The Art of Walking with the Animate Earth: A Heuristic Inquiry

by

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COMMITTEE APPROVAL

The members of Angela Bowlby's Thesis Committee certify that they have read the thesis titled The Art of Walking with the Animate Earth: A Heuristic Inquiry and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the thesis requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Environmental Education and Communication

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Abstract

This thesis is a qualitative, phenomenological, arts and nature-based study of living as an artist amid a social and ecological emergency. By taking up a method of heuristic inquiry, which utilizes personal knowledge and experience as a foundation for exploring phenomena, this research was organized as a journey around the lunar and seasonal cycles of one year. My research focused on the cultivation of ecological perception and questions of how my art practice might become more ecological and, in turn, contribute to the transformation necessary to address the social and ecological crisis. Data was gathered from reflective writing and art-making and analyzed according to the five criteria for Creative Analytical Practice (CAP). While definitive answers were not the objective of the study, the research revealed creativity and imagination as inherent qualities of life and art-making as an act of cultural reflection and a means to remain connected and responsive to the complex, living web of life, death, and human/nature entanglement.

Keywords: phenomenological, arts-based, nature-based, ecological art, heuristic inquiry, ecological crisis, reflective writing, web of life

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Nothing is ever created in isolation; rather, it is the result of a complex and intricate web of being, and that is especially true of this work. Although there are too many to name here, I would like to acknowledge and express my gratitude to some who supported me on this journey.

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My walks would have been lonely without the constant companionship of my pup, Frannie, always eager to remind me of the simple, magical act of putting one foot in front of the other and meeting the world outside.

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Figure 1 Dried and cut leaves on paper

All along the way, held by the Earth,

Guided by the rhythm of Sun and Moon.

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Now, welcome to the Anthropocene,

you battered, tilting globe. Still you gleam,

a blue pearl on the necklace of planets.

(Major, 2018, p.23)

"Art is what attention makes with nature."

(Harrison and Harrison as cited in Haley, 2003, p. 5)

Figure 2 Dried seeds on recycled paper

Dance, this way and that,

overcome by the song of the Earth.

Introduction

I am an artist and maker. By this, I mean that I am compelled to create things and primarily understand the world through form, colour, texture, and feeling. For the past fifteen years, ceramics, specifically handmade functional ceramics, have been the focus of my artistic practice—objects for everyday use, such as cups, mugs, and bowls. However, as the climate crisis and its effects increasingly permeate my thoughts, dreams and nightmares, I struggle with the environmental impact of my ceramic practice. Many of the raw materials I use are mined with negative ecological consequences. Furthermore, to generate an income, I am forced to monetize the making process and encourage the consumption of material goods. I am making objects to be sold in an exploitive, capitalist system. I believe in the value of meaningful objects and the maintenance of traditional craft skills and knowledge; however, my environmental values feel at odds with the capitalist, consumption-driven economy of which my ceramic practice is a part. The cognitive dissonance I feel, has become too much to bear. But I am an artist and maker. I cannot deny that. I want to understand, as an artist, how I can contribute to the cultural change needed to address the ecological crisis. I believe the art object is more than merely a product for a capitalist system. I want to know how art can contribute to the slow turning of our cultural gaze toward social and ecological well-being.

I struggle to articulate knowledge through language, at least proper academic language. Poetry, prose, and lyrical language are typically more suited to describe and interpret my lived experience. It is often difficult to find the words to express what I feel and know so deeply in my body, that which aches in my chest. As I write this introduction, I have completed four months of research. The research has been an autoethnographic heuristic journey encompassing a literature

review spanning many disciplines and genres, along with the practice of walking, reflective writing, and art-making. As Hilary Leighton notes: "Autoethnographers examine and focus on telling their own personal stories to unearth their truth and in so doing, illuminate what is true for others in the storied lives of all humanity" (Leighton, 2014, p.64). This research has been a process of unlearning as much as learning. It has been a process of identifying and grieving an imposed worldview that impacts not only my relationship with art and imagination but all of the ways I understand and make sense of the world, including the ecological crisis, revealing broader cultural and social understandings.

For as long as I can remember, my perception and embodied experience of the world have felt in opposition, or at least misaligned, with the dominant social and political narrative. However, to a large extent, I must live and work according to the systems in which I am embedded. In this way, the dominative, expansionist worldview is superimposed on my understanding of the world. I do not want to believe the extractive, capitalist, anthropocentric stories being told, but my words can still be found in them. I am implicated in the social and ecological harm wrought daily. I feel a profound sense of grief, not only for the species loss, ecological devastation, and suffering taking place but also for my unavoidable participation in these harms. I also experience a throbbing pain from my disconnection with the living biosphere that is a result of my daily immersion in an anthropocentric society. As ecophilosopher, Geneen Marie Haugen writes:

> I want to inhabit a fully animate world- and sometimes I do, although not usually while paying bills or getting tires rotated. In fact, the animate Earth seldom reaches me when I'm involved in the tasks of maintaining a twenty-first-century life. (2013, p. 171)

Moreover, the necessary tasks of maintaining a modern life often take precedence. I am fooled into thinking they are the most important tasks rather than an aside in my artistic practice and daily life.

For the purposes of this research, I will use the terms ecological crisis, social and ecological crisis, climate crisis, climate change, ecological emergency, and climate emergency interchangeably. However, they all feel insufficient to describe the current state of the world I am referring to. These terms imply that the current ecological devastation is distinct from the human and social suffering I witness daily. However, I believe they cannot be separated. From an early age, we are taught about cause and effect as though life can be reduced to a simple equation, denying phenomenological complexity. Brent Dean Robbins (2005) observes: "Through formal education, we learn to ignore our immediate perception of the world, and we come to forget how to remain relationally responsive to things" (p. 12). Many have argued that this severed relationality with the world, this disconnection, can be found at the root of both the social and ecological crisis (Berry, 1999; Capra, 1996; Macy & Brown, 2014). When I arrive to work at the Nelson Museum, Archives, and Gallery (NMAG) most mornings, I find the remnants and debris of human suffering. The meagre shelter of the covered front steps is frequently used by those struggling with homelessness and addiction. The mentality that exploits and destroys the natural world is the same mentality that contributes to social inequality and suffering; they are intertwined injustices (W. Berry, 2021; Machado de Oliveira, 2021). I have not found a word or phrase that describes the scope of suffering and devastation I am referencing, so I will use all of the above terms.

The current social and ecological crisis permeates my everyday thoughts. It keeps me up at night. It breaks my heart. It makes me want to weep and scream. We continue to bear witness to the ongoing, daily destruction of the world and the suffering of its inhabitants. Much of the limited political and cultural discourse surrounding the ecological crisis focuses on awareness, solutions to specific problems, or the goals and targets to be met to avoid catastrophe (Ellison, 2019). However, little emphasis is placed on “the societal drivers of the ecological crisis” (Brand et al., 2021, p. 3). I believe the Anthropocene describes a broken and destructive relationship with each other and the planet in desperate need of (re)pair.

