

# **The Space between Ecology and the Object**

Emilie Grace Lavoie

Diploma of College Studies in Fashion Design, Collège LaSalle, 2011  
Baccalauréat en Art Visuels, Université de Moncton, 2016

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## **Abstract**

My practice interrogates the space between an object and its ecology: the relationship between material practice and complex systems, such as living ecosystems, and the environments in which they are situated. My main interest is our current ecological crisis and the precarious relations which now exist between living species and their contexts largely as a result of human interventions in the natural world. This growing awareness of the fragility of the natural world, its biodiversity, life processes, and interactions among organisms, transforms my view of the world and inspires my imagination. My practice relies on a temporal process of making, sustained through multiple stages of hand production. This approach to making allows me to intervene in and potentially rebuild more holistic and regenerative ecological relations. Exploration of materials related to ceramics and textiles are produced in an effort to create an object that mirrors the transformation of an ecosystem, or at the very least demonstrates the object as dependent on the ecology of the studio.

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate my thesis project to my grandparents.

For my grandmother Grace Lavoie, who is my reference of a truly strong woman who was never afraid of hard work.

For my grandfather Normand Ducas, who always demonstrated respect and care for the nearby ecosystems.



## The Environment

*J'ai grandi dans une petite ville, dans la région du Madawaska au nord-ouest du Nouveau-Brunswick. Nous passions beaucoup de temps à l'extérieur, la tête pleine d'imagination et prêtes à l'exploration. Les forêts, les terres et les lacs faisaient partis de mon environnement et sont les qualifications de ce que j'appelle "chez nous".*

*Mes parents avaient un chalet au bord d'un lac où nous allions chaque fin de semaine. Je me souviens de tout les petits endroits où nous avons explorés ma soeur et moi. Un grand jardin au tapis bleu, des forêts à perte de vue et le lac où se cachait de petites créatures...*<sup>1</sup>

Organic marine forms have long been a source of inspiration for my practice. It is always intriguing to discover something unfamiliar that comes from a different world.<sup>2</sup> Exploring the shoreline of Vancouver as a new graduate student, I discovered how natural elements such as barnacles are specific to their environment, as the barnacles evident in the Pacific ocean look very different from the ones in the Atlantic. In an effort to consider the implications of this observation, I built an accumulation of large-scale forms (fig. 1). I used different elements such as cabbage and celery root moulds to texturize the barnacle forms. The moulds were made from ginger which look like sea sponges and which were then joined with forms that resemble human legs<sup>3</sup> (fig. 2). This arrangement of elements suggest the co-habitation of several living species within the same piece. The species I integrated into the overall structure of my piece *Parasitus* all have common biological connections: their genes. It also reflect how many species of an ecosystem are related.

*Durant un emploi d'été étudiant, mon intérêt pour les organismes génétiquement modifiés et les questions environnementales a captivé mon attention. Je travaillais sur une plantation d'arbres. Il s'avère que les arbres que je plantais étaient génétiquement modifiés et que la terre était infestée de pesticides et d'herbicides. Cette expérience m'a amené à questionner les tendances actuelles dans le domaine de la génétique et ses impacts*

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<sup>1</sup> I grew up in a small town in the Madawaska region of northwestern New Brunswick. We spent a lot of time outside, imagining and ready to explore. Forests, lands and lakes were part of my environment and are the qualities of what I call "home". My parents had a cottage on the side of a lake where we went every weekend. I remember all the little places we explored my sister and me. A big garden, forests as far as the eye can see and the lake where we hid small creatures ...

<sup>2</sup> My interest and fascination for our world became more important after listening to the documentary "Mission Blue." The ocean is important to the survival of all living species. In the documentary, Dr. Sylvia Earle shares her experience of the ocean over many years, noticing changes in its diverse habitats. There are so many areas of the ocean that have not been yet discovered that make it even more mysterious and intriguing.

<sup>3</sup> Barnacles use their legs (cirri) to capture plankton.

*inconnus sur l'écosystème. J'ai commencé à questionner plus en profondeur notre relation et notre interaction avec notre environnement et les autres espèces vivantes.*<sup>4</sup>



Figure 1. *Parasitus*, 2016



Figure 2. View of the inside.

