

## Porous Bodies: Trans-corporeality and Passages of Becoming

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay is an extension of art-based research speculating on messy entanglements between more-than-human agencies within the topos of the grotto. By examining the aestheticization of plants, animals, rocks, soils, water and air through art and landscape architecture, this essay argues for a refiguring of personhood beyond the boundaries of the individual and into a more porous, interconnected conception of self. In our time of significant anthropogenic impact, where humans are often pictured as dominant, yet separate from ecologies, this investigation proposes an immersed and enmeshed conception of humanity. The reflection on the artistic exploration diffractively reads through notions of bodies and becoming within cavernous garden aesthetics in order to challenge human exceptionality and consider expanded subjectivities.

**KEYWORDS:** trans-corporeality; more-than-human; becoming; movement; subjectivity; anthropocene; installation; sculpture; painting

*And after having remained at the entry some time,  
two contrary emotions arose in me, fear and desire –  
fear of the threatening dark grotto,  
desire to see whether there were marvelous things within it*  
(Leonardo da Vinci, 155r)

### Introduction

#### *Eroding Boundaries*

The topos of the grotto, both as an architectural garden feature and a vital subterranean ecosystem provides a rich site for speculating on messy entanglements between more-than-

human agencies. In this time of significant anthropogenic impact, where humans are often pictured as dominant, yet separate from ecologies, within representational technologies and landscape architecture practices, this investigation proposes an immersed and enmeshed conception of humanity. My exploration into two very different grotto environments culminated in a solo art exhibition at Toronto, Ontario's Ignite Gallery in March of 2019. Titled *Gardens & Grottoes*, this body of work was central to completing my Master of Fine Arts thesis research at OCAD University. I reference this art-based exploration as its many tangents offer insight into a refiguring of personhood beyond discrete boundaries of individual bodies and into a more porous, interconnected conception of subjectivity within dynamic ecologies.

Rather than running the risk of reinforcing colonial narratives of a pure wilderness, untouched by humans, I follow Donna Haraway's example in *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003) and use *naturecultures* to acknowledge the inseparability of *nature* and *culture* (8). Additionally, so as not to reinscribe the human/non-human binary, I will use the term *more-than-human* as employed by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa in *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (2017) to encompass human along with the predetermined categories of flora and fauna, environmental elements and forces (1). I argue that an expanded understanding of subjectivity is required to engage with the complex urgencies of our environmentally-compromised times. My interdisciplinary research and corresponding MFA thesis exhibition explored this conceptual opening of personhood through an assemblage of art-based approaches grounded in the theoretical framework of material feminist posthumanism. Elaborated on by Stacy Alaimo in *Exposed: Environmental Politics & Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (2016), this intersectional feminist lens draws on the interrelationships of new materialisms, which emphasize materiality as agential, and posthumanisms, which overturn conventional hierarchies that privilege the human over other forms of existence (12). I use this combination of movements because I believe that the significant overlapping areas in respect to decentering man while embracing the vitality of matter are generative in this interdisciplinary exploration. Within this investigation, I use the language and intersectional

framework of material feminisms and feminist posthumanisms to counter the harmful hierarchies of *humanism*<sup>1</sup> and emphasize the vitality of the material world. Additionally, as a woman of settler ancestry, indigenous epistemologies of the land provide important perspectives contrasting the colonial narratives of *nature*.

This work speculates that a conceptual opening of subjectivity is needed in order to live within the complexities of our anthropogenically-disturbed worlds. Alaimo proposes an immersed and enmeshed conception of humans within the world in order to counter the dominant representations of the *Anthropocene*, which separate people from the material realm (103). Karen Barad's article "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter" (2003) challenges a static conception of matter and *nature* by presenting a feminist quantum physics framework where subjects and objects never existed as independent entities, but have always been actively intraconnected prior to artificial separation (815). Barad presents an iterative, ongoing and relational conception of reality which embraces relationships of simultaneous interior and exterior space. This complicates the position of human identity and the humanist tendency to define things and objects as separate entities. A rich compost for wondering about creaturely entanglements emerges as convex and concave, inside and outside space muddy within the subterranean aesthetics of the grotto.

