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THE BODY MATTERS: MAKING THE BODY AND MATERIALS PRESENT IN POST-EXTRACTIVE URBAN TERRAINS IN RESPONSE TO ISSUES OF THE ANTHROPOCENE THROUGH SPECULATIVE AND PERFORMATIVE PRACTICES

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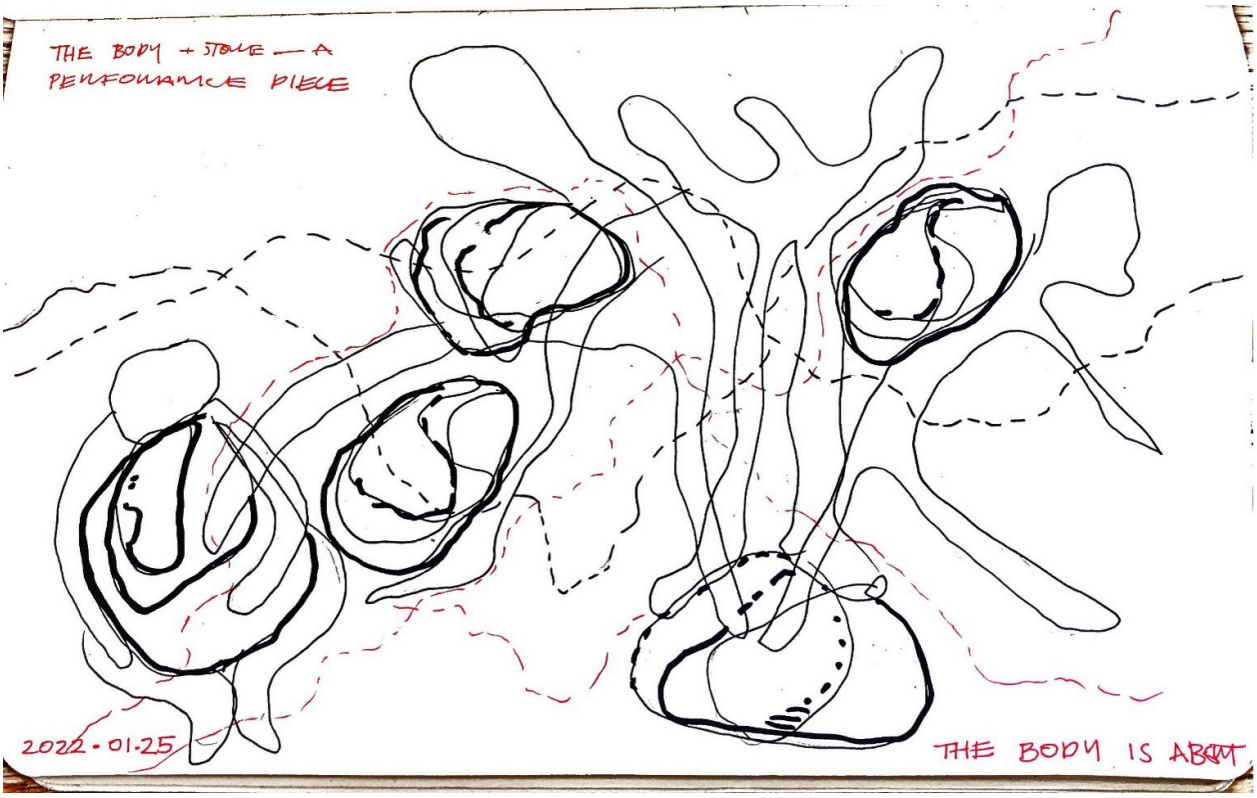
This paper explores the relationship between human actions, particularly in the context of extractive industries and colonial attitudes, and their impact on climate change. The text discusses the concept of the Anthropocene and its problematic implications, emphasizing the need to reframe the relationship between humans and the living world. It proposes embodied creative practices that engage with materials and the body to challenge extractive narratives and foster a more holistic understanding of matter and its agency. The paper highlights the importance of individual responsibility and collective action, drawing attention to the role of implicated subjects in addressing the material consequences of our actions.



