

Inhabiting Time

Holding material time through performance

by

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Introduction	5
Entanglement	6
Positionality & Practice	7
Unravelling	9
Material Time	10
Maintenance in Progress	15
Wedging	18
Cracking	20
Staining	21
Threads	25
Earth Time	26
Saeculum Time	30
Ritual Time	35
Weaving	39
Conclusions	40
Appendix A	42
List of Figures	43
References	45

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I am currently residing and creating work on traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish and Selilwitulh peoples.

As a newcomer to Canada and Vancouver, I am slowly engaging with place and its layered times through careful listening, observation and reflexive material response.

Introduction

The impulse at the center of my practice is simple: I am longing for time that stretches out. I do not wish to *spend time*, *buy time*, *save time*, *kill time*, *keep time*. I want to *inhabit time*.

But to write a paper on my wrestle with time – a term for which there is no consensus on how it should be defined – feels like a herculean task. To find a way through, I have divided this paper into four sections.

In *Entanglement*, I reflect on the capitalist time structures I grew up within, and how they inform my positionality and practice. I chart my encounters with Zenji Dogen and Carlo Rovelli's writing, whose ideas challenged my assumptions about time, and compelled me to search for time's expansive layers.

In *Unravelling*, I write about my material practice. It is through embodied observation of changing material processes that I first glimpse time that cannot be contained by the capitalist boundaries of hours and minutes. Here, I examine the elements and methods of a key durational performance – *Maintenance in Progress*.

In *Threads*, I explore three layers of time – earth time, saeculum time and ritual time – that I have discovered within my practice. In this section, I discuss the film, *Laying Ground*, which will be screened at my thesis exhibition.

Finally, in *Weaving*, I write about *not knowing* through a current project, *Watering Cracks*, and reflect on my expanded relationship with time.

I do not dive into detailed examinations of capitalist time in this paper, though I recognize my entanglement with it. I want to experience the qualities of time that arise from the earth's cycles, from embodied rituals and from the life-spans of my durational works themselves. I do not want to define my work in opposition to commodified, linear time. As I have discovered through my practice, different times exist not in tidy binaries, but as complex layers within which we are enfolded.

Guiding my explorations through this paper and through my material practice are these key research questions:

- In what ways has capitalist commodification shaped my relationship with time?
- How can I inhabit time more fully through embodied observation of my material processes?
- What qualities does earth time, saeculum time and ritual time have?
- How can I maintain an expansive relationship with time's layers, while existing in relation to capitalist structures?

Entanglement

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In this section, I reflect on the capitalist time structures I grew up within, and how they inform my positionality and practice. I chart my encounters with Dogen Zenji and Carlo Rovelli's writing, whose ideas challenged my assumptions about time, and compelled me to search for time's expansive layers.

Positionality & Practice

I grew up uncomfortable in time. In the capitalist, post-colonial urbanscape of Singapore, time is exchanged for Key Performance Indicators (KPI) – a quantifiable measure of performance over time for a specified objective. KPIs appear in nearly all institutions and workplaces, and can take many forms – grading rubrics, work performance reviews, self-evaluation reports on grant-funded projects – but the essence of the framework, which assumes that value is always quickly apparent, knowable and quantifiable, remains the same.

Arlie Hochschild (1997) writes that it is not simply having insufficient time, but the regulating of everyday life by principles of efficiency, and the constant process of re-sequencing them within designated time slots that generate the experience of time pressure. The acute and persistent sensation of not having enough time permeates deeply even into ‘leisure time’ as busyness becomes increasingly synonymous with a ‘full’ and ‘valued’ life (Gershuny 2005). In a culture that prioritizes efficiency and productivity, I felt constantly propelled to do more in an ever shorter amount of hours.

Besides its scarcity, the relentless chronology of time unnerved me. I found the finitude of my presence terrifying, and the vastness of time that stretches out before and after my temporary existence even more so. Growing up with the influence of Zen philosophy, I have always found this teaching by Zenji Dogen (1200/1994) to be a source of comfort:

The whole existence, the whole universe, exists in individual moments of time. Let us pause to reflect whether or not any of the whole existence or any of the whole universe has leaked away from the present moment of time. (p. 92)

Unable to fully understand these words, I simply took them as a reminder to be attentive in the present until I chanced upon physicist Carlo Rovelli’s (2008) book, *The Order of Time*. With simple, plain language, Rovelli clearly explains how the uniformity and chronology of time result from the blurriness of our own vision, and are not inherent properties of time¹. The standardized times that we live within were developed in the 1800s to facilitate the advent of faster travel and communication. These fragments of Rovelli’s writing in particular reminded me of Dogen’s teachings written centuries ago:

There is no ‘truer’ time; there are two times and they change relative to each other... But there are not just two times. Times are legion: a different one for every point in space. (p.16)

¹ An excerpt of Rovelli’s writing on the illusion of time’s chronology can be found in Appendix A.

The notion of ‘the present’ refers to things that are close to us, not to anything that is far away. Our ‘present’ does not extend throughout the universe. It is like a bubble around us. (p.43)

Having always strained under the pressure of commodified time, I was thrilled to read about time’s multiplicity and mutability. If there are almost infinite layers of time enveloped within what we term as ‘the present’, then there is the possibility of experiencing these times more deeply and expansively.

In *Planktons in the Sea*, which traces the different ways in which time has been quantified, valued and exchanged, the Raqs Media Collective (2011) writes:

[Ian] Walker claimed that his research showed that if people had an endless supply of money, more than 80 percent would use that money to buy time. In other words, he argued, most of us use money to buy time. But given that time is money, we are back to where we were a little while ago, using time to buy time. (p.7)

Instead of accepting the confounding cyclical structure of spending time to make money, to buy time, to spend time, I turn to the duration of material-centered performances to practice inhabiting time. I want to understand the qualities of a multilayered and expanded present through embodied experience in my practice.

