

Material Walking:

Corporeal interactions and place

Submitted by
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Abstract

This practice led PhD asks what specific types of knowledge emerge through the material engagement facilitated by walking. The physical nature of walking propels our bodies forward in motion, permitting us to continuously connect to the land we traverse. This banal action allows us to experience the world in small increments, step by step, over time as we inhabit our own bodies and experience the physical elements of place with all five senses in motion. This PhD explores this corporeal knowledge of walking through a series of investigative performances at the world heritage site of Lake Mungo. In these walks my body interacted with this ancient lakebed via a series of material interventions – with a shopping trolley and a block of Murray River ice – to rethink the relational agency of body, material and site. Communicated in video, photos and installation, this practice-led research opens up the experience of Mungo in new ways. In contemporary art walking is an increasingly established practice and research methodology drawing in a range of approaches from artists such as Richard Long, Janet Cardiff and Francis Alÿs. In the thesis component of this project, I unpack my performances and the broader field of walking in art through an interdisciplinary approach and in relationship to new materialist philosophy, delving into the complexities of interwoven networks, offering a method to break down and examine the intricacies of place and matter.

Statement of Authorship

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma. No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis. This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

This thesis contains practice-based work. A separate portfolio of work will be submitted with documentation and video files of the performances and installations displayed in the final thesis exhibition.

This thesis has been copy - edited, by Caroline Phillips

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INTRODUCTION

The rattle and clang of the trolley mutes the sounds of my body's movement as I cross the remote arid landscape. The large refurbished wheels of the trolley move over the dry cracked earth beneath my feet, and the seventy-kilogram ice block begins to transform from its dull, opaque, coldness to a glimmering sheen as it slowly begins to melt. I stop for a moment and when I begin to move again the ice block jostles back and forth and then topples forward, resting on the front edge of the trolley. I stand for a moment and stare at the precariously perched ice block and then slowly begin to move again. The sheer weight of the block seems to hold it in place and I continue to move across the ever-changing terrain of this remote place. As I walk the ice block begins to drip and the drops hit the parched earth beneath, and within moments...they're gone. In this instant, I realize the absurdity and futility of my attempt to bring water back to this remote desert landscape.

Durational walking as an experimental art form is a strange phenomenon; its investigatory nature yields insights into the experience of place, allowing access to a host of embodied knowledge. In turn, walking as a process and research methodology becomes a means to express a precarity of place, materials, and the human body. The physical nature of walking propels our bodies forward in motion, permitting us to continuously connect to the land we traverse. This banal action allows us to experience the world in small increments, step by step, over time as we inhabit our own bodies and experience the physical elements of place with all five senses in motion. This research explores this corporeal knowledge of walking through a series of investigative performances at the world heritage site of Lake

Mungo, country to the traditional owners, the Paakantji, Ngiampaa and Mutthi Mutthi people. In these walks my body interacted with this ancient lakebed via a series of material interventions – with a shopping trolley and a block of Murray River ice – to rethink the relational agency of body, material and site. Communicated in video, photos and installation, this practice-led research opens up the experience of Mungo in new ways. In contemporary art walking is an increasingly established practice and research methodology drawing in a range of approaches from artists such as Richard Long, Janet Cardiff and Francis Alÿs. In the thesis component of this project, I unpack my performances and the broader field of walking in art through an interdisciplinary approach and in relationship to new materialist philosophy, which focuses the trajectory of things, delving into the complexities of interwoven networks, offering a method to break down and examine the intricacies of place and matter.

Lake Mungo and the River Murray are significant locations for research. The River Murray has become a politicized site because its geographic location in proximity to Indigenous lands; the regulation of the Murray River; and control and degradation of the river due to agriculture. Lake Mungo is an ancient, desiccated lakebed with ancestral significance to Indigenous peoples. Knowledge from performative walking is often felt before it is realized, requiring cerebral analysis and deep listening, that can lead to a deeper understanding of both self and place. Performative walking as practice-based research incorporates props to assist with extracting meaning from these experimental walking performances. The thesis teases out the interrelated theoretical threads that under-pin this interconnected web of learning through a new materialist methodology, which allows the objects themselves to lead the research

both theoretically and creatively. Jane Bennett's theory of material vitality, which scrutinizes, the vitality of "things", and Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory which assists in framing my ideas around the significance of my props and the agency of objects. A survey of other artists like Janet Cardiff, Mark Dion, Bonita Ely, and Richard Long who deploy walking as a creative practice, are discussed in their capacity to inform this research. Placed in context with the new creative works, the material and theoretical knowledge gleaned through this research enables a new way to consider the bonds created through corporeal interaction with place.

Background to the research

The performances and critical underpinnings of this research evolve out of a series of walks that began in the Murray Darling Basin in 2014. I came to the region because of the intersections of the political, cultural, and the environmental issues surrounding the use of the Murray River. The reflection at the beginning of this Introduction describes the early moments of my first Lake Mungo performance in 2015, reflecting on the precarious nature of my white, American, female body traversing a foreign and culturally significant place, in a country that is not my own. The key props are a refurbished grocery trolley and a seventy-kilogram ice-block sourced from the Murray River that are walked through a desiccated lakebed. The trolley's links to consumerism and the ice block's reference to the continual degradation of the Murray River imparts a sense of social and cultural precarity of the inhabitants and of agricultural businesses. The performance allowed insights into the fragility of the environment and helped me develop a deeper understanding of place.

