1 The automaton *Boxette* as intercessor contraption



Fig. 6. Judith McNaughton *Boxette* (detail) 2012

Liquor decanter music box, servo motors, arduino microcontrollers, sheep vertebrae and tooth, pewter swan ornament, brass chain, electronic components. Photo by Minttumaari Mäntynen. Used by permission of the artist

Inventor Pierre Jaquet-Droz, in 1774, created two automatons in the image of small boys. One of them was ironically made to write with a quill pen “I think, therefore I am,” Descartes’s *cogito*. The automated boy wrote this at the time of his creation and writes it still, over 200 years later. This android makes a perfect vehicle for the *conceptual personae* of “I” in Descartes’s *cogito*.

Descartes’ *cogito sum* can be seen to contain a paradox similar to the one Agamben describes in the anthropological machine. The anthropological machine is said to be an optic for recognizing oneself as human, through the act of language—to the exclusion of other things and beings. A potential contradiction exists in whether the act of stating “I am separate from the non-human” actually makes me separate, when biologically I am the same as I would have been before the

ability to use language and produce the statement. Similarly, there could be internal contradiction in the *cogito sum*: whether the “I am” is the consequent of the “I think” or visa versa. Would the android writing the *cogito sum* exist even though it does not think? Does it exist as a human exists or as a thing exists? In the act of writing this *cogito sum*, the android physically acts out a paradox of duality and exclusions. I cannot say that it is supporting or defying the paradox, only that it is enacting it some way (Heidegger 303, 304).

The android is set to work, then left to enact a paradox indefinitely—long past the natural life of the inventors. “Our mechanisms defy time” is another of the phrases Jaquet-Droz’s android writes. Time is of no concern to the automaton. It never ages<sup>11</sup>, never moves its attention from the task assigned. This small android, with its precise internal clockwork, makes the perfect *intercessor contraption* (Wood xiv, xvii). The ability to give endless attention to a task, or concern, is one of the things that draw me to the automaton. There is something attractive in building a machine that will continue to enact an idea on its own, without the participation of the creator: something attractive about handing over a concern to be endlessly attended to.

Similarly, I imagine my sculptural assemblages as *intercessor contraptions*, being assigned a concern to worry in the form of small, repeated tasks. For instance, in my mind, there’s a small invocation going on inside the animation of the *Boxette* sculpture (figure 6). Through the movement of its appendages, two oppositions are perpetually connected into one continuum for the duration of motion<sup>i</sup>. I see in this appendage moving back and forth, an analogy for continuums that may exist between other dualities I encounter. There’s a sort of elegance in the connecting of oppositions leading to duration of movement. The extension from point to point to point in order to create movement takes on significance for me, linking method to methodology<sup>12</sup>.

The appendage movement created through linking points in a simple program<sup>ii</sup>, reminds me of Henri Bergson’s concept of duration. In Bergson’s duration, instants linked to each other through the recollection of memory create duration—by piecing the past to the present. As I watch the small movements of the sculpture *Boxette*, I feel a kind of revelation: that linking several individual points together leads to a continual movement; or linking several moments lead to a duration of time. As the bone appendage moves from position 0° to 180° and back, the appendage

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<sup>11</sup> Or the android does not age at the rate that its inventors age and can continue as long as it is maintained.

<sup>12</sup> The Sullivan/ Maharaj practice-based research model I employ emphasizes an adaptive form of thinking, informed by encounters, that transforms into awareness (Sullivan 96).

lifts then moves down meeting the resistance of the floor it rests on, propelling the sculpture forward. In the marrying of *duration* (moving the bone appendage from position 0° to 180° and back) and *matter* (the resistance of the floor), the object has *movement* (*Bergsonism* 94).

Of course poor *Boxette*, the liquor decanter music box, doesn't really move forward much—but staggers and struggles. This stagger is the result of the two appendages moving in cycles, slightly out of sync. Watching the movements I empathized, seeing a version of myself in this reanimated piece of consumer product. I felt an affective extension with the sculpture: my sensory memory of ineffectually stumbling around fills the space between the object and myself.