Inhabiting time is both to *be in time*, and to attune myself to *the time in me*.

Unravelling

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In this section, I write about my material practice. It is through embodied observation of changing material processes that I first glimpse time that cannot be contained by the capitalist boundaries of hours and minutes. Here, I examine the elements and methods of a key durational performance – *Maintenance in Progress*.

Material Time

Clay comes from deep geological time. Long before it is excavated from mining sites, processed and packaged into 50 lb bags, it has existed as mineral particles, eroded from the earth's crust by wind and water over millions of years. Traditional Chinese medicine herbs that yield vivid but impermanent colours have their own growth cycles. These temporal rhythms influence not only when they are harvested, but how they are prepared through a process of soaking and simmering.

Before I perform with these materials, I spend a long time rehearsing with them. I research their origins but most of our intimacy comes from the embodied experience of working with them. When clay minerals are transported over long distances by a river the heavier particles separate from the lighter ones. The smallest particles remain suspended in water and only settle at the bottom of riverbeds when the water is very still. These particles yield clay bodies that are high in plasticity and can be stretched very thin without breaking (Reijnders 2005). But I don't fully understand this sensation of plasticity until I mix clay bodies from different minerals and practice wedging, rolling, pinching and joining them. As they respond and yield to the touch of my hands, I sense the immensity of geological time enfolded within them.



Fig. 1: Wedging clay bodies mixed from minerals of different geological origins

At times, the most important part of my material process are the pauses – waiting and observing without losing attention. This is an unusual state in our media-saturated world of rapid-fire information. As film theorist and cultural critic, Siegfried Kracauer (1924) wrote in his essay on the value of boredom, “although one wants to do nothing, things are done to one: the world makes sure that one does not find oneself” (p. 34).

Kracauer argued for the transformative possibilities of experiencing true boredom, which he distinguished from the tedium of everyday drudgery. His ideas offer a compelling counterpoint to economist Staffan Linder’s (1970) ‘harried leisure’, which suggests that time pressure arises from trying to pack an increasing amount of ‘leisure activities’ into a limited amount of time. Kracauer addresses this poetically and indirectly, but what he is interested in is not the frustration of boredom, but the attentiveness and sense of expansion that can be discovered within it. This idea is essential to my practice which explores how pauses and ‘empty time’ can be used to release the temporal pressure of packing more into the finite hours that we have.

To study how clay holds moisture, I filled many unfired clay vessels to the brim with vivid pigments made from traditional Chinese medicine in my studio. I hoped that the colours would reveal how moisture seeps through clay. The surface of the herbal pigments often remained still for long durations, with no discernable changes in the clay vessels’ colour or form.

But I have learnt from practice that material time is unfolding even when it seems like nothing is happening. If I lose attention and walk away, I often return to find time that has already begun to seep or rupture. To witness time that accumulates in my materials gradually, and at times almost imperceptibly, I sit with Kracauer’s notion of boredom instead of evading it.



Fig. 2: Material studies – unfired clay vessels holding pigments made from traditional Chinese herbs

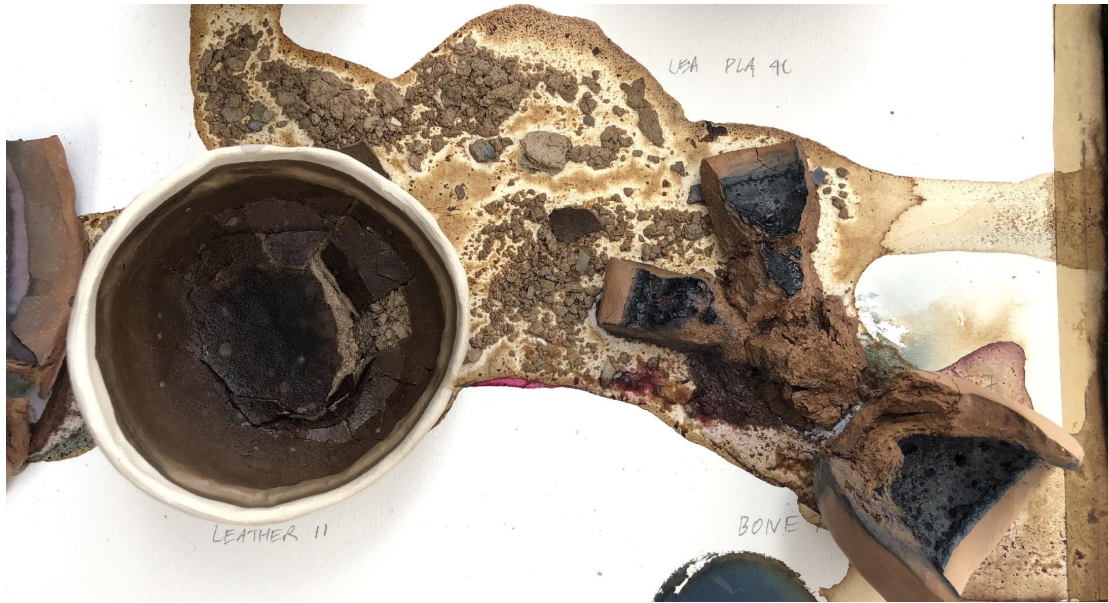


Fig. 3: Material studies – a vessel ruptures after an entire afternoon of placid containment

In *The Order of Time*, Rovelli (2018) writes about ‘Planck time’ – a unit of time that is so small that no clock can accurately measure it. At this minute scale, our notion of time is no longer valid. The ‘quanta’ of time occupies indeterminate positions in space, which means that contrary to the predictability of linear time, it is not possible to predict where an electron will appear in the next moment. It hovers between past, present and future. The suspension of progress held within the pauses of my material processes evokes the mystery of time’s mutability to me. Each moment expands as I slip from the persistent drive towards efficiency and progress. I begin to glimpse Rovelli’s Planck time – grains of time that slip between different possible pasts and futures – all held in the present instant when the clay vessels have not yet begun to erode visibly.

