

# **Shovelling Piles**

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There is plenty of time to realize the human pyramid.

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## Introduction

I am a 5th generation French Canadian settler, currently living on the unceded and occupied First Nations territory of the Lekwungen, Coast Salish and WSÁNEĆ peoples called Saanich. It is located on what is called southern Vancouver Island in the Pacific Northwest. My partner and I rent a home here and my project has taken shape within 3km of this location. I continually immerse myself in the natural environment and complete projects in or about this neighborhood. This is how I have come to learn this place.

I explore experiences that have the potential to stretch the limitations I set on myself as a disciplined participant of advanced capitalism. Throughout my everyday life, I participate in an accountable and calculated system that supports this structure. This participation occupies many of my waking hours, often mediated through my labour, consumption, and the banal activities that lie in between them.<sup>1</sup> I seek to uncover and maintain my sense of agency within the construct of advanced capitalism through self-initiated manual labour.

Philosopher Rosi Braidotti refers to advanced capitalism as being “a time-stealing machine that makes sure you never coincide with the present because you are always a commodity behind where its temporality keeps you coming back for more.”<sup>2</sup> Everything a human expends whether it be time, effort or money, must be directed towards and contribute to a system of consumption that functions adjacent to the present. This ultimately leaves little room for experiences that fall outside of the enclosures of advanced capitalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Discussed by Rosi Braidotti in “Thinking as a Nomadic Subject.” Video Lecture. [ici-berlin.org](http://ici-berlin.org). Ici Berlin, Oct. 2014. Web. 18 Oct. 2016. I propose that these banal activities, these grey areas which keep us physically or psychologically mobile are ultimately in service to advanced capitalism and can include commuting, scrolling social media and/or running errands.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



Braidotti's understanding of agency, then, is particularly useful to this present moment: "To be empowered to act on affirmative, joyful passions; positive levels of ontological energy. To confront the vulgarity of the times and have the ability to act within it."<sup>3</sup> My own confrontation with the vulgarity of now is firmly grounded in my nature to want to act freely, but I see the need to continually exercise this nature, in hopes of ensuring this freedom is indefinitely maintained. My artistic practice revolves around this exercise and hosts a commitment to be more present in my body.

Through my working-class upbringing, I have come to understand my body through physical labour. My mother was a full-time domestic worker in our household: a pre-determined role for her labouring female body. My father was the breadwinner, a manual labourer who held a mostly stable job as a woodworker in addition to other short-term jobs, some of which I distinctly remember due to his apparent difficulties in getting up from a chair when working them. These jobs included pulling ties from decommissioned railroads, building stone fences, and pouring foundations. Tensions around money (and the lack of it) were frequently vocalized in our house, and I grew up understanding that value was attributed to a labouring body that earned money. I was expected to become financially self-sufficient by the age of 18. Labour in this way was a rite of passage and also a financial imperative. This formative experience has framed my sense of self, and in turn, informs my thesis project, which hinges on a form of manual labour that has, throughout history, been predominately undertaken by the male body.

Today, I hold an administrative post in the workforce. Most of my workday is spent sitting at a desk and working at a computer. This mental labour in conjunction with my academic pursuits as a graduate student has focused my point of inquiry into what labour means to me and how else it could be activated.

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<sup>3</sup> Braidotti, Rosi. "Thinking as a Nomadic Subject." Video Lecture. [ici-berlin.org](http://ici-berlin.org). Ici Berlin, Oct. 2014. Web. 18 Oct. 2016.

Learning how my body responds to and engages with shovelling piles of organic matter empowers me to act again. It has few parameters and permits me to hold onto the present. I see this sustained engagement as a core part of the work. In this way, my commitment to complete a task for a predetermined duration is, in effect, the machine that propels the work forward.<sup>4</sup> The planning is minimal. The work develops in response to my own observations of how I feel at a given moment. I labour under a simple equation: show up, work hard for a set duration, and be conscious with my body.<sup>5</sup> Aside from consciously producing artwork, this work contributes to something *other than* productivity. My interest in exploring this form of labour arose from an earlier gesture that ostensibly aimed to activate unrequested labour.

