TOUCHING IMPERMANENCE
experiential embodied engagements with materiality
in contemporary art practice

by Katherine Fries
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This volume is presented as a record of the work undertaken for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney.
This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

I certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Katherine Fries
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Abstract

*Touching impermanence* describes the experiential moment in an art encounter when one senses the enchanted reality of one’s interconnections within the sentient matter-flow of existence. All matter in existence is constantly vibrating, changing, assembling and evolving into forms and organisms, cycling through decay and disintegration, then reforming again with diversity and difference; this is the impermanence of sentient matter-flow. Humans are just one form of these reciprocal assemblages; we are within and part of sentient matter-flow. We also co-create with sentient matter-flow, changing these cycles on micro and macro levels, just as they change us. On a macro level human actions have impacted and changed the Earth’s biosphere, altering and polluting sentient matter-flows to the extent that our present time period is becoming known as the Anthropocene, the human age of destruction and disconnection. There are many efforts to readdress our anthropocentric feelings of apathetic disconnection from the Earth; one is found in the arts and correlates with my practice-led research.

This doctoral study of sensate experiences of materiality and haptic thinking, which provide both maker and audience with direct palpable experience of time, forms a specific understanding of touching impermanence. My art processes involve working with tactile materials such as beeswax; tree branches, stumps and bark; paper; ash; rocks; ice; snow; charcoal; light and fungi. Engaging with these materials co-creatively involves a methodology of touch, multisensorily following materialities’ sentient matter-flow. Acting with the material, I am present to the material’s own sense of time, interactions, agency, histories, layers of interbeing and interconnections with surrounding matter. This requires being open to the mysteriousness of materials, inviting moments of enchantment within art encounters and the realisation of touching impermanence. This thesis investigates my studio practice and works produced, alongside related practices of Australian and international artists, by drawing on the intersections between New Materialism discourses and Buddhist philosophy to address aspects of phenomenology and eco-philosophy in the complexities of these art practices and artwork encounters.
Introduction

In certain art encounters the sensory experience of materials forms a compelling embodied connection to the immediacy of present time. I have termed this ‘touching impermanence’ as it is a powerful momentary experience of aliveness, a felt entanglement of attentive embodied engagements with surroundings experienced by both artists and audiences. This practice-led research investigates interconnections and layers of interbeing within materialities. By this I mean how we experience the vibrations of existence through touch and multisensory connections, particularly with nonhuman beings. My practice involves co-creating a sense of enchantment in the momentariness of present time, in sentient matter-flow. This thesis argues that matter is never still: it is always assembling and evolving into forms and organisms, cycling through decay and disintegration to reform again with diversity and difference. All particles vibrate, constantly moving within sentient matter-flows. Indeed my body, my self, is also vibrating with present time, constantly moving and unavoidably changing, breathing and interacting with my surroundings. These vibrations of sentient matter-flow can be attentively encountered in certain art works, through the materials, site, artist and audience: the work is co-created by all these components coalescing in present time. Indeed the art encounter always shifts and changes, despite our habitual assumptions that artwork should be fixed and permanent. My doctoral research investigates material and immaterial changeability via embodied encounters. This thesis articulates the importance of embracing the unknown so that the artwork itself provides new thinking though the world. Such ‘touching impermanence’ art encounters invite attentive interactions between vibrant materiality and our embodied sensory interconnections with present time.

Touching impermanence is an experiential contrast to the common anthropocentric feelings of disconnectedness: feeling detached from one’s surroundings, disappointed with and disengaged from one’s body, working against time, feeling quite disenchanted with living, with the world and the bleak expansive devastation of the Anthropocene. However there are compelling arguments that these notions of disconnection are caught up in one’s mind, in thinking structures that perpetuate worrying, analysing and rationalising life, rather than feeling oneself to be living within the entangled webbed interconnections of the Earth. If we practice engaging
with these lively interconnections more readily, our anthropocentric encounters with sentient matter-flow will also shift and change to felt connection, compassion, empathy and responsibility. Our assumed dualities of separation between mind and body, human and surroundings, science and spirit, are habitual cultural constructs that can be intentionally overcome by focused practice, as well as unintentionally ruptured by a brief momentary experience of enchantment, like a touching impermanence art encounter.

The discourses of New Materialism directly challenge human-centric omnipotent assumptions that justify exploitation of all nonhuman matter, things and organisms; instead they argue for new understandings of matter as having innate value, constantly changing and being vibrantly alive. Similarly Buddhist philosophies have long held that all matter is sentient, dynamic, impermanent and changing, so the actual reality of life and existence can be experientially met with only in the present moment. This intersection of Buddhist philosophies and New Materialism discourses is pivotal to my theoretical research. Drawing on these embodied understandings of liveliness, I reflect on art practices that follow material leads through sentient matter-flow and processes of co-creation. My focus on the tangibility of sensory art encounters with particular materials draws out and investigates the interconnected felt sense of being alive. The connective touch of these materials enchants me and propels my art processes, but what is it about this sense of touch that continues to intrigue and evade articulation? Although touch is immediate, ironically it is ungraspable, yet touch is the one sense that it is almost impossible to imagine living without. You can try to imagine what it is like to be blind or deaf: just close your eyes or block your ears. Perhaps it is not too difficult to imagine what it is like to be unable to smell or taste. But what would it be like not to be able to feel anything?

In asking myself that question I realised that someone very close to me had a personal lived experience of precisely this situation, of not being able to feel anything. In 2009, my father suffered a terminal accident; he fell and hit his head on a metal pillar, which broke his neck and irreparably damaged his spinal cord. Whilst my father was lying unconscious, my mother kept him alive with manual chest compressions and mouth-to-mouth until the ambulance arrived and rushed him to hospital. A few days later, when my father regained consciousness, he could not feel anything below his chin.
His broken vertebra and damaged spinal cord completely paralysed him, so he could not move his body at all. For the following three weeks he was kept alive in the intensive care unit, on a life support system with a ventilator that forced air into his lungs, so he could breathe. The movement of his lungs, as a doctor explained, repeatedly squeezed and released his heart, which kept it beating. This vital movement of air in and out of the human body became intensely, blatantly and obviously apparent to me. At that basic level the forced breathing was really the one thing that kept life going when all else had ceased.

Those three weeks were a torturous time for my family and me, being with him in this horrendous situation. But it was exceedingly more excruciating for my father, completely conscious and cognisant of his condition every waking moment. He could only speak a little when someone manipulated the tracheostomy tube in his throat. I remember him telling us he was having terrible headaches, and then a doctor quietly explained that was because his head was the only part of his body that he could feel. Able to communicate but otherwise utterly paralysed and incapacitated, it was my father’s decision to have his life support machine turned off.

To not be able to feel is to be barely alive.

Recalling what my father went through, I feel pain, deep sadness and profound grief. The loss of someone who is loved so much, who has been such a nurturing stable pillar of support and vivacity throughout my life was, and still is, difficult to comprehend. However, over time the experience of such loss can also translate into search for understanding. The empathetic extension of losing my father has, amongst other things, caused me to consider how it might have felt to be him, to be in that horrifying situation, trapped in a body that no longer moved, touched or functioned, which no longer felt anything. Honestly, I cannot really imagine it. My experience of life and existence is tied to my own body, as it is for everyone. I can stretch my empathetic imagination beyond my bodily bounds, but this always contracts back to my own body. My body is my anchor to life and my constant reference: it is my only real, experiential, source material for what life is. Gradually I have found that reflecting on my father’s final three weeks of life has compelled me to revaluate my own embodied existence through my art practice, and now more directly in this
written thesis, challenging me to more deeply understand how I experience the sense of touch connecting me to the world, to life and to the impermanence of existence.

There is a meditation practice of sitting with your eyes closed and focusing on being attentive to how your skin feels. Touching the floor, its texture, feeling gravity and the weight of the parts of your body making contact with the ground, allowing yourself to sink into it. Feeling the air on your skin, its temperature and sometimes the slight movement of a breeze or draught. Noticing the sensation of your clothing on your skin: fine or coarse, smooth or rough, loose or tight around your body. This awareness can extend to the hairs on your head, the heaviness of your eyes, the tension or relaxation of your muscles, your posture. As you feel the air moving gently in and out of your lungs with every breath, you begin to feel present within your body and your surrounds, focused on this immediate moment of your existence and the world around you.

One aspect of this meditation method that particularly stays with me afterwards is the sense of my skin as this permeable boundary, where my self meets and interacts with the world constantly. Being attentive to how the air feels on my skin, how it moves from external to internal as I breathe it in through my nose, sensing its temperature, humidity and movement, and back out again. How the textures of the floor feel under my feet, whether barefoot or not. The textures and constraints of my clothing against my skin, whether my clothing is warm enough – or too warm – even sweaty. Sometimes I think about how my skin feels in contact with the world when I’m swimming – focusing on feeling how the water moves against my body – or when I’m cycling, feeling the air rushing past. Being attentive to how one’s skin feels as it is constantly in touch with one’s surroundings can be a profound articulation of being alive, which can open up an alternative sense of self, running contrary to the usual ideas about body image and appearance, particularly the habits of body-shaming with which we usually judge our own and other human bodies in the world. Perhaps such notions of constantly touching our surroundings, being in touch with them and being held by them, can add a nurturing aspect to one’s thinking about one’s body, and to one’s personal embodied experience and being in the world.
The embodied experiences of certain art encounters engage a similar sense of sensory reconnection, combining exhilarating immediacy and deeply profound felt correlation within existence. Such art encounters have been described as ‘a calculated trap for meditation’.\(^1\) This mindful attentiveness to interconnection is essential to my methodologies of working with tactile materials such as beeswax; tree branches, stumps and bark; paper; ash; rocks; ice; snow; charcoal; light and fungi. Engaging \emph{with} these materials, beyond just what I can \emph{do} with them, allows my practice to follow the material’s sentient matter-flow. The material leads the process and consequently I act with the material. To follow the material’s lead is to engage with the material’s own sense of time, which I experience as its growth, decay, melting, solidification, fading and illumination. These materials have their own interactions and connections to surrounding matter, and their own histories. Perhaps my encounters with these materials are fairly slight when compared to their extensiveness in the world, but that increases their allure. To a large degree they remain unknown to me, which in turn invites further meaning, engagement and reflection. To work with these materials is to co-create an art encounter, one that is specific to a particular time and place.

The other artworks and art practices included in this research similarly evoke a sensory experience of being, of a tangible encounter with materiality focused on the interconnective particularity of a present moment. Numerous art practices and artworks could potentially be included here to address the notion of touching impermanence. However, I have selected artworks with which I feel embodied material connections; indeed most were encountered in person so the sensate experience of the work is personally articulated. They include: Hannah Bertram’s sifted dust; Nicholas Folland’s ice chandeliers; Wolfgang Laib’s immersive beeswax and pollen; Olafur Eliasson’s melting icebergs; Jamie North’s growing plants; Nicole Foreshew’s conjuring mineral sticks; Zhang Huan’s monumental ash; and Rei Naito’s trickles of water. Much of my experiential understanding of these works has been first hand. Embodied and localised in a specific place and time, the situated knowledge of such art encounters differs from theoretical knowledge and from the idealised

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objectivity aspired to by scientific knowledge in the clinical sterile enclosure of a laboratory.

Situated knowledge also implies a shared assemblage of encounters with other beings, human and nonhuman, in a specific time and place. The emphasis on *place* rather than *space* is important, as there are no spaces without history; all spaces are located in specific places. This is especially pertinent here in Australia, where it is customary to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander connection to, and custodianship of, Country. The richness and depth of ongoing and historical human interaction with the land is conveyed by the notion of Country: it is the deep reciprocal relationship of Aboriginal ancient cultural heritage of place. This legacy of human cultural embeddedness in place is important to my understanding of touching impermanence. However I do not wish to exacerbate cultural appropriation, but rather, where possible, seek to learn more about Aboriginal philosophies, stories, songlines and cultural practices of the specific places and sites that I visit and work within. This is an important component of the assertion that art is *experience*: it is an active, involved, embodied, place and time specific process that invokes an embodied subjectivity and creates situated knowledge.

Situating my research in this context also involves acknowledging that across Australia our history of colonial genocide and continuing disenfranchisement of Aboriginal people is often avoided in political, social and economic forums. Bundjalung and Muruwari artist and professor Brian Martin writes about the ‘tranquilization’ and perpetuating ‘amnesia’ of Western culture that is ‘complacent and apathetic about its own surroundings’. Martin argues for further recognition of the ‘dynamic ontology that exists within Indigenous cultural ideology where this reciprocity is grounded in Country’. He is part of the increasing scholarship by Australian academics, artists, writers and curators collaboratively working on this extensive project of listening to and incorporating Aboriginal knowledge into current

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3 There is no empty ‘space’ in Australia, or indeed anywhere in the world; there never was. Australia was never *terra nullius*, an insulting and entirely false colonial preconception. Australia always was and always will be Aboriginal land.
5 Ibid.
discourses, which goes well beyond anthropologic histories.\(^6\) Engaging with this deep experiential knowingness and heritage is a vital part of a number of contemporary academic discourses, including the New Materialisms. Pursuing New Materialisms through the arts, Melbourne professors Barbara Bolt and Estelle Barrett have worked with Brian Martin and others to include First Nations’ cultural knowledge in their projects of rethinking the relationships between and within humans and the world through the arts’ transformative knowledge.\(^7\) As such Bolt and Barrett are leading Australian researchers in focusing on art practice as central to the global discourses of New Materialism.

New Materialism is an interdisciplinary emerging trend in the 21st century that works across the fields of philosophy, cultural theory, feminism, science studies and the arts. The common aim of these discourses is to shift our accustomed human perceptions of matter as mute and passive – existing primarily for humans to dominate and exploit – to matter existing in its own right, with its own histories, stories. This shift in thinking is also called the ‘material turn’, and it extends across both the sciences and the humanities, to embrace philosophy, quantum physics, biology, geology, sociology, feminist theories, anthropology, archaeology and cultural studies. The New Materialisms are forming an ‘emerging paradigm that elicits not only new nonanthropocentric approaches but also possible ways to analyse language and reality, human and nonhuman life, mind and matter’.\(^8\)

New Materialisms, in the plural, cast a wide net linking material feminism, posthumanism, material eco-criticism, neo-materialism, eco-materialism, postmodern materialism, eco-feminism, vital materialism, green materialism, enchanted materialism, object-oriented ontology and speculative realism.\(^9\) Each has its own dense emphasis and complex, often discipline-specific distinctions, theoretical positions and approaches, with a number of paradoxes. For the purposes of my research, the literature reviewed throughout the thesis articulates a broad sense of how the New Materialisms can inform understandings of art practices and the

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\(^6\) Other scholars working in this area include Kate Rigby, Stephen Muecke, Freya Mathews, Stephen Gilchrist, Tony Swain, Victoria Grieves, Hetti Perkins and Deborah Bird Rose.


interconnected experience of touching impermanence. The New Materialisms challenge the anthropocentric framework of human-centric thinking that sees humans as the most important beings in existence, and certain humans as having more value than others. Disputing such hierarchical structures involves re-examining how we, in our human bodies, experience interconnections and embodiment, whilst also thinking beyond the human. Thus the New Materialisms build on feminism and postmodernism’s questioning of assumed binaries separating female and male, as well as mind and body, culture and nature, human and nonhuman, time and space. Such stubborn ideological separations of dualities interpret all matter as base, passive and existing just for human exploitation.

These dualities underpin the Western canon and can be traced back to Aristotle and Plato’s separation of hierarchical categories, which shaped the Abrahamic faiths and subsequently Christian theologies. This was then compounded into a mechanical understanding of existence in philosophy by René Descartes in the seventeenth century and Isaac Newton’s science into the eighteenth century. Often termed Cartesian thinking, this sceptical rationalism has left us with ‘a notion of matter as passive and inert, while the human mind was seen as active and creative. Matter and mind belonged to separate realms … [placing] a seemingly irretrievable wedge between the material world and the human mind’. This has caused understandings of matter to be limited to ‘a mere surface without power or potential; all qualities and ideas about it had to be located in the thinking subject’.

Descartes’ fundamental dividing of the human thinking subject saw humans as separate and superior to their surroundings. His view of matter as inanimate and completely separate from the lively intelligence of humans formed a mechanical conception of nature, wherein all existence could potentially be measured, quantified, fixed, dominated and known. In this structure the mysterious and unknown was of little value as it would eventually be analysed, rationalised and conquered. Although such confidence in human omnipotence accelerated the advancement of science and

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10 Anthropocentrism is the ‘belief that humans enjoy special, central, even cosmic significance, [it] is present in everyday thought as an attitude toward other animals and the environment generally, and in religion as the Biblical teaching that humans alone were made in the image of God.’ Parayot Butechvarov, *Anthropocentrism in Philosophy: Realism, Antirealism, Semirealism* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 1.


12 Ibid.
technology, it intensified a sense of human disconnection from the world. Ecological physicist Fritjof Capra argues that the loss of religion and spirituality in the Western paradigm has caused a profound and resounding sense of detachment. ‘The notion of an organic, living and spiritual universe was replaced by that of the world as a machine, and the world-machine became the dominant metaphor of the modern era until the late twentieth century when it began to be replaced by the metaphor of the network’.13 This alienating fact-driven mechanistic worldview continues to be extensively destructive across philosophical, social, political, economic and cultural frameworks, ignoring nonlinear interconnections, sensory nuances, mysterious aesthetics, ethical feelings and other essential elements of life.

These dominating Anglo-European structural dualisms spread globally with colonisation, escalating to the point where avaricious rationalism has become the foundation of what is generally termed the Western paradigm. However, our economically driven global culture of consumption can no longer be validly characterised as Western.14 Today, these assumptions of fact-driven rationalism dominate global economics and continue to support exploitation ‘rights’, which are extensively used to justify the capitalist destructive ways that humans live within the world today. The extent to which humans have altered the Earth has lead geologists to introduce a new stratigraphic epoch, the Anthropocene, an official span of geologic time. This concept of the Anthropocene is perhaps ‘the most earth-shaking idea to emerge in the 21st century: that we are entering a new phase in the history of the planet’.15 The term Anthropocene (‘Anthropo’ means human influenced) attests to the ‘overwhelming global evidence that atmospheric, geologic, hydrologic, biospheric and other Earth system processes are now altered by humans’.16 The Anthropocene also frames our contemporary cultural and social identities, as an alternative term to post post-modernism. Understanding that we are living enmeshed within the Anthropocene locates our contemporary existence in place and time.

The term Anthropocene is used seriously and extensively in the New Materialisms to imply how our human activities are damaging and rapidly destroying many of the Earth’s ecosystems. Situating these trends in the Anthropocene propels a sense of urgency in responding to climate change. By decentring the primacy of the human, and reworking understandings of relations into tangled webs rather than stable linear hierarchies, the New Materialisms seek to explore the complex, entangled and interconnected processes of agency in materialities, which are always already occurring regardless of human involvement.

These methods of rethinking matter as process rather than stable object redress dualism and draw on the postmodern feminist argument that it is ‘imperative not to move from one side of the dichotomy to the other, to reverse the privileging of concepts, but to deconstruct the dichotomy itself, to move to an understanding that does not rest on oppositions.’

By attending to differences of gender, the body and diversities of embodied experience, feminism questions abstract universal categories that displace and ignore the specifics of individual knowledge, situation and experience. This expands into wider discourses about how we experience the world through our senses and bodily experiences, drawing on phenomenology, specifically the work of mid twentieth-century French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. However because phenomenology privileges the first-person point of view, it is entirely human centric. Hence phenomenological empirical knowledge alone is insufficient to understand how humans are inextricably embedded within the world, and how the world is interconnected with them. Acknowledging that there is always more to the realities of existence than what we can account for through our own embodied experiences of the world, the New Materialisms counter the dominant strains of twentieth century phenomenology by asserting ‘a radical and imaginative realism that not only claims that things do exist beyond the purview of human conception, but that this existence is … almost entirely inaccessible to our understanding.’ This inaccessibility is paramount to addressing how we encounter and engage with the unknown, which

17 Stacy Alaimo and Susan J. Hekman, Material Feminisms (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 2.
remains mysterious and generative, and central to my understanding of touching impermanence.

The state of unknowing is embraced in Buddhism, as an intellectual openness pivotal to meditation and mindfully meeting with each moment of present time without judgement, expectation or preconceptions. As such, time is impermanence: it is constant change vibrating in all things. We can only experience time and existence in the immediate present moment; even when we think about the past or the future, we are in the present. Although there are many doctrines and various ritualised practices of Buddhism throughout the world, the emphasis on impermanence, interconnection and compassion is the essence of all Buddhist philosophies. These understandings share many commonalities with the New Materialisms’ vibrancy of matter and our human reality of embodiment, understanding how humans and all matter are inextricably entangled within the existence of the world. Buddhism is practice rather than theology, a holistic realising or awakening, where the body-mind-spirit is apprehended together with the world, interconnected with all of existence in the present moment. Buddhism can be explained as an ongoing process of transcending and reconciling the dualities of our thinking structures, as both seemingly simple and infinitely complex. Buddhism is full of paradoxes, challenging one to find and balance the middle way. Emphasising practice rather than theory, Buddhism is an active embodied way of being that realises non-hierarchical connections between one and others, both human and nonhuman, within time, place and all of existence.

My interest in Buddhist practices and philosophies has grown concurrently with the development of my art practice and academic studies, from my 2001 honours research into the influence of traditional monotone Chinese landscape and Japanese ensō and flung ink painting on contemporary painters, to my 2008 Masters dissertation about entanglements of interconnections, threads and narratives in contemporary art practice. Buddhism is sometimes called a process of realisation or a mode of thinking that gives rise to a certain way of acting, rather than a religion. There are patterns and methodologies in my art practice emphasising focus, repetition, patience, the present

19 Buddhism is often interpreted more as a philosophy rather than a religion because of its emphasis on the practitioner watching the mind and being connected with the world, rather than praying to a deity. See Greta Gaard, "Mindful New Materialisms: Buddhist Roots for Material Eccocriticism’s Flourishing," in Material Eccocriticism, ed. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomingston, Indiana Indiana University Press., 2014), 291.
moment and embodied sensory attentiveness, which draw from and resonate with these Buddhist traditions. Indeed, the principal Buddhist understandings of interconnection, impermanence, sentience, empathy and compassion are also fundamental to my life. This manifests in my art practice as felt interconnections with my surroundings, through specific engagement with materials that unfold and present their own stories.

Buddhism began in India 2,500 years ago, then spread to China, Japan, Korea and South East Asia. Today it remains the dominant religion in these regions. However, today China is a focal point of the Anthropocene, with consumption, destruction and pollution rampant and accelerating. Disconnection seems to be keenly felt by many people in China, and traditional values of Buddhism are mostly sidelined, as are most other religious principles of compassion and understandings of spirituality in the Anthropocene globally. Yet in these times of ecological crisis it is perhaps becoming increasingly easier and more obvious ‘to join the dots and see that everything is interconnected … the more we consider it, the more our world opens up’.20 More social and cultural practices are incorporating participatory sentient matter-flows and engaged understandings of ecologies.

My literature review of Buddhist philosophies and New Materialisms’ pertinent discourses is interwoven throughout this thesis, from the perspective of my time and place in Australia, within the Anthropocene. My doctoral research traces an account of touching impermanence through my developing understandings of the importance of art practice, as actual, intra-active, co-creative and multi-sensual engagements with materialities. As such I do not attempt to fully encompass all the diverse tangents of the New Materialisms, Buddhism, Aboriginal cosmologies or the Anthropocene. Indeed, my practice-led research begins with and consistently returns to making, haptic thinking with materiality. Hence the written thesis also emphasises the art encounter, specifically those moments in the making and experiencing of art when touching impermanence occurs.

My discussion of touching impermanence begins by drawing on a historical framework of art practices that directly address the specifics and changeability of matter, with processes and understandings that follow material leads. The inherently active nature of materials is expressed as ‘matter-flow’, a New Materialist term recently coined by Tim Ingold, ecological anthropologist and material-culture professor, to emphasize the aliveness and agency of matter-flow. I have added the descriptor of sentience, which also implies a sense of empathy, compassion and intimacy. Chapter one follows this understanding of sentient matter-flow in the way that some artists work with the complicity and collaboration with materials.

Historically this is traced through the Scholar Rocks of China and ‘naked stones’ of Japanese dry landscape gardens, kare-sansui. These material understandings later influenced the Mono-ha movement, following Japan’s tumultuous political, social and economic recovery post WWII. One of the central figures of Mono-ha was Korean-Japanese artist Lee Ufan, who today continues to work with rocks to focus matter-flow vibrational artwork encounters. Such material led practices contrast with historical European art traditions of depicting the world as a mirror reflecting the human condition, where matter was consigned to a mute substrate upon which anthropocentric narratives were told. In the 1960s these paradigms were definitively challenged with the development of Arte Povera in Italy, emphasizing the instability of matter and the history within materials, such as Giuseppe Penone’s sculptures excavating the core growth patterns of tree trunks. At the same time, in USA and Britain, artists were exploring how they could inhabit nature within the landscape by creating site-specific structures, Earthworks and art demarcations, in what came to be known as the Land Art movement. Nancy Holt was one of these pioneering artists, working with simplified industrially produced cylindrical forms placed into the landscape to frame and direct one’s experience of natural light.

These 1960s art movements, with their emphasis on the lively changeable characteristics of materials that belong to or originate from a specific site, have been fundamental to the development of Bio Art and Eco Art practices today. Bio Art involves working with biology, often wet-bench laboratory biotechnologies, to explore the porous boundaries of what life is. These shifting, complicated ethical challenges to determining how human life, sentience and life at large are valued do not always remain compassionate and equable. Buddhism teaches that we should be
wary of the dominating ‘mind of discrimination’ in such power-structured situations of manipulation and control. However, the sentient matter-flows explored in biotechnologies can also take us away from our cognitive structures into our internal bodies, like Belgian artist Wim Delvoye’s *Cloaca* installations that mimic a precisely controlled human digestive system. From the personal to the global, the scale of human consumption and excretion in the Anthropocene is vastly industrial and wide reaching. Other artists working more broadly in relation to the Earth’s biosphere are concerned about human impact on both local and extensive ecologies: the term Eco Art links these practices. They aim to reconnect people emotionally, physically and responsively to our inextricable immersion in the fragile sentient matter-flows of our planet. Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson recently staged *Ice Watch* in November 2015 outside the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris. These melting icebergs demonstrate Eco Art’s ability to follow the sentient matter-flow in co-creating with materials, forming sensorial connections between people, their lives and the urgency of acting in response to the alarming escalation of climate change. The lineage of artists following material leads can be traced historically, but combining these understandings with Buddhist philosophies and New Materialism adds additional layers to our understanding of how certain contemporary art practices encourage embodied experiential understandings of humans within the world, in the sentient matter-flows of the Anthropocene.

To follow sentient matter-flow is to work co-creatively; Chapter two considers various perspectives of relationality and interbeing that contribute to these art processes, working with embodied interconnections of materials, time and place. Interbeing is a Buddhist term, recently coined by Buddhist monk and teacher Thích Nhất Hạnh to describe the complex interconnected entanglements of the human with our material surroundings. This way of understanding our bodies and our selves as assemblages of matter parallels the New Materialist term relationality. In art making practices that follow the sentient matter-flow, interbeing and relationality are integral to focused co-creative processes of materialising, where the artist plays an important part but is not necessarily in control or directing proceedings. Art historian, critic and curator Amelia Jones describes this as the performativity of hybrid contemporary art practices. Similarly the hybridity inherent in material assemblages is emphasised by New Materialism philosopher Jane Bennett’s political theory of vibrant matter. The
way that the relationality of vibrant matter and the artist co-emerge in art practice links Barbara Bolt’s material thinking with the agency implied by W J T Mitchell’s question, What do pictures want?. Tim Ingold locates the relational dynamism of art making in the term ‘meshwork’, uniting phenomenology with ecological understandings, suggesting that co-creation is a ‘dance of animacy’. The kinaesthetic implications of dancing are brought back into theorising visual art with Christopher Tilley’s post-processual archaeological scholarship that considers how the human body engages and moves kinaesthetically within the site of the artwork. Such movements respond receptively to encounters with the unknown and unexpected. Indeed the state of not knowing is integral to co-creation and to following sentient matter-flow, which is otherwise utterly undermined if the artist, or viewer, is too fixed on a predetermined outcome. Curator and arts writer Elizabeth Fisher articulates how this state of not knowing is vitally important to artists’ haptic thinking. Art critic Carole Becker emphasises the significance of artists remaining open minded, which she links to Buddhist meditation practices.

In my own co-creative art practice, the layers of interbeing that co-emerge through my extensive work with beeswax conjure embodied experiences of sentient matter-flow and my fascination with touching impermanence. The central installation series of my doctoral research is the beeswax and ash installation series Divest (2014-2017), where hundreds of handmade polyp-like funnels are used repeatedly to form sensory, kinaesthetic and site-responsive art encounters. Working with beeswax has driven my curiosity about bees and beekeeping practices, raising questions about historical human co-evolution and interbeing with bees, and our contemporary interdependence with these little insects that form super-organisms. One of the crises of the Anthropocene is Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD), a complex global epidemic amongst domesticated honeybees, Apis mellifera. CCD is another indicator that humans feel disconnected from the layers of interbeing and meshwork of the Earth’s bio-diversity. German artist Wolfgang Laib invites audiences to experience the possibilities of reconnecting to sentient matter-flow through his sensory installations of beeswax chambers and pollen fields. Another response to CCD is the rising interest in api-centric beekeeping practices. Deliberately not human-centric, this multisensory methodology puts the interests of the honeybee colony before those of the beekeeper.
Material multisensory methodologies are further explored in Chapter three, focusing specifically on the multifaceted sense of touch. The sense of touch is at the core of sentience, evolution and mind body connections. Sociology theorists Constant Classen and Mark Paterson argue that touch has been largely under researched, yet is the ‘hungriest sense of post-modernity’. As such, we need to reconnect with our sensory engagement with the world, with touch particularly, to address the challenges of Anthropocene. The association of vision with knowledge has a long tradition in Western philosophy, and our reliance on the assumed objectiveness of sight results in us largely distrusting our other senses. However touch is the most fundamental sense to which all the other senses relate: the external exteroceptive senses (sight, sound, smell, taste) and the internal introceptive senses that can be difficult to articulate or analyse with precision. Indeed, touch reaches beyond surface associations by involving kinaesthetic, multisensory and haptic thinking.

The study of phenomenology was developed during the last century, asserting the foundational role of human senses in engaging with the world and forming our understanding of it. Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty argued that the senses work together in ‘synergic totality’, forming an ‘intentional arc’ uniting the body and mind with one’s experience in the world. However, twentieth century phenomenology is inescapably human-centric; it does not attribute value to materiality and sentient matter-flow. To expand phenomenological theories, by acknowledging things’ intentionality and human receptivity, is to incorporate the interconnections of experiential touch, as nondual, into a wider co-creative felt phenomenology. Nonduality is a fundamental concept in Buddhism, which understands subject and object as interconnected and enmeshed within webs of interbeing. The nondual reciprocity of touch is constantly vibrating in the meshwork of existence. Art historian Paul Crowther describes this as ‘ontological reciprocity’, an aesthetic art engagement, which I incorporate into my understanding of the co-creative reciprocal dynamics of art making that follows sentient matter-flows.

Cultural political philosopher, dancer and interdisciplinary artist Erin Manning articulates touch as enacting ‘reaching towards’ in a posthuman context, stressing its political agency as active and lively. Rather than the term posthuman, I adopt cultural ecologist David Abram’s phrase ‘more-than-human’, incorporating the direct
sensuous reality of the more-than-human into these generative understandings of co-creating with the sentient matter-flow of the world. Similarly, art historian Amanda Boetzkes emphasises touch as a movement of thinking integral to how artists work with the Earth. These understandings of touch as a nondual connective force are discussed in relation to Ana Mendieta’s snow *Siluetas* (1977), which palpably conjure multisensory encounters. Similarly a nuanced sense of thermoception is felt in my co-creative ephemeral Finnish snow artworks *Embrace (burrow)* (2015) and *Beguile* (2015) and my work with ice and icicles *Handheld Melting* (2016). Art encounters with melting ice and snow form a felt present time experience, and invariably reference climate change concerns, as in Nicolas Folland’s icy frozen chandelier, *The door was open...* (2006).

Touch is an immediate impermanent sensation, a present time experience. Chapter four examines how impermanence is present time; this locates all our experiences of reality as only occurring in the present moment. In thirteenth century Japan, the Buddhist monk and philosopher Dōgen, taught extensively about impermanence. My felt understanding of impermanence as the vibration of present time in sentient matter-flow draws on explanations of Dōgen’s teachings by American philosopher Joan Stambaugh. In contrast to the Abrahamic religions, where one strives to attain eternal life in heaven beyond this world, in Buddhism eternity is right now and in this moment; it is not elsewhere as there is not anything outside of existence. This is pertinent to the concept of nonduality, as time has no inside or outside. There is not even a past or future, only the interconnectedness of the present impermanent moment experienced through one’s lived body. To encounter reality as it actually is in the present moment is to experience the Suchness of existence. Indeed, touching impermanence in an art encounter is an experience of Suchness, as one is being sensorily attentive and open to the interconnections of sentient matter-flow.

Being present with, and connected to, the movement and change of time is a central understanding in the practice of Chinese contemporary artist Zhang Huan, which can be traced from his earlier performance work to his recent monumental ash installations that are built to collapse. Similarly Australian artist Hannah Bertram co-creates meticulous performative installations of stencilled dust patterns, which are then swept up, erased or otherwise destroyed, engaging with the cyclic continuances
of sentient matter-flow. The material instability, immediacy, layered interbeing and ephemerality of these art encounters invites a meeting with Suchness and the poetics of impermanence.

In the early twentieth century, philosophers Henri Bergson and Martin Heidegger began to articulate theories of time as waves of interpenetrating vibrations creating ceaseless multiplicity. However they both retained a notion of human-exclusiveness, disconnectedly observing the world’s sentient matter-flow, rather than existing and changing, interconnected within them. Neither could comprehend Suchness as an experiential embodied encounter, which must be realised beyond a theoretical surface. New Materialism’s emphasis on decentering the human importantly focuses the contemporary philosophies of Karen Barad’s intra-activity and Donna Haraway’s situated knowledge, locating human experience in place-time specific contexts within the vibrant matter of the world.

In Australia, a cosmological understanding of time is integral to the traditional philosophies of the Dreaming, which identifies the direct interconnectedness of present-time place-thought and ritual with the ancientness of Country, whereby the past is always present and the present is embodied in place. Nicole Foreshew, a Wiradjuri artist based in Sydney, works with materials from her sacred homelands, drawing on the material healing knowledge of her elders. Awareness of the present vibrancy of ancient Country informed my experience of sitting on a rocky cliff in Gundungurra and Dharug Country, in Bilpin, where I felt held by the quiet dynamics of the land and the poetically named ‘hanging swamps’. This sense of being present with the impermanence of time and ancientness of place was conjured in my installation Permeate (2015), as a sense of being within sentient matter-flow cycling through the rocks, plants, bees and humans. Another of my experiences in 2015 also involved being held by Country, captivated physically as well as attentively, at Lake Mungo – rained in and held still by the unusually flooded dry inland lake area of sacred Paakantji, Ngyiampaa and Mutthi Mutthi Country.

Being momentarily transfixed when encountering the compelling sense of vibrating present time in one’s surroundings is to be enchanted by sentient matter-flow. Chapter five considers how understandings of enchantment are positioned within the vitality
of matter in New Materialisms’ discourses, historically relating to the passionate ‘return to nature’ of Romanticism and the persistent disenchantment of modernity. Jane Bennett locates contemporary enchantment as arising from new understandings in science and technology combined with experiences within nature. As such, nature is the generative multiplicity of sentient matter-flow occurring everyday in everything, not the romanticised ideal of nature as untouched wilderness existing elsewhere. Indeed Bennett describes these encounters as ‘enchanted crossings’, involving sensory awareness of the various manifestations of nature as more-than-human conjunctions. This echoes Dōgen’s teaching about the sacred in the mundane, encountering moments of enchantment in the everyday, with the poetic immediacy, impermanence and brevity of a haiku.

Other poetic descriptions of enchantment include Henry Thoreau’s transcendentalist fascination with the phenomena of nocturnal corn growth. He also wrote about the enchantment of falling into rhythm with the Earth. This method of listening to the land resonates with Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann’s explanations of *dadirri*, the experience of wonder and enchantment felt when one is sitting quietly within Country. The ancestral vibrational presence of First Nation place-thought likewise informs Adrian Heathfield’s curatorial understandings of ‘spirited affinities’ as enchanted interconnections with sentient matter-flow. Feeling these interconnections by connecting to the Earth under our feet can become a focused enchanted crossing with each step. Thích Nhất Hạnh has made walking meditation, *kinhin*, a central part of his practice and teaching, as such mindful embodied attentiveness to walking can conjure a sense of enchantment, whether walking a focused short distance or making a dedicated pilgrimage.

Walking and breathing within Rei Naito’s *Matrix* (2010) installation was a profound touching impermanence art encounter, within a spellbinding crossing of sentient matter-flow. Also working with water and light, I co-creatively grew intriguingly shaped oyster mushrooms in *Within and without* (2016). This multisensory work conjured the mysterious relationship between fungi and honeybees. Australian artist, Jamie North also researches bio-diversity to create growing and eroding botanical edifices. His interest in the resilience of certain plant species resonates with my fascination with forest narratives. Such story telling traditions informed my birch bark
installation *Threshold* (2015) as a poetic portal of time-place understandings. Trees are integral to global atmospheric matter-flow: my paper-bark installation *Arboreal brace* (2016) invoked these understanding of forests breathing with interbeing and thus supporting all life within the Earth’s biosphere. The mindful, meditative practice of breathing with the Earth is an attentive process of letting go with each exhalation; this was reflected in my charcoal and beeswax on paper works *Exhale i-ii* (2016). The letting go of aspirations to control invites enchanted receptivity and reciprocal engagement with sentient matter-flow. Breathing with and being attentive to our surroundings is co-creative, and in an art encounter it enables touching impermanence.
Chapter One

Following sentient matter-flow
Our understandings of ourselves as humans enmeshed within the materialities of the world have been explored and expressed through art since ancient times. As such, art traces the history of human existence within the Earth’s cycles, sentience and matter-flows. In China and Japan, there is an ancient sculptural tradition of seeking nuanced understandings of the world’s agency conveyed in matter itself, and humanity’s humble place within these vast interconnections. Following the material’s lead, such sculptors explored the materiality of stone and rock, to reverently reveal its inner essence. In Europe the Greco-Roman art tradition was substantially different, predominantly used to depict the world as a mirror reflecting the human condition, rather than allowing materiality to speak for itself. The most substantial shift away from this practice of imposing a separate human-centric narrative onto matter occurred in the 1960s with Arte Povera in Italy and American-British Earthworks. At the same time in Japan there was a ‘raw material as art’ revival with Mono-ha. These art movements have influenced numerous contemporary ephemeral, site-responsive, Bio Art and Eco Art practices today. This consideration of various art movements that engage with the vitality of materials asserts that such art practices are experiential conduits of New Materialism’s re-valuing of materials and re-thinking of how we understand humans within the world, in the sentient matter-flows of the Anthropocene.

