

Matters

or

tactility, sensuality, play, affect, queerness, motherhood,
companionship, objecthood and other phenomenological matters

by Sandra Flores
s3785019

Supervisor: Professor Mikala Dwyer

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School of Art
Bachelor of Art (Fine Art) (Honours) Program

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Figure 1: *Matters Second Trial Presentation (detail)* [sculptural installation], Photo by Iona Julian-Walters.

Abstract

Matters proposed that creating multi-sensory atmospheres in sculptural installation art could reconnect us to our sensitive and material nature, blurring the boundaries between participants, artwork and environment. These gatherings could become sites for (renewed) embodiment whilst revolting against hegemonic power structures (portrayed by the institution).

My approach inhabits a community of practice that includes theorists and sculptural installation-based artists who place special care on the potential of our affectable embodiment. I based my research on ideas of common materiality (Ingold 2007) and kinship (Haraway 2016), as well as notions of phenomenological embodiment (Merleau-Ponty 2012; Pallasmaa 2009, 2012; Ahmed 2006) and the staging of atmospheres (Böhme 2016).

This qualitative and performative research had a self-reflecting, emergent, and exploratory methodological design, where open-ended experimentation and play were central. My practice-led research prioritised touch and proprioception as sensory modes that reaffirm our material bodies and common matter-iality. Hence, my chosen material palette was tactile and malleable, emphasising hand-building with clay and salt dough.

Matters saw the creation of atmospheric installations where our sensitive bodies were at the core, recreating microcosmos of worlds within worlds and beaconing alternative ways of relating to matter-as-kin. Working alongside my young daughter and having the possibility of being accompanied by my dog Hugo during the final presentation materialised the complex nature of becoming-with, sparking further inquiry.

Research questions

How can multi-kin and multi-sensory atmospheric installation practices help us reconnect to our sensitive and material nature?

How can multi-kin and multi-sensory atmospheric installation art challenge the power dynamics present in the institution?

Chapter 1: An Introduction

Rationale

A cis-gendered woman, queer, co-mother, co-child, co-friend, co-kin,
Peruvian, australian, indigenous, settler, migrant,
generations of indigenous, generations of settlers, generations of migrants,
migrant to my body, a body, more-than-a-body, nested bodies within bodies,
biome, microbiome, cells, organelles, chemical exchange,
molecules, atoms, quarks, neutrinos,
void, matter, void, void, matter

'We are bodies who start inside other bodies' (Robinson 2017:137) Our bodies are not alone. They inhabit broader bodies: uterine, social, political, ecological, cosmological. Our bodies relate to a myriad of plant, fungi, animal and mineral bodies, co-dwellers of this planet. Our bodies are themselves inhabited by microbe bodies. And our thoughts and consciousness arise from those nested bodies. Yes, our bodies are material, made of matter, the same matter as everything in the Cosmos. In a way, I am a migrant to my own body. As a kid, I always felt disconnected from it (blame neurodiversity and religion); now, I exist within a very active process of embodiment and re-embodiment, as this body can feel so limited! So frail and painful and annoying! But then, this is who I am. This is what makes *me*. The more I understand this, the less *me* there is to the equation, the more everything. And it is an interesting process, unearthing one's body-as-self, only to realise its contingency, its immersion in something much broader, permeable, and ever-changing. matter and void. Void gives me a sense of rest, of blankness; matter is something I can make-with.

Matters, my Honours year practice-led research inquired into the potential of artistic experiences to affect participants and viscerally remind us of our embodied and material nature. It proposed that this awareness could restore a true sense of material immersion whilst diluting artificial Western Capitalist power dynamics and binaries (particularly in the divisions between mind and body, notions of human exceptionalism and bounded individualism). Positioned within somatic, phenomenological, (neo)materialist and feminist/queer discourses, *Matters* proposed an embodied and material mutiny from within the institution; through the staging of atmospheric sculptural installations. Such installations comprised an array of agential matter-as-kin, prioritising clay bodies and salt dough.

The project's methodology will be examined in Chapter 2, positioning my research and praxis concerning the three research frameworks of *embodied matters*, *material matters* and *embracing matters*, and contextualising *Matters* within a broader community of practice.

Chapter 3, *Embodied Sensitivity*, locates us deeply within our flesh, expanding our body awareness. Stemming from French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception (2012), I pay attention to our sensitive body, particularly our touch. My praxis highlights the tactile nature of salt dough, clay and plaster, sitting my work in conversation with primarily tactile American artist Rosalyn Driscoll. I then explored affect theory and German philosopher Gernot Böhme's notion of the *atmosphere*. My practice in this chapter is examined alongside the highly atmospheric and embodied artwork of Icelandic–Danish Olafur Eliasson and French Pierre Huyghe. I end the chapter relating my praxis to British-Australian scholar Sara Ahmed's ideas on queer phenomenology and subsequent reorientation towards new possibilities for existing.

Chapter 4, *Becoming Matter*, focuses on what it means to fully acknowledge that we are made of the same stuff as everything around us, including the materials we choose to work alongside and the objects we manufacture. The chapter's main focus was my Honours year shift towards crafting objects as a core part of my practice. I approached this topic through a phenomenological and new-materialist lens, discussing the resulting intra-affecting encounter and *becoming(-with)*. Hence, this chapter discusses my choice of materials, my relation to them, and the potential democratising power of realising our commonality. *Matters'* materiality, objecthood and encounter are examined in tandem with British anthropologist Tim Ingold's notion of *material flux* (2007:7) and Scottish artist Karla Black's *fallacy of the object* (ICA n.d.).

Chapter 5, *Matterialising the Institution*, starts by noting how far my practice is from American theorist Donna Haraway's proposition for *making-with* and *becoming-with* (2016), as well as from German researcher Petra Lange-Berndt's notion of *material complicity* (2015). I describe my admiration for American artist Arlene Shechet's practice, in particular her skillful-yet-raw ceramic pieces. My praxis joined Black, Shechet, and Eliasson in incorporating the gallery architecture into the final work, challenging power dynamics in place. In some cases (such as Shechet's integration of the pedestal in her work), it arises from a feminist discourse, in others, (as in Eliasson's piece *Life, 2021*, where the Fondation Beyeler in Switzerland was flooded by nature) this

comes from a sense of commonality and kinship. With *Matters*, I challenged institutional hegemony by (literally) darkening the division between work and audience.

Chapter 6, *Further Rematerialising as Companion-Species*, functions as an epilogue. It contextualises the option of incorporating my whippet, Hugo, into the final Grad Show work. The epilogue inquires into Haraway's notion of companion-species and acts as a nod to Human, Huyghe's Ibizan hound and superstar of his *Untilled*, 2011–12 piece for DOCUMENTA (13).



Figure 2: *Matters Second Trial Presentation (detail)* [sculptural installation], Photo by Iona Julian-Walters.

Chapter 2: A Methodology

Matters explored three main research frameworks: *embodied matters*, *material matters* and *embracing matters*. My methodology was qualitative and performative, propelled by experience and my *enthusiasm of practice* (Haseman 2006: 3). My chosen methodological design was self-reflecting and emergent, sensitive to new findings, concepts, affects and inspiration (Pailthorpe 2017:1, Dick 2001:1). Its approach was experimental (Bippus 2013, Malins and Gray 1995:8) and exploratory, hoping for innovative questions and answers within art-making (Swedberg 2020:17). All this comprised a rich mix of research methods, which included a mind-map, a series of annotated bibliographies, a design process, the adoption of tacit knowledge (mainly through hand-building), an *artistic audit* (Haseman 2006:105), studio and kitchen-bench practice, open-ended material experimentation, and development of skills and play. This all resulted in artistic production, a written exegesis, and an array of installation iterations in tandem with their plans and tests. The accompanying documentation encompassed archival records of material and theoretical exploration alongside reflective dialogue techniques and journaling.