When looking at the broader picture of the current ecological crisis, it is apparent there is a disconnect between the individual and the surrounding environment through our interactions with it. Humankind too often forgets that all beings can be intricately connected, and mutually dependent in order to have a robust and healthy environment. In his article, “Waiting for Gaia,”<sup>5</sup> the French philosopher, anthropologist, and sociologist Bruno Latour explains how the disconnection between humans and ecology is produced in part through a distinction of scale, the individual feels cut off from the immenseness of the natural world, while the scope of environmental problems are overwhelming and beyond repair, creating a rift which makes it harder for the subject to connect with their surroundings. While Latour considers the amplitude of the disconnection through scale, he argues that this disconnection was first experienced as the sublime. The sublime by definition refers to the things in nature and art that affect the mind with a sense of overwhelming power, calculated to inspire awe through its beauty and greatness.<sup>6</sup> Latour suggests that the classical concept of the sublime is disappearing and a new perhaps more daunting one has evolved with the Anthropocene. By definition, the Anthropocene relates to or denotes the current geological age, viewed as the period during which

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<sup>4</sup> During a summer student job, my interest in genetically modified organisms and environmental issues came to the forefront. I was working on a tree plantation. It turns out that the trees I planted were genetically modified and that the land was infested with pesticides and herbicides. This experience led me to question current trends in the field of genetics and its unknown impacts on the ecosystem. I began to question more deeply our relationship and interaction with our ecology and other living species.

<sup>5</sup> Bruno Latour, “Waiting for Gaia: Composing the Common World through Art and Politics,” (lecture delivered at the French Institute, London, November 2011). Available online at [http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/124-GAIA-LONDON-SPEAP\\_0.pdf](http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/124-GAIA-LONDON-SPEAP_0.pdf). Accessed March 15, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the sublime see: Simone Morlet, *The Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010)

human activity has been the dominant influence on the climate and the environment. Human activity and its impact on biodiversity and climate change is the primary factor contributing to a sense of powerlessness. Latour argues, “we are asked to look again at the same everlasting ice, except that we are led to the sinking feeling that they might not last long after all; we are mobilized to look again at the same parched desert, except that we come to feel that it expands inexorably because of our disastrous use of the soil!”<sup>7</sup> Because of this detachment, no one feels responsible for the cause of the anthropic problem as it is too big in comparison to human scale. Therefore, through art and creative practice, it is possible to bridge the distance which Latour theorizes. By activating the relation between co-habitation of species and their environment there is the potentiality to inspire a change of perception through an interaction and more develop a diverse and grounded approach to contemporary environmental issues.

While Latour provides one important way to clarify the source of disconnection felt between human beings and their surroundings, it is also important to consider the connectivity one can feel, and potentially exploit, with the natural world. My connection to ecology starts in my studio, as I treat my medium clay, as an ecology that must be cared for in order to be robust. In my work, I generate ways to connect other organisms, such as vegetable and animal species with which we share certain biological processes and genomes. My thesis project *Parasitus*, which is a result of my understanding of the studio as a complex environment, with its own ecological structures, diversity, and fragility, has allowed me to reflect on the material implications of the work I am producing and the generative attitude I bring to my studio practice.

### **Studio Ecology and Object Ecology through labour intervention**

*En grandissant, mon père avait son propre atelier de néons, où il créait des enseignes en néon. Tout le processus était fascinant - manipuler les tubes de verre pour créer des formes lumineuses. Je passais mon temps après l'école à l'observer et à poser des tonnes de questions sur le processus. L'atelier était entouré de lumières, partout sur les murs. Mon père y travaillait continuellement, m'inspirant l'importance d'une solide éthique de travail et la compréhension de l'engagement nécessaire pour produire son métier.*

“Main-d’œuvre” “min-deu-vr” – is the French word for labour. Main-d’œuvre means the hands that work. It brings together a combination of words with multiple meanings: “main” for hands and “œuvre” for work of art. “Main d’oeuvre” makes me think of sewing something by hand. In relation to sewing, the hands are controlling everything.<sup>8</sup> All the material needs to be touched and manipulated

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<sup>7</sup> Bruno Latour, “Waiting for Gaia: Composing the Common World through Art and Politics”.

