Flotsam & Jetsam

Shoreline Studies of Time & Material

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A THESIS ESSAY SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY OF ART & DESIGN

2019

Thank you,

Randy Lee Cutler
For your guidance, care and boundless knowledge

My peers
For the laughter and many amazing conversations

Ben
For your endless enthusiasm

Mom & Dad
For supporting me no matter what

Mia
For inspiring

Abstract

This paper outlines the formation of an artistic methodology and an emerging thesis project. Walking and collecting along the shoreline serve as a conduit for creating and point towards a broader engagement with notions of time and temporality. The shoreline represents a liminal space from which to witness the effects of the Anthropocene and to notice changes large and small. The objects I forage serve as generative starting points for creation. I ask how these objects, both organic and inorganic, contain multiple temporalities, and how can I exert these qualities through methods of assemblage, installation and mimicry? The timescales I encounter in my expanding collection range from the geological to the distinctly human, from deep time to fleeting moments of capitalist consumption. I ask what knowledge can be gained from studying the matter we discard through an artistic lens, and how might it point us toward an alternative future? My work pays attention to the remnants and traces of human and nonhuman activity, to patterns of growth and decay, to interaction between organic and inorganic entities, and to the traces left behind.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Images……5

Introduction……6

- Establishing Place, Practice & Subject Position……6

- Coming Back to the Shore……9

Forming a Methodology of Movement……12

The Temporal & The Material……15

- Reconciling Past, Present & Future……15

- *Residue*……17

- Geology of the Anthropocene……22

- *Back to the lab*……25

- Between the Site & the Nonsite……32

- Rethinking, Reusing……34

Conclusion……37

- *Back to the lab II*……37

- Around the Next Bend……39

Works Cited……41

Works Consulted……43

List of Images

Figure 1: *Into the Marsh,* xerox transfer print and cut paper, 2017

Figure 2: The beginning of a collection, objects found on Bowen Island, 2018

Figure 3: *Residue,* found objects and cut paper, 2018

Figure 4: *Residue,* found objects and cut paper, 2018

Figure 5: Kelly Jazvac & Patricia Corcoran, *Plastiglomerates,* Excerpt from a larger series of ready-made objects collected at Kamilo Beach, HI, 2012

Figure 6: Kelly Jazvac & Patricia Corcoran, *Plastiglomerates,* Excerpt from a larger series of ready-made objects collected at Kamilo Beach, HI, 2012

Figure 7: detail from *Back to the lab,* found objects and mixed media installation, 2018

Figure 8: detail from *Back to the lab,* found objects and mixed media installation, 2018

Figure 9: detail from *Back to the lab,* found charred wood and cut paper, 2018

Figure 10: detail from *Back to the lab,* shell, styrofoam, plastic, barnacles, cut paper, 2018

Figure 11: Robert Smithson, *A Nonsite (Franklin, New Jersey),* wooden bins, limestone, silver gelatin print, 1968

Figure 12: Maggie Groat, *Fences will turn into tables,* salvaged fence boards, 2010

Figure 13: Maggie Groat, *Moonlight Reflectors or A Proposal for Returning Moonlight Back to the Moon*, mirrors, tinfoil, assorted found objects, 2013

Figures 14: detail from *Back to the lab II,* mixed media installation, found objects, cut paper, styrofoam relief prints, 2019

Figures 15: detail from *Back to the lab II,* mixed media installation, found objects, cut paper, styrofoam relief prints, 2019

Figures 16: detail from *Back to the lab II,* mixed media installation, found objects, cut paper, styrofoam relief prints, 2019