BM 1. Sketches of the proposed performance, thoughts on bodily relations

You Are the Weather

As I sit in my office in Johannesburg in late October of 2022, I hear the rumble of thunder, hoping and anticipating the now six-weeks-overdue spring rain. I am reminded of the evocatively titled call to climate action by Johnathan Safran Foer, *We Are the Weather* (Foer 2019). Foer attempts to reveal to the layperson the relationship between ordinary everyday actions and the long-term effect that these actions will have on climate change. Such actions are as mundane as what we eat for breakfast, where and how we choose to live, and what we throw away, the everyday material that makes up modern life. The relationship between the global systemic shifts caused by this material and the material itself is arguably one of the most difficult for humans to comprehend. This is largely because of the immense time scale involved in the carbon cycle, whose deposits we squander with alarming rapidity within the short temporal range of living memory. We need only remember that two of the most destructive chemical inventions of the twentieth century, Tetraethyllead (leaded petrol) and chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), were one person's invention (Larsen 2021). Such an example may make it easier to understand how we are inclined to act with planet-altering consequences without regard for the living world or life-sustaining planetary systems.

Over the past few years, the concept of the Anthropocene has come to characterise our understanding of the planet-altering effects of human actions on global climate. The term was first coined by Paul Crutzen in 2002 (Zalasiewicz et al. 2008, 4), and although only partly accepted by the stratigraphic community (Crutzen 2002; Steffen et al. 2007; Zalasiewicz et al. 2008, 2011, 2015), has since entered into common use outside the field. The term is not unproblematic, however: Kathryn Yusoff has raised the issue of the Anthropocene and the complicity of white colonial attitudes in her book *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Yusoff 2018). Here she suggests that the term implies that all humans are

equally to blame, while in reality the Anthropocene has primarily been scripted by Western (and, increasingly, Eastern) neo-colonial extractions and consumption, at the ongoing expense of black bodies enlisted in these processes. Within cities forged by extractive industries such as mining, like Johannesburg, black and brown bodies now find themselves disproportionally exposed to the harmful chemical aftermath of weathering, as industrial wastelands and mine tailings erode and fracture. We need urgently to address the material consequences in the here-and-now of past actions taken. The term Anthropocene, Yussof argues, promotes a 'White Geology … that creates atemporal materiality dislocated from place and time – a mythology of disassociation in the formation of matter independent of its languages of description and the historical constitution of its social relations' (Yusoff 2018, 16). In short, the planetary notions inherent in the term Anthropocene enable us to think and act within terrains without understanding their complexity or evincing concern for the consequences of our actions on humans and other forms of life. This serves to extend colonial attitudes that treat the earth as inert, resulting in erasure, extraction, and inevitable despoliation. Such attitudes can arguably be traced back to the nature/culture binary within Enlightenment philosophy.[1] In the South African colonial project, material inertness and the concept of empty land were pressed into political service, principally for the acquisition of land and mineral wealth at the expense of the black bodies who mined and worked the land. Yussof describes the black Anthropocene as the wilfully constructed subjectivity that pressed black and brown bodies into intimacy with the inhuman (Yusoff 2018, 11). The Anthropocene thus cannot be separated from a colonial, material understanding of matter as inert and black and brown bodies as inhuman. This implies that if we are to address the issue at the heart of the human-altered plant and its long-term geological implications, we will need to reframe the relationship between humans and the world around us. Thinking of the world as living, I suggest we must begin by rethinking ourselves as part of, rather than separate from, the living world. Yet we must do so in ways that acknowledge in imbalance in human blame and the consequences of Western material attitudes.

Much of the work of the decolonial project has centred upon the retrieval of the African body. Sylvia Wynter, for instance, suggests that being human is a praxis – a process of becoming with. Human beings, she reminds us, are 'magical, bios and logos, word made flesh, muscle and bone animated by hope and desire' (qtd. in McKittrick 2015, 16). In making this connection, she draws an implicit relationship between the body and the earthly materials of which it consists, suggesting the geological connections between the body and the stuff of the world. In doing so, she references the phenomenological theory of acts, as proposed by Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone Debouve, among others, which seeks to explain the mundane way in which social agents constitute social reality through language and gesture. If we enact social constructs through mundane acts, could we reframe these constructs through mindful bodily acts? Could thinking about the body, as a thinking entity, in and of itself, become a tool for thinking of inert matter as comprising vital and agentic entities outside of the human? While simultaneously acknowledging the labouring body, can we think of the body itself as thinking matter?