In April of 2015 I travelled to this region with a group of artists from the *Mildura Palimpsest Biennale* project *Unmapping the End of the World*¹. A group of fourteen artists walked through three UNESCO world heritage sites: the Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area, Mungo National Park, Australia; Kumano Kodo World Heritage Pilgrimage Walk, Japan; and Valcamonica Rock Art World Heritage Site, Italy.² At the ancient site of Lake Mungo, we listened to and walked with Aboriginal Elders from the Paakantji/Barkindji, Ngyiampaa and Mutthi Mutthi people. The Elders discussed the significance of the discovery of Mungo Lady — the oldest cremation in the world and representing the emergence of humanity’s spiritual beliefs — and Mungo man, the oldest Homo sapiens remains found on the Australian continent.³ As we continued to walk with the Elders over the course of a few days, they spoke about the significance of the human footprints in the area. This site ingrained in me the desire for a deeper understanding of this ancient place. The group walk functioned as an investigative walking experience, my walking performances allowed me the opportunity to return water, back to this arid landscape that had once been a thriving water culture.

As the group walked these remote areas together, the lack of phone service enabled us to disconnect from the outside world. At first this was awkward, as we all realized

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² For more information on these sites, see UNESCO World Heritage Centre website: Willandra Lakes Region and Lake Mungo Willandra - Willandra Lakes Region <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/167/>; Kumano Kodo - Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1142/>; Valcamonica - Rock Drawings in Valcamonica <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/94/>. Accessed February 3, 2020.

³ “Mungo Lady and Mungo Man | Share Mungo Culture | Visit Mungo National Park,” accessed February 3, 2020, <http://www.visitmungo.com.au/mungo-lady-mungo-man>.

how dependent we were on our mobile devices. Members of the group drifted together, broke apart, walked alone, or joined the discussion in another group. With our electronic devices stashed deeply in our back pockets these conversations naturally occurred and continued to bond the group as we walked. The slow, steady, toe to heel action connected us to the land and to each other. The talks with the Elders from the previous day brought to our awareness the human and non-human remains buried beneath our feet. This walking, talking and listening ingrained in me a strong desire to 'walk country' on my own (not unlike the walks that embarked on in the US) and find a way to give back, listen to the land, and gain a deeper understanding of the significance of Lake Mungo.

My own trajectory and history, as an American, White woman from Utah, is a place of complexity. Utah is a state that symbolizes the complex archaeological (mountains, sediment, Salt Lake), spiritual (indigenous cultural), historical (religious, cultural) and aspirational (new frontierism). Through the physical process of walking, a line of enquiry opened up for my art practice: questions of the significance of human and object interaction; complex social configurations embedded in both the past and present; my own body's history, temporality and limitations; and my role in this complex web of interrelatedness. These thoughts crystallised for me one morning, as I walked at Lake Mungo, whilst thinking about the significance of the ancient water culture that once existed there. Suddenly I had an intense desire to physically give water to this arid landscape. As I looked down at my dust covered shoes moving through the dirt, water, in some form or another, seemed like the appropriate choice or material to work with. I was aware that no matter how much water I returned to

this landscape it would most likely be a futile cause, but I could not shake the feeling that the action itself was of some importance. As I continued to sit with those feelings, I began to imagine myself in the landscape with an enormous ice block of Murray River water in a grocery trolley. Drawing on past walking experiences and experiments with a trolley,⁴ I wanted to better understand the agency of material objects both in the relationship to my body and to this place.

Walking as research and art practice

Walking is the antithesis of a cartesian map. The physical nature of walking propels our bodies forward in motion, permitting us to continuously connect to the land we traverse. This subtly nuanced corporeal action, allows us to experience the world in small increments, marking out a territory, with all five senses in motion. Walking is now an established practice within the field of contemporary art – engaging a range of cross-disciplinary artists and writers. It is also an area of interest to scholars across a range of disciplines. The interdisciplinary scope prompts and facilitates significant new questions for creative practice in relation to art and post-humanist approaches to place. Walking thus wends its way across artists' creative practices, connecting literature, philosophy and human and cultural geography, which combines the study of culture and place. Each of these diverse fields interacting with the practice of walking. Elements outlined above contain theoretical threads that are explored through the coinciding chapters. For example the trolley's links to consumerism and

⁴ I had used the trolley in earlier works in the United States, in installations, performances, relational works and as a prop for experimental walking performance in rural Nebraska.

consumption interconnect with the relevant discussions of the Murray River water and its use as an agricultural commodity, this in turn links back to the ephemerality of the ice block and its relationship to both the desiccated lakebed at Mungo and the fragile eco-system that exists there which in turn connect back to its temporal links to the body creating a precariousness, an instability that obliges a questioning of not only the place, the objects and the actions, but the interconnecting links that drive this interdisciplinary discussion. The contribution to knowledge contained within this thesis is linked to walking's direct connections to subject and a process within the field of contemporary art. Artists within the field use walking both as a subject for their work and as a process to research their work. The creative work builds upon the works of artists in the field. Including, Richard Long, Francis Alys, Janet Cardiff and Lesley Duxbury, all of whom are further discussed in this thesis. My attempt to contribute to the new knowledge in the field revolves around both my investigative methodology and developing embodied relationships to place through extended time in particular geographies. For example, all of the walking performances and investigative walks occurred in remote areas at Lake Mungo and the Wilandra Lakes region. Slow repetitive action of walking in a foreign environment, builds upon the work of Alys's work in Mexico City. This project furthers the work by rethinking relationships to place in terms of globalization and the breaking down of a remote area, step by step, materiality by materiality over an extended period of time then linking to the theoretical concerns and writing through a new materialist methodology.

Methodology

The practice-led research deploys a process-based methodology that interrogates the relationships and precarious nature of body and place, through the performance of walking and interacting with objects and creative and reflective writing. Through this varied methodology I am able to gain a deeper understanding of the places I have traversed over the course of this project. The walks themselves transform from walk to performance through the use of chosen props, which shift the intention of the actions and the variety of ways I am able to interact with place. For instance, the use of the trolley in the performances alters the manner in which I interact with the geographic elements of a place. In turn the creative and reflective writing allows me to process these interactions and connect to the more theoretical aspects of the project. Bioethicist and author, Margaret Sommerville discusses this connection between writing and place. She suggests that,

*Place is known through the senses, through the body, and the subtle pedagogies of layered storying which every place contains. Writing about place is an ontological act, producing the self at the same time as writing the words. It is predicated on unwinding the spiral of “material form and interpretative understandings or experiences” to enable new possibilities to come into being.*⁵

⁵ Margaret Somerville, *Water in a Dry Land: Place-Learning Through Art and Story* (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 20, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/latrobe/detail.action?docID=1128266>.