My first research framework, *embodied matters*, explored what it means to fully acknowledge our carnal lived experience, breaking apart from mind and body binaries. I considered Merleau-Ponty's theory of the interconnectedness of body and mind in understanding our world (2012) and delved into the line of inquiry this thinking has inspired. I discussed the work of Pallasma (2009; 2012) and his spotlight on the sense of touch (2009, 2012). Alongside, I examined notions of *queer phenomenology* and (re)orientation in Sara Ahmed's work. *Embodied matters* also paid close attention to the notion of *atmospheres*, described as *spaces with a mood or emotionally felt spaces* (Borch 2014). This reverberates with affect theory, expressed as reactive and embodied *moments of intensity*, as well as the spaces for such encounters (O'Sullivan 2001). I framed my praxis beside my experience of Pierre Huyghe's work and artist Olafur Eliasson's reflection on his own practice. I highlighted Eliasson's meticulous staging of atmospheres, paying close attention to his 2006-2011 piece *Your rainbow panorama* (Figures 9 and 10). This focus allowed me to place the body at the forefront of my praxis. I constructed my sculptures to be within an embodied and affecting atmosphere. The desired mood came first, then, the pieces that would inhabit it.

My second research framework, *material matters*, examines Ingold's deep-time concept of *material flux* (2007:7), establishing the equal and cyclic makeup of things. Such understanding is mirrored in artist Karla Black's deep-time assertion of *the fallacy of the object* (ICA n.d.). My fascination with clay was investigated alongside the work of Shechet, relating to, amongst others, notions of *making-with* (Haraway, 2016) and material agency. Following Ahmed's understanding of phenomenology, I shed new light on my relationship to objects and my newly-found interest in carefully crafting art objects. Such objects were initially playfully crafted in salt dough (Figures 1 and 2), with

later, more expert interactions favoring making-with clay. Our work echoes British artist and anthropologist Stephanie Bunn's assertion that craft (and art) making is intrinsically *making-with*, as an *embodied relationship with something outside of ourselves* (2011:35).

My third and final research framework was *embracing matters*, aiming to ground our material matters deeper within our material surroundings. For this, my praxis pursued the *matterialisation of the institution*. This meant softening angular institutional divisions and merging art participants and artwork. To do so, I integrated pedestals, architectural features and visitors into the work through material alchemy. Here, I positioned my work alongside feminist discourse (such as Shechet's and Black's) and gallery-breaking works by Eliasson and Huyghe, furthering the inquiry of what making-with can convey. My dog-friend-kin, Hugo, accompanied me throughout this process, furthering the inquiry into the powers of *making-kin* and becoming-with our *companion-species* (Haraway and Wolfe 2016).



Figure 3: *Making Matters* [process photo], Photo by Sarah Martin.

Chapter 3: Embodied Sensitivity

Mind-body dualism is historically ingrained in Western thought, placing the mental and the physical in separate and unmixable categories. Centuries of philosophy and religion have proliferated this mindset into all aspects of society, creating hierarchies and divisions amongst humans and towards our surrounding world and its inhabitants (Robinson 2020). Its pernicious ramifications are present in our fragmented, unequal society and the extractive, commodifying treatment of our environment. Now more than ever, it is time to reconnect to our materiality. Scientists, thinkers, and artists alike are engaged in exciting new fields of enquiry that resurface the power of our material and relational bodies. My Honours research, *Matters*, proposed that aesthetic encounters have the potential to make us self-aware of our embodied, material and sensitive nature, which in turn could transform how we relate to power dynamics within institutions and society as a whole.

Leading French intellectual Merleau-Ponty was a strong defender of the interconnectedness of body and mind. His lifetime inquiry defended that thinking and consciousness (or "the mind") are deeply rooted in our bodily perceptions of and interactions with the material world. Such material phenomenology transferred the focus from the artwork itself to the phenomenon arising in the viewer's encounter with it. This phenomenon was concurrently subjective and objective, moving beyond the viewer's mind into situated and embodied viewing. Viewing as such became a process within a wider environment, opening the understanding of art as a *site*, rather than isolated pieces (Vickery and Costello 2007). In my work, this thinking has guided my sense of encounter, where I remove the boundaries between participants and artwork. In *Matters*, I darkened the room to create a sense of dis(re)orientation. Fabrics hung from the ceiling and many architectural features were incorporated and blurred (one highlight was using the fan to activate a hanging biodegradable plastic sheet and its video projection). The pedestal became a link between the environment and the sculptural objects. Having many pieces on the floor meant that the floor became a plinth itself, and participants were placed in equal standing with the sculptures, becoming themselves artwork. The inevitable threshold between the institution and the space inhabited by my installation made it work as a stage for novel possibilities.



Figure 4: *Matters Second Trial Presentation (detail)* [sculptural installation], Photo by Mikala Dwyer.

Architect Juhani Pallasmaa cites Merleau-Ponty as an influence in his architectural thinking. In *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, he asserts that touch is 'the sensory mode that integrates our experiences of the world and ourselves', later evidencing that 'all sensory experiences are modes of touching' (2012:12). Throughout the year I have given prevalence to touch, reviving the intrinsic and ancient bond between touch and sculpture. I have prioritised the progression of my tactile knowledge through playful experimentation, sometimes alongside my young daughter, Luisa. With *Matters*, Luisa and I have played and made with salt dough and clay, engendering an intuitive formal vocabulary (that resulted in many piled balls). We mostly hand-built (Figures 3 and 5), but also experimented with building with our feet, knees and elbows.

As American tactile sculptor Rosalyn Driscoll (Figure 6) asserts, by touching we reconnect with our childhood ¹. Proximity between bodies and objects turns their materiality into something to be sensed and touched. Bodies are 'something touching which is touched' (Husserl 1989:155). Such sensations belong not *in* the body nor *in* the object, but form as a result of their encounter (Ahmed 2008:54)². The tactile object is near, within my reach, I can feel it *by* my skin, *on* my skin; we co-inhabit in this space. My body with this object is a different body than without it; the object is a different object in my encounter than without it (Ahmed 2008).



Figure 5: Luisa Taking Matters into Her Own Hands [process photo].

¹ 'Touch remains coloured by early experiences as children when touch was the primary way of interacting with the world' (2014:140).

² Phenomenology understands existence as an *interworld* or *open circuit* between the perceiving body and the world it inhabits (Diprose 2002:102)



Figure 6: Driscoll R (2020) *Viral Knot 2* [sculpture], Artsy website, accessed 16 May 2023.
<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/rosalyn-driscoll-viral-knot-2>

On all iterations of my research project participants were invited to be barefoot (Figures 4, 7 and 8), to close their eyes, and to touch at least some of the pieces displayed. My goal was to elicit a more sensorial and visceral encounter with the site, art pieces and their own primitive, animal, childish and deeply curious selves. Participants described the encounter as intimate and sensual. I was there modelling the experience and could discuss their sensations and feelings. They mentioned how present they felt and how they could absorb the atmosphere (echoing my intentions). These participants saw it as an invitation to slow down and awaken their senses. Some mentioned how the sand or carpet under their feet and hands connected and grounded their bodies. They discussed how immersive and freeing it was: as a place where they could let go of control. They also mentioned it being relational as, for moments, we would graze each others' hands when blindly touching the objects ³.