My art practice seeks to disrupt the framing of *nature* evident in representationalism by drawing out intimate interminglings with more-than-human beings through movement and multisensory installation. It acknowledges the contradictions inherent in presenting and representing dynamically alive beings and processes and seeks out the possibilities for refiguring engagement with and as part of the more-than-human. Haptic sensing is privileged

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<sup>1</sup> Humanism is the dominant conceptual framework which centres on the supremacy of the individual, scientific method, and human rationality. Adopted by Renaissance artists and scholars from Greek and Roman traditions, these principles laid the foundation for a theoretical ordering of the world into hierarchical categories and systems.

through bodily movement and intimate proximity to sensorial works. For audiences, this bodily engagement has the potential to activate the contemplation of geologic processes and more-than-human agencies in the hopes of reversing deanimating narratives of organisms and ecologies in art. My research responds to two main questions: How can my installation practice facilitate a heightened awareness of the more-than-human? How can the metaphors of the garden and the grotto be reimagined, via installation practice to offer new ways of *becoming with*<sup>2</sup> that are part of ecological reciprocity?

Beginning from below, this essay opens with my journey into the subterranean worlds of a Canadian karst cave and an Italian garden grotto. The essay then details the art exhibition created in response to these cavernous spaces. The subsequent "Substratum" section outlines foundational theoretical considerations in my art-based research. The middle three sections, titled "Cultivation," "Picturesque," and "Disembodied Vision," articulate physical and representational modes for framing the dynamic ecosystems that are relevant to the artwork. Finally, both "Becoming" and the conclusion titled "Compost" consider the networks of messy relations and expanded notions of selfhood explored through the *Gardens & Grottoes* exhibition.

## Subterranean

My experiences of entwining myself in cavernous spaces as part of ecological happenings inform my conceptual propositions for art-making. I use the term *happening* to refer to an event taking place that invites open-ended engagement and points of connection. These moments of deep connectivity and vulnerability occur when I am immersed in and enmeshed

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<sup>2</sup> In "Posthumanist Performativity," Karen Barad expands upon Judith Butler's notion of bodies acting out a gender, by considering the involvement of "all bodies" and their entanglement of matter and discourse in the formation of meaning. Pulling from her quantum-physics background, Barad applies the feminist and queer theory concept of performativity—the active participation in the creation of language and being—to the scientific world of matter and the non-human. *Becoming with* is the iterative co-creation of bodies through material and discursive means.

with my environment. In rock climbing, this is the sensation of wedging my body into a limestone crack on the side of a cliff, feeling both a bodily closeness and fierce exposure to the open air and porous rock around me. In pursuit of this tension in my art-based research, I chose caves and garden grottos because they were initially less familiar to me and hold powerful affective qualities which I have experienced personally. The combination of repulsion and seduction that I sense when entering both artificial grotto assemblages and the karst cave ecosystem motivates my curiosity and desire, pushing me out of my comfort zone and into these threshold spaces.



Fig. 1. Bernardo Buontalenti, Grotta Grande, 1583-1593. Photo: Carlson. 2018.

This art-based enquiry flows out of personal experiences within two very different grotto environments during the summer and fall of 2018. The first is an architectural garden feature built between 1583 and 1593 by Bernardo Buontalenti in the Boboli Gardens, Florence, Italy. The second is Eramosa Karst, located in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, the ancestral Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee land from the Dish with One Spoon Treaty. The karst ecosystem is sculpted by carbonic acid from rainwater seeping into the soil and dolostone-limestone bedrock over thousands of years.



Fig 2. Nexus Cave, Eremosa Karst. Photo: Carlson. 2018.

As detailed in Naomi Miller's *Heavenly Caves: Reflections on the Garden Grotto* (1982), the word *grotto* comes from the Latin *crypta* meaning vault or to hide, as well as the Italian *grotta* or French *grotte*, which refer to a subterranean passage, cavern, cave or pit (10). I am drawn to the intermingling of geologic, chemical, biological and cultural histories inscribed in these liminal, porous spaces of assemblage. These are the sites for my theoretical investigation into more permeable notions of personhood that serve as the point of departure for my art-based explorations.

Both the grotto and the karst system offer a site for speculating about the porous assemblage of bodies. Traditionally a metaphor for the cosmos, the cave is a locus for a poetic contemplation of self in relation to place.<sup>3</sup> As an elusive art form, intermingling painting, sculpture, installation, water and light play, the garden grotto has the potential to push not only disciplinary boundaries, but to also refigure the *nature versus culture* motif. The spatial permeability, converging of histories, vibrant beings, and multi-sensory characteristics of

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<sup>3</sup> Caves are prominent throughout Homer's *The Odyssey* as sacred sites of the gods.



these cavernous spaces muddy preconceived boundaries between agencies and readily exemplify intimacy in naturecultures.