Sommerville, eloquently reveals the subtle nuances and sensual nature of coming to know a place, through the body. Throughout this project, I have encountered rural and remote landscapes, that have overwhelmed my senses and forced me to consider the physicality of these places. The writings that have followed are an extension of these walks and bring to the forefront the corporeal knowledge gained as I traverse these foreign landscapes allowing me to interact with the 'layered storying' that Sommerville speaks of here.

The creative works examine the potential for walking as a means of connection and agency. The creative outcomes consist of three key performance walks –*Trolley Ambulations: Camel Pad Track*, *Basin Ambulations: Lake Mungo and Basin Ambulations: Melt* and their accompanying documentation — along with a suite of installations. Geographer Sarah Whatmore's articulation of 'hybrid geographies' is useful here to frame this research through the lens of 'geography as a craft'.⁶ Whatmore's work affirms my thinking of the alignment between space and the material body, extrapolated in this research as the physical, temporal, and sensual relationship between agents – my body walking, objects that travel with me, and the places I pass through.

⁶ Sarah Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies: Natures, Cultures, Spaces* (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE, 2002), 3.

Practice led research has proved very effective in researching relationships between different agents, allowing invention to emerge, as Australian theorist Paul Carter observes:

... the state of being that allows a state of becoming to emerge – is a perception, or recognition of the ambiguity of appearances. Invention begins when what signifies exceeds its signification – when what means one thing, or conventionally functions in one role, discloses other possibilities.⁷

The practice of walking in this research is extended through the use of selected objects (ice, red dirt, and a shopping trolley) as a point of connection between my body, earth, and place. The performances are documented with video and photography, and moments of reflective writing. This thesis unpacks these performances through an interdisciplinary approach and frames my walking in relation to new materialist philosophy, in particular the complexities of interwoven networks, that offer a method to break down and examine the intricacies of place. Furthermore, a human and cultural geography methodology allows me to investigate how walking connects one both physically and geographically to place. The thesis then enhances this analysis through an investigation of the work of other artists who deploy walking as a creative practice, locating my research within this discourse and extending knowledge of walking as a contemporary art practice.

⁷ Paul Carter, “Interest: The Ethics of Invention” Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

Thesis structure

The thesis examines the material elements used in my walking performances — my body, a supermarket trolley, red dirt, water (from the Murray River), Murray River ice blocks — that prompt a distinctive series of questions that relate back to the precarity and ephemerality of the original Lake Mungo performances. Chapter One, *Walking: Body, meaning, place*, outlines discourses of the body and sensuous geographies through the work of Paul Rodaway, who explores the body's relationship to place and geography. This in turn links back to the multifaceted knowledge that walking generates through the body deepening the connections to place and bringing to awareness new knowledge through the body's sensual connections. This relationship (a form of knowledge) is often felt before it is realized, therefore requires conscious mindful acknowledgement. To explore the sensual elements of walking, I consider Janet Cardiff's sound walks, and Australian artist Lesley Duxbury's use of walking in an extreme environment, as touchstones to my practice. Chapter Two *Props: Labour and agency through objects* builds upon chapter one's discussion of walking's corporeal relationship to place through the agency of props. It analyses the materiality of the shopping trolley, in relation to its links to consumerism and consumption, and Jane Bennett's writing on 'vibrant materiality'⁸ and 'thing power.'⁹ The chapter then explores the thinking, labour and futility that takes place while walking, returning to the performance works of Belgian Artist, Francis Alÿs, and the environmental art of

⁸ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁹ Bennett, 2–16.

British artist, Richard Long. This context is developed through the theorization and materiality of my shopping trolley, as it becomes a material agent.

In the third Chapter, *Water: connecting with actants*, the process of water collection for the performances is discussed in relation to the theoretical frameworks of Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT) and Jane Bennett's 'material vitality'.¹⁰ To broaden understanding of these concepts, I examine Australian artist Bonita Ely's *Murray River Punch – The Soup* (2014), and British artist Mark Dion's *Tate Thames Dig* (1999). Chapter four *Ice/Melt: the temporality of transformation* focuses on melting of the ice block, and linking back to ideas of ephemerality in relation to place and time. This chapter draws on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's 'Body Without Organs,' alongside Gaston Bachelard's theories of the 'instant' and Henri Bergson's theories on time, to contextualize the experience of duration through performance. Additionally, I use these theories to break down and investigate the specific elements of time within in the landscape at Mungo and in my own creative work with ice. Alongside these works, the chapter explores other works that materialise time, including Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970).

In conclusion, this thesis will outline how the research addresses the question of, what do experimental walking's corporeal connections reveal about complexity of materiality contained within a place? Through practice-based research involving the

key activity of durational walking — with objects — the research will show that walking, as an art practice, can delve into the complexities of interwoven networks and examine the intricacies of place. The thesis further explores the potential for walking as a powerful form of investigation through contextualizing its theoretical basis with key texts drawn from philosophy, New Materialism and geography. As a result, this research will argue that the creative practice of walking can be used as both an investigative methodology to understand the significance of place and engage with the material, cultural and political elements contained within a place.