Anthropocene is a term often used to describe the current geological age (Anderson, 2015; Reiss, 2019; Turpin & Davis, 2015), where human activity is the dominant force shaping the climate and environment for the first time in planetary history. As a species, we are disrupting large ecological cycles and irrevocably altering the planet. However, some suggest it may be more appropriately coined “Capitalocene” due to the unsustainable drive for resources and relentless consumption that capitalism encourages (Parenti & Moore, 2016; Tsing, 2017). Alternatively, environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht (2014) suggests, “Symbiocene,” recognizing the potential for human symbiotic reintegration with natural systems. Whichever term is officially chosen to describe this geological epoch, it has become clear that the current human-centric, disconnected relationship with the Earth and exploitive use of finite resources is devastating, disastrous, and unsustainable for all life on the planet.

There is a growing interest in answering questions related to the ecological emergency beyond atmospheric carbon counts and average global temperatures. To fully answer the most pressing questions of the Anthropocene requires more than scientific understanding (Galafassi et

al., 2018; Hine, 2023; Machado de Oliveira, 2021; Morton, 2021; Norgaard, 2018). If it were merely scientific facts we needed, our human story on planet Earth should have taken a different turn decades ago. As the botanist, writer, and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, “But while we race around asking how we might change technology or tax structures, the change that might save us goes unspoken: what we need to change is ourselves” (2014, p. 22). It is this type of personal change that this thesis investigates, a heuristic investigation that begins with personal healing as the necessary preliminary step toward social and planetary well-being.

How did we arrive at this dark ecological moment as a culture, society, and species? That is a big question. However, this question, although a more exasperated version - *What the hell have we done?!* - led me to the Master of Arts in Environmental Education and Communication (MAEEC) program. If I can understand this, I surmised, I may understand how we can change course and how I might contribute meaningfully to that change.

I am an artist, a maker. This I have always known. This thesis is a process of sense-making, making sense of this time and my place within it as an artist. Therefore, this is an art and nature-based study of living in the Anthropocene, specifically, living as an artist during the epoch of ecocide. Kimmerer suggests:

> The danger is that we have been captured by a worldview that no longer serves our world, if it ever did- a worldview whose manifestation is destroying our beloved homelands, our fellow species, and ourselves. But all we can talk about is changing the light bulbs. (2014, p. 22)

Although I have deep admiration and gratitude for climate scientists and technologists, I will not discuss light bulbs, planetary boundaries, or electrifying transportation. As important as scientific and technological questions and their solutions are, I do not believe it is the most meaningful way I can contribute to change if I am true to myself as an artist. Instead, I prefer to discuss paying attention, art and imagination, grief, and reciprocity. These ways of knowing and being are often overlooked or disregarded (Abram, 1996; Haugen, 2013; Hine, 2023; Kimmerer, 2013; Machado de Oliveira, 2021); perhaps that disregard is the beginning of the answer to my questions.

Many have argued that art is essential to the societal changes needed to address the ecological crisis (Gablik, 1992; McKibben, 2005; Tsing, 2017). Although I intuitively agree with this argument, it was unclear to me exactly how. Art that engages with environmental themes or addresses ecological questions is often called ecological art (Wallen, 2012; Weintraub, 2012); therefore, I wondered how my art practice could become more ecological. Ecology studies the relationships between organisms and their environment (Smith & Pimm, 2023). Ecology and ecological share the Greek root *oikos,* meaning home or place to live (Smith & Pimm, 2023). As my home becomes irrevocably altered and potentially uninhabitable due to climate change and a superimposed capitalist, exploitive worldview attempts to sever my relationship with the place I live, understanding how my art practice can become more ecologically rooted is essential. It may be a way to heal my relationship with this place, this home, and contribute to the change that this time calls for.

Framework

The four chapters of this thesis, Summer, Autumn, Winter, and Spring, follow the seasonal cycles, a perennial way to align with and recognize the wisdom of the natural world and a metaphor for the ongoing and iterative nature of learning and creativity. Not all the stages and processes of my learning were the same. Some kinds of learning involved a shedding or falling away, an unlearning (much like the autumn); some learning was dark (similar to winter) and required more patience, warmth, and rest. Some learning had the vibrancy, hopefulness, and exuberance of Spring, and it seemed anything was possible. I tried to honour my different learning processes as they occurred during this research, and not surprisingly, they closely mirrored the seasons as they occurred in the natural world over the past months. I believe this occurred because we are unavoidably entangled with the living planet and its cycles (Harding, 2013; Kimmerer, 2013), as much as electric lights, central heating, and other modern amenities make it seem otherwise. While I understand that this thesis will not contain definitive answers nor follow the typical structure of a more traditional academic research paper, it offers deep questioning, reflections and makings from my encounters with grief and the living world. It brings to bear these encounters as ways of knowing, learning, and healing.

Through the writing process, I have learned of my tendency to make cognitive leaps, assuming that a reader would follow the same path of thinking as I do. With this awareness, I have attempted to move more deliberately from one idea to another, step by step. Walking and art-making were both essential to this research, which is reflected in the following chapters. Interspersed throughout the chapters are images of some of the visual art I made as part of this study. Included are brief italic poetic journal-voice descriptions; however, I will describe their significance in more depth in Chapter 3: Winter and Chapter 4: Spring. The writing attempts to

walk the reader through the seasons of my research using combinations of descriptive, narrative and embodied writing. The literature review conducted as part of this research can be found woven throughout Chapter 2: Autumn, Chapter 3: Winter, and Chapter 4: Spring, rather than as a more traditional, stand-alone section.

Place

This research took place on the unceded traditional territories of the Sinixt and Ktunaxa in the Selkirk Mountains on the West Arm of Kootenay Lake, also known as Nelson, in the Southern Interior of British Columbia, Canada. It is not only my current home but also home to Cedar, Fern, Huckleberry, Squirrel, Deer, Skunk, Bear, Kokanee, Osprey, Raven, and many, many more. Some I have had the privilege to meet and some I have not, but I am grateful to all of them, the known, the mysterious, the forgotten, and the world they make possible. Each chapter will begin by situating the research in this place, recounting my experience as the place changes and responds to an altered climate. This research would be different had it occurred elsewhere; indeed, the artistic works within it would tell a different story, for they are of this time and place.

Figure 3 Cut reeds on recycled paper

Reeds gathered on the edge of a pond,

where a deer has slept, a deep impression- the shape of a living, breathing body.

Shifting weather, stormy skies.

I am part of the cycle, the never-ending circle.

Deer, reeds, me, sun, sky; breathing this body.

Chapter 1: Summer

During the summer of 2023, this research began with a proposal and choice of methodology as the hottest summer on record seemed never to end, even as the calendar changed to September. There had been little rain for months, and the land seemed parched. The usual damp and lush forest floors were dry and dusty with low stream and creek levels. The extreme summer weather and resulting confusion of the seasons further emphasized the importance of this research. The seasons and climate become more unrecognizable with each passing year, causing a feeling of "solastalgia," a term coined by Albrecht (2019) to describe the homesickness felt at home as natural systems so dramatically altered by climate change become unfamiliar.