³Participants' reactions to *Matters* echo comments regarding Driscoll's tactile work: 'There was such a sense of freedom: no barriers, no age, no survival, just bliss. Permission! Being a kid! Atavistic. A return to childhood.' (Driscoll, 2014:140) (Figure 6).



Figure 7: *Matters First Trial Presentation (detail)* [sculptural installation], Photo by Mollie-Rose Chislett.



Figure 8: *Matters Mid-year Assessment(detail): A world within a World* [sculptural installation].

Eliasson emphasises how his work gives a central place to body consciousness and embodied experience. He is an avid follower of Merleau Ponty's phenomenology of perception, reinstating the intrinsic active nature of art viewing (Bukdahl 2018:62). For Eliasson, this is best illustrated in his notion of *felt-feeling* that he attributes to our most primitive animal nature. The artist trusts in the great potential of art once we surrender to that unquantifiable, pre-linguistic *felt-feeling* or *felt-meaning*⁴. An example is his 2011 piece *Your rainbow panorama* (Figures 9 and 10), in which participants witnessed how their cityscape morphed one colour at a time as they traversed a rainbow 360-degree walkway. Participants testified how quickly and bodily they grasped the influence each colour had on their experience. Eliasson once claimed: 'The colours are not just something you see the city through. You also feel them with your body' (Bukdahl 2018: 61).



Figure 9: Eliasson O (2011) *Your rainbow panorama* [architectural intervention], Olafur Eliasson Studio website, accessed 20 May 2023. <https://olafureliasson.net/artwork/your-rainbow-panorama-2006-2011>

⁴ Eliasson affirms: 'But so much of it is experience that is strongly felt. It is not just how I personally feel about the artwork; it is also about what the feeling feels like' (Bukdahl 2018, p. 69)

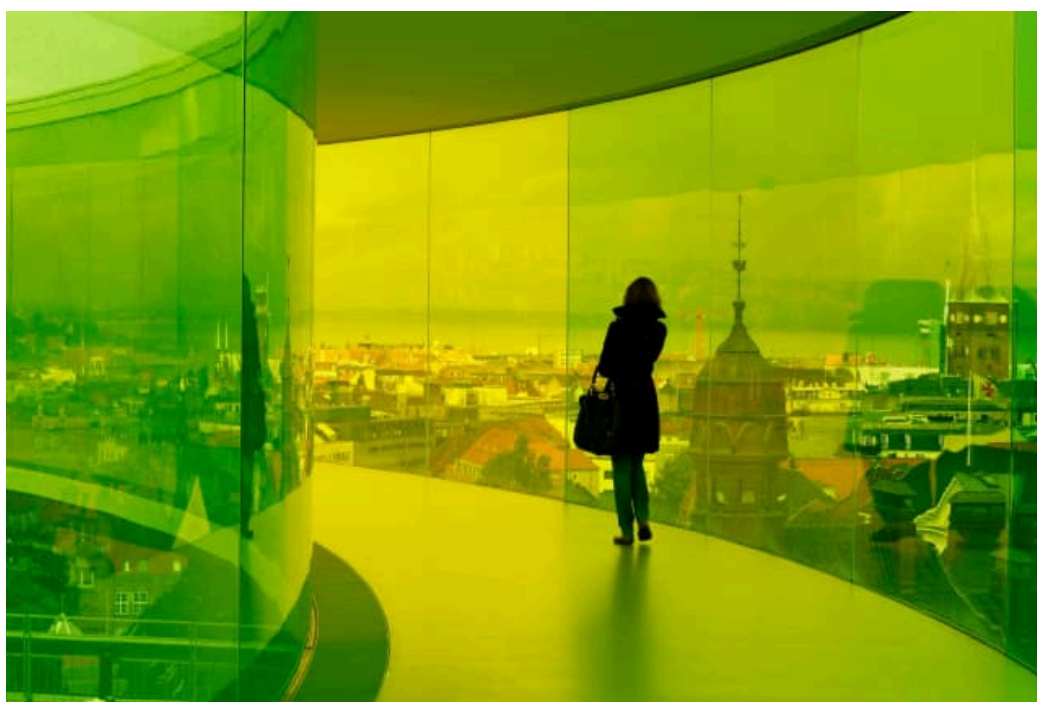


Figure 10: Eliasson O (2011) *Your rainbow panorama* [architectural intervention], Olafur Eliasson Studio website, accessed 20 May 2023. <https://olafureliasson.net/artwork/your-rainbow-panorama-2006-2011/>

Such an embodied *felt-feeling* recalls affect theory. British theorist Simon O'Sullivan describes affects as reactive and embodied *moments of intensity*, events or happenings, along with the zones for such encounters (2001)⁵. If I ever had to pinpoint a moment when I was affected by an artwork, this would be in the encounter of Pierre Huyghe's 2002 piece *L'Expédition scintillante, Act 2 (Light Box)* (Figures 11 and 35). It all happened at his 2015 solo exhibition at the TarraWarra Museum of Art. I was already absorbed by the enigmatic otherworldliness of the artist's work, in both physical and metaphorical darkness. Everything was so new to me, so unexpected. And then, suddenly, I found myself in front of this massive misty (for lack of a better word) box. Lilac, yellow, pink, absolute alchemy to the familiar sound of the *Gymnopédies*. Familiar yet uncanny, new yet extremely ancient, an object I had never encountered that somehow filled every cell of my body. This piece (and the whole exhibition) profoundly changed something in me, and ever since then, I have been aiming to emulate such a spellbinding experience in my art. As O'Sullivan affirms, aesthetical affect has the power to become a portal to a transformative (virtual) world experience, *art as an access point to other (possible) worlds* (2001:130).

⁵ O'Sullivan firmly establishes affects within philosophical materialism, emphasising their immanent and experienced-based nature (2001).

