NET-WORK: *WEAVING HUMAN–NATURE CONNECTION*

By

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A THESIS SUPPORT PAPER SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY OF ART + DESIGN

2020

Dedicated to my brother
Christopher Baker (1959 – 2020)
Lover of nature

I'll listen for your voice in the forest

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ABSTRACT

My impetus as an artist is to promote a sense of nature connectedness in the public consciousness, with the understanding that this leads to more pro-environmental attitudes. I gain insights from Indigenous ecological perspectives, the science of plant intelligence, environmental activist movements, and artists whose work facilitates reflection on biocentric values. My methodology incudes onsite fieldwork to investigate ways to express the language of trees. Dr. Suzanne Simard's research on the underground network of roots and mycorrhizal fungi enabling communication between trees, and Indigenous philosophies of animism and interspecies connection all support my work.

To address these concepts in my thesis project, I initiated a collaborative art installation, *"Net-Work",* utilizing handcrafted yarn work — knitting, weaving, and crochet — as my medium, a significant shift for me in materiality and methodology. Although the use of marginalized "women's craft" carries post-feminist stigma, third-wave feminists are embracing that challenge using craft activism, or "craftism", as an alternative form of protest. Despite my initial concerns regarding initiating a craft-based socially engaged art project, the numerous and enthusiastic responses I received from participants worldwide is evidence of a resurgence in traditional hand crafts, while demonstrating how social activism can stimulate dialogue and raise awareness of issues, in this case facilitating a tangible response to the effects of human activity on non-human kin. Reliance on the internet for connection and dissemination of information to participants has introduced an unforeseen correlation between online social networking and the underground web of tree connection. While I have now received a sufficient number of fibre works to create the installation, this project continues to evolve, supported by future exhibition opportunities and widening public interest.

INTRODUCTION

For over 30 years the fundamental impetus of my art practice has been to convey a sense of nature connectedness in the public consciousness. The term “nature connectedness” can be described as “the extent to which an individual includes nature in his or her cognitive representative of self” (Schultz, qtd. In Capaldi). In studies measuring human–nature connectedness, researchers such as Stephen Mayer and Cynthia Frantz have found that this feeling of connection is “associated with more pro-environmental attitudes, a greater willingness to engage in sustainable actions, and increased concern about the negative impact of human behavior on the environment” (qtd. In Capaldi). Promoting this mutualistic relationship with nature is as much an ethical decision as it is an artistic choice, with an intended effect of encouraging a more biocentric approach to human-nature interactions. Through my art, I am challenging current ideologies that are driving us into a global environmental crisis.

There is a myriad of evidence proffered by scientists, psychologists, and philosophers, as well as Indigenous scholars and elders, that confronting climate change is crucial to not only to our well-being but our very survival. Kent Peacock, a science philosopher at Lethbridge University in Alberta, believes “It is extremely important for us to realize that the physical environment around us is no ‘social construct’, but a vast assemblage of living and nonliving matter and forces that is immensely older and larger than we are and from which we sprang and to which we owe our continued existence” (7). While awareness of humans as being part of the natural world has long been the foundation of Indigenous knowledge, the concept of our unity with the biosphere is only in the initial stages of “mainstream” thought, particularly with government leaders and corporate decision makers. In contrast to Indigenous ways of thinking,

we continue to labour under the consumerist view of nature as commodity. According to art historian T.J. Demos, “the colonization of nature… has situated the nonhuman world as objectified, passive, and separate” (14). It is this untenable attitude of “resourcism”, which views “the non-human world … as raw material dedicated without reservation to the human purpose”, that I am confronting by making art with an intended environmental message (Livingston, qtd in Peacock 237).

Professor and ecofeminist Donna Haraway proposes that we cannot wait for politicians or businesses to find solutions for an environmental crisis of our own making, that it is up to us to re-define ourselves as “kin” — not just between gender, class, race, and nation, but kin to all life forms — and to take action in order to make a change (*Anthropocene* 161). She suggests “the human social apparatus of the Anthropocene tends to be top-heavy and bureaucracy prone. Revolt needs other forms of action and other stories for solace, inspiration, and effectiveness” (*Tentacular* 7). This environmental conflict has spurred countless social movements, pairing Indigenous philosophy and environmental activism, as well as prompting manifestos on the rights of nature in an attempt to redirect political ideologies. One such declaration, “Kawsak Sacha” (The Living Forest), authored by the Kichwa people of Ecuador, calls for us to acknowledge the traditional wisdom of the Indigenous Peoples of the Amazonian rainforest: “Whereas the western world treats nature as an undemanding source of raw materials destined exclusively for human use, Kawsak Sacha recognizes that the forest is made up entirely of living selves and the communicative relations they have with each other” (Gualinga 1). Alongside these activist movements, the environmental crisis is being addressed in innovative ways by a wide range of artists. Demos believes that “art figures as a central platform for the creative practice of speculative realisms” (10, 20). To this end I am drawing on

my previous artistic practice and current investigations to create conjectural work that challenges post-colonial anthropometric attitudes, weaving together the social surge in environmental concern, the science of plant intelligence, and the Indigenous philosophies of animism and inter-species connection.

MOTIVATION

For most people in the world today, any sense of human-nature connection lies buried under the constant distraction of contemporary urban life. However, according to British environmentalist Michael McCarthy, “we may have left the natural world, but the natural world has not left us” (62). Humans have only been city dwellers for a small fraction of our time on earth, and evolutionary psychologists are discovering that we are “hard-wired with many putative human universals that can be traced back to our ancient ancestors” and that there persists “deep in our genes, an immensely powerful, innate bond with the natural world” (McCarthy, 59-60). Art which intentionally communicates an awareness of human–nature interdependence is therefore especially relevant at a time when technology is pulling us further and further away from a direct tactile experience and into a virtual reality. The work of environmental artists such as Janet Laurence and Olafur Eliasson “challenges us to better understand that nature is resilient and can provide a source for reflection, catharsis, and regeneration in an age of stress and overproduction” (Lucie-Smith, xvii).

My own sense of connection to our non-human kin took root during my childhood spent on a farm in rural Quebec, where my playground was field and forest, and my companions were animals. As an adult, this intrinsic bond with the natural world drew me back to a rural locale, where I have spent most of my career making environmentally themed art to emphasize

human–nature kinship. Philosopher Nelson Goodman asserts that art has important cognitive value, stating “both science and art present us with views of the world that provide us with powerful insights, valuable information, and new knowledge” (qtd. in Barrett 198-199). Rosi Lister, an environmental art educator, states that a motivating factor uniting environmental artists is their desire “to change social attitudes and inspire environmental improvement” (Lister). I acknowledge the pedagogical position of my own artwork as I trial visually distinctive ways of connecting with an audience to provoke a renewed awareness about environmental issues. Specifically, I am drawing attention to trees — not as individual non-sentient organisms, but as massive interconnected communities which play a crucial role in the health of ecosystems, while also serving as carbon sinks for the biosphere. This has involved spending time on-site making art within the forest, and off-site conceptualizing ways to convey the importance of these complex terrestrial ecosystems.

Demos believes that environmentally engaged art carries the potential to change political positions on the relation of nature to culture, technology and economics, and that “art holds the promise of initiating exactly these kinds of creative perceptional and philosophical shifts, offering new ways of comprehending ourselves and our relation to the world differently than the destructive traditions of colonizing nature” (19). Like many contemporary environmental artists, I work within this paradigm, addressing new aesthetic strategies in order to promote critical reflection on the effects of human activity on our non-human kin.

Janet Laurence is an Australian artist who for decades has been creating nature-based art that carries a specific message for the public: “I want to bring you into an intimacy with nature. I feel the most important thing we have to do today on the planet is care for it and recognize our interconnection with it” (qtd. in Convery). Working in a liminal zone between art

and science, Laurence creates imaginative, aesthetically appealing work, from large-scale installations to “wunderkammer” collections of biological curiosities, which draw the viewer in and provoke a recognition of environmental concerns. Her work encompasses issues such as inter-tree communication, coral reef resuscitation, and human-nature interdependence. Her recent installation *Heartshock* features a suspended dead tree connected to the “ground” by numerous long, transparent, liquid-filled plastic tubes. These tubes are a metaphor for the xylem and phloem layers which transport life-giving water and minerals to the tree, thus provoking in the viewer a sense of profound loss while also offering hope for the future.