<sup>8</sup> Here I refer to sewing because it is the first connection I make of something handmade (fait à la main).

with the hands. Commonly with the medium of ceramics, the hands of the artist are always working. By pressing on the clay with my hands, I am able to leave my trace and create delicate forms. Harold Paris, a ceramicist and Abstract Expressionist, has explained, “my hands and every mark in the clay is a sign that I am here now at this instant and this clay is what I am and will be.”<sup>9</sup> I find this quotation profound in relation to the ceramic process. The hands are working and are leaving marks which will become permanent through the durability of the material. When working with ceramics, hands are crucial tools to the process but the clay also plays a significant role. Clay has a memory: it remembers all the folds and movements made. It will tell you when it is time to transform it and how it transforms through the many stages of its drying.

My research in the studio (figs. 3 and 4)<sup>10</sup> is a meditative exercise in which my hands take the lead in the making. It is important to work with my hands in processes related to ceramics and even to re-discover techniques such as hand sewing, which were integral to my practice prior to graduate school. This multi-tiered process demands attention through constant labour, a caring in the production of the work through various stages of preparation and making, processes of drying, subsequent manipulation and firing. The labour involved in the process of ceramics is similar to that of growing a garden, requiring cultivation, tending, and care.



Figure 3. *Main d'oeuvre*, 2016



Figure 4. Details

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<sup>9</sup> Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), page #.

<sup>10</sup> The piece is a large-scale ceramic, built in 3 sections. The height is almost human scale. The armature is covered by smaller ceramic elements that have been manipulated to leave a trace of my gesture and physical movements. I also incorporate more literal aspects of handicraft in the shape of my molded hands. Additionally, the overall piece has literally been woven together, by adding threads that pass through and connect individual ceramics pieces.

Historically, woman's labour been associated with craft and skill-based knowledge. Processes that involved time and dedication. I am disciplined, hard working and drawn to skill-based knowledge production, all qualities that have been instilled in me by my mother who sewed a lot when I was growing up. She would make clothes for my sister, my cousin and for me. She is the one who taught me how to sew and how through time, repetition and care, something as simple as sewing actually transforms fabric into a garment that can be worn.

My understanding of artistic labour is dependent on a rigorous approach in which I push myself physically in order to feel the bodily consequences of this labour and to measure its impact on my daily life. As the print maker artist Gabriella Solti explains, "When an artist uses some form of labour art, it means that all of the decisions are made during the execution and are exclusively based on the body's response to fatigue, pain or injury and the end result is a perfunctory affair."<sup>11</sup> For me, these physical efforts are important and necessary as they connect my body intimately to the work I am producing. It provides the means of understanding my own participation in the production of the work as part of the ecological cycle of the studio.

An artist who engages a similar approach to creative production is Liza Lou. She has argued that "to realize anything fundamentally one has to work, put the time in, suffer and, in a way, there's a kind of punishment involved there."<sup>12</sup> During several years (1991-1995) Lou covered an entire kitchen with beads. She highlights the everyday domestic life by challenging herself through endurance, despite the difficulty of what is involved in the making.<sup>13</sup> By giving dignity to a labour that has been historically unrecognised, Lou's practice references feminist discourses that have looked to domesticity and craft as specifically women's production. Lou pushed herself despite difficulties encountered to make visible the immateriality of labour. This type of labour must be recognized as holding a potential for subversion or the demonstration of difference not necessarily accounted for in contemporary writings on artistic labour.<sup>14</sup>

What I take from Lou's work is how she challenged the perception of women's labour through her discipline and her work ethic through her transformation and decoration of gendered space. In the same vein, my work with ceramics takes up repetition and a daily commitment to transform clay

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<sup>11</sup> Gabriella Solti, "'From 'Means to Ends': Labour as Art Practice'", 2014

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> When I think of the way, I work, there is something that reminds me of excess and obsession. Why do I feel the need to over-work myself in order to feel pain in my body? Further, every time I start a new project I want to do more and more pieces than what I accomplished before. Is this a parallel to contemporary lifestyle where we are encouraged to always want more?