In *Pressure Wash*, July 2017, I committed to pressure washing the walkway outside the entrance to the Emily Carr University campus on Granville Island for approximately 30 minutes at an exhibition opening. The main discussion in this paper focuses on the project following *Pressure Wash* which encompasses shovelling six piles on six separate occasions for about one hour each time. I find a pile through my walking practice, where I aim to tune-in to my surroundings. Once I happen upon a pile, I commit to shovelling it "soon" where "soon" is the time that feels right as opposed to scheduling a time. *Shovelling Piles* allows me to in some ways physically interrogate the pile and what it signifies to me, to consider whether notions of agency can be achieved through this work and to translate the physicality of shovelling into embodied knowledge. Movement, physicality, and bodily presence are human qualities that I see as sites of agency and momentary emancipation.



**Fig 1** Marlene Jess, *Shovelling Piles: Parking Lot Annex*, 2018.  
Video still a.



**Fig 2** Marlene Jess, *Pressure Wash*, 2017.  
Video still a.

<sup>4</sup> O'Rourke, Karen. "A Map, No Directions." *Walking and Mapping: Artists as Cartographers*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2013, p 48. Print.

<sup>5</sup> Working hard is a subjective endeavor. In the shovelling actions, I expect to exert myself every time but this is felt rather than measured.

However, if I only consider the end result of moving a pile, it might be tempting to assume nothing is accomplished, but I would argue this is missing the point. Being present with your own body, whatever the gesture, and accessing a sense of agency is not always observable. *Planning* 1969, by N.E. Thing Co. depicts Ingrid Baxter sitting in a chair. It is a detail from a series of portraits that parody images of corporate executives that aims to debunk hierarchical codes.<sup>6</sup> This image can also be examined from the perspective of productivity. The corporate executive is sitting in a chair and does not appear to be productive yet the caption reads "planning" which is typically a mental, productive activity. But how is the viewer certain? Does this executive have agency? It is possible that there is a deliberate intention to rebel against executive duties by appearing to do nothing in a productive context.



**Fig 3** N.E. Thing Co. Ltd., *Inactive Verbs*, 1969.  
detail entitled *Planning*. Collection of the Canada Council Art Bank.

The environment in which I choose to experiment with notions other than productivity does not *require* anything from me. One might think it absurd to deliberately work at this but how might absurdity relate to obsessive meditation that is mapped onto the disciplinary space of advanced capitalism? Guy Debord discusses that constant exposure to representations of need are what mediate the human into pining away for the next best thing. An obsessive meditation that threatens quality of life. "The phase of total occupation of social life by the accumulated results of the economy leads to a generalized sliding of having into appearing."<sup>7</sup> Life in the present, in nature is alienated beyond commodity acquisition in efforts to strive for a calculated, commodified social status.<sup>8</sup> My own critical position draws from this theory. I aim to draw upon the need for agency in a capitalist system that attempts to teach me what my goals and desires are and sell them to me—it sets the tone and has been the basis of my thinking as an artist for some time.

<sup>6</sup> Knight, Derek. "N.E. Thing Co.: the ubiquitous concept." Ontario: Oakville Galleries 1995, p 45. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Debord, Guy. "Society of the Spectacle." Detroit: Black & Red, 1983, thesis 17. Print.

<sup>8</sup> The mechanisms of advanced capitalism can take shape in any location through the private space of the individual. For example, seemingly innocuous platforms such as *Instagram* have become part of everyday life, and align with Guy Debord's writings from decades ago: "The commodity is explicitly presented as the moment of real life [...] even in those very moments reserved for living." Scrolling a consumer driven platform such as *Instagram*—a tool for constructing the self as a commodity in a social realm which is continuously punctuated with options to buy anywhere, anytime—keeps one occupying a construct that treats the present as an anticipation.