In the exhibition *Interstitium*, the sculpture *Boxette* was placed on a white museum display style vitrine with a small ridge on the edge so that, as it staggered and stumbled along, it would come to the ridge then begin to bump along it until eventually turned itself around and continued its trek along the length of the vitrine. This particular placement of the sculpture, on a museum-like structure, conjured an association between the composite object *Boxette* and natural history displays bearing visual categorizations related to evolution. In fact the stumbling composite *Boxette* began to appear as some kind of self-organizing creature made up from pieces of its environment.<sup>13</sup>

Isn't this what evolution suggests I am as well—the product of some self-organizing process adapting in response to its environment? I begin to think of this evolutionary response to material obstacles as perhaps the genesis of our intimate relationship to materiality. If our physical form and processes came about in response to the materiality around us, then perhaps we are sensually hardwired to be attentive to the things we encounter in daily existence.

So through a slow reflection on duration and materiality in the small movements of the animated sculpture's appendage, I come to a new awareness of my relationship to materiality. As an evolutionary product of my environment, I am more intimately connected to my surroundings than I previously acknowledged. I come to imagine a hidden task being performed in *Boxette*, the *intercessor contraption*. As long as the sculpture is moving—as long as its legs are moving point to point and back—it is like a small votive holding my faith that a lost continuum, between myself and the materiality of the world, can be mended.

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<sup>13</sup> According to Deleuze, duration can also be described in transitions from one state to another, a becoming through *differentiation*. The word “differentiation” presupposes a unity, a primordial totality that becomes differentiated in response to the material obstacles that are encountered. For instance, evolution occurs as a series of solutions to material obstacles in the environment (*Bergsonism* 94).

### 3.2 The implied body – Alan Rath’s *Hound*

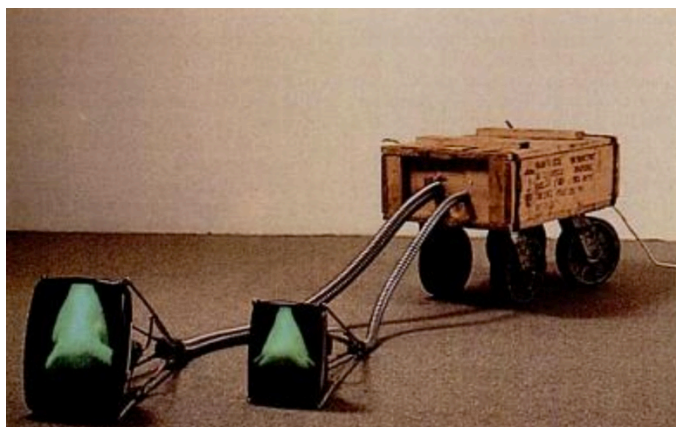


Fig. 7. Alan Rath *Hound* 1990  
Mixed media video sculpture.  
Courtesy of the artist. © Alan Rath

The materials and forms of all the artworks in my practice have somatic aspects that imply a body. Aspects of the organic materials used in the constructions, or familiar joint motions, may make the viewer momentarily aware of her own body. The implied body of the sculptures is not intact within a boundary of skin. It resists distinction, between what is beneath skin and what exists outside. Perhaps the implied body represents an alternate path of differentiation, or what form differentiation could take in a fantastical future.

In artist Alan Rath’s 1990 mixed media sculpture *Hound*, I see an implied body, constituted of objects and apparatuses (see figure 7). A small, mobile crate on wheels, reminiscent of a go-cart, is attached to two monitors by long, whimsical tubes. The video monitors display large noses, embodying a hound-like sense of smell, or some virtual facsimile thereof. The work is darkly humorous in its ironic futility: an awkward attempt at technological enhancement that is neither humanity nor its other. The *Hound*’s techno-body doesn’t suggest a whole form that has been fragmented. Rather I see an a priori fragmentation, a “next” body, constituted across dispersed objects, commodities, apparatuses, and spaces—perhaps the alternative differentiation from an original whole (Drucker 204).