Fig. 1: Laurence, Janet. Heartshock. 2008. Silicon tubing, glass vials, pigmented fluids, tree branch. 7m x 4m x 5m. Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art. Used by permission of the artist.

Although our media and methodologies vary, I take inspiration from both the scientific foundations and the aesthetics of Laurence’s work. Of her 2019 exhibition “*After Nature*” she states “I am very aware in my practice of creating an attraction to enter a space…. I want you to linger” (qtd. in Convery). Like Laurence, I endeavor to create intriguing and aesthetically

appealing artistic environments which entice viewers to “linger”, thus encouraging and facilitating reflection on the environmental issues which inform my work. I also admire Laurence’s tenacity in the face of resistance: early in her career she was often criticized for making art with and about nature, accused of “reiterating reductive ideas about women as nurturers” (Convery). In the 1980’s I experienced similar criticism for painting images that implied woman-nature connectedness. This reactionary post-feminist censure affected the trajectory of my art for several years, until I regained confidence to set my own parameters.

Maureen Gruben is an Inuvialuk artist who I respect for both personal and artistic reasons. While her art career, like mine, was disrupted by years of parenting, she continued making art, and as a mature artist is now receiving deserved recognition — an encouraging example for me and other artists/mothers. Gruben’s outdoor installations and gallery works, often merging natural and manufactured materials, draw on ancestral knowledge, traditional craft of her culture, and, as with my work, on a deep connection to the land where she was raised. Addressing environmental themes such as climate change and persistent organic pollutants found in Arctic waters, her work has an activist intent while simultaneously celebrating the richness of her native land: "I think artists are very important as activists…. I think it's about respecting what you have and taking care of what you have. And that means the land and the animals and all things that help us to survive" (qtd. in Toth). I recently saw Gruben’s 2015 work *Message* at the National Gallery of Canada: a piece that combines hair, thread, and cloth, spelling out an evocative “SOS” pertaining to the decline of the polar bear species due to global warming.

In 2019 I had the opportunity to speak with Gruben, and we discussed an issue of concern to me: Do non-Indigenous artists have a right to draw on their connection to the land

as a foundation for art-making? Her opinion was that it does not matter if we are Indigenous to the land, provided we respect the land. This echoes a statement by Indigenous environmental scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, that “each of us comes from people who were once Indigenous. We can reclaim our membership in the cultures of gratitude that formed our old relationships with the living earth” (450). As a non-Indigenous artist, I appreciate this generous attitude and tacit permission to make art grounded in my own deep-rooted connection to the land, while understanding that it comes with a responsibility to respect and protect.

Fig. 2: Gruben, Maureen. Message (detail). 2015. Polar bear guard hair, cotton thread, black interface. 450cm x 60cm. National Gallery of Canada. Used by permission of the artist.

While both Laurence and Gruben create art that provokes contemplation on crucial issues, they choose to present engaging work that communicates with the public in a respectful and optimistic voice. A 2009 research study by the journal *Science Communication* demonstrated the “declining effectiveness of perpetual scare tactics in cultivating a sense of care and love for the planet” (Davidson 8). Art which imparts disturbing or negative messages

effectively adds to the growing sense of “ecophobia”, which is described as “a feeling of powerlessness to prevent cataclysmic environmental change – particularly among young people” (Davison 8). Conversely, art which encourages hope and presents the possible can act as a transformation point for new concepts and constructive imaginings. Ecological art, or “Ecoart”, is a genre that encompasses this more positive approach to artistic confrontation of environmental issues. Ecological art is defined as a practice that “inspires caring and respect, stimulates dialogue, and encourages the long-term flourishing of the social and natural environments in which we live” (*Ecoart*). Laurence and Gruben are just two of a growing number of artists and activists who are “intent on thinking outside the enforced narratives of disaster capitalism”, addressing critical issues in a more effective manner. I share this attitude on the importance of imagining new “post-anthropocentric modalities of belonging” (Demos 13). This philosophy of imagining new ways to live as “kin” with all life forms informs my methodology and reflects the concepts I endeavor to convey with nature-inspired art.

INVESTIGATION

Primarily a painter throughout my career, I entered the Master’s program to query materiality and new ways of translating embodied knowledge into visual art. Over the past two years my motivation to create compelling nature-based art has not altered, but my methodology has shifted. For more than three decades I have conducted fieldwork along the Mississippi watershed in eastern Ontario, setting up camp to spend days journaling, sketching, photographing, and painting. While researching for my Master’s, I have been drawn to the forests along those shorelines, compelled to make art around, with, and about the trees. Here, working “among the standing people”, as Indigenous elders described the forest, I sense the

existence of a complex life force, that I am “listening to a conversation in a language not my own” (Kimmerer 29, 65). Indigenous scholars attest to traditional knowledge of the agency of all life forms. “The animacy of the world is something we already know, but the language of animacy teeters on extinction—not just for Native peoples, but for everyone” (Kimmerer 75). This Indigenous perspective confronts the anthropocentric viewpoint of humans as inherently superior to other living organisms and challenges the Colonialist attitude that “ensured the primacy of people among beings both inert and in motion” (Horton 17). I am one of many contemporary artists, both Indigenous and nonIndigenous, who are exploring this divide, *“*contributing to a larger critical project of grasping human and non-human entities as agents in a mutually affecting relationship” (Horton 29). The foundation of my thesis research has involved the investigation and articulation of these concepts by making art that can act as a catalyst for changing environmental attitudes.

Looking for ways to articulate a “language” of trees, I have been reading statements, declarations, and essays by Indigenous artists, environmental activists, and authors, such as Rebecca Belmore, Angun Gualinga, and Robin Wall Kimmerer. I have also researched analysis of Indigenous perspective by non-Indigenous writers such as T.J. Demos and Jessica Horton to gain insight into alternative ways of knowing. Rebecca Belmore states that “it’s the body and the ability to listen—to listen well, and experience not what we think is the ‘quiet,’ but what is the world outside of our bodies” (qtd. in Nixon). Working with found natural materials, both on site and off site, I listen and observe, searching for an abstract translation of something I cannot quite define but am attempting to hear.

Initially I interacted physically with trees on site: gathering discarded cones to create ephemeral forms which encircled white pines in gestures of gratitude; linking trees of different

species together with intricate connecting webs of fallen branches; and creating other more durable structures that could serve as shelter for mammalian or avian kin.

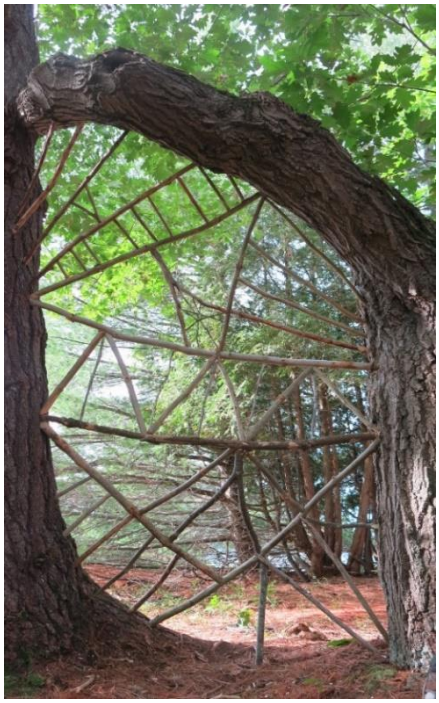


Fig. 3: Baker, Adrian. Web. 2018. Pine & oak branches. 2.2m x 2.5m.

Fig. 4: Baker, Adrian. Braided Rug. 2018. Pinecones, sticks. 2.2m x 2.2m. Photos: Adrian Baker.