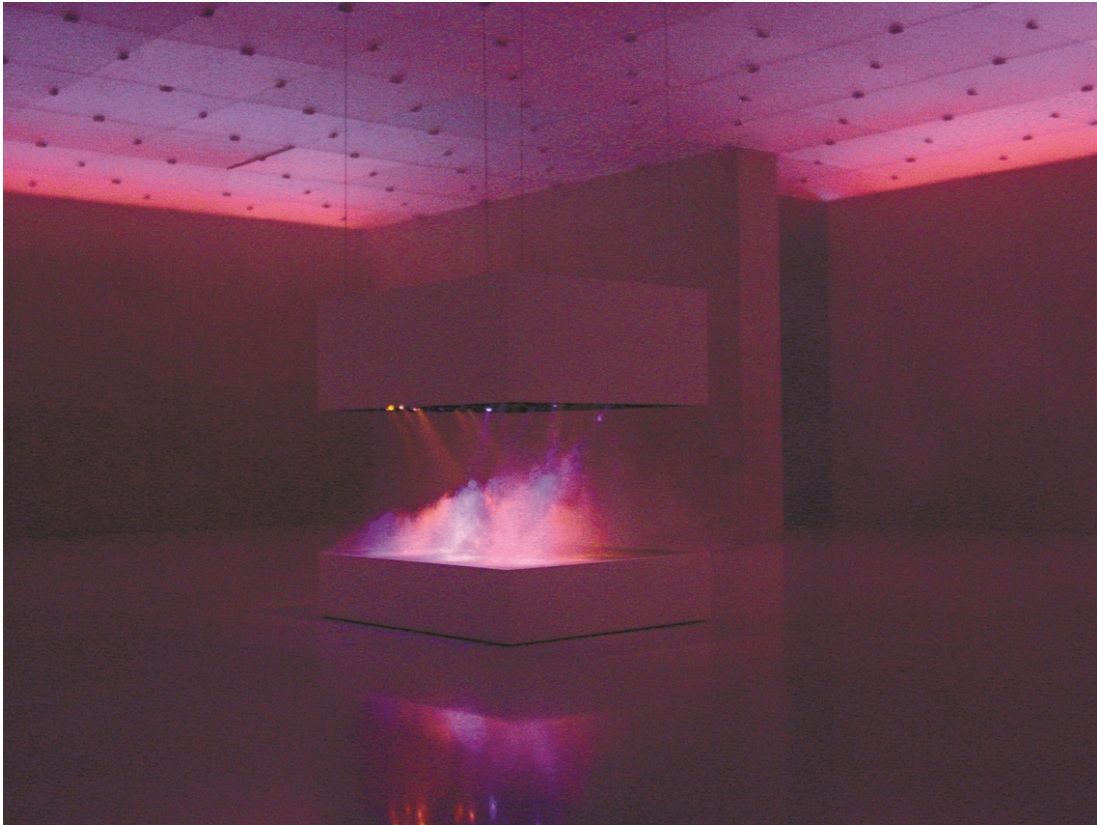


Figure 11: Huyghe P (2002) *L'Expédition Scintillante, Acte 2 Untitled (Light Box)* [sculpture], Museums and Galleries of NSW website, accessed 20 June 2023.

<https://mgnsn.org.au/articles/acr-recipient-amelia-barikin-conversation/>

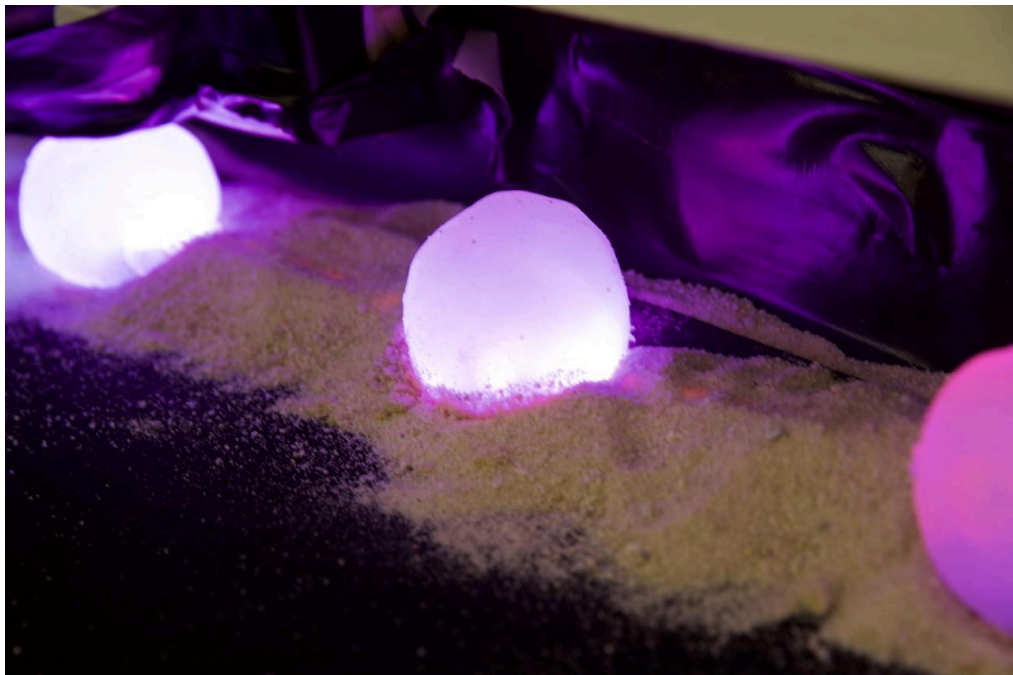


Figure 12: *Matters Second Trial Presentation (detail)* [sculptural installation], Photo by Iona Julian-Walters.

One can assert that the notion of atmosphere is a means of emplacing affects and their theories (Brown et al. 2019). German philosopher Gernot Böhme is a key figure on atmospheres. He defines them as *spaces with a mood, or emotionally felt spaces* (Borch 2014:96). As he affirms, atmospheres can mediate human aesthetic feelings with objective aspects of the environment (2016). In other words, how we bodily feel in a space considerably depends on such an atmosphere ⁶. Eliasson shares Böhme's assertion that atmospheres can be staged and (re)produced: 'When you introduce atmosphere into a space, it becomes a reality machine' (Borch 2014: 93). In my praxis, I have experienced the affecting power of atmospheres by orchestrating them within multisensory sculptural installations. I aim to (re)create microcosmos of worlds within worlds, mirroring nature (soil layers, deep waters, galaxies) whilst signalling alternative possibilities for relating to matter-as-kin. For this, I rely on the visceral power of our senses. As I have established, touch is at the core of this experience. I also play with smell by sprinkling essential oils and species to my sculptures and gelatinous-concealed LED lights (Figures 12 and 17). Lastly, by blurring the visual my work also engages our bodies' proprioception (Figure 13). I eclipse the visual further with resources such as video projections, smoke and steam (in an attempt to replicate my TarraWarra experience). Presenting the pieces as sensorial microcosmos also allows for their intimate exploration. I trust an atmosphere's capacity to alchemise our relationship with our mat(t)erial world.

And this alchemy is also a queering one. British-Australian scholar Sara Ahmed's 2006 text *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* helped me understand this (and myself) further, opening new lines of inquiry. In phenomenology orientation has a central role where consciousness is always directed *toward* an object. In her introduction, Ahmed talks about *affect as contact*: we are affected by *what* we come into contact with, which (re)orients us toward and/or away (2006:2). Orientations, she explains, form how we inhabit space, as well as how we *apprehend this world of shared inhabitation*, by framing *who or what we direct our energy and attention toward* (2006:3). My work with *Matters* ultimately wants to reorient us towards new/ancient ways of co-inhabiting the world, in full awareness of our shared material make-up ⁷. And yes, *Matters* wants to disorient us away from heteronormative space, and doing so can be uncomfortable. Ahmed cites Merleau-Ponty when describing those phenomenological *queer moments of disorientation*, that comprise not only 'the intellectual experience of disorder, but the vital experience of giddiness and nausea, which is the awareness of our contingency, and the horror with which it fills us' (2002: 296). With *Matters*, I yearn for that giddiness

⁶ As an example, Böhme uses the weather and the feeling we get from the darkening sky of an approaching thunderstorm (2016:2).

⁷ Here I want to quote Peter Wetswood's feedback on *Matters*, opening new lines of inquiry: 'While the work seems to arise from the unconscious, an interior state, it also seems to represent an external world that we don't comprehend, and here lies the socio political aspects of your project > we live in a world that we don't essentially know, although we think that we do; or the world has become something that we don't know and we need to find new ways to connect.'

and nausea, for that unknown void to be an enveloping one, as overcoming it might be the only way for our bodies to become reoriented, revitalised and reactivated (Merleau-Ponty 2002, Ahmed 2006).



Figure 13: *Matters Second Trial Presentation (detail)* [sculptural installation], Photo by Iona Julian-Walters.

Chapter 4: Becoming Matter

The atmosphere in *Matters* is inhabited by objects.

I used to be against making objects. My art was about events, not things. I despised l'objet d'art with all its extravagant commodifying, classist ways. My art would happen for a day or two, or even half an hour and then be packed up, destroyed, perhaps its components later re-used. In this, I felt like an activist against the vicious cycle of Capitalist art commodification and waste. However, now, I am confounded by my growing passion for making-with clay, as well as the acknowledgement that all art grants reside within Capitalism. There might be no use in destroying what I love. Maybe I can keep some objects, put them around the house, give them away or even sell them... and then buy materials to make more art with, right?