The term ‘matter-flow’ draws on the contemporary writing of British ecological anthropologist and material-culture scholar Tim Ingold. He argues for an emphasis on making as engaging with interactive material processes to experientially understand how humans, together with other organisms and things, are bound in both relational networks and webs of life.1 Matter-flow is how materiality always occurs in processes of flow and transformation, so art making that follows the matter-flow focuses on the ‘active materials that compose the lifeworld’.2 These processes of gathering materials in movement are ‘a particular knotting together of the matter-flow … to bring the movements of our own being into close correspondence with those of its constituent materials.’3 Ingold articulates the artist’s ability to follow the materials – to be part of the matter-flow – as a distinct ‘change of focus, away from the ‘objectness’ of things,
to the material flows and formative processes wherein they come into being.\textsuperscript{4} As such all art making processes that evolve through this matter-flow are sentient processes of growth. Ingold asserts that since matter is always in movement, in flux and variation, for artists to work with matter-flow means that materials can only be followed. Indeed, artists ‘who follow the flow are, in effect, itinerants, guided by intuition in action.’\textsuperscript{5} My addition of the term sentience to Ingold’s expression of matter-flow emphasises the aliveness and agency of materials always interacting with each other. This descriptor of sentience also implies a sense of empathy, compassion and intimacy. Humans are bound within the matter-flows of the Earth’s biosphere; we are always complicit with the cyclic vitalities of life in which we are immersed.

As an art making methodology of being guided by intuition and following the sentient matter-flow, this acknowledges that materials themselves are present: they exhibit themselves rather than representing something else. That is to say the materials in these art processes are not used as taciturn substrates fashioned to mirror abstract human ideas or unrelated objects. Nor are they overlooked as merely a base counterpart to artistic creativity that has to be transcended or transformed by the artist, but instead as sentient matter-flows between materials and artist that evolve into collaborations. Petra Lange-Berndt, an art historian working within the New Materialisms, proposes such a methodology of material collaboration in pursuing complicity with materials. ‘The path one takes when following the materials is thus not linear, not clearly divisible … rather, one encounters entangled, anarchistic layers, incorporating references that point beyond canonical art-historical boundaries.’\textsuperscript{6} To be complicit with the material and follow the sentient matter-flow is to acknowledge the nonhuman. Thus the materials become ‘wilful actors and agents within artistic processes and enmesh their audience in a network of connections … materials obstruct, disrupt or interfere with social norms, allowing for repressed, messy or unstable substances and impure formations to surface.’\textsuperscript{7} This complicity with materials and following the matter-flow is thus dynamic and often unpredictable, but it is not necessarily new.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 431.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 433. Here Ingold references Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, \textit{A Thousand Plateaus.}, trans. Brian Massumi. (London: Continuum, 2004), 451-52
\textsuperscript{6} Petra Lange-Berndt, \textit{Materiality} (London UK: Whitechapel Gallery, 2015), 13,16.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 18. .
The art process of following the material’s lead can be traced back to ancient times. One remarkable example is found in China with the tradition of Scholar Rocks (fig.1). These stones evidence a rich historical lineage of working with materials deferentially, just as they are, to tell their own stories. Scholar Rocks date back to the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220) and such artworks continue to be valued for their undulating, pitted surfaces, dramatic undercuts, hollows and perforations, reminiscent of mountain peaks, caves, blustering wind, flowing water and natural erosion. The organic forms conjured creative forces, qi, of nature.8 Humans are drawn to these stones and feel compelled to touch them, to follow the rock’s surfaces with their hands.9 A tactile conversation evolves as the human is seeking to understand the stone’s formation, history and narratives, and this contact embellishes and exaggerates the rock’s surface. Indeed, these human and nonhuman interactions follow and become sentient matter-flows that both change the stone, the artist and potentially the viewer.

(fig.1) Artist Unknown, White Taihu Rock, circa 12th Century.

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9 Although it is usually claimed that naturally formed Scholar Rocks unadulterated by human interference are the most valuable, there are very few Scholar Rocks in public or private collections today that have been unmodified by human hands.
Following the matter-flow, the artist carefully explores the rock’s naturally eroded surfaces, accentuating and embellishing them, thus evidencing these interactions of contact and human touch as a human search for connection to the dynamism of nature. Such processes of tactile human and stone engagements bring the material’s inner essence into dialogue with the artist and subsequent viewers. Scholar Rocks are meditations on how one is linked to the enormity of the universe from within a small space, the smallness of self and ego humbled by the vastness of existence. These stones invite the viewer to feel sentient interconnections with the wider world, with nature’s complexities, changeable dramas and vibrations of time.

In Japan, the use of ‘naked stones’ in Zen dry-landscape rock gardens, *kare-sansui*,¹⁰ is somewhat different, despite initially being influenced by the Chinese tradition of Scholar Rocks, which were introduced to Japan in the thirteenth century along with Buddhism. In contrast to the complex compositions of Chinese Scholar Rocks, the Japanese stones are ‘sober to the point of appearing almost banal … very different from Chinese rocks, with their convoluted shapes and tortuous reliefs, riddled with holes like pockmarked skin … If the Chinese showed a predilection for playing with stones, the Japanese preferred to read on the faces of rocks a more serious and austere expression.’¹¹ The serious austerity of these dry-landscape rock gardens is emblematic of the sentient simplicity at the core of Zen Buddhism.

The bare aesthetics of naked stones are pinnacles of Zen aesthetics, entwined with both Buddhist and Shinto traditions.¹² Zen aesthetics are ‘a matter of stripping nature of its skin, of removing from it everything that can be removed. By reducing to its smallest dimensions and bringing it back to its simplest expression, one can extract its essence … [to] provide an image of the universe in its most condensed form’.¹³ Zen dry rock gardens invite you, as a visitor, to follow the matter-flow by breathing with the rocks. The experiential encounter of being with a dry landscape garden is meditative; it can be best understood by experience. I was fortunate to visit a number

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¹¹ Ibid. 44,45
¹² Shinto is Japan’s Indigenous faith, a traditional ethical spirituality focusing on ritual practices honoring the sacred spirits (*Kami*) that reside in nature, specifically rocks, trees, mountains and waterfalls, with an deep understanding that people are not separate from the spirituality of nature but rather exist within the same world and share its interrelated complexity. Shinto traditions are practiced by some 80 percent of the Japanese people and are closely intertwined with Japanese Buddhism. Helen Hardacre, *Shinto* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
¹³ Parkes. 5,6
of Zen gardens in Kyoto, Japan in 2011 (fig.2). They were quietly moving, enchanting, meditative experiences. I felt the potential of inhaling and exhaling attentively in such a place to connect me with the flow and substance of these forms and materials, and the simplicity of being within that particular time and space, sharing that extended moment of one’s existence with a carefully constructed micro-universe. The meditative practice of focusing on your breathing, to cultivate receptivity, is central to Buddhism. There are four formal postures of meditating: sitting, standing, lying and walking. Informally, mindful breathing and receptivity are ideally cultivated in all activities, from sweeping to art making. The interconnected practices of meditation and mindful creativity are described by Brigid Lowry, Australian writer and Zen Buddhist thus: ‘practising the discipline of an art form to deepen one’s understanding the creative life itself is a spiritual practice.’

(fig.2) Ryōanji rock garden, Kyoto Japan, circa 15th Century.

In the 1960s there were a number of art movements, in different parts of the world, focusing on working with matter, following the matter-flow so the material is present as itself rather than representing something else. In Japan, Korean born artist Lee Ufan was one of the founders and theoretical leaders of the Mono-ha group. He describes how he works with rocks so that the rock presents as itself, allowing the artist and subsequent viewer gain a deeper understanding of the rock (fig.3). Lee explains that although the rock can be analysed scientifically, learning about the mineral elements of the rock remains a limited means of understanding. ‘Large expanses of time and space are condensed inside it. It is a solid mass but contains part

14 Brigid Lowry, Still Life with Teapot: On Zen, Writing and Creativity (Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 2016), 64.
of the universe as well as the atmosphere surrounding it. We may think we understand it but we really don't.'\textsuperscript{15} Lee studied both Eastern and Western philosophy, so he also explains this in relation to Immanuel Kant’s theory of ‘Ding an sich’, the thing in itself, which ‘does not mean the thing as it actually exists. It refers to an aspect of things that we can never know no matter how hard we try.’\textsuperscript{16} Such aspects of things that remain unknown to humans attribute a mysterious vitality to sentient matter-flow, an understanding central to Mono-ha.

Mono-ha is usually translated in a literal manner as ‘School of Things’; however, the ‘things’ are not the focus, rather the ‘encounter’ is.\textsuperscript{17} Thus the Mono-ha artists sought to deny the artist’s role as a ‘creator’, seeking to reveal the world ‘as it is’ through subtle interventions that explored the delicate interrelationships between humans, matter and space. In the context of Japan’s tumultuous political, social and economic recovery post war, the materials ‘spoke bluntly for themselves, evoking both the raw might of Japan’s industrial development … and the timeless immediacy of the here and now.’\textsuperscript{18} These artists looked to the essence of materiality, often through processes of reduction, stripping back and ‘not-making’.\textsuperscript{19} Mono-ha presented transient

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} “Mono-Ha: School of Things,” \textit{Tate: Art Terms} (2016), http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/m/mono-ha.
arrangements of raw, untreated natural and industrial materials, which were often laid directly on the floor, interacting with the existing architectural gallery space, or in an outdoor area. The intention of these practices was not a ritualistic honoring of the spiritualism of nature in the Shinto sense, or an attempt to define nationalistic Japanese uniqueness, but rather a gesture that connected to a felt internal emotional response to current social and economic events. The artists described their practices as material discussions that ‘provoked affective sensations arising from encounters with matter, which they expressed through colloquial words such as dokitto (heartstopping), zokutto (spine-chilling), or shibireru (thrilling), indicating a charged discovery and engagement."

One of the key concepts in Lee's work is contact, how our bodies are in contact with space and time: his works are about such encounters. Utilising what he finds in his surroundings, Lee holds a dialogue, a conversational matter-flow, with the environment that reverberates in the large empty space of the gallery, so the work has a sentience that connects to the space, and this combination sends out powerful vibrations. ‘The atmosphere or space containing these vibrations interacts with other things and they all resonate with each other … as you stand in front of it you notice your own breath and become aware of breathing and interacting with the world round you. What my art does is place the viewer at this starting point of experience.’ As such, the Mono-ha art encounters were attuned to matter-flow, the agency of materials within place and nonhuman interactions with the human. The Japanese cultural tradition of valuing materiality’s ‘communicative function of its own beyond what can be translated with words … has contributed to an aesthetic upgrading of material in Europe and North American culture as well.’

This aesthetic upgrading of attributing agency to materials also occurred in Europe and North America in the 1960s. Emphasizing sentient matter-flow contradicts European-Anglo-American historical norms, whereby art hinged on representation, and passive materials were formed and inscribed by the artist to represent a story, person, occasion or place. Materials were treated as utterly mute, base matter upon

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20 Such materials include canvas, charcoal, cotton, dirt, Japanese paper, oil, rope, stones, wooden logs, glass panes, electric bulbs, plastic, rubber, steel plates, synthetic cushions, and wire.
22 Blackwood.
which human narratives were told, so most understandings of matter-flow in art making was entirely anthropocentric; it only occurred because the artist, or God, caused it. However, mid last century these dominant artistic processes involving the ways artists worked with matter and thought about materiality began to shift with experimental and extreme material-focused art projects. The 1960s were a time of change and alternative thinking, not just in Japan but also globally. In Italy, a group of artists began similarly focusing on material presence and human interaction with it, that is to say the matter-flow of art making processes. This group of artists came to be known as Arte Povera. Their practices were a pointed reaction against modernist abstract painting of the 1950s, the consumption and commodification of art and the commercialised gallery system. They created sculptures and assemblages that were unapologetically physically unstable.

Arte Povera translates as ‘poor art’; however these practices were much more complex than this simple label implies, as these artists’ processes focused on change and ‘the flow of primary energy.’ Arte Povera aesthetics were ‘grounded in the belief that the phenomenology of experience (the ‘here and now’) and situations of process are at the basics of art’s vitality … each artwork is specific to every moment, yet timeless and changing as well.’ Experimenting with unconventional processes and non-traditional ‘everyday’ materials, such as soil, rags and twigs, these artists questioned, problematised and challenged modernist enthusiasm for technology, in stark contrast to the early century pro-war Futurists, and as a contemporary rejection of American Minimalism. The sentient matter-flow of Arte Povera was distinctly Italian in its poetic evocations of the past, locality and memory.

One of the youngest members of the Arte Povera movement was Giuseppe Penone. Working with an array of materials including clay, wood, stone, metal, plaster, resin, and acacia thorns, he continues to explore intimate, sensate and metaphysical connections with nature. Penone is considered the most hands-on sculptor of his generation; ‘given the opportunity he would alter the Cartesian ontology to “I touch,'

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25 Ibid.
therefore I am”.27 Penone’s fifty years of practice revolve around the notion of sculpture leading humans back to matter, to nature. He says that he aims to reflect ‘the relationship between myself and things to be equal’.28 Penone is best known for his tree sculptures, carving large tree trunks along their growth patterns towards the core, to reveal the sapling that the tree once was (fig.4). This process involves ‘connecting the creative forces of the artist with those of nature and underlining the intimate, complex connection between humans and the world we inhabit.’29 His work continues to investigate sentient matter-flow through the specific existence of an individual life form, like a tree, whilst also conjuring a generative, enchanted paradoxical sense of timelessness and constant change, the vitality that inhabits all natural life forms.

(fig.4) Giuseppe Penone, *Albero Porta-Cedro (Door Tree-Cedar)*, 2012.

Notions of inhabiting nature, within the landscape, underpinned the 1960s Land Art movement in America and Britain. Focusing on working within natural and often

28 Ibid.
un hospitable environments, like deserts or salt lakes, these artists created site-specific structures, Earthworks and art demarcations. The inaccessibility and sheer scale of many Earthworks also engaged with the theoretical drive of Conceptualism, which aimed to create works that could not be easily sold or consumed by the art market. The artists thought of these Earthworks as being created in nature and of nature, so the landscape and the artwork were inextricably linked in particular locations. As such, the Earthworks were exposed to the weather, which became integral to their matter-flow so they changed and eroded under natural conditions. Other artists developed Land Art’s engagement with nature by bringing natural phenomena into the gallery setting and challenging ‘the notion that nature must be rooted in a particular place’.30 Since the 1960s a number of artists associated with Land Art have become increasingly engaged with growing concerns about human impact on the environment. Indeed, their works also mark the beginnings of the socio-political environmental movement.

Nancy Holt and her husband Robert Smithson pioneered the Land Art movement in America.31 Holt’s work, with its simplified cylindrical forms and industrial production, referenced Minimalism. However the transience of natural light was of paramount importance to her, and she worked with techniques of reflection to frame perceptions of the landscape, encouraging visitors to engage within the matter-flow of their surroundings differently through these frames.32 Her most successful work, according to Whitney Museum curator Eugenie Tsai, is Up and Under (1998), in Pinsiö Finland,33 (fig.5). Holt designed Up and Under to follow the natural daylight and shadow movements of the site, by forming a raised snaking shape that connects seven horizontal tunnels and one vertical. Each tunnel relates to a compass point, and references the alignment of navigational stars. Conceived as a work to be experienced from within, from both above and below, it includes a natural amphitheatre space in the middle that is frequently used for cultural and communal gatherings. To view the work, visitors walk inside the sheltered tunnels and climb to the top of the exposed mounds outside. ‘Each changing visual experience leads to a questioning of

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30 Amanda Boetzkes, The Ethics of Earth Art (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). 6
31 Other artists involved in the Land Art movement include Michael Heizer, Carl Andre, Eva Hesse, Richard Serra, Walter de Maria, Michael Heizer, Agnes Denes and Dennis Oppenheim.
perception itself – near and far, whole and detail, reflection and reality, aerial and ground.34 Visitors become part of the matter-flow in these spaces, encountering the installation as part of the seasons, weather and nuances of sunlight or starlight.


Land Art challenged modernist perceptions of landscape, in terms of who could access the earlier distant Earthworks, which were often far from metropolitan centres. In the 1970s these art practices were increasingly relocated to urban and interior spaces, so understandings of ‘nature’ itself shifted to become more readily interpreted as being everywhere and constantly dynamic, the ever present matter-flow. Nature could no long be dismissed as separate and away or elsewhere beyond the horizon. Instead human relationships to – and within – nature changed, with nature being simultaneously immediate and also beyond the parameters of human control.35

Numerous art practices today ‘consider the natural world not only as a source of inspiration or subject to represent, but also as a realm to influence directly – a sphere of action to transform and improve through creative means.’36 As such ‘nature’ is sentient matter-flow; many artists work directly and consciously with it and within it.

Indeed, Land Art, Arte Povera and Mono-ha have formed the conceptual basis for the sentient matter-flow inherent in a wide variety of contemporary art practices,

34 Ibid.
35 Boetzkes, 14.
including ephemeral and site responsive processes, as well as Bio Art and Eco Art. The 1960s challenge to commodified permanent art objects saw these movements independently explore non-traditional, non-permanent and unstable materials, which emphasised the art encounter experience, rather than the preservation of an object. Such practices involved sensory engagements with the materiality of matter and surroundings, as well as engaging with the unknown and uncontrollable or uncontrollable. This contrasted with Minimalism’s focus on keeping the materials contained or controlled, and Conceptualism’s focus on theory rather than materiality. Where the Abstract Expressionist artist expressed her/his own internal emotions or subjectivity via the materials, Mono-ha, Arte Povera and Land Art shifted attention to the actual materials themselves. The meaning of the materials, their sentient matter-flow, was understood to remain with the materials and connected to the site, even when the materials themselves were moved; in this way this signification of matter-flow continued to resonate on a number of levels.37

The concentration of those 1960s movements on material history and agency can be interpreted as leading into the Bio Art of this century.38 Bio Art is broadly defined as art practices that work with material that is ‘alive’, including living organisms and life processes.39 However, dissecting the multifarious capillaries of sentient matter-flow, and working with life as a medium in this way, becomes increasingly complex and problematic.40 Bio Art often involves artists working closely with biologists, in wet-bench laboratories, investigating the expanding and contracting measurements of what is considered to live and be alive. Such margins are becoming increasingly blurred and porous as scientific macro understandings of the Earth’s biosphere increase, whilst at the other end of the spectrum there are extensive explorations into how microscopic organisms grow and interact. Rapid advances in biotechnologies also raise increasingly complex ethical questions about trying to identify specific points at which something is alive, dead, semi-alive and suffering.41 Indeed, viewed from a microscopic perspective, when a human dies the body actually becomes increasingly alive, teaming with masses of bacteria living on and consuming the skin,

38 The term “BioArt” was coined by Eduardo Kac in 1997, in relation to his artwork Time Capsule.
41 Ibid.
flesh and organs. Navigating the shifting and complicated structural values that guide ethical engagement for biologists, and for humans generally, challenges the discriminative hierarchies that determine how we value human life and life at large.

Buddhism teaches that such cognitive critical evaluations should be balanced with *upeksha*, ‘the mind of non-discrimination’, which also translates as equanimity. This is not indifference, but rather ‘the capacity to remain balanced, present, and compassionate when faced with such reversals … [the] synthesis of a critical mind and an open heart is known as “discriminating wisdom”’. When asked about the consciousness and relative implied value of a human, dog and an electron, Buddhist author, teacher and monk, Thích Nhất Hạnh, answered that ‘this mind of discrimination is the mind hidden in this scientific logic is the foundation of all kind of suffering’. Suffering and exploitation seem to be ever-increasing in the Anthropocene. As American ecofeminist philosopher Deane Curtin argues, ‘the last several decades have seen, simultaneously and contradictorily, an intensification in the commodification and instrumentalization of animals’. The ethical dimensions of biotechnologies and Bio Art often raise concerns, as such manipulation and control of life forms can result in animal cruelty. The Anthropocene can be described as an experimental transformation of our planet into a kind of laboratory where traditional distinctions ‘no longer hold when confronted by the enormous ecological problems and challenges that exist today’. For many Bio Art practitioners working within this macro laboratory of the Anthropocene, their Bio Art projects are like micro experiments. These art processes of sentient matter-flows evidence the boundaries and frameworks within which life can exist here and now, specifically the fragility of life confronted by the alarming extinction rates of the Anthropocene.

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47 There have been five great mass extinctions during the history of Earth. There is an ever-growing consensus within the scientific community that we have entered a sixth mass extinction as human activities are associated directly or indirectly with nearly every aspect of this current mass extinction. Ron Wagler, “The Anthropocene Mass Extinction: An Emerging Curriculum Theme for Science Educators,” *The American Biology Teacher* 73, no. 2 (2011): 78.
Some Bio Art practices focus on internal human matter-flows, specifically to ‘question the limits of the human body and its remaking and explore[s] the implications of altering nature’.\textsuperscript{48} This return to the human body, to look inside and explicitly consider what it requires to live, is reflected in Wim Delvoye’s \textit{Cloaca Professional}, 2010 (fig.6). Delvoye has created a series of these bio-art machines that consume food and defecate; he describes them explicitly as ‘shit machines’.\textsuperscript{49} Audiences are fascinated and repulsed by this mimicry of their own digestive systems, precisely framed in suspended laboratory glass and tubes. Despite audiences’ squeamish complaints about the odour of Delvoye’s Bio Art, defecating is common to all of us; it is an everyday activity of a healthy body. \textit{Cloaca Professional} simplifies the process by consuming a meal at one end, which is then processed over time, passing through a series of temperature-controlled tubes and flasks. Specific digestive enzymes are carefully added at the appropriate points throughout the process ‘with the resulting product being faeces, produced for the curious audience at exactly the advertised time’.\textsuperscript{50} Unlike the human body, these \textit{Cloaca} mimicking machines operate with precision, within a strictly rationalised scientific framework. The human body however has a much more porous and dynamic matter-flow, constantly responding to the multivariate of its surroundings and microorganisms within, growing, changing and decaying, engaging with the constraints and freedoms of its vibrant local ecologies.


\textsuperscript{48} Anker.
The contained control of Bio Art contrasts with the complex matter-flow connectivity of the biosphere in which we live, so art practices that engage more directly with the messy complex vitality of everyday ecosystems, quite removed from the science laboratory space, are aptly termed Eco Art. Such practices often engage unequivocally with the Anthropocene, critiquing human environmental impact. Indeed, many of these artists are directly involved with wider socio-political activism. Generally Eco Art aims to create public engagement with biodiversity, climate change and environmental sustainability and to increase pro-environmental behaviour through the arts.\textsuperscript{51} Art critic and writer Andrew Brown claims that, since 2010, ‘far from being a peripheral activity, art that seeks to ask searching questions about the environment is now firmly center stage, at once responding to and shaping debates in broader society.’\textsuperscript{52} A growing number of artists globally are seen to be incorporating aspects of Eco Art into their practices.\textsuperscript{53} Indeed many use art as a vehicle to investigate sentient matter-flows as ‘the systems and interrelationships within our environment: the ecological, geographic, political, biological and cultural.’\textsuperscript{54}

Directly engaging with the matter-flow of the ecologically charged political realm, Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson staged \textit{Ice Watch} at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris (fig.7-9). Working with geologist Minik Rosing, Eliasson lassoed twelve free-floating icebergs that had calved off a fjord outside Nuuk, Greenland. Transported to France in a container ship and trucked to Paris, the icebergs were then arranged in circle formation, creating a space of engagement and reflection outside the Paris Climate Change Conference. This melting monument of the Anthropocene conjured a doomsday clock, demonstrating that time is running out to collectively tackle our global environmental impact. The icebergs physically presented the one hundred tonnes of inland ice that melts every hundredth of a second.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{52} Brown, 6.
\textsuperscript{53} Such artists include Bettina Werner, Aviva Rahmani, Jeff Hong, Janet Laurence, Andrea Polli, Jeff Hong, Marina DeBris, Henrique Oliveira, Aurora Robson, Richard Box, Giuseppe Licari, Andy Goldsworthy, Ruth Wallen, Diane Burko, Alan Sonfist, Olafur Eliasson, David Maisel, Rachel Sussman, Mathilde Roussel.
Ice Watch created a space for the public and the conference delegates to unequivocally encounter sentient matter-flow, actual icebergs melting, to experience a felt understanding of climate change. Such moving emotional embodied engagements with the actual materiality of icebergs invite a more profound understanding that deepens the cognitive analysis of climate change data. ‘Cold ice in your hand is very different than reading about how it is melting’, Eliasson said. ‘From the perspective of the ice, humans look really warm.’

*Ice Watch* was a project about following the sentient matter-flow, for the artist and the audience – actively listening to the ice, watching it melt, touching and hugging it, smelling and even tasting it. Many visitors put their ears to the ice and heard ‘a little moment of *pop* and *crack*. What is released is the cleanest possible air. It is fifteen thousand years old … a little pop that has travelled fifteen thousand years to meet you in Paris, and tell the story of climate change.’57 The ephemeral impact of *Ice Watch* makes the fragility and decay of the Arctic visible, with a resounding poetic quality that speaks directly to the audience through the material’s matter-flow, inviting ‘psychological connection with the natural world.’58 It gives people the space and immediacy of a time-place embodied art encounter to reconsider and be moved again, rather than just being apathetic or resigned to climate change in the Anthropocene. Eliasson says he aims to ‘make something that may have previously seemed quite abstract more a reality … *Ice Watch* makes the climate challenges we are facing tangible.’59

(fig.9) Olafur Eliasson, *Ice Watch*, 2015, (detail views of audience interactions).

Artists whose practices fall within the expanding field of Eco Art make tangible our sentient matter-flow human entanglements and the responsibilities of living within the Anthropocene. Their works create specific and palpable opportunities to re-engage with the material vitality of our world, with its environmental concerns, climate change crisis, pollution, overpopulation and the unsustainability of the idealised growth of our consumer economies.

In many cases, the artist’s role is not, however, to provide definitive answers to these problems. Merely asking the question is often enough. Unlike the scientist, who must follow established scientific methods, the artist is free to question and redefine anything or everything at any stage, to be wide-ranging and open to all possibilities.60

57 Ibid.
59 Eliasson.
60 Brown, 8.
Being open to all possibilities implies that the artist does not have a specifically defined outcome and therefore is free to follow the matter-flow. This methodology of intuitively being guided by materiality in art making processes can be traced back to Chinese Scholar Rocks and Japanese dry landscape gardens, then more recently in Mono-ha, Arte Povera and Land Art. However current emphasis on the generative ‘aliveness’ of matter, particularly in the discourses of New Materialism, marks a shift in human understandings of sentient matter-flow and our complicated place, embedded within the Earth’s fragile ecosystems. When the constantly changing states of matter are understood as generative aliveness, working with living materials is not confined to wet-bench-work in a sterile laboratories, but expands to include numerous ephemeral, site-responsive and Eco Art practices. To navigate the touching impermanence of art encounters is to follow sentient matter-flow through co-creative art practices in these uncertain, unstable times and places of the Anthropocene.
Chapter Two

Co-creation, interconnection, relationality and interbeing
When an artist is following sentient matter-flow the process of making an artwork is co-creative, which means the artist does not make the artwork alone. Neither is the artwork already formed in the materials, nor pre-existing in the location, nor even conjured by the viewer. The co-creative engagement of art making is an entangled relationship connecting all of these into meshed layers of interbeing encountered in the sentient matter-flow of a particular place and time. Entwined relational connections between all things in existence is a key understanding in the New Materialisms and resonates with the Buddhist concepts of interconnection and interbeing. Both also challenge how we understand the human body and how, through our bodies, we engage with our material surroundings. In the focused context of the art encounter, understandings of interbeing and relationality are integral to co-creation and sentient matter-flow, which is sometimes experienced as touching impermanence, in these evolving generative conversations between materials, artist, audience and context.

The world that we live within is ineluctably material: everyday we are surrounded by and immersed in matter. Just as our bodies are composed of matter, ‘we experience its restlessness and intransigence even as we reconfigure and consume it’.1 We are always already part of the sentient matter-flows of the Earth’s biosphere, and ‘our existence depends from one moment to the next on myriad micro-organisms and diverse higher species, on our own hazily understood bodily and cellular reactions and on pitiless cosmic motions, on the material artefacts and natural stuff that populate our environment’.2 Our existence is entirely interdependent with and relative to the materiality of our surroundings: it is these relationships that enable us to live. Living is an ongoing process, never a contained state; such relationality enables and sustains life as constant activities of co-creation. When all human activities, from breathing to using the internet and making art, are viewed as co-creations then they can no longer be simply interpreted as purely human processes; rather they occur within and relate to sentient matter-flow. The New Materialisms describe how embodied humans are an integral part of such active processes of materialisation, challenging ‘the anthropocentric narrative that has underpinned our view of humans-in-the-world since

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2 Ibid.
the enlightenment, a view that posits humans as the makers of the world and the world as a resource for human endeavours.\textsuperscript{3}

As humans-in-the-world we are not just human beings, we are inter-beings. Like all other beings in the world, our sentient matter-flow is co-evolving, interrelated and interdependent. Interbeing is a Buddhist term that describes this complex interconnected entanglement of the human with our material surroundings. Thích Nhất Hạnh, Vietnamese-French Buddhist monk and teacher, coined the term ‘interbeing’ as a translation of tiep hien, which means being in touch with the reality of the world. Interbeing means that there are many elements of the nonhuman combined to make the human. Thích Nhất Hạnh explains interbeing as: ‘you are made of non-you elements, and the non-you elements continue to be in you. If you remove the non-you elements, then there is no you left.’\textsuperscript{4} As such, interbeing encompasses being in touch with everything that is around us in the animal, vegetal and mineral realms, and if we want to be ‘in touch, we have to get out of our shell and look clearly and deeply at the wonders of life – the snowflakes, the moonlight, the beautiful flowers – and also the suffering – hunger, disease, torture, and oppression’.\textsuperscript{5}

This understanding of interbeing, that everything co-exists in the world, interdependently, resonates with scientific analysis of atoms and molecules. Indeed, on a microscopic level, the molecules that make up our human bodies have also once been part of clouds, mountains and oceans. To understand interbeing is to keep in mind these connections:

As I look more deeply, I can see that in a former life I was a cloud. This is not poetry; it is science. Why do I say that in a former life I was a cloud? Because I am still a cloud. Without the cloud, I cannot be here. I am the cloud, the river, and the air at this very moment, so I know that in the past I have been a cloud, a river, and the air. And I was a rock. I was the minerals in the water. This is not a question of belief in reincarnation. This is the history of life on earth. We have been gas, sunshine, water, fungi, and plants. We have been single-celled beings.\textsuperscript{6}

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\textsuperscript{3} Bolt, 2.
\textsuperscript{4} Ustinov Prejudice Awareness Forum
However one’s human sense of unique individual identity can feel threatened by concepts like interbeing and the New Materialist emphasis on de-centring the human, which challenges the assumed hierarchical dominance of humans over the world. Indeed, these modes of re-thinking the position of human beings as inextricably entangled with the world, part of the sentient matter-flow rather than privileged exploiters and consumers, are resisted by capitalist value systems. Thích Nhất Hạnh teaches that we need to ‘get beyond the idea of a zero-sum world, where every winner must create a loser, [then] we can be free to work for the good of all. We can promote reconciliation between the two sides, rather than the victory of one over the other … because all reality is interconnected, there is no way to step outside of the situation in this moment in order to get control of it.’

On a more intimate scale, we are always experiencing the reality of existence from within our human bodies. Human materiality, the human body, is always already a fluid and changing assemblage; this continues in one’s body whether you are consciously thinking about it or not. The human body is alive, vital and constantly moving; even when at rest, it is sentient matter-flow. The way one thinks of one’s own body is challenged again by the new frontiers of microbial research. These Microbiome biological research projects show that the human body is made up of 90% nonhuman micro-organisms. Indeed, our concept of our bodies as being purely human and a containment of self becomes increasingly porous. The boundaries of our bodies are not only growing and changing, they are permeable – we have ‘leaky bodies’– an unsettling, messy and very realistic term coined by feminist Margrit Shildrick. Her notion of ‘leaking’ feels uncontrollable, somewhat repulsive and viscerally evocative. Yet leaking is utterly essential, as Tim Ingold explains: ‘things can exist and persist only because they leak: that is, because of the interchange of materials across the surfaces by which they differentiate themselves from the

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10 Margrit Shildrick, Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)Ethics (London: Routledge, 1997).
surrounding medium. The bodies of organisms and other things leak continually, indeed their lives depend on it.\textsuperscript{11} As our bodies are shifting, changing, leaking, growing and decaying they are constantly interacting with our surroundings, constantly co-creating intentional and unintentional traces, enmeshed in the Earth’s sentient matter-flows. Our surroundings in turn mark and shape us, indicative of materiality and the human body’s continuous relational entanglements.

The human body remains a conundrum, despite our extensive medical and scientific research. Even though we each live within a body and experience the world through it, the human body always maintains mysterious elements of the unknown. Despite this we like to assume that we have more control, thinking of the human body as just a container or a series of problems to be fixed.\textsuperscript{12} Understandings of interbeing and relationality see the body as more-than-human processes and generative interconnections, continually co-creating and co-evolving with our surroundings.\textsuperscript{13} Interbeing and relationality invite us to relax our human yearning for control, inducing open-ended responsive engagements with the world within sentient matter-flow, that proffer more extensive understandings of our bodies and the intra-active reality of what it is to be alive.\textsuperscript{14}

The only way we can experience reality is through our bodily senses. Merely thinking about reality relies solely on cognitive structures, distancing and disconnecting ourselves from the world; therefore we need to think experientially with the body. This is not a proposition of abandoning all understandings of human consciousness, but rather re-addressing the generative fluidity of body and mind, to revaluate how we encounter the world as a sensorium. The world is experienced at all times with one’s body at its centre: ‘the body is the storm centre, the origin of co-ordinates, the constant place of stress in all that experience-train. Everything circles round it, and is

\textsuperscript{13} Discourses about re-thinking how we understand and relate to our human bodies as more-than-human are often termed ‘posthuman’, but I prefer the implications of the term ‘more-than-human’, as it focuses to the body as leaky, dynamic and actively engaging in multisensory interactive encounters with reality, not abstract disassociations.
felt from its point of view. So while on the one hand those anthropocentric capitalist value systems of human superiority and hierarchical domination over all matter are being debunked, on the other hand one is also continually returning to one’s own human body, to be attentive and aware of how one engages with the world’s sentient matter-flows through human senses. The mind has to slow down to think with the body, even as the body is always moving. Our thinking processes tend to direct consciousness away from the body, speculating about the past and future rather than being aware of the immediate present.

All materialities in our surroundings are also in constant states of change, movement, growth and decay; sometimes we casually perceive this in even apparently enduring forms like a mountain. When experienced in close proximity even a mountain can be seen to be gradually eroding. However, zooming in much closer to a molecular level, it becomes evident that all matter is constantly vibrating, as molecules never stop moving and interacting with each other. Such understandings of the particles of existence have been around for a long time. Even ‘the ancient Greek atomists proposed that everything we observe, including life itself, is nothing more than matter in motion, composed of indivisible material atoms.’ As such, matter is constantly forming, stabilising and destabilising into assemblages and bodies. Sentient matter-flow means that these bodies also mark other bodies, affecting the materialities they come into contact with, rippling out through both the human and nonhuman, into an entangled web. This is at the core of the New Materialist ‘understanding of ourselves as materialities interrelated with other materialities, and a new concept of our agency as intra-actively determined in continual engagements with the stuff of the world, of which we ourselves are constituted’.

Acknowledging the continuous change, movement and instability and complex entanglements of cause and effect in all matter challenges our ingrained human-
exceptionalist assumptions that humans dominate, colonise and exploit their passive surroundings. Recognising that the materialities and sentient matter-flows in our surroundings are not passive, static or inert, but have their own vitality, purpose, relations and agency, is a key concept in the discourses of New Materialism and can shape how we understand art. As object-oriented-ontology philosopher Timothy Morton asserts, art is ‘far from a superficial and exclusively human-flavoured region of reality’. Rather it tells us ‘something profound about the very workings of causality itself … to make an artwork is to interfere directly with the realm of causes and effects.’ As such, to engage with art making processes is to co-create with the sentience of matter-flow and interbeing of materialities.

Experiences of this are particularly evident in hybrid contemporary art practices involving interaction with materials and charged encounters with artist and audience. Amelia Jones, an American art historian, critic and curator, articulates these art practices as materialised and materialising, rather than abstracted or theoretical. The way she recounts her experiences of artworks is embodied, emotive and personal, recalling an artwork encounter as ‘animate in multiple senses. It moves me.’ In this particular art encounter, Jones empathetically responded to the imprints of the artist’s bodily actions in the material. The co-creative engagement of the art encounter transformed and animated the material, the artist and the viewer. These traces focus the viewer’s attention on the present immediacy of the material’s agency, so the material is much more than merely a support for the artist’s gesture. The artist’s relationship with the material is a bodily engagement with interbeing as co-creating. In this way an experiential understanding of focused engagement with sentient matter-flow is formed. Jones describes her response to such a work:

These elements all together are evocative in a phenomenological sense of what I want to call the feeling of their ‘having been made,’ affecting my physicality, my sense of scale and (through identification) my desire to act or react in return. I have a particularly visceral relationship to this hunk of clay-flesh. Surely it smells of sweat? It has the texture of skin. It is a body to me. It reanimates [the artist’s] actions.

This relational art experience is a palpable one, of smell and texture along with the visual. Jones’ background in performance theory informs her interest in questions of

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20 Jones, 22.
21 Ibid., 20.
labour, but she relates to the material as representing more than just the physical effort the artist invested in shaping it. These signs of labour are not interpreted as the circulation of capital with the goal of erasing traces of production. Instead Jones considers them to be the evidence of the artist’s physicality and as providing an invitation for the viewer to ‘engage the materialities once the literal action is over and, crucially, to explore how the traces of artistic making can be inscribed in the materialities, engaging later audiences through a particular kind of performativity.’ The audience’s performativity is co-creative and becomes part of the causality of the art encounter, engaging with sentient matter-flow.