### 3.3 The failed unity – *Gidget* and the TV monitor

Within my studio process I am perpetually striving, however futile it might be, to transcend the positions of human/non-human. Enacting my own desire for transcendence, I reanimate the stuff of the world—digitally, kinetically, or virtually—in an attempt at an animistic transformation: from the utilitarian consumer culture, to a spiritually integrated state. The stop motion video *Gidget Flying* is one manifestation of this reanimation. It is constructed of the reassembled parts of both the consumer and consumed, made from sheep bones and coyote fur, arranged in such a way that it resembles a fantastical creature. This creature, *Gidget*, flaps its bone appendages in jerky attempts to take flight, but is trapped within a black box TV monitor (see figure 8).

Upon reflection, I am not exactly sure what *Gidget* is attempting to escape. *Gidget* may be trying to escape its own materiality: a kind of transcending of the body for the Judeo-Christian spiritual realm; or transcending the dualities of the consumer and consumed of which it is composed; or transcending the facile consumer culture of television and advertising, as represented by the TV monitor. Still the fact that *Gidget* continues to attempt may be enough: by fulfilling its role as an *intercessor contraption*, enacting the ideas at hand. As long as *Gidget* struggles in its primal strife—hovering in nothing—it can remind us of those rare moments of anxiety when we are pulled out of the superficialities of existence. Those moments in which some awareness may be revealed: like that fleeting, but intense, moment of extension that I experienced among the expended consumer items of the consignment store.

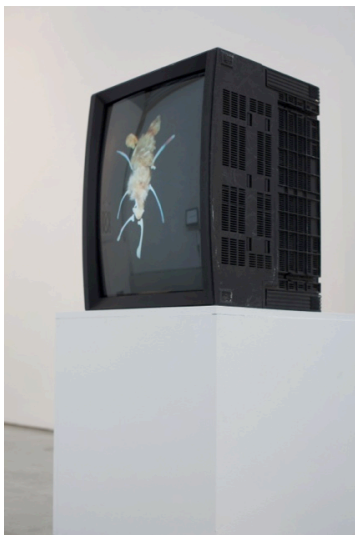


Fig. 8. Judith McNaughton *Gidget Flying*, 2012  
Stop motion animation with sheep bone & coyote fur.  
Photo by Minttumaari Mäntynen. Used by permission of the artist.

## 4 The Anthropological Machine

### 4.1 Kafka, Dion and the human-centric coexistence

I would find it difficult to enter into a discussion of the isolating nature of late-capitalist society without a nod to Franz Kafka, iconic for his cultural representations of an absurd and disenfranchising industrial society. His 1915 novella *Metamorphosis* is one of a few literary works with which I have had a lifelong relationship that changes and matures each time I cast back to it. In *Metamorphosis*, the overworked protagonist Gregor finds himself transforming into the abject configuration of a giant bug-like creature. Kafka invokes, in this potent image, a mind/body division central in the ontology of Western society. Influenced by the Christian dualism of soul and body, the rationalist philosophical tradition contains oppositional dichotomy: between mind as the site of reason, and body as the domain of sensation. In the grotesque form of a bug, Kafka portrays the body as a foul thing that cannot be entirely accounted for—or controlled. The original word he uses for the transformed body is *ungeziefer*, vaguely meaning vermin or pest: connoting a nastiness rather than a specific creature (Robertson 559). Kafka may be expressing a personal ambiguity about the body, but could also be referring to the rationalist Western ideology separating people from their own corporeality—their animality and materiality (Robertson 556).