Implicated Subjects

When considered in the light of colonialism, the anthropocentric view of climate change raises questions of implication, blame, and responsibility. In her discussion on collective responsibility, Hannah Arendt suggests that when it

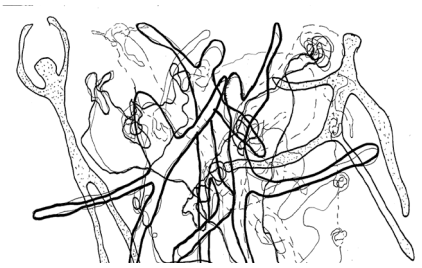
BM 2. Becoming Compostist

comes to the issue of action and responsibility, it is vital to remember that responsibility is individual rather than collective; the collective cannot be held accountable for individual actions (Arendt 2005). Only individuals can assume the responsibility to act, whereas collective guilt, or empathy, tends to lead to inaction: 'everyone's problem becomes no one's problem.' Arendt argues that '[t]here is such a thing as responsibility for things one has not done' (Arendt 2005, 187). In the present context – although a few big offenders are more directly to blame for climate-altering omissions – this means that, as citizens of the early 21st century, we should all take responsibility, even if we are not to blame. Michael Rothberg's term 'implicated subjects' is helpful here. Implicated subjects, Rothberg argues, occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes (Rothberg 2019, 1). We inherit implication, whether or not we are responsible for the original activity; moreover, we enact inherited material narratives of colonial attitudes through our everyday actions, even if we were the victims of those narratives. In sum, individual and societal implications are profoundly entangled and should be collectively addressed in a creative, practical response to questions arising from the anthropocentric material narratives we have inherited.

How can this be achieved in the arts? We are not scientists capable of creating the hoped-for scientific breakthroughs that may rescue us from the crisis and enable us to emerge like a phoenix from the ashes. Nor are we in possession of the political power and will required to enforce the necessary changes to halt carbon emissions. Suppose we understand that the everyday material acts of both the many and the few have brought us here. We can then understand that everyday material acts also have the potential to alter the trajectory of climate change. I propose a counter-narrative of terrain specificity as a counterbalance to the easy abstractions of materials and bodies associated with the term Anthropocene. The Anthropocene enacts historically constituted deformations that join human and inhuman earth into relations for extractive actions (Yusoff 2018, 11). Both black and brown bodies and physical matter are erased within the colonial attitudes of the Anthropocene. This situation can be addressed through creative practice aimed at recouping erased material narratives. The relationships among the active body, the vital materials from which terrains are constructed, and the planetary movements of extracted matter, are difficult to conceptualise but should be part of any discussion of the Anthropocene in a postcolonial context.

In her writing on the Posthuman, Donna Haraway suggests that redressing extractive attitudes within the Anthropocene requires us to 'make kin' within the non-human world. We should become *compostists*, rather than posthumanists, who think about and act within materials in 'tentacular' ways (Haraway 2016, 101). In creative practice, this requires us to learn and think about materials through direct bodily encounters with vital materials in living terrains. Feminist posthumanism promotes an understanding of bodies and 'other matter' as one, indistinguishable from one another and thus interconnected with one another through a quantum understanding that directly challenges Newtonian physics on which our material frameworks are predicated. In this view all matter is considered to be intelligent and self-organising (Braidotti and Hlavajova 2018, 308).

As a material practice, composting is a process of learning to think with, become with, and make with the posthuman other of urban terrains. To take Haraway's proposition forward in ways that redress inhuman others in the Anthropocene requires us to develop imaginative ways of participating in the living world,



BM 3. Moving and acting with matter weaves life words

turning to modes of practice that acknowledge what is at stake and acknowledge blame. We should be seeking out imaginative ways of bringing the issue of extractive attitudes towards matter into one conversation with all the human bodies who inhabit urban terrains, that is, in ways that make humans, organisms and the environment co-present (Haraway 2016, 31). In the following practices, I present stone, body and terrain as my creative language by making present extractive matter. I aim to contest the extractive and colonial material thinking in the Anthropocene by re-imagining the stony matter of the urban terrain as vital and living. The human body becomes an active co-labourer in shaping the urban terrain by thinking beyond matters of extraction to imagine stony matter as a vibrant social actant.