Endeavoring to adopt a more biocentric approach in my work, for my interim exhibition I experimented with mark-making as a way of interpreting the “language of trees”. Employing a relief printmaking technique, I transferred “script” etched into tree trunks by invasive insects onto rice paper and linen. This generated unique calligraphy and hieroglyphics – dialects of dying trees - that have yet to be deciphered. Additionally, I undertook a laborious four-month process of collecting, drying, boiling, and crushing black walnuts, and subsequently documented the procedure in a series of seven illustrations made with the resulting black walnut ink. I also researched scientific, Indigenous and historic descriptors for the native black walnut tree and inscribed them onto wood slats with the walnut ink. These slats were suspended by threads hanging from ceiling to floor, forming a massive tree shape, with

walnuts scattered on the “ground” below. Whether transcribing, translating, or interpreting tree communication, it was my hands manipulated the mark-making to create this work. I envisioned the trees having still more agency in the process.

Fig. 5: Baker, Adrian. Interim exhibit. 2019. Walnut ink, wood, braided thread. 1.2m x 1.2m x 4.2m. Michael O’Brian Gallery, ECUAD. Photo: Jack Wong.

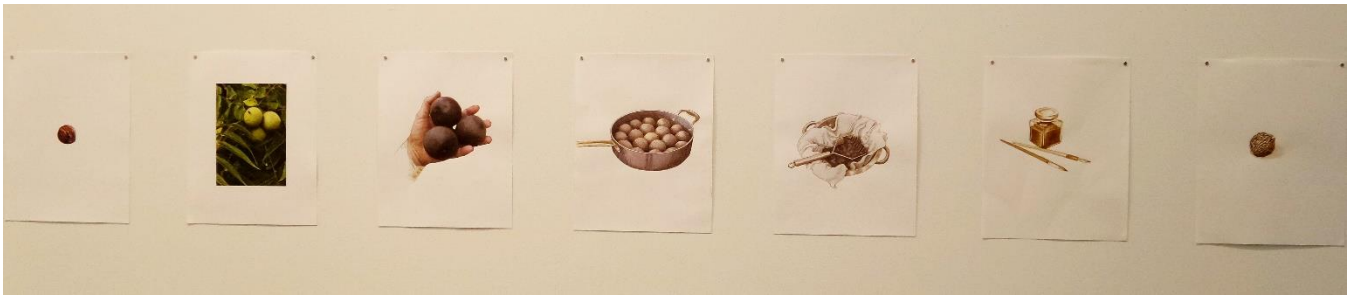


Fig. 6: Baker, Adrian. Black Walnut. 2019. Walnut ink, watermedia paper, photo transfers. 7 x (28cm x 36cm). Michael O’Brian Gallery, ECUAD. Photo: Jack Wong.

Following the interim exhibition, I travelled back to camp to consider further possibilities of tree communication without focusing on artistic outcomes. On observing the continuous movement of pine boughs in the wind, I fastened pieces of charcoal onto the ends of low-lying

branches and then affixed paper to a portable easel set at an angle to enable contact. The branches swung back and forth in the wind off the lake, causing the charcoal to sweep across the paper in linear and circular patterns. I spent an entire day facilitating white pines to create these “wind-drawings”. With the branches physically influencing the mark-making, this process more closely approached my challenge to acknowledge the animism of the trees.

Fig. 7: Baker, Adrian. Wind drawings. 2019. Charcoal on paper. 28cm x 36cm.

Dr. Suzanne Simard, a professor of forest ecology at University of British Columbia, has spent the past thirty years researching tree communication, and has discovered that as opposed to the Darwinian theory of survival of the fittest, trees are interacting with each other and trying to help each other survive (Simard, *Mother*). In a statement that resonates with holistic Indigenous thinking, she asserts that when she walks in a forest: “I feel the spirit of the whole thing, everything working together in harmony” (qtd. in Grant). Along with fellow researchers, Simard has established that trees are interconnected at root level through a vast

underground network of mycorrhizal fungi. The fungi wrap around the cortical cells in the tree roots, feeding on sugars while allowing carbon and nitrogen to pass back and forth between to trees. Simard and her colleagues tracked the flow of nutrients and chemical signals through this subterranean network, discovering that every tree within a thirty metre square plot was connected to the network, with the oldest trees functioning as hubs with as many as forty-seven connections (Pollen). This network gives trees access to water and nutrients that their roots cannot reach and helps convey information such as a warning of insect attack.

As a scientist, Simard's methodology involves empirical research and quantitative conclusions, but she also acknowledges an Indigenous ecological perspective, stating: "there comes a point when you realize that … traditional scientific method only goes so far, and there's so much more going on in forests than we're able to actually understand…" (qtd. in Toomey). While not claiming that trees possess a "consciousness", she uses the term "tree communication" without apology, pointing out that beyond resource transfer, the network enables defense signals and kin recognition between trees. "To me, using the language of "communication" made more sense. We as human beings can relate to this better. If we can relate to it, then we're going to care about it more. If we care about it more, then we're going to do a better job of stewarding our landscapes" (qtd. in Toomey). Learning of Simard's research was a watershed moment in my thesis research. It built on my previous exploration of the language of trees, combining a scientific foundation of nature connectedness with an indigenous biocentric perspective, both fundamental to my artistic practice.

CONCEPTION

Querying ways of representing an underground “web” or “network” of interconnection, particularly within the gallery space, I relocated from forest fieldwork back into my studio. Working through the myriad of materials there, I began experimenting with yarn and string, a medium with which I had little previous experience. Hanging and weaving the yarn and string across the room, I recognized the visual potential of long fibrous strands embodying networks of roots and mycorrhizal fungi. I envisioned viewers moving through a space interwoven with roots and fungi, an immersive experience that would prompt reflection on inter-species communication and connection between trees. I questioned, however, whether reaching an audience through gallery display was sufficient; would a more enhanced opportunity for engagement and contemplation be generated by involving others in the physical making process? If I were to employ a completely unfamiliar medium for my installation, was I also prepared to step away from the ego-imbued role of primary author and encourage a broader input in the creation process? The concept was appropriate in the context of socially engaged ecological art, which aims to “foster the non-possessive, shared authorship of a process that eventually develops a life of its own” (Kagan 2).

Collaborating to make art that symbolizes connection and cooperation between trees corresponds with my artistic vision. Participants’ willingness to work communally demonstrates a human–human connection, and their participation both encourages contemplation on the human–nature correlation and promotes pro-environmental attitudes. My intent was to initiate a collective art project that “fosters critical reflection on individual and societal relationships with the environment through the act of making, to generate dialogue to assist expression of emotional connections and knowledges, and to inspire action” (Rock 50). Art historian Grant

Kester uses the descriptive “dialogical” to define collective or collaborative art practices, which illustrates my objective not only for conversation between participants, but also for the installation to communicate a message to an audience. He believes that “empathetic insight” can result from “the rapport between artists and their collaborators” and that these feelings of empathy can extend to the audience (Kester). While Kester is specifically referring to understandings between cultures and communities, I believe this theory is transferable to artwork with an objective of empathy towards non-human communities.

As I am normally a solo artist, initiating a socially engaged art project felt both daunting and compelling, presenting many unknowns: How to recruit makers? Would there be adequate response? How to retain artistic agency while allowing for individual creative autonomy? What if respondents did not follow through, resulting in insufficient material for a thesis installation? According to Rosi Lister, when initiating a socially engaged art project, creative individuals are “more open to experience and unafraid to fail as it is in their character to experiment, learning from failure rather than seeing it as a negative end” (Lister).

While I cannot claim that I was “unafraid to fail”, I was open to viewing the process as a learning experience. I was willing to relinquish sole authorship of the work and act as facilitator and curator of a collective art project, recognizing that while this role might generate some tension, individual creative interpretations could present unique visions of human-nature kinship. Previous life experience gave me confidence to tackle the leadership and curatorial roles; the fabrication might be somewhat out of my control, but I would remain the architect of the work. As I am predominantly a painter, this significant shift in materiality and methodology seems an audacious decision, but whatever the outcome, pushing my artistic boundaries is the intention.