Methods

Uncovering the personal meaning of an ecological art practice amidst an ongoing ecological emergency requires a process of deep reflection and discovery. Heuristic inquiry provided a systematic but flexible framework for such a process (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Mihalache, 2019; Sultan, 2019), a research methodology that includes a process of self-reflection, self-discovery, and self-transformation. Heuristic inquiry is an open-ended, qualitative, social constructivist, phenomenological research method (Sultan, 2019) that uses personal knowledge and experience as a foundation for exploring phenomena. It was developed by the American psychologist Clark Moustakas (1923-2012) with the publication of his book *Loneliness* (1961). Douglass & Moustakas acknowledge that "it is difficult to describe the heartbeat of heuristic inquiry in words alone-so much of the process lurks in the tacit dimension, in mystery, in wild promptings of imagination, and in edgings of subtlety" (1985, p. 53).

Heuristic comes from the Greek word *heuriskein*, meaning to discover or find ("Heuristic," n.d.); this research approach is a process of discovery, where "the research question and methodology flow out of inner awareness, meaning, and inspiration" (Schneider et al., 2001, p. 309). It is from this search for meaning that my research questions emerged. The research questions I developed have deep, personal significance.

How do I continue with an art practice if I do not understand its purpose?

As professor Hilary Leighton describes, the depth of connection to the research questions is of foundational importance for the heuristic inquiry process:

> This question (or questions) must hold personal, powerful implications that would render life untenable if not pursued, as the process requires a depth of authenticity, disciplined commitment, and an enduring receptiveness and patience to uncover subtle and underlying meanings. (2014, p. 58)

Heuristic inquiry is a methodology that mimics my creative process in many ways, with opportunities for deep immersion and spaciousness that allow emergent insight and inspiration to occur. In this methodology, "exploratory discovery, rather than testing hypotheses, is the goal" (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 58). Heuristic inquiry acknowledges the tacit knowledge of the researcher, enabling my artist experience to contribute to the research process in collaboration with the wisdom of other artists, thinkers, and the other-than-human world. Researcher and psychotherapist Nevine Sultan eloquently describes the synthesis of inward and outward exploration that the heuristic inquiry process invites:

> Such is the domain of heuristic inquiry, which summons us to linger in silence

> and solitude, even as we are magnetized by the pull of life and the richness of the dark forest, and as we seek—both within and without—knowledge, meaning, and growth. (2019, p. 2)

These characteristics and the flexible nature of heuristic inquiry made it well suited for my search to understand how my art practice can become more ecological, contribute to the change necessary, and more meaningfully address the ecological emergency.

Study Design

I used the following six stages of the heuristic inquiry approach (Moustakas, 1990; Schneider et al., 2001; Sultan, 2019) as the framework for my study design. The stages and details are as follows:

Initial engagement

The researcher's first encounter with the topic through personal experience leads to a central question of personal and social significance (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019). A quest to understand the significance and impact of my art practice within the context of the social and ecological crisis led me to the Masters of Arts in Environmental Education and Communication program and has continued to guide the development of my research questions. What it means to make art amid the Anthropocene is a question that lingers, nags, and begs for deep clarification. *How can my art practice become more ecological?* I have allowed this question to pull me with the intuitive knowledge that the answer is not as simple as it may appear. My Fine Arts education and years as a full-time artist have developed my skills and material understanding but have left a meaning gap that this research aims to address.

Immersion

Moustakas describes the immersion stage as a time when "the researcher lives the questions in waking, sleeping, and even dream states, allowing the researcher to be on intimate terms with the questions-to live it and grow in knowledge and understanding of it" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28). This is a time of rich data collection. My immersion/data collection process included an interdisciplinary literature review, reflective writing, art-making, and periods of immersion in the other-than-human world through daily walks in wild and cultivated outdoor areas near my home in Nelson, BC. The contemplation that walking and art-making allowed was crucial to the immersive research process. About walking author Rebecca Solnit writes:

> Walking itself is the intentional act closest to the unwilled rhythms of the body, to breathing and the beating of the heart. It strikes a delicate balance between working and idling, being and doing. It is the bodily labor that produces nothing but thoughts, experiences, arrivals. (2001, p. 5)

Walking allowed me to be with the other-than-human world with intention and attention. While walking, I was developing what ecopsychologist Laura Sewall describes as "the skill of ecological perception" (1999, p. 201). Sewall outlines five perceptual practices for ecological perception. They include learning to attend, learning to perceive relationships and context, developing perceptual flexibility, learning to perceive depth, and the intentional use of imagination. These will be explored in more depth in Chapter 2: Autumn. Sewall argues that the "ability to fully use our attentional capacity is a learned skill, requiring the practice of mindfulness and awareness" (1999, p. 204). Walking daily is a mindfulness practice that invites the reshaping of my subjective reality. I recorded insights that emerged while walking through reflective writing.

My research schedule included planned periods of immersion around the new and full moons. However, these periods often went on for days or weeks, returning to particular literature or art materials over and over again.

Incubation

Incubation was a time to disengage or step back from the research questions, a retreat "from the intense, concentrated focus on the question" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28). This allowed slow thinking and rest to increase the tacit dimension (Brisola & Cury, 2016). All that has been gathered during phases of immersion requires the time and space to incubate and integrate into the researcher's understanding (Moustakas, 1990)—at times, incubation periods occurred naturally as I went about the daily demands of work and life. However, there were also planned periods between immersion times to release my grasp on logical knowing and allow knowledge to emerge. It was also difficult at times to step away. However, it often allowed new insights to surface. The incubation periods still included daily walking. Walking has been, and continues to be, a way for me to be in the world and with the world, an embodied experience of the world, and as Solnit notes, walking is "an ancient and profound relationship between body, world, and imagination" (2001, p. 272).

Illumination

This is a process of insight, "the researcher's arrival upon a new awareness, understanding, or discovery that was previously unrealized or unsynthesized" (Maxner, 2022, para 9). Illumination is not passive; it happens naturally but requires the researcher to be receptive and open without conscious striving. The process of illumination required vulnerability and willingness to be reshaped and reimagined by the research. The researcher must be alert to

new insight and knowledge or corrections to distorted understanding (Moustakas, 1990). As insights occurred, they were recorded textually, through writing, and visually with painting, drawing, and natural material assemblages as part of the data collection process.

Explication

This was a time to identify emergent themes and meaning from my experience with the phenomenon studied. “The researcher analyses… the nuances, textures, and elements of the phenomenon. This investigation leads to the representation of the essence of the experience” (Brisola & Cury, 2016, p. 6). I creatively analyzed the data collected during immersion, incubation, and illumination during this stage, searching for reoccurring verbal and visual themes. To aid in this process, the five criteria for Creative Analytical Practice (CAP) outlined by sociologist Laurel Richardson (2000) guided me and are as follows:

1. Substantive contribution: Does the work contribute to the understanding of social life? Does it demonstrate a grounded or embedded human-world understanding and perspective?
2. Aesthetic merit: Does the work succeed aesthetically? Is the text aesthetically shaped, complex, and not boring?
3. Reflexivity: How was the information gathered? Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgements about the point of view?
4. Impact: Does the work make an emotional impact? Intellectually? Does it generate new questions or inspire action?

5. Expresses a reality: Does the text present an embodied sense of lived experience? Does it seem accurate? Is the work a credible account of a cultural, social, or individual sense of reality? (p.254)

As Richardson notes, ethnography is always situated in human experience and contains the "strengths and limitations of human perceptions and feelings" (2000, p.254). However, CAP provides criteria that hold the work to a high standard and as such, increases its validity.