Debord urges that construction of authentic situations can help us be conscious of our positions within society and make changes to our rote functionality, to appropriate events abruptly removed from a life defined and mediated by images. In turn, I see the ability to make an unmediated decision to act in the world in instances across my present physical reality. Debord's intent is to incite an overturn of the system, but I believe this to be impossible at this time. My understanding of the contemporary situation is more closely aligned to the continuing arc of critical inquiry into the impacts and manifestations of capitalism found in Rosi Braidotti's work. Braidotti's critical theory works from a point of knowing that this system is here to stay. "Advanced capitalism will not break, it bends, adapts and mutates in non-linear and contradictory ways. These mutations are pernicious, opportunistic and lethal to us. They capture our desires and make us function."<sup>9</sup> One example of this functioning is through the body's completion of errands. Errands can be described as grey areas between production and consumption. Braidotti describes them as actions directly linked to consumption. "They are compulsory patterns of repetition which keep us mobile within the beastly system of advanced capitalism."<sup>10</sup> The patterns that errands represent can provide examples of disembodiment in a life under this system.

I am interested in counteracting the activity of mobile disembodiment with the embodiment of a task outside of the grey areas discussed above. I want this activity to afford me the space to improve my self-awareness and foster my ability to know the difference between, for example, an algorithm that suggests to me via an online platform what book to read next and what book I feel I should read next based on my own intrinsic process of decision-making.<sup>11</sup> For me, this algorithm is constructed in and continues to grow—with my help—in the grey area of disembodiment I am attempting to act outside of.

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<sup>9</sup> Braidotti, Rosi. "Thinking as a Nomadic Subject." Video Lecture. [ici-berlin.org](http://ici-berlin.org). Ici Berlin, Oct. 2014. Web. 18 Oct. 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Harari, Yuval Noah. "Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs: Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow." Video Lecture. [Youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldTV4qowNms). 28 Feb. 2017. Web. 12 Jun. 2018. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldTV4qowNms>>

Braidotti stresses the importance of cultivating a sense of possibility. But what is the cultivation of a sense of possibility? How can I resist the despair that results from the reminder that I am an intrinsic component of this overwhelming structure? The proposal to speak, act and write from where one is in an effort to continue generating criticality here and now is a way for me to maintain and enact a sense of agency.<sup>12</sup> It drives my work. I start from my geographic location, vocation, occupation, and ability to access the land I walk on daily. *Now* must be grasped, as time is a fleeting presence in the highly technological world I live in. There are potential opportunities to act in the present and I respond to my desire in activating them. These are the possibilities.

*Pressure Wash* and *Shovelling Piles* were initiated by the need to spend time outside my head and service my artistic pursuits with my body. Initially, shovelling was the enactment of an expression "we're just shovelling gravel here" that I periodically exclaim to co-workers at my occupation to encourage stress reduction. It is intended to balance out the perceived weight of a task in comparison to all other tasks, and to incite laughter! Putting these words into action was not something I did to relieve stress, but instead solidify my decision to contribute to a sense of something other than productivity where I can escape the demands to be productive in my daily life. My actions have been recorded and disseminated through video as a strategy for both record keeping and audience engagement. This reproduction operates in a separate realm beyond the direct, intimate experience I have as I labour, but it aims to create an entry point for the viewer.

In this way, I see a parallel to a work like *Plot*, 2007 by Derek Brunen. In this work, which activates an expression through physical exertion, Brunen declares to have asked himself what would happen if he realized the cliché of "digging your own grave" to affirm the presence of death in our daily existence.<sup>13</sup> He takes on the formidable task of digging for several hours to reach the depth of the plot and



**Fig 4** Marlene Jess, *Shovelling Piles: Neighbourhood House*, 2018. Video still a.



**Fig 5** Derek Brunen, *Plot*, 2007. Video still. © Derek Brunen 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Braidotti, Rosi. "Emotional Geographies Conference." Video Lecture. *Youtube.com*. 15 Jul. 2013. Web. 2 Dec. 2017. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjQkdkle8rY>>

<sup>13</sup> Egan, Danielle. "Visual Arts Digging Your Own Grave." *The Globe and Mail*. Feb. 23, 2007, p 7 R5. PDF. 7 Apr. 2018.

through this labour, explores the subject of death, a topic of discussion typically considered a social indiscretion.