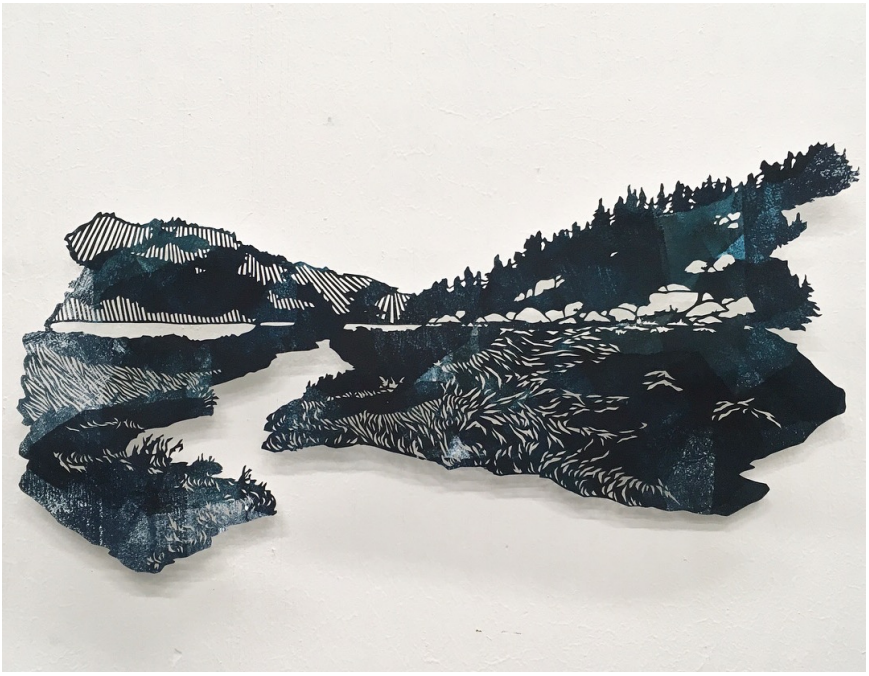

Figure 1: *Into the Marsh*, xerox transfer print and cut paper, 2017

When I was a child, growing up on the coast of Maine, I could narrate my summers based on my many bruises, scrapes and stubbed toes. I would recount the story behind each injury to my parents: a barnacle scrape from scrambling out of the water at our local swimming hole, a cut from when I fell chasing my brother across the craggy granite shoreline, a bruised toenail from climbing out of the row boat. Some referenced specific moments, while others built up over time, like the callouses that formed from walking barefoot over gravel paths and broken shells. The map that covered my shins and feet served as a bodily reminder of an emerging relationship to the land I grew up on. Although these scrapes and bruises would fade with the season, I still feel these experiences today, recorded in my skin, informing the course of my life and artistic practice.

INTRODUCTION:

Establishing Place, Practice & Subject Position

The experiential knowledge gained from a life spent outside is what feeds my desire to create. This feeling I cultivated as a child stays with me as I grow older and inhabit new spaces, from Maine, to Colorado, to Wyoming, to here in British Columbia. Evoking an embodied experience of place through a physical creation is the enduring challenge that sustains my artistic practice. Memories from my childhood on the Atlantic coast meld together with my experiences living here on the Pacific coast. The methods I employ for this thesis project both build on and diverge from an established practice of drawing, printmaking and papercutting in response to the natural environment (fig. 1). Walking and collecting from the shoreline forms an emergent methodology for my practice. The theme of time and temporality is woven into my work and research, drawing on memory and the embodied experience of walking, and by studying and responding to the objects I collect. Through this study of materiality, my understanding of "natural" and "unnatural" objects and materials has begun to shift, envisioning a fluid spectrum rather than a strict binary.[1] I ask how these objects contain multiple temporalities, and how can I express these through methods of assemblage, installation and mimicry? In this time of acute

[1] While I acknowledge that these boundaries have become blurred, for the purpose of this paper I occasionally reference "organic" and "inorganic" materials in order to provide clarity.

environmental distress, I question my choice to make art during the Anthropocene[2]. What knowledge can be gained from studying the matter we discard through an artistic lens, and how might it point us toward an alternative future?

Living and studying in British Columbia has broadened my understanding of the complicated relationship between land and representation throughout Western history. Growing up in New England, where colonial heritage is proudly celebrated, I was never asked to question my connection to the land I occupied, or the work I created in response. Here in Canada, the conversation around decolonization and indigenous reconciliation is vigorous in comparison to the mere whisper in the US. As I negotiate my identity as an American white woman of European, settler descent, I am investigating how my artistic choices can honor a lifelong and reciprocal relationship with the land without perpetuating art historical notions of power and control. Strategies like installation, assemblage and the use of found materials that are beginning to shape my practice have allowed me to move away from well-trodden notions of representation, like the sublime or the picturesque.[3] I acknowledge that this text and corresponding project demonstrate only the beginning of this inquiry.

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[2] A proposed name for a new, post Holocene geological era in which environmental impact from human activity is the defining factor. It particularly references the behavior of a few industrialized nations and is not indicative of indigenous practices. While the term has been present in environmental discourse for decades, I find anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli's 2017 definition to be particularly useful. She explains, "…the Anthropocene marks the moment when human existence became the determinate form of planetary existence – and a malignant form at that – rather than merely the fact that humans affect their environment" (1).

[3] I hope that my work suggests a relationship to nature in which humans are part of an entangled and interdependent web of species and materials, rather than passive viewers of a distant landscape.

My artistic practice is defined by an engagement with the land around me, and an intuitive responsiveness to materials. My creative process is generated by encounters with moments of wonder, in the land that I walk on and the objects I collect. The French philosopher Rene Descartes pronounced wonder to be "the first of all passions", an encounter with the unforeseen and a generative starting point for further investigation (52). To me, wonder is the intuitive need to hold something in my hands, to run my fingers over it, and to put it in my pocket and take it back to the studio. It is the feeling of needing to get closer, to kneel down and study repeating form - layers of mushroom, patterns of peeling bark or clusters of barnacles. I find that attempting to capture a sense of wonder through an artistic gesture often leads down curious and surprising paths. The winding trajectory of my practice within the last two years reflects this theory. In *Wonder in Contemporary Art Practices,* Tiffany Shafran describes wonder as, "a reflective activity that prompts reevaluation of our understanding of the world" (36). The objects I pick up, turn over in my hands, and bring back to my studio, elicit this reexamination of the world around me, each exerting their own complex narrative and relationship to time.