I find deep resonance with the artist Wolfgang Laib’s material practice. Laib lives and works in a small village in Upper Swabia, Germany, near his childhood home. The sumptuous vegetation surrounding his studio offers pollen from dandelions, buttercups, hazel, alder, pine, and moss (Fondation Beyeler 2006). He goes out alone and “harvests” pollen from one plant at a time. From this process, his pollen pieces emerged.

Once in the exhibition space, Laib sieves the fine pollen he has gathered to evenly coat a rectangular area on the floor. The accumulation of this vividly-coloured pollen has an immense energy and radiance. Yet it also introduces the fact of extreme fragility and fleetingness to the space. We know that pollen is a substance that can be effortlessly removed, even by simply breathing on it (Fondation Beyeler 2006, p. 78). After an exhibition ends, Laib retrieves, cleans the pollen, and conserves it in tightly sealed glass jars. On occasion, he also displays these pollen jars in varying hues, singly or in groups.

Despite the radiant beauty of the completed work, it is Laib’s material process that I find most compelling. The humble, painstaking process of collecting pollen, one speck at a time is what

gives this work its profound conceptual meaning. In looking at the pollen resting on the ground, I am acutely aware of the time of a flower's growth cycle, the time that Laib spent gathering and sieving pollen, and the time that is returned to jars after Laib gathers and cleans the pollen during deinstallation. I can't help but reflect on what I do with my time, and how I assign value to things in my life in relation to time.

In my practice, I work with materials that are constantly undergoing changes in state. This is how they exist in the cyclical rhythms of earth time. I forgo the illusion of stability, and it becomes necessary for me to tend to my materials continually. I hope that the immanence, which Laib imbues his materials with through time and care, comes through in my works too.

But perhaps material processes are even more central in my work, as Laib's pollen pieces at least temporarily come to rest in a state that is considered 'complete' in a gallery or museum. My works exist in a state of change, and remain in the flow of material time – a time scale that encompasses a material's origins and my continuous process of learning from their nature.

Maintenance in Progress



Fig. 4: Excavation site of the Broadway Subway Project behind ECU

In the summer of 2021, the City of Vancouver had just begun to excavate an enormous hole in the ground for the Broadway Subway Project. This is where the ECU parking lot used to be. Watching a fleet of yellow tractors rapidly dig and toss aside humus, soil and clay minerals, I decided to work on the ground within ECU.

But unlike the excavation outside governed by capitalist benchmarks of efficiency, I wanted to meditate on what maintenance is by performing with and learning from the properties of unfired clay: What does it mean to maintain something? The earth's crust continually undergoes cycles of erosion and formation, absorbing the impact of our urban constructions, holding the ground that we exist on. How can I perform gestures that enact the maintenance work of geological time cycles?

In this section, I start by providing an index of the materials used in my 40-hour performance, *Maintenance in Progress*. Then in the following pages, I detail the material processes central to this work in the left column, and describe moments of the performance in the context of ECU's bustling concourse in the right column. I observe the unfolding of my materials as well as the space-time that I inhabit during this performance, but I do not fully reveal my internal experiences of this time, nor do I provide explicit answers to the complex question of what maintenance is.

Working within a capitalist, Eurocentric art world, I am often asked to articulate and evaluate experiences prematurely: What did you discover during this process? Did you fulfill your artistic intentions? What are your take-aways for your next work? A part of my practice is

learning to hold the silence, to let my materials speak, to protect what emerges from being claimed immediately by the language of capitalism.

Language is always limited by perspective. I cannot articulate what is still forming for me in these experiences of time. When we circumscribe something in language, we stop observing actively. We think we know because we have named. My work is practice. I can only practice attentively when I remember that I *do not yet know*.

Site

Emily Carr University concourse

Materials

Plywood under-layer

Partially-constructed wall studs and skinning

Unfired clay

Mass-produced ceramic tiles

Water

Performer

Forty hours

Wedging

Wedging is a process of kneading clay through a combination of lifting, pushing and pivoting the material. There are subtly different methods of wedging – ram’s head, spiraling lotus, cone - that are named after patterns that arise from the movement of one’s hands.

These movements feel complex and uncomfortable⁽ⁱ⁾ to me initially, but after a period of regular practice, they emerge from my body as a fluid gesture; a gentle force with a reciprocal echo in the clay body, which rolls back into my palms after every push.

Wedging is often cited as essential because it releases air pockets that may be hidden in the clay. Air expands rapidly when heated to high temperatures in the kiln; if trapped, this air will rupture carefully-made forms in their attempt to escape.

But wedging prepares clay to become, long before it enters the threshold of the kiln.

(i) Push down on the ball of clay with the heel of both palms. Hold onto both sides firmly to prevent the clay from becoming too elongated. Lift the back of the clay ball slightly with your fingers and push down with the heel of your palms from the sides toward the center of the clay again. As you repeat these motions, the ball of clay will begin to spiral into itself from both sides creating a form similar to a ram’s head. The indent created by one’s palms should not be so deep as to fold air into the clay, but enough pressure needs to be applied so that hidden air pockets can be released. A ball of clay that can be held comfortably by both hands needs to be wedged a minimum of two hundred times.

The hallway is a rush of people updating each other boisterously about their weekend plans, walking briskly to their next meeting, scrolling through phones while waiting for lunch orders, pushing carts filled with cleaning supplies or the day’s package deliveries. Amidst the flurry of activities, I am crouched on the ground in a narrow strip of rectangular space that slices through the exhibition hall and wraps around a concrete pillar. I am bent over and moving both hands slowly and methodically on the ground.

It is hard to see what I am doing from a distance. The area has been laid with bare plywood and is partly covered in glossy tiles. There appears to be a gap in the wall that cuts through the area. Jars of water and balls of vividly-coloured clay are stacked on the studs of a partially-built wall section. Some passersby cast a curious glance, but many do not notice me.