Fig. 9. Mark Dion *Library for the Birds of Massachusetts*, 2005  
 Steel, maple tree, plywood, books, and mixed media, 20 x 18 x 20 feet  
 Installation view: *Becoming Animal*, at MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA  
 Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

The Western anthropological apparatus, as described by philosopher Giorgio Agamben, is the result of an accumulated history of religious doctrine, philosophical speculation, political thought, and biological classification. Much of this has been an argument to prove that humans are outside and greater than the animal kingdom (Agamben 26). This history can be traced to Aristotle who created a classification scheme dominating Western thinking until Darwin. In this scheme the pinnacle was the human male with the rest of the animal kingdom cascading downward to the sea urchins. According to Aristotle's scheme all animals exist for the use of man (Thompson 18).

Artist Mark Dion brings into visual scrutiny the Western classification of nature. In contrast to the modern museum's sterile appearance of objectivity, his investigations harken back to the roots of the museum, the Wunderkammer or cabinet of curiosities, and the medieval library. Dion's displays seem to reveal something lurking just below the surface if we dare look closely enough. Books are piled on the floor and dead animals hang from trees installed in a sterile white cube room (see figure 9). It seems a way of arranging things that acknowledges there are connections outside being 'of a kind'; that these connections are fluid and not entirely knowable in a hermetically sealed, Latin labeled, sort of way. The work speaks a specific, subjective language of proximity: posing apparent disorder as an invitation to new readings (Thompson 46).

Dion's juxtapositions support an ontological worldview based on interconnections and multiple associations. I see a metonymic resonance within his arrangements, taking the form of a perpetual repositioning of things that may not seem to belong together, until they are together. In this context the things appear to have an independence, or agency, that would make them unownable—things among things, in a post human-centric world.

The flattened plane of post human-centric coexistence is also the space in which I attempt to approach objects during my practical research: handling them with a simultaneous reverence and irreverence, appropriate to the serious absurdity of our time. I don't ignore the hierarchical consumer culture in which these objects exist, but attempt to approach the objects as fellow occupants within the cultural circumstance.

## 4.2 Consumption paradigm

The human-centric worldview presupposes a hierarchical separation between humanity and the other beings and things in our world. Within that conceptual construct humans take on the role of subject to the objects around them, objects that are placed into an economy of utility to be consumed.

Consumption is a complex term. For the purposes of this thesis, I use it as defined by Jean Baudrillard in his book *System of Objects*: “consumption is an active form of relationship (not only to objects, but also to society and to the world), a mode of systematic activity and global response which founds our entire cultural system” (Baudrillard 217).

Baudrillard is not referring to biological or material consumption, which he asserts is not ‘consuming’ in the contemporary meaning of the word. Traditionally, objects (tools, furniture, the house) were mediators of a real relationship or directly experienced situation. The relationship to objects has changed in Western capitalist culture, as objects have taken on meanings other than that of their original use. They have become signifiers of something quoted to us by advertisers. What is consumed now is not the object but the *idea of the relationship* to the object. Advertising is based on a system of satisfaction that is perpetually frustrated: by its absence in the reality of what is purchased (Baudrillard 218, 219). Consumption seems irrepressible because it is no longer about satisfying needs. It is about the ever-disappointing project of chasing the lost relationship that cannot be satisfied by these objects—which have become empty signifiers (Baudrillard 224).

It is in this lost relationship to objects that I find a link to my practice. As I have described, one of the inspirations for my inquiry is a sense of disconnect: catalyzed by a disorienting experience at the sight of rows upon rows of domestic consumer objects taken out of economic context and placed in a massive post-user display. Out of their intended context, these objects lost the function they had previously played in consumer society. In Baudrillard’s terms, they no longer acted as a sign, something to be ‘bought’ in consummation of the act of consumption. They are no longer part of the ongoing quest for an elusive satisfaction that has been promised through advertising and the capitalist dream. In their post-consumer context, the purchase of these objects holds no elusive promise: the grail reveals itself as a room of slightly tarnished cups; the quest itself is a chase for something perpetually absent.