So, yes, in *Matters* the atmosphere is inhabited by objects.

At least for now.

Thinking about objects in my praxis is new to me. Having audiences relate to *carefully crafted objects I made as art* is probably the biggest change I have experienced throughout the year. And I am still coming to terms with it all. My atmospheres in previous works were quite bare; the objects in them were functional, undecorated, many times found, mostly ephemeral. The work was about the embodied mood induced by the series of phenomena encountered. This is easily perceived in the interior of my work *Solace*, from 2021, *Matters'* great grandmother⁸(Figure 14). Something is lacking, the encounter is not as embodied, and the aesthetically pleasing clay and salt dough objects are part of that.

⁸ One could find vapour, smells, sand, video projections, salt, and containers I would have repurposed from previous works and would repurpose again and again. There were also my agar balls (I still use the same silicon mould to make them). If you visit my current studio, you will find all those fish bowls, the cushion, and perhaps even the same salt, rebagged (I did try to keep the sand, but it went musty).



Figure 14: *Solace* (2021)[sculptural installation].

So, what do these novel objects bring to my work's encounter? Ahmed (2006) discusses objects from a phenomenological and *ethno-phenomenological* perspective. In phenomenology, we are directed toward things, objects that cast an impression upon us. We only perceive them as things when we share close proximity and a residence with them. If we are oriented towards it, then it can become an *it*, an object to apprehend and value. This, in turn, gives us a position that affects how we act towards the object and the space we co-inhabit. Ahmed supplements this with the object's biography, a *co-perception*. The feedback I got from participants in *Matters* reflects this. There was a lot about the materiality of the objects in clay, but my use of salt was discussed in particular depth. I was aware of salt's historical impact, making it a reason behind choosing it. I had gathered fundamental materials for humans, chapters in our Earthly history. Many are related to domestic activities, such as clay and vessel making, or flour and bread-making, or wool and knitting. There is clay. There is salt. There is flour. There is cotton and wool. And then, there is what looks like plastic, but in its biodegradable form, which alongside agar, works as a beacon to new material narratives. But yes, salt with its Capitalist associations became a serious debate, which reminded me of how much there is to things, to our material choices. As Ahmed confirms: 'If phenomenologists were simply to *look at* the object that they face, then they would be erasing the *signs* of history' (2006:41)⁹.

⁹ Objects, Ahmed asserts, have arrived from somewhere: 'an arrival that is at once the way in which objects are binding and how they assume a social form' (2006:41).

However, in my work objects and materials *became* something else, or as someone said: 'came to form to at once disintegrate'. Clay was clay, and was a ceramic object, but also a being, an entity, an enabler of different worlds. Salt was salt with all its complex connotations, but also stars and a reminder of smell, salinity, and the ocean: an *alchemical flux*. Such reactions to my work echo one of my favourite quotes by anthropologist Tim Ingold (2007:7): 'Like all other creatures, human beings do not exist on the "other side" of materiality but swim in an ocean of materials. Once we acknowledge our immersion, what this ocean reveals to us is not the bland homogeneity of different shades of matter but a flux'. These words are among the main influences on my work for the past few years. They resonate with all of my deepest beliefs. Every particle in our body is made of and will transform into the same matter as the rest of the ever-becoming Cosmos. It is so obvious, so intrinsic, yet the dualistic society I inhabit is founded in breaking apart from this truth. As Ingold suggests, *Matters* proposes returning to the *generative fluxes of the world of materials*, in which *things are in life rather than that life is in things* (2007:12). Here, there are no fixed material properties, but everything perennially transforms with its surroundings. So, with *Matters*, I acknowledged the object in all its objecthood just to reassert its ephemerality.

Karla Black shares this awareness when describing *the fallacy of the object*: 'I like to think about how the material world is in a constant state of flux, and therefore the object is a fallacy. Energy becomes mass, then energy again, and so on.' (ICA n.d.). The artist aims to steer away from any possibility of a formal resolution; from any possible objectification of her pieces (Archer 2008). By doing this, she aims for a raw state of potentiality, before the constraints of giving things meaning, where things *almost* or *only just* come into existence (Archer 2008). Her material choices align with this, with many of her materials arriving from *pre-object* mess (or formless matter) or *post-object* waste. Black's work resides in the in-betweenness of materials, permanently in the liminal process of becoming (ICA n.d.)¹⁰. She hangs sheets of fabric or cellulose, covering them, the floor, walls, windows, and other surfaces in powders, pastes, oils, creams and gels¹¹ (Figures 15 and 16). Her material freedom and inhabitation of the space have been a major influence on my work, but the most straightforward connection resides in that *in-betweenness*. I was delighted to hear participants to *Matters* stating that my pieces are *embedded in the nature of matter and creation*, referencing *matter and dematerialisation processes over a final product*. Encountering matter in its various forms (liquid, solid, dust, vapour) felt like *material experiments from the past*. Participants

¹⁰ Even Black's colours are unresolved, leaving space for potentiality and transformation: 'A lot of the time I'm trying to float colour in the air' (ICA n.d)

¹¹ Black's miscellaneous materials include paper, nail polish, face powder, plaster powder and bath bombs.

perceived the work as perennially coming about, in constant flux, regathering, dissolving, alive, and even creating waste. The installation changes over time: salt grains disperse, agar forms go musty, and the smell of the hidden nutmeg evolves. Our perception adapts too: we get used to some smells, to certain sounds, to a particular light or warmth. My video projections, they affirmed, prompted a sense of movement, which was amplified by the luminescent grains of salt scattered in the ground. Yet, they explained, this was contrasted by a sense of otherworldly stillness and quietness. *Matters* followed different physical rules as the world outside: the carpet muffled the sound, the degradable plastic drop sheets and muslin hanging from the ceiling remained still. My material choices provided a sense of alchemy and mysticism and the creation of *something new, a possibility for change*. Participants in my work discovered even more than I had expected, which filled me with joy and a sense of accomplishment, especially when conveying a sense of *becoming*.



Figure 15: Black K (2009) *Pleaser* [sculpture], Saatchi Gallery website, accessed 23 June 2023.
https://www.saatchigallery.com/artist/karla_black



Figure 16: Black K (2021) *Fences Kept* (detail) [sculpture], ArtMag website, accessed 23 June 2023.
<https://artmag.co.uk/pink-white-and-black-bigger-fruitmarket-reopens-in-edinburgh-with-sculptural-retrospective/>

Such an encounter echoes O'Sullivan's understanding of art as a magical and aesthetic function of transformation: less about making sense of the world and more related to exploring its opportunities for experiencing, being, and becoming in the world (2001:130)¹². American feminist physicist and philosopher Karen Barad agrees. Their seminal text *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) puts forth their theory of *agential realism*, an ontology that rebuffs the division between object and viewer. Following notions of quantum physics, Barad suggests that matter and materiality not only consist of discrete substances and objects but of dynamic phenomena, 'a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity' that results in *becoming* (Barad 2007:210). It means that no dualities (not even cause and effect) would have clear boundaries, but would exist as an integral part of the world in its open-ended and *differential becoming* (Barad 2003:821-829). Becoming evolves synchronously with past, present and future reconfigurations of the world¹³.