Moustakas describes explication as "a comprehensive depiction of the core or dominant themes developed. The researcher brings together discoveries of meaning and organizes them into a comprehensive depiction of the essences of the experience" (1990, p. 31).

Creative Synthesis

This final stage allows a creative interpretation to emerge from the researcher's experience (Maxner, 2022; Sultan, 2019). Art-making was central to my data collection process and a significant component of the creative synthesis stage. This included natural material assemblages, paintings, and drawings, some of which are included within this written work. Arts-based research (ABR) methods and heuristic inquiry support uncovering tacit and commonly overlooked knowledge. Leavy notes that "ABR offers ways to tap into what would otherwise be inaccessible, make connections and interconnections that are otherwise out of reach" (2020, p. 22). Synthesizing and presenting research findings in both written and visual form can make the information accessible to a broader audience (Leavy, 2020; Rolling, 2016). Through art-making, ABR can facilitate reimagination- "visual art can propel people to look at something in a new way, which is critical to social change" (Leavy, 2020, p. 240).

The presentation of stages here hints at a step-by-step process, however, my research journey involved moving iteratively through each stage multiple times to deepen my understanding and confirm my findings. The data collection, generation, and creative analysis processes were linked and occurred concurrently. As Leighton describes from her own experience, the heuristic inquiry is a framework, a guide, but not a linear process:

> Heurism is NOT as straightforward as Moustakas's (1990) six stages imply, nor do they follow any linearity instead they are more like a phenomenological dance of deepening and surfacing, deepening and surfacing with long periods of gestation for something to be born that aspires toward a final, rich synthesis of feeling and language. (2014, p. 61)

I moved between the six stages, remaining responsive to the unexpected, emergent experience and the upwelling of previously unexpressed knowledge.

Limitations and Delimitations

As Moustakas first proposed, heuristic inquiry includes human co-researchers (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Sela-Smith, 2002; Sultan, 2019). However, for my inquiry, this would limit the uncovering of personal meaning. As Sela-Smith identifies, "self-search…is the objective of this method," and "the inclusion of coparticipants seems to create a distraction from the internal process" (2002, p. 71). Engagement with the other-than-human world and relevant literature helped provide reflexivity and confirmability. Artists are culture producers; they help shape the cultural imagination (Reiss, 2019; Weintraub, 2012). Therefore, the personal investigation of ecological art-making has societal significance. Sela-Smith argues that heuristic inquiry "results in self-transformation and the creation of a story that generates potential for transformation in others and society is the strength of the self-inquiry method" (2002, p. 82). Understanding what I

can offer as an artist and how that may contribute to social and ecological well-being was essential to me. I hope that the personal transformation that occurred and the understanding uncovered during this research may provide insight and reflection for fellow artists, curators, and arts-funding organizations who also wish to contribute to changes the world needs in this time of social and ecological crisis.

Rigor of the Study

Prolonged engagement (Moustakas, 1990; Sela-Smith, 2002; Sultan, 2019) with both the phenomena and the more-than-human world, thick description as “clear articulation and communication of the research process and findings” (Sultan, 2019, p. 183), the use of CAP (Richardson, 2000), and exploration of alternative perspectives in the literature review all aim to strengthen the research’s validity and credibility (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019).

The subjective nature of any autoethnographic research methodology, such as heuristic inquiry, requires the acknowledgment of researcher bias (O’Leary, 2021). Richardson notes, “the ethnographic life is not separable from the self” (2000, p. 253). The data collection and analysis are inevitably filtered through my subjective experience and the layers of my worldview, as well as the superimposed worldview of an exploitive, anthropocentric society. I needed to critically investigate my experience and reflections by asking: *What does this assume? What else is possible? Is there another way to experience? Interpret? Understand?* Recognition and acknowledgment of my bias, critical analysis of the data, and the inclusion of alternative perspectives in the literature review help to establish the trustworthiness of the research.

Although summer ended later than usual, it did eventually end. As the days grew shorter and leaves began to fall, I began my heuristic research journey.

Figure 4 Cut birch bark on recycled paper

A collection of notes, stories I have forgotten to listen to.

Forgive my absence, my deaf ears.

I am learning to listen again.

Chapter 2: Autumn

It was an unseasonably warm and late autumn. As autumn slowly and reluctantly settled in, what I imagined as a healing and nurturing heuristic process of reading, walking, reflecting, and art-making was the awakening of deep sorrow and bewilderment. To open myself fully to the reality of the ecological emergency, as feminist scientist and scholar Donna Haraway (2016) suggests to "stay with the trouble" (p.3) was and continues to be painful. As Sewall (1999) writes, "Full awareness hurts" (p. 202).

Autumn is usually a frantic time for me, the busiest season as a ceramic artist. I would typically spend long days and evenings in my ceramic studio to produce as much work as possible in preparation for Christmas art and craft fairs, online sales and the seasonal rush of Holiday shopping. However, for the first time in fifteen years, I was slowing down rather than speeding up as the sun set earlier each day, and crunching leaves became the soundtrack to my walks. I still longed to be creating. I began collecting natural materials on my walks - fallen leaves, bark, branches, dried grasses and other plant matter as I contemplated what makes art ecological. I would return home and press the materials between the pages of the books I read. Along with painting and drawing, these would become my art materials, each with its own texture, subtle colours, and frequently overlooked beauty.

Ecological Art Theory

It is not easy to pinpoint the exact emergence of ecological or environmental art as a distinct genre (Reiss, 2019), but it is often associated with 1960s counterculture (Reiss, 2019; Weintraub, 2012). Ecological art spans many mediums, practices, and places. Art, whether painting, sculpture, installation, film, or other medium, focused on environmental or ecological

themes (Loveless, 2019; Tsing, 2017; Weintraub, 2012) is often described as ecological art or eco-art (Wallen, 2012; Weintraub, 2012). After the 1970s, eco-art was primarily relegated to the margins of the mainstream art world until a gradual growth "in interest from the art world generally, and from artists most of all, for ecological questions" (Reiss, 2019, p. 58) began in earnest in the 21st century. Artist, author, and art critic Suzi Gablik was an early advocate for modern art to address the ecological crisis, writing some of the early theories of eco-art. Gablik (1992) was critical of modern culture's foundation of human separateness from nature and called for art to restore meaning and cultural consciousness of the symbiotic human/nature relationship. Decrying modernity's exploitive and consumptive nature and its environmental consequences, Gablik suggested that "art can help us recollect our belongingness" (1992, p. 50).

The current ecological crisis is revealing that we have forgotten something fundamental, whether belongingness, relationality, our entanglement with the other-than-human world, or something else. However, *how* can art help us recollect, uncover, and repair the problem? Furthermore, is it currently doing that? Some eco-art theorists suggest the challenge for contemporary artists is "making climate change culturally meaningful to people's everyday lives and social practices" (Reiss, 2019, p. 42) or to "open up new spaces of viewing and new modes of understanding and responding to climate change" (p. 48). Author, curator, and educator Linda Weintraub argues that ecological art's defining philosophical underpinning is an embrace of ecocentrism, which "envisions humans as components of interconnected systems" (2012, p. 9) and challenging anthropocentric assumptions.