Chapter I, WALKING: BODY, MEANING AND PLACE

Walking up a sand dune is not a straightforward process. It's almost like walking up an escalator backwards. The soft silky sand encases my feet with each step. Moving upward is difficult, because I have to pull each foot up out of the sand, place it, let it sink and repeat the action. The sand is inconsistent, sometimes it swallows one foot and barely grazes the other one. My feet slip and slide back into the dune at varying depths. Progress is slow. Sometimes I have to slide several steps backward before making any progress again. Eventually arriving at the top of the dune, I am once again surprised by the solitary stillness. The wind blows and occasionally I see a kangaroo or an emu in the distance.

Walking is at the core of this project. In particular, it is the direct bodily interaction with the unique material elements of the places I traverse, that leads the research enquiry. As my reflection above illustrates, the ever-changing materiality of a Mungo sand dune dramatically alters my bodily movements. Walking is an action that demands constant intimate sensual interaction with the environment. Due to its banality, however, most of us rarely pay attention to our body's daily haptic synergies. Coming to know a place through the body brings awareness; to our actions, our situation/site, and to the body itself. Walking as a creative practice harnesses this awareness and the corporeal knowing that accompanies it. This chapter interrogates the discourses, practices and materialities of the walking body, in the extreme conditions of Lake Mungo and the Australian bush, as explored through textures,

sounds and feelings. These walks grounded my practice in rural and remote areas, which allowed me to focus more on the earth beneath my feet and the varied terrains. These embodied materialities foreground this research, to ask the questions: how does walking generate knowledge through the body? And How does walking as performance (and the attention it brings to the process) accesses this knowledge and provides new insights into the body's sensual connections to place?

The scene is set with a reflection, *Traversing a Mungo Dune*,¹¹ a key piece of creative writing that foregrounds my research concerns on walking, and the site of Mungo as a key location. Theorist Paul Rodaway's articulation of haptic geography, which focuses on the body's tactile interactions with a geographic location is a framework for this chapter's discussion of the walking body as a generative creative practice. I then go onto consider the works of other artists whose walking practices have informed my own research. Janet Cardiff and her unique, interactive sound walks is investigated as a link to the use of sound in the creative portion of this thesis and the sound experiments that cropped up amongst the other creative works. The artist Lesley Duxbury's work is explored here, to support my thinking about corporeal knowing, alongside discussion of my creative work, *Trolley Ambulations: Camel Pad Track*, and my initial explorations of sound recordings as material investigations.

¹¹ *Traversing a Mungo Dune*, is an entry in my creative practice journal. The walk occurred while I was on a research trip to Mungo. It was the first time I had been at Mungo alone without a camera crew and the trip allowed time for personal reflection about my interactions with this place that were recorded in the journal.

This is the first time I have been to Mungo on my own. At first I'm apprehensive about getting too far away from my car, but eventually I can't help myself and I start to wander freely. The landscape is littered with dunes of all shapes and sizes. Some are barren and eroded, others are covered in struggling foliage. But as I look out over the dune I realize there are green leafy trees dotting the tops of some of the dunes. Is it possible that these dunes are harbouring enough moisture for them to thrive or are they just so old that their roots are able to reach down far enough to grab the essential moisture they need to survive in this thirsty, parched landscape? The sky is so big here, I feel like an ant on the sand swallowed up in its vastness. The smaller dunes that dot this landscape make it difficult to keep track of where I am. Several times I find myself wandering around looking for my equipment, but then I begin to find landmarks. The sand also holds my footprints well and I can track my way back to the site following them. As the day goes on, I notice my earlier footprints beginning to change. The dune has absorbed the well-defined patterns of my boot and the prints seem to be slowly disappearing. They are still there at the end of the day, but they are now hollow impressions in the sand that lack the definition of my earlier steps. I also notice that the kangaroo and emu tracks that I noted earlier have changed over the course of the day. The dune seems to be slowly erasing our movements. I can't help wondering how long it will take for them to disappear. The dune seems to hold a temporary record of my movements throughout the day, but even this brief record is constantly shifting and changing.

I can't help wondering what else the dune has swallowed up. There are bones and skulls and even some bits of carved stone lying about the top of the dune. There are areas that seem more solid, almost rock like, but as I watch the ice block melt throughout the day, I begin to realize the moment liquid touches these hard masses they revert back to their, porous, sandy texture. As I wander about, I notice a dune that has shed a few layers of its sheeting. The layers almost look like blocks. At first, I think they are solid, but when I touch them they disintegrate into sand. I also notice bones and skulls emerging from the sand. It is difficult to tell if these animal remains are recent or ancient bones reemerging through the ever-changing sands of this place.

The wind here seems to be a key factor in the constant shifting of this place. Looking across this wind-blown landscape I realize the wind has created water-like patterns on the surface of the sand reminiscent of this place's watery past. The smaller dunes seem to have a clay- like core. I can't help wondering if this holds moisture that supports the trees and other foliage that top many of these smaller dunes. The patterns of erosion in these smaller dunes are almost like maps of time and I return to thoughts of the watery past of this place. Looking at these smaller dunes, I can't help thinking about the larger dune I am standing on. What lies beneath my feet? Does it have a clay core, like many of these smaller dunes? I've witnessed its subtle shifting and ability to erase itself. How quickly does it move? Does it ever stop? Or is it a constant subtle shifting movement, like I have experienced here today? Do the animals that exist up here, help with this movement? Does their body weight help with these shifts? Walking down the dune is much like stepping onto an elevator. The dune shifts and gravity pulls down on my feet with each step. Much like my upward movements. I have little control.

Some steps are longer and other steps are shorter. Regardless of the length, the dune seems to control my movements.