For political theorist Jane Bennett this hybrid performativity is an ‘efficacy or agency [that] always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces.’ Bennett’s New Materialist theory of ‘vibrant matter’ is epitomized in the relationality of such artworks, where the physical encounter of a human-nonhuman assemblage is emphasised. This challenges our usual anthropocentric notions of an artwork being static, finished and fixed. As all matter is actually sentient matter-flow, never really inert, so an artwork cannot be static either. Not only does the artwork’s materiality change over time as it fades, cracks or crumbles, it also changes in relation to its surroundings, and in relation to each viewer who brings personal associations and embodied engagement into the work. Co-creative artworks are thus ‘imbued with the sum total of the viewer’s own experience, encumbered by the myriad of eccentricities that govern individual engagement and response.’ Such particular engagements and responses that occur in an art encounter occur in the webbed interrelations of materials and humans, makers, interpreters and viewers, as well as the tools used in the relationality of making and viewing, including paintbrushes, camera phones and of course the human body – our bodily senses are always our initial tools. As such, the co-creation ‘issues from but also calls forth interaction’.

Each co-creative art encounter occurs in a specific place and time, so the sites of the making and the viewing of the artwork are layered with interbeing,

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 22.
26 Jones, 22.
all enacting relationality and contributing to levels of interpretive engagement. In a similar way, art critic and artist Alexander Dumbadze describes such a co-creative conversation in the art encounter as liberating:

It liberates both the object and the viewer from any obligations to traditional aesthetic comportment. Thing and person can be as they wish, and agency flows between the two. We project onto the works; they affect us back … caught between feeling and thought, always about to translate, always stuttering just a bit, enjoying the quiet: my speechlessness a space in which sensation can well. This interstitial space of language in formation, my emotions on the edge of becoming socialized, belongs to me [and the artwork] alone. No one can take it away from us. We will always have that feeling.

Each encounter with an artwork is unavoidably mediated in its relationality, and this involves multiplicity and embodied interactive emergence. The connections between the artist, materials, viewer and the context enable each art encounter to ‘become’ differently, and so artwork is never really finished, permanent or stable. Jones explains that the art encounter occurs within the ‘interrelational flow of meaning between me and the stuff called art … it allows for an interpretation that is provisional and interrelated with its object rather than fixing it in any final way. The point is that I am not by any means fully in control of this as intentional subject … Rather, I am largely guided by the materialities I engage.’ Jones’ notion of being guided as a viewer by materials is also co-creating with sentient matter-flow, in many art encounters the audience is indeed essential to the hybrid performativity.

Barbara Bolt addresses similar notions of hybrid performativity in terms of material thinking. She deconstructs human-centric notions of control by acknowledging the agency of all components in the assemblage of the art encounter. The human is no longer outside the assemblage directing the proceedings, but instead is just ‘one material-semiotic actor engaged in complex conversation with other players’. Bolt expands on this description as the ‘dynamism’ of material practice which begins with unknown outcomes; each art encounter occurs with ‘a different constellation of forces and speeds … Thus our relations [are] inevitably characterized by a play between the understandings that we bring to the situation and the intelligence of our tools and

27 Ibid.
29 Jones, 25.
materials. This relation is not a relation of mastery but one of co-emergence.\textsuperscript{31} As the artwork encounter co-emerges within sentient matter-flow, the art encounter becomes a relational engagement rather than a finished object. When the contributions of all the players in this co-emergence are understood to be equally necessary, then authorship becomes relational.

Being ‘not in control’ of the encounter with an artwork is to share authorship with the nonhuman and to attribute agency to the artwork itself. Art historian W J T Mitchell challenges notions of human control and addresses the relationality of image and beholder in \textit{What do Pictures Want?}\textsuperscript{32}. Although Mitchell focuses on a direct two-way exchange between the viewer and the picture that bypasses the more complex co-creative web, his provocative exercise in considering pictures as ‘living’ reflects the inherent vitality of artworks that is always already apparent in the ways we speak about, relate and respond to pictures as if they are alive. Mitchell explores the ‘varieties of animation or vitality that are attributed to images, the agency, motivation, autonomy, aura, fecundity, or other symptoms that make pictures into \textit{vital signs} … not merely signs for living things but signs as living things’\textsuperscript{33}. As to what pictures want, Mitchell concludes they want ‘an invitation to a conversational opening or an improvisation in which the outcome is somewhat indeterminate, rather than an ordered series of steps’\textsuperscript{34}. In this sense Mitchell’s co-creative conversations with images assert that art is not passive, but that art actually ‘changes the way we think and see and dream’; indeed art is ‘indispensable’ to us.\textsuperscript{35} As such the relationality of the artwork encounter reaches beyond the actual shared physical moment, to shape further thoughts, understandings and encounters, rippling out in sentient matter-flow, to co-create other tangents of relational webbing.

Tim Ingold similarly locates art making as co-creating within the world’s relational webbing; art making is the ‘co-responsive movement of occurrent things along their manifold lines of becoming.’\textsuperscript{36} He terms this relational webbing ‘meshwork’, uniting

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 48, 49.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 92.
\textsuperscript{36} Ingold, “Toward an Ecology of Materials,” 437. Ingold uses the term ‘occurrent’ to indicate that these things are always already occurring currently, a more dynamic inflection of ‘at the same time’ or ‘concurrently’.
‘the flesh of phenomenology with the web of life of ecology’. Thus Ingold aligns his assertions with the famous use of the word ‘flesh’ by phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty: ‘things open up to the perceiver even as perceivers open up to them, becoming mutually entangled in that skein of movement and affect’. It is within this meshwork that ‘sentient awareness and responsiveness are embodied’. The meshwork is where matter flows and causes materials to assemble into bodies, organisms, things and artworks. However in artwork the human component co-creating with sentient matter-flow is more focused, attentive and performative. Ingold described such art practices as corresponding with the world, not by describing it, or representing it, but in a conversation that involves answering to the world. To make art in this way is to ‘mix the movements of one’s own sentient awareness with the flows and currents of animate life. Such mixture, where sentience and materials twine around one another on their double thread until … they become indistinguishable, is the essence of making.’ These co-creative and performative correlations essential to the essence of making resonate with the meshwork, the layers of interbeing within the materials, the artist, the audience and the context of the art encounter.

This performative element can be interpreted as developing into Ingold’s term ‘dance of animacy’, where ‘bodily kinaesthesia interweaves contrapuntally with the flux of materials within an encompassing, morphogenetic field of forces’. Although this dance of animacy occurs as we correspond with the everyday world, it is most apparent in the focused and attentive experience of the art encounter, where the thinking of the mind joins with the body in the fluxes and matter-flow of the art materials.

These materials think in us, as we think through them. Here, every work is an experiment … in the sense of prising an opening and following where it leads. You try things out and see what happens. Thus the art of inquiry moves forward in real time, along with the lives of those who are touched by it, and with the world to which both it and they belong.

Such material conversations dance-with, grow-from and unfold-in-relation-to both the artist’s awareness and the materials with which they work, to ‘swirl around and

37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ingold, Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture, 32.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 101.
43 Ibid., 6,7.
between the islands that articulate knowledge joins up. The skilful practitioner knows how to negotiate the passages’ and still makes discoveries along the way.\textsuperscript{44} These dancing journeys of discovery occur in sentient matter-flow through movement and physical engagement – they are kinaesthetic. As such the kinaesthetic element of co-creation is feeling how your entire self is in array with the world; with every movement you make the entire world also moves with you.\textsuperscript{45}

To interpret an artwork encounter as kinaesthetic is to draw again on phenomenology, Christopher Tilley, a British archaeologist known for his post-processual archaeological scholarship, extrapolates from Merleau-Ponty’s theories a kinaesthetic approach for interpreting European prehistoric cave paintings.\textsuperscript{46} Tilley considers the ways that the human body moves within the site of the artwork, incorporating the surrounding landscape location and the cave’s specific textured rock surface to shape kinaesthetic co-creation. This multisensory body-in-movement encounter reveals the interconnections of relationality, simultaneously expanding and condensing one’s experience of place, time and interbeing, stepping in the footsteps of those who have been there before. As such, the kinaesthetic element of co-creation asserts the deep historical and ongoing entanglements of sentient matter-flows between humans and their surroundings. Art has always held specific important in understanding dynamic co-creative emergence. Tilley rethinks how ancient people interacted with surroundings, with each other and with their own art practices, articulating them evocatively as a present-time relational engagement, asking:

\begin{quote}
... what effects the carvings themselves had on my body as someone looking at them: What did I have to do to see the carvings? How did I have to move? How did the quality of the stone itself (colour, smoothness, presence or absence of cracks, surface morphology, size, and the like) affect my perception and relate to the position of the carvings? How might the location of the rock in the landscape affect my perception of it in relation to my surroundings? \textsuperscript{47}
\end{quote}

Moving with one’s entire body and using all of one’s senses would have been essential in order to make and view these cave paintings when they were created. Today such kinaesthetic engagement is lost in the digital, cropped and generally

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 111.  
\textsuperscript{46} Christopher Tilley, Body and Image: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology vol. 2 (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2008).  
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 16.
small-scale reproductions through which most of us see images of cave paintings, far removed from the reality of a co-creative art encounter within the physical proximity of the artwork. David Seamon suggests that when Tilley argues that ‘the meaning of rock-art images is as much a matter of flesh, of sensation, of feeling, of corporeality as it is a matter of cognition or mental process’, he is making ‘one of the most innovative uses of Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of bodily perception’. Similar to other contemporary theorists working with phenomenology, Tilley’s accounts of bodily perception are beginning to reach beyond the body and to understand the human within generative dynamics of sentient matter-flow. His use of kinaesthetic engagements implies a push beyond the implied human-contained perspective of phenomenology that ‘insists on a macroscopic, anthropomorphic view, while to be complicit with the material means above all, to acknowledge the nonhuman’. Kinaesthetic movement, sensory engagement and corporeality remain paramount for many contemporary artists’ processes, as integral in relating to materials and context in an open-ended approach to making.

These embodied processes begin with intuitive curiosity and the premise of not knowing exactly what the outcome will be. However, admitting to ‘not knowing’ is often considered a confession of ignorance, so this important aspect of relationality in art practice is largely under-theorised. Unknowing is vital to the flux and flow of these entanglements and connections, inviting us to repeatedly encounter our materialities and surroundings anew, despite assumptions of familiarity. Many artists work repetitively with specific materialities and locations, finding that the more they begin to understand the material, the more enthralled and fascinated they become with it, increasingly immersed in sentient matter-flow. In this unfolding conversational dance of interbeing, the material and the artist both always have more to contribute. The material can never be known in its entirety, as both the artist, the material and the context of engagement are always changing. As such, art is always generative and in a constant state of renewal. The flux of relational layers of interbeing that unfold in the art encounter can be poetically articulated as ‘encountering the unknown’.

49 Lange-Berndt, 17.
50 See discussion of Ad Reinhardt’s Art-as-Art, Corris, 15, 21, 22.
The physical act of making is always different from the act of thinking. Elizabeth Fisher, curator and arts writer, describes how artists often begin these material engagements without clearly anticipating exactly what the outcome will be. In practice this translates as thinking through doing. It might seem irrational to embrace chance and the unknown, following a hunch rather than a rationale and privileging the senses over the intellect. However, for the artist, not knowing is potentially a useful position to be in: ‘once you know you don’t know, you can begin to explore ... invite and defy interpretation simultaneously … Art pursues knowledge and yet resists the assimilative urge to know.’

Knowledge is generally understood as co-current with naming things, categorisation, stability and the structures of language, so it can be challenging to convey a fluid state of unknowing in words. Fisher expresses the artist’s state of not knowing as ‘a kind of liminal space where not knowing is not only overcome, but sought, explored and savoured; where failure, boredom, frustration and getting lost are constructively deployed alongside wonder, secrets and play’. As such, relational connections with materialities and process can occur across a range of art activities imbued with a generous pursuit of experimentation, exploration and openness. For both artist and viewer, ‘art draws us into a space of not knowing, a space of thinking in the widest possible sense, in which to test what it means to be in the world’. The touching impermanence experience of an art encounter always contains elements of the mystery; the complex dynamism of sentient matter-flow unavoidably contains the unknown and unpredictable.

Some artists find when working that this focused openness of unknowing conjures a state of attentiveness. This is akin to meditation, a working state of embodied un-self-consciousness. Indeed, opening up to a state of not knowing is at the heart of meditation practice, where one drops all conceptual knowledge so that the interconnections of existence are directly encountered. Arts writer Carole Becker

References:

52 Ibid., preface.
54 Fisher and Fortnum, preface.
55 Ibid., 13.
56 The acknowledgement of ‘not knowing’ is essential to many religious and spiritual traditions around the world. Engaging with the mysterious and unknown is at the heart of mystic understandings. An interesting example of this is *The Cloud of Unknowing,*
relates this to the concept of the ‘unknowing mind’, an idea central to Buddhist thought, which similarly focuses an invisible process that values the ‘intimate, immediate, spontaneous, obvious’ and original above all else. ‘Many artists seem to understand intuitively that “the true mind”, also known as *wu hsin*, is “no mind”. This state of un-self-consciousness, a most valued condition of the process of creativity, is not easily translated… Somewhere between the heart and the mind is a state of concentration out of which ideas, thoughts, and insights emerge.’\(^{57}\)

As a methodology such a working state of embodied un-self-consciousness is a generative way to co-create with materials, to engage with both the material’s sentient matter-flow and one’s own. Such a process of mutual response is always open-ended, so the artist is ‘also allowing themselves to be moved … the mind is listening without straining to hear’.\(^{58}\) This willingness to be with the unfolding elements of encounters arising and falling away, without trying to grasp them, is to feel the vibration of time in existence. Ideas gradually form and become realised through this co-creative process with materials, so the art encounter is multivalent, proffering numerous layers of interpretation. The materials lead the co-creative conversational dance, pushing forth these encounters and processes; simultaneously the artist is enchanted and follows these sentient matter-flows. However, the art encounter is frequently not an easy or smooth process, with the artist often struggling to learn the language of this dynamic kinaesthetic material conversation, and also to practice the steps of this changing co-creative dance as it progresses. Indeed, the lack of human control within sentient matter-flow means that art making processes can be frustrating and arduous, the artist often becomes obsessive, and the results of these art encounters ephemeral.\(^{59}\) Despite this many artists remain enthralled with evolving processes and committed to pursuing challenging sentient matter-flows within art encounters. The tangents of co-creative unknowing are inexhaustible; some artists work with specific materials extensively for many years, as the enchantment and fascination grows rather than diminishes. As such, the entanglement of relationality and interbeing in art making processes cannot be resolved or demystified. Tim Ingold describes art making as ‘a

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58 Ibid., 89.
59 Ibid., 94.
process of correspondence … the drawing out or bringing forth of potentials immanent in a world of becoming. In the phenomenological world, every material is such a becoming, one path or trajectory through a maze of trajectories.\(^60\)

In my own co-creative art practice, with its various trajectories and material conversations, one particular path that can clearly be traced through these sentient matter-flows is my continuing fascination with beeswax. This has expanded into curiosity about honeybees, *Apis mellifera*, and the unfolding of an intriguing exploration into how honeybees make their beeswax and the history of human relationships with bees, as intersecting layers of interbeing. My research has also included learning about many artists working with bees and beeswax with various conceptual intentions.\(^61\) However my own work with beeswax grew from an initial tactile attraction to the changeable states of this natural material and its fragrant luminosity. While I was an artist in residence at Bundanon Trust NSW in 2012, I began experimenting with polishing beeswax into a termite-riddled hollow log as a way of accentuating and engaging with its surfaces (fig.10). Today, I continue to be enchanted by multisensory material engagements with beeswax and even somewhat surprised that it has not become, and probably never will feel, entirely familiar or ‘known’.

(fig.10) Kath Fries, *Worlds within*, 2012.


\(^61\) An number of artists work with bees and beeswax including Aganetha Dyck, Tomas Libertiny, Fiona Hall, Joseph Beuys, Mike Bianco, Sarah Smuts-Kennedy, Mario Merz, Lynda Benglis, Owen Leong, Abdullah Syed, Mark Thompson, Alec Finlay, Matthew Brandt, Penelope Stewart, Rebecca Chesney, Ren Ri, Sarah Mosca, Anne Noble, Tessa Zettel and Karl Khoe. However a full discussion of their practices is beyond the scope of this chapter.
Embarking on my PhD research in 2014, I initially began making numerous little beeswax funnels, as a way of immersing myself in this material and trying to understand it in an embodied way. I would repeatedly warm the wax and carefully wrap it around one of my fingers, like a bandage, then press the little funnel onto a table to stand vertically. Being so engrossed in beeswax I have been compelled to further learn about the material’s origins and wider human and honeybee entanglements. I soon learnt that human relationships with honeybees are extremely complicated and intertwined. The more I learn about bees and their co-evolution as super-organisms, the more I realise I do not know about these insects, which are integral to human existence and to almost all ecosystems in the world.62

In the warmth of the hive, the youngest worker bees secrete small scales of wax from the underside of their abdomens and beneath their wings, which are removed by their sisters to construct comb chambers. Humans have long admired the hexagonal patterning of honeycomb and marveled at the apparent mathematical abilities of these insects, fascinated by the angular perfection of honeycomb, speculating wildly about how the bees form their hexagonal wax combs. However, scientists working with micro-video technology have proven that honeybees actually make their comb funnels in a circular form, moulded around a honeybee’s body, constructed to curve into a funnel.63 The bees then warm the wax funnel again by prodding it with their legs, so it softens slightly and gravity causes it to slump against the funnels on either side. Thus the funnels become hexagonal leaving no gaps in between.64 The resulting comb capsules vary in size, with the largest being the brood chambers – the nursery – where the queen lays her eggs, which then grow into larvae and baby bees; the other chambers are used to store honey and pollen. So the beehive is shelter, pantry, nursery, and essential to the survival of the super-organism bee colony. Indeed, honeybees spend over 90% of their lives in their dark warm hives.65

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62 There are over 20,000 species of bees in the world, bees are found on every continent except Antarctica.
65 Honeybees remain within the hive for the first three weeks of their lives, growing from larvae into bees, then building and maintaining the comb and feeding the young. Worker bees only venture outside the hive to forage for food in the last two or three weeks of their lives. The usual lifespan of a bee in spring and summer is five to six weeks and in winter eight to ten weeks. Healthy queen bees should live five to six years, but today most artificially breed queen bees only survive for one year at most.
I came across this information about the honeybees starting their hexagonal comb as circular funnels in 2016, two years after I began creating my beeswax finger casings (fig.11). Although I did not initially realise I was mimicking the honeybees’ building methods, now I am even more intrigued at the way in which the materiality of the beeswax influenced how I worked with it, one of the interbeing mysteries of sentient matter-flow. It seems almost as though there is a message hidden within my co-creative conversation with the beeswax that led me to these repetitive forms. Now as I wrap a small piece of warmed beeswax around my finger to form a funnel, I often think of the honeybees moulding their comb capsules around each other’s bodies. I remain a little astounded by this scientific account, which seems to indicate that the material conveys a reciprocal sense of moulding around the body, with both the honeybees’ bodies and my finger shaping wax with our body heat. However my funnel forms are never intended to be as meticulously precise as the bees’ honeycomb. My larger finger casings are deliberately irregular, neither hexagonal nor neat. These polyps have clumsy deformations, but there is something endearing in their individual non-uniform characteristics that resonates with kinaesthetic material learning patterns.

My polyp funnels are clustered into installations, using the natural adhesiveness of the beeswax material and the suction properties of the curved end to connect directly with surfaces. The beeswax funnels invasively populate corner spaces, tracing intersections of walls, floors and ceilings. Titled Divest, this work has had a number of iterations that grow, adapt, respond and change in configuration as the artwork co-creates with different exhibition sites (fig.12-19). To ‘divest’ is to dispossess, to deprive of rights or property, implying loss of home or habitat. As the title of this work, Divest connects directly to the material, as the beeswax itself has been divested, or stolen, from the bee’s hive, then reconfigured in the exhibition space, suggesting unwanted insect or crustacean invasions of human-purposed interior space. The installations quietly question our accustomed hostility to such nonhuman adaptability, and our human-exceptionalist infliction of extensive habitat loss on so many creatures while we reshape the Earth to suit ourselves. Human presence is evidenced in the fingerprint swirls caught in the beeswax surfaces, and accentuated by dustings of ash, smattered over their surfaces. The ash conveys entropy, forming a material and emblematic connection to the smokers that beekeepers use when opening a beehive to ‘steal’ the honeycomb, as the smoke discourages the bees from becoming overly aggressive. In Divest, my gesture of scattering ash also echoes a sense of loss apparent in the use of ash in grieving rituals across many cultures, but more personally for me – it recalls my father's cremation. Collected from winter fireplaces, resonating centres of warmth, nurture and contemplation by the indoor hearth, the ash also recalls notions of home, family and belonging.

67 ‘Smoking’ the bees makes the bees more docile and less likely to sting, as they interpret the smoky intrusion into their hive as a fire they need to escape, rather than a predator invading the hive. The smoke hinders their sense of smell and pheromone communication to defend the hive, as well as triggering their survival response to quickly store up on honey, by eating as much as they can in preparation to flee. See Rujuta Pradhan, “How Does Smoke Affect Honey Bees?,” Nature - Science ABC (2016), https://www.scienceabc.com/nature/how-does-smoke-affect-honey-bees.html. See also Laura Bortolotti and Cecilia Costa, “Chemical Communication in the Honey Bee Society,” ed. Clara Macignat-Caretta, Neurobiology of Chemical Communication (Florida: National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, 2014), https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK200983/.

68 See further discussions about the use of ash in my art practice in Chapter 3 Touch, embodiment and multisensory connections pages 103-108.
Working with hundreds of the small polyp-like beeswax funnels through the various iterations of these installations has developed my co-creative understandings, as deeper tangents formed within the material conversation, through tactility, patience and repetition. This dance of co-emergence connects me with the materials, site and processes of kinaesthetic relationality. The notion of ‘becoming with’ the artwork evolved as I moved my body in the installation spaces, climbing up high to the ceilings and reaching down low into the floorboard cracks, as well as engaging with textured surfaces and architectural features, smells of the space and sources of light. Layers of history are ever present in the atmosphere and materiality of the location, so the materials of my artwork colluded with the materials of the site. As such, the mingling of these material engagements and haptic thinking processes directed how each installation evolved.
The first iteration of *Divest* was in Sydney College of the Arts Galleries (fig.12,13). My site included some of the old wall mounted machinery, remaining from when the building was the psychiatric hospital’s laundry, which had steam driven industrial belts that powered numerous washing machines. I incorporated these into the invasive colonising of my beeswax polyps, clustering on the old machinery high up on the wall and scattered across the wall as if entering or exiting from the window above. The beeswax polyps travelled across a vertical landscape of varying colours, tones and textures, where the layers of original institutional paint gradually peeling off the old walls had exposed the warm tones and stratified textures of the sandstone wall beneath. *Divest* involved working with the complexity of the site, being sensitive to the various people who had passed through there, considering what they had been divested of and lost.69

(fig.13) Kath Fries, *Divest*, September 2014 (detail view).

The windows and changing natural daylight suggested a focal point and a possibility of escape, like insects drawn towards the light. The beeswax funnels had a luminosity, fragility and fragrance, fading from golden yellow to pale cream in the sunlight. Some

69 For many psychiatric patients Kirkbride became their home, and there are stories of some who were ‘released’ into the community when the hospital closed, who repeatedly came back to these buildings, to the place where they had felt safe, of which they had again been divested.
of the funnels became more like dried broken pieces of bones under a thin layer of ash. Following these clusters of polyps, viewers were drawn to look closely into smaller nuances of engagement and interconnection in this large vacant space. Viewers would follow the *Divest* trails, kinaesthetically crouching down on the floor to look under the white gallery false walls, and craning their necks to look up, tracing the progression of polyps as they blended into the old peeling wall paint, as they disappeared and reappeared with the changing daylight and shadows, seemingly escaping into the world via one of the six-metre high windows above.

My co-creative conversation with *Divest* continued at Fremantle Art Centre (fig.14), as I made more beeswax polyps in the spring sunlight and they accumulated across the old wooden floor of my residency studio. Interestingly the Fremantle Art Centre buildings were also originally designed as a mental hospital, so *Divest’s* undercurrents of loss, instability, uncertainty and even quiet panic were again subtly felt in these site-responsive engagements. Indeed for me, being on the opposite side of the continent, so far away from my home and friends yet still in the same country, I sometimes felt a little lost, away from my usual routines, teetering on the edge of the west coast, on the shores of a different ocean, where I could almost map the rhythm of my days by watching the sun set over the sea. Fremantle’s history of shipping trade and transience resonated with my generative understandings of *Divest*, being lost and found, of connections left behind and new interactions beginning.

(fig.14) Kath Fries, *Divest*, October 2014 (detail view).
Again by the water and within another heritage structure, *Divest* was next installed in the entrance of an old disused Coal Loader Tunnel at Waverton NSW (fig.15,16). Here the polyps merged with their surroundings, invading the space subversively, as viewers often did not notice the artwork until they looked up and saw the polyp clusters over their heads. This mode of being attentive to minute detail is reflected in my own increasingly frequent everyday observations of bees and insects. Always there but easily overlooked or dismissed, bees become more ever more fascinating the more one is aware of them.70 To observe and engage with *Divest*, viewers had to move around it kinaesthetically, stepping carefully on the uneven ground, across old train tracks, rocks and puddles, and allow their eyes to adjust to the cavernous tunnel darkness contrasting with the bright daylight outside, all infused with the dank underground aromas of the site. Installing the work was an interesting negotiation of damp, dusty and oily surfaces. Finding places for the polyps to hang upside down, like barnacles, became part of the challenge, as many of the surfaces were covered in damp layers of grime that stuck to the beeswax.

(fig.15) Kath Fries, *Divest*, March 2015 (detail view).

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70 I have also been learning about Australian native bees, including various local types of solitary bees, such as the Blue Banded Bee (*Amegilla cingulata*) and the Teddy Bear Bee (*Amegilla bombiformis*), as well as the stingless little social Sugar-bag bees (*Tetragonula carbonaria*) that build their comb into intriguing coil hives.
Inside Articulate Project Space my installation focused on one of the old original wooden pillars protruding from the wall, with *Divest* clustering in the corner crevice (fig.17). At this boundary where the pillar meets the white wall, the polyps converged as though pushing in or leaking out through the crack, a porous margin. Next to the big corner windows of Verge Gallery, a transitional inside and outside space, *Divest* playfully climbed over and under the suspended gallery wall panels, clambering up a rounded column and collapsing into a corner, as though swept away or rallying for invasion (fig.18). Again the work required the viewer to be curious and seek it out, to look under and behind the wall panel, up to the ceiling and into the corner.
(fig.17) Kath Fries, *Divest*, December 2014.
(fig.18) Kath Fries, *Divest*, June 2015.
Similarly at Casula Powerhouse, *Divest* resonated with the flux and flow of the heritage space, implying both loss and growth (fig.19). The polyps spilled over the top of the gallery’s false wall as if from the original wall behind, leaking through the junction between white gyprock plasterboard and perpendicular concrete block wall, intersected by the gallery’s orange electrical piping. Prior to being installed in this
space the beeswax polyps first had to be treated in the conservator’s freezer, just in case there were real insects or bugs lurking inside any of the beeswax funnels. This behind-the-scenes process added another layer to the co-creative conversation, posing questions about the potential and past habitation of these hollow shells, which then extended into the past and future habitation of the exhibition site, formerly an electrical powerhouse, and the efforts to control – both then and now – what is allowed in or kept out, displayed or concealed.

Human efforts to control the flux, flow and porosity of interbeing arise in almost all human engagements with materiality. Indeed in beekeeping practices, humans tend to assume they can improve honeybees and beehives, ignoring how the bees themselves have been co-evolving with the flowering plants of Earth’s ecosystems for over one hundred and thirty million years.71 Bees are among the oldest species of living creature on this planet. Indeed, it can be argued that human senses have evolved in response to bees.72 We are attracted to the same tastes, sights and smells, but we do not share these same sensory attractions with other insects, like blowflies. The same coloured flowers and their fragrances attract both humans and bees, and many humans have a similar sweet tooth – a taste for sugar and honey. We even share a proximate gestation temperature. Human body temperature is 37 degrees, and worker bees, who are all female, maintain a constant 35 degrees in the brood section of the hive around their sister baby bees, eggs and larvae.73

The earliest records of our human fascination with bees are found in cave paintings in Spain, India, Australia and Southern Africa dating back to the Upper Paleolithic period, dated back to 25,000 years ago.74 There is also evidence that honey played an important role in the Paleolithic diet and medicine.75 In ancient Greece, Aristotle wrote extensively about bees and beekeeping, from his own observations and general knowledge at the time.76 However, the ancient Egyptians are credited with being the

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72 Taggart Siegel, Queen of the Sun, What Are the Bees Telling Us? (Portland: Collective Eye Production, 2011), Documentary.
74 Eva Crane, The World History of Beekeeping and Honey Hunting (London: Duckworth, 1999). There is a famous Mesolithic rock painting of honey collection from a wild bee nest, in the Altamira cave, Spain, dated to approximately 23,000 BCE.
76 Crane, 581.
first culture to begin the tradition of keeping bee colonies in man-made beehives, about 9,000 years ago. They considered the bee to be sacred, and beekeeping was depicted in the hieroglyphs found in temples and tombs, with paint made from a mixture of beeswax and natural pigments. Honey was highly valued, a luxury good, used in ceremonial offerings, to pay taxes, and in medicine due to its antibacterial properties. Beeswax was also used in the embalming process to block the nose and mouth, and for death masks. The sealing, preserving and healing properties of beeswax and honey link them closely to death rituals and belief in rebirth and afterlife. Since the ancient Egyptians, humans have continued to domesticate bees by building sheltered structures for their hives, collecting wild swarms and taking ‘rent’ in the form of honeycomb and pollination services.

Human reverence for bees has shifted over time, particularly over the last 150 years, and is almost completely focused on just one species: the European honeybee, *Apis mellifera*. Age-old traditions of respect and reverence have largely degenerated into human-exceptionalist relationships of manipulation and control, through selective artificial breeding, intercontinental transportation and industrialised agricultural practices. However today more than ever, *Apis mellifera* are essential to human existence in the Anthropocene. Not because we enjoy the taste of their honey, but because their pollination services make them responsible for the success over a third of the world’s agricultural crops. Even as the importance of bees to human existence becomes more apparent, these honeybee colonies are dying out at astounding increasing rates. Since 2006 there have been dramatic global decreases in domesticated European honeybee populations, with 40 to 60% of colonies dying each year. Termed Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD), this complex multi-causal phenomenon is reaching epidemic proportions in Europe, Central and Southern America and China. Most domesticated European honeybees have an extremely weak immune system, in part due to poor genetics from artificial breeding. They struggle to cope with a constant combined onslaught of viruses and parasites such as the varroa

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78 Crittenden.
80 Ibid.
81 *Apis mellifera* is a species originally from Italy and today is the most popular domesticated bee because these colonies are more easily managed, less aggressive, swarm less frequently, and can produce more excess honey than other species.
mite, pesticides, malnutrition, and the stressful demands of migratory commercial beekeeping. Trucking hundreds of beehives thousands of kilometres across the land is the anthropocentric beekeeping response to the pollination needs of mass mono-crops and the loss of local wild insect pollinators.82

Honeybees need a range of flowering plants to feed from. Like humans they are much healthier when they have a varied diet. So areas with minimal human impact host the largest variety of flowering plants and suit honeybees the best. It is in such a wild, bee-haven natural landscape that the artist Wolfgang Laib has his home and studio, in Southern Germany. Around his home he collects pollen and beeswax for his co-creative artworks. Cut into a hillside near his studio is his 2004 permanent installation *Without Place, Without Time, Without Body*, a narrowing rectangular tomb-like space lined with beeswax (fig.20). There is a physical sense of enclosure in the space that gradually narrows towards the back, like a giant coffin.


82 See Benjamin and McCallum, 199.
Visitors have an immediate multisensory response to this work. The soft warm light reflecting off the beeswax walls, the tactility of the surfaces and the quietness of the space compel one to slow down to a contemplative encounter. The interior atmosphere of the installation reflects the origins of the beeswax in the hive, but the material here is expanded and translated into man-made human dimensions. Laib’s beeswax chambers are meditative spaces of interiority. Katharina Schmidt describes being drawn into ‘the protective cloak of these enclosures. The gaze glides closely and intimately over the shimmering wax; we become aware of its smell; the demands on our senses of hearing are lessened; our skin is stimulated … They allude to presence and absence, and to various forms of existence. However, these chambers cleanse the symbolism of death of its terror: they are not threatening.”83 The layered sense of interbeing in this work connects to cycles of life and death, reaching far back to the ancient Egyptians’ tombs and their reverence for bees.

The resonant materiality of the beeswax in Laib’s tomb-like installations is characteristic of his practice, described by Klaus Ottmann as ‘spiritual materiality’, an ongoing ‘involvement in the question of being, transcendence, and the social by way of its materiality. For Laib, art is an act of participation and sharing – participating in nature and sharing that experience with others.’84 Thus the layers of co-creation in Laib’s art practice entangle the materials, artist, location and visitors in a web of interrelations. There is a felt sense of interbeing that radiates beyond the actual artwork encounter to influence other engagements with ecologies and with existence. The co-creative conversations in Laib’s practice involve a sense of spiritual materiality that is embedded in layers of history and mythology within the material of beeswax. This is brought to the surface by Laib’s ritualistic processes of working alone, as his relational co-encounters with materiality and site are attentive, quiet, mindful patient, kinesthetic and methodical (fig.21). This sensibility inhabits the installations, which in turn allows viewers to embody these interconnections. Themes of spirituality and healing run throughout Laib’s practice, which he links to his interest in Eastern philosophies and his studies in medicine. However Laib never pursued a career as a doctor as ‘much to his own surprise, he found the medical profession too narrow to

satisfy his desire for a life work that addressed not only the body but also the spirit. As such, his co-creative processes with beeswax are more than just symbolic of healing and nurturing; these material engagements conjure a holistic therapeutic experience.

Another material that Laib works with closely is pollen. Like the beeswax, it is integral not just to bees but the holistic cycles of ecological regeneration (fig.22). Laib collects pollen by hand around his home every spring and summer, beginning with the hazelnut tree and continuing with the dandelion, buttercup flower, and pine tree. Just as when installing his work, he prefers to undertake his pollen gathering alone, as his purpose is not to simply gather as much pollen as possible, but rather to meditatively be within the sentient matter-flow and to feel the interconnected layers of interbeing in the countryside around his home and studio. ‘His method is simple: he collects the pollen with his hands and shakes it into a small, glass jar in which it is stored and sometimes even exhibited ... The pollen is recollected and cleaned at the end of each

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exhibition for utilization in future installations. As such, Laib’s pollen pieces are themselves cyclical.

These cyclical installations are formed by delicately hand sifting the pollen onto the floor, forming a glowing layer that shimmers as though hovering just above the bare concrete floor (fig.22). Pollen is an ‘active, living material, connected to the generation of many earthly life cycles … pollen is very fine, the consistency of dry sand. The brilliant yellow color is remarkably stable over time and the material so light that it appears to float in the air just above the ground. The pollen’s iridescent vibrancy is almost luminous, conjuring the power of sunshine and webbed cyclic layers of interbeing. Within the apparent stillness of Laib’s installation is the dance of aliveness, the vibrating interconnections of existence: ‘alluding to this cyclical practice, Laib once referred to pollen as “a detail of infinity”.

(fig.22) Wolfgang Laib sifting hazelnut pollen, 1992.

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87 Ibid.
88 Ottmann, 152.
For Laib, the co-creation of art making is an act of participation and sharing – participating in nature and sharing that embodied understanding of interbeing with others (fig.23). Communicating via his materials with the audience, from within sentient matter-flows, Laib’s works are more than visual experiences; they are ‘contributions to social and spiritual change. For him, the spiritual reality of the work is embedded in its materiality – the two cannot be separated: “I have always had this almost naïve belief that a pollen piece … contains a message that could change the world”.89

(fig.23) Wolfgang Laib, Pollen from Hazelnut, 2013.

Although a honeybee collects pollen much more efficiently than a human, flicking it off the flower’s anthers with her four front legs and thrusting it into her special hairy ‘pollen baskets’ on her hind legs, Laib’s slow meditative process of collecting pollen with a single small dry paint-bush and jar is a considered reflection on ecological interbeing. Indeed, since we humans have co-evolved within the bio-diverse ecological meshwork that bees are such and important part of, these kinesthetic acts of pollen contemplation reflect how we remain inextricably part of sentient matter-flow, even as we ignore it. As such Laib’s practice seeks to reconnect his audience

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89 Laib in conversation with Harald Szeemann, in Klaus Ottmann, Wolfgang Laib: A Retrospective (Ostfildern/Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2000), 152
with a spiritually generative sense of their interconnections with the co-creation of existence. Each of Laib’s pieces is ‘a record of his own working toward a balance of inner and outer worlds … [that] ask for more than repairing the environment. They demand … that we do nothing less than change the attitudes governing our lives.’

This challenge of examining the ‘attitudes governing our lives’ is a provocative directive. It is something that I consider in the ways that I work with beeswax, a material that – even when not in an artwork – exemplifies interbeing and co-creation on an evolutionary scale. My processes of engaging so directly with this material and finding out about alarmingly unsustainable ‘bee-exploitation’ in commercial and industrialised beekeeping practices prompted me to search for alternative ways in which humans work, converse with, and continue to co-evolve with honeybees.

Indeed, global concern for the plight of honeybees has inspired many domestic and small-scale beekeepers to consider more api-centric understandings, putting the honeybee interests ahead of human interests, managing hives to mimic how honeybee colonies live in the wild. At the forefront of api-centric practices is NSW-based beekeeper Tim Malfroy. Api-centric and ‘natural’ beekeeping practices put the health of the honeybee colony before its harvest by limiting human interference. Thus the relational dynamic between beekeeper and honeybee colony shifts from extremely intrusive to being more observational. In this way api-centric beekeeping is less human-centric; this practice of beekeeping that puts the bees’ needs first is an interesting way of understanding the New Materialisms’ goal of decentering the human.