<sup>14</sup> Julia Bryan Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Kim Grant, *All About Process: The Theory and Discourse on Modern Artistic Labor* (University Park: PA: Penn State University Press, 2017); and Betsy Greer, *Craftivism: The Art and Craft of Activism* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014).

through various states of being into a hard object that is then subsequently transformed by other materials such as textiles (figs. 5 and 6). I see this type of repetition and reworking of process and form as a way to generate research. These fabrics are added to certain ceramic pieces in order to further imbue them with domestic matter. By adding fabric like burned lining into the piece after it had been fired, I am able to play and transform it into something more lively in an effort to show the complexity of living species. In other works, I add plasticine, wool, little pieces of leather and coil covered by yarn.

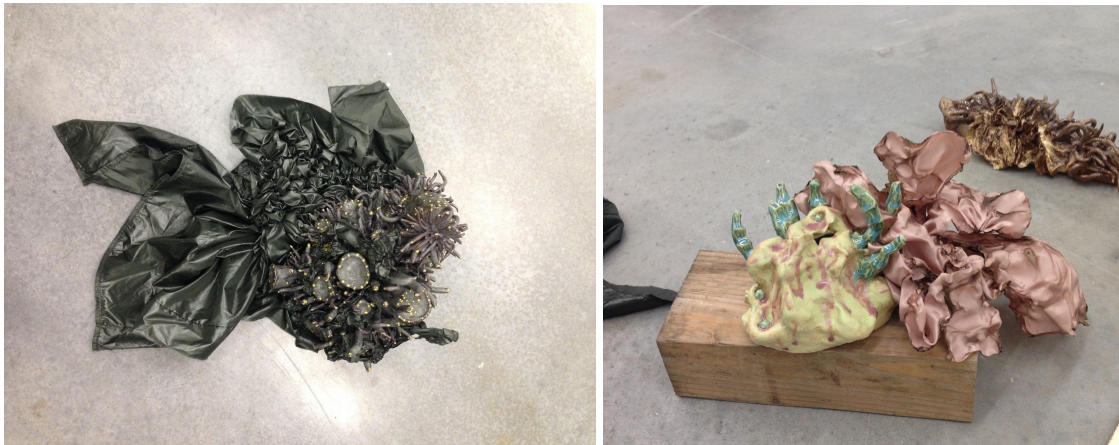


Figure 5 and 6. Examples of interventions of fabric added to the ceramic.

## Studio Ecology

As a means to further challenge my own approach to the ceramic medium, I started working with recycled clay, something I had been taught ‘not to do.’ The recycled clay is the leftover of everyone’s clay in the studio and is mixed with water and re-dried into the appropriate humidity for re-use. Different clay bodies lose different amount of water while drying, so by mixing different bodies of clay together it loses elasticity while drying and can result in cracks in the final piece. By using this clay, the glaze can provoke unknown reactions which allow the medium to transform unexpectedly. Chance and the unexpected is the reality of working with a medium like ceramic. One needs to handle it with care to make sure it will not morph in the kiln. Although efforts can be made to ensure that the clay does not mutate, it still happens more often than we anticipate. In the process of using recycled clay, the body of my work became more fragile, making chance and the unexpected a more integral part of the work.. For example, in my work *Symbiose*, the clay cracked in process. The piece survived but transformed in the bisque fire (fig. 7), adapting and shifting almost into its final shape (fig. 8).

In the early 60s, Peter Voulkos was one of many ceramicists who started to consider the potential of ceramic as a sculptural object. “[T]o be a ceramicist-sculptor in the 1950s and 1960s was in some



essential way to be marginal to ‘sculpture’... in the semantic associations to pottery, ceramics speak for that branch of culture which is too homey, too functional, too archaic, for the name of ‘sculpture’ to extend to it.”<sup>15</sup> One of the first gesture to bridge the separation between pottery and ceramic sculpture was to stop building with the potter’s instrument, the wheel, and to start hand building. By resisting conventional rules, which involved the use of the wheel, and challenging material use, Voulkos opened new possibilities to building ceramic forms.