Weaving Lifeworlds

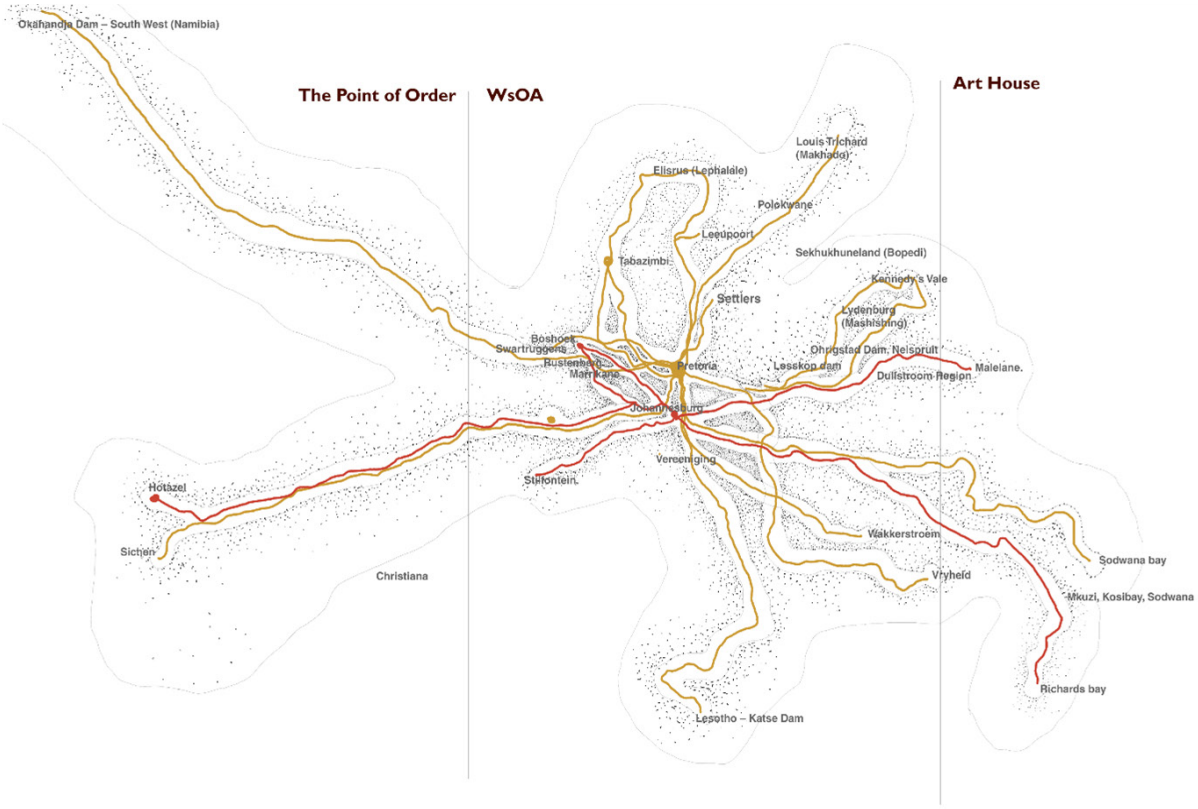
We have the oldest, richest and simplest tool at our disposal for making matter and terrain present in the body that we use to move through the medium of the living world. In my creative approach, I pursue unstructured body-centred practices of coming to know matter as vital actants in world-making; for instance, to consider stone as a vibrant material within the urban terrain formation, after Jane Bennet's proposition that all matter is vibrant and actant and endowed with 'thing power' (Bennett 2010, 2–3).

The anthropologist Tim Ingold describes the body-centred way of coming to know materials as akin to weaving and growing. In body-centred practices, materials traverse the body in the process of becoming. Ingold suggests that we learn about the materials from which we make things by engaging directly with those materials through the sensory body that moves through the medium of earth and air, in, on and along the ground (Ingold 2010, 121–22). We are thus repeatedly reminded that material knowledge is created through bodily experience, with materials, in a weathering world. Ingold examines the work of crafting, making and designing through the lens of art, architecture, anthropology and archaeology (Ingold 2013). He emphasises that making a thing from raw materials is coming to know through a haptic encounter, be it through weaving, designing a house, making a hand axe, or forming a mound. He suggests that when we make things, the maker and material are in conversation through gesture. Physical acts of making incorporate the whole body and forge an entangled understanding of materials and agencies which together produce the final emergent form.

Marcel Mauss describes actions that generate material knowledge as 'bodily habitus' (Mauss 1973, 73). He highlights techniques that enable us to negotiate materiality as a medium: bodily techniques such as walking, climbing, tramping, stomping, tiptoeing, sloshing and swimming are techniques to navigate the complexity of land and water. Other general techniques such as pulling, pushing, throwing, and holding are joined by techniques of the hand for discovering things about the world and its material qualities – touching, rubbing, and squashing.