Donna Haraway takes this further by prompting us to *become-with* our fellow Earth-bound. She proclaims: 'If we appreciate the foolishness of human exceptionalism

¹² In this evaluation, O'Sullivan makes note of the reasoning of, amongst others, French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze's materialist philosophy expands on the real material forces of life, where individuated "beings" result from becoming and are far greater than what their apparent fixed forms imply (Vickery and Costello 2007).

¹³ Italian-Australian feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti would add, in something that relates strongly to Black's praxis, that becoming happens between the *no longer* and the *not yet* (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn 2012:32), where what is cast off turns into an integral part of what is becoming.

then we know that becoming is always becoming-with, in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake' (2008: 244). Becoming is grounded in connection, blurring delusions of separation (Wright n.d.).



Figure 17: *Matters Second Trial Presentation (detail)* [sculptural installation], Photo by Iona Julian-Walters.

Chapter 5: Materialising the Institution

One of Donna Haraway's most influential descriptions ¹⁴ is the one of *sympoiesis* or *making-with* our fellow Earth-bound kin ¹⁵. Nothing exists alone: everything in existence has been co-created by deep-time interactions with others ¹⁶. As she asserts, *sympoiesis* is a word for *worlding-with, in company* (2016:58). Many have related this to notions of new-materialism and *material agency*, where making becomes a collaborative endeavour between (human, animal, plant, mineral, etc.) agents (Bolt 2007).

During my honours year, my praxis reflected on German researcher Petra Lange-Berndt's query into *material complicity*: 'What does it mean to give agency to the material, to follow the material, and to act with the material?' (Lange-Berndt 2015:13). My studio and home were a place of open-ended experimentation, where every task and event was appreciated for its potential for *becoming-with*. To *complicitly make-with* materials means one has to be ready to be profoundly affected and guided by them, assuming the *response-ability* (Haraway 2016) their extraction and usage presupposes. This is an extremely challenging premise, as there is no denying that by making any/art object, one also is an active part of a complex network of consumerism and commodification. As someone who just recently discovered their love for object-making, I still have a long way to go about this.

I prioritised hand-building with clay-as-kin. I let bodily instinct take hold, and my hand(and sometimes foot or knee)-made clay sculptures inhabited an open-ended, playful space. Clay has been my teacher, and I have only started to know it (although not necessarily control its outcomes) by spending time and slowing down, wedging, and hand-sculpting. My praxis inhabited the pre-lingual, the raw and primal. My predilection for clay as a medium is incarnated; the more I experiment with it, the more deeply immersed I become in its cosmical materiality (Figures 4, 13 and 18)¹⁷. My hot desk in the ceramic studio was a place of open-ended experimentation, where I spent long hours making-with clay, forming a kinship, developing my hand-building, somatic, tactile, and sensorial understanding; following Ingold's assertion that we can learn more from the material world by erasing our fabricated divisions and directly engaging with it (2007).

¹⁴ Haraway clarifies this is a borrowed term, originally by M. Beth Dempster, from her 1998 MA thesis *A Self-Organizing Systems Perspective on Planning for Sustainability* (Haraway 2016:61).

¹⁵ To an extent, Haraway contrasts this with autopoiesis or self-organising, only in that nothing is truly self-sufficient (2016:61).

¹⁶ In this Haraway pays homage to Lynn Margulis's inquiry into symbiogenesis.

¹⁷ The elements that compose clay have come from a myriad of cosmological, geological and biological moments and connect not only to human history but to the history of the earth and all Earth-bound critters (the first soil was made by lichen), extending to supernovae explosions and the Cosmic Web.



Figure 18: *Making Matters* [process photo].

The main artist who accompanied my work on clay was Arlene Shechet. This is primarily due to aesthetic reasons: her work feels so right. Also, whenever I watch videos of her process, I am aghast by the visceral expertise of her making (Figure 19). Her work epitomises how skill comes with making, how the body learns-with materials by practice¹⁸ (Sorri 1994) and repetition. I am new to clay and look forward to decades of learning-with it. Clay is a rich and challenging mentor, and making with it is a fully-embodied experience. As Shechet describes: 'Clay is so malleable, and the body can work on it with no tools, so it is very much a body-to-body experience' (Rapaport 2016). Something else I share with Shechet is the discovery that clay's material properties and processes allow us to juggle full lives. Clay becomes a regathering ground amidst our roles as mums, artists and teachers. This balancing act might be behind her incorporation of the pedestal into her finished work¹⁹ (Figure 20).

¹⁸ In *The Body Has Reasons: Tacit Knowing in Thinking and Making* (1994) Finnish philosopher and ceramist artist Mari Sorri discusses the tacit nature of artistic knowledge. For this, she analyses Hungarian-British polymath Michael Polanyi's theory of cognition. Polanyi asserts that all human cognition is predominantly bodily. Tacit knowledge is *knowing from the inside* (:25), where one's body knows more than one's mind can explain. And we get it through practice: through a series of integrative acts. These integrative acts provide increasingly more comprehensive knowledge of a task, eventually becoming a full set of skills. After further practice, those new skills become a part of the person's bodily cognition. As Sorri states: 'one learns to swim by swimming' (:20).

¹⁹ She often defines herself as primarily an installation artist. She asserts: 'I'm very interested in architecture and in the pedestal as a form of architecture. I think about the work in the room, the gallery space, and the installation as a whole in the world. All of these are essential pieces that I feel are necessary to consider.' (Phaidon 2017)

Shechet's arrangements have an instinctual phenomenological rationale: 'In making an exhibition, I always want to animate the whole show, but I also want to animate the viewer to each piece' (Pace Gallery 2022)²⁰. Her addition to the pedestal is not new, as countless artists have done it before and after her. I take her as an example of how such integration can reflect a feminist blurring of divisions and hierarchies: between art and craft, sculpture and décor, the institutional and the domestic (Morris, 2017). If we pay close attention to her material processes we can see how they embody such blurring assemblages. She repurposes kiln bricks and shelves, revaluing them by glazing and altering them; colour glazes trickle down between the clay pieces and their supports, merging them. She leaves some ceramic pieces unglazed. Others, she glazes repeatedly. Her pieces feel gestural and raw yet skillfully polished. The artist's expertise lies at that liminal moment of becoming, *poised on the brink of transformation* (NY Times 2020), where viscosity and instinct meet experience and bodily know-how. She knows when to leave things almost untouched and when to keep on working. Shechet's is material complicity acquired through years of making-with, and I find it electrifying.



Figure 19: Abel R (2013) *Shechet in her studio in 2013* [photography], ARTnews website, accessed 23 May 2023. <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/market/arlene-shechet-joins-pace-gallery-9910/>

²⁰ In her work, each piece is a comment in itself, and the whole installation works as a conversation (Pace Gallery 2022).