INITIATION

I launched the *Net-Work* installation project at the start of January 2020 — with one group email to friends and a single posting on Facebook — requesting that people create long, narrow “strands” to represent underground roots and fungi. The parameters were minimal: the hand-crafted strands could be between one and six inches wide and up to fifteen feet long, in any colour, of natural or synthetic fibre, knitted, woven, crocheted, or crafted in an alternative technique. In keeping with environmentalist tenets, yarn was to be sourced from leftover scraps of previous projects, or unwoven from discarded items, rather than purchased new. I presented a synopsis of the science, of the environmental and artistic motivations for the installation (with an invitation to visit my website for further information) and set a deadline of April 30* to receive the “strands”. Without previous experience overseeing an online collaborative art project, I could only estimate the potential response. However, once the seeds of an idea were planted, the movement became rooted and began to grow. The initial email was passed extensively from person to person, while the Facebook post was shared seventy times. *(appendix i)* As a result, over the ensuing months I was inundated with requests to participate. People are overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the opportunity to demonstrate their connection to nature by creating a tangible interpretation of the symbiotic relationship between trees.

Coordination of the *Net-Work* project entails frequent re-iteration of guidelines and responding to enquiries from prospective participants, managing a growing list of participants and their contact information, reminders to send photographs, regular updates to my website, and emails thanking individuals when their hand-crafted “strands” arrive. In addition, I

*This deadline was eventually extended due to the pandemic and cancellation of the graduate exhibition.

photograph the work as it arrives and send monthly updates on the progress of the project to all participants. *(appendix ii)* It soon became clear that my initial conjecture would be far surpassed: by the end of June there were 225 people on the mailing list, and over 280 “strands” had been mailed or hand-delivered to my studio (some made multiple strands), with many more pieces anticipated.

Fig. 8: First strands started arriving within weeks of initiation. Various media. 1.5m x 1.5m. Photo: Adrian Baker

Due to the large scale of the proposed installation and unpredictable outcomes, I initially relied on drawings and maquettes to envision possibilities. My intent is to create an “environment within a room” evoking the vast underground network of interwoven roots and mycorrhizal fungi. Long fibrous strands of knitting, weaving, crocheting, and braiding in a variety of lengths, widths, colours, and textures will be strung across the room, running at varied angles spanning from ceiling to wall, floor to wall, ceiling to floor, wall to wall: intersecting, interweaving, knotting, and twisting together. Lighting will be utilized to create a

tangled pattern of shadows on the walls and ceiling, enhancing the appearance of the multitude of “root” and “fungi” strands.

Fig. 09: Maquettes. Feb. 2020. Synthetic yarn & card. 0.5m x 0.5m x 0.5m.

Intentional spaces or “tunnels” formed between suspended strands will entice visitors to move through and within the installation, to linger, and to contemplate. This immersive experience of connection to an ensemble that embodies non-human life forms is a visceral reminder that “we can never imagine that we are, or ever were, the sole agents in that web of multi-species relations that not only *sustains* us but fundamentally *is* us” (Tsing). A single chair situated adjacent to an unfinished strand — knitting needles still attached — will be an open invitation to the audience to also participate as maker.

As the completed strands arrived at my studio, I began to get an enhanced sense of the materiality and layout of the installation. Besides synthetic yarns, participants are creating strands with hand-spun and dyed wool, torn fabric strips, dried reeds, cotton string, plastic, burlap, beads, shells, and fine flexible metal. Fabrication techniques include knitting, weaving,

crochet, braiding, corking, and binding with wire or string. Due to the unanticipated quantity of works, the installation will occupy a larger expanse than projected and enable varied iterations in accordance with exhibition spaces available. The remarkable diversity of technique, material, design, colour, texture, and size initially implies disconnect, but when interwoven, the strands merge to form a comprehensive and enticing whole that invites closer investigation. The colour-induced vibrancy calls attention to a biological phenomenon that normally exists outside of our awareness. Moving through this vast hand-crafted network generates a sense of wonder by physically situating the viewer within a space consciously formulated to embody the underground web of roots and fungi connecting a forest, with each unique unit providing input into the dialogue. The installation will spin a yarn: each strand is a word, each hand-crafted section a paragraph; the combined piece communicates a narrative of connection, communication, collaboration, and care.

Fig. 10: New strands arrived daily. March 2020. Various media. 3m x 3.5m. Photo: Adrian Baker

The high quality of craftmanship and creativity evidences the level of engagement participants have with this project. They are actively embracing the opportunity to generate a collective web of embodied knowledge, articulating their thoughts on how we situate ourselves among human and non-human kin. Participants include professional artists, experienced weavers, expert knitters, as well as novice crafters. Knitting groups, weavers' guilds, families, and seniors' residences have participated collectively to create individual and communal strands. An Indigenous group in Ottawa, the Thunderbird Sisters Circle, invited me to meet with them, and then combined their skills to create an intricate multi-media piece for the installation which incorporates knitting, weaving, beading, line-making, and embroidery. During public exhibitions of this installation, the names and photographs of all the collaborators will be on display at the entrance of the installation room.

Fig. 11: Strand by Thunderbird Sisters (detail).
Yarn, felt, beads, canvas, horsehair, embroidery thread. 12cm x 4.3m. Photo: Adrian Baker

CRAFT + ACTIVISM

Creating an installation with knitting, weaving, and crocheting – all considered conventional “women’s craft” — has necessitated consideration of the implications of a medium that has been traditionally marginalized, and inadvertently carries a heavy post-feminist message. Textile craft may hold traditional histories, but it can also convey a subversive subtext. Certain second-wave feminist artists such as Judy Chicago, Joyce Weiland, and Faith Wilding intentionally used textile work to embody the power of the feminine and to upset the “phallocentric and abstract-dominated art world” (Robertson, qtd. in Wallace). In 1972 Wilding created *Crocheted Environment* — also referred to as *Womb Room* — as part of the *Womanhouse* exhibition, drawing parallels between grass huts woven by our female ancestors and her protective womb-like crocheted environment. For the most part, however, feminists of this era rejected traditional women’s craft as a symbol of imposed domesticity and of typically devalued “women’s work”.

The new millennium has witnessed a resurgence of “domestic craft”, as evidenced by the notable increase in yarn sales and the growing popularity of online knitting websites. In her essay “Feminism, Activism and Knitting”, Beth-Ann Pentney proposes that third-wave feminists are embracing knitting — a craft often perceived as antithetical to fine art — because “the denigration of knitting correlates directly with the denigration of a traditionally women-centered activity”. She adds that “if second-wave feminists have been historicized as women who put down their knitting, third-wave feminists may be characterized as those who have picked it back up again” (Pentney). However, social activism through knitting is not exclusively about gender issues. Yarn and textile crafts work across a wide spectrum of concerns and have spawned an emergent social activist movement: craft activism — or “craftism” — a term coined in 2003 by artist and activist Betsy Greer.

According to Canadian art historian Kirsty Robertson, craftism offers participants “a constructive approach to activism that encourages interpersonal interaction and everyday resistance” (210). Encompassing such practices as yarn-bombing, crochet graffiti and collective knit-ins, craftism activities can range from a simple knitted band wrapped around a lamppost to an elaborate work by multiple participants large enough to cover a public monument, signifying an new paradigm of peaceful protest. In 2006 Danish artist Marianne Jorgensen initiated an Iraqi war protest by recruiting over a thousand volunteers to drape a World War II tank with four thousand pink crocheted squares. In a similar fashion, Betsy Greer instigates international activism projects that encourage participants worldwide to fabricate and install hand-stitched works in public places, communicating anti-war statements, human rights promotion, and the messages of affirmation as conveyed in her current project. Robertson wonders whether craft-based activism might be viewed as “an alternative to activist burnout—a way of healing that remains, in its essence, subversive” by presenting an appealing substitute to more aggressive protest tactics (210, 212).

Fig. 13: Greer, Betsy, I am not a terrorist. (detail)
International Anti-War Graffiti Cross Stitch Series. Used by permission of the artist.