*Shovelling Piles* can be considered a resistance to the homogenous system I find myself operating in. I need to be busy doing something, yet recognize an impulse to resist making endless contributions to a system that requires me to produce and consume wherever and whenever possible. The action is a metaphor for my enthusiasm to gain control over this seemingly uncontrollable situation, to learn who I am to the core, if only for an hour at a time.

The remainder of this paper is presented in a glossary of terms and discusses the similarities and differences between projects undertaken by other artists who have also investigated manual labour. As an alternative to presenting complete or exact definitions, the glossary format acts as a set of beacons that help clarify my path in no specific order. Comparing and contrasting my project with the work of other artists in the context of this paper has allowed me to draw productive links between a set of practices that position manual labour within an artistic context.

Mapping these sites of experience provides context about the project and creates a space to dedicate this work to the land that was used for it. A diagrammatic map denoting where the piles were moved can be found in Appendix A. Moving found organic piles on the landscape without permission reflects a physical response to navigation and free will, an exploration of the body among nature and gives me a unique space to consider the context in which I live and work.

## **Walking**

My walking habit is integral to my working method. This space of research is where I engage in body movement that produces thoughts, experiences, arrivals.<sup>14</sup> It is where I am most grounded, where my thoughts become clear, quiet and at times non-existent. Silence in walking is "the dissipation of our language. Everything in this world of work, leisure, activity, reproductions and consumption of things,

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<sup>14</sup> Solnit, Rebecca. "Wanderlust." *A History of Walking*. New York: Penguin Books, 2001, p 5. Print.

everything has its function, its place, its utility, and a specific word that corresponds to it".<sup>15</sup> Once there is silence, there is clarity. Language is set aside, breath is prominent, the weight of my head is balanced, there is space to "intuit the bones", "the variation of movement between the skull and the atlas are vague, non-specific so imagination supplies the exact site of action."<sup>16</sup> Sensations around the bones while walking can be felt beyond sensing compression and weight transferred from the heel to the landscape.

I am intuitively aware of my female body as it relates to history as a walker. In the 19th century, a woman walking alone in public was a body-at-risk. It was considered disgraceful and dangerous. Women began to enjoy public spaces at the turn of the 19th and throughout the 20th century but there was always a clear distinction between genders. "It's crucial for the flâneur to be functionally invisible but the stir a woman alone in public creates prevents this from happening [for her]."<sup>17</sup> I don't consider myself a practicing flâneuse but have on multiple occasions, while on a walk, had my sense of peace erased because I am female. On a base level, walking for me is an opportunity to exercise my freedom to perambulate in public. It is a right and it aligns with a creative potential that helps me piece myself together as I piece a terrain together and somehow merges the two one step at a time.

While walking out of doors, on land, my body engages with the natural environment. I identify with the notion of attempting to integrate oneself into nature. The physical involvement of walking creates receptiveness to the landscape. Hamish Fulton claims to walk on land to be woven into nature. The character of a walk, then, is practical.<sup>18</sup> He is likely referring to an ecological merger: the material structure of the body intermingling with the natural environment through a series of breaths. The experience of being out-of-doors, outside of a closed receptacle or a series of interiors is of critical importance to my well-being. It initiates a sense of

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<sup>15</sup> Gros, Frédéric & John Howe. "A Philosophy of Walking." New York: Verso, 2014, p 62. Print.