Clay consists of mineral plates held together by a capillary force⁽ⁱⁱ⁾ that gives necessary cohesion in a clay body (Reijnders 2005). Mineral plates in unprepared clay are partially disordered. When I touch it, it wants to crumble apart even with sufficient moisture present.

But I am not afraid; I hold the clay body firmly and fold it into itself repeatedly until the process brings the mineral plates into alignment. Then it becomes pliant and cohered in my hands.

Clay has a persistent, hidden memory. When reshaped, it remembers its past. Clay that is prepared commercially in the pug mill and packaged into rectangular blocks will remember its edges. Without the wedging, ghosts of previous forms may emerge during drying or firing, creating cracks in even the most finely finished surfaces.

(ii) Capillary force can be explained by the following comparison: Two pieces of flat glass are placed on top of one another with a little bit of water in between. The two parts can slide around, but they can't easily be separated as a strong force, the capillary force, holds them together (Reijnders 2005, p. 24).

There are several balls of dark clay laid on the ground. Each one is carefully brushed with water and covered with a damp rag. After resting in moisture for some time, they are taken out and kneaded. I lean forward with my body weight with each push. I lean back with each lift and turn of clay. Push, lift, turn, push, lift, turn, until the movements blur into a steady rhythm. The clay is the colour of coal or tar. They leave shadows of their movements stained on the plywood ground.

"It's a lot of work," someone murmurs as they pass through the hallway.

A dark, soft layer has gathered on the floor around the pillar. Its surface is dimpled and sometimes marked with longer grooves. There's a bucket of grey water at rest nearby. Long, dark coils of clay are laid out on a piece of stained cloth.

Cracking

When working with clay, an enormous amount of labour is dedicated to avoiding cracks during the building and drying process.

The causes of cracking can include but are not limited to: a lack of plasticity in the clay body, a lack of cohesion, insufficient moisture, sudden shifts in the thickness of clay, drying unevenly or too quickly.

If a crack is caught when it's tiny, it can be smoothed out with fingertips.

If a large crack appears, moisten with water, wedge the entire form back into plastic state and start again from scratch.

If a surface repair is made, the crack will likely reappear once water escapes from the clay body. Sometimes despite wedging, joining, supporting, smoothing, moistening, covering, checking, waiting, clay can still crack or fragment upon drying.

Cracked clay can be soaked in water and reworked into a plastic state, even after it becomes bone dry.

Cracks have begun to creep towards the pillar from the outer edges where dark clay has turned a lighter grey. Rich, orange clay is rolled gently into long, pliant coils. From time to time, I dip my hands into a bucket filled with orange-coloured water, and run my fingers along the coils, leaving them wet and shiny. When a number of coils have been accumulated, they are laid out along the outlines of past layers.

Sometimes the coils are smoothed out with fingertips, each press and pull of skin on clay closing the gap between the coils until they are a spread of dimpled orange. Other times, the coils are smoothed out with feet, soft wet clay giving way easily to the weight of a body, spreading outwards to bridge the gap between clay and pillar.

The narrow space is a smudge of charcoal black and vivid orange in the empty hallway of polished concrete floors and stark white walls. Cracks have woven their way into the ground around the pillar, branching outwards in a centripetal pattern, as though the pillar has suddenly acquired a life-force.

Staining

Clay bodies, taken from the earth, contain large amounts of minerals that can give them potent staining strength. One of the most common naturally occurring minerals in clay – iron oxide – gives bodies a rich red, black or yellow colour. Most ceramic studios have separate work surfaces for staining clays because their colours seep into almost any surface upon contact.

These clay bodies resist the desire to keep things clean and contained. Wherever they touch, they leave an echo of the earth. I begin to notice the shadows of wedging movements on plywood surfaces, the outlines of slip that linger on plaster slabs long after the clay has been removed. When I spend a day working with clay bodies rich in iron oxides, the sink gradually become filled with bright orange⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ as I wash my hands, clean my tools, and wring out of rags that are dyed burnt orange.

Where clay touches the white tiles, it begins to seep into the gaps between them. Rich orange and dense black spill out from the grid of shiny tiling. I am on my hands and knees filling in clay slip and wiping away the excess with a wet rag. The water bucket becomes murkier and murkier. Orange and black smear across the tiled surface, at times almost obliterating the grid. I rinse and rinse the rag in water, but the vivid colours stain everything – the water, the rag, my apron and shirt, the skin on my hands and feet.

“How much longer do you have to complete this? Can you finish it in time?” someone asks.

“I am doing this for five days,” I reply.

Clay has spread from edge to edge on the slice of ground. It seeps through the partially built wall and emerges on the other side, spreading until it touches the edge of the ceramic tiles. There's no more clay stacked on the wall studs. Every jar of water has turned a shade of orange, brown or grey. Nearly all the clay has cracked. Some fissures are so large, the stained plywood beneath is visible; other cracks are a fine web, impossible to discern where they begin or end. Some cracks are being repaired with orange clay. I roll out thin coils between my palms, carefully apply water to the cracks with a brush, lay the coils in the cracks and smooth them out with my fingertips. But even this clay begins to crumble as water escapes.

Much of the dried surface has been peeled away, leaving only crack lines mapped by orange dust and a plywood surface with deeply stained tree rings. There are stacks of clay fragments laid out on the ceramic tiles now smeared with traces of orange and black. I break each piece of clay into smaller pieces on a damp rag. When a mound of tiny fragments have been accumulated, I pour them back into the water bucket to soak.

(iii) Clay studios usually have sinks with clay traps to prevent clogging. Clay particles suspended in water will form sediment and separate from water if left undisturbed overnight. This allows one to trap and recycle the clay. If working in an area with no running water, one can use three separate water buckets for clean up, gradually progressing from a murkier to a clearer bucket during the washing. Let the buckets that are murky sit for several days, and clay particles will form sediment, allowing clear water to be poured off the top. Both water and clay slip can be reused.