Api-centric beekeeping understands the honeybee colony is a super-organism: an individual bee cannot survive for long without its colony. The colony is intrinsically embedded in the meshwork of its bio-diverse local ecology, constantly contributing to and drawing from these complex sentient matter-flows. Api-centric beekeepers aim to

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93 The beekeeper watches the honeybees’ behaviour to assess their health, rather than frequently opening the hive, and honey is only harvested in surplus seasons.
observe the bees’ behaviors at different times of the day, taking into consideration the weather and the season to understand the health of the colony, rather than frequently opening the hive. Importantly, api-centric beekeeping does not reintroduce old beeswax back into the hive after harvesting honey. Instead the bees are allowed to build their comb anew for each generation, which is essential for honeybee health; healthy colonies are capable of producing extraordinary large amounts of honeycomb. Interestingly the temperate climate and large variety of nectar-rich eucalyptus flowering all year round in the wider Sydney basin region enable the European honeybee to thrive better here than anywhere else in the world. Understanding where this beeswax is sourced from and this combined human and interspecies relationship informs the webbed layers of interbeing that resonate through my work and connect back to Malfroy’s api-centric beeswax. In an expanded relational sense, this material also locates and connects me to the ecosystems of the Sydney basin region.

All species, from plants to humans and even tiny insects, exist interdependently: to embrace this view of ecological interconnections is to feel and respond to webbed layers of interbeing. The mounting human concern for the plight of honeybees is enmeshed with anxiety for our planet, our biosphere home that we cannot live without, especially in this place time of the Anthropocene. To be concerned for a species as individually tiny as a honeybee is to be concerned with the continuation of human existence, to understand our inextricability within the meshwork of the details and diversity of sentient matter-flow. Environmental philosopher Freya Mathews vividly describes the ‘desolating portent we intuit’, when confronted by the disappearance of the honeybee:

The beehive is the story of the biosphere told in miniature. The story of the biosphere is the proto-story, the condition for all stories, all meaning. The disappearance of honeybees is a portent not merely of ethical catastrophe nor merely of physical demise but of something more ultimate: the unraveling of the larger context of meaning itself, the context in which ethics and even extinction can matter.

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95 My notes from Tim Malfroy’s Natural Beekeeping Course, Milkwood Permaculture, 14-15 November 2015.
96 As Benjamin and McCallum argue in A World Without Bees, humans as well as many other animals and plants will not survive in a world without bees.
98 Ibid.
Co-creative art encounters open up such stories of the biosphere and personal narratives of sentient matter-flow. These engagements of interconnection and generative material conversations explore layers of interbeing. Such multisensory experiences can resonate deeply to inform understandings of relationality with materials, with small honeybees and minute pollen particles. These then ripple out through the webbed tangents of interbeing that inextricably link us within the Anthropocene, within the sentient matter-flows of the Earth’s biosphere. Thus art practices that co-creatively engage with the unknown to touch both artist and audience, connecting us physically, emotionally and intellectually with the vibrant matter of our surroundings. The sense of touch, paramount in touching impermanence, gives a felt experience of immediacy, interconnection, contact and reconnection.
Chapter 3

Touch, embodiment and multisensory connections
Co-creative art processes depend on contact, on the multifaceted sense of touch, which reaches beyond surface associations by involving kinaesthetic, multisensory, and haptic thinking. Our human bodies are unavoidably, always already, touching our surroundings. This has been extensively analysed in phenomenology but reaches beyond phenomenology’s human-centric paradigm. As such, a generative understanding of touch is vital to my notion of touching impermanence. The sense of touch constantly connects us within the sentient matter-flows of existence and our inextricable entanglements with interbeing. Touch is both physical and emotional, from the intentional act of reaching towards to the open receptivity of being touched by, and being in touch with, existence. Focusing specifically on thermoception, I consider several art encounters that hinge on the touching felt contact of one’s warm cutaneous body with freezing surrounds. From Ana Mendieta’s snow Siluetas to my snow, ash and ice installations and Nicolas Folland’s frozen chandeliers, these experiential works rely on the receptivity of touch to connect the co-creative art encounter with sentient matter-flow.

The sense of touch is arguably the most ancient human sense and also the first to evolve in the womb. To be human is to be a sensing being, to be able to perceive and feel things. Indeed to be sentient is to be connected to the senses, and ‘the senses have been around for a long time, much longer than language or even thought’.¹ This generative understanding of the senses and sentience is not limited to humans and animals but extends to all things, as sentience has “evolved from a kind of proto-sentience found in all matter. The preexisting form for whole-organism sentience is simply small-scale sentience – sentience at the molecular and atomic level.”² Sentience is part of the interbeing of all things, and therefore so are touch, contact and connection. For humans, touch is also integral to co-creating and following the sentient matter-flow of existence. The role of touch continues to be paramount in the evolution of the human body, particularly our mind and body interconnections. Touch has always been essential to human existence, evolving and changing gradually as our ancient ancestors began standing upright to use their hands. As the dexterity of our opposable thumbs evolved, we began making tools and making art. This aspect of

² Ibid., 88.
human bipedal evolution is termed the ‘Freeing of the Hands Hypothesis’, initially articulated by Charles Darwin in 1871. The connections between the human hands and brain are fundamental for human survival. Often termed haptic-thinking, which means thinking through doing with one’s hands or body, this takes place in activities of co-creation, connecting to one’s surroundings, both nonhuman and human. Indeed, haptic-thinking and touch remain central to almost all modes of art practice.

Touch is however largely under researched. Cultural historian Constance Classen argues that in the academic world ‘touch has often passed under the radar. Like the air we breathe, it has been taken for granted as a fundamental fact of life, a medium for the production of meaningful acts, rather than meaningful in itself’. Classen’s seminal *Book of Touch* marks a growing interest in social studies research into this sense and its generative ways of engaging us with the world. Touch is usually taken as a given, overlooked as ‘somehow superfluous or inconsequential … relegated to common sense or parcelled off as automatic biological function, unworthy of more detailed social exploration and nuanced explanation’. Human-geographer Mark Paterson is one scholar whose focus on post-embodiment theories engages with touch as ‘more-than-representational’; he argues for the primacy of touch as our most continuous and immediate connection to the world.

The immediacy of touch is often lost or dismissed in our anthropocentric societies that prioritise intellectual thinking and digital data systems over the body’s sensory experiences. We often feel disconnected living within climate controlled environments and in consumer cultures that seek to rationalise and appease emotions rather than actually feel them. For many people this often results in a fractured sense of self that disengages from our bodies and surroundings, a disembodied affliction of the Anthropocene. Classen argues too that touch is ‘the hungriest sense of postmodernity. The inability to touch the subject matter of the images that surround us … produces a sense of alienation, the feeling of being out of touch with one’s society, one’s environment and one’s cosmos – an isolated fragment in an indifferent

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6 Ibid.
universe.'\(^7\) This sense of isolation can be countered by co-creating in the world’s sentient matter-flows. By actively focusing on the direct immediacy of multisensory engagement, this incessant sense of disconnectedness can be redressed by particularly being attentive to touch, as touch is always already present in every nanosecond. We need to reconnect with our sensory engagement with the world, with touch particularly, if we are to survive the Anthropocene, and if the Earth is to survive humans.

All humans generally share the same range of senses. However, how we each experience the world through our senses, through our touching skin, varies for each individual. These human senses are not just body-specific; they are body-time-place specific, differentiated by age, gender, culture, sexuality, health and other variables. The ways in which each person experiences the world through her/his senses is not fixed; ‘there are congruent slippages … and humans are always open to experiencing the social and spatial world differently as a result’.\(^8\) Senses can be intentionally honed, trained, or the opposite, unintentionally neglected. Indeed often uncontrollable situations force one to feel the world and one’s body differently. Illness or injury can shock one into a very different felt understanding of one’s body. Socio-political writer and activist Rebecca Solnit describes this paradoxical feeling of being intimately alien within one’s own body:

> When you are well, your own body is a sealed country into which you need not explore far, but when you are unwell, there is no denying that you are made up of organs and fluids and chemistry and that the mechanisms by which your body operates are not invincible. You may have pains in places where the healthy person feels nothing, you may when injured see your own bones, or see X-rays and be reminded of death’s skeleton under the flesh of life, you may be invaded, have parts of yourself removed, or tubes, shunts, devices, plates, and more added, your chemistry and hormones may be tinkered with, drugs administered. The system has been opened up and so has your awareness of it.\(^9\)

Contemporary art aims to extensively open up awareness of otherness and systems, critiquing our habits and assumptions. However, while we habitually identify so-called ‘fine’ art as different to poetry, music, theatre or literature, ‘fine’ often defaults to ‘visual’ art. This is indicative of the tendency to overlook touch in our

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\(^7\) Classen, 2.  
\(^8\) Paterson, 2.  
wider culture, privileging the sense of sight. Often assumed to be objective, sight is somewhat externalised, reaching beyond the body, as the observer can often avoid direct engagement with the object of her/his gaze. In this way the sense of sight has been used to claim a distinction between subject and object. Indeed, this can be traced back to ‘the ocular-centrism of Greek thought … [subsequently] the constitutive link between subject and object is suppressed or forgotten’. Such separation and hierarchical valuing of the senses is deeply pervasive in anthropocentric contemporary culture. This stratification of the five senses into a stable hierarchy dominated by sight was initially theorised by Aristotle. He interpreted touch as the most basic and lowly of the senses, whilst also observing that touch is the most necessary as ‘fundamentally an animal is unable to survive without it’. Touch forms the base layer, the foundation of this hierarchical pyramid; the other senses are interpreted as not just evolving from touch, but moving away from and improving on it, with sight as the most evolved and improved sense, the most distanced from touch.

The association of vision with knowledge has a long tradition in Western philosophy; since Aristotle and Plato reason has been conceived and imagined in terms of sight. This became further emphasised in Renaissance epistemology and Cartesian thought. Over time the primacy of vision was compounded into an enduring cultural assumption. Seeing ‘requires little perceptible activity on the part of the viewing subject, which entails that vision appears to exist effortlessly, in its own right, elevated to the status of the objective and the theoretical, or that which is consistently valid’. Touch and hearing, however, are experienced as more explicitly temporal, immediate and therefore fleeting and unreliable. The notion of vision allowing the perceiver to have some detached immunity and physical distance is supported by the idea that ‘we get a better view of our focus of interest from afar than we do closer up; the perceiver also remains at a remove from the potentially corrupting aggressiveness and raw power of lived experience’.

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13 Ibid.
Today the raw power of lived experience is often avoided, shielded by our
categorical, systematic and scientific understandings of reality that continue to aim for
the impartial and detached analysis of experience. However, this association of sight
with analytical thinking and objective distance is frequently confounded by the
immediacy and bodily entanglement of touch, bringing interconnection to the fore and
making detachment and impartiality nigh impossible. Touch is connection, and we are
always, unavoidably touching the world around us.

The term touch usually conjures one’s hand coming into contact with another surface,
human or nonhuman; such moments of connection are immediate. Although the skin
is the largest organ of the body, touch is not just cutaneous skin contact; it is deeper
and more profound. Touch can be interpreted as uniting the senses of the human
body, as without touch no other senses are possible. Touch is not just cutaneous; what
we feel with our hands and what comes into contact with our skin’s surface
(somatosensory). It encompasses the impact of light touching our eyes so we can see
(ophthalmocpection); the vibrations picked up by the fine hairs and membranes in our
ears so we can hear (audioception); the airborne molecules touching the inside of our
noses so we can smell (olfacoception); and our tongues and palates touching food in
our mouths so we can taste (gustaoception).14 These exteroceptive senses are outward
orientated, connecting the body to the outside world. Since Aristotle these five senses
are traditionally the limit of how senses are recognised in Western culture, but our
bodies also have other sensory experiences, and current research suggests there may
be up to twenty-one senses.15

The majority of these other sensory experiences are felt internally, within the body.
Inward orientated, they are introceptive senses. This includes how our muscles move
and balance our bodies, how our internal organs work, how we feel pain inside our
bodies – in our muscles, bones and organs. The introceptive senses can be difficult to
articulate or analyse with precision, as such ‘interrelations are less familiar, the
presence of such sensory information to consciousness being unclear … interception
is often vague due to the lack of nerve endings and can easily be mistaken. There is
something ineffable, something barely articulable about internal bodily states and

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15 Ibid., 20.
somatic sensations.'\(^{16}\) Despite such synergetic entanglements, our somatic introceptive senses are generally divided into four categories: the perception of one’s body in relation to gravity, movement and balance (vestibular); the perception of one’s limbs in relation to each other, coordination, and the strength or effort being employed (proprioception); the ability to sense heat and cold (thermoception); and the perception of pain (nociception).\(^{17}\) These haptic senses are ‘interrelated and co-dependent, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s words, working as synergetic totality.’\(^{18}\)

Synergic totality is the way that our human senses intentionally reach towards the world. As such our senses are into a porous experiential sphere where we encounter the world as a sensorium. We perceive life from within this ‘intentional arc’ which projects around us our past, our future, our human milieu … [it] ensures that we are situated within all of these relationships. This intentional arc creates the unity of the senses, the unity of the senses with intelligence.’\(^{19}\) As such, Merleau-Ponty’s concept of intentionality includes what we now describe as embodiment. He argued that it is only through our bodies’ senses that we have access to the world as lived reality. Merleau-Ponty locates the human body as central to intentionality, so the intentional arc becomes ‘the means by which we both objectify the world and orient ourselves within it … This intentional arc is then the knowledge of how to act in a way that coheres with one’s environment bringing body and world together.’\(^{20}\) The intentional arc is carried with you; it is all of your history with which you filter and interpret your experiences in the world. Merleau-Ponty’s arc can be expanded to an intra-active and co-creative touch that produces and creates existential space with more-than-human materialities.

Merleau-Ponty argued for an entangled interpretation of sensory experiences, which do not need to be separated into thoughts or external objects or events, but are part of the entirety of our bodily bearing, the ‘body schema’. Merleau-Ponty explained touch as linking ‘the biological facticity of the body and its relation to the felt coherence of somatic sensation, and the self-affirmation of the lived, sensible body through the

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 27.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., 20,21.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., 21.
reflexive touch, of one hand touching another’. When first proposed, Merleau-Ponty’s theories radically challenged the dominant discourses favouring intellectualism over embodied experience. His *Phenomenology of Perception* focused attention on ‘the importance of immanent sensory knowledges’, usually bypassed with the ingrained Cartesian assertion of ‘the superiority of ‘higher’ wisdom’. This duality separating the thinking mind from the sensing body cannot be easily overcome: it continues to underpin many of our problems of disconnection as humans living in the Anthropocene.

Merleau-Ponty’s experiential example of one hand touching the other is a fairly well known instance where the basic phenomenological truth of touch can be enacted and understood. However, there is a dualistic separation expressed in this scenario of one active hand touching the other passive hand. ‘When one of my hands touches the other, the moving hand functions as subject, and the other is object.’ The responsiveness and relationality of this encounter are overlooked when one hand has the active subjective power and the other is a disempowered and impassive object. For Merleau-Ponty phenomenology is ‘knowledge in our hands’. Merleau-Ponty insists on only humans having this knowledge and phenomenological experience, a human-centric positioning that bypasses any acknowledgement of the agency or layered interbeing ‘knowledge’ within matter. Bjørnar Olsen, a Norwegian archaeologist and New Materialist scholar, has identified this problem within traditional phenomenology: ‘Merleau-Ponty does not give much credit to things’ capacities or competence. Thus, even if insisting that every action is an interaction, things’ share of the inter seems rather modest. Is it really the case that the knowledge referred to only is “knowledge in the hands”? Therefore to expand phenomenological interaction into co-creation, as more than human intentionality, there needs to be a balanced acknowledgement of things’ intentionality and human receptivity.

New Materialism’s reciprocal sensorium of encounters shapes ‘a radical and imaginative realism that not only claims that things do exist beyond the purview of

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22 *Touching Space, Placing Touch*, 2.
23 Merleau-Ponty, 329.
24 Ibid., 145.
25 Olsen, 80.
human conception, but that this existence is … almost entirely inaccessible to our understanding²⁶. Despite the connective force of touch, materiality remains ‘almost entirely inaccessible to our understanding’, as our cutaneous contact can only ever form limited understanding, we can never gain a complete or stable comprehension of things in their entirety, simply because they are constantly changing and so are we. All things, materials and humans are inextricably part of sentient matter-flow. To flow with this inaccessibility necessitates an openness to not-knowing, an important understanding in Buddhist philosophy as previously discussed, which is essential in the co-creative art encounter, particularly regarding touch and multisensory engagements with materials.

Fundamental to the Buddhist tradition is the concept of nonduality. The understanding of subject and object as interconnected and enmeshed within webs of interbeing involves a dynamic acceptance of and interplay with unknowing. This is quite different from the duality that underpins our usual conceptual knowledge, which is ‘knowledge about something, which a subject has; and such knowledge must discriminate one thing from another in order to assert some attribute about some thing³.²⁷ Buddhism asserts that we can actually encounter existence directly without judging it. As such, nonduality is openness to embodied experience, where things, materials, humans and the immaterial are not separate. The reciprocity of touch does not just flow in one linear direction from subject to object, but is constantly vibrating in the meshwork of existence. The term nonduality expresses how we as humans experience reality as immediacy, right now in the sentient matter-flow of existence.

To incorporate the interconnections of experiential touch as nondual, whilst critically and constructively drawing on our habitual dual positioning of the human-subject and matter-object, is to develop a wider co-creative felt phenomenology that embraces interbeing. Indeed, subject and object distinctions can still be useful, but it is important to realise that such conceptual dualities are structures of language; they are not the only way of understanding the world and how we as humans experience it. The nondual mode of understanding revalues how we touch and sense our surroundings from within – ourselves as part of them and them as part of us. These

²⁶ Kerr.
²⁸ This is discussed in greater depth as ‘Suchness’ and ‘impermanence’ in the next chapter.
felt sensations involve emotional responses: ‘to have such a sensation is to feel it, and there are no externally measurable criteria that are applicable’. Touch is a prerequisite for our human capacity for empathy, compassion love, anger, pain, sadness and the entire spectrum of emotions. Indeed, the term sensation is also used in this context of passionate responses and again links back to the bodily senses. This sensate interconnectedness is central to the nondual reciprocity of touch, as rational thinking can never be purely objective or completely disconnected from the rest of our being. Indeed, emotion is involved in all our modes of being and thinking. The reciprocal engagement of touch, thinking and being in the world is always dynamically entangled.

As our bodily senses reach toward the world, the world also reaches towards our bodies in the reciprocity of existence. Paul Crowther is an aesthetic philosopher who describes this as ‘ontological reciprocity’, which he argues is best understood in art encounters. In such specific experiences of focused sensory connection, co-creation is ‘the inseparable phenomenological and logical unity of embodiment and experience itself’. Indeed, an art encounter can focus our ‘embodied inherence in the world, and by clarifying this inherence it brings about a harmony between subject and object of experience—a full realization of the self. In the creation and reception of art, we are able to enjoy a free-belonging to the world.’ Crowther’s phrase ‘free-belonging to the world’ correlates with my notion of art processes co-creatively following the sentient matter-flows of existence. Touch is absolutely constant and integral to our human lived experience, but it is also mysterious and ungraspable as a stable concept: it flows and vibrates, it cannot be held still.

The dynamic nature of existence means that it cannot be held still, even as we reach towards it. Cultural theorist, political philosopher, dancer and interdisciplinary artist Erin Manning writes about the politics of touch as active and lively, arguing that our understandings of relational time-space and extended provisional embodiments ‘are inventions of touch: the body senses in layers, in textures, in rhythms and
juxtapositions that defy strict organisation into a semiotic system. The socio-political implications of touch as an intentional act of reaching towards generate ethical potential, as touch engages connection.

Touch is an ethical discourse because I cannot touch you without being responsible for doing the touching, I cannot touch you without being responsive. For touch must always indicate its source, and its source can never be identified by an individual … Movement precedes sense … senses stimulate worlds, which in turn activate bodies. When we think of touch this way we challenge meaning-producing practices of knowledge and information that are considered ‘innate’ to the body. Experience is animated by the senses, sensing. Experience implicates the senses … What I sense is always an expression of potential … My body intensifies differently with every reaching-toward.

Bodily experience intensifies and is focused in the intentional action of reaching towards. Manning argues that the reach of reaching towards stretches beyond our bodies, redefining the permeable boundary of skin that we generally assume contains our physical being. Reaching towards is an empathetic extension of touch, which embraces inclusion, consideration and compassion towards others and can be expanded to nonhuman phenomena and materiality. Manning expresses the generative reach of touch as, ‘there is no touch in the singular. To touch is always to touch something, someone’.Humans reach towards each other; they also reach towards nonhumans, and nonhumans reach towards humans. Indeed, nonhumans are also constantly reaching towards other nonhumans, and ‘reaching towards’ is a pivotal understanding for thinking about the vitality and agency of matter. Touch reaches beyond the porous skin boundary of our bodies as our senses ‘fold into one-another creating an in-folding and out-folding, an exfoliation of experience. Touch is an event.’ Indeed, touch is the event in the art encounter where connection occurs and meaning is generated. To reach this is to be open to the understanding of our senses reaching beyond our bodies’ boundaries. Through them we engage and communicate with the world; in this way our senses are prostheses of our bodies.

Manning describes touch as the prosthesis through which our bodies make contact. ‘Touch is the manner in which I navigate from a subject position (an imagined stability) to an in-betweenness where the line between you and me becomes blurred.’

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33 Erin Manning, Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xiv.
34 Ibid., 9, 141-42.
35 Ibid., 12.
36 Ibid., 141.
To touch is to become posthuman. The term posthuman critiques historical humanist view of human bodies being static, fixed, non-permeable, non-changing containers. From this posthuman perspective the body’s senses ‘provide platforms of experience that extend beyond the organism’, beyond the boundary of one’s skin surface. As such, posthumanism suggests a new way of thinking, not a new way of being. We have always used our senses to extend beyond our bodies; ‘we have always been posthuman’.

Posthumanism is closely tied to the New Materialisms, as it also rejects classical humanist divisions of self and other, mind and body, society and nature, human and animal, organic and technological. The term posthumanism is often misinterpreted as a search for disembodied human perfectibility. However posthumanism is actually the opposite, seeking to further develop our understandings and experience of embodiment and the ‘embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world’. However, I prefer the term ‘more-than-human’ to posthuman, as being more generative, connective and inclusive.

The term more-than-human is used by philosopher, cultural ecologist and performance artist David Abram ‘as a way to overcome the nature-culture bifurcation, suggesting that the human world should be considered a subset of the more-than-human world, as the subset of a material collective that contains, yet exceeds, all our human designs’. Thus the understanding of the dynamism of the world shifts from a human-centric to a material-centric one, which we as humans are embedded in and experience through our bodily senses. Abram writes about how the direct sensuous reality of the more-than-human ‘remains the sole solid touchstone for an experiential world now inundated with electronically-generated vistas and engineered pleasures; only in regular contact with the tangible ground and sky can we learn how to orient and to navigate in the multiple dimensions that now claim us’. Thus, directly

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37 Ibid., 61, 156.
38 Ibid., 156.
39 Ibid.
41 The quest for human perfection, triumphant disembodiment and disconnected autonomy is termed ‘trans-humanism’.
42 Wolfe, xv.
43 Iovino and Oppermann, 16.
addressing the reciprocal connection of touch is a fundamental way of co-creating with the world, within its sentient matter-flows.

Touch is a haptic, sensory webbed event of interconnection in the meshwork of sentient matter-flows; touch is a ‘movement of thinking’.\(^45\) Art theorist Amanda Boetzkes emphasises such movements of thinking that occur in experiential embodied art encounters as ‘the locus of contact with the earth – where it touches us as it exceeds that limit’,\(^46\) pushing our sensory abilities to expand beyond our usual expectations of sensory limits. The art encounter occurs as both the act of touching and the trace of that touch. Such reaching into the surface of the Earth, so that human skin and Earth’s crust meet and merge, is focal to Ana Mendieta’s extensive series of Silueta works, 1973-1980. Mendieta’s bodily imprint, Silueta, (fig.24,25) marks a point of contact with the Earth ‘that subverts the very notion of materiality as fixed condition’.\(^47\) She photographed the transformation of her outlined trace in the landscape as it melted, burned, filled with water or blew away. These works are ephemeral marks of open receptivity, reaching towards, contact and touch between Mendieta’s body and the ground. Boetzkes describes this connection as marking a ‘threshold’, where a sensation of the Earth appears ‘both raised and deferred at the point where the opaque surface opens up to an uncontainable spectacle of vital substance … [here] the unstable signification of the body is achieved precisely because of the instability of the elementals, which wash over, grow through, or otherwise disrupt the silueta’.\(^48\)

\(^46\) Ibid., 63.
\(^47\) Ibid., 52.
\(^48\) Ibid., 53, 54.
The *Silueta* artworks are photographs, tracing Mendieta’s private performative acts, never intended to be experienced as live performance. Despite the static, visual flatness of the documentation photographs, a visceral physical tactile experience of embodiment is conveyed to the viewer. These relational engagements conjure a sensory response, and the viewer feels her/his body within the outlined trace, immersed in the texture, smell and temperature of the surrounding landscape. The viewer relates to these works synesthetically; although they are arguably just two-dimensional images, the co-creative engagement transcends such boundaries into the immediately multisensory.

Boetzkes has different expectations of these photos, which to her ‘fail to deliver its sensual fullness … textual documentation points to the inability to re-create nature’. However, I disagree that the artist actually intended to ‘re-create nature’, as Mendieta understood nature as being far too complicated, nuanced, mysterious and changeable to be re-created in a photograph. Rather, I interpret these images as intending to invite the viewer into the artist’s co-creative dialogues with the Earth. Mendieta’s photographs succeed in unfolding the art encounter into open-endedness and relationality, expanding the experiential encounter, opening it up rather than closing it down. Thus the artwork is intended to be viewed in diverse ways by different people and in various contexts, inviting them each in their own way to connect with sentient matter-flow. The enchantment of the artwork pulls the viewer into this relation of
wonder, yet continues to withdraw and maintain a sense of mystery, so the artwork itself cannot be fully known, understood or contained, and certainly not isolated into a single interpretation, by one viewer, in one context.

(fig.25) Ana Mendieta, Untitled (Silueta series), 1977.

For Mendieta, the relational context of her Silueta series emphasised reconnecting with the Earth. These art encounters are kinaesthetically enacting our human inextricability within sentient matter-flows, as a ‘visceral return to origins, an insertion of the self into the infinite cycle of life’. Indeed, we all come from the Earth; our human lives are sustained by the Earth’s air, food, water and shelter. The cyclic continuation persists with death, as our bodies are returned to the Earth in ‘a primordial embrace from which one arrives and from where one departs again’. However, Mendieta’s practice was as personal as it was universal. She was searching

50 Ibid.
for a sense of belonging and reconnection, having been torn from her family and home country of Cuba when she was twelve years old.

Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth … I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body. This obsessive act of reasserting my ties with the earth is really the reactivation of primeval beliefs … [in] an omnipresent female force, the after-image of being encompassed within the womb, in a manifestation of my thirst for being.51

Mendieta’s Silueta works are haptic emotional embraces with the earth, a folding into and out of, connecting and interacting. Amelia Jones interprets the Siluetas as ‘deeply disruptive to modernism’s desire for presence and transparency of meaning’.52 Indeed, there is no singular meaning in these works; the way that they engage the viewer in sentient matter-flow is co-creative. Such works are not static; they cannot be fixed, and their relational engagements are always shifting. This is not just because of the ephemeral materials of the site eroding and changing, but because there is something very particular in them about the body’s connection to the Earth, merging into it, nurtured by it and lifting away from it. The folding and unfolding, dynamic push and pull of these works resonated throughout Mendieta’s practice. It continues to draw people in, generating new meaning, with new audiences fascinated with her work and her life story which ended so abruptly in 1985.53 Adrian Heathfield, arts writer and curator, describes this continuing ‘irresistible’ allure of her work, life and death, which seems to call from the beyond to demand repeated attention.

It is protean, fecund, it demands repeated attention. The thicket of words that has grown around Mendieta’s corpus responds directly to the powerful muteness of the work… the arguments have continued to proliferate and thicken, because the work itself, silently, passionately, continues to speak with us. Mendieta’s visceral and incendiary acts, corporeal traces and loamy impressions still touch, burn and trouble. Her use of elemental substances (earth, air, water, fire and flesh), her deployments of the figure and the ground move through the emotive paradoxes of mortal existence: the lived tensions between the material and the immaterial, the present and the absent, what remains and what departs. As such, these works operate at the limits of what can be thought and said through language. They access feelings of elemental

51 Boetzkes, 26. Boetzkes quotes Ana Mendieta’s artist statement
53 Ana Mendieta died on September 8, 1985 in New York from a fall from her 34th floor apartment in Greenwich Village's 300 Mercer Street, where she lived with her husband of eight months, Minimalist sculptor Carl Andre. Andre was subsequently charged and acquitted of her murder, inciting protest and outrage from her friends, the feminist community and supporters of her work. ‘Many of her friends remain unconvinced of Andre’s innocence. They cite contradictions in his police interviews, and his decision to be tried by a judge rather than a jury – which meant that the evidence was weighed up without him being cross-examined by the prosecution.’ Sean O'Hagan, “Ana Mendieta: Death of an Artist Foretold in Blood,” The Guardian (2013), https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/sep/22/ana-mendieta-artist-work-foretold-death.
existence, and gesture towards boundlessness and eternity. Though they are evidently marked by the time of their making, these works carry a timeless quality, such that they feel oddly contemporary.⁵⁴

Heathfield’s reference to how these works continue to speak to us conjures a felt connection with ‘elemental existence’, which is precisely a co-creative experience of sentient matter-flow, of touching impermanence. Mendieta’s Silueta snow photographs reach towards the viewer, eliciting a palpable synesthetic response, sensing how one’s own body would feel thermostatically in that space, with the cold melting touch of snow against warm skin. These works were slow co-creative dialogues, waiting for time to pass and for the compressed snow of the silueta indentation to melt more rapidly than the surrounding snow. Eventually a patch of dark grass and leaves in the shape of Mendieta’s body was revealed, outlined in white snow. Although these works can be interpreted as repeating the cyclic seasons, and water circulation through condensation, freezing, precipitation, thawing and evaporation, they are also more than merely marking the snow and watching it melt. ‘Mendieta places the body in the death of winter and rebirth of spring. Mendieta also troubles the very metaphors she cites. The work is not just about the seasons or the land but also about the ways in which both are invested with racial, ethnic, and hemispheric associations.’⁵⁵ However, on a personal level I respond to these works with a more immediate sense of interconnected felt phenomenology. These snow Siluetas conjure an instantaneous sense of the cold snow against my warm skin, each reacting, responding, relating to the other. The snow warming and melting, becoming liquid, my skin cooling and contracting into goose bumps: an intense contrast – but I have always loved snow. To me, Mendieta’s snow Siluetas signify a reciprocal exchange as well as an encounter.

Snow is permeable, ephemeral, concealing and mysterious. From carefully touching the outer surface of deep snow to falling through its layers, pulled by gravity towards the Earth; often the reciprocal engagement between human body and snow conjures responses to one’s touch that are unknown and unknowable. When I began my 2015 residency at Arteles Creative Center in Finland, the snow was thigh high in the forest and I repeatedly fell over in it. Some days the snow changed slowly, sometimes

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quickly, by the hour, with changing temperatures and weather conditions. Danish author Peter Høeg describes forty-two different types of snow, the first being ‘qanik – big, almost weightless crystals falling in stacks and covering the ground with a layer of pulverized white frost’.\(^{56}\) His descriptive attention to detail, texture and context demonstrates Nordic traditions of close attention to snow and surroundings. My attentiveness to the snow around me in Finland traced how it shifted from newly fallen, light and powdery, to more dense and malleable, thawing to slushy and wet with warmer temperatures, then freezing again into a firm frozen layer, and my favourite – the spikey frost feathers of early morning (fig.26).

(fig.26) Kath Fries, *Embrace vi (burrow)*, 2015.

The four weeks of my residency in Finland was the longest time I have ever spent in a consistently snow covered environment. The process of being in that landscape, walking in the forest and countryside almost every day, repeatedly reaching towards and embracing the snow, was joyful and playful, a fundamental part of how I experienced that landscape. I have always loved the snow; my father was a keen skier and he began to teach me to ski almost as soon as I could walk. The snow-covered landscapes that our family skied through were always beautiful and intriguing, but

there was never time to stop and reflect, or to play; my father’s focus was always on
maximising our number of runs and covering as much of the mountain as possible in a
day. I have not been skiing much since my father died, but being surrounded by snow
in Finland, even though I was not skiing, vividly reminded me of him; he felt close to
me in that environment.

During my first snow filled week at Arteles, I delightedly waded through the knee-to-
waist deep snow leaving behind big footprints. Occasionally I fell over and found
myself visually observing the snow close up and feeling the snow’s changing tactile
touch as it melted against my skin. The indentations and traces that my limbs left
behind as I moved through the thick layers of snow were not just holes that I left in
the snow, but also the snow impacting on my body, mind and emotions. I deliberately
began using my hands and arms to reach around and into a mound of snow. My hands
met in the middle, hugging the snow and creating interconnecting burrows. These
ephemeral snow burrow interventions went beyond merely looking at the snow, to a
more co-creative process of experientially understanding how it felt on my skin, from
quite firm and malleable, then starting to thaw, drip and become slushy, then
refreezing into spiky prickles of tiny frost feathers.

Now looking at my photographs, I recall vivid, immediate embodied memories of that
experience: the sense of touching the snow and feeling it against my skin; the bodily
trace that remained – of a tunnel reaching into the Earth; the feeling of reaching into
the Earth for comfort, out of curiosity about what was concealed beneath and
connecting the feeling of snow on my skin to skiing with my father. My father, who
could not feel me hug him for the final three weeks of his life, when he lay paralysed
in the intensive care unit. On one level embracing the snow was also embracing my
father and his former vitality. As I reached into a mound of snow to connect my
hands in the middle, I would rest my face on the surface. My *Embrace (burrow)*
installations were formed by ‘reaching towards’ the snow; in a sense I was reaching
into the unknown, as I was not entirely sure how the snow, with its mysterious depths
and densities, would respond to my touch (fig. 27, 28).
Embrace (burrow) reaches towards the Earth as parent, home and family, feeling the Earth reaching back in a reciprocal embrace. Relating to the snow in that place, I felt the layered connections of interbeing with my father and with the Earth, through this tactile, enfolding, embracing engagement. This gesture of reconnecting to your family
and your past, through embodied connections with the Earth, now seems to echo Mendieta’s *Siluetas*, even though I was not aware of her work with snow at that time. The immediacy of such present time and place co-creative encounters conjures a vertical sense of time, bringing oneself and one’s past into a connection with the present.

Another ephemeral thermostatic work that evolved during my residency in Finland focused on the icicles, which at first seemed frozen and still, dependably solid, but then quickly melted in the sunshine of the first thaw, falling from the roof to spear the snow beneath. The thaw happened quickly; surprised I frantically tried to collect the fallen icicles (fig.29). Holding one in my un-gloved hand, I felt it melt against my warm skin, with the freezing water running fast down my fingers and hand – my fingertips soon met in the middle and the icicle snapped and fell into the snow.

(fig.29) Kath Fries, *Handheld Melting (work in progress)*, 2015.

Co-creatively responding to my thawing surroundings, I felt an abiding sense of wonder at this reciprocal dance between the icicles and myself, as we each mutually impacted the other. Quite soon all the icicles on the south-eastern side of the house melted and disappeared, but on the north-western side I found a cluster glinting in
shadows, catching the reflected colours of the afternoon sunset. These icicles were also gradually dripping away and diminishing; they felt to me to be the last I would find (fig.30). A year later, almost to the day, on the other side of the world, in Sydney’s hot humid February summer weather, I restaged this experience of holding ice and feeling it change and melt in my hands, framed by video-projected Finland sunset hues.

(fig.30) Kath Fries, *Handheld Melting (work in progress)*, 2015.

In the gallery *Handheld Melting*, 2016 featured pieces of ice, frozen in a domestic kitchen freezer, positioned on a ledge in an alcove (fig.31-34). The ice reflected and refracted the light of the video image projected through them, much as the icicles caught the glow of the sunset the year before. There was something intriguing about the cyclic repetition of the work, returning to this moment, and yet on every repeat visit something was different. The work is not stable or contained. Each day the gallery opened I would replace the pieces of ice. The new pieces were always slightly different, their forms initially shaped by air bubbles trapped inside, then by melting in my hands and being reshaped under running water. As the ice melted in the gallery, the water runoff trickled a few metres along the ledge, following the gallery wall, spilling over the beeswax channels I had constructed to direct its progress, eventually dripping down into a glass receptacle, which you could sometimes hear as echoing, bell-like, rhythmic drops.
This repeated process of handling the ice, feeling it change as I touched it, gradually deepened my sense of connection to this elemental material. I developed a greater attention span to this encounter of relationality, of change. On one level this felt connection with ice can be interpreted more widely as our human fundamental connection to water, our dependency on fresh water, alarm at climate change, icebergs melting and oceans rising. But on a personal level it was an encounter of touching impermanence, feeling the vitality of the ice flux and change as I touched it, and it touched me, connecting with the sentient matter-flow through co-creation.
(fig.32) Kath Fries, *Handheld Melting*, 2016 (detail view).

(fig.33) Kath Fries, *Handheld Melting*, 2016 (detail view).
The heat of the human body contrasting with frozen water, as ice and snow, was experienced repeatedly during my time in Finland, particularly when learning to maintain and use the traditional Finnish wood burning sauna at the residency. One’s sauna-heightened body temperature dramatically contrasts with the touch of frozen snow. Housed in a little yellow-painted wooden cabin set a short distance away from the other buildings, on the edge of the forest, the Arteles sauna was built in 1961 (fig.35). It remains quite unchanged, still cherished and used regularly by the staff and artists-in-residence. Finland has a long tradition of saunas, dating back to ancient nomadic times. Today, sauna remains one of the most important Finnish cultural practices; the sauna is considered an almost sacred space, even more so than church for many people.
The sauna is central to Finnish life; children are taught and expected to act respectfully and calmly in the sauna. Traditionally it was the place to give birth and to wash newborn babies, due to the warm and almost sterile conditions. For the same reasons the sauna was also the place where healers did their work, and where dead bodies were washed and prepared for burial. So the sauna – a small cabin of wood, steam and fire – was the site of the beginning and ending of life. In a more everyday sense the sauna continues to be an important place for the family to relax and spend time together. I repeatedly heard that Finns think of saunas not as a luxury, but as a necessity.
All the artists-in-residence at Arteles were shown how to build the sauna fires, ladle the water, maintain and use the sauna, so we were able to regularly incorporate this traditional activity into our time at the residency. There is a serious code of respect implied in the sauna, which – along with the relaxed communal nudity – at first seemed very foreign to me, visiting from Australia, and it certainly was to the American artists, though perhaps less so for the Germans. Preparing the sauna is quite lengthy, labour intensive and somewhat ritualistic but, from an artist's view of process as physical engagement in a specific series of manual time consuming performances, these activities became significant in themselves. Then the sauna-ing that followed was relaxing, warming and rewarding, especially in contrast to the cold snow outside. The preparation of the sauna conjured a sense of time, embodied in a ritualised process, which developed a mindfulness and sense of being attentive to the present moment. These periods of time have gravitas, embodying human connectedness to place, body and time itself.