## 5 Immanent Apparatus

### 5.1 Mothlung: vibrant matter and becoming



Fig. 10. Judith McNaughton *Mothlung*, 2013  
 Video of automated assemblage projected onto drafting film  
 Photo by Judith McNaughton. Used by permission of the artist

In the July 2013 graduation exhibition *Offline*, presented at the Charles H. Scott Gallery, I installed the artwork *Mothlung* in combination with a version of *Gidget Flying*. A pair of works from the *Disintegrate* series hung in the front window of the gallery. The *Mothlung* installation is made up of the shadow from a kinetically animated assemblage sculpture that had been video recorded and rear projected onto a sheet of drafting film printed with ink (see figure 10). The

image on the drafting film is a human outline, digitally and manually manipulated. It is indistinct from the surrounding ground, which gives it the appearance of dissolving or dissipating into its surrounding. The human silhouette bears a small skeletal form with the visual appearance of pixilation. In other areas, the image bears evidence of a physical flow of ink over the surface, with colour and texture striations connoting landscape. These effects lessen the distinction between the internal body and the external landscape.

Projected onto the image, is the shadow of a kinetically automated assemblage with a moth-like silhouette. The movement of this shadow resembles the slow repetition of an organic function. There is a subtle, breath-like sound in the space. The drafting film is hung in a rather dark enclave, close to viewer height and scale, so that the viewers could walk up to and around it if they chose. The film hangs free from the ceiling so that it ripples slightly with air currents or as viewers pass by.

The *Disintegrate* works hang back to back in the window of the gallery, as an invitation into the space and perhaps a last notion upon leaving (see figure 11).

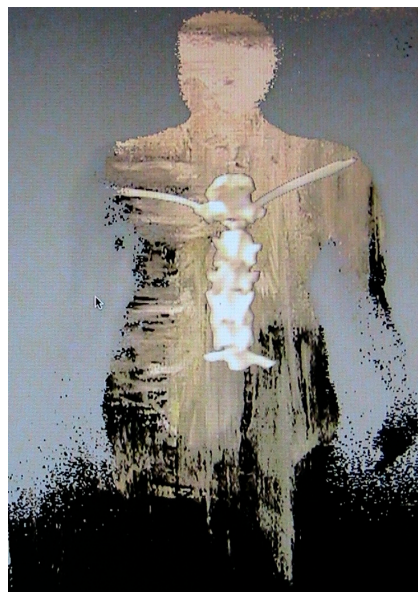


Fig. 11. Judith McNaughton *Disintegrate Series*, 2011  
Altered digital images  
Used by permission of the artist



Fig. 12. Judith McNaughton *Mothlung Installation*, 2013

*Offline Exhibition*

Video of automated assemblage projected onto drafting film

Photo by Minttumaari Mäntynen. Used by permission of the artist.

There were many contingent factors in the installation: physical circumstances that required decisions to be made in the space; variables such as air currents of the gallery blowing the drafting film; specific light qualities of the gallery space; how the piece is positioned proportionally to the room; the way idiosyncrasies of the video loop intersect with other contingent factors; and how the pieces are positioned in relation to the work of other artists in the room. Decisions in the installation phase are as critical to the form and content of the artwork, as they are in any other point in the manifestation. Accidents or coincidences that occur during the installation demand decisions on whether these chance occurrences should be kept or eliminated. Like other stages of the artwork's creation, such decisions are based on both the aesthetic effects and the meanings generated by these contingent factors.

A medium grey paint designates the borders of the space containing the *Mothlung* installation. A grey baffle wall separates the *Mothlung* installation from the rest of the exhibition room, decreasing atmospheric light and making a more private area for the viewer's encounter with the work. The grey at the edges of the *Mothlung* image blend into the grey of the walls, making the rear projection on the drafting film seem to glow and hover, and invoking a sense of the

transcendent. There is a glitch to the video loop that serves to break the sense of transcendence; every 54 seconds the shadow projection's slow flapping motion is interrupted, giving it a jankiness that recalls its material illusion.

An old Commodore monitor running the *Gidget* video is placed on its side, on the floor, just outside the baffle wall (see figure 12). It peeks out from the enclosure giving the impression that the work has escaped the designated installation space, like something surplus or delinquent. The flapping *Gidget* seems to irreverently mimic the shadow projection's slower motions<sup>14</sup>. It acts as a kind of mocking counterpoint to the *Mothlung* piece, bringing humour to the balance of reverence and irreverence within the overall installation.