The following day I begin at another site. This site is different. The patterns of erosion are accentuated here. Walking to the top of the dune is similarly difficult, but when I reach the top, I realize the surface seems to be more solid and there is evidence of water running through this space. The erosion patterns are more accentuated, they are almost skeletal and the presence of water is more obvious. I consider setting up a time-lapse video here, but for some reason it just doesn't seem right. I can actually see into the crevices where the water rose and fell and walk down the beds that the water ran through. I can't help wondering if there are human and animal remains buried within the crevices here. Will the waters someday return to this place? Will the rains of the future help to reveal more evidence of the human and non-human inhabitants of this place? There is a fragility to this place, but it has existed for thousands of years, constantly shifting and changing. How will it shift next? How did the human and non-human inhabitants survive here as the lake rose and fell? How did they adapt to these climate changes? Were the shifts subtle at first? Did they see the climate shifts coming and store goods in advance?

Traversing a Mungo Dune was written during my final research trip to Mungo in 2018. I spent several days alone working on a sand dune. It was probably one of the most challenging experiences of my entire candidature. I carted equipment up and down the sand dune multiple times and was forced to reckon with the elements and the limitations of my body. I began to question my body's relationship to this foreign landscape, and its distinctive and historically loaded elements. The significance of this

history directly links to the traditional owner's ancestral history buried deep beneath my feet. Additionally, the landscape is laden with geological evidence of the Lakes' constant rising and falling. This is evident in the eroded dunes that exist around lakeshore lunettes and are constant reminders of the lively water culture that existed here. As I travelled the roads of Mungo both on foot and by vehicle, a thin layer of dust infused everything I carried including my own body. The smell of this dust encased my nostrils and coated the back of my tongue. Although this was not an overt element of the performances this Mungo dust, dust from the sand dunes, dust from the road kicked up by the trolley and my own two feet continually became part of the performances.

My experience with the Mungo dune compelled me to question the information that my body collects during a walk. Repetitive walks up and down the dune, forced me to think about my body's sensual interactions with the terrain. I learned sand is not easy to walk through, and the more weight I carried the more difficult it was to move my body. I also had to keep track of my movements, so I could find my way back down the dune to my transportation. But as I continued to move through this environment, my body seemed to learn and adapt to the shifting sand and the other physical elements of the dune. It never became particularly easy to walk the dune, but it did become familiar. This familiarity compelled me to question the body's sensual ability to know a place. How and why does the body adapt to a place? Is it purely survival? Is it pleasure? What is walking's role in the body's sensual perception of a place? And how does its movement contribute to the bodies understanding of a place?

Geographer Paul Rodaway brings insight to my experience. His writing on the body's haptic relationship to place is relevant here because it provides a framework for considering performance works as a form of research into place. As Rodaway says:

Focusing on the dimensions of touch in individual experience also reminds us that this geography is always, ultimately in reference to...our bodies, and each space and place discerned or mapped haptically is in this sense our space and because of the reciprocal nature of touch we come to belong to that space. In this sense the sense of place is grounded in the participatory quality of haptic geography.¹²

Walking is a unique method of bodily inquiry that employs the senses while negotiating and experiencing place. Urban designer Filipa Matos Wunderlich discusses walking as a multisensory experience in urban spaces, arguing that all senses including 'the aural, the olfactory the visual and touch, even taste is occasionally referred to as contributing to the process of retaining a sense of place.¹³

The contemporary field of artists who walk as an integral part of their practice has expanded over the last forty years, as captured in the exhibition *Walk On: From Richard Long to Janet Cardiff – 40 years of Art Walking*. This exhibition included a diverse range of contemporary walking artists as well as historical documentation that highlighted the legacy of performance art of the 1960s and 70s, including, Marina Abramovic, who "argues that from land art and conceptual art and from street photography to essay-film, an exceptionally wide range of first-rate artists have

¹² P. Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies: Body, Sense, and Place*, London, Routledge, 2011, p. 54.

¹³ Filipa Matos Wunderlich, "Walking and Rhythmicity: Sensing Urban Space," *Journal of Urban Design* 13, no. 1 (2008): 128, doi:10.1080/13574800701803472.

created their work from an act of walking, in the city or the land.”¹⁴ Exhibitions¹⁵ and festivals such as the *Sideways Festival in Belgium (2012)*¹⁶ and the *Walking Artists Network*¹⁷ reinforce the complexity and depth of practice by the growing field of artists and curators interested in walking as a form of contemporary art. My practice of walking sits in the field as a durational performance with a focus on the investigation of the materiality of place.

Though the media, materials and locations vary from artist to artist, they all experience their work through their own bodies and share their experiences with their viewers in multiple ways. Sometimes participants walk with them; other times they share their experiences in images, video, film, sound works, drawings, painting or maps. Walking artists embrace the body through many different forms. For instance, Janet Cardiff, offers her participants headphones and her voice accompanies them as they follow a predetermined route that Cardiff herself has walked and recorded. Richard Long, on the other hand, rarely engages with his viewers during a walk. He directly interacts with a specific site, leaving traces of his body in the land, which are then shared through exhibitions of documentation. Other contemporary walking artists such as

¹⁴ “Walk On – WALK,” accessed May 30, 2019, <http://walk.uk.net/portfolio/walk-on/>.

¹⁵ Mike Collier, ed., *Walk on: From Richard Long to Janet Cardiff - 40 Years of Art Walking* (Sunderland, England: Art Editions North, 2013), 3.

¹⁶ “Welcome to the Sideways festival,” accessed June 1, 2019, <https://www.tragewegen.be/nl/about>. The festival took place in Belgium in August – Sept 2012 over the course of five weekends in five different locations, Menen, Herzele, Brussels, Turnhout, and Zutendaal. Festival is also listed in, Collier, Mike, ed. *Walk on: From Richard Long to Janet Cardiff - 40 Years of Art Walking*. Sunderland, England: Art Editions North, 2013.

¹⁷ “Walking Artist’s Network,” accessed May 31, 2019

This site is a resource for walking artists and lists walking exhibitions, seminars, publications, and other resources for walking artists, however, it should be noted listings of exhibitions etcetera only go through 2017.