Coming Back to the Shore

Having moved around the American West for a number of years before finding myself in Vancouver, I started Emily Carr University's MFA program feeling somewhat untethered to any particular place. This feeling of dislocation permeated the body of work I created in my first year here. I started the second year of the program in search of a more specific structure of site and

methodology to work within. Lucy Lippard describes this feeling of "multicenteredness" in contemporary society in her book, *The Lure of the Local*, and suggests that artists look to their immediate surroundings, addressing the nuances of the particular place they inhabit. She explains,

> I am concerned here only with that which is directly tied to place – with examining the ways art can help us focus on existing places, how their topography and every detail reflects and generates memory and a certain kind of knowledge about nature and culture (Lippard, 20).

With these ideas of the "local" in mind, I was drawn to the shoreline of Vancouver[4] and its environs as a potential site of extended investigation. The shoreline as a site of inquiry operates on multiple planes. While it is specific to Vancouver, it is also a place I go to in order to find a sense of familiarity, a reminder of the coastline I grew up on within a still unfamiliar city. Visiting the shoreline has become an important part of my methodology and research practice. The time spent there connects me to the specific place I am living, studying and creating in, while also exerting a powerful sensation of home. Though the ecologies and assemblages[5] I study here are particular to British Columbia, the implications spread far beyond these local waterways. In this way, my investigation of the shoreline has the potential to continue into the future as a sustained and sustaining methodology, taking on new forms and iterations beyond the limits of this project.

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[4] Deep Cove, New Brighton Park, Ambleside, Wreck Beach, Bowen Island to name a few. Throughout the course of this project, the nature of these visits has shifted from simply experiencing the shoreline, to intentionally choosing sites where I know there is good "stuff" to be collected. I record the general trends of my findings on a map in my studio.

[5] I use "assemblage" as a reference to the interdependent webs of organisms and objects that make up our world. In her essay "Deep Admiration", author Ursula K. Le Guin describes this theory of "assemblage" as, "A web of connections, infinite but locally fragile, with and among everything – all beings – including what we generally class as things, objects" (Le Guin, M15).

The shoreline feels particularly pertinent in this current era of global climate disruption and ecological devastation. I am intrigued by the shifting identity of the ocean in the contemporary discourse, from a vast, limitless place, a "non-human" realm, to a place where our destructive and distinctly human behaviors are made glaringly manifest. In her article for *Drain Magazine* titled "Convergence Zone", Abigail Susik illustrates this shift: "The formerly awe-inspiring sublimity of the ocean as a cultural symbol has now given way to a new kind of disturbing awareness: humanity can no longer fully escape itself through exploration of alien marine reaches" (par. 1). Perhaps the most visible of these changes is the accumulation of plastic debris, as we produce, consume and dispose of consumer goods on an ever-increasing scale. Susik argues that our relationship to the sea is in a state of flux, "shifting from a space of otherness to one of disturbing familiarity and repressed intimacy, in which we are constantly confronted and crowded by our own material proliferation on both an infinitesimal and a massive scale" (par. 29).[6] The shoreline is a threshold from which I piece together fragments of this ongoing transformation, an in-between space where these changes can be observed and investigated.

[6] I will elaborate on the proliferation of marine debris later in the text.

It is one of those late November days in Vancouver when it feels like the sun never actually rises. There isn't a person in sight –why would there be? It's early afternoon on a Wednesday, and it's pouring. The North Shore Mountains, just across the inlet, are completely obscured by dense blue-gray clouds. Above me, a steady stream of headlights flies past on the Ironworkers Bridge, but I am completely alone as I approach the shore. I traverse along the piled boulders towards a smaller pebbled beach, choosing my steps carefully among the slick rocks. I usually relish being alone, but today as I walk – maybe it's the weather or the time of year - the contentment of being outside and moving is punctuated by pangs of loneliness. A seagull joins me for a moment. It always surprises me how much comfort I find in their echoing call, how it brings me home. Even on this bleak November day, I have a feeling that I need to be here. I need to move, I need to feel this melancholy. I need to feel the rain running down off my coat and soaking my jeans, to take in the musty smell, to feel the rocks beneath my feet.

FORMING A METHODOLOGY OF MOVEMENT

I have always needed to use my body in order to think. I have always needed to spend time outside in order to create. As I begin to focus in on the shoreline as a subject of investment, walking - experiencing and inhabiting a space by moving through it - has become deeply ingrained in my research process. In her book *Wanderlust*, Rebecca Solnit describes how walking facilitates thinking by occupying our bodies with a familiar task:

> Walking allows us to be in our bodies and in the world without being made busy by them… The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts (5-6).

Walking the shoreline, my thoughts follow the contours of the rocks, sand and fallen logs. When the ground is even my mind wanders beyond my immediate surroundings. When the terrain becomes trickier, I am forced to look down and choose my steps, taking time to notice exactly what is beneath my feet. I walk without a particular destination, no point A or B. I retrace my steps, stand still for a moment, divert, return, stop and look, taking in and occupying the space by traversing it with my body.

