

# STAGING MATERIAL ENCOUNTERS: RELATING TO THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN

Helen Elizabeth Mann

## INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines and reflects upon a recent period of practice-based research into the human and more-than-human relationship at this critical time for life on Earth. Drawing on ideas from within the field of human trauma, which describe how remnants of traumatic experiences become trapped within the body as sensations, pain, processes, and cancers, completely cut off from the original experiences that contributed to their formation, the research was centred around the concept of Earth as an expressive archive of valuable information about the way it has been treated and related to. Like Van Der Kolk's human body (Van Der Kolk, 2015), the Earth in this context "keeps the score". Notions of extractivism, objectification and othering, along with ideas around 'separation sickness', describing the 'cultural trauma' of intergenerational disconnection from ourselves and the land (Rust, 2020), form the backdrop to the research.

A variety of starting points fed into the work, impacting upon one another in rich, diverse, and complex ways. Printmaking processes were utilised throughout as both research tools and within more resolved works. The paper is a series of reflections, not necessarily chronological or complete, but rather a snapshot of key ideas, questions, processes, and directions.

## BEGINNINGS

Exploring my ancestral heritage and 'geological roots' took me first to the geographical area of the East Anglian Fens. Researching land, soil, and land use through walking and immersion within the environment, I was able to draw on a full range of sensory, emotional, and bodily responses to the question and communicate the multiple ways we come to 'know'. Our human propensity to turn away from, to prefer not to know, not to feel, is very familiar to me, as a psychologist. This capacity for denial can be necessary for our psychic survival when things are too overwhelming, too difficult,

too painful, too vast. As ever though, there is a cost, and this revealed itself as an ever-present shadow within the work that emerged during this period. A sense of foreboding and dark portent made its way, for example, into the installation 'C-scape', 2021, charcoal screen print series (2/3) and video.

This piece enabled me to foreground the use of carbon and carbon-based materials to reference carbon emissions, the carbon cycle, carbon as the fundamental building blocks of life, interconnection, and so on. The related spectre of the climate crisis is implicitly present. 'Hyper-objects', that is, those things 'so massively



Figure 1



Figure 2

### Figure Titles and information

Figure 1: 'C-Scape', 2021. Charcoal screen print series (2/3). Each screen print: 65 x 100 cm

Figure 2: 'Edge', 2020. Charcoal, graphite, pastels on paper. 200 x 70 cm.

distributed in time and space' that they dwarf us and become too difficult to comprehend or access (Morton, 2007), were apt here. Climate crisis, with its immense, complex, and terrifying nature, catalyses denial and a tendency toward not knowing, with all its attendant shadows. The psychological mechanism of distancing oneself (emotionally) from the matter at hand underpinned a question I wanted to interrogate through my research and my making: what role, if any, can art have in enabling us to 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016). What is the character of this enabling effect and how does it speak through the work?

'Staying with', I imagined, could bring new knowledges, new modes, different futures perhaps, and new perspectives on space and time itself. As Timothy Ingold (Ingold, 2020) has proposed,

*There is a whole eternity within the present moment, every moment is, in fact, a moment of beginning for the whole, the world is in continuous birth.*

How might this speak to art-makers creating at this current moment, I wondered. How could or should we inhabit Ingold's different 'temporal sensibility', to 'rethink time' and to sense 'deep time within'? And why are these re-thinkings especially pressing at this moment of climate breakdown? Geographer Sarah Whatmore (Whatmore, 2006) suggests the need for a shift of focus from what things mean to what they do. As I held my materials in my hands – the crumbling soils from my garden, my powdered carbon pigments, the colourful decaying vegetables from my compost bin – I began to think about what things do to us, how they affect us or don't affect us, what the consequences might be, how we touch and are touched. I had a sense of this moment and wanted to explore what these materials might be telling me about it.