Participatory art with a social activist intent — in my case promoting discourse on specific environmental concerns — emphasizes the work not as “a centralized fixed object but rather as a structure through which dialogue is encouraged (Hjorth and Sharp, qtd. in Rock 50). As with many other socially engaged environmentally-based art projects, the intention for the Net-Work project is to ”raise awareness, stimulate dialogue, change human behavior towards other species, and encourage the long-term respect for the natural systems we coexist with” (Martinique). To this end, the tactile and meditative process of knitting and weaving provides a tranquil atmosphere in an era of quick sound bites and instantaneous information. “As time is essential for critical consciousness… hands-on, non-digital art-making might be most useful as a means of slowing things down for reflection and meaningful expression” (Rock 51). Many of the *Net-Work* participants are expressing how the process of hand-crafting a ‘strand’ for this project has offered a hiatus from other distractions, generating an environment conducive to contemplation on the importance of interconnection, on the function of trees in the ecosystem, and our mutualist relationship with nature. *(appendix iii)*

The internet plays an essential role in contemporary craft networking, providing access to pattern exchanges, online lessons, discussion panels, and knitting blogs to a wide and diverse community. It follows that networking also enables widespread dissemination of information and actualizes participation in contemporary protest approaches such as knit-ins, yarn bombing, and crochet graffiti. Those engaged in craftivism *“*occupy a hybrid model of socially networked space, forming traditional social networks via knitting groups and via online social networks.… The community grows by word-of-mouth and over the internet [and is] actualized through participation and craftivist practice” (Wallace). Nato Thompson points out that social activists must be increasingly media savvy and that over the past twenty years “we

have seen the integration of cultural manipulation into its most poignant social movements and accompanying forms of activism" (29, 30). This technological connectivity plays a crucial role in most contemporary social activist practices and has been an important element in my ability to engage participants for the *Net-Work* project.

For my thesis work the manipulation of social media — initially a means to an end, a way to stimulate increased interest and to widen the participatory space — evolved into a significant aspect of the art-making procedure. In the process of sharing with friends and acquaintances, participants have been creating an expansive virtual "social network", generating new enquiries not only from personal connections, but also from numerous people across Canada, the United States and overseas. Intrigued by the visual inference of this web of disembodied communication, I researched the mapping of email traffic and social networks. I discovered that diagrams which depict online social networking patterns hold similarities to those that map out underground tree-mycorrhizal fungus networks, a compelling echo to the premise of the *Net-Work* installation.

Fig. 14: Image of social network analysis map removed due to copyright restrictions.
Refer to International Trading Centre website:
https://blogdev.itcilo.org/social-network-analysis/
.

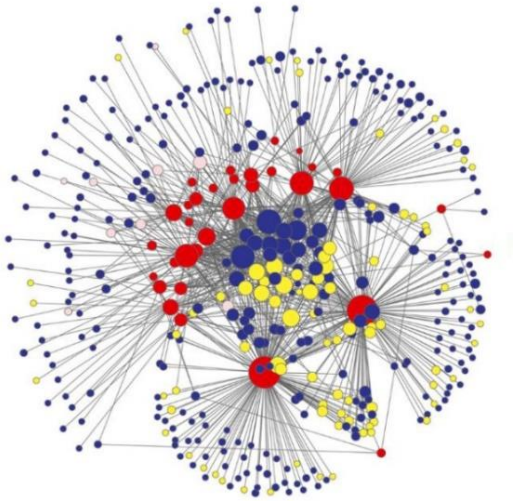


Fig. 15: Hirokazu Toju et al. Architecture of the below-ground plant–fungus network. 2014. Assembly of complex plant–fungus networks: Nature Communications. Creative Commons.

Another notable factor that has emerged during the progression of *Net-Work* is that, of the two hundred and twenty-five respondents to date, only six are men, prompting consideration on whether this statistic is relevant to the intent of the installation. Is there a facile explanation: that more women than men are involved in yarn and textile craft; or is it more complex: do women hold a different affiliation to the natural world? This latter question is often debated in the context of ecofeminism, bringing gender into the ecological conversation. “Affinity” ecofeminists express “a recognition and deep concern about the equally masculinist domination and exploitation of nature through the same habitual structures of thought, feeling and action that devalue and harm women” (Curry 95). While this emphasis on a women/nature connection is not the tenet of all ecofeminists, they are however united in their emphasis on “the centrality of *human* embeddedness in the natural world” (Mellor). Considering this issue in relation to the Net-Work project, I recognize that not being cognizant of how most of the participants may self-identify, it is not productive to focus on gender binaries, which will only disrupt the discourse. Rather, as Donna Haraway asserts, the emphasis should be on “the multispecies ecojustice, which can also embrace diverse human people …Who and whatever we are, we need to make-with – become-with – compose-with – the earth-bound …” (*Anthropocene* 161).

REFLECTION

As this work progresses, the influence of the coronavirus pandemic is generating unanticipated meanings and repercussions. With much of society brought to a sudden halt, we have seen a global reduction of carbon emissions and a renewed comprehension of how deeply human activities have been affecting nature, and how much we have been relying on forests to mitigate our overuse of fossil fuels. The newly cleared air allowed a glimpse into future possibilities: that world-wide cooperation to protect our forests – the carbon sinks for the world's ecosystem – could generate similar positive results. In conjunction with social isolation and increased online communication, I received an influx of new enquiries to participate in the project. Many have articulated observations that expand on the original intent: that participating generated feelings of connection and community; gratitude for the opportunity to contribute to the dialogue, and the simple pleasure garnered from hand crafting with intent.

While citizens have been asked to cooperate during this time for the benefit of all people, there is evidence of a desire to cooperate as well for the benefit of our non-human kin. I see in this a reflection of Simard's sentiment about the community of trees: "Actually, it doesn't make evolutionary sense for trees to behave like resource-grabbing individualists. They live longest and reproduce most often in a healthy stable forest. That is why they have evolved to help their neighbors" (qtd. in Grant). As described by Robert Cox, a social activist practice "can be understood as a form of environmental communication under its mandate of facilitating society's ability to respond to environmental issues relevant to the well-being of human and wider biological communities (qtd. in Rock 64, 65). As a social activist project, this work succeeds in fostering critical reflection amongst participants on issues originally

underlined in my “Call to Artists”: awareness of the symbiotic relationship between trees, and of our deep connection to and mutual reliance on both our human and non-human kin.

Like Demos, I believe that artists can help spur a “green revolution… to introduce a biocentric integration of humans with their environment so that nature’s rights to exist will be acknowledged and enforced, as many Indigenous groups demand” (18). This sentiment is echoed in the Indigenous proclamation Kawsak Sacha: “this continuous relation that we Indigenous people have with the beings of the forest is central, for on it depends the continuity of the Living Forest, which, in turn permits a harmony of life among many kinds of beings, as well as the possibility that we all can continue to live into the future” (Gualinga 1). Taking my inspiration from Indigenous principles, and in response to continuing public interest in creating work that reflects people’s feelings of eco-connection, I plan to maintain an activist objective by developing the *Net-Work* installation project beyond my graduate thesis.

Fig. 16: 250 handmade strands (partially unrolled) May 2020. Various media. 3m x 11m. Photo: Adrian Baker

POSTSCRIPT

After the cancellation of this year's graduate exhibition, I was offered a space in a local textile museum for trial installations in order to actualize *Net-Work* in its entirety. This has presented an unanticipated opportunity to realize the scale of the work and to experiment with the configuration for future exhibits. The first iteration, mounted in a confined space, confirmed that a more expansive locale will be essential for public exhibition to allow for audience interaction with the work. I have since mounted two additional trial installations in a more spacious area of the museum, to consider how the components might be reconfigured in response to the architecture. As the museum could not allow public visits, I have documented the process to share with participants. This installation, like a forest, is not static, but is gradually expanding and transforming, reliant on the physical interaction of individual components as well as its situational environment.