Walking serves as my foundation for a developing methodology that informs my site visits. It is a way of reading a landscape and all of its nuances, which utilizes body and mind. In his essay "Ghostly Forms and Forest Histories", anthropologist Andrew S. Mathews describes an attentive approach to walking and looking used in his study of ancient forests. Traversing the ground on foot, he diligently records repeated patterns, textures, colors and forms, taking special note of traces of human intervention in the landscape. This work is rooted simultaneously in attention to observable detail and imagined inferences. He writes, "I walk with a dozen speculative possibilities in mind, some of which strengthen into impressions, many more of which I soon dismiss or remain speculations" (Mathews, G147). As I continue to develop my own walking

methodology, I have begun to see the act of collecting as a valuable framework.[7] The objects I collect traverse the spectrum of natural and human made, yet all spark some moment of wonder, and serve as a starting point for further investigation and interpretation. This flotsam and jetsam, rocks, sticks, barnacles, algae, bits of discarded metal, plastic and wood, contain numerous temporalities and tell a fragmented story of human and nonhuman relations within each site that I walk (fig. 2). This collection serves as a bridge between the embodied experience of walking the shoreline, and the interior space of the studio. By organizing, arranging and studying each object in their displaced state, I am both retracing a particular moment and uncovering new information. This thesis project is defined by the interplay between the narrative that these collected items exert on their own, and the narrative that I subsequently impose on them.

Figure 2: The beginning of a collection, objects found on Bowen Island, 2018

[7] In *Walking Methodologies in a More-than-Human World,* Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman suggest "activation devices" as a way to "alter the function of the walk". These devices – cameras, notebooks, music, mirrors, sound recorders, etc. – are not meant to directly record the walk, but as a means to experience the walk in a new and altered way (135). I consider the act of collecting to be my "activation device".

I don't remember thinking about time much when I was a child. Now I visualize each year as a square with rounded edges. Each season is a side - August turns a corner into September. The rest of the fall descends vertically towards the slow horizontal trudge through January and February. March begins to arc upwards again, meeting up with summer at the corner of May and June. Each year slips into the next, with milestones, due dates, events aligned in this cyclical arrangement. I think as a child, time just stretched out infinitely in front of me in a straight line, becoming fuzzy and eventually disappearing altogether.

THE TEMPORAL & THE MATERIAL

Reconciling Past, Present & Future

Questions around temporality, and varied ways of experiencing and understanding time, weave in and out of my material practice. Geographer Yi Fu Tuan muses that children feel as if they stand outside of time, impervious to it, while adults feel time thrusting them forward without control (185). Experiencing a site by walking feels steady and methodical, in contrast to the constant rush of contemporary life. I slow down, particularly along the rocky and uneven shoreline, and to pay attention to exactly what is at my feet. Walking in this reflective manner makes me wonder how our own personal sense of time affects the way we interact with our surroundings. How do we reconcile our own distinctly human timescales with that of the earth that we live on - with the geological time of the rocks and earth that we walk on, build on and sustain ourselves with?

Deep time – referring to the many millions of years recorded in the strata of the Earth – feels difficult to resolve with the anthropocentric time scale within which we operate on a day-to-day basis.[8] There is no agreed upon date or event that marks the beginning of the Anthropocene – some scientists point to the Industrial Revolution, while others look to the creation of the atomic bomb. Regardless, it is clear that human activity has massively transformed the Earth in an incredibly short time period. [9] The effects of human behavior on the Earth long outlast human lifespans. Even the plastic that wraps our food and holds our drinks will outlive us by centuries. How do we shift perspectives, so that our personal sense of time melds with the geologic past, while acknowledging a future beyond our own existence? The work I create in response to collected materials serves as a speculative approach to this question, and is a way of situating my embodied act of walking within a broader timescale.

[8] In her book, *Rising: Dispatches from the New American Shore,* Elizabeth Rush elaborates on our struggle to imagine time beyond the human scale, writing:

> "Four thousand, four hundred million, or 4.5 billion years – it is all the same to us. We tend to think in human lifetimes, and there our scope is limited… Which is why it is so fantastically difficult for us to recognize that in our frenzied attempt to keep nearly eight billion people fed, watered, clothed, sheltered, and distracted, we are fundamentally altering the geophysical composition of the planet at a pace previously cased only by cataclysmic events…"(53).

[9] Some scholars take issue with the term "Anthropocene" because of its failure to differentiate between the destructive effects of capitalist culture and indigenous practices. Donna Haraway writes, "Anthropocene is a term most easily meaningful and usable by intellectuals in wealthy classes and regions; it is not an idiomatic term for climate, weather, land, care of country or much else in great swathes of the world, especially but not only among indigenous peoples" (49).