The tension I feel when entering a garden grotto composed of sculptural and painted grotesques,<sup>4</sup> harvested coral and shells, marble sculpture, remnants of water features, and picturesque paintings comes from a disjuncture between artifice and the living flora and fauna. This immersive play between crafted reproductions, the living flora and the once-living fauna (coral) both attracts and repels me. An assemblage of bodies exists within the garden grotto with water play, algae, mosses, and an overall mixing of material and forms. Along the Buontalenti Grotto walls there are uncanny sculptures of human, goat, dog and landscape forms. During the High Renaissance and Baroque periods fountains would have propelled water down these forms composed from coral, shell, mosaic, and concrete. Despite the prolific representation of porous bodies throughout grottos like Buontalenti's, garden grottoes are often anchored in the humanist tradition, intended as a showcase of man's power through artistry and theatrical spectacle. One example of this would be the prolific use of marble in Renaissance grottos which were modeled after classical discoveries, such as Nero's palace in Rome. This incredibly important imperial resource showcased man's ability not only to quarry marble from various conquered regions, but to also transport massive blocks over vast distances of land.<sup>5</sup>

In reflecting on the Renaissance naturecultural entanglements in literature and art, Deborah Amberson and Elena Past quote theorist Rosi Braidotti in *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Modern Italian Literature and Film* (2014) for her appeal to move beyond humanist condescension, which she terms the "bioegalitarian turn" (3). In "Animals,

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<sup>4</sup> Grottoes are associated with the *grotesque* after the capricious ornaments of hybrid creatures decorating Nero's Golden House were inadvertently found during the Renaissance. These ornamentations were adopted by sixteenth-century artists and continue to shape conceptions of classical art and garden features to this day.

<sup>5</sup> For more on Nero's palace, see *Nero's Golden House*, directed by Phil Grabsky, 2001.

Anomalies and Inorganic Others” (2009), Braidotti describes this turn as a “radical repositioning” of and by the human subject in order to “bypass the metaphysics of substance and its corollary, the dialectics of otherness” (526). This drastic shift away from human centrism, towards the inclusion of multi-species worlds is an ongoing commitment that starts with dismantling the walls that define fixed subjectivities.

As I pursue this radical repositioning in my art-based practice, I want to facilitate immersive experiences that activate physical movement and sensorial engagement in ways that foster visions of complexity and inclusion of otherness. In my Master of Fine Arts thesis research, this led me to push through my own deeply-sedimented othering of cave spaces, where a very different kind of abject experience is foregrounded for me. A visceral rejection of confined, dark and disorienting spaces and the beings that live there would overwhelm me at the thought of descending into a hole in the ground. Crawling on my belly in a tunnel two-feet tall by three-feet wide, with my back bumping against the bulbous spidery bodies and the dripping ceiling of the cave was far beyond my conditioned sense of comfort and even safety. However, I found my fear, sense of precarity, and lack of control to be a crucial part of my investigation. I came to know this vulnerability extended beyond my immediate physical insecurity, to the very urgent visible, and invisible, ecological imbalances at play in the karst. Evidence of this was apparent as I was crawling through beer bottles and plastic bags mixed in with sticks, mud, and water. As a forest drainage system, the cave filters debris from the hiking trails and surrounding suburban development sites.

Further dispelling any imagined separation of the cave from human culture is Silvia Frisia and Ian Fairchild’s charting of the geochemical records in “Definition of the Anthropocene: A View from the Underworld” (2014). Archived in the formation stalagmites, rising pollution levels act as boundary markers for our anthropogenically-disturbed time (239). Similar markers of human presence, such as people’s names, are scrawled onto the lichen-covered walls of Nexus Cave in Eramosa Karst. As faint reminders of Paleolithic cave paintings, they mark human



consciousness of self in relationship to place. This vernacular mark-making supports my inquiry into paint's ability to refigure conceptions of *nature* that is inclusive of oneself.

In a cave, experiential knowing through scent, sound, and touch is often privileged over sight. As I crawled and climbed through Eramosa Karst, my mind battled ominous thoughts of getting stuck, the tunnel collapsing, or of encountering creepy cave creatures. Psychologically, my proposition to myself was to let go of these varying degrees of rationality and prejudice in order to embrace the many bodies of the karst space. This evolved into a video performance where I covered myself in mud and forest runoff before climbing the walls and ceiling of the cave. This process simultaneously heightened my self-consciousness and acutely attuned my attention to the porous surfaces, gritty textures, reverberating sounds, and dank earthy smells. As headlamps panned light across the cave, cameras operated by my life-long friend Franziska Brand, sister-in-law Miriam Carlson, and husband Bruce Carlson recorded my camouflaged body surrounded by limestone strata. During these moments of vulnerability, I saw these close companions adding to the intimate assemblage of bodies gathered in the karst cave.