<sup>16</sup> "Steve Paxton's Small Dance Guidance: Notes added by Steve Paxton, April 2008." myriadcity.net. <https://myriadcity.net/contact-improvisation/contact-improv-as-a-way-of-moving/steve-paxton-s-1977-small-dance-guidance>. np. Web. 17 Jun. 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Elkin, Lauren. *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2016, p 13. Print.

<sup>18</sup> Kastner, Jeffrey, and Brian Wallis. "Land and Environmental Art." London: Phaidon Press, 1998, p 243. Print.



freedom and openness. Walking is a way for me to occupy my entire body and engage with the terrain outside in the world all at once, an indulging privilege which is easily accessible from my geographic location.

## The Pile

"pile, n. 1. A heap; a mass of anything thrown or laid together to form a regular or irregular elevation of which some parts are supported by others."<sup>19</sup>

Each pile is made up of one or a combination of gravel, sand, soil, compost, clay that have been previously assembled on the landscape. It belongs to the location it has been deposited on. By walking towards one I begin to get a sense of its substantial weight. Shovelling changes its original shape, frees it from the confines of its previous frame, refreshes it.

For me, a pile is a pyramid that symbolizes labour, an accumulation of perpetual responsibility. Perhaps this stems from my longtime habit of associating administrative duties with gravel or from understanding the world through my working-class upbringing. The pile as mental labour fluctuates in size and if it is cleared away, there is another close by. Mental labour is an activity that spans an ongoing agenda which functions according to an inextricably linked pattern. "Labour has a schedule, it is constantly doing groundwork for itself and does not engage in activities that prevent it from progressing."<sup>20</sup> It presses towards a future end goal that consistently resets itself. I am committed to a version of this pattern by meeting administrative deadlines and getting remunerated.<sup>21</sup> Labour consists of the continuous execution of a defined routine that requires maintenance and often extends into free time. My body moves in service to labour and its productivity.



**Fig 6** Marlene Jess, *Shovelling Piles: Community Centre*, 2018. Video still a.

<sup>19</sup> "pile." *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary: Unabridged*. New York: The Publishers Guild, 1943. Print.

<sup>20</sup> Hyde, Lewis. *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*. New York: Vintage Books, 2009, p 87. Print.

<sup>21</sup> It could be argued that meeting academic deadlines and paying for tuition is also linked to labour's schedule.



In *Paradox of Praxis 1*, 1997, Francis Alÿs pushes a block of ice through the streets of Mexico city for hours until it is melted. The outcome of this effort is something other than productivity. "Sometimes, to make something is really to make nothing; and paradoxically, sometimes to make nothing is to make something."<sup>22</sup> One element of the action addresses the effects of capitalism on the working individual—a disproportionate relationship between effort and remuneration. This durational piece influences my project. I believe the pile and the ice can each stand-in as a symbol for labour. One is moved and newly assembled, the other melts down while moving. Each is being tended to yet nothing is "produced".

My actions rely on physical exertion for completion where I become more efficient with each new pile. The commitment I have set out for myself is important to me, regardless of the consequences or second thoughts. It is part of my ethic and focuses my psychological direction to one single task. It also resonates with *Honest Labor*, 1979 by Chris Burden in which the artist digs as an alternative to delivering an artist talk. The task ends when the scheduled time ends. The trench is not intended to be put to use. Burden describes it matter-of-factly:

"I was invited to Vancouver for a week to be a visiting artist by the Emily Carr College of Art and Simon Fraser University. Rather than meet with students to present and discuss my past work in a teaching context, I requested that I be provided with a wheel barrel, a shovel, and a pick ax. On the first day of my visit, I immediately began, in a vacant lot that had been provided for me, to dig a straight ditch about 2½ feet wide and 3 feet deep. Each following day students could find me digging from 9am, until 5pm. I did not have a specific length or goal, except that I would be digging during the times of day that I had designated. Occasionally, someone would offer to dig for me, but after trying for a few minutes they would return the job to me."<sup>23</sup>

This action is also about physicality and commitment. Much of Burden's practice addresses duration and the physical and psychological limits and capacities of the body. The body has developed its own language.