To materialise extractive narratives, we may present such actions and habits of the body in installation and performance. Here, a multiscalar approach is required to address the global and the specific, making present global material narratives through speculative practices and material installation while also making the body and the immediate terrain present in performative actions of making. In the next section, I explore two moments of material encounter

and installation that attempt to narrate the relationship between particular and global extractive actions. In the first, I explore how to make global extractive actions materially present (see Figure BM 4). In the second, I explore the specific performatively through the act of piling and stacking stones (see Figure BM 1).



BM 4. Mapping of the movements of my grandfather over the South African landscape in the course of his work in mineral prospecting

Part 1: Materialising White Geology in Recent South African Material History through an Exploration of Implication in Family Histories

A short while ago, I produced a collaborative work with the artist Chloe Shain, in which we attempted to make present the often erased materiality of extraction and the related movement of white bodies across the terrain of South Africa from the 1940s to the early 1980s. We set about this by tracing and mapping the movements of our respective grandfathers, hers a mining engineer, and mine, a driller who worked for mineral prospecting and mining companies throughout his adult life (see Figures BM 4,5). The map is drawn from the study of personal family archives, my extensive photographic archive, and a map of places visited, dates and what was being sought at the time.

The installation aimed to make present the actions and consequences of the Anthropocene. My grandfather died in 1981, a year before I came into the world. I am clearly not responsible for his actions. However, as an architect working daily with building materials, one cannot help but feel the weight of these actions. If the body does not remember, the terrain certainly does, through the cutting and scarification of the earth from mining and water developments and the cumulative choices, movements, and marks we make as we go. I find that to address the questions of materiality in the Anthropocene, one must think 'tentacularly,' with multi-species interrelations, making at-

tachments and detachments, weaving and knotting relations among matter, extractions, time and weatherings (Haraway 2016, 31). Through this installation, we were speculating on the interrelationship between extractions, the built form and the weathering urban terrain. The traces of the everyday actions and decisions of you and I will remain long after we have departed.

The installation was placed over a series of fragmented sites (Figure BM 6) constructed of stones gathered from extraction sites, and placed in configurations to mimic our spatial mapping of movements (Figure BM 4). Each constellation of stones bore a place name and was connected to a tag with the name of the mineral extracted (Figures BM 7 and BM 8).

Within the installed map and meshwork, we trace movements across the Southern African hinterland using strings which connect places in map-like configurations. We connect the stone from each place with the extractions that occurred there over the years. The interconnections between extractive actions, landscape dispossession and ownership, and movements across a landscape become visible within the work through the stones gathered from sites of extraction and the strings that tangle and mark the movements and connections between places. This manifests within the work's physicality the entangled implications of the legacy we inherit. We see that whether or not we are directly implicated in past actions, we are implicated as heirs of the colonial legacy of extraction. That which is hidden or voided in extractive actions becomes visible in the traces of historiographic and archival knowledge contained in personal narrative and family history. It is important to note that in the case of my grandfather, extraction includes both minerals and water and records material relationships among access to land, mineral and water during the anthropocentric acceleration of the Anthropocene in the South African context from the 1950s to the 1980s.

BM 5. Explorative mapping of the proposed installation over three sites across the Wits School of the Arts precinct

As I have done with every installation work throughout my research practice, the recent installation involved shifting stones, collected over vast distances, in this case over several years, into the space for the installation. In this activity, the body traces its movements, and the stones leave traces on the body; dust settles in the lungs and nose, and cuts, bruises, and abrasions result from the handling of stones, entangling specific physical action with global consequences.

Part 2: Making the Body and Material Present through Material Encounters

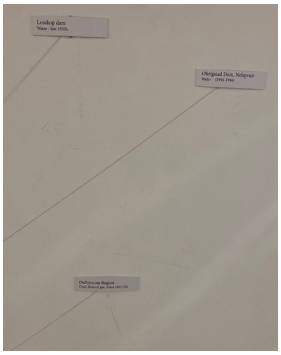
In the second part of the work, I explore the second scale through a bodily encounter with stony material in the construction of a cairn (stone pile) made from stone extracted from the central Witwatersrand ridgeline (Figure BM 15)(watch the film here: https://vimeo.com/763335238). This work takes place as an embodied exploration of making the stone present through creative practice, shifting and touching the stone in a recorded performance of making. The work is set in a specific context in which the material and the body interact, with the late afternoon, winter sun, a gentle breeze and the sound of the highway all forming part of the performance (Figure BM 8). The body moves within the terrain in the act of making and interacting with the stone.