Editing the video further muddled forms and complicated platonic rationalist conceptions of "above" and "below" earth.<sup>6</sup> I intercut the footage and then datamoshed it with video of the lush karst forest. Datamoshing corrupts video files in ways that are unexpected and difficult to control, resulting in erratically dissolving pixels from one composition to the next. Moving images of lush landscapes, trickling streams, and active insects dissolve into pixels of my mud-covered body, climbing inside the chamber of Nexus Cave in Eremosa Karst. This collaboration with technology further decentres my human agency while dissolving representations of bodies in playful and surprising ways.

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<sup>6</sup> In Plato's *Republic*, "The Allegory of the Cave," Plato presents the concepts of *above* and *below* as binary oppositions and as metaphors of truth and ignorance. Through compositional and spatial explorations, this project aims to upturn traditional orientations for defining oneself in opposition to others.

The dynamic movement and blurring of more-than-human bodies present in both the garden grotto and the karst cave system compose the substratum of my art-based research. The interdisciplinary inmixing of materials, movement, and forms is a result of these separate, but theoretically linked cavernous spaces. Through these different material approaches, including sculpture, painting, video, and installation, my resulting thesis exhibition *Gardens & Grottoes* functioned simultaneously as an interior and exterior space. Incorporating living materials and drawing on karst cave attributes, it sought to collapse distinctions between nature and culture, self and other, and human and more-than-human.

### **Gardens & Grottoes the Exhibition**

The entrance to the main gallery space featured a pergola archway with sculpted stalactites and hanging plants, emphasizing the portal of the gallery itself and suggesting a sense of passage. Climbable structures, painted to resemble a cave opening mounted on the wall included organically-sculpted rock climbing holds resembling various fossilized plant and animal bodies. These tactile, modular sculptures were marked with coloured tape to indicate the various pathways one could take when touching or climbing the work. Sounds of trickling water echoed throughout the exhibition from the *Fountain Flora*, two sculpted fountains referencing bodily plants with fleshy features.



Fig. 3. *Vera*, Fountain Flora detail, winterstone, resin, water pump, 2019. Photo: Carlson. 2019.

A ten-foot wide by five-foot high marbled geodesic canvas stretched over a steel climbing structure, with climbable sculptures incorporating mosses, plants, and human hair, sat in the corner of the main gallery for haptic engagement. The steel climbing structure is a repurposed climbing set using the geodesic architecture and design principles that Buckminster Fuller popularized in the 1940s and 50s. By stretching a marble-painted canvas over the steel structure, *Undergrowth* acknowledges the monumentality of Fuller's utopian design philosophy, as detailed in Michael K. Hays's *Starting with the Universe: Buckminster Fuller* (2008). Additionally, the painted figurative representations of landscape played with Fuller's notion of a "fluid geography" that connects "nature's coordinate system" on macro and micro scales.<sup>7</sup> Viewed with the light of a headlamp, the interior of the geodesic grotto revealed an elaborately painted night gardenscape with various recognizable and fictitious flora dancing under a cosmic sky. Suspended from the triangulated steel frame were sculpted stalactite planters that contain living ivy, pothos, and other plants requiring low light. The lumens

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<sup>7</sup> This exhibition catalogue by Michael K. Hays elaborates on Fuller's philosophy based on "nature's coordinate system" and his geological engagement with architecture.

emitted from headlamps supplemented the light received from a grow light placed near the plants each night.



Fig. 4. *Undergrowth*, installation process detail, 2019. Photo: Carlson. 2019.

In the projection room, the datamoshed video of Eramosa Karst is projected onto hanging plants and stalactite planters. The video is comprised of footage and audio recorded while hiking and spelunking over a two-month period. The result is an ebb and flow of bodies and movement enfolding in an immersive expanded cinema environment. This disrupts traditional filmic techniques and linear storytelling in order to subvert expectations of discrete representations of human and non-human bodies. The video has no fixed duration and the installation offered a space to wander, sit on marble-dyed bodily shaped pillows, watch, and listen.

*Gardens & Grottoes* was spatially and temporally open and inviting of engagement. Climbing holds, head lamps, and upside-down plants invoke movement and provided opportunities to cross the threshold into relational space where awareness of interconnection is made possible. At every stage of this artistic project, the practice-based research reveals theoretical and tangible engagement with more-than-human relationships.