The Commodore monitor is associated with the Commodore 64 home video game popular in the 1980s, and has an association with adolescent indulgence. I was pleased to see that, particularly among male viewers, the monitor with the irreverently flapping *Gidget*, was an immediate draw and even caused laughter. Of all the viewer responses these were the most obvious and overt. In front of the *Mothlung* piece people seemed to be timid and quiet, tending not to walk close to, or around it—though they did walk close to the *Gidget Flying* piece. The verbal response I received from viewers was that the *Mothlung* work was very emotional: that it made them aware of their own physicality in a way that was uncomfortable. These very different responses to the two works in the installation validated what I had intended their roles to be: *Mothlung* as serious and transcendent, *Gidget Flying* as irreverent and humorous. I had expected more viewers to go up close to the *Mothlung* work, but the tendency to keep distance may indicate that it elicited a reverent atmosphere that made distance more appropriate or desirable. This dynamic may have been different if the space had a quieter aura, making an approach more comfortable, but this is speculation. The fact that the installation was presented in a white cube gallery space likely contributed to the reverent atmosphere, to the benefit of the work. It sets the conditions for consideration of larger emotional and ontological issues, as is the intent of the installation.

The *Mothlung* installation emerges from a consideration of repurposing, and the place of humans within the larger non-human environment. The title *Mothlung*, like the *Disintegrate Series*, refers to a sort of immersion or becoming part of the surrounding things and environment. In this work I visualize the human as a kind of heterogeneous assemblage, to borrow a term from Deleuze and

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<sup>14</sup> The *Gidget* creature is made up in part from coyote fur. The Coyote has connotations of the trickster in some indigenous North American myths, associations that could add to the irreverent mocking characteristic portrayed in the *Gidget Flying* artwork.

Guattari, in which an individual is actually a confederation of materials, more alike than different from things around it. In my subjectivity I may perceive myself as a discrete entity. In fact I could be perceived as an assemblage of repurposed elements, existing equally with the organic and non-organic materials around me (*A Thousand Plateaus* 71).

In her book *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett rethinks dualistic tendencies for “parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)” (Bennett vii). She claims there is vitality intrinsic to materials, and that it has an *aesthetic-affective* influence, perceivable if one is attentive enough. This idea draws from a Spinozist<sup>15</sup> notion of affect in which organic, inorganic, natural, and cultural objects all are affective and extending with other bodies. They, in a subtle way, can be actants<sup>16</sup> (Bennett 21). Bennett’s idea of vibrant matter expands on a philosophical history in the West beginning with Benedict de Spinoza and including Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of *assemblage*. This concept describes how bodies affect each other with the potential of *becoming*:

It is the wolf itself, and the horse, and the child, that cease to be subjects to become events, in assemblages that are inseparable from an hour, a season, an atmosphere, an air, a life. The street enters into composition with the horse, just as the dying rat enters into composition with the air, and the beast and the full moon enter into composition with each other (*A Thousand Plateaus* 262-263).

This quote describes the intimate state of *becoming* in which the street enters into composition with the horse and the dying rat with the air. In his final essay *Pure Immanence: A Life*, Deleuze explores an even more intimate state—pure immanence. This is a singularity in which subject and object dissolve and there aren’t individual moments but only between-times (*Pure Immanence* 29).

The state of extension between dualities is broached in visual elements of my practice-based research: through pairing works in installations to resonate with each other; also by evoking simultaneous dualities such as digital/analog represented in pixilation and physical flow of ink. The ambiguity of a human/non-human duality is alluded to by visually blending the individual form with landscape. The installation *Mothlung* and the *Disintegrate* series strive to hover in a state of becoming between human, object, and landscape—reminiscent of a liminal plane.

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<sup>15</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, philosopher born in Amsterdam in 1632.