Anthropocentrism, the centring of humans in the web of life, and human exceptionalism have permeated most social and political systems in modern societies (Hine, 2023; Iovino &

Oppermann, 2014; Machado de Oliveira, 2021; Parenti & Moore, 2016). Art and environmentalism are no exceptions. I have begun to understand that this worldview has influenced my relationship with art and creativity. My Fine Arts education emphasized and celebrated individual artistic achievements. I have been taught, and the dominant culture continues to encourage devotion to the cult of the individual, rewarding personal work and achievement. However, is there anything I truly do alone? Is art ever an individual, personal achievement in an interconnected world?

New Materialism/Animism

Literary scholar Hubert Zapf explains the influence of human exceptionalism on creativity:

> For a long time, the concept of creativity appeared to be inextricably bound up with a notion of radical individualism and the quasi-godlike creative genius of the human mind, which seemed to represent a classical case of an anthropocentric metaphysics. (cited in Serenella et al., 2014, p. 51)

But Zapf also offers an emergent understanding of creativity, “creativity is beginning to newly move into focus of attention not alone as an exclusionary feature of human culture but as a property of life and, to an extent, of the material world itself” (p. 51). I would argue that this is an aspect of what it means to have an ecological art practice - decentering the human artist, recognizing human/non-human interdependence, and embracing creativity as an inherent quality of life. This requires relinquishing notions of human hubris, dominance, and control. As an artist, I collaborate with human culture and the other-than-human and material world. Nothing I create is solely a product of my creativity. Not only am I collaborating with the materials I use, but I am

also influenced and inspired by the world in which I am embedded. My imagination cannot be separated from the surrounding context, the web of life. This is a comfort and an antidote to "the terrible loneliness of living in a meaningless, insentient universe" (Haugen, 2013, p. 173). Viewing my life as an interconnected web of relationships with humans and other-than-human worlds empowers my role in this time and place. Relationships can be repaired, nurtured, reimagined. Without this relational perspective, I am a victim of the current ecological emergency with limited recourse. This "multispecies entanglement", to borrow a term from ecofeminist and scholar Donna Haraway (2016, p.115), gives language to my felt, embodied experience of the world and provides a way to engage with a changing climate.

Young (2023) describes a "particular form of participatory imagination" (p. 37) that acknowledges the inherent creativity/imagination of the living world, noting that "participatory imagination is not thus limited merely to what occurs in human cognition… the participative imagination goes further to assert that there is a sense in which nature is itself imaginative" (p.38). I have always considered nature and the material world more broadly, imaginative and creative, but failed to recognize that I am not distinct from that wonderous creativity but always in relationship with it. This shift in understanding is aligned with the post-humanist turn in the humanities, explicitly new materialism theory. New materialism questions the anthropocentric view of the world, recognizing the interconnectedness of human cultures with other material cultures. Haraway coined the term "naturecultures" (2003, p. 2) to describe human entanglement with the living and non-living world. New Materialism attempts to undermine ideas of human mastery and control, emphasizing complexity, interdependence, and the agency of the non-human world (Bennett, 2010; Choat, 2018; Iovino & Oppermann, 2014).

New materialism concepts are not new; many Indigenous cosmologies offer perspectives that do not make human and non-human distinctions (Leonard, 2020). As anthropologist and eco-philosopher David Abram (1996) notes, it is a way of relating to the world common to Indigenous oral cultures: “Nature itself is articulate, it *speaks*. The human voice in an oral culture is always to some extent participant with the voices of wolves, wind, and waves-participant, that is, with the encompassing discourse of an animate earth” (p. 117). These ideas are helpful theoretically and philosophically when considering creativity and imagination and the social and ecological challenges of this time. From this perspective, my actions become part of an intimate relationship with a complex, living world. However, I struggle with a constant tension between a personal, embodied experience of entanglement and interconnectedness and the anthropocentric, insentient perspective of the dominant culture. This tension often results in my beliefs and my felt experience being in opposition to my daily participation in a human-centric, capitalist society.

Ecological Perception

The influence of anthropocentric thinking seems to permeate everything, including approaches to environmentalism and art. Many scholars (Anderson, 2015; Miles, 2010; Wallen, 2012) question the heroic and solutionist narratives that artists, designers, and curators can develop related to the ecological crisis. Solutionist narratives are rooted in the idea that humans control life on the planet and can fix environmental problems that arise in order to maintain the status quo and continue the neoliberal capitalist project of the 21st century (Evernden, 1993; Parenti & Moore, 2016; Serenella et al., 2014). Artist, writer, and curator Kayla Anderson (2015) hypothesizes that works that promote critical thinking about modernity and our social and

political systems and invite a re-envisioning and reimagining of our systems and futures may be more helpful. Malcolm Miles (2010), writer and researcher of critical theory and art, views art as an act of cultural reflection that can challenge cultural constructs, including human/nature dichotomies and anthropocentrism, suggesting that such reflection can lead to new ecological consciousness and catalyze change. Art is for "imagining not only new aesthetics but also new social forms" (Miles, 2010, p. 16).

I do not know how to do this in a specific work of art or body of work. However, I am committed to paying attention, not turning away from the horrors and harms of the current moment and attuning to the entanglement of being as an artistic process unconcerned with a specific product or outcome, but rather remaining responsive to what emerges. Sewall (1999) refers to this type of perceptual practice as developing the skill of ecological perception:

> In relation to developing an ecological consciousness, skillful perception necessarily includes emphasizing perceptual practices that help us to extend our narrow experience of self and to experience sensuality, intimacy, and identification with the external world. Skillful perception is the practice of intentionally sensing with our eyes, pores, and hearts wide open. It requires receptivity and the participation of our whole selves, despite the potential pain. (p. 204)

Sewall (1999) identifies five practices that can help cultivate a deep connection to the world through mindfulness and sensory experience, which contribute to the development of ecological awareness. These practices are in more detail:

1. Learning to Attend - mindfulness of sensory experience and the subjective nature of perception. Becoming aware of “where and how we direct our attention” (p.207). With intention, one can develop a new way of seeing.
2. Perceiving Relations - practicing a relational view of the world by becoming aware of context and relationships rather than a reductionist perception of only the things themselves in isolation. Relational perception values human participation in and an embodied exchange with the world.
3. Perceptual Flexibility - the practice of perceiving beyond human concepts of time and space. “It requires a fluidity of mind in which the magic of the visible world is revealed by relinquishing one's expectations and nurturing a freshness of vision” (p.210).
4. Reperceiving Depth - a shift in worldview toward a biocentric perception that recognizes human embeddedness in the world. It is being within and dependent on the body of the Earth.
5. The Imaginal Self - reawakening the capacity to imagine and using visual imagery to shift one's worldview and create clear visions for the future. “They are the images that may guide our daily, unconscious choices. They are the images that will serve to create the world in which we wish to live” (p.214).