Figure 5. *Karst Composting*, installation process detail, 2019. Photo: Carlson. 2019.

## Substratum

In *Heavenly Caves: Reflections on the Garden Grotto*, Naomi Miller traces the ancient and varied tradition of the grotto and observes that “from Homer to Joyce the grotto has been the locus of mysterious forces, of unanswered questions, of states of being and becoming” (123). In this section, I critique humanist discourses present in the aestheticization of a conceived *nature* and investigate the concept of *becoming* as an alternative to reductionist framings of dynamic beings and processes. Material feminist and feminist posthuman notions of performativity and trans-corporeality<sup>8</sup> infuse this sense of *becoming* embedded in the form and meaning of the grotto space. These efforts to upturn fixed subjectivity within a cavernous context are bolstered by Luce Irigaray’s feminist reading of Plato’s cave in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974). Her play with optics, orientation, and origin, as well as her ironic use of masculine discourse to expose Western philosophy’s construction of truth (and subjectivity)

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<sup>8</sup> Termed by theorist Stacy Alaimo, this is a central concept in my research into the reimagining of *nature* and simultaneous opening up of human subjectivities. I discuss this term in depth in the following section.



inspire the interdisciplinary intermixing of terrestrial and subterranean bodies within the *Gardens & Grottoes* installation.

The queering of ecological politics and cultivation of alternative “modes of embodiment, attention, imagination, and new ways of telling stories about lands and bodies” is central in the photographic essay “Ungrid-able Ecologies: Decolonizing Ecological Sensorium in 10,000 year-old NatureCultural Happening” (2017) by Natasha Myers and Ayelen Liberona and resonates greatly with my work (22). Myers and Liberona pull at time and light to blur bodies with environment, foregrounding movement and the “impossibility of disentangling nature from culture” (13). While *Gardens & Grottoes* employs familiar modes of representing more-than-human forms, I also look to movement to complicate seemingly enclosed entities and to draw out the always already porous intermingling of phenomena. Movement is central in the datamoshed video, where bodies are dynamically dissolving within a karst. It is also present in the participatory proposition for kinaesthetic movement, such as climbing, meandering, and crawling within the exhibition. Traces of movement are noticeable within the material and composition of painting, and at its most fundamental level, movement is trickling in the play of water fountains and in the vibrant life of the collaborating plants.

In *Difference and Repetition* (1994), Gilles Deleuze critiques fixed representationalism for its single centre, “unique and receding perspective and in consequence a false depth” (55-56). He asserts that representation “mediates everything, but mobilizes and moves nothing” (56). By contrast, he stresses how movement “implies a plurality of centres, a superposition of perspectives, a tangle of points of view, a coexistence of moments which essentially distort representation” (55-56). *Gardens & Grottoes* sought to carry forward this critique of representation’s static enclosing through dynamic participatory movement and the blurring of seemingly singular phenomena. Along with offering tactile engagement, the work compositionally dissolves represented bodies and forms across recognizable materials and beings. In doing this, the exhibition acts as a grotto assemblage of disjointed forms and techniques in order to query familiar readings of painting, sculpture, video, and the presence



of plants (both living and represented), while simultaneously queering rigid constructions of self and more-than-human beings.

### Cultivation

The collaboration with and representation of living plants within cavernous aesthetics is intended to subvert conceptual separations around what is considered above and below the earth, while also playing with garden grotto motifs. Gardening can be an intimate activity of flourishing and care for more-than-human beings, yet throughout Western art and architecture, gardens are complicated sites for politics and power. In *Sowing an Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (2004), Jill Casid identifies how mastery over *nature* is epitomized in cultivation and landscaping practices which are inextricably tied to the imperial imagination. The garden—as an extension of architecture—is a particular site of aestheticized *nature* whereby dominant powers impose order and preserve colonial-patriarchal establishment (45). In his article, “Borderless Histories: The Botanical Art of Maria Thereza Alves,” Richard Hill quotes Edward Young’s eighteenth-century prose “On Pleasure” (1854, 446), disclosing how a garden is not only

a promoter of a good man’s happiness, but a picture of it; and, in some sort, shows him to himself. Its culture, order, fruitfulness, and seclusion from the world, compared to the weeds, wildness, and exposure of a common field... A garden to the virtuous is a Paradise still extant, a Paradise unlost. (Hill 10)

Hill considers how the art of Maria Thereza Alves addresses the naturecultural entanglement of colonial gardens and in particular the trafficking and “nativisation” of plants into the idea of “an English landscape” (10). By contrast, in “My Mother’s Garden: Aesthetics, Indigenous Renewal, and Creativity” (2015), Laura Hall shows how the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee nations view a garden not in the possessive singular, but as the “soil, water, and air” moving towards the Great Lakes, nourishing the entire continent (283). Hall’s intimate and reciprocal

relationship with her family garden has informed my ability to take a step back and think critically about my own complicated cultural connections with gardens.