<sup>16</sup> The term is coined by Bruno Latour’s: an actant is a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman Latour, from *Politics of Nature* (237).

## 6 Conclusion

This thesis project was stimulated by an immersive experience of affective extension that I encountered when entering in a large room of objects during my daily routine. The intensity of the sensation, and the unexpected circumstances of the aesthetic encounter, initiated a course of questioning that caused me to look at my art practice and many of my basic assumptions from a shifted perspective. This initial impetus was followed by a consideration of theoretical and practice-based research models appropriate for an inquiry into my repositioned relationship with the things around me. The Sullivan and Maharaj practice-based research models seemed useful, as they emphasize adaptive thinking and are informed by experiences that transform into awareness (Sullivan 96). Maharaj's research model offered the concept of a contraption for generating knowledge: mixing and repurposing scraps, placing them in proximity to each other to understand how this affects their meaning (Maharaj 42). The image of the knowledge-generating contraption seemed particularly suited to a methodology based on learning and thinking through the things around me.

This model of inquiry raised a series of questions: what form might this practice-based research take? What understanding or awareness might emerge? What new questions or directions of inquiry might this process generate? For the purposes of my practice-based research, the awareness-generating contraption takes the form of a machine: as assemblage made from parts of the world around me, with a hint of independence, reanimated to act out a task or function in pursuit of new understanding or awareness. The methods of research manifested as the processes of collecting, reflecting, assembling, and re-animating. The methodology engages a metonymic sensibility utilizing materiality and affect. Each automated assemblage is imagined as a form of intercessor, set forth to act out its task in pursuit of some resolution in the isolation of contemporary consumer culture. This resolution is not likely to be completed, but reflections on the motions of the contraption may generate new moments of awareness for myself, and possibly the viewers.

In a slow reflection on the movement of the animated sculpture *Boxette*, I felt a new awareness regarding my relationship to materiality, a new understanding of the intimate connection to my surroundings. I had attempted to infuse the sculpture with humour and pathos in order to engage the viewers in hopes that they may also experience slow contemplation, affective response, and metonymic associations.

In the exhibition *Interstitium*, the *Boxette* sculpture was placed on a white vitrine reminiscent of museum displays. This context brought connotations of scientific classifications and the processes of evolution, but also seemed to heighten the vulnerability of the object *Boxette* in its struggle to move around the vitrine. The *Interstitium* exhibition was in the Concourse Gallery of the Emily Carr University of Art and Design. Because of the nature of traffic flow through the building, many people moved through the concourse during the day. I was surprised at their reaction to the moving *Boxette*. People going through the space stopped to stare and often came over to investigate. Viewers appeared to empathize with the sculpture, or expressed that they felt sorry for it; some viewers even tried to help it along when it appeared to be struggling in a corner of the vitrine. Particularly during the exhibition's reception, people appeared to find humour in the sculpture's actions. I had intended the sculpture to have a strong affective influence on viewers, both pathos and humour, but the actual responses exceeded my expectations. I believe that the casual, well-trafficked placement of the sculpture assisted in influencing this response.

Reflections on the *Mothlung* and *Gidget Flying* artworks led me to consider transcendence and the material interruption of transcendence. I noticed the ways that I have been habituated to disconnect from my own materiality and position myself outside the other things of the world. The immersive installation space of the *Mothlung* installation, created by the greys of the wall and the grey of the Mylar blending so that the image alone is glowing, gives the viewer a feeling of merging into the installation, unsure where the edges are. Likewise the rippling Mylar creates an optical illusion with the projected image, which is subtly disorienting. The colours—pink, blue, and grey—conjure the body, as does the rhythmic movements of the shadow projection and the breath-like sound. Together the immersive experience aspires to create an affective, corporeal response in the viewer.