Fig. 5: *Maintenance in Progress* performance



Fig. 6: *Maintenance in Progress* performance



Fig. 7: *Maintenance in Progress* performance

Threads

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In this section, I explore three layers of time – earth time, saeculum time and ritual time – that I have discovered within my practice. I discuss the film, *Laying Ground*, which will be screened at my thesis exhibition.

Earth Time

Vancouver sits close to the Cascadia subduction zone – a long crack in the earth's crust stretching from California to North Vancouver that is continually converging into itself, building up pressure over the past three centuries (Shulz 2015). Locals sometimes joke that 'the big one is coming' with a mixture of cavalier humor and anxiety, but mostly this knowledge is forgotten in the frantic day to day pacing of time.

I did not know about this crack until I was doing research for Field School, a place-based learning program led by Laura Kozak and Jean Chisholm at ECU. Fascinated by the patterns of cracking in my material observations of clay, I found it apt that the earth beneath our feet, which consists of large amounts of clay mineral, is also slowly fissuring unnoticed by us.

In ceramics, the time of making yields to the time of earth, which remains clay's nature even after it has been packed neatly into 50lb bags. Almost every step of the process is carefully considered to avoid the appearance of cracks. But working with unfired clay cyclically, I embrace the cracking. I study their patterns and watch for the moment when they first appear. In the performance, *Maintenance in Progress*, I mend cracks that appeared with wet clay, only for them to reappear as moisture leaves the mended joints. My mending is as much repair as a tactile retracing of fissures that emerge.

To explore the gesture of repairing cracks further, I invited my peers from the MFA and MDES program to go on silent, hour-long *Mend Walks* starting from the ECU campus. On each walk, my guest and I both have a small ball of unfired clay that can be used to mend pavement cracks. There were no specifications for what constituted 'mending', which cracks or how many cracks to mend. I began each walk with the invitation to consider cracks not as a structural flaw, but as the necessary release of tension trapped within or beneath the surface. A rupture that allows new possibilities to arise.

In the *Maintenance in Progress* performance, viewers encountered the material and geological time scales of the work through external observation. Most viewers pause briefly or rush by during the forty-hour performance. Much of their engagement arises from the friction between the temporal rhythms of my performance and everyday capitalist time. In *Mend Walks*, I wanted to offer participants the possibility of experiencing time more expansively through embodied material gestures.



Fig. 8: *Mend Walks*, filling in cracks with unfired clay



Fig. 9: *Mend Walks*, a mended crack after several rainfalls

In Vancouver, rainfalls come frequently in autumn. On days when rain hangs like mist, unceasing throughout the day, the clay begins to wash away even as we are rolling out soft coils with our fingertips and pressing them into cracks. These walks hold a space for meditating on care, labour, futility – notions that are neglected in a efficiency-driven capitalist society. But I am most interested in these walks as an experience that brings to awareness cyclical earth times. The clay that we use is excavated from the ground beneath the skin of concrete and asphalt in cities. When the rain washes away the clay we have laid out, they

simply return to the geological cycles that they came from. The ephemerality of these processes calls me to be present to the moment, and allows me to glimpse the past and future not as separate from, but a part of the present.



Fig. 10: *Mend Walks*, a walk on a rainy day

I think of my practice as being in dialogue with, but distinctly different from the Maintenance Art pioneered by Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Ukeles performed the mundanity of exhausting maintenance work, while granting it visibility and value within the civic realm (Molesworth 2000). Much of her practice is grounded in critique of social structures that undervalue the daily maintenance work performed by females and racialized, blue-collar workers. While I am also performing gestures of care that may appear laborious to some, I am much less interested in picking apart the value systems of the late-capitalist society that we live in. I understand and accept that it is deeply flawed. There is no clearer evidence of this than time being treated as a commodity. Instead, I want to practice gestures of care in relation to the ‘maintenance work’ that is continually taking place through cycles of erosion and formation in earth time.



Fig. 11: *Mend Walks*, mending a crack teeming with plant life

In *Maintenance and Care*, which traces the history of Maintenance Art and explores how ‘taking care’ is a form of maintenance, Shannon Mattern (2018) cautions against the easy romanticization of care. On one of the mend walks, my guest Marcia Higuchi and I encountered many pavement cracks teeming with plant life. By unspoken agreement, we tried to fill the crack with unfired clay only where plants were not growing visibly. After the walk, Higuchi confessed that she was worried whether our ‘mending’ the crack with clay was in fact smothering hidden plants and depriving them of sunlight. This reflexivity is precisely the complexity I am interested in introducing to my work, which is often read through a lens of care. As Mattern writes, “We should also remember that the preservation of our world – the human one – is sometimes at odds with caring for the ecological context. Perhaps not every road *should* be repaired.”

Saeculum Time

There's an Etruscan word, *saeculum*, that describes the span of time lived by the oldest person present, sometimes calculated to be about a hundred years. In a looser sense, the word means the expanse of time during which something is in living memory. (Solnit 2021, p.6)

My performances, being temporal, have their own saeculum time. I may be present in the busy concourse of ECU for an entire week, but when the duration draws to a close, I pick up the fragments of dried clay, disassemble the wood structures, scrub the area clean, and that 40-hours which has lapsed is no longer visible. But as long as the performance is still in the living memory of someone who has walked through the concourse, the temporal memory of my work is still unfolding.

In a studio visit, a professor once said to me slightly apologetically, "I was only able to come to see the performance twice. But all week while I was working in my studio, I was acutely aware of you being there. And that made me wonder if we could reimagine what work time is." This, for me, is part of the saeculum time of my work. It is not often that someone can break the pace of their own work week and sit down to observe material processes with me. What is significant is not simply the time that someone experiences while watching my performance, but whether that duration lingers as they return to the time of their own work week.