The artificial Edenic paradise is queried in *Gardens & Grottoes* through featuring grids of climbing English ivy along with other plants within the unruly and unkempt cave aesthetics. These cultivated and commodified plants are ghostly agents that not only signal the therapeutic, nostalgic and colonial narratives associated with the domestication of plants, but they also act to materially-discursively tangle human and non-human bodies within the work. The grotto as an assemblage of forms, with ambivalent qualities and difficult to discern theoretical traditions, is where I have chosen to locate my art-based investigation. Its inherent function as a metaphor for the universe as well as its labyrinthian quality as a portal for wonder open opportunities for play and subversion of the *nature versus art* motif.



Fig. 6. *Touching Bodies*, winterstone, resin, moss, air plant, ivy, hair, 2019. Photo: Carlson. 2019.

## Picturesque

Intermingled throughout *Gardens & Grottoes* are painterly renderings of ecosystems. The familiar framing of landscape painting serves as a point of departure into surreal, energetic and materially-engaged realms. These immersive painted landscapes query the rise of landscape painting during industrialization and the “development of the picturesque as a way

of seeing" (Casid 13). This romantic transformation of land into landscape pulls on nostalgic, imaginary ideas of "virginal wilderness" used to rationalize the dispossession of Indigenous people from their lands in the US and Canada (Hill 8). In meditating on Albert Bierstadt's oil on canvas titled *Sunset in the Yosemite Valley* (1868), Edward O. Wilson describes how "the dreamlike quality of the painting rolls time forward" and in his book *Biophilia* (1984), he details an imaginary, primeval scene where "the valley, empty of people, is safe" (11). This fictional portrayal of a virginal landscape fuels colonial and nationalist agendas by ignoring the presence of indigenous peoples.<sup>9</sup> While humanism laid this groundwork for painting's "subduing of nature, laying the grid on chaos," which is often conflated with ideas of femininity, in *Figure/Ground* (1997) painter Mira Schor argues for a feminist reclaiming of paint that employs the wet, bodily attributes of paint to tell "the Other's untold story" (152).

In an effort to denaturalize human-nature dualities in paint, *Gardens & Grottoes* plays between elements of represented landscape, between figuration and abstraction, blurring visual boundaries, embracing liminality, and opening up readings of subjectivity. Cave painting's role in the formation of subjectivity is theorized by Kathryn Yusoff in "Geologic Subjects: Nonhuman Origins, Geomorphic Aesthetics and the Art of Becoming *Inhuman*" (2014). Yusoff discusses the *Birdman* hybrid figure of Lascaux as the "originary figure in human origins," along with living pigments of the *Gwion Gwion* rock art in Kimberley, Western Australia, to propose a queer genealogy of origins rather than a discrete, exceptional model of human subjectivity (385). Within *Gardens & Grottoes* the sculptural characteristics of the paintings encourage haptic engagement where bodies can touch, penetrate, and even climb the work. This project proposes a move beyond the fixed objecthood of painting by enveloping

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<sup>9</sup> See Duane Daniel's "Goodbye, Yosemite. Hello, What?" in *The New York Times* (Sept 2, 2017) for more on the estimated 300,000 people inhabiting California before the arrival of Spanish missionaries in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

the viewer to offer an immersive, vibrant experience, which the human participant is intimately a part of.

### Disembodied Vision

The dominant ideological project behind the aestheticization of non-human bodies into flat picturesque landscapes and curated gardens persists in today's prolific vision of the proposed *Anthropocene*. Despite the shift from the romantic idealization of landscape to sublime images of environmental destruction, these aestheticizations position a disembodied, Western conception of "man" as superior and safely removed from the affected worlds.<sup>10</sup> Irmgard Emmelhainz, in "Images Do Not Show: The Desire to See in the Anthropocene" (2015), articulates how "the hegemonic sight conventions of visibility is an empowered but unstable, free-falling and floating bird's eye view that mirrors this present moment's ubiquitous moment of groundlessness" (137). Donna Haraway refers to this technological mediation in "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" (1988) as a "god-trick" that is "simultaneously celebrated and presented as utterly transparent" (582). Within the exhibition, the projected video of the karst ecosystem emphasizes the construction of the technological apparatus through foregrounding digital pixels while simultaneously composting compositions of human and non-human bodies together.