These practices support the development of an ecological consciousness and nurture an interconnected relationship with the world. They are a way of not forgetting - a way of returning again and again to my embeddedness in the web of life despite societal demands. Art-making has become a reply to these practices, to paying attention, a form of call and response with the living

world. As an artist I am learning how to listen and be in conversation with the animate world. Art is a way to renew and deepen my relationship with the living world. Moreover, in turn, I am nurtured and sustained. Although there is pain in paying attention, there is also beauty.

Autumn was not an easy season. Not turning away, staying with the trouble, required me to confront my complicity in the ongoing social and ecological devastation. It felt like a descent toward winter and the depths of my grief, guilt, *and* gratitude.

Figure 5 Dried and cut leaves on recycled paper

One by one, layers of grief gather,

Creating a blanket of sorrow stitched together by the unspoken, the unheard.

Chapter 3: Winter

Winter seemed as reluctant as autumn to arrive. The temperatures were mild, and there was little snow. However, a subtle change was still happening. The world got quieter. The bird song on my walks disappeared. There was silence among the plants and animals. And the light started to slip away. I began my morning walks just as the sky was lightening and returned home from work as the sun set. I was mindful of my sensory experience, learning to attend and perceiving relations, as Sewall (1999) suggests. It was the first time I had given my full attention to the shifting of seasons, to the sounds and nuances of the Earth's seasonal transformation, and my body and mind seemed to respond. I also grew quiet. I needed slower walks, more rest, and time for contemplation. In the silence and darkness of winter, I became overwhelmed with grief. It snuck up on me at first, a heaviness, a sorrow. Upon deeper reflection, it was clear it was not solely my own grief for the uncertainty and unfamiliarity of a changing planet but also the grief of the world around me. A grief I had been able to ignore when I was not paying deep attention. Beginning to dissolve, "the separation between 'in-here' and 'out-there'" (Sewall, 1999, p. 207) revealed the intertwined and layered nature of the grief and sorrow I was experiencing.

Grief and Mourning

I began walking in the cemetery - not intentionally at first. The local cemetery is at the top of the road I walk most mornings, and the beautiful, majestic old trees lining the pathways drew me in. Although it did seem like an appropriate place to walk as I sifted through layers of grief. It became a weekly ritual throughout the winter to mindfully, attentively wander the cemetery's winding paths. I located the graves of the original owners of the 120-year-old house I live in; they once slept under the same roof and gazed out the same windows as me. It reminded

me of my impermanence, my fleeting time on this planet. This may seem like a morose, morbid, or unnecessarily dark thing to do, but on the contrary, I believe it is the work of “reperceiving depth” (Sewall, 1999, p. 212), a way of acknowledging my vulnerability, my fragile existence.

Author and social thinker, Dougald Hine, points to a link between Western culture’s discomfort with death and its inability to meaningfully address the environmental emergency:

> When I look at how we get stuck over climate change, the dead ends and desperate manoeuvres, the outbreaks of bleak certainty or shiny, groundless optimism, I can’t help thinking there is a connection to this culturally distinctive difficulty in facing death. We swerve around these black holes rather than look at them directly; anything is better than slowing down, sitting with the darkness and allowing our eyes to adjust. (2023, pp. 28–29)

I was choosing to mourn and look directly at my grief, to examine it, get to know it. This is not easy in a culture that typically avoids the deep and the dark (Hine, 2023; Macy & Brown, 2014; Weller, 2015). Grief and mourning often make for unwelcome conversation topics. Moreover, it is not art-making in an obvious way. However, with each passing week - art practice, not art product - became an important distinction. The need or pressure to produce something, something great, something marketable, sellable, a tangible, material piece of art, has been ever-present in my life as an artist. And it continued to tug at me. It has felt that my validity as an artist depended on it. However, I believe this is another way in which the dominant culture's expansionist, perpetual growth narrative imposes itself on my relationship with art and creativity. If allowing my art practice to become more ecological requires renewing my relationship with the other-than-human world, paying attention and learning to hear the world

speak, then not turning away from the grief that emerged seemed a necessary process. Francis Weller, a psychotherapist and author specializing in grief work, notes:

> Whether or not we consciously recognize it, the daily diminishment of species, habitats, and cultures is noted in our psyches. Much of the grief we carry is not personal, but shared, communal. It is difficult to walk down the street and not feel the collective sorrows of homelessness or the economic insanity revealed in commercialism and consumerism. (2015, p. 46)

This type of pervasive sorrow and grief threatened to overwhelm me. I suppose it had been there for quite some time, lingering beneath the question: *What the hell have we done?!*

I wanted to quit and abandon the project of this heuristic inquiry, this thesis. I have lost count of the number of times I have been on the brink of giving up. It felt like too much discomfort and sacrifice to look directly at my complicity, hypocrisy, and grief and then describe it in APA formatting with proper academic references. However, how could I not continue? I had seen too much, felt too much and needed to make sense of it. It may not be the perfect way to grieve and mourn, but it is a way, and as environmental researcher and scholar Ashlee Cunsolo Willox notes:

> Mourning is work for us *all.* Climate change-both its causes and its resulting impacts-is also work for us *all,* as citizens of this planet, and as those who hold the responsibility for the changes and the changes perpetuated on our feathered, furred, scaled, insect, microbial, and phloemy kin. (2012, p. 155)

Not only as a citizen of this planet but even more so as a white, middle-class, cis-gendered, privileged citizen of this planet, I have a responsibility to do the work of mourning and reflect deeply on my contribution to the current social and environmental emergency.

I have directly benefited from colonization, social inequalities, and the material comforts of an extractive, expansionist capitalist culture. I was raised in a comfortable, middle-class household. I attended a funded public school and had the opportunity to pursue higher education and an artistic career. I never worried about having enough to eat, a roof over my head, or a warm coat to wear. In fact, I own multiple coats, a fossil fuel-powered car, and my own home full of beautiful furniture and art. However, people are suffering and sleeping on the street just a few blocks from my house. My donations to local outreach and service organizations are an insufficient attempt to redistribute the inequality of wealth and opportunity. I see a broken system, and it seems few, including myself, engage with the complexity of repairing or reimagining it (Machado de Oliveira, 2021, Macy & Brown, 2014). How much time and energy am I willing to give to the vulnerable and suffering in the world? In my community? I attend a fundraising event, and then I go for drinks. Afterward, I feel disillusioned and dissatisfied by both. When I arrive at work in the mornings, I approach those sleeping on the front steps with empathy and kindness, but I also ask them to leave when it is time to unlock the doors and welcome young students into the building. But where are they supposed to go?

Then, there are the ecological consequences not only of my ceramic practice but also of my lifestyle. Although I walk rather than drive whenever possible, eat a plant-focused diet, and limit my consumption of material goods, I still heat my house with natural gas, eat vegetables shipped from Mexico, chocolate and coffee from even further, travel to visit family and friends

and for the pure pleasure of it. These are just a few examples. I do not understand the full impact of most of my simple, daily choices. That is the horror of it. I am so far removed and disconnected from the complexity of being, the intricacies of ecosystems, and the deep entanglement with other-than-human worlds that my existence depends on (Abram, 1996; Harding, 2013; Macy & Brown, 2014). Joanna Macy, author, educator, and systems thinking scholar, asserts: “It is nearly impossible in today’s global economy to feed, clothe and transport ourselves without unintended harm to the natural world and other people’s well-being” (Macy & Brown, 2014, pp. 24–25). However, I cannot allow the discomfort of my complicity and the pain of my guilt to impede my efforts at change, as imperfect as they may be.