Before building the fires, ash from the previous fire has to be removed; usually it is scattered on the snow around the trees behind the sauna cabin. Scattering ash, even when it is an everyday domestic act, always seems to be careful, poetic and ritualistic. In my mind this is intrinsically linked to cremation and grieving, recalling my father’s death and cremation. The grieving process does not fit neatly into our normal notions of daily time, measured by clocks and calendars; it ebbs and flows for each person differently, with various scales of intensity. Ash is heavy in its symbolism and metaphors, yet almost weightless as it floats through the air when scattered; ash is an embodiment of impermanence. The ritualistic process of patiently constructing a fire and contemplating the flames parallels the quiet time and space of mediation and prayer. It is this tangible essence of time and contemplation within the wood ash from my fires that I’ve used in my installations. With these ritualistic, contemplative and spiritually connective associations in mind, I began collecting the sauna ash to see what I could do with it, keeping in mind that the sauna has a rich legacy of being a sacred place in Finish cultural tradition.

For the ancient Finns, sauna was a sacred place to cleanse the body and spirit. As with all the other places of importance, the sauna was also guarded by a guardian spirit, saunanhaltija, whose job it was to ensure all the norms and customs regarding sauna were followed properly. Sauna was at least as much of a sacred place as the church, and it was thought that when one cleanses one’s body, mind and behaviour must
also be purified. Sauna was also the place where women gave birth and healers did their work. People were expected to act respectfully and calmly in the sauna. When people were finished, water was poured on the stones for the spirit to enjoy the warmth of the sauna in peace.\(^{57}\)

In Finnish mythology, all things – trees, water, stones, fire, animals, plants and buildings – have guardian spirits, which sometimes manifest as väki and haltija, little elf-like creatures. Most of the specifics of these pagan beliefs have been lost over time, but interestingly the sauna elf is still remembered. Traditionally, just before you leave the sauna, a final ladle of water is poured on the hot stones, allowing the elf spirit to enjoy the last of the sauna's warmth in peace. Although we did not intentionally incorporate this tradition at Arteles, the sauna was always still warm when we left, and there was a slight sense of that being a waste. However to view it as a gift to the place itself invites notions of reciprocal engagement. Gifts are also customarily left for the sauna elf, especially during Christmas. Perhaps our occasional, accidentally-abandoned, unfinished beers and chocolate left by the sauna door counted as gifts for the Arteles' sauna elf to enjoy in the remaining steamy heat of the sauna after we vacated.

The theme of the Arteles residency was *Silence Awareness Existence*. Quiet attentiveness is an important aspect of my co-creative practice, so the emphasis on silence particularly interested me. The Finns have a deeply ingrained cultural respect for silence, and they are comfortable with it. ‘Folklore praises the virtue of silence as a sign of wisdom and talkativeness as a sign of fools.’\(^{58}\) Indeed, silence is seriously studied as a form of communication by Finnish academics. This appreciation of silence can feel very awkward to visitors from the English-speaking world, who are much more accustomed to the social necessity of keeping the conversation flowing as a form of politeness. A British travel writer, trekking in Lapland with a Finnish guide, tells this story:

> We had walked for two days without seeing anybody. Then I saw someone in the distance, coming towards us, and really looked forward to exchanging views about the beauty of Lapland in the full glow of autumn colours. The man came closer and closer, passed us with barely a nod, and continued on his way. I turned to my guide to ask why we didn’t stop to talk. The guide explained that this man would have come


\(^{58}\) Terttu Leney, *Finland Customs and Culture* Culture Smart Series (Great Britain: Barnes and Noble, 2005), 151-52.
to the wilderness to enjoy the silence and to be alone, and that we had no right to disturb him. 39

With the silence of the sauna elves in mind, and the ephemeral materials of snow and ash to hand, I selected a site near the sauna cabin on the edge of the forest. There I made a group of knee high, hollow snow pillars and carefully filled them with ash from the sauna. The sizes and forms looked similar to some nearby tree stumps and related somewhat to my imaginings of the size and stature of sauna guardian elves. These ephemeral sculptures changed over the following week with changes in the weather. The temperatures warmed with another pre-spring thaw. At first this alarmed me; it was out again of my control. The context and materials were co-creating quickly, and I felt that I was lagging behind yet again. However, the early thaw became an essential component of these ephemeral works, as the outer layers of snow melted away and then re-froze overnight, to simultaneously hold and expose the ashy core within. I titled these ephemeral sculptures *Beguile* in acknowledgement of the sauna elf’s enchantments and her imagined cheeky character (fig.36,37,38).

Although both snow and ash are quite ephemeral and transitory, the ash lingered for longer, clumped together within its outer skin of snow, which melted, refroze and then resealed with a light snow shower. Over the next two weeks my sculptures continued to change naturally with the weather conditions and eventually disintegrated back into the ground. There was a natural cycle embedded in these works, which manifested as an encounter rather than as an illustration or description. Cycles have always been an important consideration in my practice, and now I’m interpreting them more specifically as part of my methodology of co-creating and following sentient matter-flows. My process of listening, observing and being attentive to my surroundings leads to open-ended playfulness. I aim to leave space for the material to respond to my experimental handing, without necessarily trying to predict what will happen. Sometimes this is just gravity causing the work to fall over; at other times it is more magical and unexpected, like the thawing and refreezing of my snow burrows causing the smooth surfaces to become covered in tiny frozen feather needles, or even those moments of first stepping outside into the cold dark night and seeing a warm exhalation of breath condense into a cloud of tiny frost.

39 Ibid.
particles. Co-creating with matter-flow can be as simple as attentively inhaling air into your lungs then exhaling, breathing air back out into the outside world.

(fig.36) Kath Fries, *Beguile iv*, 2015.
(fig.37) Kath Fries, *Beguile i*, 2015.
The material presence of breathing in and out can be made visible and more noticeably tangible when cooled to sub-zero temperatures. The frozen moisture of human breath features in Nicolas Folland’s frozen chandeliers, *The door was open…* 2006 (fig.39,40). This ostentatious crystal chandelier has a freezer unit wired into its centre, which freezes the moisture in the air, collecting layers of frost that build into a substantial snow ball. This playful works points to the leaky nature of bodies, specifically human bodies, and their destabilising effect on artificially controlled space. Most museum spaces are climate controlled, with the atmosphere kept dry and cool to maintain stable conservation conditions. It is the warm bodies of the visitors in the gallery, breathing moisture into the air and sweating, that disrupt this atmospheric stability. Thus the growing condensation freezing onto Folland’s chandelier is almost entirely composed of the moisture from visitors’ bodies. Indeed, this decadent home
furnishing is covered in frozen spit and sweat, as the freezer unit attracts the moisture particles of the air’s sentient matter-flow. *The door was open…* cleverly manipulates a sense of touching at a distance, as the moisture particles from our bodies dissipate unperceived around us constantly. Yet to see these moisture particles visibly materialise, condense and form into a dense frozen ball of ice is surprising, mysterious, and perhaps alarming for museum visitors to be confronted by so much tangible evidence of the salvia and sweat secreted by their own bodies and the bodies of their fellow humans.

(fig.39) Nicolas Folland, *The door was open…*, 2006.

As confronting as this thermostatic material encounter might be, it is also grounded in the everyday, as our human bodies are always breathing and sweating, intra-acting with our surroundings, part of sentient matter-flow. Indeed refrigerators and freezer units are also common to our everyday domestic lives. The title of the work *The door was open…* recalls parental annoyance when the freezer door was left open at home,
as well as a child’s sense of enchantment at the magical excessive build up of frost, manifesting as an assemblage of material agency beyond human control that also makes it impossible to easily close the freezer door. The ellipsis at the end of the title trails off mysteriously into the unknown of what might come next; perhaps the ice is threatening to colonise the entire gallery space.⁶⁰

(fig.40) Nicolas Folland, The door was open... 2006 (detail view).

This ornately decorated cut glass chandelier ‘grew a huge tumour of ice at its centre. In its frigid plumbing… the refrigerator seemed to both be a clinical as well as domestic apparatus – a life support system attached to the chandelier – but also a parasite.⁶¹ The door was open... is a humorous, clever and palpable conjuring of the interconnections from within our human bodies, always already moving fluidly across the surfaces and rematerializing within the artwork, not as a virtual impression but actual, physical and real. Folland is interested in extremes and human failures when attempting to conquer such physical, climatic and geographical boundaries. This ice

making installation ‘recalls the passages from the diaries of Antarctic explorer Robert Falcon Scott, recounting how the men’s breath froze in their beards, and their tents became lined with a layer of ice’. As such, the everyday freezer unit resonates with liminal outcomes, referencing heroic failure and Romantic narratives of humans defeated by the landscape, yet Folland’s pragmatism is coupled with a sense of paganism regarding the power of the elements. Folland says that much of his work ‘either includes or implies a transformation taking place, or something in-between states’.

The frozen globe at the centre of *The door was open...* forms a poetic musing on humanity’s conflicted relationship to natural forces and resources in the Anthropocene. The work playfully echoes our dependence on electric lights, fridges and air-conditioners to moderate our interior domestic environments and make them more liveable, even as these produce carbon emissions that change weather patterns and make them more indispensible. Since this work was made in 2006 we have experienced increasingly dramatic and extreme weather events around the world that are indicative of climate change: escalating hotter summers and acutely colder winters, record snowstorms and increasingly severe tropical cyclones. In Folland’s work such extensive cycles of sentient matter-flow interconnecting us within the Earth’s biosphere are condensed into a micro co-creative art encounter that mysteriously touches the viewer. Ironically then, whether the ‘ice grows on the chandelier like a parasite, or the chandelier grows out of the ice like a vine from its host, there is an intimation here of a beautiful and finely calibrated ecosystem hanging in the balance between the natural and the man-made’. The metaphor of an ‘open door’ usually implies hope of escape from a current situation or crisis; perhaps this can also be inferred in Folland’s work, the irrepressibility of hope that lingers, even as we breathe in the Anthropocene.

Seeing one’s breath visualise into a tactile materiality brings awareness back to the body, and how the body is permeable, porous and leaking, always touching and co-creating with its surroundings. The breathing human body senses on multiple levels
and feels its own rhythms within sentient matter-flow, part of the vitality and growth of interconnected life. From our hearts beating, our lungs breathing, internal organs digesting, processing and filtering, and numerous bacterial micro-organisms living within our bodies and on our skin, the touch of time and existence can be experienced as embodied and palpable. As such, being in touch with the world involves intimate nondual receptivity. When encountered in the embodied immediacy of present time, this touching impermanence can challenge our anthropocentric thinking structures. Touching impermanence can be explicitly felt in an art encounter due to one’s attentive openness and expectation of sensory experience, like the focused sensory experiential engagement of touching and sensing materials like snow, ash or ice. This understanding of being within the impermanence of matter-flow requires sensory reciprocal attention to the momentary, to the impermanence of experiential time, which engenders direct engagement with the reality of existence.
Chapter Four

Impermanence – present time and ancient place
The felt experience of touching, and being touched by, the vitality of existence is impermanence. Touch is an immediate sensation, a present time experience. It is more than just temporal; touch is impermanent. Impermanence is present time, as we experience reality only in the present moment. Even when we think of the past or the future, this always occurs in the present. To understand impermanence is to comprehend that our experiences of time cannot be disconnected from our embodied existence in the world. As such, the present is always located in a particular place, and place also has its own vibrations of time regardless of whether humans are there or not. These felt connections of immediacy are pivotal to my understanding of touching impermanence, as each artwork encounter is specific to a moment of time and location of place. Throughout history, all cultures have pondered and articulated their own concepts of time and cosmology, interwoven with experiential understandings of place. Today, the touching impermanence experienced in an art encounter can co-creatively connect one with sentient matter-flow and assist with understanding how we can live within and remediate the Anthropocene.

Our bodies are fluid, constantly touching, sensing, changing, breathing and leaking, interacting with sentient matter-flow. Understanding that our bodies themselves are present time, as they are always already vital and changing, is central to comprehending that impermanence is time, and time is impermanence. Such philosophies of embodied time as relation and relationality are foundational to Buddhist philosophies. In thirteenth century Japan, Dōgen taught extensively about impermanence. He is one of the most sophisticated thinkers in the tradition of Japanese Buddhist philosophy and ranks ‘with those of the greatest figures in the Western tradition, from Plato and Augustine to Hegel and Heidegger’. 1 Joan Stambaugh, a renowned American Buddhist scholar, writes extensively on Dōgen’s work and his teachings about impermanence. She explains impermanence is ‘being-time’, uji, expressed as the present moment of how we experience our embodied existence in the world. Impermanence also relates time to eternity and how different experiences of time are intimately bound up in the present moment. 2 All time is

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2 Stambaugh, 1.
impermanent; whenever something happens, it ‘is not in time, but is time itself. Time is the taking place of all beings’.

In Buddhism eternity is right now and in this moment; it is not elsewhere or outside of existence. This understanding is a decisive contrast to the Abrahamic religions where eternity is always placed somewhere else, in the afterlife or heaven. So the Buddhist understanding of living in the midst of eternity, immediately, right-now in the present moment fundamentally shapes how time is experienced and how impermanence is understood. Re-thinking time as a concept that is not a container or something we can have more of, challenges our anthropocentric modes of articulating knowledge that view time as partial and derivative, predominantly horizontal, measurable, containable and linear, as formulated by Plato and compounded by Galileo, Newton and Descartes. This notion of time as a container that can be divided into sections is reinforced by a perception of a human individual life starting with birth and progressing toward eventual death, which in turn is the basis for the conception of linear historical time. Such a rational concept of time perpetuates ‘the idea that time is linear, sequential, irreversible and something separate from and independent of things or events in it’. However, to shift one’s understanding of time from a container of existence, to comprehend instead that time is the taking place of all beings, can be challenging. Time is impermanence, manifold, a meshwork of webbed dynamic existence. This generative concept is more complicated and expansive than simply flipping analytical time around, to say that existence ‘contains’ time. Existence actually is time. There is no ‘containing’ time. To understand that time is impermanence is to allow oneself to feel present with the vibrations of time, within one’s body and within the world, part of the dynamic meshwork of sentient matter-flow.

To experience how impermanence is time, is to begin with the body and the senses: ‘we have to begin with the self; it is our access to reality. We have, so to speak, to begin with the self and go through it – leave the self behind, forget it’. To move beyond a human-centric view of the world, to feel how time vibrates in everything, is to understand that humans are always already vibrating with time along with

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3 Ibid., 26.
4 Ibid., 25.
5 Ibid., 10.
everything in existence. Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani expresses this as ‘a conversion from the self-centred [human-centred] mode of being, which always asks what use things have for us, to an attitude that asks for what purpose we ourselves exist’. As such, there is an important correlation between the Buddhist mantra of ‘overcoming the ego’ and the New Materialisms’ quest to decentre the human. Emphasising that everything in existence has its own vitality and agency is to understand that time vibrates in all things, human, nonhuman and more-than-human.

Stambaugh explains that analytical conceptions of time are generally ‘that things can persist in it. The Buddhist idea of the instantaneity of time goes against any such persistence in time. Time is never extended.’ Therefore, matter cannot sit statically or permanently within time, or even outside time. Impermanence is inside all things, rather than all things being inside time. Indeed, the Buddhist understanding of eternity being in the present moment also emphasises that there is no place or space outside time, no outside of existence. The Buddhist understanding of impermanence challenges us to be attentive to our embodied experience of present time, to ‘experience the situational aspect of time’ as the transience of ‘being’ time. This means that each moment, as it exists in all things, has value, bringing about diversity and difference. Buddhism averts extremes where ‘our conceptual thinking somehow inevitably gravitates toward the two inappropriate poles of nihilistic impermanence and lifeless permanence. Either there is something or there is nothing.’ The generative vibration of impermanence, of time, is far from nihilistic because it manifests value in every moment of existence, rather than nihilistically draining meaning from life. That is not to say that life is not difficult and suffering is not painful, but suffering and difficulties are also part of constant change, they are also impermanence. Rather than taking dualist extremes, Buddhism conceives of another dimension to conceptual thinking, the middle way. This is not a space between two dualistic extremes; it is instead an active dimension of vitality, a collusion of opposites; it is nonduality. Impermanence is a constant dynamic movement, and present time cannot be conceived as ‘a spatialized (static) place-thing’.

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7 Stambaugh, 18.
8 Ibid., 20.
9 Ibid., 20-21.
10 Ibid., 92-93.
This shift in thinking about time can be very challenging. If time does not persist and has no duration, if it is not a lineal cause and effect, then how can we understand and experience time? In the Buddhist tradition being attentively present with time, with impermanence, is most successfully experienced as *zazen*, meditation in a seated posture. Such sustained exertion of meditating and being present with impermanence is *gyoji*, which means continuous practice; this downplays development and instead emphasises practice, focusing on process rather than result. The practice of being attentive to the temporal conditions of existence is meeting with impermanence, and it assists in ‘getting rid of the obstinate belief in persistence, duration and substance’. However sustained exertion and continuous practice are not just confined to sitting mediation: ‘anything done with total concentration and dedication is a form of sustained exertion … every moment provides an opportunity for practice and realization of the way’.

Dōgen taught that practice is a process, not a journey from A to B. Rather it is cyclical and renewed moment after moment, it cannot be forced. ‘At the moment you begin taking a step you have arrived, and you keep arriving each moment thereafter. In this view you don’t journey toward enlightenment, but you let enlightenment unfold.’ Dōgen coined the word *dokan*, which is translated as the ‘circle of the way’, to explain how this process of attentiveness and active understanding of the ‘interconnectedness of all things at each moment sheds light on the absolute value of the present moment’. In this way the co-creative process of making art often involves a form of meditative sustained exertion or mindfulness, of following the matter-flow. Similarly the attentive engagement experienced by the viewer in the co-creative relationality of an artwork encounter is also a meditative sustained exertion, feeling present with impermanence, with the vibrations of present time in one’s body and within sentient matter-flow.

Being present with the vibrancy of matter coming forth is to experience ‘Suchness’, a translation of the Buddhist term *tathātā* or ‘thusness’ that means the mind and body

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11 Ibid., 23.
12 Ibid., 22.
13 Ibid., 29.
15 Ibid.
are simply resting on their own being, in their reality. Suchness is feeling how one is part of the manifestation of existence, within the sentient matter-flow, precisely in this present moment: it is mysterious and ineffable reality. Suchness is beyond conceptualisation, so the way to experience Suchness is to let go of preconceptions and thinking structures, to just be with what is. Rather than framing how reality is experienced through perception and trying to understand reality through words or through ideas, Suchness is the immediacy of how we experience reality right now. American Buddhist teacher, Ajahn Sumedho, explains that Suchness is ‘as-is-ness’ of the moment. Suchness is not a perception of reality, it is reality:

… Suchness is right now. This is the way it is. But sometimes, when I say, ‘This is the way it is,’ somebody will say, ‘You mean this is the way it is forever?’ No! RIGHT NOW — this is the way it is. The only way it can be is the way it is right now! It’s changing, but at this moment, the Suchness of this moment, is just this way. The thinking mind has to stop. Otherwise you will want to ask, ‘Where is it? What is he saying?’ You just have to stop your mind and listen, or watch. Then you will be relating to Suchness, the Suchness of the moment, the as-is-ness.\(^\text{16}\)

To experience Suchness is to experience reality by being completely attentive to the present moment. It is often experienced in the everyday, when one lets go of preconceptions, including structures of time. It is not clinging to the human-centric interpretation of your ‘permanent ego anxiously watching time fly past or slip away’.\(^\text{17}\) Instead one’s understanding of existence shifts to experience your body, your very self as time. ‘I am time. As long as I am time, it does not slip away. Any activity involving intense concentration and absorption bears witness to this.’\(^\text{18}\) When an artist is absorbed in the process of creating, or when a viewer is engrossed in the experience of an artwork encounter, neither is aware of time passing. Instead this being present with time, with impermanence, means that they are time, they are impermanence.

Time cannot slip away or fly past if time is you, always already present in your body, your thinking, your understanding of self and existence. However we are often so distracted by our jumbled fleeting thoughts, ideas, dissatisfactions and desires that we do not attentively focus on the immediacy of being engaged in the present moment. ‘Normally we proceed through life, on and on, with our eyes fixed on something or

\(^{17}\) Stambaugh, 36.
\(^{18}\) Ibid.
other, always caught up with something within or without ourselves. It is these engagements that prevent the deepening awareness.\(^{19}\) Although seated meditation, \textit{zazen}, is the traditional Buddhist formal practice of sustained exertion and attentive focus, the Buddhist practice of mindfulness, being attentive, of experiencing Suchness, is intended to extend to all aspects of life, all moments of living. It ripples out into being attentive in all activities in life. Indeed, such a sense of attentiveness is often expressed by people as feeling of being ‘moved’ by an art experience. These penetrating glimmers of attentive experience of present time, of impermanence, are the profound touching immediacy within sentient matter-flow, reaching towards deeper interconnections of existence.

The sense of focus within art encounters exerts and entangles one with time, with Suchness. Stambaugh expresses it as the artist allowing her/his mental chatter and expectations to drop away, to be focused and open to the unknown: ‘when someone or something exerts itself totally, the whole world presences in it … thus no thing or being obstructs any other being, and every moment is a total manifestation of the entire world. To see phenomena in this way is to see them in their suchness.’\(^{20}\) The artist is interconnected with the receptivity of embodied relationality with context, materials and surroundings, within the sentient matter-flow. As such, the artist is being present, ‘right in the midst of time’.\(^{21}\) However this receptivity is not limited to artwork encounters; it can occur at anytime in anyplace when our habitual analytical judgemental modes of thinking dissolve into the openness of not knowing, encountering Suchness.

\begin{quote}
When I look at a flower, I see it completely; the flower is exerting itself and I am exerting myself. That I exert myself does not mean in this case that I make an effort, but that I let the flower presence as it is … The experience of presencing pulled free of spurious continuity may well be very ‘strenuous’, but when it actually happens I am not making an effort.\(^{22}\)
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To be completely present within the moment is to feel the entanglement of time’s vibrations in our own human bodies and our surroundings. ‘The moment does not fly

\(^{19}\) Nishitani, 4.  
\(^{20}\) Stambaugh, 32.  
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 43.  
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 131. Stambaugh’s example of ‘being present with’ a flower, also refers to the famous flower sermon, a wordless teaching whereby Buddha picks a simple flower and shows it to his followers. Most are confused but one of his students, Mahakashyapa, smiles, wordlessly expressing his understanding of the uniqueness of the singular flower. Thus allowing the flower to present as it is and as you are with it, thus the completeness of ‘being present with’ the flower, that specific moment in time.
away. It moves, but within itself, or, as Dōgen also says, up and down.\textsuperscript{23} Rather than the conventional horizontal flow of time, the understanding of time as movement is shifted into vertical vibrancy. Time is felt throughout all phenomenological experiences. There is no time without all beings. Stamburg goes on to explain that ‘time is simply the way these beings take place or presence; they are nothing over and above and beyond this taking place and presencing. There is no substance and no duration … Every thing, including ourselves, is just its moment of taking place or presencing.’\textsuperscript{24} As such, time vibrates vertically: it ‘jumps’ up and down, rather than flowing sequentially along a conveyer belt. Japanese academic Shūzō Kuki similarly describes time’s onto-phenomenological movement as vertical: ‘the time of transmigration … is vertical. Each present moment … is an instant whose thickness is of infinite depth … no longer phenomenological, rather it is mystical.’\textsuperscript{25} He is implying that to simply frame time as phenomenological would be to claim that it can be held as static and known categorically. This is not possible because time is constantly moving and changing so it is always the unknown: it is mystical and complex sentient matter-flow.

Time vibrates in all things. It is mystical and unknown, it cannot be contained. The metaphor of jumping vertically does not imply that time vibrates in all things in unison or predictably, but rather implies that time always moves with variables and important degrees of difference. The way impermanence vibrates and jumps can span infinite and inconsistent spectrums: higher, lower, faster, slower, and sideways as well as up and down; it is more chaotic than choreographed. Another way of expressing this metaphorically is as the continuous dance party of existence, perhaps even the energetic chaos of a mosh pit. Physicist, ecologist and spiritualist Fritjof Capra describes time as a cosmic dance of energy, which is experienced as Suchness.

I was sitting by the ocean one late summer afternoon, watching the waves rolling in and feeling the rhythm of my breathing, when I suddenly became aware of my whole environment as being engaged in a gigantic cosmic dance. Being a physicist, I knew that the sand, rocks, water and air around me were made up of vibrating molecules and atoms, and that these consisted of particles which interacted with one another by creating and destroying other particles. … As I sat on that beach my former experiences came to life; I saw cascades of energy

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 50-51.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
coming down from outer space, in which particles were created and destroyed in rhythmic pulses; I saw the atoms of the elements and those of my body participating in this cosmic dance of energy; I felt its rhythm and I heard its sound, and at that moment I knew that this was the Dance of Shiva, the Lord of Dancers worshipped by Hindus.26

Capra continues to use this poetic dance metaphor of movement and interrelations, from these initial realisations about the parallels in mysticism and physics in his recent descriptions of how modern physics ‘pictures matter not at all as passive and inert but as being in a continuous dancing and vibrating motion whose rhythmic patterns are determined by the molecular, atomic, and nuclear configurations’.27

When I look around and I consider that everything I can see is vibrating with sentient matter-flow, with time itself, this comprehension feels joyful and I understand why Capra describes it as a dance. However to try to stretch one’s mind analytically around the entirety of time constantly vibrating and dancing within all things, throughout the universe, in all of existence, feels overwhelming and utterly uncontainable. Perhaps this is because our habits of knowledge are always trying to measure and contain phenomena, not allowing for mystery or mysticism. So the challenge is really to realise that measuring and containing are just constructed ways of thinking, one of many ways of understanding the world. Consciously recognising and attempting to shift these constructs, helps to loosen the constraints of trying to be rational and analytical: measuring, containing, categorising and judging. If I can instead allow myself to feel and be within the present moment, I can feel that I am my breathing body that is part of and dancing with the vibrations of impermanence, in the meshwork of sentient matter-flow. Then those futile efforts to grasp, measure and contain the universe and time itself slip away, into this immediacy and vastness of impermanence as continuous change, moment to moment, in every particle of existence.

To dwell with present time, to meet with Suchness and comprehend that time is constantly moving in all things, is to no longer try to grasp at impermanence or attempt to step outside of time and view it from a distanced objective analytical

27 The Systems View of Life: A Unifying Vision, 75.
standing point. ‘Everything, including past and future, is in the moment, which is not a [singular] now-point and whose measurement is irrelevant.’ Impermanence implies a quality of not knowing, realising one cannot grasp any of the multiple vibrating now-points of present time that are constantly occurring. To dwell with impermanence is to belie any possibility of analysing it externally, as one cannot be separated from time and existence. This is difficult, Nishitani explains, because we are ‘accustomed to seeing things from the standpoint of the self. One might say that we look out at things from within the citadel of the self, or that we sit like spectators in the cave of the self.’

Viewing existence at a distance, ‘from the standpoint of the self’, is to be utterly human-centric, detached and disconnected from the reality of life and the present moment, leaving no opportunity to feel the immediacy and interconnections of touch. To be attentively present with time is to be aware of constantly touching one’s surroundings. For any single thing to exist, it too must touch its surroundings and vibrate with time. We are of time; we are sentient matter-flow. By its very nature the vibration of time causes difference and diversity. Indeed, diversity is the fruit of impermanence. Diversity and differentiating are constantly arising as impermanence, which undercuts human-centric interpretations of time and existence. As time vibrates within the sentient matter-flows, it causes constant change, so there is difference in each moment and diversity in the forms that arise from it and flow back into it. We are all subject to the condition and context of impermanence: it is what creates us and creates existence.

Being present with, and connected to, the movement and change of time is a central understanding in the practice of Chinese artist Zhang Huan. The embodied experience of time as ‘universally valid experiences’ has always been central to Zhang Huan’s practice. In the early 1990s he was a key figure in the legendary Beijing East Village artists group. Zhang’s performances ‘emulated the mental fortitude that monks seek by enduring extreme physical tests’. They are often interpreted as extremely political and angst-ridden, brimming with ‘pain and a meditative

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28 Stambaugh, 48.
29 Nishitani, 9. Nishitani is referencing Plato’s cave metaphor.
masochism’. 32 Indeed I recall my initial visceral reaction and synesthetic disgusted horror at this photograph of Zhang’s 12m² (1994) performance (fig.41). 33 The performance involved Zhang smearing his naked body with honey and fish oil, then sitting on a dilapidated filthy toilet in Beijing East Village. 34 After an hour, with his body completely covered in flies, Zhang stood up and walked out into a pond nearby, submerging himself completely underwater, and the dead flies floated to the surface.

I just felt that everything began to vanish from my sight. Life seemed to be leaving me far in the distance. I had no concrete thought – I could only feel my body, more and more flies landing and crawling over nose, eyes, lips, ears, forehead, every part of me. I could feel them eating the liquid on my body. Some were stuck but did not stop eating – the very concept of life was then for me the simple experience of the body. 35

Zhang’s recollection of this work articulates Suchness, an embodied connection with impermanence, with life cycles of defecation, feeding, disintegration and renewal. Indeed, the felt experience of being present with impermanence requires no special place or staging; meditating on the toilet is a classic Buddhist teaching. 36

32 Ibid.
33 In 2003 I was fortunate to meet Zhang Huan in Sydney, while working in a gallery that was exhibiting two photographs of his 12m² 1994 performance.
34 Sebag-Montefiore. When speaking about this work Zhang recalls ‘the poverty of his childhood in rural Henan province and the sparseness of his digs in an artists’ community on Beijing’s outskirts in the 1990s. Public toilets swarmed with shit and flies. Indoor plumbing was then, and remains for many today, a luxury.’
35 Dziewior, Goldberg, and Storr, 47.
Meditative sitting and feeling embodied presence with the impermanence of time is perhaps even more apparent in Zhang’s recent work, *Sydney Buddha*, 2015 (fig.42-44). In this work it is the Buddhas that are sitting, and the audience’s art encounters are immersive and multisensory, involving touch, smell and movement, as well as observation. Indeed, ‘Buddha’ is generally understood to be a state of mind, rather than a person, so potentially anyone’s state of mind can be in tune with impermanence, however fleetingly. *Sydney Buddha* featured two Buddha forms, one made up of compressed layers of incense ash, collected from temples in Shanghai, imbued with the hopes, prayers and blessings of the people who lit the incense. The other was the metal mould that the ash Buddha was formed in. Rather than representing a duality of container and contained, these two Buddhas could be interpreted as form flowing into emptiness and emptiness flowing into form. At the opening event of the *Sydney Buddha*, visitors were invited to light incense sticks and add them, with a private blessing, prayer or wish, to the legs of the sitting Buddha. This often caused a little crumbling in the soft ash surface, a participation with ephemerality and impermanence, an invitation to ‘reflect on our place in the world
and on our own blessings and dreams that we may have for our own futures and those that we love. This is a work that represents physically the collective souls, memories and prayers of many that in itself give the work a strong presence.’37

(fig.42) Zhang Huan, *Sydney Buddha*, 2015.

Sitting opposite the ash Buddha, the empty metal Buddha mould presented an open invitation to the viewer to fill it and metaphorically become this Buddha state. This welcoming invitation to participate in the art encounter and be present with it was poignantly extended and enacted in a traditional smoking ceremony, an important Aboriginal ritual of burning fragrant eucalyptus leaves. Budjedi elder Uncle Max Eulo performed the smoking ceremony to bless and cleanse the site, welcoming Zhang and all those visiting to Gadigal land. Zhang was deeply moved by the smoking ceremony and honoured to have ‘worked with two Australian traditional Uncles … I’ve never experienced such a feeling. The first time I saw them, I felt the connection between Oriental culture and Australian traditional culture as felt in the soul of this earth.’38 This spiritual sense of interconnectedness with the Earth, with sentient matter-flow was beautifully incorporated into this Welcome to Country. Indeed Buddhism is already welcomed and situated in Australia, as it is the most common non-Christian religion.39

The participatory, co-creative genuine engagement of the smoking ceremony and

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39 Michael Young, “Zhang Huan Sydney Buddha,” *Art Asia Pacific Blog*, http://artasiapacific.com/Blog/ZhangHuanSydneyBuddha. Young also points out that NSW is also home to Nan Tien, the largest Buddhist temple in the Southern Hemisphere.
Sydney Buddha is integral to Zhang’s understanding of universality and connectivity. For me, the co-creative impermanence of this work was beautiful and profound. I visited Sydney Buddha twice, first at the opening and again during its final week. Lighting an incense stick at the opening, I quietly moved around the monumentally fragile installation, smelling the heavy aroma of the incense ash, observing precarious sections of the ash sculpture crumble away. As Zhang said, ‘being within the presence of the sculptures is a meditative experience within itself … people also connect with the story of the many hands that made Sydney Buddha over the years’. ^40 Zhang started working with ash after he returned to China in 2006 and noticed that Longhua Temple floor was covered with ash leaking from the giant incense burner. Seeing this image of ash conjured a feeling inside of me: it was a beautiful material and it moved me greatly. These ash remains speak to the fulfillment of millions of hopes, dreams and blessings. It was here that I finally discovered the ingredient I had been looking for to pave the way for new work … To some, ash seems useless and insubstantial; it is a short-lived witness to human spirituality and spiritual practice. To me, it carries unseen sedimentary residue, and tremendous human data about the collective and individual subconscious. ^41

The process of creating Sydney Buddha was cyclic. Zhang and his assistants collected four tons of incense ash from temples in the Shanghai area, shifted the ash and sent it to Sydney. There the ash was packed firmly into a metal mold, which was then removed, allowing the ash to crumble down again. ‘The ash Buddha had to be freed from its metal casing before it could be complete, but now that it had been released it was beginning to crumble. In that way, I can see its intended metaphor for the impermanence of life. The ash Buddha’s decay is striking to see, as it crumbles down and collects around the incense sticks that are poking out of its knees. Its destruction is inevitable, but entirely to be expected.’ ^42 Although change is ‘entirely to be expected’, we often do not expect it; instead we idealise stability and perfection, striving toward these impossibilities. It is difficult not to reach for conclusions, to read straightforward cause and effect into experience, expecting to arrive at a complete and knowledgeable conclusion. To be present with change, with time vibrating with all things in existence, is not to grasp after stable perfection. Dōgen called this non-

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^40 Sweet.
thinking. ‘In non-thinking, our everyday busying consciousness is supplanted by a different kind of awareness. Subject, ego and self give way.’

(fig.43) Zhang Huan, *Sydney Buddha*, 2015.

(fig.44) Zhang Huan, *Sydney Buddha*, 2015.

Stambaugh, 113-14.
To practice non-thinking is to be present with change, with the vibration of time in oneself and one’s surroundings. In this way the New Materialist understanding of things as assemblages of vibrant matter, as processes, rather than stable categorised objects, parallels non-thinking. Stambaugh describes non-thinking as having ‘something to do with understanding; it has nothing to do with knowing’. Non-thinking is also termed shikantaza, the path of silent illumination. It is the act of pure meditation based on the principle of ‘just sitting’. However, non-thinking practice is more than just seated meditation, focusing on one’s breathing: it is the dropping away of thinking structures, which can then enable one to meet with Suchness, with what is. Non-thinking is experiencing a ‘clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens to us and in us’. American Buddhist author and psychotherapist Mark Epstein, expresses this state of non-thinking as a state of bare attention or mindful moment-to-moment awareness. He explains that bare attention is ‘a kind of radical acceptance of, or tolerance for, all of our experience’. It is actually very natural to us, but the ability to be open to the experience of bare attention has been forgotten, ‘or it may be in hiding – it may even feel threatening for one reason or another – but it is natural to our being. Discovering it always involved a sense of recovery’. Epstein emphasises that, for both artists and art audiences, the art encounter evokes a similar state. ‘Art is another portal to the space of bare attention.’

Focusing one’s bare attention on ash as an art material is poetic and ephemeral, as it contains layers of interbeing in its almost-weightless particles. However, encountering ash in everyday life often involves quickly sweeping it up and cleaning it away, like dust, dirt and debris. The process of sweeping in Buddhism is often one of mindful moment-to-moment awareness, of training to focus on the embodied moment. Although the repetitive motions of sweeping may seem like a mundane and lowly activity, these repeated gestures can also become a practice of metaphorically and literally sweeping away the mental clutter and distractions from one’s mind. Both sweeping and dust are used in various metaphorical and actual ways in Buddhism.

44 Ibid., 117.
46 Ibid., 31, 34.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
Leonard Cohen, Canadian musician, poet and Zen Buddhist, wrote about how dust is the formless circumstance of what we are. Cohen’s ‘formless circumstance’ is sentient matter-flow, within which all particles, and dust, dance with the vibrations of time. To be mindfully attentive to these dancing particles is to dance with time itself.