Within *Karst Composting*, the movement of bodies, along with camera techniques of panning, tracking, and tilting, compositionally create data corruption by lagging pixels during playback. This foregrounds the technological apparatus and the partiality of human perspective in cinematography and editing choices. Projecting the video onto sculpted stalactite hanging

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<sup>10</sup> The Anthropocene exhibition, and corresponding films by Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier at the AGO and the National Gallery of Canada from September 2018 to January 2019, aestheticizes anthropogenic destruction of our planet. The viewer is implicated in this event through various scale-shifting techniques of photography, film, and augmented reality.

planters further distorts the images with the goal of implicating the viewer within their timespace, while extending the messy naturecultural entanglements around us. This diffracted depiction of biotic and abiotic compositions inspires the weaving of terrestrial animal and botanical forms with subterranean geologic figurations throughout the *Gardens & Grottoes* installation.

### **Becoming**

In her chapter, "Your Shell on Acid," Stacy Alaimo proposes that in order to "counter the dominant figurations of the Anthropocene, which abstract the human from the material realm and obscure differentials of responsibility and harm," we need to consider "the Anthropocene subject as immersed and enmeshed in the world" (Alaimo 103). She highlights the necessity of assemblage theory in articulating the different and contingent compositions of human, non-human, technical and systemic entanglements at play. This involves not only a shifting of representational scales to implicate specific relationships and culpability, but also a complete reconsideration of a discrete human identity altogether. She terms this concept "trans-corporeality" and describes it as a porosity of boundaries between human and non-human bodies. This includes not only a corporeal intermingling with biological, chemical and climactic processes, but also geological ones (Alaimo 106).

Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality" heavily informs all stages of the *Karst Composting* expanded cinema installation in *Gardens & Grottoes*. The extending of self in space through intimate proximity and vulnerability was central to the documentation of bodies in space. A weaving of several shot types in the recording stage provides multiple scales at which to intimately experience the cave at various proximities for audience viewing. Additionally, the expansion of the cinema screen through projection onto suspended plants and sculptures within the gallery invites audience members to physically become a part of the installation and contemplate their own relationship to the physical and projected beings in the space.

Attention to more-than-human beings is facilitated throughout *Gardens & Grottoes* in many mediums through art-based encounters. Informed by Yusoff's writing on rocks and subjectivity in "Anthropogenesis: Origins and Endings of the Anthropocene" (2015), the climbing wall installation *Surface Bodies* offers opportunities for questioning organic and nonorganic dimensions of life through movement. Yusoff speculates on the mineralogical dimensions of human composition and argues that the collision of human and inhuman<sup>11</sup> histories requires a lithic subjectivity that "redefines temporal, material and spatial orders of the human (and thus nature)" (3). This sense of immersion and comingling is central to Cree scholar Dwayne Donald's teaching on "ethical relationality" as detailed in Zoe Todd's "Indigenizing the Anthropocene" (2015, 249). Rooted in what he describes as our "ecological imagination," ethical relationality is about paying attention to the webs of relationships we are enmeshed in (249). Additionally, this ethic embraces multiple time scales in holding that "the past occurs simultaneously in the present and influences how we conceptualize the future" (250). In engaging with the temporal and material contractions of our time, Yusoff conceptualizes ecologies of subjectivities in an effort to abandon the assumption of discrete, auto-poetic identity-making. Within *Gardens & Grottoes*, as a participant climbs the bodily and fossil shaped sculptures composed of winterstone, plants, and human hair, *Surface Bodies* asks for close attention, intimate proximity, and precarious action as one leaves the ground to rely on physical connection with others.

The entire *Gardens & Grottoes* exhibition evolves with participatory engagement and iterations of intimate moments of connection. From the initial passing under a rock-like garden arch and crawling into a geodesic cave, to traversing a rock climbing wall and being immersed in a digital room projection, the exhibition invites play and performance from participants. This shift from traditional gallery spectatorship towards active engagement and

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<sup>11</sup> The term "inhuman" is defined as that which is not human in nature or character. It is used by Kathryn Yusoff as it relates to nonorganic dimensions of life.