Tim Knowles, take a multi-disciplinary approach embracing photography, film and abstract drawing.¹⁸ The work of these artists is discussed in more detail later in this chapter, but for now I draw attention to a common element amongst artists who walk, the embodied connections between the body and the site. Through this research, my walking encounters are revealed as extending this discourse, through an exploration and emphasis on direct, bodily interaction with a place and the visceral physicality of interacting with a place.

Once upon a wander

My own walking practice, and walking performances, began life as preliminary works that were experimental, and brought up theoretical questions about time, body, material and place. During these early stages, I experimented with different types of documentation. *Once upon a wander* (2013 - present) is a series of ongoing investigative walks, that has continued throughout this research. Many of these walks were repetitive, occurring at different times of the day but at the same locations. Some of the walks occurred on the urban streets of Melbourne, others occurred in the rural areas of Bendigo and Mildura and still others occurred in remote areas of Mungo national park. As an American living in Australia, these walks have allowed me to come to know these places through my own body, experiencing the diverse, sights, sounds,

¹⁸ M. Collier (ed.), *Walk on: From Richard Long to Janet Cardiff - 40 Years of Art Walking*, Sunderland, England, Art Editions North, 2013, p. 94.

textures and smells of each individual place. This early thread of walks has allowed me to informally experience place and work through ideas that eventually became part of the larger themes contained within this thesis.

Embedded in the *Once upon a wander* project is a series of more formal research walks that occurred while I was living in the Mildura area. Once again some of these walks were repetitive walks, occurring on a daily basis while I was walking my dog. Walking with my dog compelled me to look down more often and notice the ground beneath my feet, as well as the what was creating the sounds and textures that I was hearing and feeling. Also, since these were repetitive walks, I was able to hear, smell and see the shifts that occurred on the roads and trails that I walked as the season shifted and changed. These repetitive walks also inspired me to explore the broader area on my own, raising questions and possible avenues of further research.

I walked along the river. I walked through the vineyards around my house, during the winter months when the vines were dead and dry. I watched them shift into spring and early summer, as leaves sprouted and grew. Eventually I began to wonder how the river was supporting all of this agriculture. I began talking to local farmers and then began a series of walks on my landlord's farm. At first, I just wandered through the orchards, but eventually the walks became more experimental and research oriented as I followed the water lines to the river, which led to a series of additional investigative walks along the river, which in turn eventually led to the more remote walks at Mungo and the final series of performances for this project. It should also be noted that these walks have continued through the final writing-up process, allowing

me to continue to connect to place and provide time to work through theoretical and writing issues.

Once upon a wander (2013 - present) led to the commencement of the performances at Mungo, key works in this research that later utilised the trolley, and the ice block, discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters. These early works instilled in me a desire to begin working with materials to foreground my bodily limits in terms of both stamina and endurance. Would I be able to complete these performances? And how would my body react to the harsh elements of these remote places? What additional demands would a shopping trolley and a 70 Kilogram ice block add to the performances? And how might these objects connect with the remote landscape of Mungo? At first these links seemed distant and I questioned the validity of them, but as these experimental walks continued to unfold, I began to see the interconnectedness of nature and body, mind, place and object, shift and change.

At Mungo my walks evolved through my interactions with objects and the remote Mungo landscape. The earth beneath my feet and the wheels of the shopping trolley dictated the way that I moved and interacted with this place. The ice blocks that I carried left an invisible trail behind me emphasizing the ephemerality and fragility of matter, including my human body and this remote environment. Looking back at my time at Mungo I now realize my initial walks were sketches – spontaneous interactions between the environment and my body in motion. It was through these preliminary connections that I first experienced what artist and academic Paul Carter names as a

‘condition of invention’ in relationship to walking.¹⁹ Through this process I learned to listen and pay attention to the unfolding and interconnected nature of my own experimental walking practice, and the development of the final creative works. Walking ‘exceeds its signification’²⁰ when it becomes a creative act that forces the viewer to question the intention of the artist instead of the action itself. In this case walking has simplicity on its side. Its commonplace nature lures the viewer in and then forces them to question why the action is taking place.

Walking is an established practice within the field of contemporary art, yet it remains an untraditional medium, with unconventional materials and methods. Its near universality and everydayness are a key aspects of its appeal to cross-disciplinary researchers including writers, philosophers and artists, along with its intimacy with the body and its connections to ethical, low impact relations to place and environment. But as I delve into readings of new materialist theory, human and cultural geography, the study of and post-humanist ideas of place to fortify this thesis it is truly, my own body and creative practice of walking that edify this project

My practice of walking has highlighted its multi-sensory nature, as Matos Wunderlich notes; walking activates all the senses and in so doing opens new possibilities for thinking, connection and interaction.²¹ This field of ‘sensuous geographies’, a term coined by Paul Rodaway, sheds light on embodied experienced of place. In his book,

¹⁹ Carter, “Interest:The Ethics of Invention” in Barrett and Bolt, *Practice as Research*, 15.

²⁰ Carter, “Interest:The Ethics of Invention” in Barrett and Bolt, 15.

²¹ Filipa Matos Wunderlich, ‘Walking and Rhythmicity: Sensing Urban Space.’

Sensuous Geographies, Rodaway concentrates on “the senses and geographical experience.”²² He acknowledges that “Interest in sensuous geographies is not new”²³ Branches of the field include, “aesthetic geography”²⁴, “perception geography”²⁵ and “humanistic geography”²⁶ all of which inform the human experience with place.

This research captures a sensory connection to place through different modes including sound, images and writing. One inspiration has been the writing of Carrie Tiffany whose novel *Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living* features similar country to the one I have been working on: the mallee scrub of North Western Victoria.²⁷ Tiffany’s description of the visceral, multi-sensory connections of her characters to the earth and to the landscape — where they constantly taste, smell and handle it in different ways — has been an important reference in my creative process. Tiffany foregrounds the deep sensuality of the characters’ relationship to place through interacting with its elements sensorially, for example, when the protagonists collect soil, one of them observes:

I like to watch it pouring into the calico bags and I have to curb the impulse to reach out and feel it on my skin. It reminds me of the many fabrics I have handled and know by touch: silk, velvet,

²² P. Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies*, p. 4.