**Fig 7** Francis Alÿs, *Paradox of Praxis 1 (Sometimes Doing Something Leads to Nothing)*. Mexico City 1997. Video documentation of an action 5 minutes.  
© Francis Alÿs, Courtesy David Zwirner Gallery, New York/London/Hong Kong.



**Fig 8** Chris Burden, *Honest Labor*, 1979.  
© 2018 Chris Burden /  
licensed by The Chris Burden Estate and Artists Rights Society (ARS),  
New York.

<sup>22</sup> Sigler, Friederike. "Work." London Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2017. p 220. Print.

<sup>23</sup> Burden, Chris, et al. "Chris Burden." *Extreme Measures*. New York, NY: Skira Rizzoli in association with New Museum, 2013, p 231. Print.

## Agency

Consider water as it flows down a riverbed. If agency is ignited at the water's initial point of action, when it has broken through the construct of its containment, then its force as a river is a continuance of this agency. The river is water's preservation or maintenance.

After completing *Pressure Wash*, a few individuals approached me claiming they had believed I was a maintenance worker. Around this time I was introduced to the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles whose projects can be considered a unique form of endurance art where repetition and duration are used to represent the complexities of invisible and unrecognized labour in society. Performing maintenance work in an artistic context shapes a space of creative uncertainty and theoretical ambiguity and questions the line between what is real and artificial.<sup>24</sup> Laderman Ukeles' actions succeed at burning an image in the public eye which alters public perceptions about specific types of labour through repetition. For example, scrubbing concrete stairs, or shaking the hand of sanitation workers over and again.

In hindsight, the most gratifying moment while pressure washing a walkway was directing the vigorous stream of water at a melted candy bar for what felt like an indulgent length of time. This focused stillness, its questionable productivity and the notion of physical labour as art undertaken in the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles stimulated the need for a closer investigation of the types of labour I take part in daily and whether I could consider them more critically.

Agency might also describe the tension between my body and its operation in advanced capitalism and my body and the pile being shovelled. The former is urged to follow an external mechanical, pre-determined functionality, the latter functions outside of that command. I have an "epistemic understanding of the conditions of my bondage".<sup>25</sup> I feel motivated to carve out a place of agency within a system that seeks to direct my every action toward consumption.



**Fig 9** Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance (Outside)*, 1973. Part of Maintenance Art Performance series, 1973-1974. Performance at Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT. (11) 20"x16" photos. Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

<sup>24</sup> Phillips, Patricia C., et al. Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art. New York: Prestel, 2016, p 28. Print.

<sup>25</sup> Braidotti, Rosi. "Thinking as a Nomadic Subject." Video Lecture. ici-berlin.org. Ici Berlin, Oct. 2014. Web. 18 Oct. 2016.

## Embodied Knowledge

Do we live in the age of disembodiment? How much time does my mind spend outside my body? I acknowledge that rational conceptual processes are dominant over bodily knowing. This is how I have learned to maintain control over my life. Yet "knowledge not only exists in our minds but is also enfolded in peoples' muscles and skeletons and the existence of this knowledge calls into question the privileged place given to conceptual knowledge."<sup>26</sup> *Shovelling Piles* is a heuristic experience where I am learning with mostly physical rather than predominant cognitive involvement. Given how the 'built-in function' of breathing impacts and constrains what and how we think, I am curious about how bodily knowledge has potential to form the mind.<sup>27</sup> By revisiting and developing a type of pattern, I seek to anchor the mind—keep it present.

With each new pile, I experience a process of transformation which involves sweat, deep breathing, muscle ache and growth, overall increased body awareness. I have felt moments of feeling trapped, of aggression. I have also felt moments of elation and strength. The weather, nearby sounds, my mental state are some of the factors that affect the experience. A putrid odour leads to a deep feeling of entrenchment. Shovelling at a traffic intersection invigorated my strokes, shovelling among birds and pedestrians felt steadier. I have imposed daily stresses into the transfer of energy by thrusting the pile's matter.