What am I willing to sacrifice? Is attempting to make my art practice more ecological just a gesture, an attempt to absolve myself from the burden of guilt? A futile attempt to do something? To what extent am I willing to reject the comforts and conveniences of a modern, extractive, capitalist lifestyle, knowing its harmful social and ecological consequences? These are the questions that nagged at me. In her challenging and powerful book, *Hospicing Modernity: Facing humanity’s wrongs and the implications for social activism* (2021), Latinx interdisciplinary scholar and educator Vanessa Machado de Olivier writes:

> Modernity dying, not on our terms, can also be considered a rite of passage for humanity. Different people will experience the element of severance in different ways. For some it will be something external, like social or environmental collapse. For many, this first interruption will be internal and marked by *dis*illusionments and *dis*enchantments with a broken culture that can no longer offer direction, vitality, sanity, or hope. (p. 214)

So perhaps this is a rite of passage or at least the threshold. Machado de Oliveira asks: "How will you prepare to face the rite of passage of modernity dying" (2021, p.214). I believe the transformation of my relationship with art and creativity is an aspect of preparation. More specifically, the practices that enable that transformation and begin to extract modernity's influence, including Sewall's (1999) perceptual practices, a willingness to stay with the trouble, witness the suffering, acknowledge my complicity, and do the work of mourning. Hine notes, "what is dying is not an external entity: modernity exists within and around us" (2023, p.173). Furthermore, I would argue that it is inevitably ingrained in my relationship with art and creativity. I am just beginning, on the threshold, of understanding how this is true.

Changing and transforming my art practice requires relinquishing and sacrificing what was, how I previously understood the world and my place in it. This change, this reimagining, is not confined to the art I make; it is intimately intertwined with my entire relationship with the world. Art and creativity are how I understand the world. Changing my art practice is changing my mind, and as science-fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin notes: "Changing our minds is going to be a big change" (2017, p. 15). Loss is inherent in change (Hine, 2023; Machado de Oliveira, 2021; Weller, 2015).

For something to change, something is lost, transformed - something changes form. This loss was one of the layers of grief I encountered. The type of change I am referring to, the complete reorientation of relating to the world from extractive, expansionist anthropocentrism to the complexity and entanglement of an animate ecocentrism, is that it is long, ongoing (Abram, 1996; Hine, 2023; Machado de Oliveira, 2021; Willox Cunsolo, 2012). It is not a singular moment, the flicking of a switch. It is not changing the light bulbs and carrying on. Therefore,

loss and grief are experienced over and over again. The work of mourning is never done. "Mourning, then, is work to which we must always attend and which we must always share with others - a work that does not finish while our own body is alive" (Willox, 2021, p.145).

I first encountered this in ceramics: specific processes and relationships have no end. I can never make the perfect bowl. I have made countless bowls, hundreds. Some are better than others, but there will always be the possibility of a more perfect, more harmonious, more balanced, more beautiful bowl. It is partly this unattainable eventuality, this potential, that motivates me to keep making. Likewise, there will always be loss and grief; it will not end. It cannot be avoided, and there is always the possibility of meeting it with more grace, to continue to learn from it and be changed by it.

Perhaps the deepest layer of grief I experienced was the grief of uncertainty. Uncertainty permeates everything. As Weller states, "when we acknowledge grief, we acknowledge that everything we love, we will lose. No exceptions" (2015, p. 24). This loss is amplified by climate change as the world becomes more unpredictable and uncertain due to extreme weather and altered seasonal cycles (Stott, 2016). Will spring bring atmospheric rivers and floods that threaten my home? Will I spend the summer feasting from the garden, swimming in the lake, or choking on the smoke of a drought-fueled inferno? This ever-present uncertainty has forced me to release my illusory grasp on control. I can care, but I cannot control. There is humility in surrendering to my dependence on the animate earth. As Hine suggests:

> The journey down to earth starts with an awakening to our own complicity, but also our own helplessness and absurdity. Coming to see the world differently involves coming to see ourselves differently. (2023, p. 174)

This may all read as hopelessness; however, letting go and allowing things to die and change allows new possibilities (Hine, 2023; Machado de Oliveira, 2021; Macy & Brown, 2014; Weller, 2015), ones not yet even imagined. Vanessa Machado de Oliveira poignantly articulates the necessity and potential of letting go:

> Before anything different can happen, before people can sense, hear, relate, and imagine differently, there must be a clearing away, a decluttering, an initiation into the unknowable; and a letting go of the desires for certainty, authority, hierarchy, and of the insatiable consumption as a mode of relating to everything. (2021, p. 235)

In decluttering and clearing away, I felt less concerned about defining my art practice as ecological. I had also become less concerned with outcomes and more interested in practice. There were many times when I felt just as content to appreciate the inherent creativity in the world around me as I did creating myself.

I had been primarily painting through the autumn, but as the season shifted to winter, I began art-making using the natural materials I had gathered and dried. I chose to simplify the process, minimize the human hand and emphasize the materials themselves, sometimes cutting them, sometimes not, and arranging them on paper. I saw them as tapestries weaving together my complicity, grief, uncertainty, gratitude, and the beauty of the materials. Pieces from this body of work are included throughout the text. Miles (2010) views art as an act of cultural reflection, and this series was born from my reflections on grief and reconnecting with the animacy of the Earth while navigating life in a modern, capitalist culture. I cannot escape the time, place, and culture in which I live, nor my complicity in its harm. To do so would be a form of denial. I can, however, use art as a form of reflection that invites others to do the same, to look directly at the

discomfort of embracing change and its uncertainty that is required to address the social and ecological devastation of this time.

As the light slowly returned and the days grew longer, I felt changed, not entirely unrecognizable but slightly altered. I still felt a deep sorrow for the ongoing social and ecological destruction, but I understood the potential and power of that sorrow to guide me in the art of walking with the animate earth. The little snow that winter had brought melted away, and suddenly, there was the sound of birdsong on my walks.

Figure 6 Dried and cut daylily leaves on recycled paper

A story of growth, blooming, decay, growth again.

Roots, futures, and uncertainties intertwined

Chapter 4: Spring

Spring was a season of transformation and possibility. New green buds emerged from the ground and on the tips of branches, and there was life everywhere. The season's enthusiasm was contagious. Like the sun, I woke earlier, and the world's inherent creativity was impossible to deny. On my walks, there was a symphony of birdsong and a vibrant palette of Spring colours. With creativity springing forth from every direction, suddenly, it seemed silly to question the meaningfulness of my artistic practice. Life *is* creativity. Spring was the embodiment of inherent creativity; all that laid dormant through the winter burst forth with the returning light and warmth of the sun.