In streams of light I clearly saw
The dust you seldom see,
Out of which the Nameless makes
A Name for one like me.
...
All busy in the sunlight
The flecks did float and dance,
And I was tumbled up with them
In formless circumstance. 50

Such attentiveness to our embodied engagement with the momentary is similarly conjured in the repetitive actions of sweeping, focusing on the minute debris of the everyday, dust and ash. Australian artist Hannah Bertram co-creates with cycles of impermanence – collecting, accumulating and forming intricate layered patterns and then letting go, allowing them to be swept away and absorbed back into the world. Bertram describes her practice as cyclic: ‘the verb to dust is circular. It means both to cover with a fine powder and to remove dust from a surface’. 51 Her installation practice involves being attentive to time, to impermanence and the mundane. The materiality of her practice is co-creating with the layered interbeing of the dust of the everyday (fig.45-48). Bertram spends many hours methodically collecting dust, sometimes working with a team of assistants or students, sieving and sorting the dust into tones and colours. ‘Having collected this material – sorted and stored – Bertram shifts from noun to verb in her understanding of her medium and what she sets out to achieve – from “dust” to “to dust”.’ 52

52 Michael Brennan, "To Be Continued," in Hannah Bertram: The Global Dust Project, Aisles of the Dead (Melbourne, Australia: La Trobe University Museum of Art, 2015), 16.
Having researched the history of dust in detail, Bertram’s understanding of its cycles, layers of history and impermanence is both poetic and archeological. Dust has many layers of interbeing: it is ‘the most extraordinary story book providing an understanding of the past, and also crucially important for our society … Dust is weathered, transported settled, and transformed.’ Dust can be shed dead human skin cells; fibers from fabrics; eroded crumbles of stone, wood, paint, furniture, building materials; dehydrated top soil; exhaust fumes and air pollution particles blown through open windows to settle in corners and shelves. Understanding dust in this way is being attuned to the materiality of place and how the hard surfaces of our human buildings, like concrete, sandstone, paint plasterboard and wood, gradually erode to powder. The human body is always already becoming nonhuman. Indeed, the majority of dust in our homes is shed human skin cells. The traditional funeral incantation, ‘ashes to ashes and dust to dust’ speaks of the material cycles, the sentient matter-flows that are in our bodies and that our bodies move through in life, and are also constantly recurring, returning to the Earth.

Bertram’s use of decorative motifs playfully questions the complexities of ornamentation, the way that embellishments add value while being functionally superfluous, how beautification transforms banal materials into temporary delicate installations. ‘By combining decorative motifs with worthless materials, these works offer an alternative experience of preciousness in which value is found not in the perpetuity and richness of ornamented objects, but within subtlety of transient experience.’\(^{54}\) Her co-creative practice investigates the ambiguity of value, critiquing our anthropocentric responses to matter, where worth is often only acknowledged in the appeal of surface appearances.

Bertram meticulously works with finely hand cut stencils to form decorative patterns with her dust and ash, layered like sedimentary strata into complex fragile artworks. She is attentive to the finest detail in the installation process, carefully peeling back the stencils to reveal – without disturbing – the intricate patterns, and cautiously correcting a minute flaw with the static point of a fine dry nylon paintbrush to remove flecks that have moved astray of the pattern. At a certain point, usually just before the exhibition opens, Bertram declares the work finished and abandons it to chance and

the elements, allowing the installation to be disturbed, disrupted and ultimately destroyed. Bertram says, ‘I feel a sense of loss when the works are swept away. I also feel a sense of completion and calmness. I never regret it.’\footnote{Casey Hutton, "Hannah Bertram Interview," \textit{The Meander Journal} 6 (2013).} Sometimes Bertram works with dancers to move over the work so the dust trails their footprints, tracing rhythmic movements (fig.48). On other occasions she leaves it up to gallery visitors to decide their own limits of restraint or indulgence in touching the work. Often the challenge to the viewer is that to experience the work, to see it in its entirety, ‘one must walk across it, destroying (or perhaps simply transforming) parts of it in the process. As observers, we are forced to acknowledge the role we each play ourselves in the ever shifting act of becoming and un-becoming – creation and destruction – on the world.’\footnote{Brennan, 16.}

Bertram described her process of collecting dust as salvaging it from ‘the overlooked remains of life in motion’.\footnote{Bertram.} Dust is the deterioration of all matter, as the particles cycle through the meshwork of interbeing in sentient matter-flows to eventually reassemble and grow into another form. This tends to be a slow cycle: ‘intrinsic to the production of dust is time, it evolves or devolves over days, years and centuries, accumulating slowly and quietly’.\footnote{Ibid.} The timing of Bertram’s installations is, in comparison, extremely brief, but the material of dust and her processes of layering co-creatively speak to deep time, the layers of strata in geological time. The Anthropocene is producing more dust than ever before: geologists distinguish human-induced dust sources from natural ones in order to define the strata boundaries of the Anthropocene. Huge amounts of dust are floating in the atmosphere, still caught in the Earth’s biosphere but suspended and separated from their usual cycles of matter flow. This anthropo-dust has been co-created by humans through over-cultivation, over-grazing, deforestation, erosion, and related activities largely tied to agriculture and industry. These have ‘precipitated huge increases in atmospheric dust loading—with much of that dust also carrying anthropogenically raised pollutants’.\footnote{Lynn Soreghan, "The Dust of Civilization," \textit{Inhabiting the Anthropocene} (2015), \url{https://inhabitingtheanthropocene.com/2015/04/11/the-dust-of-civilization/}.}
Bertram titles many of her dust installations *The Global Dust Project*. She collects dust and creates these performative installations internationally. These co-creative decorative works decay and deteriorate, existing in fluid states of becoming and disappearing. However, considering that the material leading the process here is the dust of the Anthropocene, this forms a more urgent communication about human disconnection from the Earth and disrupting sentient matter-flows, as so much of the fertile dust from which ecologies grow is now caught, suspended above the ground in Earth’s atmosphere. Bertram’s co-creative art encounters invite the audience into a micro situation of quiet dynamic tension, occasionally flaring into something dramatic, but on a macro scale it is the dust of the world that humanity is playing with. Observing the nuances of Bertram’s work and feeling this interconnectedness between the micro and macro, the sensory immediacy of fragile existence is felt as a moment of touching impermanence. This embodied contemplation is palpable and links to a rich history of co-creative meditative floor stencilling that points towards an experiential understanding of Suchness.

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60 Atmospheric dust does not stay in the atmosphere permanently but will return to the ground in different ways, potentially smothering parts of the landscape in a blanket of dust, destroying and reshaping ecosystems in dramatic and unpredictable ways.
In Tibetan Buddhism there is an ancient practice of creating Sand Mandalas. This involves focused, delicate placement of tiny coloured grains and particles into a precise fragile elaborate picture of a ‘tightly balanced, geometric composition wherein deities reside’. The mandala is then ceremoniously swept away. Ritual chanting and prayers are integral to the creation of the mandala and its disintegration, and ‘each grain of sand that falls is alive with the sacred energy’. The sand is traditionally sourced from the Himalayas, so each grain is imbued with the spirituality and ancient wisdom of those colossal mountains: rich layers of interbeing are contained within a tiny particle. The ritualised destruction of the mandala is a ‘living enactment of the Buddhist cycle of change’ and impermanence. The ceremony concludes with visitors and the public being blessed and given handfuls of the sand; each grain of sand is a blessing. The remaining sand is scattered in the flowing water of a nearby

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61 Sheri Brenner, *Sand Painting: Sacred Art of Tibet* (Berkeley, CA Berkeley Media, 2002), Video/DVD. The specific art of Tibetan sand painting has been preserved in the monasteries of India and Tibet for some 2,500 years. Traditionally practiced in seclusion, this unique art form has only been practiced publicly in the last few decades. Indeed the practice of sand painting, and Tibetan Buddhism itself, is an act of endurance and defiance, which marks the survival of this ancient religion against the odds.


63 For beautiful footage of a mandala being swept away see the feature film by Martin Scorsese, *Kundun* (Universal Studios, 1997), feature film. Cinematography by Roger Deakins.

64 Brenner.

65 Ibid.
stream, thus blessing the Earth, and returning the sand to the great cycle of eroding mountains flowing into the ocean.

The mandala tradition exemplifies how all matter is alive with interbeing, part of sentient matter-flow. Grains of sand and dust may commonly be thought of as dead; however, impermanence undercuts the notion of death being a permanent state. This notion of death being final reflects our usual analytical thinking, an anthropocentric cultural habit that wants a sense of security and stability, solid unarguable facts. Indeed, our lives, societies and consumer cultures in the Anthropocene have been constructed around such dual notions of dead/alive, valuable/worthless. Such overthinking of the experiential causes one to imagine oneself at a distance, out of touch, and thus one misses the moment. To perceive all encounters to be just a trace of what is past, fails to feel and be present with the vibrant reality of sentient matter-flow. Intimate direct and touching encounters with being and existence are felt in the body, through one’s senses. They can occur in everyday life but perhaps one is more likely to focus on and recall them when experienced in an artwork or meditation context, when one is deliberately and mindfully open to a temporal sensation of realisation or enlightenment.

There are many examples of people learning mindfulness techniques today, and there is also a rich history of such practices influencing philosophy. In the early twentieth century, German philosopher Martin Heidegger was intrigued by Eastern religions. Heidegger’s theories continue to be pivotal in challenging Western assumptions of analytical thinking and subsequent ingrained notions of duality and separation. Contemporary philosopher Graham Parkes has researched how profoundly Heidegger was influenced by Buddhist philosophy in his search for understanding a sense of being. Heidegger considered how being and time are inseparable, ‘vibrating within itself’. He suggested that we need to learn to dwell with present time. However Heidegger did not completely comprehend Suchness. He could not entirely ‘let go’ of mental constructs, as Timothy Morton explains:

Heidegger descended to this ontological depth without much protective gear. He thought he had hit some kind of authentic bedrock, and in a bitterly ironic way, he had. But voyaging at these depths requires some

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kind of cognitive protection – this is territory that Buddhist mystics swim in, as Heidegger himself intuited. The depth could drive you crazy. Why? Because there are no guarantees. The protection that a Buddhist has at this depth is the protection of emptiness: not a hard suit of armour or tough diving gear, but a light-touch sense of the openness and illusoriness of things, without cynicism.  

This ‘light-touch sense of openness’ that Morton refers to is impermanence and the mysteriousness of Suchness. Heidegger struggled in this realm and perhaps came close to drowning as he clung to a dead weight of Western categories that seek surety, fixture and permanence. He could not penetrate beyond this conceptual level because he did not have a meditation practice; the realisation of Suchness is an experiential one, a cognitive understanding is insufficient. However Heidegger’s search for a way of dwelling in the moment, in present time, connects embodied being with intellectual thinking and moves closer to the view of all experience being sentient matter-flow. Heidegger critically drew on Henri Bergson’s work, which sought to understand the role of intuition in thinking and time as duration, and he developed a concept of multiplicity. Contemporary philosopher Elizabeth Grosz explains that Bergson sought ‘access to this rich profusion of vibrations that underlie the solidity of things’. Although Bergson conceived of the world as ‘teeming and interminable multiplicity’, with ‘waves of interpenetrating vibrations’, this remained ‘outside the relevance of our practical concerns’. As such, Bergson retained a human-centric focus in relation to how the fluidity of existence could be encountered.

To feel the immediacy of being in the very substance of the world, through the porousness of our bodily senses, is not a rational or analytical way of understanding time. Rather it depends on intuition, which reveals the temporality of consciousness, of thinking. Bergson, and later Deleuze, developed a theory of duration, which has ‘a time internal to one’s self … a kind of flowing experience, and duration is the immediate awareness of this flow’. Although duration is not the same as impermanence, it is getting closer. However duration does not convey sensitivity to the felt embodied experience of present time’s aliveness, to sentient matter-flow and how this is encountered as Suchness. ‘Duration is the continuous progress of the past

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69 Ibid., 133.
which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances." Indeed this theory of duration does not invite one into the touching impermanence of an art encounter, as it does not really value the present moment.

All experience occurs in relation to time, place and body. This relationality is immediate and inseparable, so to discuss the aliveness of time one must also incorporate place. Often the term ‘space’ is used, but the theoretical abstraction of this term implies that space is not anchored to place. Such abstractness is frequently contested by the New Materialisms, which prefer situated knowledge and the particular diversities of differentiating. Although we are always immersed in processes of flux, with matter constantly reconfiguring, we encounter reality ‘in the making of spacetime itself.’ Physicist and New Materialist philosopher Karen Barad explains this a process of understanding how matter comes to matter:

The world is a dynamic process of intra-activity in the ongoing reconfiguring of locally determinate causal structures with determinate boundaries, properties, meanings, and patterns of marks on bodies. This ongoing flow of agency through which “part” of the world makes itself differentially intelligible to another “part” of the world and through which local causal structures, boundaries, and properties are stabilized and destabilized does not take place in space and time but in the making of spacetime itself. The world is an ongoing open process of mattering through which “mattering” itself acquires meaning and form in the realization of different agential possibilities. Temporality and spatiality emerge in this processual historicity. Relations of exteriority, connectivity, and exclusion are reconfigured. The changing topologies of the world entail an ongoing reworking of the very nature of dynamics.

To generate open understandings of the ongoing re-workings of the very nature of existence is to follow the sentient matter-flow. Barad’s term ‘mattering’ is important in the co-creative understanding of humans existing in matter-flow. Indeed, we are the matter-flow, but the matter-flow is not just us, not just human: it is also nonhuman and more-than-human. Sentient matter-flow vibrates in time and place; how we encounter sentient matter-flow is time and place specific. The New Materialisms, feminism and post-colonial discourses clearly emphasise the importance of specific locations with particular histories, which are all too often easily overlooked by the dominant, colonially shaped, narrative. This ‘situated knowledge’ is foundational to

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71 Olsen, 120.
72 Barad, 817.
73 Ibid., 817-18.
acknowledging and understanding the immediacy of time, unambiguously rooted in place. Feminist scholar Donna Haraway argues for ‘situated and embodied knowledges … partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections’. The meshwork of sentient matter-flow is interconnected, but one can only encounter it in the present moment, through one’s body, which is situated in a specific place.

My personal time and place experiences of being, living as a first generation non-Indigenous Australian in this country, are increasingly influenced by Aboriginal cultures and cosmologies. This always focuses on place, on Country. Being in that location is specific to the local language group of that area. Indeed, the majority of this thesis was written on Gadigal Wangal Country of the Eora Nation. Aboriginal understandings of Country open up possibilities for others to consider this time-place perspective. Indeed present time vibrates in Country. One’s connection to Country is sometimes described as being felt through one’s feet when standing, or through one’s hip bones and tail bone when sitting: the vibrations of Country are felt as cyclic, more vertical than horizontal. The present moment holds the past within the present, as one experiences it in actual place, through Songlines and continuous ancestral Dreaming. Perhaps this could be described as one’s cyclic time-place axis piercing down into Country through one’s feet – it is a constant connection.

Of course I cannot fully comprehend the Eora elders’ understanding of deep ancestral connection to Country. This connective custodianship runs through their blood, their bones, their feet and hands as they touch Country; it is present in every moment of their existence. I do not want to appropriate their custodianship or their unique connection to Country. Their experience is not mine. But as I walk and co-create on Gadigal Wangal Country, and elsewhere on Aboriginal Country, I aim to be attentive to being on the Country of their ancestors and spirits, to respectfully acknowledge this, and also listen to and learn from their stories and knowledge. Indeed,

74 Haraway, 583,84.
75 As Zoe Todd Amiskwaciwâskahikan (Canadian First Nation academic) points out there is a real problem with ‘the appropriation of Indigenous thinking in European contexts without Indigenous interlocutors present to hold the use of Indigenous stories and laws to account [that] flattens, distorts and erases the embodied, legal-governance and spiritual aspects of Indigenous thinking’. See Zoe Todd, “An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn: ‘Ontology’ Is Just Another Word for Colonialism,” Journal of Historical Sociology 29 (2016): 5.
76 Dan Edwards, “The Courage to Address Other Ways of Being,” Real Time Arts, no. 129 (2015). Edwards refers to David Gulpilil’s advice to non-Indigenous Australians: “Listen to our history. Listen to us. Listen to what we say. Listen to who we are.”
incorporating generative understandings of the time and place of my existence can richly infuse my sense of being present, encountering this time and place.

There is a profound entwining of embodied time-place found in almost all First Nation cultures. Vanessa Watts, a Canadian Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee scholar, describes this as Place-Thought, a theoretical understanding of the world via a physical embodiment. ‘Place-Thought is the non-distinctive space where place and thought were never separated because they never could or can be separated. Place-Thought is based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and nonhumans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts.’77 Similarly on the other side of the world, in the Northern Territory of Australia, where anthropologist Fiona Magowan works with and for the Yolngu people, she explains that time-place and place-thought are much more than topographical. This melding of past and present does not imply that these temporalities are condensed into one. Instead they are subsumed inside each other and the ongoing process of temporal ancestral past and human present. ‘The ancestral world extends into the everyday world, the inside flows into the outside. Outside forms are in a sense generated by inside forms and are not separable from them.’78 This fluid merger of the two temporalities manifests as the ongoing presence of ancestors in the landscape. The ancestors are spoken of as if presently emergent, and so there is always the generative possibility of co-creating new ritual expressions of ancestral power in songs and dances.79

The Australian Aboriginal cosmology of the Dreaming, also known as the Dreamtime, is both time-place and place-thought, connecting the past experience of Country with the embodied present. It is not separate from present time, but coexisting and intertwined with culture and agricultural practices.80 Sociologist Mike Donaldson describes the temporality of the Dreaming as ‘fundamental to the contestation which defeated British attempts to crush Aboriginal culture … the continued assertion of their own temporal order against standardized metric time

79 Ibid.
[formed] successful resistance to attempts to dispossess them of the Dreaming’. This acute sense of Aboriginal cosmology, the resolute time-place of the Dreaming, has formed, strengthened and evolved over tens of thousands of years, pre-colonization. The Dreaming is interconnected across time and place, linking people across generations and across the continent with a multitude of trade routes, which were also Dreaming paths, with hubs of ceremonial exchange and sacred centers through which flowed sacred and profane knowledge, as well as various material goods.

When the time was right in conjunction with the Dreaming cycles, Aborigines would move across the land. They manipulated their diverse ecologies according to temporal, religious, technological and social considerations, thereby taking advantage of periods of peak productivity of plants and animals. The regional responses to the various environments ranged from moth hunting to sealing, from eel trapping to cycad harvesting.

Walking across Country, walking with Dreaming cycles, Songlines and ancestral spirits, is to be walking with Country. The ancientness of Country is constantly manifesting in the embodied experience of being present, connecting through one’s body, as each foot touches the Earth in a cyclic, receptive time-space axis. This connection to Country is an experience of Suchness. Nicole Foreshew, a Wiradjuri artist based in Sydney, describes this connection to Country as ngayirr, which means ‘sacred’ in Pama–Nyungan, the traditional language of the Wiradjuri people of Australia. ‘Nothing is more powerful or more ngayirr (sacred) than the relationship between the garraba, marrin (body, the human body) and dhaagun (earth, dirt, ashes, land, soil).’

Her mineral and wood sculptures, Ngayirr (sacred), 2015, are suggestive of walking sticks, connecting with the ground with each step, held in the hand, steadying one’s body, pointing down into the Earth and up into the sky, each a vertical connective axis of temporality, movement, culture and continuance (fig.49,50). They are also, in a sense, contemporary message sticks marking the passage of knowledge through generations. Indeed, Foreshew’s arrangement of the sculptures, leaning against the wall with the tallest in the middle, suggests a family group. Co-created with Country,

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82 Ibid., 4,5.
83 Ibid.
Ngayirr (sacred) conjure a deep understanding of co-existence with the land, a legacy of ancestors surviving and flourishing, celebrating spiritual and physical nurturing that is sung from the land.

Foreshew worked with materials from her sacred homelands, Wiradjuri Country, tracing personal connections of kin and drawing on the material healing knowledge of her elders. In these co-creative processes she learnt about how to find ochres and minerals in specific places, each with a particular use, tradition, song and story. These materials are found in the Earth, layered with interbeing, created by the Earth, by Country, imbued with a sense of their associated and secret traditional rituals of healing, cleansing and reviving physical, mental and spiritual health. Ngayirr (sacred) speak of the Wiradjuri spiritual and sacred connection to Country, pointing towards, but not actually attempting to explain, the complexity of ritual knowledge and mystery in the Suchness of this healing within Country. In this way Foreshew has created powerful personal contemporary artefacts, with the materials of Country and specifics of her Wiradjuri traditions, co-creating into these works her embedded relationships within the human body and the materials. These sculptures also resonate
with a sense of residue, an anxious protective echo calling out to other objects inconsiderately removed.

Foreshew’s emphasis on working with the land, extracting and using these particular raw materials, is a narrative and language from the environment. The materials explain ‘the fragility of life, recalling those experiences and understanding that it comes through a collective understanding’. The sensibility of co-creating with these materials is an assertive expression of culture, demonstrating the continuance of traditions and connection to Country. This is particularly resonant for Foreshew, given that in the south eastern region of Australia there is a commonly held perception that cultural practices and activities ‘have ceased, or have changed too much to have any value or visible relevance to broad audiences. Yet … Aboriginal art practices emerging from the wreckage of first contact and generations of colonial impacts are assuming an increasingly important role in the continuation of our nation’s cultural strength.’

There is something strong about these Ngayirr (sacred) sticks, which is not exactly a physical strength but perhaps more shamanistic. Bundjalung curator Djon Mundine explains that Aboriginal people are widely believed to have an intuitive sixth sense, a spiritual insight that perceives powers at play beyond the usual everyday. This sense is conjured in Foreshew’s works, as if a simple stick, struck by a Wiradjuri elder into a certain piece of land in the correct way, would cause the dry stick to grow these magical crystals. So the message of these sticks is one of continuing knowledge, for those who know the land, sing with the land. They understand where to find such minerals and how to use their healing properties. Perhaps these sticks themselves become scarred through the act of grasping one end and walking with it, marking the ground, supporting the body, performing ceremony.

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The cluster of minerals at the top of each conjures warm hand-held contact, the imprint of the artist’s grip marked by crystals (fig.50). On a hot day, the salt in one’s sweat evaporates into the air, into Country, and through interconnected layers of interbeing one’s sweat-salt finds its way back to the crystal minerals within the land. Salinization speaks of dry land, a parched human struggling to walk, an absence of drinking water, but for those who know the land water can always be found. Water is healing, perhaps these Ngayirr (sacred) sticks have ritual divination powers in the right hands. Foreshew’s practice seeks out and reactivates ancestral ritual process into present time, involving spirituality, history, politics, race and identity, translating ritual into the contemporary. ‘By drawing personal connections to objects and places, her work goes beyond questions of aesthetic contemplation, blurring the sharp boundaries through people, parents and plant material found on the surface of the suburban architecture and extracted from landscapes of fertile land.’

The interconnected fertile ecosystems of Country have been challenging to comprehend for non-Indigenous people, who often feel disconnected from the land. It takes time, patience, being present with the land and listening to those who have ancient knowledge of Country. However, even without such understandings, non-Indigenous people can be receptive to the power of the land, its sentient matter-flows. Sitting on a rocky cliff in Gundungurra and Dharug Country, in Bilpin overlooking Wollemi National Park, I felt a quiet immanence, being held by the land, a quiet connection to so many people who had passed that way before me over thousands of years. As the late afternoon light and shadows changed with the setting sun then merged into twilight, I felt an embodied sense of presence – of being there – immersed in that moment, myself inextricably part of the Suchness of that place and time. My contemplative awareness incorporated not just what I could see – the view and the tree tops – but also the smell of the air as I breathed in and out, the touch of the cold sandstone I was sitting on, and my emotive state. Beyond my bodily boundaries I could also sense the ancientness of the rocky escarpments, supporting diverse and intriguing ecosystems that are mostly unseen by our human eyes, yet felt on other levels. The sandstone outcrops evidenced the Gundungurra and Dharug peoples’ ancient continuing presence: caves marked with ochre hand stencils and tool grinding groves in the rock platforms – these shifting engagements of humans with these complex ecosystems.

I collected some of the sandstone shards piled near my residency studio. They were made of the same materials as the cliffs; indeed they were previously part of the cliffs and the ground. Made together, forming a long time ago, with stratified layers of minerals and ochre colours, they held history, presence and interbeing. Holding them I felt the cliffs, these shards were the cliffs. My sandstone shards had co-created with the formation of the mountains millions of years ago. The process of bringing them into a gallery focused these layers of interbeing. The rocks held and shared their layered history and my feeling of being held by those mountains.

89 At BigCi (Bilpin international ground for Creative initiatives).
These sandstone shards formed *Permeate* (fig.51-54), installed in the dark secluded projection-room of the Hawkesbury Regional Gallery. Smeared clouds of beeswax seeped out of the junctions between the rocks and the walls, the warm enclosed dark room accentuating the dense honey-oily fragrance of the beeswax, becoming a multisensory immersion. The tactile jutting sandstone shards – each rock consisting of its own layers of historical time, coloured with clay, ochre, grit and sand – became like rock-climbing-handholds, each stone a plateau for one’s eyes and thoughts to rest upon, or to jump between, rock-hopping through a micro interpretation of the Bilpin Wollemi landscape. The quietness of being with the work, to walk around and sit within the generative sensorium of the space, felt contemplative and exploratory. *Permeate*, as an art encounter of ‘touching impermanence’, opened an experiential time and space for embodied Suchness.
One of the most intriguing and unique aspects of the geological ecosystems in the Bilpin Wollemi area is the poetically named 'hanging swamps', which are formed over long periods of time, as the thick porous sandstone cliffs absorb large amounts of rainwater, like giant sponges. This water builds up against the thinner impermeable
strata of claystone and ironstone, which shunt it sideways along the resistant strata to the surface, so the groundwater trickles out continuously, providing constant moisture. The reliable dampness forms patches of swamp conditions with damp peat-rich soil, which nurture and sustain the surrounding vegetation on the seemingly inhospitable steep rocky escarpments. The beeswax in *Permeate* echoes the rain precipitation and seeping movement of the water in the hanging swamps. It also refers to another layer of the ecosystem’s interconnections, that of bees and other insects pollinating the trees and plants of the area, which often goes unseen and unacknowledged by humans looking at the landscape vista.

(fig. 54) Kath Fries, *Permeate*, 2015.

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Back at home, on Gadigal Wangal Country of the Eora Nation, I do not often look out onto vast landscape vistas. Living in Australia’s biggest city, on the coast, it often feels like Sydney’s culture is harbour-centric. When we look for a horizon to calibrate our lives we tend to turn towards the beach and the ocean, thus turning our backs on the vast inland and largely avoiding it. Perhaps it is a colonial legacy of looking out to sea, when home was thought of as being on the other side of the world. Today, that city sense of not-looking-inland, and not-thinking-inland, is even more acutely felt when I travel out of the city. In 2015 with a couple of friends, I drove 900 km inland almost to the state borders, to visit Lake Mungo in Paakantji, Ngyiampaa and Mutthi Mutthi Country. It is a traditional sacred meeting place of these three peoples, and the land holds ancient archeological records of their connection to country in its dry clay beds. Imprinted there is a series of footprints that have been dated back 20,000 years. Wind and erosion revealed these footprints in 2003, and archeologists worked with Pitjantjatjara elders from the Northern Territory to decipher the tracks, reading a complex narrative of family dynamics, children playing, an elderly one legged hunter and two tall men sprinting. It is the largest known collection of Pleistocene human footprints in the world. After being thoroughly recorded the tracks were once again covered in sand, concealed and preserved, their exact location kept secret, remaining a mystery to tourists from the city like myself.

Strangely our visit to Lake Mungo coincided with the heavy five year rains: the land literally held us there as the clay roads dissolved underwater. Being unexpectedly trapped in that place enabled deeper conversations, not just with my companions and other visitors, also with the national park ranger stationed on site, a Ngiyampaa woman, a traditional custodian of the site. We were gifted with the time to really listen to her history and better understand her sense of being connected to ‘the Lady’. In an understated way she explained about the importance of continuing to care for Country, teaching visitors and children. These conversations took on a sense of patient unraveling and added a significant depth to our unique experience of place and time. The dissolving clay roads made it impossible to rush around snapping photos then speed back home again. The land held us and we had to stay much longer, until the water receded and the roads dried (fig.55). All the while the Lady’s spirit

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93 Lady Mungo is the name given to the 42,000 year old cremated female remains found at Lake Mungo. She is considered to be a direct matrilineal ancestor of the three Aboriginal groups of the area, and her spirit is said to watch over the place.
watched over us. Lake Mungo is a phenomenal place, and I was fortunate to be held still there, to feel myself within its sentient matter-flow, the ancient impermanence of that enchanting place. In that forced slowing down I came to a deeper felt understanding of Country.

To feel how time is utterly entangled with place and experienced through our bodies, walking the land and breathing the air, runs counter to the disconnected analytical measurement of clock time. The layered connections of interbeing are felt in the present; to encounter them through attentive embodied immediacy, without judgment, is to meet with Suchness. Focusing on a felt connection with impermanence, with present time, is to sense the immediacy of being enchanted by the aliveness of the Earth, with its sentient matter-flows and its vibrating particles that constantly co-create the diversity and difference of place-time. The interconnections of place-time are richly understood in ancient and mystical knowledge, which survives even in the spiritually drained Anthropocene. For me, in Australia, understanding time as impermanence will always be situated in the ancientness of place, within the world’s oldest continuing culture. The mystery of impermanence opens up the space of unknowing, so encounters of touching impermanence in art practice draw one beyond

(fig.55) Kath Fries, Afternoon shadows, Lake Mungo, 2015.
one’s human-centric concerns and notions of control, pulling one into the orbit of another sense of place and time, into a sense of enchantment.
Chapter five

Enchanted attentiveness
The felt immediacy of present time that manifests in the touching impermanence of an art encounter involves a sense of enchantment and interconnected attentiveness. This engagement is co-creating with sentient matter-flow, embracing the unknown and releasing one into the experiential state of impermanence without preconceptions. To be enchanted is to be drawn beyond one’s human-centric attempts to control, to be touched by a sense of another time and space. Such experiential felt absorptions of wonder and delight are theorised within the vitality of matter in the discourses of New Materialism. Historically enchantment relates to the return-to-nature passionate ideals of Romanticism and the persistent disenchantment of modernity. From the fascination of watching rivulets of water trickle away, to observing the strange ways that mushrooms grow, meditative walking, hugging trees, perceiving a plant sprout from concrete and feeling the connective reality of breathing with the Earth, art encounters focus and conjure enchantment as both letting go and waking up. These experiences involve falling into rhythm with the Earth and feeling oneself to be vibrating with sentient matter-flow. It is this letting go of control, of analytical thinking structures, which is at the heart of touching of impermanence.

Enchantment is an embodied compulsion and an immediate response to sensory engagement with one’s surroundings, which is quite distinct from cognitive control and intellectual rationalism. Something is sensed in the atmosphere, almost subconsciously, as one approaches such an art encounter. One’s walking pace slows, breathing changes, eyes adjust to different light, ears strain to listen, the subtle smell and taste of the air alter. All the senses are holistically heightened, as the mind, body and spirit focus together in nonduality, synchronised in the present moment, in the totality of being in ‘the temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement … to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter’.¹ One is transfixed and spellbound. Jane Bennett describes how ‘thoughts are brought to rest, even as the senses continue to operate, indeed, in high gear … The world comes alive as a collection of singularities’.² The interconnectedness within the sentient matter-flows of the Earth is felt as magical and mysterious.

² Ibid.
This way of being attentive within a state of awareness is sometimes termed mindfulness. It is important in co-creation, as such exerted concentration brings everything together, and nothing is exiled. The most creative impulses do not come just from your mind or well established tropes of logic, but rather stem from the beyond, from the unknown. Peak experiences of enchantment are accidents; you cannot order them to happen, merely be open to them and put yourself in their way. As such, moments of enchantment can sometimes be conjured subtly and almost imperceptibly. One can be unaware and unsuspecting until suddenly one is in the midst of an enchanted embodied immersion. Enchantment is really only experienced in the immediacy of present time, when one experiences the nonduality of present time with the world, with the nonhuman other. Since this total direct engagement with the world is often only for a split second, there is always an element of surprise inherent in enchantment: it is a felt encounter with the unknown and unexpected.

Art experiences of enchantment are historically related to sensory absorption in natural phenomena, which is generally viewed as originating in the Romantic movement, from the late eighteenth to mid nineteenth century. Romanticism broadly encompasses a number of artists, writers, philosophers and musicians whose nostalgic interests in folklore, pagan myths and untouched wilderness were a reaction against the dehumanising mechanisation of the Industrial Revolution, the reductive pragmatism of science and society’s increased secularism. The Romantics’ emphasis on human passion, and their concern that archetypal human connection to nature was being lost, is often represented as a yearning for a ‘primitive’ or an uncorrupted ‘return to nature’. Drawing on Romanticism, German sociologist Max Weber popularized the phase ‘disenchantment of the world’ in 1913, meaning that ‘people’s epistemic attitudes towards the world had changed, they no longer expected to encounter genuinely capricious forces in nature. Everything could, in principle, be explained, since no mysterious, incalculable powers come into play’. However this explicability ‘came at a price, for the eradication of immanence also meant that … nature was dead and inherently meaningless’. Once the life force of nature was

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3 Ibid.
stripped of its value, the value of human life soon lost its anchor without a belief in
the power of nature to sustain it.

Disenchantment continues to pervade most of our human and nonhuman interactions
today. On local, national and global levels the contemporary world, the
Anthropocene, seems increasingly to be characterised by dearth, alienation and
control. This expansive state of disenchantment is deeply problematic, as it
discourages affective attachment to the world. Jane Bennett explains that such
disenchantment fails to ‘nurture the spirit of generosity that must suffuse ethical codes
if they are to be responsive to the surprises that regularly punctuate life’.6 She asserts
that we must resist the story of the disenchantment of modernity; otherwise we will
forever be trapped in this conundrum asking ‘what is there to love about an alienated
existence on a dead planet?’7

Bennett argues for a new understanding of enchantment as more than ‘a homesick
variant of romanticism’.8 Indeed the New Materialisms’ engagements with science
and technology are more generative than Romanticism’s horror at rampant
rationalism and industrialisation. Today there is broad cross-disciplinary interest in
the ways that biology, physics and chemistry open up alternate complex and evolving
ways of understanding matter, particularly dimensions of nature that often escape
human notice, operating ‘below the threshold of human perception. “Mere” plants,
ants and ideas turn out to have a degree of complexity and material efficacy that
humans have hitherto ignored or underestimated. New scientific practices and
instruments render these capacities sensible to us, and we are both charmed and
disturbed by them’.9 Being both charmed and disturbed is integral to enchantment:
there is always something scary, frightening about the unknown. Such enchantment
can be encountered through a microscope and translated into the realisation that all
our surroundings are aggressively teeming with life. Then the reality of this
continuous unseen vibrant activity of our surroundings can continue to haunt our
everyday and our anthropocentric aspirations for control.

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7 Ibid., 4.
8 Ibid., 32.
9 Ibid., 171.
The liveliness of the minute and the microscopic everyday resonates with traditional understandings of the spiritual as ever present in our surroundings. Seeking more diverse understandings of spirituality in relation to science, the New Materialisms draw on other traditions such as Buddhism and ancient modes of knowledge, acknowledging First Nation cosmologies as living and valid belief systems, rather than a Romantic reductionist yearning for lost primitive ways of relating to the world. New Materialisms see nature as interwoven into everything in existence, as the constant changing intra-actions of all matter in the world, whereas Romanticism saw nature as untouched wilderness, an idyllic situation uncorrupted by humans. While Romanticism longed to be re-united with nature, New Materialism asserts that we have never actually been separated from nature. Indeed, we cannot be separated from it, as we are always necessarily within nature, within our bodies that are nature. Nature is sentient matter-flow, which humans are intrinsically part of, yet we tend to feel disconnected from it. As such, new frameworks and descriptors are needed for envisioning and understanding how the human is inextricably interconnected with the nonhuman, within the Earth’s biosphere and with the more-than-human.

Understanding these connections within and beyond our bodies as more-than-human, as nature, requires active engagement with one’s surroundings and being open to a sense exhilaration and acute sensory activity. ‘To be simultaneously transfixed in wonder and transported by sense, to be both caught up and carried away – enchantment is marked by this odd combination of somatic effects ... it is a state of interactive fascination, not fall-to-your-knees awe.’¹⁰ The Romantic notion of the sublime was ‘fall-to-your-knees awe’: the sublime was an experience of the powerful immensity of God reflected in nature like a mirror, by which one was awestruck. This contrasts with the New Materialist understanding of the ever-present enchantment of the everyday; although surprising, unsettling, wondrous and sometimes scary, it is different from the human-exceptionalism of biblical dread conjured in the Romantic sublime.

Everyday moments of enchantment can occur at any time. Bennett uses the term ‘crossings’ to explain such experiences of intersecting complex connections in the

¹⁰ Ibid., 5.
webbed networks of interbeing. The particularities of encountering an enchanted crossing involve being attentive to the distinctively unknown unexpected and uncontrollable within an ensemble of everyday phenomena. Although we are constantly forming more-than-human conjunctions, to be enchanted by an experience one cannot be dismissive or flippant, but rather must be receptively open to the intra-active co-creation of the crossing.

If you engage certain crossings under propitious conditions, you might find that their dynamism revivifies your wonder at life, their morphings inform your reflections upon freedom, their charm energizes your social conscience, and their flexibility stretches your moral sense of the possible... Crossings can show the world to be capable of inspiring wonder, with room for play... [with the] increasingly multicultural, multispecied, and multitechnical. 11

Enchanted crossings are always multi-species, more-than-human; these moments are inherently unstable, ungraspable, vibrating with life, mystery and energy. Although enchantment can be receptively prepared for, and even be cultivated to some extent, it largely remains uncontainable and unmanufacturable: ‘enchantment hits one as if from out of the blue, without warning. You can prepare for it and try to cultivate a receptivity toward it, but it is never only or fully the product of will or intention.’ 12

Moments of enchantment occur in the everyday, and for some attentive people they occur frequently ‘as an array of minor experiences in contemporary life’. 13 These enchantments are often simple, like finding a mushroom growing in a forest as it emerges from its camouflage blanket of pine needles, following a trail of ants, or catching the flicker of a brief shadow amongst stillness in one’s peripheral vision. For most adults our engagements with the world are dominated by rational, compartmentalised and analytical frameworks, so we distance ourselves from experiencing enchantment.

However, Bennett argues that our human ability to experience the world as enchanted is hard-wired into us from birth. Children frequently experience the world as an enchanted place, so all humans should be able to reconnect with this ‘subdispositional attachment to the abundance of life that is deeply installed in their bodies’. 14 This embedded attachment to the liveliness of the Earth is the source of receptivity and

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11 Ibid., 32.
12 Ibid., 169.
13 Ibid., 131.
14 Ibid., 158.
generosity towards our co-inhabitants, human, nonhuman and more-than-human: ‘in the hem of this matrix, ethical principles… ideals, and sensibilities are born’.15 In this way, cultivating and valuing a sense of enchantment with the world also inherently nurtures ethical responsibilities. By paying attention to our surroundings, being curious and not judging, we can be open to enchantment. Seeking modes of enchantment gives us the ‘energy and inspiration to enact ecological projects, or to contest ugly and unjust modes of commercialization, or to respond generously to humans and nonhumans that challenge our settled identities. These enchantments are already in and around us’.16 To seek enchantment one needs simply to be open to them, attentive to the present moment and receptive to these small instants of wonder.