Fig. 16, 17: First temporary installation. May 2020. 2.7m wide x 5.5m deep x 3.5m high. Photos: Robert Cretien

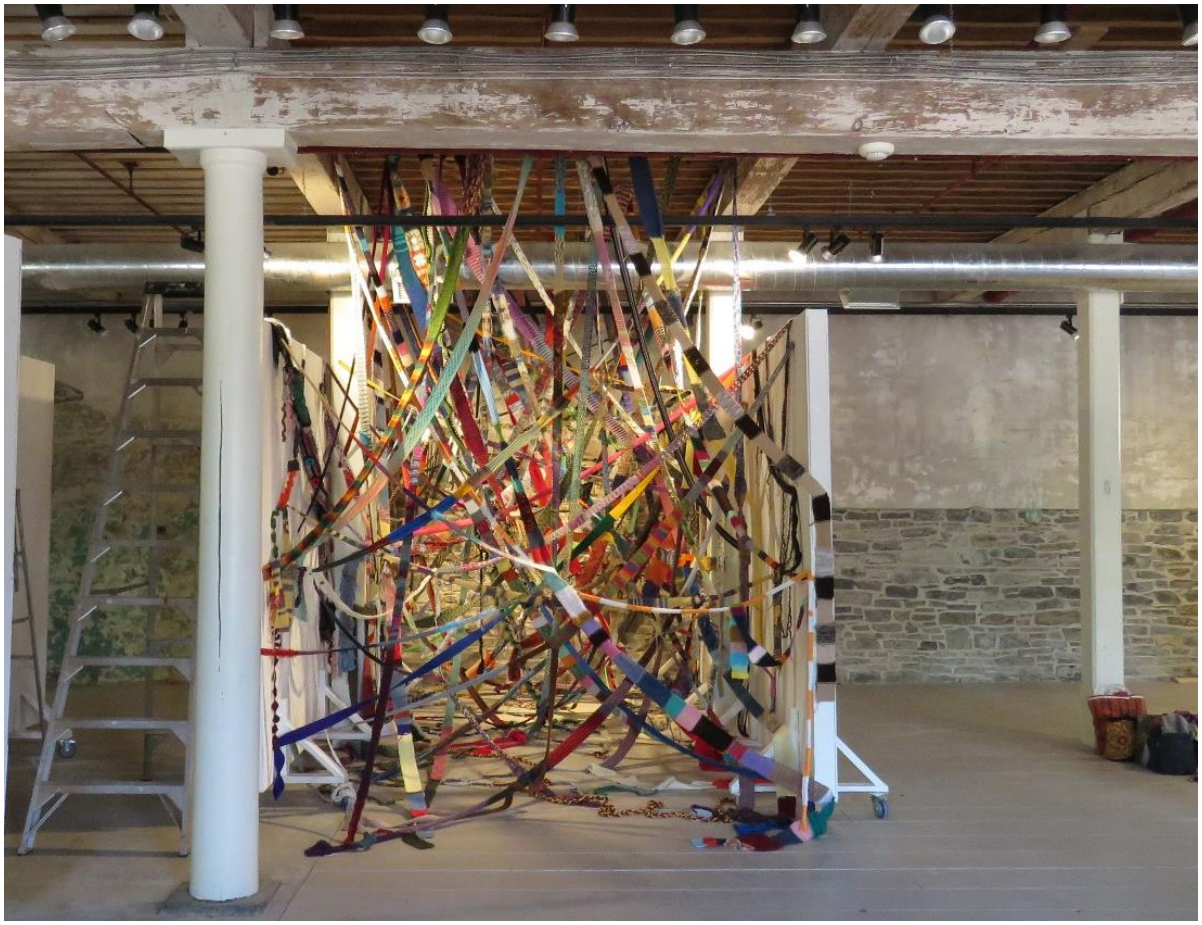
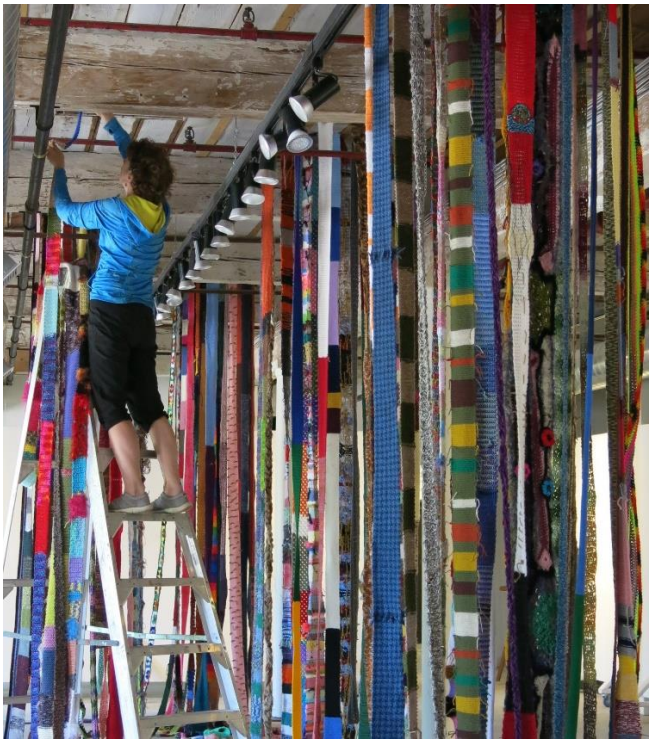
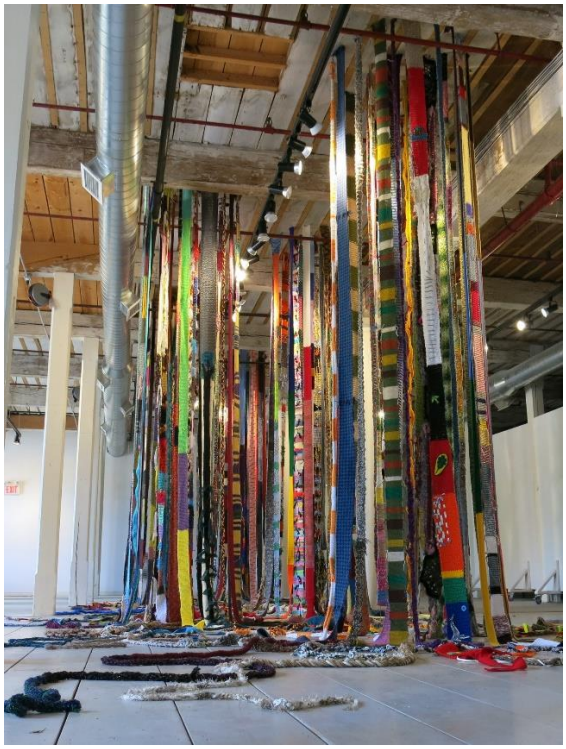


Fig. 18, 19: First temporary installation. May 2020. 2.7m wide x 5.5m deep x 3.5m high. Photos: Alison Ball

These exploratory installations have reinforced the necessity of remaining flexible, that pre-conceived visual concepts may guide the process but will not dictate the outcomes. Looking ahead to the possibility of participant collaboration in the mounting of future installations, I consider the significance of an evolution from solo artist to socially engaged artist, and the influence of this shift on my art practice.

As the widely dispersed participants have all expressed a desire to physically experience the installation, I plan to exhibit the work in multiple venues after social gathering restrictions have lifted. The Thunderbird Sisters Circle in Ottawa has invited me to install the work in a Quebec forest that they tend, and I have been asked to collaborate with a Toronto-based textile artist who curates environmentally themed social activist projects. In 2021 the installation will be displayed in the Mississippi Valley Textile Museum of Eastern Ontario, and I am currently submitting proposals to galleries in Vancouver and the United States for future exhibits. With the social network of interest in this project continuing to grow, it is difficult to foretell when the processes of communication and making will come to an end, and what might be its enduring influence. Anthropologist Bruno Latour believes “the alliances formed between the audience, the creator … and the objects themselves may be temporary. However, the thinking related to considering the object may combine with other information to influence actions in the future” (qtd. in Zemits 16). Like Latour, I am confident that an imparted message of kinship with nature will linger with participants and audiences well beyond the life of the installation.