I have reflected on the postural and psychological differences and similarities between for example, free-walking<sup>28</sup> and running an errand. These processes and my body define the materiality of the work as they help formulate new knowledge. An audience is not needed to complete the action. A viewer of the work may associate its futility with their own position in society rather than an enthusiasm for physicality but this is in-line with an intention for the project: to initiate criticality



**Fig 10** Marlene Jess, *Shovelling Piles: Maintenance Yard*, 2018. Video still a.



**Fig 11** Marlene Jess, *Shovelling Piles: Vacant Lot*, 2018. Video still a.

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<sup>26</sup> Peile, Colin. "Emotional and Embodied Knowledge." *Implications for Critical Practice*. The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare. Dec 1998, p 45. PDF.

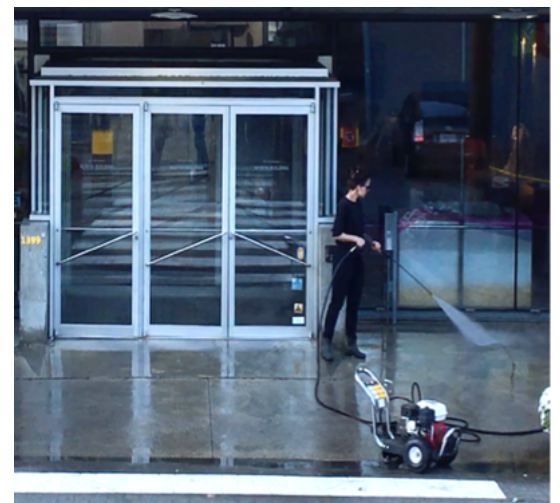
<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p 47.

<sup>28</sup> This type of walk is enjoyed with my dog, it has no errand in mind. Walking my dog is not an errand, it is a shared perambulation. Although about half of these fit into a window of time, they are guided by natural rhythms.

about the workings of an economic and political system that humans contribute to and maintain.

Recently while shovelling, I conducted an internal scan. Starting with the toes, up to the knees, the lungs, the chest where I adjusted my foot and straightened my back to become more conducive to the task. The scan continued to my nape, the back of my eyes, temples, jaw, ears where I realized my head was straining my neck considerably and so I adjusted it. I experienced an influx of energy by making these small calibrations and took to deeper breathing. "If one is successful in dropping the conviction that one's mind is anything other than the body itself, one may abruptly experience oneself in an entirely new manner—not as an immaterial intelligence inhabiting an alien, mechanical body, but as a magic self-sensing form—a body that is itself awake and aware."<sup>29</sup> Through being attentive while shovelling, my body first builds on its capacity to make small adjustments internally which then translate to external adjustments that can foster agency in the contemporary moment.

This project is concerned with cultivating "calm, and stillness somewhere outside the cascades of contemporary speed culture [in addition to investigating] what it means to experience a world of speed, acceleration, and coterporality through experience."<sup>30</sup> It provides me with new ways of considering how my body comports itself in and responds to everyday mediated experiences and unconscious influences, and makes use of this awareness by helping me improve my corporeal existence. The work here was also self-initiated. A brief moment of fear is experienced before piercing the pile. This is caused by not having asked for permission.<sup>31</sup> Once shovelling begins, I am experiencing the freedom of my actions which is what grounds my work in general.



**Fig 12** Marlene Jess, *Pressure Wash*, 2017.  
Video still b.

<sup>29</sup> qtd. in Epp, Ellie. Embodiment Studies Web Worksite. <http://www.elliepp.com/mbo/bodies/index.html>. np. Web. Nov. 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Koepnick, Lutz P. "On Slowness." *Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014, p 10. PDF.

