

ENACTING PARTS

Heather Leier

*There were so many days
where the heat was too much
forcing fragments of polymer
polyester
and enamel
to fall between the cracks in the wood
under my feet.*

*In other times, there was no need
for your protection
yet freckles still emerged on my skin.
It was always there, like you,
even when I couldn't see it.*

I have lived in Mohkínstsis/Calgary for four years, most of which have been marked by the pandemic that is ongoing as I write this. I highlight this here because my physical, social, and cultural connections with this city are limited. However, given the circumstances, I had the privilege and opportunity to connect with the land and the non-human world around me. Walking, a privilege that allowed me to engage with places I have visited and lived in throughout my life, has been particularly significant during the pandemic. Walking through the northwest suburbs of this city has allowed me to foster a relationship with the land, which now animates my practice. In the spirit of respect, reciprocity, and truth, I acknowledge that I am an uninvited white settler occupying this land, which forms the traditional territories of the Blackfoot Confederacy (Siksika, Piikani, Kanai First Nations), the Tsuut'ina First Nation, and the Stoney Nakoda (Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Wesley First Nations). This territory is also home to the Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3. I am grateful to be situated here, and through my work, I aim to honour the land and all its forms, taking greater responsibility for my presence and potential future in this place.

Through undulations in creative and less-creative writing, this text will explore questions that have emerged and continue to emerge within my life and creative practice. This paper will also acknowledge some of the human and non-human

forces that form the networks through which my work is shaped and exists.

The short poem at the beginning of this text was written in conversation with a broken umbrella that was destined for the landfill. This text also embodies my struggle with the relationship between my lived experiences with gender violence and trauma, and the forms of environmental violence that are so present within the place I call home. These struggles run through all the work in the *Enacting Forms* series. Within the artwork depicted below, the final words "It was always there, like you, even when I couldn't see it" are printed repeatedly across the surface of the paper. "It" in this sentence refers to the trauma that

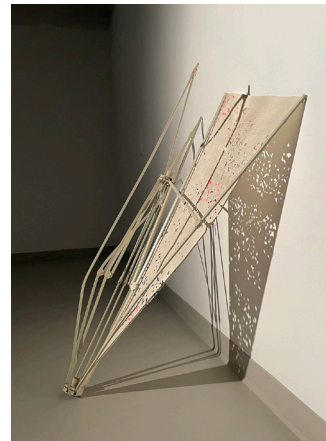


Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure Titles and information

Figure 1: Always There

Figure 2: Enacting Parts

exists within me, yet simultaneously refers to the sun, the impacts of environmental violence that permeate our lives, and the permanence of objects that are always there even when out of sight. *It was always there, like you, even when I couldn't see it.*

When I touch you, I feel your breath. I feel the pulsation of your fibres as they flicker in the soft wind. I feel the subtle fluctuations in tension across your seams, left behind by fleshy bodies cradled on your surface. When I touch you, I feel the gentle texture of fibres, polluted by dust, sand, soil, and soot. The tiny grains roll off your surface making their way to the ground beneath you. I feel us lose them.

When I touch your damaged edges, the soft, and delicate wisps of thread flutter across my fingertips almost too quickly to absorb their presence. I feel your cold metal frame and the bumps and divots from long winters outside in prairie storms. Still strong, it attempts to maintain any semblance of your purpose. When I touch you, I feel the pressure on the soles of my feet, as I rocked myself backward. When I touch you, I feel my belly brace before sinking, briefly, like at the top of a rollercoaster, weightless. When I smell your surface, I breathe the soil and all the microbes that penetrate your body. I smell the oils off our bodies lounging in the sun. I smell the book I read as I nestled into you in the morning sun during a slow time, like no other. I smell the winter. I smell the heat. The smell makes me imagine the networks active amongst your threads and in your crevices. I smell the cheap beer and spitty chew of a friend of a friend. When I smell you, I smell the grass that grew next to where you lived. I smell herbaceous spices that absorbed into my fingertips. Your smell is unstable and dynamic, like many who have felt you.