²³ Rodaway, 4.

²⁴ Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies*, p. 4.

²⁵ Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies*, p. 4.

²⁶ Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies*, p. 4.

²⁷ Carrie Tiffany, *Carrie Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living*, Sydney, NSW: Picador, 2012

rayonelle, chenille, Irish linen, lawn. My fingers alone could read the warp and weft the threads.²⁸

Along with texture, my project has also focused on the sound of place and landscape, and here a key point of reference has been the work of Janet Cardiff.

Sound as Place

Walking through the landscape with a pair of headphones on forces one to focus on the sound of a place. Transient nature of sound is different than the more concrete physical actions of my other work. In previous research trips, my creative work has focused on the visual. I used a filmmaker to document these works. Thus, I spent most of my time in front of the camera not behind it. I had to trust somebody else to make visual decisions about this work. I controlled how I dressed, and how I moved through the landscape. This time it's different. It feels like I am the only human presence for kilometres. The wind blows in bursts and much of the time it's hard to hear anything beyond that. Between the winds billowing bursts I get a glimpse of the stillness that exists here. There is the incessant buzzing of the flies around my head and the constant rhythmic sound of my feet moving through the smooth sand. Even the wind that encapsulates me most of the time has a whirring, whistling resonance. But it's mostly in the tranquil moments of the winds billowing bursts that I hear the subtle sounds that envelop the stillness here.

²⁸ T. Carry, *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living*, Sydney, NSW, Picador, 2012, p. 134.

Sound is a way to convey the specificity of being in a place, but sometimes it is difficult to tune into the subtlety of the multi-layered soundscape of a place, especially when it is shrouded in remote silence. During my final trip to Lake Mungo I walked the dune with a microphone and a pair of headphones on. I was astounded by how much sound existed in the apparent silence of this place. It was through this experience that I discovered the multi-layered elements of sound that existed in the dune, and connected with the work of Janet Cardiff, whose sound walks use technology to heighten a connection between participants and place. Cardiff does not physically accompany her participants on her sound walks, she accompanies them with her pre-recorded voice, drawing their attention to specific elements of each place throughout the walk.

Janet Cardiff is a Canadian born artist who lives and works in Berlin, Germany and Grindrod, British Columbia in collaboration with her husband George Bures Miller. They use binaural sound²⁹ recordings which create a three-dimensional sound experience for participants listening through headphones. The process of binaural recording involves placing one small microphone in the ears of a dummy, which is then

²⁹ Binaural sound, 'is a special recording technique and a particular way of approaching sound. Using a dummy's head (or a real one), one places two small microphones directly into the ears in order to capture exactly the sounds as they arrive. When this recording is played back over headphones, the pre-recorded events reproduce the sound environment as if it were lived.' T.R. Hanssen, 'The Whispering Voice: Materiality, Aural Qualities and the Reconstruction of Memories in the Works of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller', *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2010, pp. 39–54. Additionally, Cardiff herself discusses the details of sound in the opening chapter of 'Janet Cardiff, Anatomy of a walk' in Mirjam Schaub (ed), *Janet Cardiff: The Walk Book*, Walther König, Köln, p.4. Additional details about binaural sound can be found in Bruce Bartlett's *Stereo Microphone Techniques*. Boston, Focal Press, 1991, pp. 96-104.

carried *en route* as a proxy for future listeners. This creates a unique internal environment for the viewer and allows Cardiff to interact with her audience's 'inner voice'.³⁰ Cardiff speaks of her sound collages as 'physical cinema': 'the sound collages I make are like filmic soundtracks for the real world...they [give] you a sense of being in a film that is moving through space'.³¹

Image removed due to copyright

Figure 1 Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller Jenna Walk (Memory Field) 2006
Audio walk. Commissioned by the Culture Department of City of Jena Germany.
Documentation, exhibited in *Walk-on*, 2013, Sunderland, UK

In Cardiff's *Her Long Black Hair*, created in 2004 in New York City, the participant is given an audio CD player and a pair of headphones, along with five photographs. Cardiff's voice then guides each individual through Central Park, pointing out landmarks and sharing personal experiences with them. The overarching narrative about a dark-haired woman in the Park in 1965, shown in one of the photographs, is intercut with other reflections on the park: historical, literary and personal. Cardiff describes the text for *Her Long Black Hair* as a 'walking kind of script', that, 'meanders through ideas and time, from a physical grounding of the listener's body in Central

³⁰ T. Rigby Hanssen, 'The Whispering Voice: Materiality, Aural Qualities and the Reconstruction of Memories in the Works of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller', *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2010, p. 48.

³¹ Hanssen, *The Whispering Voice*, p. 39.

Park to historical ideas of photography.’³² The immersive quality of the binaural recording draws the viewer in and Cardiff’s voice immediately lulls them into her world. The personal nature of her words and the whispering quality of her voice are intimate and soothing. Her use of strikingly personal memories encourages the viewer to participate in the creation of a shared memory. As Justine Shih Pearson observes in her analysis of *Her Long Black Hair*, the work reveals ‘place as a layered, historically soaked thing constituting and constituted by our memories and imaginings.’³³ My creative walking practice draws on similar goals to evoke layered, shared memory in relationship to place. Preliminary research allows me to begin to establish a connection to a place but walking the site itself stirs my inner voice bringing up questions that relate to that place. I have discovered that direct bodily contact with a place encourages cerebral interaction and opens up my own inner voice. This is the voice that continually compels me to question, the sights, sounds, textures and smells that my body encounters in a specific place as I walk. Additionally, the fluid nature of these thoughts, often allow me to process ideas about creative work and writing.