Residue

During the fall of 2018, I began to experiment with strategies of assemblage, mixing found objects from the shoreline with my own created elements. The first complete piece, *Residue* (figs. 3 & 4), was comprised of an arrangement of fragmented plastic, styrofoam, wood, metal, fiberglass, bone, barnacle, algae and cut paper forms, which I displayed in a horizontal vitrine. I arranged this particular set of objects sequentially, from organic to inorganic, in an abstract reference to the ceaseless human process of altering natural materials of the earth into permanent, undying matter.[10]

At the core of this project was an attempt to both reconcile and contrast multiple temporalities within one spatialized scene. I saw this concept of time exerting itself through the objects and their arrangement in numerous ways, and at numerous scales. The white algae specimens in this piece alluded to fossils, in a similar way that the white paper elements suggested an ethereal, ancient oceanic life form. These particular objects were meant to reference the tens of thousands of years it takes to form a fossil, which through processes of extraction and refinement we convert to oil and ultimately to plastic. The bits of plastic transform from product to trash in an instant; yet this debris lives on for centuries after we dispose of it, unable to return to the earth it came from. *Residue* could be interpreted in both directions, chronologically from past to present, or by extrapolating backwards, building from the traces and remnants

[10] At this point in my practice, I was still working through my own perceptions of "organic" and "inorganic" objects. While in retrospect, this ordered arrangement was rather simplistic, it was a useful entry point to a more complicated understanding of materials.

we leave behind. As a whole, it served as a visualization of the spectrum of my collected materials, making connections and relationships visible.

Figures 3 & 4: *Residue,* found objects and cut paper, 2018

Within *Residue*, a further manifestation of time and material investigation was present in the white cut paper forms. The painstaking process of cutting out these forms by hand was an abstract illustration of time through the use of an endless repetitive gesture, and demonstrated my bodily commitment to the work. My relationship to paper has been cultivated for years through a continual inquiry of its material qualities. Through this process I have come to see paper as a collaborative partner in my practice, one that actively exerts its materiality. In her essay "On the Value of Not Knowing", Rachel Jones cites her theory of "material intelligence", as a way of understanding the dynamic role materials play within the creative process. "'Material intelligence' implies not only human intelligence about matter, but the intelligence of matter, understood as adaptive and self-organising" (Jones, par. 15). In this way, the rendered cut paper elements possess more than just the form I impose on them, but also their own information and agency.

With the creation of *Residue*, I was attempting to make sense of the earthly materials we are surrounded with, how we manipulate them and how they change over time. Robert Smithson, whose earthworks and sculptures dealt with depleted landscapes and extracted materials, blends the boundaries between natural and unnatural in his essay "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects". In his study of mines, quarries and gravel pits, Smithson reminds us, "Even the most advanced tools and machines are made of the raw matter of the earth" (Smithson/Holt, 82). He suggests a fragmentation of the everyday materials, pulling them apart and studying them in their unrefined, most basic

state, as a way to better grasp their earthly origins (Smithson/Holt, 87). I find Smithson's words, written in the late 60s, to be in conversation with contemporary new materialist thinkers[11], who reject the binary of nature and culture, and who argue that all objects, whether animate or inanimate, contain agency and vitality.[12] The materials we transform and manipulate for our own use contain complex histories and knowledge. New materialist theorist Jane Bennett describes the urgent need to rethink the hierarchy of our material relations. She writes, "I'm in search of a materialism in which matter is an active principle and, though it inhabits us and our inventions, also acts as an outside or alien power" (Bennett, *New Materialism*, 48). This type of thinking points towards a world in which humans are no longer central, but rather enmeshed in a broader spectrum of materials and beings.

[11] In *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost propose a radical shift in the way we relate to the materials around us. They write,

> "This means returning to the most fundamental questions about the nature of matter and the place of embodied humans within a material world; it means taking heed of developments in the natural sciences as well as attending to transformations in the ways we currently produce, reproduce, and consume our material environment…It also demands detailed analyses of our daily interactions with material objects and the natural environment"
> (Coole & Frost, 3-4).

[12] In her essay "An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' is Just Another Word for Colonialism", Métis scholar Zoe Todd refutes the idea that "new materialism" is "new" at all, but rather an exploitation of Indigenous thought, which has always given agency to the nonhuman and recognized the "sentient environment".

Residue demonstrates a shift in my practice, away from more conventional image making, allowing for interactions between found objects and created elements.[13] The cut paper elements served as a kind of "residue" of past work, highlighting a transition from familiar territory towards a more open and responsive approach to making. My work evolves with the hope of suggesting a more relational and entangled ecology that includes all matter, blurring the constructed boundaries between organic and inorganic, human and non-human.

[13] My use of found objects brings up ideas of the "ready-made" throughout art history, most commonly associated with Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* or *Fountain.* In his essay "Ready-Mades: Ontology and Aesthetics", scholar Simon J. Evnine poses a list of questions raised by ready-made work, including, "Is there any value in viewing such an object? … Does the artist create anything new by merely choosing (or displaying) an already-made object?" (407). While I take interest in these questions, I see my work functioning more as a reaction to found objects, incorporating, altering, arranging and responding to them within a practice that still places importance on my own artistic hand.