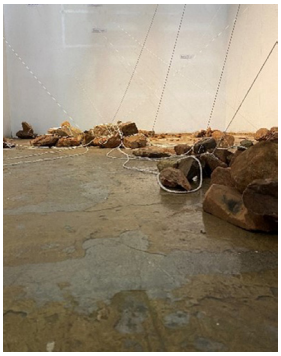
The performance begins with encountering the stones' physicality, as one selects and picks up each stone and works with its form and surface texture in stacking and forming the cairn. As one builds the cairn, stones are shifted and turned to create the form (Figure BM 9). The exploration of the stone's qualities thus blends into the construction of the cairn, the body moving backwards and forwards to the pile as the cairn grows. Each stone is weighed, felt and shifted or turned over, then settled into place in the temporary aggregation of the cairn. To form the cairn, each stone must work with those below and above; through the hand, the body must feel out the final form through the process of making and the act of aggregation. Through this interaction, the stone and the body work together to create the work's final form. In much the same way, through every specific act of making and unmaking, the city's terrain shifts and changes over time. The process is depicted in Figures 11–14, below.

BM 6. Connecting mapping and extractions

Reflections

Within these installations, we witness two modes of making present the materiality of terrains; in the first, we trace the Anthropocene through implied action, materialising that which is often erased and making present the terrain-altering and climate-change implication of the action. Through bodies that move across terrains with the intention of extracting and through familial relations, we trace the implication of societal changes and decisions. We reveal the tracings of decisions made regarding fossil fuel extraction for electricity generation and make present a thousand decisions pertaining to consumption extending back across time and terrain. We make visible the terrains that enable our society to function and make connections between waste, decay, excess and the material extractions which they necessitate. As time is collapsed in the process of mapping, we begin to understand our implication as those who have inherited the actions of the past.

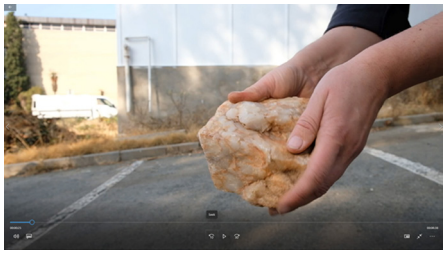




BM 7. Central mapping of extractive histories – WSoA 2022.

In the second work, what is made present is the effect of bodily habits, the unconscious actions of our bodies, and our contribution through these to terrain and climate change. The turn towards stone shows how bodily care for the environment can equally inform the form and process of making and weathering on this human-altered planet. We become beings present in the body alongside the other-than-human world to direct our large-scale material actions. We need to fold time, extraction and action into one moment as we ask ourselves, what is our place in the world?

By bringing the body, movement and materials into the conversation, the acts of extraction evoked resonate globally as they relate to individuals who lived, worked and moved within the landscape. While meaning is made through personal connection to the story, at the same time the material attitude towards the land is laid bare. Acts of care, being and becoming with are absent in the first work, but through the foregrounding of touch are introduced in the second. This reminds us that we, like those that came before us, act individually, moving and shifting matter, but that our actions today have future consequences. We can and should take responsibility for things we have not done, but also for the future consequences of what we are doing. As you view the work, I ask you to reflect upon your bodily habitus and how you, as creative practitioners, are implicated in the Anthropocene through material framing and thinking and the everyday habits that inform larger impacts. What implications have you inherited, and what are the material implications of your actions?



BM 8. Context of performance

BM 9. Encounter with the stony matter, through touch, rough and smooth, weights and form, all combine in making the cairn.

BM 10. Creating base

BM 11. Fitting, forming and shuffling

BM 12. Inserting a capping stone

BM 13. Finishing the body in the cairn form

BM 14. The final form and 3D scan of the cairn

BM 15. Unmaking the cairn

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Notes

1 The nature/culture binary which emerged in Enlightenment philosophy, and a Newtonian understanding of matter as inert and humans as separate from the living world; this extended into a philosophical understanding of terrains as inert surfaces for human action and extraction within spatial thinking.