consciousness of oneself in spatial-temporal relationships is inspired by the thinking of Karen Barad. The continuous formation of subjectivity in relationship with the world is embodied in her 2003 essay "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." She elaborates on feminist notions of becoming through a quantum physics lens, with her relational framework of "Agential Realism"; here, subjects and objects have never existed as independent entities, but have always been actively connected prior to their artificial separation (810, 815). She refers to this network of "phenomena" in the world as "intra-action"—the ongoing process of mutual creation, where boundaries and categories exist only in specific contextual (material and discursive) relationships (817).<sup>12</sup> Barad brings our attention to how matter, like meaning, is "not a fixed substance," and she argues that all bodies (not merely human bodies) "come to matter through the world's iterative intra-activity—its performance" (822-23). The implication of Barad's argument is that "humans" refer to "phenomena," rather than singular entities with inherent properties, and that the boundaries between "human" and non-human stabilize and destabilize in particular material reconfigurings (818). The posthumanist, materialist account of performativity proposed by Barad challenges the positioning of matter as a mere effect of human agency and *nature* as a passive surface "awaiting the mark of culture" (827). The shared action of creating reality through relationships of simultaneous interior and exterior spaces, complicates the position of human identity, and with it, the entire Western tendency to define things and objects as pre-existing separate entities.

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<sup>12</sup> This is different from *interaction* which assumes the previous separation of entities that are engaging with one another.



Figure 7. *Karst Composting*, video still, datamoshed video, 2019. Photo: Carlson. 2019

## Conclusion

### *Compost*

As I traverse the mythical separation of what is above and what is below the earth to challenge the separation of humans from a statically framed *nature*, I look to Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016). Her stories from the earth help to undo Western philosophy's "human exceptionalism and bounded individualism" while refiguring webs of relations (30). Rather than "Anthropocene," she offers the "Chthulucene" to conceptualize our precarious and muddled time. This compound of two Greek roots: "khthon," referring to mud and "of the muck," and "kainos," meaning now, are driving concepts in my interdisciplinary storying of a timespace for humans to conceive of themselves as geologic and of the earth (2). Tracing ancient mythologies of gorgons like Medusa, Zeus' daughter Persephone, and other beings from the underworld, Haraway imagines "chthonic ones" as being "replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair" (2). These unheroic, spidery creatures with their multiple appendages are useful figures for imagining our intermingling of bodies within space, time, and matter. Haraway also suggests "compost" instead of "posthuman(ism)" and "human as humus" to revise subjectivity

and emphasize collaborative becoming (31). This muddy entanglement is the stimulus for my art-based investigations into karst cave and grotto bodies. The interdisciplinary painting, sculpture, installation, and video of *Gardens & Grottoes* intermingle skin, rock, water, mud, root, web, and exoskeleton, while playing with light, shadow, and movement throughout. Rather than an individualistic self-making, the works investigate what Haraway terms “sym-poiesis,” a collaborative becoming where living (and dying) well with other critters can be sought after (58).

Through physical movement, sensorial immersion, and the privileging of ambiguous bodily forms, *Gardens and Grottoes* seeks to illuminate overlapping gray areas of agency and challenge hierarchical *nature-human* binaries. Rather than distancing naturalistic and natural forms through a glass display, frame or screen, intimate interactions with more-than-human bodies are facilitated through sensorial play. The cavernous garden grotto aesthetic offers a diffracted-depiction of what Barad describes as a world not composed of “things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but things-in-phenomena” (Barad 817).

*Gardens & Grottoes* was a naturecultural event that celebrated an enmeshing of more-than-human bodies while traversing mythical separations of above and below the surface of the earth. As an assemblage of materials and disciplines, it sought to refigure deanimating representations of subjectivities. In the body of work created, I address my affective experiences in the Buontalenti Grotto and Eramosa Karst environments as well as my investigation into permeable perceptions of self within ecologies by opening up opportunities for kinaesthetic engagement. Within the material feminist and feminist posthumanist theoretical frameworks, I created an interdisciplinary body of work that addresses *nature* in art through the ongoing process of *becoming-with*. As I combine my art practice with my interests in immersive ecosystems of assemblage, my art-based research seeks to move beyond the border work of hybridity and interspecies relationships, to consider the trans-corporeal, expanded interfacing of bodies.

By situating these interdisciplinary works within a garden grotto installation, I invited people to consider their own physical proximity and relationship with this enveloping, multisensory work. In combining a variety of materials, artistic techniques, and recognizable bodily forms, the installation prompts sensorial engagement, mobility, and response from viewers. The intermingling of bodies through paint, sculpture, video, and installation elicits potential for affect and new embodied understandings of self within more-than-human worlds.

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