Figure 20: Shechet A (2020) Deep Dive [sculpture], Flaunt Magazine website, accessed 23 May 2023.
<https://www.flaunt.com/blog/arlene-shechet>

As previously established, Shechet's addition of the pedestal is nothing new. There is a strong tradition of artists breaking apart from the confinements of their medium. This is primarily a revolt against the modernist colonisation of the arts by cultural theory, notably against American essayist Clement Greenberg's notion of *truth to materials* (1960), where each medium had to stay *self-defined* and untarnished by others. Black's own feminist post-medium mutiny started in art school, against an instructor's claim that sculpture has to be self-supporting (Barcio 2017). Her rejection of this is evident: her site-specific sculptures occupy every nook and cranny of space, vertically, horizontally, aurally... making the encounter between viewers and objects a raw, embodied and liberating one. Her work can be read as a *site of resistance* that challenges long-established power dynamics within mediums, processes and modes of presentation (Cachia 2016:4). Another example is Eliasson's 2021 exhibition *Life*²¹, at Fondation Beyeler in Switzerland (Figures 21 and 22). Here, the artist removed the facade between

²¹*Life* was complemented by an online microsite, as well as by a series of micro-phenomenological interviews by cognitive scientist Katrin Heimann. She interviewed a group of purposely invited visitors that included museum staff from Fondation Beyeler's educational team, non-Swiss background school teenage students, and a few friends of Studio Olafur Eliasson. Eliasson explains: '*Life* lives and breathes through the experiences of its visitors, both human and non-human. I welcome everything visitors bring with them to the artwork – their expectations and memories, thoughts and emotions. Katrin Heimann's micro-phenomenological interviews offer unique access to these experiences and create an expanded understanding of what the artwork does and is.' (Fondation Beyeler n.d.).

the building and its enclosing garden, expanding its pond into the galleries. Visitors were invited to roam the exhibition along a wooden walkway, both day and night, encountering life unfolding around and within them. In this instance, the artist's incorporation of the architecture was about co-existence and becoming-with^{22 23}.



Figure 21: Eliasson O (2021) *Life* [exhibition], Olafur Eliasson Studio website, accessed 13 July 2023.
<https://olafureliasson.net/exhibition/life-2021/>

²² 'With Life, I work actively to create a space of coexistence among those involved in and affected by the exhibition – the art institution, my artwork, the visitors, other beings that join in, the trees and other plants in the park, the urban landscape that surrounds the museum, and beyond. Through collectively exploring the world we share, we can, I hope, make it livable for all species.' (Eliasson n.d.)

²³ This is a beautiful quote from the exhibition's webpage: 'Start with the plants, follow their inquisitive growth, their running roots and rhizomes, the widespread movements of their pollen and seeds, and an entire ecology of beings and becomings and comings undone will soon become perceptible. Get caught up in the involutory momentum that propels these beings to get entangled in one another's lives and you will soon start to perceive affective ecologies taking shape among the thicket of relations all around you.' (Myers 2018).



Figure 22: Eliasson O (2021) *Life* [exhibition], Olafur Eliasson Studio website, accessed 13 July 2023.
<https://olafureliasson.net/exhibition/life-2021/>

My work has followed this tradition. Being the first time I created crafted objects, I had the option of using plinths for the first time. *Matters'* saw institutional pedestals beings transformed and incorporated into the work; questioning the entrenched power dynamics in art and academic institutions. First, I bio-morphed an RMIT table (Figures 7, 8 and 27). Later, I painted RMIT plinths, linking them to sculptures, walls and carpets (Figures 23 and 24). Following feedback, I made my own plinths in the shape of basalt columns (Figure 25), prompted by my long fascination with their hexagonal shape and volcanic origin ²⁴. With help from Duncan Freedman, technician in the sculpture studios, we perfected a process for making them using cardboard, plaster and jute (Figure 26).

²⁴ First, Duncan and later Carly Fischer and Raphael Buttonshaw (all wonderful techs at RMIT) told me about the importance of basalt in Victoria's geology and history. The Western Victorian Volcanic Plains are one of the world's largest basaltic plains, developing over centuries of volcanic action. The most recent eruptions occurred between thousands and tens of thousands of years ago and were most likely witnessed by indigenous people in the area (Planning Victoria 2013). As well as this, bluestone, used in many of Victoria's early public buildings, is typically basalt (Resources Victoria 2022).



Figure 23: *Matters Mid-year Assessment(detail)* [sculptural installation].



Figure 24: *Matters Mid-year Assessment(detail)* [sculptural installation].



Figure 25: *Matters Second Trial Presentation (detail)* [sculptural installation], Photo by Mikala Dwyer.



Figure 26: *Making Matters* [process photo], Photo by Duncan Freedman.



Figure 27: *Matters First Trial Presentation (The Tactile Room)* [sculptural installation], Photo by Mollie-Rose Chislett.



Figure 28: *Matters Mid-year Assessment(detail): Thresholds* [sculptural installation].



Figure 29: *Matters Mid-year Assessment(detail)* [sculptural installation].

Chapter 6: An Epilogue: Further Rematerialising as Companion-Species

And then there is Pierre Huyghe's milieus: symbiotic systems inhabited by a vast range of life forms, inanimate objects and technologies, co-existing and co-creating new possibilities. Examples are his *After ALife Ahead*, for Münster's *Skulptur Projekte 2017* ²⁵, a time-based bio-technical system that de/re-constructed a former ice rink (Figure 30), and *Variants*, 2021 – ongoing, a re-imagined island ²⁶ (Figure 31), at Kistefos Museum sculpture park in Norway.



²⁵ Pierre Huyghe's *After ALife Ahead*, for Münster's *Skulptur Projekte 2017* digged into the ground of a former ice rink to create hilly landscapes where concrete, earth, clay, styrofoam, gravel debris, and Ice Age sand were scattered with leftover surfaces. Inhabitants included beehives, microbes, peacocks and a HeLa cell culture continually dividing, prompting effects such as the appearance of augmented reality shapes. Other processes morphed the spatial configuration of the space, opening and shutting windows and more (Anklam 2017).

²⁶ Perhaps his most ambitious work to date is *Variants* (2021 – ongoing) at Kistefos Museum sculpture park in Norway. An accidental island that emerges only when the water is high; reasserting the impossibility of taking our ground for granted. The mixed-media installation materials are listed: Scanned forest, real-time simulation, generative mutations and sounds, intelligent camera, environmental sensors, animals, plants, micro-organisms and materialized mutations: synthetic and biological material aggregate. Huyghe describes it as 'a multipolar entity that perceives, generates and modifies. It is simultaneously an island and what that island could be in an alternate reality.' (Kistefos Museum 2021).

Figure 30: Huyghe P (2017) *After ALife Ahead* [exhibition], ARTnews website, accessed 15 July 2023.
<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/constant-displacement-pierre-huyghe-on-his-work-at-skulptur-projekte-munster-2017-8602/>



Figure 31: Huyghe P (2021) *Variants* [exhibition], e-flux website, accessed 15 July 2023.
<https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/473018/pierre-huyghevariants/>

Human, Huyghe's dog-in-residence, was an inhabitant of such milieus. She was a rescued Ibiza hound who accompanied Huyghe in a series of works, most notably in *Untilled*, 2011–12, his piece for dOCUMENTA (13)²⁷ (Figures 32, 34 and 35). The artist has been placing animals in his work for a long time. Such incorporation brings to my mind notions of in-betweenness, *becoming-with* and material agency: 'I became fascinated by the work in progress. I realized that what I was more and more attracted to was the aspect that was undetermined. You frame a rule, set the conditions, but you cannot define how a given entity will interact with another.' (Theung L 2014). Moreover, Human is a dog: our paradigmatic *companion species* and *partner in the crime of human evolution* (Haraway 2016:98). Through her manifestos Haraway reveals society's artificial binaries and power dynamics, how these divisions aggravate asymmetric oppressive relations amongst humans and between humans and others (Latimer 2017). Haraway wants to rethink those divisions and re-invent our interconnectivity by stressing *kin-making* and *composting*. With her logo: 'Make kins not babies.' she reinstates that for companion species kinship and inheritance are not merely linear but also lateral: in generative co-engendering (Latimer 2017). To do so, she places affective relationality at

²⁷ For a hundred days, Human cared for a composting site/garden alongside a puppy and their handler, co-inhabiting the space with a nude sculpture with a head swarming with bees, an uprooted oak tree from Joseph Beuys's *7,000 Oaks* (1982) and a myriad of aphrodisiac and psychotropic plants. As with many of Huyghe's works the boundaries between the artwork and the outside world, reality and representation were undefined (ArtReview), resulting in new worlds as uncanny *non-places*, sites *in-between* nature and culture (The Conversation). And then, there was Human, roaming around, sleeping, playing, doing her thing. Huyghe's intention was that participants bear witness to nature's phenomenological happenstance: '*walking through the woods not knowing if he will find a ravine or a creek, or if an unknown animal will pass him on the left* (Art news art in America).

the core. We are not just phenomenological *beings-in-the-world* or Deleuze's *human beings as becomings*. We are perentially becoming-with others (companion-species and cyborgs alike) in affective and interdependent 'worldings' (Latimer 2017).