Having always had a strong sense of the importance – but often undervalued status – of 'intuitive', 'instinctual', 'common' or 'procedural' knowledges, I was interested in Whatmore's perspective on the need for a redirection towards more-than-human modes of enquiry: a 'politics of knowledge' rather than a politics of identity. This aligns with New Materialist ideas around relational, contextual, non-essential, and pluralist ways of knowing. Again, this resonated with my clinical work, where 'intellectualisation' can manifest as a psychological 'defence', creating distance from one's emotional, sensual, and bodily life but presenting it as rational, clear, articulate, and certain. Operating at a societal, perhaps culturally sanctioned, systemic, and personal level, this denigration of intuitive knowledge can risk and starve so much, a troubling dimension of the climate crisis I wanted to explore and express in my making. The potential of art to circumvent this defence is one of the reasons it excites me.

So, these were some of the modes and stances I brought to the research from the outset. I felt excited as these ideas converged with my work as a psychologist, my interest in change, and my thoughts about art and creative practices. I was thinking about what enabled and



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure 3: 'Kipos', Spring 2020, eco-print, rust on paper, 200 x 140 cm  
 Figure 4: Detail, 'Kipos', Spring 2020.  
 Figure 5: '4 metres', 2021, food-waste eco print on paper, 300 x 230 x 100 cm, "It was, they were certain, a calling down of something upon the draining", ('Fer', Daisy Johnson)

disenabled engagement – with politics, with climate catastrophe, with art, with oneself, with others, and with the more than human.

## SENSUOUS GEOGRAPHIES

I set out initially on the 'Fen Edge Trail', fascinating, not least, because it marks what was once the edge of the land. I could map the topography of the terrain with my own two feet and imagine what was once the place of water. As I walked, I made rubbings, collected organic material, made sun prints, and paid particular attention to sensations of pressure, pain, cold, warmth, balance, and muscle movement. I realised how little I attended to these as 'senses' and became increasingly open to broader definitions, beyond the five senses we all know and learn about (Rodaway, 2002). I wanted to incorporate these into the work, if possible, as with them, I thought, comes emotion, life, and relationship.

I was inspired by the scale and tactility of Richard Long's 'Waterfall Line', 2000, and his use of mud in works such as 'River Avon Mud Circle', 2011. I was drawn to the physicality in his making, along with that of other land artists such as Andy Goldsworthy and Julie Brook. I was told to 'go big' due to the enormity of the subject matter I was dealing with. I needed to immerse myself in the land, as it were, get as close as I could, and feel it in every sense of the word. I started making large-scale rubbings with charcoal, graphite, and pastels. Getting my hands dirty, digging, scraping, and feeling the soil almost became a ritual, and I wasn't surprised by the finding that soil is beneficial for one's mental health (Marshall, 2018). Rust's 'Separation Sickness' was now echoing loudly in my mind.

The idea of 'Touch' as a foundation, the 'container' of all other senses (Rodaway, 2002), captured my imagination. It linked, in my mind, to psychoanalytic ideas around emotional 'containment' (Bion, 1970), which is essential for psychological health, growth, and development. The touch-feel quality of the process felt holistic and embodied. I tried to keep hold of my own emotional responses, as Rodaway writes, of 'care and love' and 'disgust and hate', all at once. I continued to document unstable land-water grounds as I researched permeability and water sequestration, using the photopolymer print process and the sun for exposure. I began to make inks with the soil, to reference the connection to materials and place.

I had been and continued to grapple with the process of artmaking and its impact, endeavouring to practice more sustainably, working with the 'restrictions', and properties of the materials and processes. I was researching and experimenting with non-toxic printmaking processes, and studying artists such as Anselm Kiefer, Vivian Suter, and Gillian King who use organic materials in their works and processes.

It was lockdown, and my garden now became my studio. I had been experimenting with using organic garden matter, soil, and rust in the creation of eco-prints, which developed into the installation, 'Kipos', in Spring 2020.



Figure 6



Figure 7

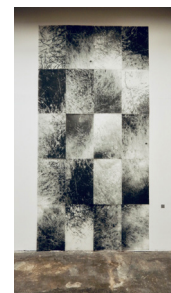


Figure 8

Figure 6: Detail, '4 metres', 2021.

Figure 7: 'Storm Drawings', 2019 - , rain, wind, charcoal, soil, pigment, paper.