Marie Ulmer, a pioneer Acadian ceramicist, had a similar approach. Working primarily with ceramic as a sculpture medium, she experimented using local clay, glazed some pieces using three steps glazes and integrated non-ceramic materials into her work. My knowledge of ceramics was influenced by Ulmer. She set greatly impacted generations of ceramic artists in Acadie. In the ceramic department at Université de Moncton the focus and the techniques I learned were put toward hand building sculptures.



Figure 7. *Symbiose* before glaze



Figure 8. *Symbiose* after glaze

The transformation of *Symbiose*, the sense that it is almost alive, determining its own shape or form, relates to the theoretical writing of political theorist Jane Bennett who argues that things or objects can contain a vitality that exceeds their materials limitations: “Thing-power gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience.”<sup>16</sup> With her term ‘thing-power’, Bennett refers to how objects have their own agency as somewhat separated from the

<sup>15</sup> Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, Berg, 2007

<sup>16</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), xvi.

maker or from humankind. My medium, clay, behaves like an extension of my body that navigates between being independent (showing agency) and being determined by me. But it is this quasi-independence that has potential, to signal to the subject that we are not sovereign, our environment is active and has a vitality we can not fully control. During my time in my studio, the power and energy of the objects I create gets activated through the production process, and emanates out from there to energize surrounding contexts and environments. This makes visible through the material practice something that supersedes the object and my own intentionality, perhaps drawing attention to the ecologies in which the object is situated.

Pushing myself through such a multi-staged process of making has opened up many possibilities, specifically regarding the connections between myself and the work. I feel a visceral link between my labour and the ecologies in which I am situated, drawing attention to the reciprocity and entanglements between my own health (how I might push myself through the physical acts of making) and the wellbeing of the ecosystems I am contributing to. By working everyday, putting care and time through the repetition of making, I experienced the consequences of that labour on my body and my mind (with its own ecology and systems). Latour, in writing about the Anthropocene, describes how humans are at fault for the ecological crisis. Yet in this process, we are not only destroying our surroundings but also we are destroying ourselves.

### **The Ecology of the Object**

With a background in fashion design, it is natural for me to work with textiles and manipulate them as a way to transform flat material into sculptural form. This method is similar to making ceramic slabs into three-dimensional form. In an effort to bring together diverse materials such as ceramic and textiles, I transformed fabric into ceramic, submerging matter such as fabric, yarn, and jute in ceramic slip to be transformed in the kiln (fig. 9). Through the firing process, the textile disappears leaving only the slip to transform into hard ceramic. This slip technique is also used by Jessica Drenk to create delicate ceramic sculptures (fig. 10).





Figure 9. Jessica Drenk, *Porcelain Skins* (series), 2006, Porcelain, cotton swabs, 7 x 6 x 6 inches. Courtesy of Jessica Drenk



Figure 10. Tests with fabric in slip

I strive to transform my work (the object) into an ecology (where the objects interact with their habitats), by creating a soft sculpture environment. Like many craft media, soft sculpture was marginal to traditional sculpture, and inhabit (at least historically) a space between art and craft. My experimental forms were created using diverse material such as yarn, textile, chicken wire and techniques related to preparation for dyes.

I imagine my ceramic and fiber objects as strange species that could live in the water but eventually mutate to live on earth. I add pieces of textiles that are part of my personal environment, in order to connect the imaginary world with a lived material world. The ecology becomes the place where I can question and explore unknown forms and known materials. As if the imaginary world has been affected by elements that are part of our material world and are infecting and changing our present environment. This process is similar to that used by the artist Juz Kitson, who creates her own ecologies and systems using materials such as textiles, fur and ceramics (fig. 11)



Figure 11, Juz Kitson, *Naked Simplicity; radiant with the warmth of an immense compassion*. 2016, Southern Ice porcelain, Jingdezhen porcelain, Merino wool, horse hair, paraffin wax, marine ply and treated pine, 130.0 x 65.0 x 33.0 cm. Courtesy of Juz Kitson and Jan Murphy Gallery, Brisbane, Australia

Since becoming more comfortable transforming flat matter into sculpture, I started then using my sculpture to create wall drawings with an overhead projector (figs. 12 and 13). With this method I am aiming to more connect fully the object to its environment, to demonstrate their symbiotic relationship, among habitats, ceramic entities, other materials, and objects. The point is to create objects which seemingly participate in an organic system.