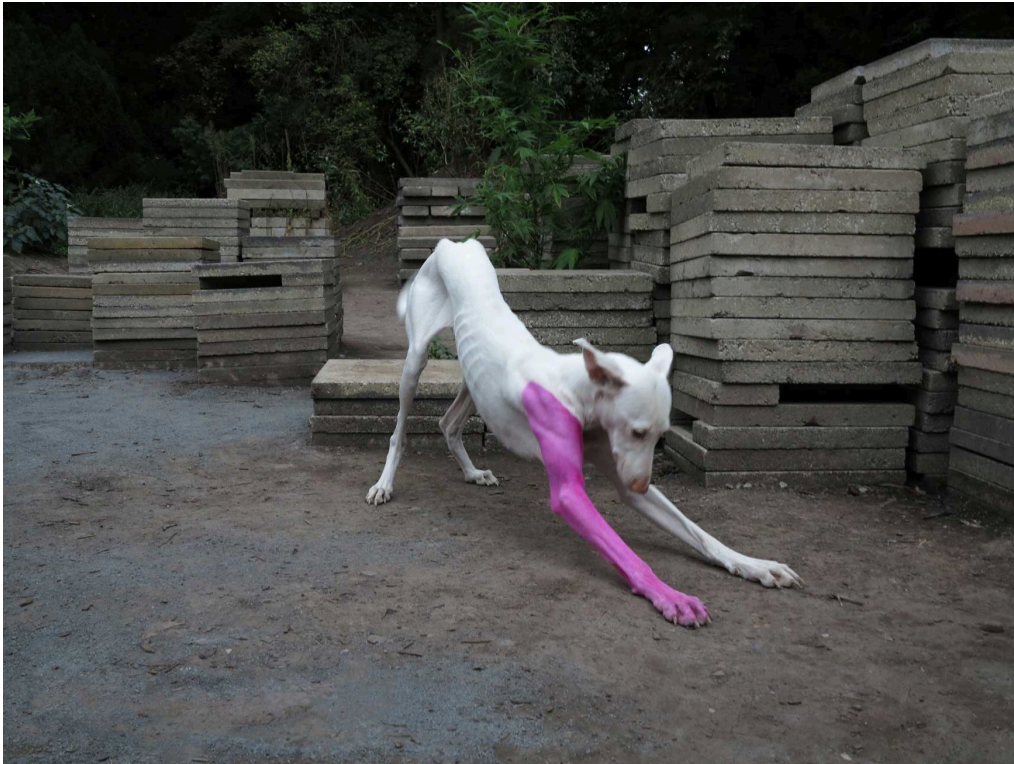


Figure 32: Huyghe P (2011-2012) *Untilled* [exhibition], Esther Schipper website, accessed 8 June 2023.
<https://www.estherschipper.com/exhibitions/386-untitled-pierre-huyghe/>



Figure 33: Hugo by my side as I write this.

Hugo, my own dog-in-residency (Figure 33), came to be part of *Matters* both inspired by my long-term fascination with Human and my short-term kindness with Haraway's notion of companion species. However, the decision to incorporate him into my installation came in a conversation with Peter Westwood, who assessed my work. Throughout the year, Peter's feedback has highlighted my work's profit from a welcoming and often guiding host, who so far has been me (sometimes equipped with tea and biscuits). However, my opinion has increasingly been that the work (which includes its participants) should be its own host. A compromise and further expansion of this was incorporating Hugo. This addition has already started in my Archived Records, and now Hugo, subject to RMIT's authorities, might be a member of our Grad Show. Human's presence in Huyghe's work at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2014 came with a series of *need-to-know points* regarding her *participation, lifestyle, and the best ways to appreciate her when visiting the exhibition* (Theung 2014)²⁸. If Hugo's participation materialises, it will be accompanied by his own series of equally respectful dot points.

²⁸ One of them reads 'Human comes and goes with her handler as she pleases—she is never required to be in the gallery at any particular time. If she desires to go for a walk, to eat, or to rest, she does so. We are extremely sensitive to her needs.'



Figure 34: Fröhlich F (2012) *Pierre Huyghe, Untitled (Senor & Human)*, BlindBild website, accessed 8 June 2023.
<https://www.blindbild.com/kassel-documenta-13-karlsaue-zwischen-auesee-und-auedamm-juni-2012/documenta-13-pierre-huyghe-4/>

Chapter 7: A Conclusion

This practice-led investigation was fuelled by questions about the potential of multi-kin and multi-sensory atmospheric installation practices in rekindling us to our sensitive and material nature. This reclamation would act as a mutiny against dualistic power dynamics in the institution and society at large. My qualitative and performative methodology placed our common material makeup at the forefront. As such, my research revolved around the senses (touch in particular) in tandem with notions of phenomenology, material agency, *making-with*, and *becoming(-with)* (Haraway 2008, 2016).

This Honours year has been a challenging yet extremely rewarding one. My praxis has evolved immeasurably. A milestone was gaining embodied skill when hand-crafting sculptural objects in salt dough and clay, expanding my formal vocabulary. This was a playful and instinctual process, especially when working alongside my young daughter. As well as this, *Matters* was the first time I incorporated carefully crafted sculptural objects within my multi-sensory atmospheric installations. I believe their presence has allowed for *affect as contact* (Ahmed 2006), (re)orienting participants toward our shared material flux and away from heteronormative dualisms.

Another breakthrough regarded the incorporation of the pedestal and architecture of the space into the final artwork, blurring boundaries between artwork and participants. Doing this in an atmospheric and disorienting setting (particularly by covering the floor with black carpet) allowed for a new way of inhabiting the space, reactivating our bodies by alchemising our relationship with our surroundings.

Finally, my praxis has flourished through a deeper understanding of the theories underpinning it, expanding my community of practice, which has enriched not only my work but my life in general.

Becoming-with our fellow Earth-bound kin is imperative in changing our current exploitative ways. My praxis will increasingly follow the ethical imperative of being fully alive to the myriad of possibilities *becoming-with* brings about. Paying attention to the wonders, mysteries and complexities of our common matter is how we can start creating new possibilities for being-in-the-world. Art has the freedom and *response-ability* (Haraway 2016) to conceive new worlds outside hegemonic binaries. As Sarah Robinson says: 'Art, insofar as it is the essence of human perception and intuition, belongs to another order. Its very nature is (...) to dream a new world into being. The work of art is judged not by the binary criteria of right or wrong, but by how it moves us—how it

deepens us—how it opens new dimensions in our minds and unfolds new potential in our lives.' (2017:156).



Figure 35: Huyghe P (2013-2014) *Pierre Huyghe at the Centre Georges Pompidou* [exhibition], Los Angeles County Museum of Art website, accessed 8 June 2023.

<https://unframed.lacma.org/2014/11/26/human-pierre-huyghe%E2%80%99s-dog-residence>

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