Like all artists working with ephemeral mediums, I need to contend with my relationship with documentation. For the first 40-hour performance I did in my MFA program, *Holding* (2021), I recorded the entire duration on video. The footage generated served as evidence that indeed I had performed for 40 hours, but the viewing experience of that video came across as a linear endurance of time. It did not capture the sense of expansion I felt through my materials and shared with viewers who sat with me during the performance.



Fig. 12: A still image from the 40-hour documentation of *Holding*

What I want to do through documentation is not to point to a past event, but to expand the living memory of a performance by offering a temporal space where viewers may re-experience the performance, or encounter it for the first time. To do so, I turned to the language of film. In *Doing Time*, Lee Carruthers (2016) writes, “cinematic time can be conceived as an active process of engagement – in other words, as something we can *do*, as viewers” (p.2). This is precisely how I approached my film, *Laying Ground* (2022), an 75-minute piece created from footage of the *Maintenance in Progress* performance. This work is an invitation for viewers to pay attention to filmic time as a crucial part of the experience, not as secondary to the content of the film.

The late-capitalist world is so inundated by time-based media – Instagram stories that are replaced by new posts every 24 hours, Tiktok videos that are only a few seconds long, multi-season Netflix series that can be binge-watched in a night – that many of us have lost sensitivity to the temporal nuances of moving images. Guided by Carruthers’ writing, I work towards creating a film that asks viewers to pay attention to “the ambiguities of filmic time... pauses, gaps, repetitions, and stretches of time illuminate a living field that extends from our viewing activity” (p.2).

Laying Ground consists of 14 long take² scenes that often utilize static framing and deep space. Deep space refers to the cinematic technique of including layers of space that have varying levels of legibility to the viewer. This is markedly different from conventional film language, which tends to cut to important narrative details within the frame, directing the eye to the action.

² The average shot length in mainstream English language films has decreased from 12 seconds in 1930 to about 2.5 seconds today (Cutting 2014). What is considered a long take?

Each scene in this film reveals a duration of time in the continually unfolding process of clay forming and unforming the ground that the performer engages with. I am deeply influenced by the work of Taiwanese 'slow cinema' filmmaker, Tsai Ming-Liang, who relinquishes the primacy of editing structures to present time as sheer duration.

In the opening scene of *What Time Is It There?* (2001), a man emerges with a dish of hot food, carries it to the table and sits, leaving his meal untouched. He lights a cigarette, walks to the kitchen to call someone who does not answer, and returns to the dining table. Eventually he walks to the far recesses of this space, and stands smoking, still visible through a doorway. Most of this single shot, which lasts 3 minutes 39 seconds, would be edited out in the mainstream film style that "endeavors to manage time, parrying away what is extraneous to narrative progression because 'nothing happens'" (Carruthers 2016, p.86). But having practiced watching for the moment where herbal pigments unexpectedly rupture or leak from the surface of clay vessels in my material studies, I am most interested in capturing through film moments when it seems that 'nothing happens' – the long minutes when moisture has already begun to seep into the spaces between clay minerals but has not yet become visible to the distracted eye. It is these moments that offer us a chance to attune ourselves to the granular nature of time³ and its possibilities.



Fig. 13: A long take, static shot from *Laying Ground* shows the unwrapping, wedging and rewrapping of several balls of clay for 4 minutes 55 seconds

³ In Shobogenzo, Zen Master Dogen (1200/1994) writes that a day consists of 6,400, 099,980 moments. Each moment offers the possibility for awakening. Many centuries apart, Carlo Rovelli (2018) refers to the granular nature of time in his writings on Planck time. More reflections on this in the section *Material Time*, pg. 14.

In film, our attention is often directed by deliberate framing of what we see and camera movement. We are so accustomed to this visual language, we often interpret insert shots that draw our attention to key narrative details and skips in time to omit less eventful durations, without consciously registering the hand of the editor. Borrowing from Tsai's cinematic techniques, in *Laying Ground*, I use duration instead of camera movement to attune viewers to what is unfolding on screen. The static camera, patiently held in focus by my cinematographer, Noah Penner, insists that significant processes are unfolding.

The medium and medium close-ups scenes in *Laying Ground* offer an intimate viewing experience that was not easily accessible in the live performance. In the live performance, one encounters material time from a distance. Bound to the fast-paced temporal rhythms of their work day, viewers cannot easily stop in the busy concourse to watch. There is a wide range of stimulus – from text messages and conversations with colleagues, to the meeting that begins in 15 minutes and someone's lunch order at the cafeteria – that make it challenging for viewers to become attuned to the rhythms of material time and earth time in the performance.



Fig. 14: A medium close up shot from *Laying Ground*

In *Laying Ground*, the cinematography's close framing and the carefully composed sound environment draws one into material time and earth time more easily. Layers of ambient sounds from the busy concourse remain audible. One can hear fragments of passing conversations, and doors opening and closing in a distance, which suggests the multiplicity of temporal rhythms at the site. But most of these surrounding activities occur outside the frame visually and auditorily. The focus of the camera remains on the cracks weaving through the clay ground, drawing closer to reveal minute shifts in colour and texture as clay dries gradually over time.

This film has a running time of 75 minutes, and is meant to be viewed in full in an immersive screening space. It is this creative decision more than any other that has been met with resistance in my MFA program. I wonder why many of my peers and even some of my professors have been concerned about whether viewers have the time or patience to experience an 75-minute film, when the average adult⁴ consumes far more screen-based media on a daily basis?

I have steadfastly refused to fragment or compress this span of filmic time, despite well-intentioned suggestions to ‘play it on loop’ so that viewers can walk in and out any time. Although I cannot anticipate how viewers receive this film nor whether they choose to watch it, I believe that this duration of filmic time offers a suspension of day to day, linear time, and opens up the possibility of experiencing time in cyclical, granular and unhurried ways.