The walk between my apartment and my studio is like a repetitive meditation, a thirty-minute buffer between two different realities. I begin on the linoleum floor of my kitchen, stepping onto a square of ceramic tiles by my door, where I pull on my rubber soled boots. I step outside and cross my brick patio, then descend down concrete stairs towards the cracked pavement of the sidewalk. I wait for an opening in traffic and then dart carefully across the asphalt of Commercial Drive. I turn onto Clark and am suddenly suspended by iron and more cement, the Millennium Line flying beneath me. I shuffle downhill over patchy pavement and potholes, onto the wide, straight bike lane leading towards school. This time of year I feel the brittle crunch of salt granules beneath each step. I finally arrive, crossing one final sea of cement, before entering the polished concrete hallways of Emily Carr. My daily journey, from one interior space to another, is always mediated by materials, layers of matter dividing my feet from the earth somewhere beneath them.

The Geology of the Anthropocene

Continuing this investigation into the relationship between time and material, I look to the collaborative work of sculptor Kelly Jazvac and geologist Patricia Corcoran and their series of collected objects termed "Plastiglomerates" (figs. 5 & 6). The Plastiglomerates are congealed formations of rock, sand, plastic and other human debris, collected from a Hawaiian beach choked by marine garbage. These composites of diverse materials act as a new classification of rock formation, a tangible relic of the Anthropocene. They mark the permanence of our waste culture, demonstrating our ephemeral trash cemented into a

geological form. These variegated forms call into question an assumed binary between the natural and unnatural, as the forces of nature literally compress these presupposed categories into one another. The Plastiglomerates are laden with multiple temporalities, from the deep geological past, to our anguished present, and a future in which the waste of today persists en masse (Carlesimo & DiRisio, 50). As scholar and curator Kirsty Robertson describes, they illustrate a "death that cannot decay" (par. 24). Furthermore, the Plastiglomerates present an interrogation of art making during and in reference to the Anthropocene. By showing the Plastiglomerates as found sculptural pieces, Jazvac and Corcoran challenge the practice of using new materials and creating new images in order to interrogate our culture of consumption and waste. Perhaps, rather than perpetuating the constant need for something new, we should delve into what we already have, studying the embedded information in the materials that surround us, and which persist long after we throw them out. This apprehension is reflected in my own work, as I shift towards a practice that accentuates found materials.

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Figures 5 & 6: Kelly Jazvac & Patricia Corcoran, *Plastiglomerates,* Excerpts from a larger series of ready-made objects collected at Kamilo Beach, HI, 2012

Back to the lab

As my collection of found objects expands, my studio becomes an environment in which I arrange, sort and tinker with each object, studying their unique materiality. In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things,* Jane Bennett describes her theory of "Thing Power" as "the curious ability of inanimate objects to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (6). Arguing that this "thing power" is present in all forms of matter, no matter where they fall on the spectrum of organic and inorganic, Bennett is particularly interested in the vibrancy of the objects we discard. She describes how our relationship to objects has morphed into what she calls "antimateriality", in which "the sheer volume of commodities and hyperconsumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, conceals the vitality of matter" (Bennett, 5). This idea feels pertinent to my ever-expanding collection of shoreline detritus. The more time I spend walking and collecting, the more I am struck by the amount of packaging materials, particularly styrofoam, that accumulate as if regurgitated from the sea. Its presence becomes unavoidable; from massive quadrangular slabs the scale of a body, to tiny but ubiquitous spherical nurdles[14]. This material is produced with the sole purpose of taking up space for a mere moment, to facilitate the ever quickening and increasing flow of commodities around the world. It is meant to fill a temporary void, yet its presence is permanent, continuing to take up space long after we render it useless. In this way,

[14] A tiny pre-production pellet of plastic and a major source of marine debris. Over 100 billion kilograms of nurdles are manufactured and shipped each year (Yoldas, 364).

styrofoam is not just “antimaterial”, but somehow operating in a space even further removed from our consciousness.

These ideas of materiality and “antimateriality” fed the conceptualization of *Back to the lab,* a sculptural installation piece created in late 2018. I experimented with methods of display, with the goal of communicating the varied ways in which my collected items take up space and exert diverse temporal scales. The installation was made up of three separate compositions, each in conversation with each other. I used the allusion of a suspended mobile (fig. 7) to express the airy quality of styrofoam, its simultaneous lightness and volume. The suspended pieces dripped into a large pile on the floor, appearing as a still frame within a cycle of constant accumulation. As a counterpoint to the hanging piece, the “stack” (fig. 8) acted as an exertion of mass and a demonstration of the agency of the material. The stack contained multiple metaphorical possibilities, referencing a geological core sample, a cairn and a body. Using found materials, particularly one that is so pervasive and easy to come by, allowed me to work on a larger scale, and take up space in a way that I have struggled to achieve in previous work. Even though I was creating work from shoreline trash, the styrofoam had a sort of mysterious beauty. When taken out of context and placed in the gallery, their color and softened edges, worn by the ocean and the elements, began to mimic a collection of beach pebbles. This type of mimicry and imitation recurs throughout my work, as I attempt to draw the viewer in and question their initial reaction.

Figures 7 & 8: details from *Back to the lab,*
found objects and mixed media installation, 2018

Where I did include my own cut paper elements, the gestures were small and discrete. The two smaller sculptures (figs. 9 & 10) were each comprised of collected material and integrated cut paper forms. I intended for them to represent the perpetual growth, decay, accumulation and loss that I witness while walking the shoreline. By displaying them together on a low table, I attempted to recreate the experience of looking down at the ground around one's feet, requiring the viewer to lower their body in order to inspect minute patterns and details.