Figure 8: 'Unseasonable', 2021. 45 mph wind, inkjet print on Bib Tengujo, 350 x 186 cm



I loved the lack of control inherent in the eco-printing process and how the materials behaved and would also change over time. There was an ephemeral quality to them that I loved and was drawn to as something to explore further. I was reflecting on the reading I had done about the carbon cycle and the loss of the carbon sink due to peat soil depletion in the Fens, and from this, the installation '4 metres' emerged. Reverberating with the environmentally catastrophic draining of the Fens and the privileging of farming monocultures, it aims to raise broader questions about our relationship with the non-human world, materiality, loss, and interconnectedness. The intuitive and experimental nature of my practice melded happily with my interest in expanding the boundaries of printmaking and utilising low-tech, easily accessible methods. The benefits of this became evident during the lockdown when I had no access to specialist printmaking workshops. '4 metres' was made with food waste in a saucepan in my own kitchen.

## VITALITIES

I have always been drawn to processes that reduce my own agency or that introduce a human-non-human collaborative dimension – leaving something to chance, using the accidental, allowing the non-human to touch the work. I wanted to take this further and began leaving soil, ash, rust, and pigment outside exposed to the elements. Here began the documentation of disrupted weather systems and the exploration of processes of loss, decay, repair, and renewal. The 'Storm drawings' (2019–present) emerged after Storms Dennis, Ciara, and Jorge and continue until the present with the recent additions of Storms Eunice and Franklin (WIP).

I had initially considered transforming these with a printmaking process and created a few very large digital images of them, but the power, violence, and expressiveness were lost. The question of who or what made the artwork was also key, and I saw these 'drawings' as a collaboration with nature. I was reading about others who were operating in a similar realm, such as Jessica Worbuoys and her 'sea paintings'.

I explored the concept of human-nonhuman 'assemblage', where the vitality and energy of materials, natural processes, and elements contributed to the making of the work, raising questions about power, agency, interdependence, and a 'de-centring' of the human, as a possibility. The practice was conceptualised as a series of encounters or 'productive events' (Fox & Alldred, 2019), documented through drawing, camera-less photography, printmaking, video, 3-D, and installation. The methodology evolved into one of 'Staging Material Encounters'. From here, the installation 'Unseasonable', 2021, emerged.

The 'Storm drawings' series and 'Unseasonable' were both attempts to render something intangible, visible; a stark reminder of the slow violence that can so easily be disavowed. I discovered other printmakers, like Julie Leach, who were also harnessing the wind into prints.



Figure 9



Figure 10

Figure 9: 'Ditch', 2021. Rain, wind, sleet, snow, sun, charcoal, soil, pigment on paper, soil stencil. 45 x 180 x 200 cm.

Figure 10: 'Taste for Earth', 2021. Rainwater, charcoal, pigment, beeswax, soil, snail-eaten paper, 120 x 55 x 60 cm

The work became an exploration of climate catastrophe through materials in a way that speaks to concepts of 'thing power' and place as 'matter-energy' (Bennett, 2010). These ideas invite us to develop a different type of awareness and stance in relation to non-humans, seeing them not as passive, inert objects or materials, but as agential, vital, and ever-changing. My research was beginning to highlight the potential in these reframings, with artmaking serving as a bridge towards reimagined futures, a tool to enable us to 'stay with' instead of 'turn away', to harness the imagination and thereby create new spaces to 'think', feel, and act.

## **POLITICAL ECOLOGIES**

I had become interested in pursuing 'materiality as a strategy to address environmental neglect' (Weintrobe, 2019) and was excited by ideas articulated by eco-material artists which I felt spoke directly to what I was exploring and how I worked.

'Eco material art relinquishes the centrality of 'form' to focus on 'matter'. Form is confined to static measures of shape and dimensions, whereas matter engages a multiplicity of physical qualities and the ever-changing continuum of conditions' (Weintrobe, 2019 p. 17). This sense of dynamism and multi-layering ('both-and') was also what I wanted to capture in my work.