Saeculum time is the span of time during which something is in living memory. But in our late-capitalist world of rapid-fire information, our daily experiences are often rushed. It *takes time* to notice and become attuned to earth time and material time. It *takes time* to practice engaging actively with the ambiguities of filmic time, to observe how a pause, an omission or a repetition in a scene can offer a shift in our experience. It *takes time* to form enduring temporal memories that will linger on, calling one to discover more expansive ways of being in time, even when one cannot shed the hold of capitalist time entirely.

⁴ A study by the U.S Bureau of Labour Statistics showed that in 2013-17, the U.S. population aged 15 and older spent an average of 2 hours and 46 minutes watching TV everyday (Kent 2018). A study by the regulator Ofcom showed that screen time, spurred on by pandemic lockdowns, was an average of five hours and 40 minutes daily for UK adults in 2020 (Wakefield 2021).

Ritual Time

In *chado*, traditional Japanese tea ceremony, each guest washes their hands before entering a simple hut through a *nijiriguchi*, a small entrance way that one bends low to pass through. This ritual, which has been repeated for centuries, symbolically prepares participants to be present with full attention at the tea ceremony (Parkes 1993). Having grown up with the influence of Zen and Taoist philosophies, preparatory rituals are a cornerstone of my practice.

When I create the sound design for *Laying Ground*, I sit in the editing studio and listen to the room tone before I begin. Every space has its own hum, which consists of a note or several notes that are repeated at every octave. Sometimes, I hum a note that I hear in the room tone, and when it overlaps precisely, I feel a vibrational resonance that seems to dissolve the boundaries between the space and I. This preparation allows my auditory perception, which is accustomed to filtering out noise in an urban city, to come into awareness. There is no music or scripted dialogue in the film; I am composing with the hums of the building, the drips of a water splash or the almost imperceptible sound of wet clay giving way to the weight of my body.

While creating *Maintenance in Progress* and *Laying Ground*, I often recalled the ritual time in Andy Goldsworthy's practice. The documentary, *Rivers and Tides* (Riedelsheimer 2001), shows Goldsworthy stacking broken stones found on the beach before the incoming tide. After hours of carefully arranging and balancing each piece of rock, he has made a shallow hemisphere about a foot from the ground. The camera shows him placing one larger rock near the center to hold what he has stacked in place, but when he lifts this center rock to continue stacking, it has shifted the balance of the layers beneath. They all tilt outwards and the hemisphere falls apart. Goldsworthy lets out a frustrated huff, and leans forward for a moment, hands on his knees, looking at the collapsed stack of stones. To the camera, he says, "This is the fourth time it has fallen, and each time, I got to know the stones a little bit more, and got higher each time. It grew in proportion to my understanding of the stone... that is really one of the things my art is trying to do, is trying to understand the stone. (25:30 - 25:55)" For me, Goldsworthy's practice is devout ritual of attempting to understand the nature of his materials. Even if his temporary structures are thwarted again and again by winds, tides or simply gravity, what is magnificent about his practice is that he attempts it again and again.

To *inhabit time* requires being alert and present with the time layers in the environment, in my materials and most importantly, within myself. When I engage with material processes, I repeat my gestures again and again. In doing so, I sense "the flow of the past rising up through the present moment" (Parkes 1993, p. 92). I am aware of the clay that I rolled into coils and joined together a moment or a week ago; I am also connected to this gesture of rolling and joining, that has been used to create clay forms for thousands of years before me.

Laying Ground reflects the repetition necessary to ritual time. Gestures performed with clay are done, undone, and redone. In these cyclical enactments of geological processes, the performer sometimes turns diaphanous and acquires a mirror image that allows doing and undoing to unfold simultaneously. Watching and listening to the footage attentively and repeatedly while editing the film, I am continually improvising and responding to not just my gestures within the frame, but also the ambient sounds and passersby captured on the periphery. In doing so, the conditions of the live performance's temporal space become an essential part of the film.



Fig. 15: Mirrored figures from *Laying Ground* doing and undoing simultaneously



Fig. 16: A passerby waves to someone outside of frame in a scene from *Laying Ground*

My work often appears laborious, yet what they generate is materially and temporally ephemeral. This pair of characteristics appears contradictory or futile when read through the lens of capitalist productivity, but harmonious when viewed from the perspective of *ritual time*. In Zen tradition, one cultivates the state of *mushin*, or ‘no-mind’, which refers to an openness to the present unhindered by ego-centered prejudices or social preconditions. In this state, one connects to the deep “wisdom of the body” in one’s movements and gestures (Parkes 1993, p. 88). My durational performances do not culminate in a physical art object that is fixed in time, because I think of them as a continual practice of inhabiting time through embodied rituals.

One day a great scholar
arrives to seek a Zen teacher's insights.
The scholar asks many questions, but is met only with silence.
The Zen teacher lifts a teapot and pours tea into a cup on the table between them.
Tea fills the cup to the brim, and then overflows onto the table.
Yet, the Zen teacher keeps pouring.

The scholar cries out urgently,
“Please stop pouring, sir! The cup is full.”

When the Zen teacher hears this,
he places the teapot back on the table and replies,
“Your mind is like this cup. If you don't empty your own cup,
how can you hear me?”

Weaving

~

In this section, I write about *not knowing* through a current project, *Watering Cracks*, and reflect on my expanded relationship with time.

Conclusions

Having traveled through many layers of time with me in this paper, perhaps for the time being, we feel freed by its cyclical, granular and expansive nature. But I am certain the question still lingers: how does this art practice provide an antidote to capitalist time?

I shall not prolong the suspense any further – I do not have the antidote.

And in fact, I do not seek an answer to the predicaments of commodified time through my practice. I started this my MFA program with the desire to practice *inhabiting time* – to both *be in time*, and to attune myself to *the time in me*. Through my material performances, I have come to discover the complexity of this endeavour. *Material time*, *earth time*, *saeculum time* and *ritual time* do not sit in binary opposition to capitalist time. All these times are entangled layers that form the whole experience of the present. What I want to do is open up the possibility of being in this present more fully.