The first of the two sculptures (fig. 9) consisted of a charred scrap of found driftwood with subtle cut paper interventions that masqueraded as mushroom-like forms. I have always been captivated by the fecundity of mushrooms, barnacles, and species of lichen and mold. The simultaneous decomposition and regeneration, and the sheer abundance of new growth are curiously mesmerizing. This sense of excessive production is a phenomenon we usually associate only with human activity. Mushrooms multiply endlessly, barnacles overwhelm the surface they grow on. These same cycles of death and regeneration occur on my own skin and within my own body. Scholar Justine Parkin suggests, "Fecundity, in short, gives palpable, concrete expression to these complex interweavings and crossings over between human and nonhuman bodies" (par. 8). Encounters with fecundity seem to place my human body within an interconnected web of species and entities. With this particular sculptural piece, I wanted to tie this feeling of excess to a simultaneous sense of mystery. Mushrooms quietly insert themselves, appearing seemingly from nowhere in

surprising places. The paper forms I created faced away from the gallery entrance and camouflaged into the scrap of wood. With this gesture I was asking the viewer to discover the discrete intervention by taking their time and looking closely.

Figure 10: detail from *Back to the lab,*
found charred wood and cut paper, 2018

Figure 9: detail from *Back to the lab,*
shell, styrofoam, plastic, barnacles, cut paper,
2018

The second small sculpture (fig. 10) was an assemblage of similar shapes and patterns that I witness over and over, in the texture of a shell, a scrap of plastic or the trace of a barnacle. The layered white paper pieces mimicked this circular mark, emphasizing a simultaneous sense of absence and presence through the reductive nature of cutting. This idea of mimicry, or mimesis, is at play on multiple levels in my work. I find commonalities in pattern and form across the spectrum of materials that I collect, whether in the tiered layers of mushrooms materializing on a decaying log, crisscrossing piles of driftwood scraps and crumbling shards of fiberglass, or in the circular clusterings of barnacles and styrofoam nurdles. I too perform acts of mimicry in the studio, recreating observed shapes by altering and transforming paper in similar ways.

The repetitive cutting gestures I often utilize reflect similar occurrences of repetition that I witness in the natural word, like the endless rectilinear pattern within the white algal form in *Residue* (fig. 4). In *Mimesis & Alterity*, anthropologist Michael Taussig[15] describes the act of mimicry as a manner of studying and questioning nature through the creation of a "second nature" (xiii). The mimicry I engage in when cutting paper is an active method of thinking through the relationships between my collected objects. Taussig reasons that through mimesis, presupposed boundaries between self and other, nature and culture, become blurred. He explains, "Pulling you this way and that, mimesis plays this trick of dancing between the very same and the very different" (Taussig, 129). In the same way that the piled styrofoam (fig 7) imitated beach pebbles, the painted black paper forms disguised themselves as fungal growth (fig. 10). Mimicry, both observed and created, points towards a connectivity and an interdependency among diverse materials and beings.

[15] While Taussig writes through an ethnographic lens, studying mimetic activities across cultures, I find the parallels to art-making to be inspiring.

Between the Site & the Nonsite

The objects that I collect travel from the shoreline, to the studio, to the gallery, taking on new forms and configurations along the way. I am intrigued by the transition between these sites, the changes that occur and the information that is lost and gained in the process. My work does not attempt to recreate the visual space of the shoreline within the gallery, but rather to exert its material qualities through diverse manners of organization and display. With these strategies in mind, I return to the words of Robert Smithson, his theory of the Site/Nonsite and his corresponding sculptural series (fig. 11). Utilizing raw materials – rocks, sand, slate, etc. – extracted from a specific site, Smithson's Nonsites reference the site indirectly, acknowledging the physical and metaphorical distance between site and gallery.[16] The materials are often shown alongside a map or drawing, playing with specificity and ambiguity, and the shifting information between two-dimensional and three-dimensional renderings of space (Smithson).

[16] In explaining one of his works from this series, *The Nonsite, (an indoor earthwork),* Smithson writes,

> "Between the *actual site* in the Pine Barrens and *The Nonsite* itself exists a space of metaphoric significance. It could be that 'travel' in this space is a vast metaphor. Everything between the two sites could become physical metaphorical material devoid of natural meanings and realistic assumptions. Let us say that one goes on a fictitious trip if one decides to go to the site of *The Nonsite"* (Smithson).

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Figure 11: Robert Smithson, *A Nonsite (Franklin, New Jersey),*
Wooden bins, limestone, silver gelatin print, 1968

While Smithson's Nonsites often demonstrate the containment of natural materials, my work seeks to expose the vitality of the objects I collect. The materials I gather, both organic and inorganic, seem to animate and take on new qualities in their displaced state. Relocated from the shoreline to my studio, objects change color, acquire new smells, grow mold, become brittle, expand and contract. The work I install in the gallery references a laboratory – a location for further investigation, to reimagine and repurpose materials. I create an environment for the objects to take on new forms and react to one another in unexpected ways, through a combination of their own material agency and my artistic intervention.