When I smell you, I imagine the other ways you have smelled. I imagine you smelled of something new, chemical, and sanitary emerging from a box. When I smell you, I imagine the life you lived before me, on a shelf, in a store, in production. I imagine the hands that have touched you, that made you. I imagine the upheaval of resources from our lands, seas, and soils, which have allowed me to smell you. When I see you, I see a purpose lost. I see a metal frame holding together the torn fabric laced to its surface. I see a tiny pillow, not large enough for indulgent comfort. I see your destiny just north of here, amongst other broken things, decaying matter, the overconsumed, and their byproducts. I see the way your torn body shivers in the wind. I see that you are scared. I see the way you have changed. I see the way that you became your biome, full of living breathing, and enacting parts. I see you outstretched in the elements and folded in the wind. I see you make yourself small.

When I see you, I see that your colours are mottled with new textures and shapes emerging from your surface. I see the water that has hit you. I imagine some running below you into the earth and some absorbing into your porous surface, changing you, enacting on you, before evaporating into the clouds. When I see you, I see how you are active like the weeds in the garden, the soil beneath you, like the hail that hit you, and the heat that surrounds you.

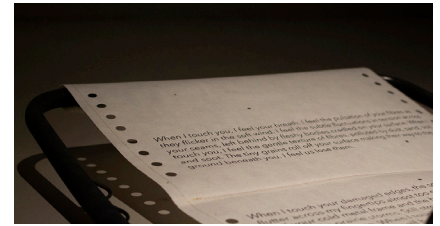


Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure 3: Enacting Parts (Detail)
 Figure 4: Overconsumed
 Figure 5: Overconsumed (detail)

When I see you, I see myself during golden hour, hastily flopping onto you, feeling safe, yet trapped. I see myself sinking back into you before sinking too far, my face red with heat. I see my body folded through you. When I look at you, I see myself at 12, conscious for the first time of my rapidly changing body. I see myself bleeding, smelling, and truly sweating for the first time. When I look at you, I see my uncertainty and feel my heart racing as the seat below me snapped, quietly i'm sure, but loud enough to send a familiar tremor through my body. When I see you, I feel the pinch that shot through me when I was eight. When I see you, I hear the sound of the wood hitting the floor, and I feel the shame rise within me, as I fell in slow motion. When I see you, I see the stories that you embody and the bodies that you have held.

As noted, the circumstances of the pandemic have afforded me the privilege to think more deeply about the space and things that directly surround me. For most of the pandemic, I have lived just south of a landfill, and like many others, during lockdowns, I turned to walking as a means of moving my body and enlivening the otherwise monotonous days spent in front of screens. With limited activity happening outside the home, I began to take greater notice of my surroundings and became acutely aware of the very short distance that objects I throw away would travel to become essentially just "out of sight." Simultaneously, I attended a virtual seminar series/residency called "Traces" with a small group of peers from various international locations. I seized this seminar/residency as an opportunity to expand my practice and was encouraged to begin by deeply observing the world around me (Diego and Juan, 2021). While I was thinking about my location close to the landfill and the objects that surrounded me, I was inspired by another artist in the group, Jess DeMuro. At the beginning of the program, she observed and deeply engaged with a sunrise, recording her experience and ultimately performing a stunning text called *And Just Like That The Day Begins* (DeMuro, 2021). Simultaneously, I was reading Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, in which she implores readers to recognize the agency of non-human forms and forces to foster more responsible ecologies. (Bennett, 2010)

The text I previously read, along with this sculpture itself, emerged from this residency and was animated by the following questions:

What could emerge from the experience of using all my senses to engage with items that have seemingly lost their purpose? Might life exist in the torn edges of a broken object or emerge through the pit of my stomach? How does an object made for a fleeting purpose, never just go away? How can the ongoing activity of non-human and seemingly inanimate life-forms be made visible? Once visible, what impact might this have?

While I came to this work through collective conversation, individual reflection, and the scholarly work of Bennett, I came to understand that the animacy of the more-than-human is central to Indigenous thought and scholarship. This understanding first came to me through a conversation with my colleague and phenomenal artist Judy Anderson (Anderson, 2021). I am grateful to her for sharing this knowledge