Recently, Lou Sheppard, a Canadian artist who has been engaged with the history of False Creek, invited me to host a material response workshop to this site. Vancouver's urban waterfront near ECU used to be an ecologically rich waterway shared by the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh peoples. That hard edge of concrete was an intertidal zone shaped by the movement of water as the tides rose and fell twice a day.

Drawn by the layers of historical and ecological times within this site, I immediately agreed. I remembered the minute fissures in pavements carved by rainwater that I encountered during *Mend Walks*, and I wanted to study the cracks at False Creek. I thought about mapping the cracks by making rubbings of the ground. But as a newcomer to Canada, and a guest to both Lou's project and the site, I hesitated. I wondered if we begin to think that *we know* the moment we begin to create records that are fixed in space and time.

It struck me that my material response to False Creek could simply be to observe the creek water itself. Together with many peers from Fieldschool and my MFA program, we gathered on a Saturday morning to water the cracks along Vancouver's urban waterfront with borrowed creek water. Silently, we traced and retraced minute fissures in the ground, reenacting the memory of tidal movements in centuries past. The weekend crowd flowed around us. Some paused to watch, a jogger ran past us but took care not to step on any of the cracks we had watered.

All traces of our gestures had evaporated by the afternoon. But as I continue my practice of inhabiting time, and invite others to join me, I hope to hold onto the openness and humility of *not knowing*. Of observing and responding to the time layers of a place materially, with awareness of the complexities of time we are all enfolded within.



Fig. 17: A moment during the *Watering Cracks* workshop

During the Thesis Exhibition film screenings, I experienced a very different temporal relationship to my viewers from the live performances. I introduced the film briefly at the beginning of each screening and returned at the end for an informal Q & A session, but I did not sit with my audience during the screenings. I often sat outside the theatre reflecting on the peculiar sensation that this temporal work – a film – that I had laboured on for many months held many intertwined time scales and rhythms open for viewers to experience, even without my presence. In many ways, this temporal span takes on a life of its own. Although my gestures are literally captured in the visual and auditory elements of the film, and I have revisited these actions again and again during the editing process, these 75 minutes remain opaque to me unless I am viewing the film together with my audience.

Perhaps it is still Merleau Ponty (1974 / 2012) that said it most succinctly, “Time only exists for me because I am situated in it, that is, because I discover myself already engaged in it. (p. 447)” I endeavoured to create a temporal work that does not point to or sum up the time of a live performance that has already taken place, but reopens that time for embodied experience and exploration through active viewing. As Lee Carruthers wrote, it is impossible to engage in this active viewing from a distance. One must submerge oneself in this filmic time to experience it deeply, but in doing so, one also practices coming to terms with the fact that there will always be time unfolding out of frame, just beyond our field of vision or hearing. However much we study it, we cannot master time or summarize it; we can only *inhabit* it.

Appendix A

Entropy, which only increases or remains the same in a closed system, is often taken as iron-clad proof that we cannot return to the past. The particle world around us is continually becoming more disordered as the amount of heat in universe increases. Rovelli's text introduces Ludwig Boltzman, who discovered that the chronology of time is a result of our own blurry vision - there is no arrangement of particles in the universe that can be objectively considered "more ordered" or "more particular".

Using a deck of cards to illustrate the amount of entropy in the universe: if the first twenty-six cards in a pack are all red and the next twenty-six are black, we say that the configuration of the cards is "particular," that it is "ordered." This order is lost when the pack is shuffled. The initial ordered configuration is a configuration "of low entropy." But notice that it is particular if we look at the colour of the cards – red or black. Another configuration will be particular if the first twenty-six cards consist of only hearts and spades. Or if they are all odd numbers, or the twenty-six most creased cards in the pack, or exactly the same twenty-six of three days ago. (Rovelli 2008, p.31)

List of Figures

Fig. 1: Wedging clay bodies mixed from minerals of different geological origins. Photo by Xinwei Che.

Fig. 2: Material studies – unfired clay vessels holding pigments made from traditional Chinese herbs. Photo by Xinwei Che.

Fig. 3: Material studies – a vessel ruptures after an entire afternoon of placid containment. Photo by Xinwei Che.

Fig. 4: Excavation site of the Broadway Subway Project behind ECU. Photo by Xinwei Che.

Fig. 5: *Maintenance in Progress* performance. Photo by Gemma Crowe.

Fig. 6: *Maintenance in Progress* performance. Photo by Gemma Crowe.

Fig. 7: *Maintenance in Progress* performance. Photo by Gemma Crowe.

Fig. 8: *Mend Walks*, filling in cracks with unfired clay. Photo by Laura Herridge.

Fig. 9: *Mend Walks*, a mended crack after several rainfalls. Photo by Laura Herridge.

Fig. 10: *Mend Walks*, a walk on a rainy day. Photo by Laura Herridge.

Fig. 11: *Mend Walks*, mending a crack teeming with plant life. Photo by Laura Herridge.

Fig. 12: A still image from the 40-hour documentation of *Holding*. Image courtesy of Xinwei Che.

Fig. 13: A long take, static shot from *Laying Ground* shows the unwrapping, wedging and rewapping of several balls of clay for 4 minutes 55 seconds. Image courtesy of Xinwei Che.

Fig. 14: A medium close up shot from *Laying Ground*. Image courtesy of Xinwei Che.

Fig. 15: Mirrored figures from *Laying Ground* doing and undoing simultaneously. Image courtesy of Xinwei Che.

Fig. 16: A passerby waves to someone outside of frame in a scene from *Laying Ground*. Image courtesy of Xinwei Che.

Fig. 17: A moment during the *Watering Cracks* workshop. Photo by Xinwei Che.

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