Rethinking, Reusing

I find inspiration in the work of multidisciplinary artist Maggie Groat, whose discrete yet potent gestures of collage, assemblage and installation resonate with the trajectory of my practice. Working with found images and objects, Groat envisions alternative relationships to land from a hybrid indigenous and settler perspective. Her work transforms salvaged materials into emblematic tools for a reimagined future. In *Fences will turn into tables* (fig. 12), Groat rethinks Western notions of property and land ownership by repurposing found fence boards to create a communal table. In a similarly poetic gesture, *Moonlight Reflectors or A Proposal for Returning Moonlight Back to the Moon* (fig. 13), Groat utilizes fragments of found reflective objects to suggest a renewed reciprocity between human and nonhuman, earthly and cosmological[17] (Hanna, 75).

[17] In another iteration of this project, titled *Trying to Give the Moon Back to Itself*, Groat attempts to buy a plot of land on the moon through the "Lunar Registry", an entity claiming to own mineral rights on the moon's surface. With the intention of gifting the land back to the moon, Groat interrogates the notion of human superiority over nature, in which our own attempt to possess and profit off the land has spread even beyond the Earth (Carlesimo & DiRisio, 48).

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Figure 12: Maggie Groat, *Fences will turn into tables,*
salvaged fence boards, 2010

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Figure 13: Maggie Groat,
Moonlight Reflectors or A Proposal for Returning Moonlight Back to the Moon,
mirrors, tinfoil, assorted found objects, 2013

I find parallels between Groat's re-contextualization of materials, Donna Haraway's imaginative proposal laid out in her book, *Staying with the Trouble*, and my own practice. Haraway envisions a response to our ecological crisis in which we forge unexpected collaborations across species and material. Employing the metaphor of the "compost pile", she suggests that we collect and repurpose the detritus of the Anthropocene, "chipping and shredding and layering like a mad gardener"(57).[18] Haraway's speculative approach and Groat's expressive re-use of materials reflect my own practice, in which I employ the discarded fragments I find around my feet, blurring the boundary between organic and inorganic, and between past, present and future.

[18] As an alternative to Anthropocene, Haraway suggests the "Chthulucene", an epoch that highlights the tangled and interconnected relationship between the human and nonhuman.

CONCLUSION

Back the lab II

I entered the MFA program at Emily Carr with a strict method of creating work, and a connection to the natural world that I found hard to define. Over the course of two years I have sought to establish a relationship to site that moves beyond simply illustrating or depicting a visual space, towards a communication of embodied experience. My final thesis exhibition, *Back to the lab II*, was the latest attempt in this pursuit (figs. 14, 15 & 16). While the exhibition contained multiple threads of material exploration, perhaps the most important theme was the fluid movement between two-dimensional and three-dimensional modes of expression. Incorporating found materials has expanded my practice in surprising ways. Through gestures of stacking, suspending and assembling, I have created work I could never have foreseen. These methods and material experimentations have carried over into more comfortable elements of my practice, pushing me to work with paper in new and unexpected ways. This dimensional and material evolution feels deeply important to my enduring artistic practice, and to a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of site.

Figures 14, 15 & 16: details from *Back to the lab II,* mixed media installation, found objects, cut paper, styrofoam relief prints, 2019

Throughout the creation of this project, I have often questioned my role as a visual artist in a time that calls for such urgent action. I wonder if my contributions to a broader environmental discourse are enough - if my gestures, which are so often discrete, are adequate. I have at times felt deeply unsure of my direction. I wondered how I could convey a feeling of intense melancholy, of the deep love and dread, peace and lurking anxiety, that I feel when I am walking the shoreline. Through this project, I have come to see my work as a series of intimate moments, simultaneously inviting and challenging to the viewer. As I move forward, I will continue to explore visual art's ability to implicate, to communicate to viewers through personal and intimate connections.

Around The Next Bend

I see my work beginning to take up more space and exert its own agency. As I continue to walk and build my collection of shoreline objects, I have come to envision it as its own living entity. The collection swells and contracts with each new iteration of work, like a cycle of breath. It sits in piles, haphazardly divided and organized in my studio, always growing and expanding, always with the potential to take on new, expressive forms. The work I make, both with and inspired by this flotsam and jetsam, is never a culmination, but rather one moment in an enduring sequence. In the same way, the shoreline presents an endless site of inquiry, both locally and universally, and one that I will carry with me beyond this project.

Through my exploration of the shoreline, I am beginning to piece together a more nuanced sense of time. The objects I collect and create reference the deep geologic past of our planet, our troubled present and an uncertain future. By utilizing methods of sculptural installation and found objects, I hope my work can call into question our own personal relationship to time and materials. While I feel great anxiety about the future, I find moments of hope in unexpected collaborations and assemblages that point towards a more reciprocal relationship between human and nonhuman. Perhaps by situating ourselves within a broader time spectrum we will able to forge more mindful and sustainable partnerships with the materials that support us.

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