with me, which allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of the situatedness of these ideas outside of white-settler discourse. Therefore, as draw on Bennett's work through this project, I must also respectfully acknowledge those Indigenous scholars who, as Zoe Todd states in her article *An Indigenous Feminist's Take On The Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word For Colonialism*, are "thinking and discussing the more than human." (Todd, 2016). This includes the work of Alison Jones and Te Kawehau Hoskins in their chapter *A Mark on Paper: The Matter of Indigenous-Settler History*, which directly addresses Bennett's work (Hoskins and Jones, 2016), as well as Erica Violet Lee in her article *Reconciling in the Apocalypse* (Lee, 2016) and Vanessa Watts in *Indigenous place-thought & agency amongst humans and non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European world tour!)* (Watts, 2013), amongst others. Here, I do not not equate Indigenous thought and new materialisms but rather seek to recognise the dynamics at play in academia and beyond. As Jones and Hoskins state, "One set of ontological assumptions has been relegated to the 'outside' of scholarly thought; the other considers itself, in social theory today, 'cutting edge' scholarship." (Hoskins and Jones, 2016, p, 86). I acknowledge here that the ideas I am grappling with in my practice are not 'cutting edge scholarship', but rather run in certain parallels (and differ) with Indigenous knowledges that have been disregarded by the white academy. Within my creative practice, I recognise the importance and value of embracing notions of the animacy of the non-human in reimagining relations between the things I surround myself with and am responsible for. What has emerged is work that explores the use of language, images, objects, and light, to develop a deeper recognition and understanding of discarded objects as active agents within my domestic and natural spaces, but also within my body, memory, and all non-physical aspects of my being.

Enacting Parts comprises screenprinted text panels, punctuated with small circles cut throughout that are sewn together and strung across a deconstructed and reassembled chair. The holes that are cut through the paper render it permeable. These holes also symbolise missing pieces within the work, serving as an acknowledgement of how my understanding of this object is incomplete, as there are gaps in my understanding more broadly of the non-human world. Simultaneously, these holes allow for shadows to be cast beneath the work, which I see as a means to make visible the vitality of this object beyond its physical form. The sewn gold thread attempts to hold the paper together, piecing together the fragmented stories written on the page, while also glimmering in the light, unsteady and vibrant. The reconfigured chair is propped up precariously, as if it could collapse at any moment, mirroring the delicate balance at play between humans and other forces and lives with which we coexist.

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Overconsumed is a work born out of deep engagement with the roots of a tomato plant from the previous season. After a long winter, I began preparing the garden by pulling out any remaining lifeless plants from the soil. As I did so, I noticed how the roots of this plant branched and extended in ways that reminded me of veins. They were beautiful, familiar, yet unusual. I began this work by photographing the roots and creating a photo-intaglio plate from a macro image.

The final work includes 48 impressions of that image printed in colour, transitioning from cool black into transparent pink. Mounted together and reinforced by sewing, they cascade from the wall to a metal frame and sprawl across the floor. The impressions of the roots mirror one another, resulting in a form that somewhat mimics a double helix/ DNA strand. This piece extends across the gallery floor, embodying an extension of life through space and time. My mother's stereotypically "feminine" handwriting extends down the right side of the work, beginning with "Overconsumed and Underappreciated" and gradually

distilling down to “appreciated”, repeated until it becomes illegible.

The front of the work is dotted with printed pink confetti, while the back is entirely consumed by it. This serves as a nod to the perceived joy and vitality of girlhood, and this work harkens back to the relationship between gender and the environment that brought me to this project.

Through the Enacting Forms project, I seek to make visible the liveliness of useless/broken things to draw attention to issues of overconsumption and the infinite active participation of these objects. I achieve this by reconfiguring discarded objects into new forms, incorporating text and imagery, and exploring the use of light, shadow, and delicate materials. By reconfiguring the object forms, I aim to abstract them, not to only make them appear more formally dynamic, but also to transform their meanings, drawing attention to the materials from which the objects are composed. Therefore, I intend to entice viewers into considering the implications of the materials from which the objects are created as part of the sculptures’ life beyond the purpose the object once served.

More broadly, through this work, I intend to maintain sustained engagement and dialogue with objects to trouble and make visible some complexities of late capitalism and anthropocentrism. That being said, this work is contradictory in that through attempts to deeply engage with the non-human, the work orients itself around the human. Therefore, perhaps, this work is at best a reflection of my struggle with this complex experience of understanding the liveliness of the more-than-human through my limited perspective, and is a means for me to consider, and hopefully encourage others to consider, their responsibilities to both human and non-human lives and forces at play within our existence.