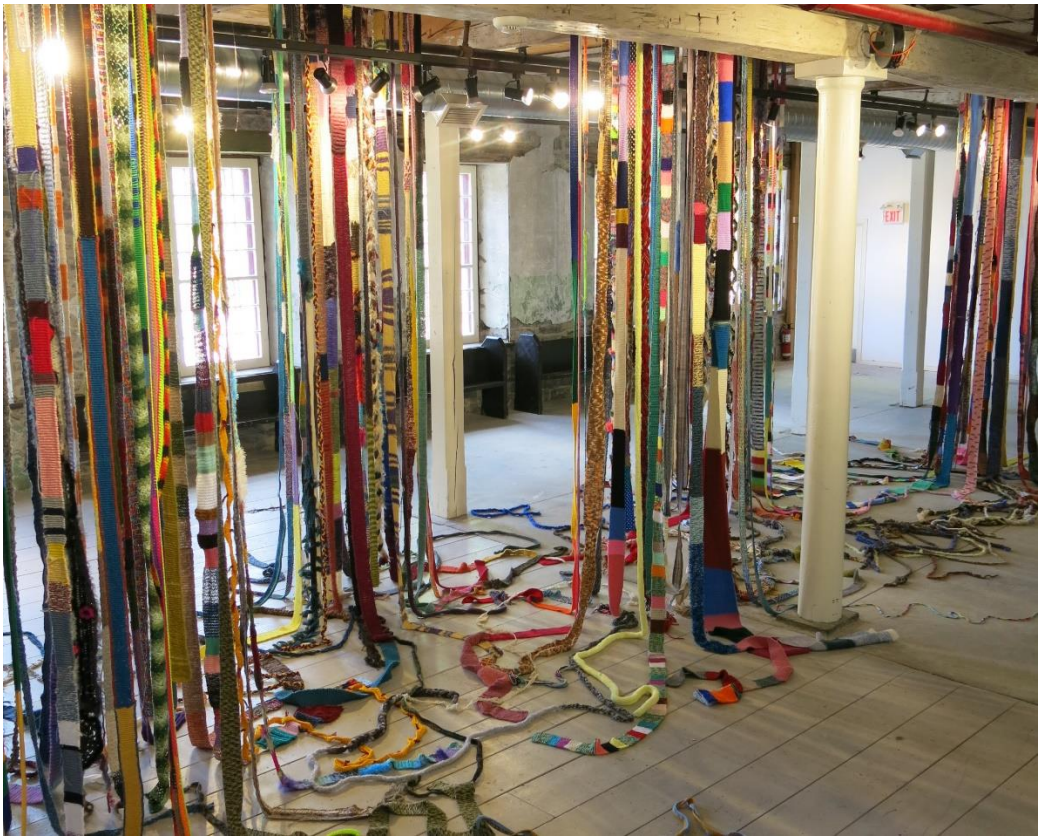


Fig. 20 - 22: Second temporary installation. June 2020. 5m wide x 9m deep x 3.5m high. Photos: Robert Cretien

Fig. 23 – 25: Third temporary installation. June 2020. 5m wide x 9m deep x 3.5m high. Photos: Robert Cretien

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Appendix i: Facebook Post - Call to Artists and Crafters *(3 pages)*

Adrian Baker
January 2 ·

KNITTERS! CROCHETERS! CRAFTERS!
Do you want to be part of an environmental art exhibition? I'm looking for 'makers' to create long strands of knitting, crocheting, weaving, macramé, etc, to be included in a collaborative installation called "Net-Work", which will be exhibited next summer in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

The piece that you knit (or otherwise create with fibre) can be just a few inches wide but must be long - I mean very long – up to 10 or 15 feet!! You can use any material - yarn, string, jute, etc - in any colour or colour combination. (a great chance to use up all those leftovers bits of yarn!) Can't do 15 feet? No problem, shorter pieces will be attached together to create longer strands.

If you're interested in participating, or for more info about the project, please message me or connect with me through my website. There's no fee involved. All participants will have their name (and picture!) included in the exhibition.

Adrian Baker
www.adrianbakerart.com

Patty Baker, Laura Coward and 48 others 62 Comments 70 Shares

Like Comment Share

Jessica Beres Hi, I would love more information.
Thecrochetanything@gmail.com
Like · Reply · 11w

Sara Jameson I'm going to do this! what fun
Like · Reply · 11w

View 21 more comments

LeAnne Cheswick Very cool, I'm in!
Like · Reply · 5w 1

Liane Thiry-Smith Is participation open to anyone globally? Or to Canada? I'd love to share this with two of my FB groups. Mildly Offensive Fiber Artists and the Upcycled Cloth Collective.
What an exciting endeavour. I've just started my contribution.
Like · Reply · 9w · Edited

Sammi Marie I'm interested!
Like · Reply · 10w

Jillian CarsonJackson When do you need it?
Like · Reply · 4w

Adrian Baker replied · 1 Reply

Maria Connell Art Hi Adrian, I am almost finished knitting my strand and will be mailing it to you. This art project is so interesting!
Like · Reply · 3w

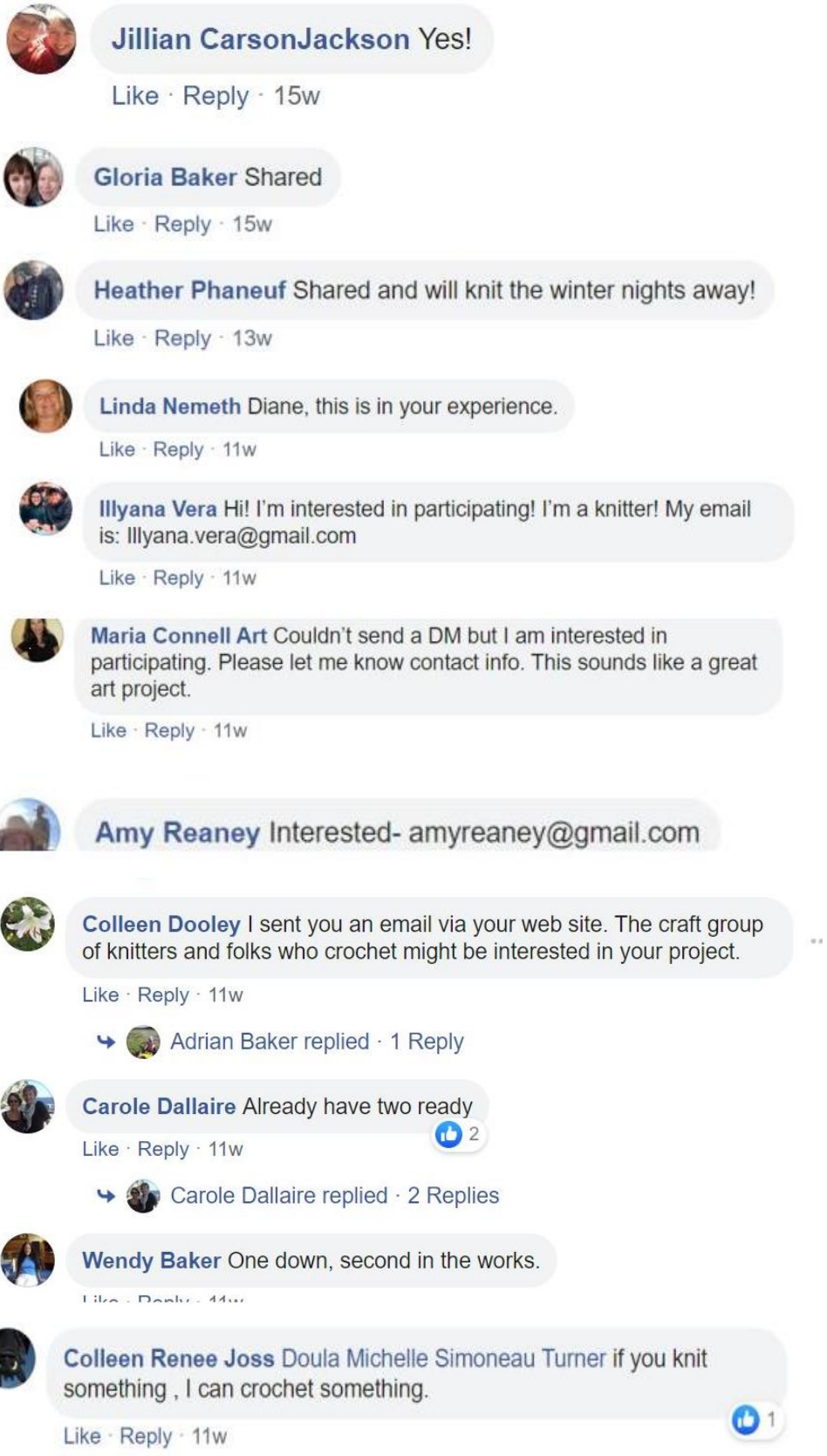
Bridget Longo I'd love to be a part of this! I crochet, and I'll see if my roommate wants to knit so we can combine our stuff into one big piece.
Like · Reply · 11w