<sup>31</sup> I was questioned by a municipal employee on one occasion and responded: "I am putting my body through something.." It was as if I had stepped outside my body to speak for it while it continued to do the work—on behalf of human physicality to a member of the public sector through a brief, cordial, awkward interaction.



## Video Installation

*Shovelling Piles* is a series of actions completed in public without announcement and documented for an art viewer. A cell phone is mounted to a tripod in the distance. The relatively unplanned nature of this work is a key motivating factor. The process of making includes honouring intuition with timing, walking to the site, and travelling light. I have come to understand that this work is best disseminated as a record where its makeshift documentation is a core part of its aesthetic.

For the graduate exhibition I experimented with projecting the six video records as three silent diptychs. The diptychs were assembled with attention to the visual points and counterpoints between the different videos. The videos were silent to anchor the depiction of the moving body. The videos themselves are my primary concern, rather than the format of presentation. Whether as screen-based or projection-based installations, my interest is in the videos providing a multiplicity of perspectives and actions, unable to ever be seen all at once or all at the same time. The room in which the diptychs were presented for my defence, however, created a number of unexpected complications. The technical limitations of the space and equipment challenged me to compromise on the scale and location of the projections: they were too high and ultimately less visually effective due to their smaller than intended size.

Regardless of the challenges of this presentation, the encounter with the action itself is what really matters to me. I understand the audience may need or want more than the records to fully get a sense of what I experienced in action, so I see an opportunity to explore other installation strategies. In my upcoming presentation of this work, I will decouple the videos, separating them and projecting them larger, while also experimenting with supplying the sound that accompanies the actions with a hope that it will translate the methodic, physically challenging task being depicted. In future installations, I may also supply an olfactory element to the work by bringing in a pile of dirt and offering a map of the sites of action. Because walking is fundamental to my research, I believe that



**Fig 13** Marlene Jess, *Shovelling Piles*, 2018.  
Installation detail for 2 of 3 diptychs.

sharing a walk with a viewer can add a beneficial element to the work. A scheduled, silent walk will provide an active alternative to viewing.

## Conclusion

*Shovelling Piles* is straightforward and recognizable among most adult individuals and the feedback has been rich and varied. My role here is not just to complete a project but to establish and maintain an attitude, a way of feeling. I want to foster an ethic that is concerned with agency among a heavily mediated environment which promotes a life that is in service to advanced capitalism. I believe such a life has the potential to erase the sense of freedom that underwrites the human experience. In writing about the site of the treadmill as a form of physic terror for inmates in *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, Rebecca Solnit provides a highly useful description of life under advanced capitalism more generally: "It is its monotonous steadiness and not its severity which constitutes its terror, and frequently breaks down the obstinate spirit."<sup>32</sup> This is the site of my contestation. My endeavours celebrate the capacity of the human body and the freedom to act authentically in the world. My body knows that this is best for my spirit.

Embodied knowledge translates to knowing as something I am, not something I have. Knowledge as such is not storable outside the body. Knowledge as an effective cognitive structure can only be constituted and reconstituted in individual bodies.<sup>33</sup> My unique knowledge of shovelling empowers me to seek, maintain and extend this transformation to more aspects of my life.

I continue exploring opportunities for action in my neighborhood and community. To speak, act, and write from my position in the world offers a wide range to work from. My projects have taken root in movement and physicality. They respond to the current moment. I have learned to honour my intuition in activating new ideas if they stick, if they become clear to me while I am walking.



**Fig 14** Marlene Jess, *Shovelling Piles: Trail Head*, 2018. Video still b.

<sup>32</sup> Solnit, Rebecca. "Wanderlust." *A History of Walking*. New York: Penguin Books, 2001, p 260. Print.

<sup>33</sup> Epp, Ellie. Embodiment Studies Web Worksite. <http://www.elliepp.com/mbo/bodies/index.html>. np. Web. Nov. 2016.

Appendix A



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