These small instances of wonder can also be understood as the sacred in the mundane. Dōgen taught about the importance of being open to and appreciating such moments of enchantment in the everyday, ‘Those who regard the mundane as a hindrance to practice only understand that in the mundane nothing is sacred; they have not yet understood that in sacredness nothing is mundane’.17 As such, Dōgen taught that sacredness reaches everywhere and can be felt as enchantment and wonder: it exists constantly in the everyday, in all places. One simply needs to be attentive to notice the numerous enchantments in the mundane. Such contemplative awareness and attentiveness, which brings one into realising the co-creation of interconnection, is also called silent illumination. The correlation between the terms silent illumination and enchantment is immediately apparent in the way that they express the experiential wonder of being within such a moment. This felt encounter within the vibrancy of life and interbeing links enchantment to Suchness – encountering reality as it is, without preconceptions or judgement. There is often a quietness, silence and reverence in such moments of sacredness and enchantment. The practice of being, listening and being attentive echoes the silent focus of meditation, quietening the chatter in one’s mind so the thing-in-itself can come forth.

In Japan there is a rich tradition of haiku poetry, which vividly conjures such moments of enchantment, the sacred mundane and the surprise of wonder

15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 174.
encountered in the everyday. Bashō Matsuo (1644–1694) is the most well known of Japanese poets. He was a wanderer, wayfarer and Buddhist, who undertook numerous walking journeys, pilgrimages of sorts, to particular landscapes and sites of natural beauty. Haikus are deceptively simple and brief yet also striking and surprising, often with undertones of paradoxical stillness and movement, sensory conflation, playful queries and emotional subtext. Bashō’s poetry captures moments of surprise, human foibles and wonder at the world just getting on with the cycles of existence

Sitting quietly, doing nothing, 
Spring comes, and the grass grows, 
by itself.18 

Similarly American transcendentalist, Henry Thoreau was fascinated with the ‘phenomenon of nocturnal corn growth’.19 Thoreau found this unseen natural activity enigmatic and compelling, in keeping with ‘his appreciative recognition of the elusive, mysterious, and vital nature of matter’.20 Rochelle Johnson, an American environmental humanities scholar, considers Thoreau’s accounts of the elusive growth of corn in the dark to signal the ‘productive agency of matter in shaping Thoreau's experience of the human/more-than-human continuum’.21 An activity that takes place outside at night and goes unseen by sleeping humans indoors, its hiddenness adds to the enchantment of discovery in the morning. This present time mysterious encounter with something unexpected demonstrates how enchantment can only be located within the immediacy of the present moment. Furthermore the present moment is experienced as embedded in the Earth’s rhythms and cycles, or ‘routines’ to use Thoreau’s term. These rhythms of sunlight and night time, ecological cycles and seasonal changes are local and place specific. They are ‘routine as necessary to the well-being of both human and nonhuman life forms … [and] integral to the material universe’.22 They can also be understood as sentient matter-flow.

Thoreau’s attentiveness to the Earth’s routines is a felt interconnectedness and series of enchanted crossings. His emphasis on sound and silence implies that he is listening to the ineffable more-than-human presence of silence. ‘Silence is audible to all men, at all times, and in all places. She is when we hear inwardly, sound when we hear

18 Bashō Matsuo was a 17th-century Japanese haiku master and Zen Buddhist (1644–1694).
19 Johnson. 619.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 615,17.
outwardly. Creation has not displaced her, but is her visible frame-work and foil’. Johnson regards Thoreau’s attentive listening as a way of integrating and constituting himself amid his world. As such, mysterious multisensory understandings of what is not seen, what is not touched and what is not heard contribute to enchanted crossings. The sense of wonder that is key to enchantment also implies a sensory searching, which is often playful, even joyous. Johnson asserts Thoreau’s ‘reverie is the routine of the human/more-than-human continuum, and amid this materiality … he conveys a heightened sense of his own experience … the continuity of self, silence, spirit, and matter’.

Johnson reflects on Thoreau’s accounts of the enchanted interconnectivity he felt with nature to argue for bringing a dimension of spirituality back into philosophical discourses. Indeed this seems a logical development of New Materialist discourses about the intra-activity of all matter, extending it to an understanding that ‘spirit exists as matter even as matter exists as spirit … that is, spirit not as originating from humanity/culture but as part of the being that is the world’. Johnson asserts that the embedded immersion of humans in the world demonstrates a desire amongst such philosophers to ‘move beyond emotional and ethical registers and toward the mystical … Certainly, much New Materialist scholarship already employs language that assumes an ineffable quality to existence.’ Matter is thus understood as being not just physical particles, manifestations and phenomena but also including the ineffable. Johnson emphasises the interconnections of the ineffable with the material and the human, stressing that Thoreau understood such enchantment as occurring ‘not as an escape from the material world but from the meeting of his sensory experience as a body, the material world, and the matter that is his mind’.

The enchanted crossing is felt in the meeting of body, world and mind when listening to, and being within, the land. In Ngangikurungkurr Country in the Northern Territory, this is known as dadirri. Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, a Ngangikurungkurr artist, elder and educator, teaches about dadirri as an experience of wonder and enchantment felt when one is sitting quietly within the land. Dadirri is

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23 Ibid., 620. Johnson quotes A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. By Henry D. Thoreau. 391
24 Ibid., 623, 22
25 Ibid., 614.
26 Ibid., 609.
27 Ibid.
like a meditative practice, as it involves deep listening and quiet stillness, reciprocity and a felt understanding of interconnectedness within sentient matter-flow. The practice and understanding of listening to the land are fundamental to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and indeed to most First Nation Cultures. *Dadirri* ‘is inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness.’\(^{28}\) This also involves listening to and feeling one’s interconnections with the waterways of the land, as Ngangikurungkur Country is on and around the Daly River in the Northern Territory. The river is central to Ngangikurungkur culture, songs, stories, time, place, and understandings of existence. ‘We are River people. We cannot hurry the river. We have to move with its current and understand its ways.’\(^{29}\) Ungunmerr-Baumann explains that Ngangikurungkur means ‘the Deep Water Sounds' or 'Sounds of the Deep'. As such *dadirri*, listening to the land, is both a practice and an understanding of ‘tapping into that deep spring that is within us’\(^{30}\). *Dadirri* flows from and back into the river, as well as around and within humans, and all living things in Country.

*It is inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness. Dadirri recognises the deep spring that is inside us. We call on it and it calls to us … When I experience dadirri, I am made whole again. I can sit on the riverbank or walk through the trees; even if someone close to me has passed away, I can find my peace in this silent awareness. There is no need of words. A big part of dadirri is listening … There is no need to reflect too much and to do a lot of thinking. It is just being aware.*

*Dadirri* is a combination of a sense of wonder with a sense of empathy that enables openness and receptivity, which allow one to feel the sense of wonder. In this way, lack of *dadirri* can be understood to cause stress, impatience, overconsumption and many of the problematic anxieties of living in the Anthropocene. Ungunmerr-Baumann believes that the gift of the *dadirri* is ‘perhaps the greatest gift we can give to our fellow Australians’. This understanding and practice of *dadirri* is taken up by non-Indigenous Australian environmental scientist and writer Haydn Washington, he teaches about listening to the land and experiencing ‘a sense of wonder’.\(^{31}\) He sees rejuvenating our sense of wonder at nature as essential to addressing our local and global environmental crises, to ‘give us the deep belief to make the difficult decisions needed. Respect and listening to the land, empathy, *Dadirri* – these offer us a sense of


\(^{29}\) Ibid.

\(^{30}\) Ibid.

perspective, of humility … if we listen to the land we develop an eco-centric worldview, where we are part of nature. That means nature has intrinsic value and ‘rights’ of its own." Understanding that nature has innate value and rights of its own counters the human-centric view of nature as a machine to be utilized, fixed and exploited. Washington uses the term ‘Homo-denialensis’ to reflect how humans living in the Anthropocene continue to deny the realities of our finite interdependent planet, pursuing a growth economy, overpopulation and overconsumption. Across First Nation cultures variations of this lesson of listening to the land resonate. Our global human need is to feel enchantment, to reconnect and relearn that ‘Nature is a patient teacher too, we don’t create nature, it creates us. So listening helps us to break through our denial.'

Listening to the flow of existence and the relationships between and within things, the breaking through of our denial of interconnections, is termed ‘spirited affinities’ by British curator and writer Adrian Heathfield. He describes how spirited affinities seek reconnections between the secular and the spiritual, the material and the immaterial. Heathfield is specifically interested in art practices where the ‘human animal’ becomes re-attuned to planetary forces and the powers of the unknown, where ‘a transcendent materialist sense of spirit emerges, emphasising transcendence as that which is coming into being, rather than being beyond being’. Such understandings of spirited affinities involve a sense of enchantment, surprise and embracing the unknown, accepting that there are temporalities beyond human perception and cognition ‘that exceed and include the human estate and are found all around us in what was once called the natural world’.

A spirited affinity is not simply a correspondence of forms, or a shared aesthetic sensibility; it is rather an inclination towards such outsides joined in differentiation. Much like Bennett and Johnson’s use of the term enchanted, Heathfield’s spirited affinity is a connection or a ‘metamorphosing of distinct ways of being with singular unknowns … presencing the limits of the human perceptual field. Earth manifests

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32 Ibid., 25.
33 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
itself here as an unfathomable presence, an eruption of atemporal and extra territorial forces outside of human intelligibility’.³⁷ The possibilities of articulating spirit in New Materialist relations are becoming more open-ended and complex. Heathfield sees these diverse questions and arrays of understandings of spirit as not necessarily affiliated with formalised religion, but rather leading to multiplicative understandings of spiriting as generative art processes.

Focusing on contemporary performative practices, Heathfield locates his understanding of spirited affinities as part of the co-creative art encounter, enmeshed in relational webs of interbeing that connect materials with the body and surroundings, including the air. To associate spirited affinities with the air harks back to traditional descriptions of spirit as being like vapour. Indeed, the connectivity that air has in relation to all things conjures such notions of the spirit and its vibrant connective energy as atmospheric, permeating and touching all things. Heathfield recalls the sense one experiences when walking into an immersive multisensory installation where ‘you become part of the work as you are changing the air by being there; you are participating in a process of transformation’.³⁸ Heathfield explains that there is an agency even to one’s entrance; it is felt intra-actively, co-creatively. As the artist is presencing air, so too is the viewer presencing the air – intimately, as the air is a connective tissue, a sustainer of life.

Co-creative practices plunge into generative intersubjective conditions, into forms of communion between people, spirits and things. The enchantment of such processes is ‘auto-poetic, where one thing leads to another and it is impossible to decide where the agency of the artwork’s generation actually resides’.³⁹ Drawing on spirited affinities as temporal encounters that focus on the moment turns the nature of event-hood into a fissure or breach, rupturing various orders of knowledge and power. Heathfield expresses the enchantment of such processes as ‘prolonged, processual, continuous, resilient and obdurate, with slow morphologies of lingering, insistent and persistent dimensions’.⁴⁰ Co-creative practices have porous dimensions, with energetics and forces moving through time to register in history as subterranean rivers or

³⁷ Ibid.
³⁸ Ibid.
³⁹ Ibid.
⁴⁰ Ibid.
imperceptible flows that exist in close proximity to aspects of life.\textsuperscript{41} These spirited affinities and enchantments in art encounters can be quietly insistent, coming in and out of currency and visibility at different times. They foster new lives and new works, with a kind of empathy across and within different and differentiating situations. Heathfield’s term ‘spirited affinities’ aptly describes the immaterial and affective forces moving through and between materialities, tracing passages from, to and with and outside, so the division between materialism and spirituality becomes somewhat redundant.\textsuperscript{42}

Spirited affinities are ever present in the material world and are sometimes encountered as enchanted crossings. Quite simply they can be felt wherever these paths meet, potentially each time our feet contact the Earth. Although such ineffable enchantments are always already with us in the world, within the Earth’s entangled webs of interconnected vitality, we often do not feel or realise our connections with them. Yet, everyday we are walking these pathways and enchanted crossings. The phenomenological attentiveness conjured through the simple kinaesthetic processes of walking can open up such encounters and realisations. Merleau-Ponty expressed enchantment as phenomenological moments when ‘qualities radiate a certain mode of existence around themselves … because the sensing subject does not posit them as [inert] objects, but sympathizes with them, makes them its own, and finds in them … momentary law’.\textsuperscript{43} This momentary law is what Timothy Morton terms the ‘realist magic’ of causality, happening constantly as the ‘appearance and disappearance of things happens in the sensual realm’. Yet we often do not notice realist magic, as it is a ‘secretive affair’.\textsuperscript{44} Morton argues that this is because causality is mysterious and ‘mystery thus suggests a rich and ambiguous range of terms to convey something essential about things’.\textsuperscript{45} This allure of the mysterious in everyday causality can potentially be met with in every experience of touching our surroundings.

Walking is always an act of touching, a series of rhythmic repeated acts connecting one’s body and self to the ground and to the Earth. Although walking is usually dismissed as a merely a way of getting from one place to another, for many artists,
writers and pilgrims, walking is practiced as an important embodied form of thinking. The movement of walking synchronises with the movements of thoughts, not just prompting moments of clarity in the mind as one’s feet repeatedly touch the Earth, causing an almost jolting rhythm that can shake up the thinking processes, but even more, as American writer Rebecca Solnit asserts, such walking serves to connect ‘the lowest and most material to the most high and ethereal, to close the breach between matter and spirit. It subversively suggests that the whole world might potentially be holy and that the sacred can be underfoot rather than above’.  

It is this sense of walking as a connecting process with the Earth, involving body, mind and spirit, which is the focus of kinhin, walking meditation. Thích Nhát Hạnh has made kinhin into a central part of his practice and teaching. The movement of walking allows the body to understand the agitations of the mind, so the holistic meeting and synchronicity of body and mind is not just the mind slowing down to meet the body but the body also moving to meet the mind. Walking meditation requires focus and the attentive alignment of mind and body through breathing: ‘when we return to our breathing, we return to the present moment’. The mindfulness of being attentive to one’s breathing and walking allows each step to become an enchanted crossing, as one meets with this kinaesthetic process connecting one back to the Earth. Hạnh says that if we stop rushing from one place to another then we can arrive in the present moment with every step:

The first thing to do is to lift your foot. Breathe in. Put your foot down in front of you, first your heel and then your toes. Breathe out. Feel your feet solid on the Earth. You have already arrived.

Each footfall feels a point of connection to the Earth and to being alive, focusing on the body in reminding me ‘to notice and enjoy that my body is alive and strong enough for me to walk’. Each breath brings the world, and the present moment, into one’s body, whilst it releases the body back into the world in a continued cycle of interconnection. Each step returns attention to the breath, bringing one back to the present, to the immediacy of the here and now. Thus the kinaesthetic mindfulness of breathing and walking can be felt as repeatedly unfolding within the entangled webs

48 Ibid., 8.
49 Ibid., 15.
of interbeing, connecting to the Earth, reminding one to be more present. The Earth is a teacher: ‘It is always there, greeting your feet, keeping you solid and grounded.’

Being aware of how the Earth ‘greets our feet’ as the ground reaches towards us accords with feeling the joy and the enchantment of being alive. It is a simple yet profound connection and realisation of our cohabitation within the world’s biosphere, recognising that we are ‘walking on a living being that is supporting not just us but all of life. A lot of harm has been done to the Earth, so now it is time to kiss the ground with our feet, with our love.’ Such understandings are experiential rather than intellectual. Although it can be described and explained, walking mediation, like seated meditation, cannot really be understood until it is practiced. Cultivating attentiveness and mindfulness is necessary to experience the enchantment of such interconnections and the wonder of being fully in the present moment. The present moment involves us realising we are in ‘the process of going back to Mother Earth right now. Thousands of cells in our bodies are dying each moment, and new ones are being born. Whenever we breathe, whenever we walk, we are returning to the Earth … Each step contains insight … and compassion for the Earth and for all beings, as well as for ourselves.’

Walking can be a compassionate way of feeling the embodiment of being alive, of feeling at home in one’s body. However, it is not always gentle and comfortable, particularly the exhaustion of a pilgrim’s walk, which tests the limits of one’s body, as well as one’s mind and spirit. As Solnit explains, ‘pilgrimages make it possible to move physically, through the exertions of one’s body, step by step, toward those intangible spiritual goals that are otherwise hard to grasp’. Although we may often say that life is a journey, actually going on a real expedition takes hold of that notion and makes it tangible. A pilgrimage enacts experiential spiritual connections with the imagination, body and Earth ‘in a world whose geography has become spiritualized’. The effort and commitment involved in walking such pilgrimages return the body to its original limits while also extending the body out into the world.

50 Ibid., 13,16,50,56.
51 Ibid., 32.
52 Ibid., 48.
53 Ibid., 74,76.
54 For a detailed discussion of ‘feeling at home in one’s body’, see Sobchack.
56 Ibid.
Indeed walking can allow us to be in our bodies and in the world without being made busy by accomplishing tasks. Such walking can give freedom to think without being wholly lost in one’s thoughts. However, walking is a freedom and privilege not available to all, as Australian human-geographer Lesley Instone asserts:

There are many ways to walk, many ways of seeing and knowing… walking is as cultural as it is embodied … And, of course, walking, the choice to walk and the freedom to be able to walk, is a privilege not available to all. A privilege not to be squandered or taken lightly. At best it’s a generative practice of risking ourselves and risking new relations, rather than falling back on sedimented habits and well-worn paths.

I have had the privilege of undertaking a certain type of pilgrimage, in my case not a traditional religious pilgrimage but art pilgrimages to visit distant galleries, site-responsive works and far flung art museums to see life-changing artworks. Somewhat like a religious pilgrimage, such journeys also require a sense of commitment, leaving behind familiar comforts and embarking on encounters with the unknown. In 2011, I was fortunate to travel, with the assistance of the Japan Foundation New Artist Award, to the Benesse Art Sites located on the islands of Japan’s Seto Inland Sea. Exploring Naoshima Island, with its astute architecturally ultra sharp contemporary galleries juxtaposed with the old disused buildings of fishing villages that now house fabulous site-responsive installations, I heard about Teshima Art Museum and the enchanting work by Rei Naito that it contains. Intrigued, I managed to find a ferry to Teshima Island and negotiate transport to the museum site. There was not much to see on arrival, just a small cube-like space-age concrete bunker. This was the museum information center, where all visitors had to surrender their bags, cameras and phones. I was then directed to follow a meandering path around the side of a grassy hill. Finally I was nearly there. I walked quietly, watching the long grass sway gently in the breeze, sparkling in the light rain and intermittent sunshine, whilst inside I was silently bubbling with anticipation. Even as I approached, the museum itself remained concealed from view, crouching in the landscape’s undulations and hidden by trees.

57 Ibid., 29,5.
Finally I saw it, but it was not really a building, more like a gigantic sculpture, a strange, crouching, low-sitting, almost UFO-like droplet of an enormous concrete eggshell, both fragile and nurturing. Teshima Art Museum was designed by Japanese architect Ryue Nishizawa in close collaboration with Japanese artist Rei Naito. Indeed it was impossible to really say where Nishizawa’s museum ended and Naito’s artwork began, in this a wonderful merging of collaborative co-creation. The immersive experience of Naito’s *Matrix*, 2010 also worked with the landscape and natural elements of air, light and water. Removing my shoes and ducking to enter through a round low-ceilinged opening, I entered Nishizawa’s thin concrete shell, a structural masterpiece devoid of pillars, seemingly resting on the Earth, like a giant delicately calcified raindrop (fig.56-59)

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With each step my cold bare feet connected with the sensation of this cool, smooth, damp concrete under my toes and soles as I moved around the space. Two large oval openings in the concrete shell wall allowed wind, sounds, and daylight to enter from the world outside. I crouched down to watch tiny droplets of water well up through the miniscule craters and minute irregular perforations in the floor. The trickles of water seemed to pause, then move, encouraged by the breeze and sloping floor. They would gather momentum and run off in another direction, join other droplets or puddles, and just as spontaneously disappear back into the floor. Sitting there, quiet and still, I was utterly mesmerized and enchanted. The artwork was so quiet. If people spoke in the cavernous space it was only in whispers, you could hear the wind outside moving into the space and fluttering the white ribbons that hung across the open, unglazed, round window spaces. The atmosphere was reverential, spiritual, a meeting with Suchness.
The Teshima Art Museum feels very much like a religious site to most people who visit it. This dedicated space feels ‘sacred’, in the sense that the function of this place is to leave one’s usual preoccupation of life and self outside with your shoes, or even back at the information center bunker with those superfluous bags, phones and cameras. Indeed, entering this space without that physical and mental baggage enables one to be more present and attentive to the experience, more receptive to the meditative atmosphere and, for many, to fall into a realm of utter enchantment. The porosity of the space, and the breeze, sunlight, water, people and spirited affinities moving through it, form an enchanted crossing. It felt like I had let go of myself, of the dualities of my perceptual structures, and in doing so had fallen into rhythm with the Earth.
Although the breeze dissipated within the space, I could still feel it on my skin and it remained sufficient to animate the water droplets and rivulets on the floor, causing them to move – sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly – across the floor to gradually pool and puddle together, then be slowly absorbed back into sections of the porous floor. This continuous cycle is added to when rainwater enters the space through the open windows. It was raining gently on the day that I visited, so I could see and feel that the outside was coming inside, as rainwater mist, as well as light and air.

Interestingly the island receives relatively low annual rainfalls, so *Matrix* does not just rely on the rain as its water source. The museum was built around a spring, which pushes water to the surface and retrieves it again. As well as being constructed around the spring, the museum shell was also built from the hillside and into the hillside. The concrete was poured onto a compacted mound of earth that had been shaped to echo the contour lines of the site, supported only by an overlaid grid of reinforced steel, like a ribcage. After the concrete had hardened over the ribbing, the solid soil inside was dug out with heavy earth moving machinery, eventually leaving behind the concrete domed shell form, which was then cleaned and polished into its present state. The concrete shell slab has a freeform curvature that spans 60 metres at its longest
point and reaches up to 4.5 metres at its highest, quite an engineering and architectural feat by Ryue Nishizawa and his team, co-creating with the landscape to create this structure without a seam or pillar. It is profoundly unusual and alien yet also wonderfully part of the hillside, spring, trees and rice terraces of that place.60

The museum is shaped like a water droplet, which is integral to the micro and macro experience of the work. Simultaneously open and closed, the shell protects and nurtures the artwork, as well as allowing air from the outside world to have a physical presence and effect on the artwork. Generally people don’t give a thought to the air, even less so inside a museum but here ribbons over the wide-open window spaces draw visitors’ attention to the movement of the air. The title of the work, Matrix, refers to the interconnections of all things; such webbed patterns of existence have evolved with the Earth, and they are inseparable from Earth. These micro and macro elements include the air, which is integral to the biosphere of Earth and to the complex, bio-diverse ecosystems that sustain life.

There was an intriguing sense of harmony between the external and the internal in this work. The natural and the man-made work together beautifully: the usual duality of these two elements dissolves. I felt like I could have sat there for hours watching the daylight and weather change outside, affecting the atmosphere inside. The movements of the water droplets offered endless fascinating tiny narratives. Rei Naito describes it thus: “water trickles out from the ground, here and there, throughout the day. As light, wind and the voices of birds – on occasions also rain, snow, and bugs – enter through the two openings and come in resonance with each other, an infinity of expressions are revealed as time passes. Immersing calmly in this space, feeling united with nature, we may sense the joy of life on earth.”61

Naito suggests that the space is womblike, a maternal space, a vessel, reflecting the forces that make life on Earth possible and also that observe life on Earth. This understanding of Matrix as something that is always with us, something that everything is born from and nourished by, reflects a continuing theme in her work: ‘is

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61 Ibid.
existence on earth itself a blessing? This open-ended question can be interpreted in different ways: whose existence is a blessing for whom? It can challenge our human-centric thinking, suggesting that as interconnected entities we can potentially be blessings for each other, nonhuman, more-than-human and human alike. Matrix’s arrangement of connected entities, as the wind, water, air, spirited affinities and people meet in this place, form an enchanted crossing, so perhaps Naito is implying that we are all blessed to be existing on this Earth, nonhuman and human together. I certainly felt fortunate, blessed even, to have encountered Matrix. In the reciprocity of blessings, there is an implication that we should respond by blessing the Earth, by appreciating and taking care of the air, the soil, the water, extending ourselves to nurture and cherish this blessing of existence of which we are part. Teshima Art Museum is an enchanted crossing, simply and thoughtfully conceived and constructed so it is at once separate from the everyday and still part of it, given the straightforward materials – concrete, water, soil, air and a ribbon – from which this enchantment was formed.

Art encounters often invite enchanted crossings, aided by the construction of the gallery space and the attentive focus of its visitors, the habitual ritual of leaving preconceptions and everyday anxieties outside – even when you do not take off your shoes or relinquish your phone. I am interested in the ways that people move around an exhibition space kinesthetically and how we respond to artworks multi-sensually, so when I curated Future Stratigraphy, I wanted to invite a sense of an enchanted crossing into these co-creative art encounters. However, the disparate artworks in the exhibition addressed the challenges and despairs of our more-than-human entanglements in the Anthropocene. But even in toxic pollution there are glimmers of life and the potential to be enchanted for a moment. Looking into the Earth’s stratigraphy, its layers of strata and geological history written in the deposits of these immense stretches of rock, is to engage with an astounding sense of deep time. Indeed the crossing of present time with deep time brings one to the Anthropocene.

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By drawing out underlying connections between perspectives of the Anthropocene expressed in each of the works, my *Future Stratigraphy* curatorial project became a co-creative process. A sense of flow ebbed around the artworks’ materials and meanings, stimulated by conversations with the artists, prompting senses to be alert to charges in light, sound and aroma in the space. Calling attention to the present place-time of the exhibition itself and the audience’s phenomenological encounters with it, I began my catalogue essay by prompting visitors to think about, and feel their connection with, the ground they were standing on, Gadigal Wangal Country, and their co-creative participation in the Anthropocene. ‘We are not standing neutrally, there is always an impact and trace left behind. Humanity’s current actions indelibly impact the Earth and the stratigraphy we are marking right now will either map a trajectory of destruction or a turning point of the Earth’s future.’

Notions of connectivity, and sentient matter-flow linked the various works in the exhibition, echoing the interdependent ecological systems of the Earth’s biosphere. The connecting materiality of the artworks included soil, rock, mineral samples, electricity, video, photography, virtual reality, drawings, styrofoam and sound bleeds. The overall atmospheric soundscape originated from three different artworks; these

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audio layers overlaid each other, interconnecting into undulating drones, crackles and hisses that permeated the exhibition space. This audial element caught the gallery visitor in the ‘now’, as well as posing a futuristic sense of anxiety, with hums of electricity and crackles of white noise.

( fig.61) Kath Fries, Within and Without, 2016.

On another sensory level – the olfactory – my work Within and Without emitted some complex aromas. This bio-artwork was a living installation, with damp beeswax, growing oyster mushrooms (Pleurotus ostreatus) and old cracked tree trunks. Within and Without was multi-sensual: tactile, visual, aromatic and kinesthetic (fig.61-64).
Viewers encountered the work, situated in the middle of the dimly lit gallery space, like a strange magical copse of trees. The audience walked around and between the tree trunks. There was something friendly and welcoming about these vertical pillars of wood. They were like solid echoes of the standing space occupied by the humans, and a reassurance that trees still existed somewhere out there. Smattered with melted beeswax, the trunks engendered a sense of tenderness, as though inviting hugs. Each tree trunk was crowned with a glowing nest of beeswax and fungi. Visitors would look up to the higher circlets and down into the pitted honeycombed forms of the lower crowns and inhale an intriguing aroma: sweet, oily, honey-like and earthy fungal, damp.

(fig.62) Kath Fries, *Within and Without*, 2016 (detail view).

Over the four weeks of the exhibition, the installation grew and changed as the oyster mushrooms inside the beeswax crowns grew and subsided in three flushes. The materials were almost entirely allowed to co-create on their own. I withdrew my
influence and authorship at that point and did little beyond merely watering and documenting, watching the mushrooms grow from within the honeycomb structure: the mycelium webs crawled over it, investigating the world, making their own decisions when to reach towards the light, morph into different shapes, abort or to unfurl, releasing spores and slowly drying out. The old mushrooms were left in place to shrivel, die and dehydrate, as new mushrooms ‘pinned’ and grew around them (fig.54). This was a marked divergence from usual domestic and commercial mushroom cultivation practices, when oyster mushrooms are harvested in their prime, at their most appetizing. Working with living fungi as artwork was an intriguing co-creative and mysterious process. Although I had attended a practical gourmet mushroom growing course, researched mycology and had been growing oyster mushrooms at home for almost a year, it was distinctly different co-creating with fungi like this, as an art encounter, in the gallery setting. The mushrooms were even more enchanting here. Like Thoreau’s corn growing overnight, the fungi grew strangely and quickly, at their own pace, all day and all night. The oyster mushrooms started as tiny pins that stretched into sea anemone tentacles, fanning out into pretty little umbrella-like canopies, with accordion-pleated undersides, and sometimes into unrecognisable weird almost-alien shapes or strange genitalia-like forms. I observed and tended to the work daily, sometimes talking to them, fascinated by the changing textures as mushrooms’ fragile velvety gills unfurled, eventually drying out into ribbed leathery firm surfaces.

(fig.63) Kath Fries, *Within and Without*, 2016 (detail view).
Within and without invited experimental embodied encounters, which opened up different understandings of how humans both value and disregard trees, fungi, insects and the biodiversity of forests. The work speculated on how we can become re-enchanted with forest ecosystems, particularly those aspects of ecologies that are often overlooked like insects and mycelium, drawing on mycoremediation processes used to rehabilitate damaged sites of the Anthropocene. *Pleurotus ostreatus* (oyster mushrooms) are used in mycoremediation to rehabilitate abandoned logging-truck roads, repairing the severed fungi mycelium networks necessary to sustain the forest's complex ecologies of soil, plants, trees, insects and wildlife. American mycologist and bio-diversity advocate Paul Stamets has been developing processes whereby inoculating barren logging roads with fungi spores helps the mushroom mycelium networks spread and rebuild soil nutrition, thus rebooting, reconnecting and gradually regenerating these divided and vulnerable patches of forest.64

Mycoremediation is also used in other stressed or contaminated environments, like abandoned industrial sites and oil spills, as the fungi mycelium absorbs pollutants, sustains robust soil foundation and assists in controlling infectious outbreaks. Indeed, the vast fungal kingdom of life can also provide health benefits for humans, with recent trials successfully treating cholesterol levels, some viruses and cancers.65 Honeybees similarly seek out these fungal medicinal properties, occasionally sipping on the mushrooms' sugar-rich fungal thread-like roots (hyphae), which boosts their immune systems and helps with the detoxification of pesticides and other (human caused) harmful environmental contaminants.66 Stamets and a team of scientists are currently researching how fungi can assist beekeepers in responding to the global honeybee crisis, colony collapse disorder, CCD. There is ‘something fundamental to the foundation of nature – that the mycelial networks in forestlands influence the immunological health of its inhabitants – of people, bears, birds, swine, and bees … We are at a time critical period in history and need to muster an EcoRevolution to save the natural biomes … Deep inside, I feel there is a spiritual element at play

65 Fungi are the largest group among living organisms after insects. The total fungal species is estimated to be 1.5 million, of which 72,000 have been reported and 1500 are added every year. Fungi are used in various biotechnological applications such as in the pharmaceutical and agrochemical industries, in bioremediation, biological control, as natural scavengers, for recycling of elements and dyes. S. K. Deshmukh and Mahendra Rai, *Biodiversity of Fungi: Their Role in Human Life* (Enfield: Science Publishers, 2005).
It seems there are spirited affinities in this discovery and responsive research: it is an enchanted crossing in the Anthropocene, where laboratory science meets forest trees and mushrooms dance with honeybees.

The beeswax used in *Within and without* reflected this story of fungi being brought into the bees’ honeycomb, not just the nectar and pollen of flowers. The super-organism of the beehive will always have mysterious depths and co-creative assemblages unknown to humans. Conjuring the interlinked interdependent webs of biodiversity, *Within and without* congregated fungi, insects, forests and people into multisensory enchanted encounters of tactility, aroma, decay and growth. The work invited viewers into co-creative embodied experiences with these processes, to touch the logs, smell the beeswax and watch the mushrooms grow, shed spores and gradually dehydrate. Interestingly, even just growing for this short time in the gallery, the mushrooms began to form their own ecosystems, attracting tiny gnat flies – sciarids – which then attracted a spider, followed by a chirping cricket.68 I was intrigued to learn that crickets like to eat fungi and little insects like sciarids: they are

67 Ibid., 16.
68 Paul Stamets explains how in focused mycoremediation processes many ‘tactical predator-prey combinations’ are intentionally developed, with the fungi as ‘insectaries’, breeding grounds for insects and grubs essential for animal food chains and bio-diverse ecosystems. Stamets, 83.
not simply herbivorous. Although there were no visiting birds, perhaps given a little bit more time they would have joined in the foray, bringing with them digested plant seeds, thus beginning a botanic aspect of the ecological cycle. Bird shit does not seem all that enchanting itself, but seeing a tiny sapling spring from a digested seed certainly could be.

Learning to grow fungi and observing its cycles cultivated, not just the mushrooms and their expanded ecosystems, but my art of noticing. American anthropologist Anna Tsing writes about this art of noticing in relation to her research into and participation with various regenerative fungi practices. Observing and engaging with fungi frequently conjures an enchanted sense, which inspires both artists and naturalists. Tsing recounts how American composer John Cage was a mushroom hunter and his observations of mushrooms inspired his approach to composing, listening with open yet focused attention to surrounding sound: ‘mushrooms are unpredictable; they help one listen’.69 The enchantment conjured by mushrooms’ strange shapes and wondrous growth can be extended into ‘arts of inclusion that call to others’.70 Tsing argues for the importance of such inclusiveness, as in these times of extinction, the Anthropocene, ‘even slight acquaintance can make the difference between preservation and callous disregard’, and mushroom-based projects of inclusion ‘help us build modes of wellbeing in which humans and nonhumans alike might thrive’.71 She terms such projects ‘multispecies love’, as participants are both scholars, artists, writers and scientists whose ‘passionate immersion in the lives of the nonhumans being studied … allows learnedness in natural science and all the tools of the arts to convey passionate connection’.72

Another artist co-creating with growing materials and cultivating extensive botanical knowledge is Australian Jamie North. I recall the initial enchantment of first encountering North’s bio-art sculptures, The Path of Least Resistance, 2009, at Mop Gallery in Sydney (fig.65).73 I was utterly spellbound by these actual living and growing micro-ecosystems forming within vertical pillars of recycled slag. Tiny

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70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
plants had been carefully nurtured to grow with their roots tangling around and within these structures, straining towards the light. There was incidentally even a red-back spider making her webbed home in one of the sculptural mini-gardens.


North continues to co-create with plants, concrete, light, water and sunlight in his *Terraforms*, in various shapes, sizes and locations. One of his most ambitious works, *Succession* 2016 (fig.66), featured in the 20th Biennale of Sydney. It involved two towering, fragmented columns inhabited by a carefully considered selection of Australian plant species.74 The compressed strata-like layers of the pillars had solid compacted bases that look like trampled mountain landscapes, reminiscent of traditional Chinese ink paintings. *Succession’s* monotone supports were compacted from cement, steel, blast furnace slag, recycled expanded glass, coal ash, oyster shell and soil – layered referenced to Australia’s mining and construction industries.75 The precipices ‘simultaneously soar and crumble with emergent vines and other native plant species, generating a dynamic interaction between the organic and the inorganic’.76 The boundary between what is natural and what is man-made is deliberately porous, implying a cycle of returning to the Earth, layered into the strata

74 North has a vast botanical knowledge and always specifically lists the species of the plants he works with. *Succession* included Ficus rubiginosa (Port Jackson fig); Platycerium veitchii (Silver elk horn); Cissus antarctica (Kangaroo vine); Hoya australis (Common wax flower); Pandorea pandorana (Wonga Wonga); Plectranthus argentatus (Silver spur flower); Adiantum aethiopicum (Maidenhaire fern); Dichondra repens (Kidney weed); Peperomia enervis. Jamie North, “Succession, 2016,” http://jamienorth.com/succession-2016.

75 North’s use of these materials convey layered references: coal ash – Australia’s extensive reliance on coal mining, as one of the world’s largest coal producers, exporters and consumer per capita, Australia relies almost entirely on coal-fuelled electricity; oyster shells – the destruction and mining of middens that mark ancient ceremonial and feasting sites on the East Coast; steel slag – an industrial waste product composed of metal oxides and silicon, generated when iron ore is smelted to create steel.

of the Anthropocene. These bio-art sculptures, given enough time, will exhibit the organic consuming the seemingly hostile inorganic, working it back into a complex ecological cycle, despite human efforts to maintain structures of unchanging permanence. The title, *Succession*, cites a key concept of ecological theory where relatively few pioneering plants develop a complex ecosystem, like the previously mentioned fungi. North selects plants that are able to recover, regenerate and reclaim an environment after human intervention; these species thrive in improbable places, taking root in the seemingly inhospitable mortar of city buildings and the precarious cliffs of road cuttings. For *Succession*, North selected Kangaroo Grape (*Cissus antarctica*) and Port Jackson Fig (*Ficus rubiginosa*) for their resilience.

Kangaroo Grape and Port Jackson Fig tend to benefit from human disturbance, thriving in low light and artificial conditions. Given the propensity of both species to overwhelm their environments, there is a distinct possibility that the plants may engulf the work, gradually consuming and destroying it over time.77

![Image of the sculptures](fig.66) Jamie North, *Succession*, 2016.

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77 Ibid.
Another resilient plant in the Anthropocene is the birch tree (*Betula pendula*), continually thriving with human co-habitation; indeed it is often endowed, anthropomorphically, with such human characteristics as being a frontrunner, a survivor, beautiful and strong. Birch trees were the first to return to Europe as the glacial Ice Age retreated. These trees grow on higher slopes and closer to the Arctic, are highly resistant to frost and tolerate poor soils, actually improving the ground for other species. They are the first trees to move into clear-felled forestry land and neglected fields. With their silvery wisps of paper-thin bark, individual birch trees can be immensely tough; some have fallen over collapsing cliff edges, tumbling to the bottom and then simply re-rooting and carrying on growing.\(^7^8\) In northern Europe, humans have co-evolved with the birch trees as constructive and destructive, growing and felling them for fuel, building materials, dyes, medicine, gunpowder and alcohol. They have a long history of being magical. Sara Maitland, British writer and feminist, tells of the rich literary and folk history of birches as ‘magical trees: Druids claimed them as the sister tree to the oak; witches’ broom sticks were traditionally made out of birch, and so, in some parts of the country, were maypoles’.\(^7^9\)

Enchanted by the birch trees surrounding the Arteles residency in Finland, I explored the forests, walking amongst the trees, observing and listening to these quiet trees covered in snow (fig.67). Thin, almost translucent layers of silvery bark gently lifted away from the birch trunks under my fingertips, reminding me of exfoliating human skin. Indeed, I was told that, like exfoliating skin, taking small amounts of bark does not harm the trees, so I began collecting it from both growing trees and those fallen on the forest floor. This smooth, semi-transparent bark held the mysterious allure of the forest, a sense of its history and human conjured fairytales, stories of wayward children lured into the dark mysterious forest never to be seen or heard of again.