I was intuitively drawn to ideas expressed in 'reacquainting the public with the lapsed wonders of weight, texture, moisture, temperature, fragility, suppleness, elasticity, bulge, hollow, contour, and a host of other physical properties that are being neglected in favour of data, simulations, and digital transmissions.' (Weintrobe, 2019 p. 17).

I had begun to feel overwhelmed by the subject matter at times, with ongoing questions about whether art can truly play a role within or make any difference in how we engage with climate catastrophe. I was reading about other artists working very successfully within this field and facing similar dilemmas, such as Claire Pentecost, who stated that the role of the artist is to put knowledge in a form such that it can be 'a sharable sensation', something that can be felt rather than conveyed in a rational way. Her installation, 'Soil-erg', (2012) clearly communicates soil as a unit of value and something useful for life.

'Inhale/Exhale' (2008/2011), the work of Finnish artist Terike Haapoja, enables the soil to be perceived as an 'active process' rather than as a dead material or object. She states, 'matter is transformed into gazes-body into spirit' and views her work as being 'more about finding out what it is to be human than directly about soil, or more about finding an emotional connection to the phenomena in question that remains beyond our direct experience' (Toland, Stratton Noller & Wesolek, 2019 p. 224 -225). The concept of 'giving the soil a voice' (Toland, Stratton Noller & Wesolek, 2019), promoting the value of decomposing matter, human-soil relations, and 'soil stewardship' as a new paradigm for a living (Lyons, 2020; Feller, Landa, Toland and Wessolek, 2015) revived

hope again and from this point, the works 'Ditch', 2021, and 'Taste for Earth', 2021, developed, using soil stencils, and decayed, snail-eaten paper. The work with snails and soil is ongoing, with a series of collagraphs made with snail-eaten cardboard, titled the 'Snail etch' series, WIP. Could this be conceptualised as an extended printmaking practice – non-human etching?

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

So, the research and the making continue. It strikes me that whatever it is or is not, whatever it could be, whatever drives it, and wherever it goes, it is this that must go on, in whatever shape or form that takes. This feels like the most precious aspect to me. There is a danger, I feel, that the making process itself can become intellectualised, and something is lost or made distant. There is a risk in writing a paper like this, even a reflective paper, that the making and work is explained, given, told, and wrapped up into something neat. Making and creating is not like that of course, and nor is life. My intention has never been to explain 'it', or for the work to be single-issue in nature. On the contrary, I view the works more as potential openings, ways in and through, with starting points and references, but that hopefully tap into something more universal, non-verbal, sensual, emotional, deep, perhaps. There is an urgency at this moment, yes, and the work is made within that context. Perhaps it taps into themes around materiality, deep time, fragility, intimacy, impermanence, and change, along with broader questions about what is at risk and what is possible. But perhaps, above all, it is the process of getting the hands dirty, digging in, feeling, and sensing, and all that brings, that is the broader subtext. Who knows, let's see where things go next...

## REFERENCES

- Bennett, J., (2010). *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*. London and Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bion, W.R., (1970). *Attention and interpretation*. London: Tavistock. Reprinted in: *Seven Servants: Four works by Wilfred R. Bion*. New York: Aronson, 1977.
- Feller, C., Landa, E.R., Toland, A. and Wessolek, G. (2015) 'Case studies of soil in art', *SOIL*, 1, pp 543-559, doi:10.5194/soil-1-543-2015.
- Fox, N.J. and Alldred, P. (2019) *New Materialism*. In Atkinson, PA., Delamont, S., Cernat, A., Sakshaug, J.W. and Williams, M. (eds) *SAGE Research Methods Foundations*. London: Sage. <https://methods.sagepub.com/foundations/new-materialism>
- Haraway, D., (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- Ingold, T., (2020). 'The Shape of a Circle in the Mind of a Fish: The Understory of the Understory'. Interviewed by Obrist, H.U. *Serpentine Galleries*. 5th and 6th December 2020. Available at: [https://youtu.be/qU8Q\\_Zd0ubw](https://youtu.be/qU8Q_Zd0ubw) (Accessed: 21 April 2021)
- Johnson, D., (2016). *Fen*. London: Random House.
- Lyons, K.M. (2020) *Vital Decomposition: Soil Practitioners and Life Politics*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

Marshall, L., (2018) 'Can good bacteria make the brain more stress-resilient? Christopher Lowry has dedicated his career to finding out', Colorado Arts and Sciences Magazine, (September), 28.