Throughout the winter, I remained present with grief and suffering, refusing to turn away even in the most uncomfortable moments. With the arrival of Spring, wonder and possibility grew alongside the grief and mourning. It eased the difficulty of loss and uncertainty. I could feel the natural cycle of growth, death, decay, growth. It was not an intellectual understanding but a fully embodied knowing. As Weller (2015) writes:

> Life is hard, filled with loss and suffering. Life is glorious, stunning, and incomparable. To deny either truth is to live in some fantasy of the ideal or to be crushed by the weight of pain. Instead, both are true, and it requires a familiarity with both sorrow and joy to fully encompass the full range of being human. (pp. 110–111)

I believe familiarity with both sorrow and joy arises from paying attention (Sewall,1999), and art-making, in its various forms, such as music, dance, poetry, ceramics, painting, or drawing, is a response to an engaged, attentive relationship with the living world and all that it encompasses,

grief, suffering, beauty, and wonder. For me, creating and making art feels like the most natural response to paying attention; the form is irrelevant. Cultural historian Thomas Berry noted:

> The natural world demands a response beyond that of rational calculation, beyond philosophical reasoning, beyond scientific insight. The natural world demands a response that rises from the wild unconscious depths of the human soul. A response that artists seek to provide in color and music and movement. (1999, p. 55)

There is an irony in attempting to rationalize, the wild and the magical; however, this thesis is my humble attempt to do just that.

The Livingness of Creativity

Many theorists argue that the power of ecological art lies in its ability to act as a form of cultural reflection, think critically about anthropocentric beliefs, and contribute to reimagining our worldviews and social systems (Anderson, 2015; Gablik, 1992; Miles, 2010; Weintraub, 2012). The need to rethink our understanding of how to live with and within the living web of life is not new. For decades, there have been artists, scientists, anthropologists, and philosophers who argued for the necessity of reimaging life on this planet for human and planetary healing (Abram, 1996; T. Berry, 1999; Drengson, 2005; Gablik, 2004; Harding, 2013; Haugen, 2013; Kimmerer, 2013; Lovelock & Margulis, 1974; Macy & Brown, 2014). I also believe, feel, and know this. I know it from my lived experience, from witnessing a shift in the seasons, the changing of the very Earth beneath my feet, from summers full of wildfires, autumns that feel like summers, winters without snow, and springs that come too soon. I know it even more deeply as I have been paying attention and developed the skill of ecological perception (Sewall, 1999),

and I have stayed with the trouble (Haraway, 2016; Hine, 2023; Machado de Oliveira, 2021). As Robin Wall Kimmerer argues:

> Paying attention is an ongoing act of reciprocity, the gift that keeps on giving, in which attention generates wonder, which generates more attention-and more joy. Paying attention to the more-than-human world doesn't lead only to amazement; it leads also to acknowledgement of pain. Open and attentive, we see and feel equally the beauty and the wounds, the old growth and the clear-cut, the mountain and the mine. Paying attention to suffering sharpens our ability to respond. To be responsible. (2014, p. 20)

Art is a way to heal and renew my relationship with the animate Earth and respond. Art is an act of reciprocity. It is a way to remain connected to my entanglement with all life and to give back. I had lost something along the way, from my first impulse to create through my formal art education to the monetary pressures of life in a capitalist society; I lost what I would describe as *the livingness of creativity*. I believe this is how my art practice can become more ecological by reconnecting with the livingness of creativity. This type of livingness includes death, decay, and growth. It includes grief, complicity, wonder, and joy. It does not turn away or exclude any aspect of the complexity of being. It is a willingness to pay attention, to witness and respond to the fullness of life.

As outlined in Chapter 2: Autumn, creativity can be understood as a property of life. The human imagination cannot be separated from the world in which it is embedded, the inherent creativity of a world where the green shoots of Spring emerge from the decaying leaves of Autumn. Berry notes, "Artists have something in them that is wild, something guided and inspired ultimately by imagination" (1999, p. 53). Developing the skill of ecological perception

includes my re-engagement with the wildness of imagination, unconstrained by capitalist, anthropocentric ideals. Macy and Brown note:

> Free play of the imagination requires trust in life and courage to walk where there is no path. It takes us beyond our perceptions of what is to what might be, opening us to new ways of seeing and new ways of being. The powers of mind are then liberated from the dead hand of habit. Imagination suggests alternatives to the dominant narratives of our time and can keep us from surrendering to conformity and mob mentality. (2014, p. 33)

This is the work of an ecological art practice: reflecting and resisting the dominant narratives and continuing to imagine other possibilities. Within this is relinquishing notions of certainty, outcome, and product. That may be the most challenging part. In *Hospicing Modernity,* Machado de Oliveira (2021) writes, “The desire for certainty, for all-encompassing knowledge, is in the same harmful cluster of desires to conquer, consume, and control that have created the colossal mess driving us toward human extinction” (p. 165). There is not always something distinct and tangible to point to. This entire project would have been easier if I had come up with a definition of ecological art and then made a series of work according to that definition. However, sometimes, the work is invisible; sometimes, it is simply paying attention and asking questions. As Galafassi et al. (2018) observe, “Artistic works are usually concerned with deepening questions rather than providing answers and solutions” (p.77). Furthermore, “A unique characteristic of artistic inquiry is its ability to engage with more-than-rational, non-reductive knowledge and experiences of the world in their living qualitative complexity” (p. 72-73). Art can be the thread that reminds us that we are part of a complex, imaginative, wild web of life and “that the living planet has the capacity to ask something of us, and that we have the capacity to

respond" (Kimmerer, 2014, p. 18). My art practice is a response and a small act toward social and ecological healing.

Conclusion

In many ways this was a circular journey, returning me to where I began but with an altered perception and new understanding. As Hine writes:

> There's no single answer to the question of what art should do under the shadow of climate change – and besides, anything that's worth the name of art is allergic to words like 'should'. It takes a subtler kind of dialogue, an indirect approach, to stumble to the places where the work of art comes alive. (2023, p. 93)

I am still an artist and maker amid a social and ecological emergency but I am paying attention and reconnected to the livingness of creativity.

Attuned to the lunar and seasonal cycles, I anticipate many more revolutions of learning ahead that will continue to deepen my learning. As writer and scholar Joseph Campbell expressed: "Just think of it: cycles, cycles, cycles; nothing occurs that has not already occurred. There's nothing to it but to yield to it" (2003, p. 9).

I once described myself as a ceramic artist. Now, if pressed, I would say I am an artist and educator. Not long after beginning the MAEEC program, I pursued other employment to extract my creative practice from the monetary demands of living in a capitalist society. I currently work as an educator at NMAG, designing and facilitating youth programs to encourage critical dialogue about history, engage with contemporary art, and explore the power of creativity and imagination. I see this work as an attempt to keep youth engaged with the livingness of

creativity and learn that art can be a way to bear witness to the social and ecological emergency and consider other possibilities for being.

I continue to work with natural materials, painting and drawing, each gesture an act of grief, gratitude, and reciprocity. I have also made a gentle return to my ceramic studio, making small batches of work attentive to material use and the life cycle of the objects I create. I began this heuristic inquiry to understand the meaning of my artistic practice. However, I discovered it is, in fact, art that gives meaning to my life and helps me not turn away from the horrors of the social and ecological catastrophe but rather have the courage to imagine another way of living and walking with the animate Earth and its many glorious inhabitants.

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

(Eliot, 1988, p. 59)

Figure 7 Dried and cut leaves and stems on recycled paper

In this new and shimmering light,

What is possible?

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