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\(^7^8\) Sara Maitland, *Gossip from the Forest* (London: Granta Publications, 2012), 47.

\(^7^9\) Ibid., 49.
These forested enchanted crossings are always full of unknowns; they can also be terrifying and dangerous. Humans continue to be intrigued by forests. They call to us from a deep place, from our shared history and co-evolution. Maitland suggests this sense of enchantment has ancient origins. At the end of the last ice age, 10,000 years ago, when the ice began to retreat back towards the polar regions: ‘the forests chased
it northwards as far as they could, and homo sapiens followed the forest. People lived symbiotically with the forest; until recently humans could not survive without trees. Indeed, our biosphere cannot survive extensive deforestation, and so people still cannot survive without forest. In ancient times northern European forests were ‘dangerous and generous, domestic and wild, beautiful and terrible’. The forests were the terrain out of which fairy stories, one of our earliest and most vital cultural forms, evolved. The mysterious secrets and silences, gifts and perils of the forest are both the background to and the source of these tales … Nonetheless, the forests that remain are strange and wonderful places with rich natural history, long narratives of complex relationships – between humans and the wild, and between various groups of human beings – and a sense of enchantment and magic, which is at the same time fraught with fear.

Warm and safe, out of the forest and back within my residency studio, I applied the pieces of birch bark to a curious sealed off doorway, marking this boundary with porousness of forest imaginings and interconnections. This grew into a dense birch-bark impenetrable entrance, which held a sense of liveliness, a billowing dreamlike threshold where exterior meets interior, conjuring a shifting boundary of imagination and reality. I gradually formed a larger installation around it, with a video projection from the forest – looking up into the birch tree branches swaying in the wind – falling across a chalk-dusted, icy-azure paper scroll. Experiences of the forest became dreamlike, ensconced in the bedroom-studio’s long wafting white curtains (fig.68). The enchantment of walking through the snow-covered forest, breathing in the icy cold air, the sense of being held by the quiet winter muffled landscape, was already beginning to settle into a dreamlike memory.

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80 Ibid., 10,12,16.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
Back in Australia, that enchanted Finnish forest felt a long way away, and those snow
blanketed magical days soon melted into a fairytale memory. Looking at a printed
photograph of my birch-bark doorway, *Threshold* 2015 (fig.69), I could still sense the
mysterious billowing surface, with richly textured depths yet obviously shallow,
conjuring the liveliness of the trees and the rich, complex enchantments of the forest.
The photograph now seems to be a ‘once upon a time’ entrance, a potential opening to
the magic of forests, not fixed historically but rather reinterpreted constantly. A
beginning of a story, an enchanted crossing located in no particular time, or rather
beyond the everyday, specific to fictional time, fairy-story time. Such a beginning ‘is
a doorway; if you are lucky, you go through it as a child, aurally, before you can read,
and if you are very lucky, you become a free citizen of an ancient republic and can
come and go as you please’. 83

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83 Ibid.
(fig.69) Kath Fries, *Threshold*, 2015.
The term fairytale invites an engagement with mythical realms or parallel universes. It opens up collective, shared and personal imaginative spaces, full of the potential for encountering the magical, unknown and unexplainable. *Threshold* is an enchanted crossing, conjuring the spirited affinities of that place, the sauna elves. The stories of the forest almost speak through the raw knots in the wooden beamed walls of the house. More-than-human layers of interbeing mingle with spirited affinities in those enchanted materialities. *Threshold* invites a fictional time, a sense of something beyond, both threatening and comforting. A doorway, growing in the night, breathing into memories and imaginations, a tangle of forested fairytales, holding potential for experiential encounters that are ‘chaotic – beautiful and savage, useful and wasteful, dangerous and free.’

Remembering walking in that Finnish forest, I specifically recall my breathing. I could feel the cold air enter my lungs, being warmed by my internal body heat as oxygen was extracted, and carbon dioxide released back into the world as a visible vapour cloud, temporarily at a higher temperature than the other molecules in the air. My surroundings were so quiet, muffled in snow, I could easily hear every breath I took. The birch trees were also breathing, but I could not see or hear their absorption of carbon dioxide and exhalation of oxygen. Nevertheless, we were exchanging air, as indeed humans always are with plants.

Trees, both individually and as forests, from the minute to the massive, connect earth, water and the air in many ways... We live immersed in the medium of air, inseparable from it for our biophysical, metaphysical and economic needs. We share this common breathing space with all things, living and non-living, from the regenerative forest to the smoke-belching factory. All influence our common airspace.

My common airspace, back home in Sydney, is shared with the thunder of landing aeroplanes and shuddering din of passing trucks. There are no birch trees growing here, but nearby I am fortunate to find a variety of eucalyptus. A tall line of majestic Paperbark trees (*Melaleuca quinquenervia*) grows along my road. They are nothing like a forest, but remarkable trees nonetheless, with wonderfully tactile layers of soft bark. I encounter these trees almost everyday, observing the bees feeding from their nectar rich fragrant flowers and the birds nesting in their branches. The Paperbark’s

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84 Ibid., 17.
thick external layers have evolved to insulate and shield the trunk of the tree during bushfires, with the fire’s heat waking up the dormant buds of new growth on the trunk. Almost immediately after a fire these buds sprout from under the burnt bark casing, as the Paperbark, like most Australian native plants, relies on bushfires for regeneration. Paperbark was traditionally used around here by the Gadigal Wangal people of the Eora Nation: to make coolamons and shelters: to cradle babies: wrap baked food; and to line ovens; also in bush-medicine, as the oils in the leaves have antibacterial properties.

(fig.70) Kath Fries, *ArboREAL brace*, 2016 and *Threshold*, 2015.
Touching this bark, my fingers sink into it; the tactility is soft and flakey, yet dense, almost spongy like a compressed layer of feathers. I began collecting the fallen pieces of this bark and thinking about how I could use it to bring an enchanted sense of a tree into an interior space, to conjure a spirited affinity of these interconnections. At AirSpace Projects in Marrickville, I melted beeswax between these layers of bark, adhering them to an architectural pillar (fig.70-72). I titled it *Arboreal brace* to suggest that the tree’s branches were holding up the ceiling, a metaphorical gesture indicating how trees influence our local climate, shape extensive ecologies and our general surroundings. Branching out beyond that, trees hold up the sky, as forests are integral in supporting and maintaining the balance in the Earth’s atmosphere.

(fig.71) Kath Fries, *Arboreal brace*, 2016 (detail view).
The unexpected appearance of a tree inside a building has an enchanted sense to it, conjuring an almost magical notion of trees growing in the night, when we are not looking. Indeed the saplings often spring up and grow quickly, although we tend to assume that trees grow slowly compared to humanity’s rushing. Trees often mark enchanted crossings, in the forest or even along the side of the road. A tree is an intersection of bio-diverse life forms, from the fungi, worms and soil around her roots, to the insects living in her bark, the birds in her branches, bees in her flowers, possums in her hollows, and leaves reaching towards the sun and photosynthesising, breathing.

What the plants are quietly breathing out, we animals are breathing in: what we breathe out, the plants are breathing in. The air, we might say, is the soul of the visible landscape, the secret realm from whence all beings draw their nourishment. As the very mystery of the living present, it is that most intimate absence from whence the present presences. 86

To breathe with the trees and the plants, to feel the actuality of being present with these interconnections of the biosphere, seems like it should be easy enough to do attentively everyday, even in the Anthropocene. But often it feels extremely difficult, as one becomes caught up in worrying about the future, gripped by a sense of tension, stressed, holding one’s breath. In the Anthropocene we are often so focused on ourselves that ‘we do not speak of the air between our body and a nearby tree, but rather speak of the empty space between us. It is empty. Just an absence of stuff, without feeling or meaning.’ 87 However, to re-think the air as having agency, being sentient matter-flow, changes the reciprocal engagement of breathing. Then even the simple attentive action of breathing out can release anxieties and preconceptions.

Breathing is an ever-present mode of essential exchange with the world, integral to our interconnections and entanglements with the Earth and to being alive. To exhale, to loosen one’s grip on the fears and anxieties generated in one’s mind, can be a difficult thing to do. However to co-create in art making processes with integrity, one has to let go of such notions of control and embrace the openness of reciprocity. Such haptic breathing with the world allows one’s predetermining chattering mental needs to drop away and for a condition of unknowing and receptivity to arise. This is

86 Abram, 226.
apparent in both making art and in meditation. As preconceptions drop away and senses become that much clearer, the nonduality of this condition leads to the possibility of greater play with an openness of imaginative engagement, where one encounters materials, without set directions or dictates of preconceived knowledge, from within sentient matter-flow. Sometimes I follow some simple rituals to focus. These can be systematically sorting through and preparing materials in my studio, or just taking time to focus on my breathing and be attentive to it, or even just stepping away to go for a walk and listen to the world. Rituals, both traditional and religious as well as private and everyday, are segues into enchanted crossings, mindful preparatory processes or sets of activities that bring the mind to what is, to Suchness, rather than being distracted or muddled by questions, by ideas and associations. David Abram describes his process of mindful breathing:

I try to relax, and so begin to breathe more deeply, enjoying the [air] … as it floods in at my nostrils, feeling my chest and abdomen slowly expand and contract. My thinking begins to ease, the internal chatter gradually taking on the rhythm of the in-breath and the out-breath, the words themselves beginning to dissolve, flowing out with each exhalation … The interior monologue dissipates, slowly … 88

Breathing out and exhaling mindfully is letting go. Exhale i-ii is a series of works on paper that lift away from the wall, breathing out, relinquishing tight structures and attempts to remain predetermined and fixed (fig.73-74). The works respond to the pull of gravity, as though in the process of being released. Blown across their surfaces is loose powdered charcoal, catching the irregular textures of beeswax smeared into the paper’s surface, like dusting for fingerprints these traces find a sense of presence in the translucency and uncertainty of the oily abstract marks. There is a spirited affinity here, a freedom and enchantment in the co-creative art encounter of these works, allowing a sense of tension to dissipate. In the gallery, sunlight from the opposite window played across the undulating paper surfaces, permeating sections of beeswax-soaked semitransparency. The felt presence of the work seemed to gradually shift, with the strength of the paper succumbing to gravity. Exhale was not a fixed representation of stability or permanently arriving at peace, but an ebb and flow of breathing in and out, the balance of instability and stability.

Exhibited in a group exhibition titled *Stable*, these works resonate with cycles and shifts from stability to instability. Initially I approached the concept of ‘stable’ with a fixed conceptual notion that everything is unstable and all stable states are an illusion. The paradox of this idea lacked flow and responsiveness. Gradually, as I spoke to the other artists, played with materials and unpacked the themes of ‘exhale’ and ‘stable’, I came to a more nuanced response to the concept of stability: cyclically pouring from empty to full, unstable to stable and back again. Breathing with existence, feeling the impermanence and interconnectedness of body, mind and surroundings results in a sense of awareness or knowingness, ‘an embracing of an internal quiet and space in which we can simply be at home with ourselves’.89 To feel simply at home with ourselves, in our bodies, is to relocate our ‘grounding and walk in the world … to have dimension, gravity, and the enabling power to regain our sense of balance and to comport ourselves differently’.90

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90 Sobchack.
This feeling at home in one’s body involves being mindful of how we move, breath, act, and think. Luce Irigaray, French feminist cultural theorist, uses the term ‘self-affection’ to express how one can dwell in ‘a state of gathering with oneself and of meditative quietness . . . peacefully staying within and returning to oneself’.\(^9\) In *Breathing with Luce Irigaray*, Jean Marie Byrne, Australian academic, writer and yoga teacher, responds to Irigaray’s theories, expanding and elaborating on the ways that meditative practices allow us to know our difference, yet also retain an awareness of the interconnected nature of all things.\(^2\) This awareness can remain with us after meditation as we continue living and being in the world, enabling the individual to interact with the world from a ‘spacious knowingness of awareness’, which can be developed from the meditative practices of conscious breathing. There is a sense of the enchanted, which is somewhat akin to dwelling in the space of Irigaray’s self-affection, in this understanding that your being is always interconnected and also uniquely different. Indeed, dwelling in self-affection is literally the opposite of

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\(^2\) Ibid.
drowning in self-loathing, anxious self-analysis or depressive self-criticism, those anthropocentric mind games of worrying about the future. Byrne expands on this from her personal experience: ‘through breathing practices, I continue to peel away the layers of fabrication and artifice of who I should be to experience in my body what it means to be me, a woman. I dwell with this awareness, at times not just for myself but also because in doing so, I may assist others in creating the possibility of dwelling in their own self-affection.’93 The nondual, mind-body-spirit, holism of these breathing practices, is described by Irigaray as the ‘sensible transcendental’. 94 As one senses unity between the sentient matter-flow of the world and one’s internal spiritual transcendence, the sensible transcendental is a feeling of peaceful reciprocal openness. It is not a theory so much as an embodied practice, which requires actual doing and living; it cannot be understood or achieved just through thinking and theorising.

In the art encounter one is not doing seated meditation or yoga, but the mindfulness of being present occurs, the experience of the sensible transcendental, brought about by the enchanted crossing of the encounter and a quiet attentiveness. The listening of quiet attentiveness requires cultivating a type of silent availability, which Irigaray explains, ‘corresponds to a breath that is not yet determined or expressed in a certain way, according to certain rules, a certain logic, and thus can be respected and shared as life itself beyond its various embodiments and forms of expression … This silence ought to remain the basic condition and place for any sharing between living beings who are dependent on air for their own subsistence.’95 Irigaray’s shared silence of the sensible transcendental opens the space for enchantment, for connecting with layers of interbeing and co-creation.

In this sense, the silence or quiet mindfulness that features in touching impermanence art encounters is a dynamic space of interconnection, where enchantments are sought and spirited affinities encountered. The anticipation of this quietness when approaching the ‘sanctified’ space of an art museum or gallery enables one to be purposefully attentive to experiencing what is there, potentially to meet with Suchness. Indeed the artist often behaves in a similar way in the studio: awareness of

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93 Ibid., 89.
94 Ibid., 97.
95 Luce Irigaray, “To Begin with Breathing Anew,” ibid., 232.
the relationality of time, place, materials and activity is focused. As such, a sense of enchantment surrounds the experience of touching impermanence for both the artist and the gallery visitor. There is something in the air, something sensed by the body that is not so easily rationalised by the mind: it is a ‘liminal experience’.96 The enchanted nature of a liminal experience by viewers in an art encounter is described by Lee Ufan in relation to his work: ‘when people come to a space like this they feel something different with every breath. Their relationship with it changes every time… Whenever you see this work or pass it, it will feel different, take on a different atmosphere.’97

The enchanted atmosphere of a touching impermanence art encounter is a crossing and a meeting with wonder, a nondual moment of feeling and being at one with the Earth’s sentient matter-flows. Being receptive and open to sensing these enchantments and spirited affinities requires attentiveness, dadirri, listening to one’s surroundings, which can be practiced and cultivated. Indeed, enchantment can occur to anyone at anytime in any place. The surprise element of enchantment springs from its mysteriousness and the unknown. Similarly, embracing a co-creative process of not knowing in the art encounter conjures an immersive and absorbed embrace of sentient matter-flow with the more-than-human. This felt experience of the sensible transcendental engages with the present moment through one’s senses, rather than intellectual rationalism. Enchantment may only be experienced for a split second, but its repercussions can be deep and profound, an epiphany that resonates throughout the rest of one’s life, actions and interconnections with the Earth.

97 Blackwood. Lee Ufan interview with Alexandra Munroe.
Conclusion
Art practices that follow sentient matter-flow are attentive to the nuances of sensory material engagements, and this can engender an openness to being enchanted by the Earth and its co-creative processes of impermanence. Such receptivity counters the dominant anthropocentric feeling of being distant and disconnected from our surroundings. These art encounters conjure expectation and enthusiasm for a focused meeting with the more-than-human, the unknown and the reciprocal embrace of being in touch with the liveliness of existence. Indeed, the very materiality of experiential art, when actually met with in the embodied present moment, often results in the touching impermanence of a momentary enchanted crossing. The co-creation at play in these art processes involves interconnections with layered understandings of interbeing. These mysterious links can be accessed through phenomenological touch as multisensory correlations, and this results in haptic thinking, the unity of mind-body attentiveness in present time.

Touching impermanence cannot be grasped or held still; it can only occur in physical embodied momentary encounters. Although such felt enchantments with sentient matter-flow do occur in the everyday, art uniquely focuses one’s sensory attention through direct engagement with materiality, time and place. This attests to art’s being the primary process by which humans generate understandings about our commonalities, differences, diversities and our actual being in the world. Today our being in the world occurs within the Anthropocene, as we try to understand and respond to the devastating impacts that human overpopulation, pollution and avaricious consumerism continue to have on local and global ecologies. We have altered the biosphere’s sentient matter-flows to such an extent that the Earth will soon be unable to sustain many of the life forms that currently co-exist and co-evolve here, including humans. Indeed, our anthropocentric disconnection from the sentient matter-flows of the Earth is cumulatively destroying life as we know it.

Many people are working on changing how we engage with the Earth, by urging individuals, communities, societies, nations and global organisations to rethink and reevaluate the magnitude of sentient matter-flows on both micro and macro levels, beseeching us all to take more care and act differently. Artists have always been at the forefront of exploring alternate ways of being and behaving in the world. Indeed over
the past decade there has been a global surge of Eco Art practices, aiming to reengage people with the sentient matter-flows of the Earth, to feel connected with time, place and the more-than-human. Apathy and consumption are two of the main causes of the Anthropocene as a perilous and escalating situation, so the need for individuals to develop empathy, compassion and reconnection is vital to nurturing responsibility and understanding, to accelerate responses to the urgent crisis of climate change.

The New Materialisms mark one of many responses to the catastrophic predicaments of the Anthropocene, by connecting researchers, scholars, scientists and artists across diverse disciplines in rethinking and rearticulating how humans value and treat the nonhuman. Focusing on our human inextricable position within sentient matter-flow, the New Materialisms take on the challenge of de-centering the human by theorizing how our economies, politics, societies and cultures need to radically change and operate differently, by incorporating and generating understandings that matter has its own innate value and lively agency. The idea of valuing the nonhuman and its agency is not new; in fact it has ancient origins as First Nations’ cosmologies attest. The New Materialism discourses connect a various theoretical positions, generating not just common approaches but also a number of paradoxes. Even after a decade of scholarship, the New Materialisms is a field that remains speculative, emergent and contestory. However the openness of these discourses is of paramount importance to my research as it correlates with the Buddhist philosophy of embracing ‘not knowing’.

The Buddhist admission that humans cannot ever know everything, is essential to comprehending impermanence, as all things are constantly changing, co-evolving and interdependent. Therefore it is an arrogant trap to claim that any theoretical (or even spiritual) framework could possibly encompass everything. Even the ways that we think, feel, and empathise; our very subjectivity is also constantly changing and co-evolving with the rest of existence. But to attentively touch this impermanence, with the understanding that all things are constantly changing, can open up a genuine sense of interconnection with the constantly changing sentient matter-flows of existence. My contention for the importance of touching impermanence in art practice relies on Buddhist philosophies and traditions of mindfulness and meditation, the practice of
meeting with the vibrations of existence within sentient matter-flow, in the embodied attentive present moment.

My doctoral practice-led research has formed new experiential connections between art making and art viewing, working with these philosophical and theoretical understandings about reconnecting with the sentient matter-flow of existence. Following sentient matter-flow has become a rewarding adventure, beginning with my co-creative work with beeswax, moving from the enchanting sensorial engagements of working with this material to learning about the honeybees making their beeswax and the importance of bees to humans throughout history, then focusing on our extensive industrialised agricultural practices today and the critical problem of Colony Collapse Disorder. The outcomes of these co-creative processes continue to be generative. I am always intrigued to observe visitors interacting with my installations, like *Divest* (2014-2017), for the ways that they kinesthetically encounter the work, responding to the shared experience of its tactile, aromatic and visual presence. Having given numerous artist talks on site as part of these exhibitions has further demonstrated to me how people’s embodied engagement with the multi-sensual materiality of the installations accentuates and deepens their understandings. On other occasions, presenting and lecturing with only projected still images to translate these art encounters, has been interesting to see how effective embodied imagination can be in creating generative understandings of the installations and the touching impermanence experience.

In Finland, the opportunity to be utterly immersed in an enchanted snow blanketed forest for an extended period of time nurtured and brought to fruition several of my ideas about working with ephemerality, quietness and narrative traditions. Co-creating with snow for my *Embrace (burrow)* installations, with ash in my *Beguile* sculptures, icicles in *Handheld Melting*, and flakes of birch tree bark to create *Threshold* cultivated particular engagements with the wondrous sentient matter-flow of that particular time and place. Each of these works invited a unique touching impermanence experience. The very specific time and place of the co-creative processes of my Arteles Residency in February 2015 could not be repeated; even if I returned there in mid-winter, the place would not be the same and neither would I. My understanding of the precisely distinctive value of the present moment was honed
during my time at Arteles and continues to be emphasised in my recollections of the touching impermanence of those ephemeral experiences.

Soon after I returned home from Finland to a hot summer in Sydney, I was invited to undertake a project on the northern side of the Blue Mountains in Bilpin, a place relatively close to home that I had not visited before. As an aid to focusing myself on being present in the landscape, I developed a ritualised habit of sitting quietly, mindfully, on a specific rocky outcrop in the cliffs at sunset. This process of being attentive to an obvious point of transience, from day to night, in time and place, enabled me to listen, touch and better understand being present with impermanence in an ancient place. Indeed, this sense of feeling myself to be with and within the landscape’s sentient matter-flow, being held by the cliffs, became pivotal in bringing together the other strands of my research into Gundungurra and Dharug Country and the rare micro-ecologies of the poetically named ‘hanging swamps’. These layered understandings then fed into my co-creative immersive installation *Permeate* (2015) for the Hawkesbury Regional Gallery in Windsor. That year I also visited Mungo National Park and found myself to be held there by the land’s sentient matter-flow, its five-year flood. My present time experience of that ancient sacred site at the intersection of Paakantji, Ngyiampaa and Mutthi Mutthi Country was quite profound and deepened by conversations, experiences and understandings that evolved because of the specific history of that place and the flooding at that particular time.

My art practice habits of being attentive to my surroundings, mindfully listening to, and reciprocally engaging with, sentient matter-flow and interbeing as a way of nurturing co-creative processes, have grown significantly during this intense period of practice-lead research. The initial urgency to read widely across philosophical discourses was somewhat overwhelming but soon caused opportune engagements with the discourses of New Materialism and their optimism for creativity, alternative thinking, action and change. The terminologies, poetic phases and material metaphors that I have learnt from the language of these discourses has opened up inspiring possibilities to verbalise some of the almost unutterable ineffable aspects of touching impermanence: how to express the body’s complexities, time’s convolutions and the ungraspable nature of the two key terms touch and impermanence. Although I have always been interested in Buddhist philosophies about living and art making, this PhD...
has motivated me to study them more directly and incorporate sitting meditation into my processes. The practice of being attentive to one’s breathing, which calms the anxieties of mental chatter, bringing awareness back into one’s body and its enmeshed interconnected vitality within the world, has become very important to me. Such acknowledgements of breathing with the plants and the trees were conjured in *Arboreal brace* (2016), where an internal gallery pillar was bandaged with beeswax and paperbark, as a symbolic and healing gesture of reconnection with the forests that support all the breathing spaces of the biosphere.

Inhaling and exhaling is a continuous cycle; the movements of our lungs contracting and expanding are always essential to being alive. As my life has been shaped by the deaths of family members, in my grief I have focused more intensely on the value of being alive in the present moment – heart beating, lungs breathing, limbs moving, eyes seeing, hands touching, nose smelling, tongue tasting, ears hearing, body feeling and leaking, skin sweating or shivering – all this has an always already gravitas of importance, joy and gratitude that I remember and continually return my attention to. Attentively breathing in the air of the world and consciously being aware of breathing it back out again, changed – just as I am changed by it – can help to focus my mind, heart and body unity within the present moment. The particular sensation of exhaling can be a letting go of anxieties, expectations and judgments, allowing one to be with things as they are in all of our vibrating constant impermanence. *Exhale i-iii* (2016) refocuses my attention on breathing, even as we are breathing with the soot, smog and pollutions of the Anthropocene in which we live.

The findings of this research articulates the felt experiences of touching impermanence in ephemeral art encounters, specifically how one can feel and understand the dynamic interconnections and layers of interbeing enmeshed within materialities. These sensory experiences are co-created with ‘suchness’, the letting go and allowing oneself to be enchanted by the momentariness of present time sentient matter-flow. As such, the art encounters created thus provide new thinking though the world that invites attentive interactions; the new knowledge of lively interconnections and shifting layered understandings.
Concluding this doctoral practice-led research finds me in a generative situation of time, place and opportunities. I am more attuned to the folding into and out of co-creative sentient matter-flow, receptively responding to moments of enchantment and unexpected assemblages of opportunities as they arise. There is much potential for further co-creative and more collaborative work with beekeepers, mushroom growers, environmental rehabilitation projects, focused immersion in micro-ecologies and local cultures; this may well include a return to Japan. Equipped with more confidence and a wider vocabulary, the possibilities of listening, learning and sharing knowledge across disciplines seems more achievable to me than ever before. Indeed following the matter-flow will continue to enchant and inspire co-creative unpredictable art encounters of touching impermanence.
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Appendix A

Catalogue of Work Presented for Examination

Kath Fries, *Within and Without*, 2017, beeswax, logs, sawdust and water, dried and growing oyster mushrooms (*Pleurotus ostreatus*). 240 x 610 x 1260 cm (overall installation dimensions)

PhD Exam Exhibition, Sydney College of the Arts Galleries, Lilyfield NSW, Gadigal Wangal Country.


Appendix B

Other works completed in PhD research

Kath Fries, *Suffuse i*, 2016, beeswax, powdered charcoal, paper and light-boxes, 22 x 65 x 190 cm
‘Tracing Materiality’ group exhibition, Chrissie Cotter Gallery, Camperdown NSW, Gadigal Country.
Kath Fries, *Within*, 2016, wood, beeswax, oyster mushrooms (*Pleurotus ostreatus*), light and water, dimensions variable, approximately 42 x 34 x 30 cm, group exhibition ‘Out of Time’, AirSpace Projects, Marrickville NSW, Gadigal Wangal Country.


Kath Fries, *Reservation i (orb)*, 2017, beeswax and glass, 13 x 13 x 13 cm. Photo credit: Kath Fries.

Appendix C

Future Stratigraphy – curator's essay, Kath Fries

October 2016, presented by Sydney College of the Arts’ New Materialism in Contemporary Art research cluster, Future Stratigraphy comprised an exhibition, symposium and masterclass that explored ways of understanding and envisioning the materiality of landscape, and the repercussions of human impact on the earth.


Artists:
Madeleine Boyd, Tracey Clement, Tim Collins and Reiko Goto, Penny Dunstan, Kath Fries, Elaine Gan, David Haines and Joyce Hinterding, Kenneth Mitchell, Sean O’Connell, Emma Robertson, John Roloff, Dell Walker, Bryden Williams and Josh Wadak.

Curator and program co-ordinator:
Kath Fries

Exhibition:
6 - 29 October 2016
Sydney College of the Arts Galleries, The University of Sydney
Lilyfield NSW, Gadigal Wangal Country.

Link to the full catalogue with other essay and images of exhibited work:
FUTURE STRATIGRAPHY

BY KATH FRIES
To look down at one's feet is to feel, as well as see, one's connection to the ground and to the Earth. On one level it is simple enough to know that we are always standing on strata, on dense layers of rock, but to really engage with the multi-directional interconnected complexities of the Earth – both below and above the surface – it is important to re-think our entanglements of existence.

At Sydney College of the Arts we are standing on Gadigal and Wangel country. Standing here and now marks a vertical connection, a kinesthetic moment of being present with this particular time and place. We are not standing neutrally, there is always an impact and trace left behind. Humanity’s current actions indelibly impact the Earth and the stratigraphy we are marking right now will either map a trajectory of destruction or a turning point of the Earth’s future.

**WE HAVE LIVED MOST OF OUR LIVES IN SOMETHING CALLED THE ANTHROPOCENE AND ARE JUST REALISING THE SCALE AND PERMANENCE OF THE CHANGE.**

*Future Stratigraphy* offers a slice of present time, an almost archeological gathering of work by artists critiquing the Anthropocene from within. These artists are engaging with the material agency of their surroundings, both metaphorically and actually. From rocks, soil, plants and fungi, to fire and water, metals and minerals, electricity and air, each artist’s process is informed by aspects of science, cultural traditions and philosophy.

The term Anthropocene draws from the Greek ἄνθρωπος (*man/human*), and *cene*, from the current geologic period, the Cenozoic. The International Geological Congress recently voted to proceed with formally recognising the Anthropocene as a stratigraphic epoch, an official span of geologic time. From the atomic bombs of WWII (referred to as the ‘golden spike’) to the post war boom that became the ‘Great Acceleration’ of fossil fuel combustion, the stratigraphic “marks of the Great Acceleration will endure, even if somehow humanity reverses global warming and gives half the planet over to conservation. And if humanity doesn’t change course, then future stratigraphers might need to elevate the Anthropocene’s rank in the geological hierarchy... An epoch would be thinking too small.”
The concept of the Anthropocene pulls all the evidence of environmental change together, recognizing the extent of human impact on the Earth - mass extinctions, destroyed ecosystems, polluted atmospheres, waterways, oceans and landscapes. *Future Stratigraphy* asks how our current human activities will reveal themselves in the layers of the future, by exploring traces and scars of human presence on Earth, and how we work with, exploit, understand and attempt to rehabilitate our planet.

**Penny Dunstan**'s practice-led research engages directly with attempts to rehabilitate ex-coalmine sites in the upper Hunter Valley region. Her voluminous installation drawing, *PastPresent* (2014-15) conveys her experiences of walking and tracing these violently disturbed topographies. Her work scrutinizes mining companies' failure to make-good and to reestablish hospitable landscapes. Dunstan creates ghostly lumen prints with materials collected from these sites. Her samples of the ground are presented as *Soil Monoliths* (2016), sections of anthrosol: man-made-mining soils consisting of degraded rock from mudstone, waste oil, coal wash water with high salt content and sand.

Mining sites are deliberately obscured from public view and actual mined materials are often not seen. **Sean O’Connell** experiments with the materiality of mined coal, chrome, mercury, iron, and uranium in *The Force of Matter* (2016). He works with direct imaging, saturating each ore sample with high voltage electricity over photographic negative films, to capture the sparks of their unique energetic structures. Energy is used at each stage of the mining process: to dig into the ground; extract the minerals; and in transportation and processing. O’Connell’s images record not just the elemental qualities of these minerals but also the implied cost.

Electricity is always all around us, but usually invisible to us; we are not aware of it unless we flick a switch. **David Haines and Joyce Hinterding** play with this phenomenon of invisible energy in *Encounter with the Halo Field*, (2009-15), as they sway pairs of fluorescent tube lights beneath electrical transmission towers. In this act of multi-sensory connecting, the hum of electrical energy is heard and the artists’ hands grasp the unplugged tubes that we see mysteriously lighting up. Agitated by the transmission towers’ electromagnetic fields, the atoms of mercury gas inside the fluorescent light tubes emit ultraviolet light, which hits tube’s phosphor coating and makes the unplugged lights glow.

**Kenneth Mitchell** is also actively listening to the materiality of the Anthropocene, querying the minerals and technologies that enable mobile phone communication and all contemporary digital technology. He works with silicon carbide, a mass-produced synthetic composite mineral, which includes silica extracted from sand and quartz, one of the most common minerals. In *Crystal Amplifiers* (2016), Mitchell uses a quartz crystal as an amplifier, reconfiguring the 1930’s Adams crystal amplifier with contemporary computer circuitry and requisite elements of silicon carbide. These minerals transduce modulations of energy into electricity and the resulting sound is physically amplified by the quartz crystals, into a speculative, revelatory voice that connects the listener back into the Earth, to the invisible subterranean origins of these minerals that underpin the communication of our everyday lives, saturated in technology.
The silica mined from ocean beaches is redirected to a variety of human uses, including silicon carbide in smartphones. In *Sands of Time* (2016) MADELEINE BOYD employs the everyday practice of snapping photos on one's smartphone to be immediately shared in the digital ether. Presenting her quasi-scientific documentation of Queensland's Burleigh Beach on a smartphone within a Google Cardboard virtual reality frame. Boyd mimics beach stratigraphic observation methods, collating images of changing sand formations, scientific diagrams and subjective responses to patterns, found objects and anthropocentric daily living. These images become layered technological experiences of media sharing forming stratigraphic perceptions of life-matter.

A similar process of patiently watching and documenting natural changes through a viewfinder, frames the time-lapse video *A Tree is a Living Thing* (2010). TIM COLLINS AND REIKO GOTO focus on a large Elm tree, set against the Aberdeen City skyline, as it changes with the weather over the course of a day. Accompanied by a voiceover speculating on the production of aesthetic truth and the distribution of creative freedoms, the work explores notions of value, science, nature, aesthetics, and empathetic exchange.

The value of trees and the enchanting complexities of forest ecosystems are explored in KATH FRIES’ sculptural installation, *Within and without* (2016). When access roads for logging trucks are slashed into forests, the less obvious fungi mycelium networks underfoot are also severed, with ominous repercussions for the biodiversity of the soil, plants, trees, insects and wildlife. Echoing recent scientific research into Mycorestoration, a process in which *Pleurotus ostreatus* (oyster mushrooms) are used to rehabilitate abandoned logging roads, Fries invites viewers into embodied experiences with these processes — to touch the logs, smell the beeswax and watch the mushrooms grow.

Many plant species have been pushed to the edge of extinction by human impact on fragile ecosystems. Some have existed on Earth for millennia, well before humans evolved; the species now diminished beyond the possibility of propagation are termed Living Fossils. EMMA ROBERTSON collaborates with botanists to research and articulate narratives of such critically endangered flora. Her extended use of drawn layers, indicative of the passage of time, expand into physically altered and re-layered paper-cut pieces suggestive of both evolution and extinction. In *The Archaeology of Absence* (2016), falling seeds of endangered plants are trapped in the strata of human environments, struggling to survive.

In much the same way as seed banks attempt to forestall flora losses, forming an optimistic type of insurance against climate change, imaginative conjectures about human survival prospects are constantly proliferating, particularly in relation to rising sea levels. JOHN ROLOFF has been speculating about future nautical navigation across specific flooded landscapes in *The Sea Within the Land* (1998-2016). Using sonar-scan technologies to simulate oceanographic bathymetric scans, he maps how current coastal cities may look in the future. Roloff calculates these predictions using scientific estimates of a full meltdown of all glaciers, which would cause a rise in sea level 80 metres above the contemporary mean. This data is then creatively re-interpreted to imagine how humans, plants and animals will move within, and engage with, this changed future landscape.
Saturating global maps with the impact of rising sea levels, TRACEY CLEMENT charts how the whole world is drowning and what this may look like in the future. Her labour intensive drawing processes in Critical Cartography (2014-16), emphasise that this alarming situation is not happenstance; it is a direct repercussion of humanity’s concentrated actions, we are all complicit in creating the current climate crisis.

Communicating the trajectories of climate change is also the central concern of Jubilee Venn Diagrams? (2014), JOSH WODAK’S video portrait series. Standing in waist-high water each person enacts diagrams of climate change data, tracing horizontal and vertical trajectories. There is subtle coding: red denotes global average temperature, green indicates greenhouse gas concentration in the atmosphere and blue represents sea levels.

Low-lying coastal regions, such as the Mekong delta in South East Asia, are particularly vulnerable to rising sea levels. In Oscillation & Invasion: Temporalities of the Mekong River (2016), ELAINE GAN considers the multispecies that inhabit and shape this river region. Fragmented images prevent the viewer from seeing any singular species in its entirety, from the humans in the floating market; to rice, the main crop of the Mekong delta threatened by rising sea levels; to water hyacinths, an invasive species that now covers most waterways in the Mekong; and a giant catfish, now an endangered species in this area due to overfishing.

Rivers flow into the ocean and carry with them an assortment of non-biodegradable Anthropogenic waste, which are often caught by a system of circular ocean currents and condensed into the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, an expansive thick soup of micro-plastic particles. The escalation in global consumption of plastics, made from fossil fuels, confronts the viewer in DELL WALKER’S A Growth Economy (2016). Bulging into the gallery space, this uncontainable mound of salvaged polystyrene foam packaging (aerated plastic) was destined for landfill, where it would survive longer than the soon-obsolete objects it was designed to protect. Capitalist growth economies see little financial gain in recycling, and subsequently massive garbage dumps continue to be filled and indelibly mark the Earth.

Garbage incinerators equally contaminate the air, scarring the Anthropocene with our bury-it-or-burn-it waste habits. Fire, even when contained inside a building, is difficult to control. The frequency of devastating wild fires is symptomatic of climate change; as summers become longer the fire season extends, conditions are drier increasing fuel for bush fires, and lightning strikes multiply as thunderstorms become more severe. BRYDEN WILLIAMS’ Fire Sprinkler above Camp Fire (2016), may suggest feeble human attempts to respond to climate change in our uncoordinated efforts to individually put out each spot fire. Williams’ interior, architecturally-bound fire protection sprinkler is displaced and out of context when installed outside over a campfire. However, campfires invite contemplation, perhaps to reflect on the absurdity of first fueling climate change then trying to control it.

Soot, air pollution, radiation, micro-plastic particles, mining, mass extinctions and immense human population growth; now mark the initial strata layers of the Anthropocene. But this may yet prove to be a pivotal time where our concern for ecological crises and creative thinking changes the course of not just humanity’s, but the Earth’s future.
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ENDNOTES


2 The 35th International Geological Congress was held in Cape Town, South Africa, 27 August - 4 September 2016. http://www.35igc.org