Morton, T., (2007). Ecology without Nature rethinking environmental aesthetics. London: Harvard University Press.

Rodaway, P., (2002). Sensuous Geographies. London: Taylor and Francis e-Library.

Rust, M-J., (2020). Towards and Ecopsychotherapy. London: Confer Books.

Toland, A., Stratton Noller, J. & Wesolek, G. (2019). Field to Palette. London New York: CRC Press.

Van Der Kolk, B., (2015). The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma. London: Penguin Random House Group.

Weintrobe, L. (2019). What's Next? Eco Materialism and Contemporary Art. Bristol and Chicago: Intellect

Whatmore, S. (2006) 'Materialist returns: practising cultural geography in and for a more-than-human world', Cultural Geographies, 13(4), pp. 600-609

## **AUTHOR**

**Helen Elizabeth Mann**

**Contact: [helen@helenelizabeth.uk](mailto:helen@helenelizabeth.uk)**

Helen is an artist, activist and clinical psychologist based in London. She completed her MA Fine Art Printmaking at Camberwell College, University of the Arts London in 2021 and a residency with the ecological artist Aviva Rahmani in July 2020. Helen is a member of Women Eco Artists Dialogue @wead.artists, Ecoartspace @ecoartspace, CarbonBorders-Voices @carbon.borders.voices and Regroup Collective @regroupcollective.

Copyright @ 2023 Helen Elizabeth Mann

Presented at IMPACT 12 Conference, Bristol, The Printmakers' Voice, 21-25 September 2022 UK September 2022

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.



IMAGE GALLERY



---

Figure 1: 'C-Scape', 2021. Charcoal screen print series (2/3). Each screen print: 65 x 100 cm  
Figure 2: 'Edge', 2020. Charcoal, graphite, pastels on paper. 200 x 70 cm.





---

Figure 3: Kipos', Spring 2020, eco-print, rust on paper, 200 x 140 cm  
Figure 4: Detail, 'Kipos', Spring 2020.



---

Figure 5: '4 metres', 2021, food-waste eco print on paper, 300 x 230 x 100 cm, "It was, they were certain, a calling down of something upon the draining", ('Fen', Daisy Johnson)  
Figure 6: Detail, '4 metres', 2021.



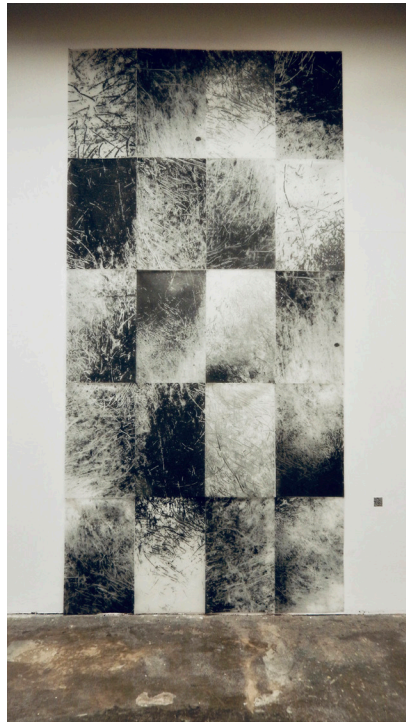


Figure 7: 'Storm Drawings', 2019 - , rain, wind, charcoal, soil, pigment, paper.

Figure 8: 'Unseasonable', 2021. 45 mph wind, inkjet print on Bib Tengujo, 350 x 186 cm





Figure 9: 'Ditch', 2021. Rain, wind, sleet, snow, sun, charcoal, soil, pigment on paper, soil stencil. 45 x 180 x 200 cm.  
Figure 10: 'Taste for Earth', 2021. Rainwater, charcoal, pigment, beeswax, soil, snail-eaten paper, 120 x 55 x 60 cm