The *Gidget Flying* piece of the installation is slightly outside the immersive area. Though it echoes *Mothlung*'s movements and corporeal associations (with bone and fur), its plastic monitor and diminutive size counter the expansive, transcendent aspects of the *Mothlung* work. The intent of this oppositional tension in the installation is to elicit humour, lightening the mood and providing a sense of balance to the work. The viewer responses suggested that some found humour in the oppositional tension. Few viewers spent a lot of time in the space, which may indicate that the work contained too much tension. In future installations, I would experiment with the subtleties of the arrangement to find a sensually and psychologically inviting atmosphere, so that viewers might be engaged long enough to have a richer experience.

The viewer reactions to the *Mothlung* installation in the Charles H. Scott Gallery could be held in contrast to those of the *Boxette* sculpture of the Concourse Gallery exhibition. Viewers spent less time with the *Mothlung* work, and visual responses appeared less animated. The more formal, less-trafficked space of the Charles H. Scott Gallery might account for this difference. Also the work itself was more subdued and subtle, the intent of the work more contemplative. I believe both works achieved their aims to varying degrees, but for future strategies it seems the physical context of the artwork is critical to its being received to full potential, and the optimum context may differ according to the intended reception of the specific work. In considering the gap between intent and reception of the work, it's clear chance is involved. I cannot anticipate the exact viewer responses to a work, as viewers bring varied histories and associations.

In Baudrillard's description of the system of consumption he speaks about an absence, a void, left where there was once a meaningful relationship between people and the things in their lives. In my mind, the rows upon rows of post-consumer objects I came across in the local grocery store physically represent that void. The emptiness Baudrillard refers to, chasing an unattainable idea in the act of consumption, seems very similar to the sense of disconnect that acted as an impetus for my thesis project (Baudrillard 217).

The artworks of this thesis project, made up of the stuff of the world, with their small, repeated corporeal movements are a kind of devotion to a fissure existing between the world and myself. The vulnerable motions, mimicking the pulses and movements of our own bodies, are meant to touch a place in us where we might recognize or remember a kinship to other things. Perhaps resulting in more attentive encounters in the world. The reanimated *intercessors* act out small tasks of attempted transcendence. They are put out into the world of viewers to perform their little rituals, attempting and possibly failing to transcend their state as pieces of consumer society. In my mind, these small repeated acts are attempts to recreate relationships that have been lost to the priorities of consumption. Small shifts in attitude, like reimagining our position in relation to other things in the world, may hold the potential to challenge assumptions engrained through Western thought and language. Cultural productions might be a place where such shifts and reimagining could begin. Art could be a way to experience those extended places in-between: to become accustomed to viewing the world and our relationships from a slightly altered position—as one being among others.

*"The light that gradually dawns on him consists in his understanding that his fantasy is a real psychic process which is happening to him personally"* (Jung 528)

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**Endnotes:**

<sup>i</sup> *Boxette's* vertebrae legs are attached on hinges that move with servo motors, the kind used in robots. There is one servo motor on each leg, programmed to move slightly out of sync so that the legs stagger in awkward movements. There is a hidden, but gratifying, aspect to the program of these servo movements. In order for the appendage of the sculpture to move back and forth in positions from 0 to 180 degrees and back again, there is a simple program. Basically the program says that if the current position of the appendage is less than 180 degrees, then move to the present position plus one degree;  $0^{\circ}+1$ , then  $1^{\circ}+1$ , then  $2^{\circ}+1$ , and so on until it reaches  $180^{\circ}$ , then move back again to  $0^{\circ}$ . As long as this loop keeps going the leg moves back and forth from the first position to its opposite position (180 degree opposites).

<sup>ii</sup> This is an excerpt from the program.

```
{
for(pos = 0; pos < 180; pos += 1)  // goes from 0 degrees to 180 degrees in steps of 1 degree
{
myservo.write(pos);                // tell servo to go to position in variable 'pos'
delay(15);                          // waits 15ms for the servo to reach the position
}
for(pos = 180; pos >= 1; pos -= 1)  // goes from 180 degrees to 0 degrees
{
myservo.write(pos);                // tell servo to go to position in variable 'pos'
delay(15);                          // waits 15ms for the servo to reach the position
}
```