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IMAGE GALLERY

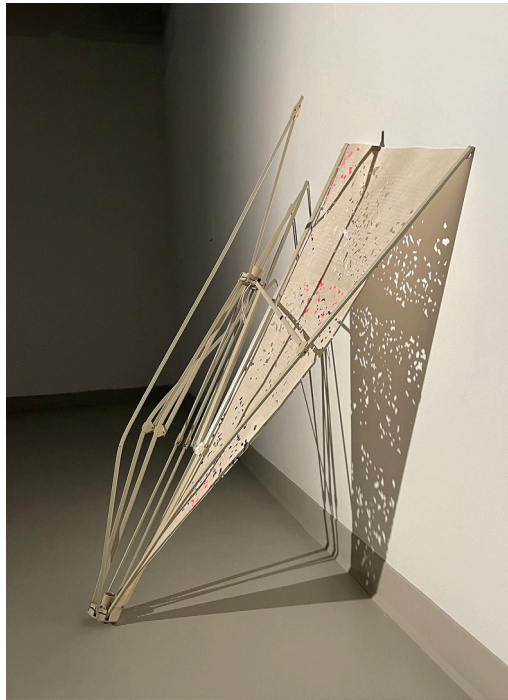


Figure 1: Always There
Figure 2: Enacting Parts

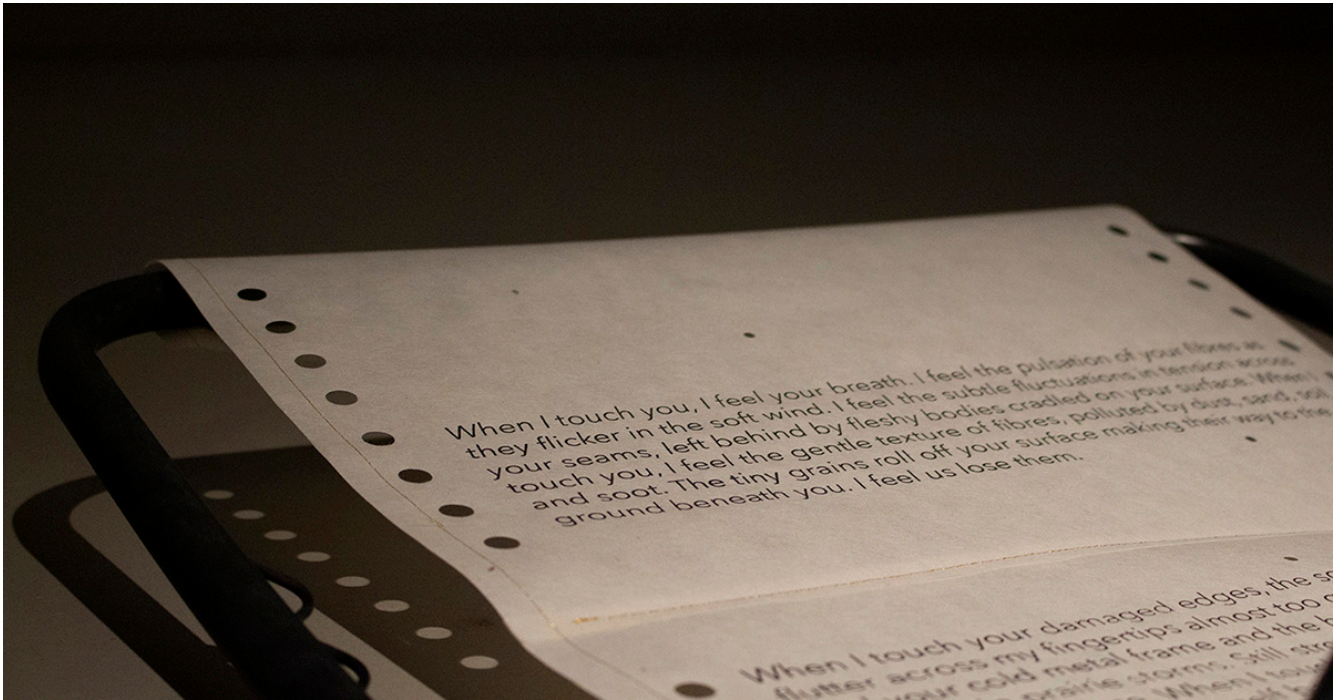


Figure 3: Enacting Parts (Detail)
Figure 4: Overconsumed



Figure 5: Overconsumed (detail)