Figure 12. First test in the studio



Figure 13. In the process

As a gallery installation, I make decisions on site, through an intuitive process. My work highlights the importance of temporal and intuitive processes in exploring material production, and the installation and eventual display of the work. The writer Kim Grant's definition of process is akin to my own: "At the simplest level it is a declaration that they are dedicated and attentive to their creative labors. This is probably the most common use of the phrase, and one that stresses artist's' commitment to their own work rather than external goals. It is the doing of the work rather than the outcome that is the most important thing."<sup>17</sup> My intention is to create an awareness of the object's ecological habitat. Every object, painted form, textile, or even plinth is carefully ordered and considered to highlight an interconnectivity, which is both beautiful and unsettling, as is the natural world in the era of the anthropocene (fig. 14).



Figure 14. Final ceramic pieces and their display

Treating ceramic pieces with glaze, oxides and adding other materials, serves to highlight their differences. This makes them more vibrant and unique. Referring to Bennett's theory of "thing-power", the viewer experience it through the elements added to the installation that blurred the line between the object and aliveness. 'Thing-power' accent the relationship to the object which exist outside of me in their own ecology.

Furthermore, the scale of the wall piece, its connections to what is installed on the floor, allows the viewer to interact and perhaps be subsumed within its environment (fig. 15). By creating an unknown

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<sup>17</sup> Kim Grant, page #.

world, and immersing the viewer in it, I am both creating a distance between the viewer and the pieces (which seems co-dependent and part of a broader ecological system) and connecting them. Potentially highlighting the interconnections between the subject and the broader exhibition space. Moving forward, I will experiment with space through a more indepth exploration of scale and through the production of larger ecologies and environments. By occupying a broader footprint, and further testing issues of site and placement, the viewer would be able to interact and be part of the the habitat that is continuing to propagate, continuing to grow.



Figure 15. Wall piece, fabric sculpture, yarn and chalk drawing

As a mean to further work within space, my recent work *Between an ecology and the object* (fig. 16.) shows larger segment of ceramic pieces installed on the wall in order to more immersive overall piece. The installation continues on the floor in an effort to connect the viewer and the space that these objects occupies. My work in the gallery space is a way to encounter and think about ecosystems, their dependence to each other and their vulnerabilities.





Figure 16. *Between an ecology and the object*, 2018.

*En 2005, je reçois le diagnostic d'une maladie chronique auto-immunes. En d'autre mot, mon corps croit que mon système digestif est un corps étranger. Mon système immunitaire se bat contre moi-même. Il y a des jours que je suis pleine d'énergie, d'autres j'ai du mal à bouger ou même me sortir du lit. Depuis ce jour, je ressens le besoin de compétitionner avec moi-même pour me prouver que je suis plus forte que la maladie.*

Through my research, the awareness of the ecology as been on my mind. In recent health complication, I experienced how one small thing can change everything. The philosopher Timothy Morton speculates that gigantic problems such as climate change are too overwhelming for one to understand.<sup>18</sup> My studio work is not directly related to ecological crisis but rather focus on small ways to think about ecosystem, dependence and fragility. In my process, I forgot about my own ecology that is my health, only to realized how that local ecosystem, is as vulnerable and fragile than the global crisis. What my body was telling me, my practice was teaching me. In a sense, my outside world influenced my inside world.

In conclusion reflecting on the impact of ecologies can have on other one, how could my work be impacted by a nearby ecosystem? My recent production has opened the potentiality of exploring local

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<sup>18</sup> Timothy Morton, "Subsistence," E-Flux Journal 85 (October 2017).

matters such as the origins of the clay I use, where the fabrics I incorporate come from, and how these material elements have impacted their immediate environments. This will be generative and important to my practice by allowing me to highlight the broad reach of different ecologies and the co-dependence of discrete habitats, and most importantly firmly place the audience, who is a vital part of such networks, within this complicated and ever changing terrain.



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