Allie Heather O'Neill Hi Adrian, I'd like to know more about this project. I can knit and love to crochet!
Heyallieo@gmail.com
Allie O'Neill

Lori Lori Very cool! Sent you a DM for more info. Thank you!
Like · Reply · 11w

Sarah Davis Stoked! Just DMd you
Like · Reply · 11w

Melissa Lea Interested! Melearosenfeld@gmail.com
Like · Reply · 11w


Jillian CarsonJackson Yes!
Like · Reply · 15w
Gloria Baker Shared
Like · Reply · 15w
Heather Phaneuf Shared and will knit the winter nights away!
Like · Reply · 13w
Linda Nemeth Diane, this is in your experience.
Like · Reply · 11w
Illyana Vera Hi! I'm interested in participating! I'm a knitter! My email is: Illyana.vera@gmail.com
Like · Reply · 11w
Maria Connell Art Couldn't send a DM but I am interested in participating. Please let me know contact info. This sounds like a great art project.
Like · Reply · 11w
Amy Reaney Interested- amyreaney@gmail.com
Colleen Dooley I sent you an email via your web site. The craft group of knitters and folks who crochet might be interested in your project.
Like · Reply · 11w
Adrian Baker replied · 1 Reply
Carole Dallaire Already have two ready
2
Like · Reply · 11w
Carole Dallaire replied · 2 Replies
Wendy Baker One down, second in the works.
Colleen Renee Joss Doula Michelle Simoneau Turner if you knit something , I can crochet something.
1
Like · Reply · 11w

Appendix ii: April. 2020 - fourth update sent to participants *(2 pages)*

April 25 – 4th *update of 'Net-Work' installation*

Hi fellow artists, knitters, weavers and crafters, hope you are all keeping well. So much has changed for all of us since the last update! In answer to your inquiries, yes, the project is still on. However, as expected, the Vancouver exhibition has been cancelled, and so like so many others I'm adapting to sudden changes in plans. (Rather than graduate with my cohort this summer in Vancouver, we will defend our thesis online and graduate 'virtually').

I'm currently arranging a local space for a 'temporary install' of Net-Work and will take pictures for my MFA thesis. However, there will be more exhibitions coming up, including at the textile museum in eastern Ontario, and I will soon begin submitting proposals to Vancouver galleries and other venues. You will of course be notified about all these events, and I'll keep sending pictures!

Almost 140 'strands' have arrived so far! (not all strands shown in this picture)

I'm excited to report that there are now over ***175 participants*** signed up from across Canada, the United States, and overseas (Greece, Denmark, Germany, UK, Scotland, Australia), and to date I've received ***almost 140 'strands'*** . Thank you!! The strands are all unique, and so creative! I'm overwhelmed and very grateful to all participants.
Interestingly, there has been an influx of requests to participate in the past month, possibly because many of us have more time on our hands. I also feel that the project holds a deeper meaning during these difficult times when we are living socially isolated. It represents not only our bond with nature, but additionally, creating this installation collaboratively reflects our connection to one another.

I'm including the links below again in case you didn't have a chance to see them. The first one is a lovely animated short that explains how trees communicate:
https://www.ted.com/talks/camille_defrenne_and_suzanne_simard_the_secret_language_of_trees?language=en
This next one is an interesting talk about the science of the underground tree root to fungi network, by the scientist whose work inspired the Net-Work installation:
https://www.ted.com/talks/suzanne_simard_how_trees_talk_to_each_other?language=en#t-1087078

As mentioned in the last update, the deadline was extended to May 15. If you haven't done so yet, please don't forget to ***email a me picture of yourself***, to be included in all exhibitions. You'll get another update next month, hopefully with pics of the upcoming temporary exhibit.

Please keep well, and thanks again to everyone for participating!

Appendix iii: Selected comments from participants *(2 pages)*

“You brought a community together and who knew we would need one so badly right now? When installed, and it will, there will be layers of meaning for all of us”.

“I have read with great interest the links you have mentioned regarding mycorrhizal networks. . I'm a great believer in relationships and connections particularly with strangers. The seeming randomness of events in life hold consequences beyond our awareness. As an 'older' person I am embracing each day as a gift to be part of the universe whether it knows it or not.”

”It is mind boggling to think that the vast taiga forests chat across the continents and through time...with fungi--- the fibre dyer's gift and pleasure.”

“The following thoughts guided my knitting: Communication between humans, animals or biological species, not undertaken in a straightforward even pathway…As discussions continue there may be holes or breaks on one side or the other. Understanding may be blocked or threatened….If the original bond is strong enough then perhaps the flow changes…it bulges and break free of constraints…then all can flourish once more”.

“Thank you for creating this and I look forward to seeing images of its progress - whatever that will mean as our world begins to unfold….”

“I love this project and I have commented to friends on a number of occasions over the past several weeks why I think this project is even more important and ‘connecting’ in these challenging times.”

I started making my strand from old shirts and used clothing that I tear into strips. Now I’m incorporating fabric scraps from the masks that I’m sewing for health care workers.

“Collaborative fibre art is yet another way of touching people about serious issues. As it turns out, cancelled plans and social distancing are a very deep part of the message. I expect you are finding new permutations every day! I am so glad I heard about you, and have become part of the " hive", the web-net you are highlighting and stringing along.”

“Especially important in these times to spread cheer, and we pass the baton to each other. Have fun in your next phase of creating and reading/sharing!”

“What I wonderful idea in such a time when folks cannot enjoy community! Here at least you allowed us to help you fulfil a dream.”

“Enclosed is a skein made by an 18-year-old student with brain damage. She saw me working on my strand and just arrived with this hand-dyed, handspun skein to add to your project. She was so excited to have made it, I hope you could find a place for it”.

“We thank you for communicating through the wonderful world of art, messages of our environment and the role of trees”.

“This strand started on the Camino de Santiago and finished on Glen Isle [Ontario]”.

“I worked with two master knitters: Our connection began with grandchildren, family, and the wider community of our world and how we live together on this earth. Like the community of trees, we adapted our social connection and grew new dendrites to adapt to the change with COVID 19. The import of healthy environments, the possibilities and our roles has never been more poignant”.

“Each flower, each strand of wool fascinates my imagination in a world of positive ideas. Just like you, with a different approach, I love to create. Thank you again for letting people like me take part in your wonderful work of art.”

“Have read lots of tree books recently it seems. It will be a chance to talk with [her granddaughter] about the tree network and hopefully she will be happy to participate.

“I think your concept is very interesting and your message very important on both levels…trees/roots and people/community”.

“This is a project that began when I was six years old in the hospital. Over many years I added scraps of yarn from time to time. Our kids came along and also learned to cork. I am thrilled to find a home for this piece of my life”.

“I’m calling my piece ‘leaves’ – I used recycled wool from a project I never finished. It was a good distraction during the COVID 19 lockdown as I found it difficult to concentrate on anything else”.

“I had a lot of fun researching mycorrhizal fungi and using yarn from my treasure-chest-of-yarn. After I made the piece of four-season trees & neon fungi, I made some extra ‘connector’ pieces to join it to others”.

“Truly your project has provided all of us with a chance to connect with other people and to be part of something bigger at a time when that is hard to do”.