Cardiff’s voice is all encompassing in her walks, engaging both the body and the mind. Her stream of consciousness style of speaking melds into the viewer’s thoughts. Art historians Anamarija Batista & Carina Lesky eloquently discuss *Her Long Black Hair* in relationship to the voice. They say:

³² Schaub (ed), *Janet Cardiff*, p.54.

³³ J. Shih Pearson, ‘Ruminations While (Audio)Walking: Time, Place, and the Body’, *Extensions Journal of Embodiment and Technology Extensions Journal*, vol. 5, (Performing Space and Place), July 2009, p. 3.

The narrative voice builds the frame of cinematic experience, creating gaps that we accept, blending them into what we really see. At the same time it colours our own associations with the thoughts and feelings passing through her mind. Involving us in the audible stream of consciousness, Cardiff has us meandering in her mind as we wander through the space directed by her voice. Doing so she also reflects on the issue and bodily state of walking.³⁴

Cardiff's relationship to voice is further explored in the sound walk *Ghost Machine* (2005), where video joins sound recording to add layers of meaning to place. In this work each participant is given headphones and a digital video camera with pre-recorded video. Cardiff's voice guides the viewer, beginning with an invitation, 'I'd like you to take a walk with me... Swivel the camera in this direction, follow the picture so that we can stay together'.³⁵ The voice continues to guide while the video flashes across the viewing screen and Cardiff leads her viewers through the deserted Hebbel-Theatre in Berlin. The role of voice shifts here slightly: Cardiff continues whispering in the participants' ears, but the video adds an additional exterior element that Cardiff's voice interacts with. There is a push and pull between the viewers' direct bodily experience with theatre and the aural and visual media that Cardiff provides each of her participants. It is Cardiff's voice that directs each individual experience. Her words meld with their thoughts and become part of their body in an intrasubjective experience in time.

³⁴ A. Batista, C. Lesky, 'Sidewalk Stories: Janet Cardiff's Audio-Visual Excursions', *Word & Image* vol. 31, no. 4, October 2, 2015, pp. 515–23.

³⁵ E. Nedelkopoulou, 'Walking Out on Our Bodies Participation as Ecstasis in Janet Cardiff's Walks', *Performance Research*, vol. 16, no. 4, December 1, 2011, p. 119.

Voice has played an important role in my creative walking practice and research methodology, as words, images and questions that flow through my mind as I walk and interact with each new location. I have captured this stream of consciousness through a creative writing process which plays an important role in my preliminary and post-performance processes. This process begins with a query, which is then enhanced by extensive research about each performance site. The research methods include reading about a place, looking at maps and images, talking to locals and conducting a series of preliminary walks. I consider these preliminary walks as sketches: uninhibited interactions with the site itself. The physicality of the walking motion brings up thoughts and emotions that inform the development of a performance. I try not to overthink these initial walks, and often experiment with documentation — of the place and my own bodily movements — through sketches, video, images and writing.

Through the study of Cardiff's work, I have discovered how the subtle elements of a soundscape can reflect the changing nature of place. Sound has movement, texture, and a deep ephemeral connection to site. Cardiff focuses her listeners on minute details of place. As I have come to know her work, the significance of sound in relationship to the places I have traversed has been heightened. The writing below comes from my creative practice journal. This entry, *Sounding a Mungo Dune*, delves into a research walking experience at Mungo used to gather sound bites to enrich a video soundtrack. Focusing on the aural elements of the dune deepened my corporeal knowledge of dunes subtle textures and sounds.

Sounding a Mungo Dune

Today I'm working with a boom microphone. It's encased in a windscreen and wrapped in a furry shield, called a wombat. Without this I'm not sure I'd be able to hear much over the wind. I put my headphones on and I'm surprised how much the mic picks up. The microphone is directional, which means it only picks up the sound directly in front of it. I point it at my feet and I'm immediately shocked at how much I can hear. I've always loved the sound and feeling of crunching beneath my feet. My creative walking practice and research have encouraged me to pay attention to the texture of a place. But before I put these headphones on, I was unaware of the wide array of sounds my body was making when it came in contact with this landscape. I can hear the sand shifting beneath my feet. Small branches crack. The bleached petrified lake mud snaps and pops beneath my boots. I can feel the wind whipping around my body, but the microphone shields me from its sound.

As I continue to point the microphone at my feet, I can hear my boots pushing the sand as I move forward. Eventually I walk across a hard-crusty surface and I'm startled by the way the sound changes. The crunching noises are significant. And I start to realize how much texture there is to this place. The earth beneath my feet begins to feel more fragile and transient. The microphone has silenced the wind and the sound of my body moving across the landscape is crystal clear. It's strange how the microphone and headphones force me to focus on the sound and texture of this place. I close my eyes for a moment and continue walking. The shifting sand and textures

beneath my feet become more obvious with the increased focus on sound. The headphones' amplification turns me inward to my body's movements and the landscapes responses. Even the sounds of the flies buzzing around me are amplified now. I'm more aware of the sun and wind on my body and their constant interactions with this place. Opening my eyes again I'm aware of the sun's brilliance. It's not easy walking across this landscape. There is weight to the earth beneath my feet that I haven't felt before. In my previous performance here, I was conscious of the stillness of this place, as I wandered across the landscape placing small ice blocks on the thirsty earth. I remember feeling the fragility of the terrain here, but now I can actually hear that fragility in my footsteps. The amplified sound of the constant movement beneath my feet makes me wonder about the ancient inhabitants of this place. What was the texture of the land here when the lake was full? Were there soft grasses and squishy mud beneath? Were the inhabitants aware of the shifts and sounds in the landscape? It's hard to imagine that this sun-baked landscape was once a thriving water culture.

In the distance I hear a magpie squawking. I look up and see it fly to a tree nearby and point my microphone in the same direction. The mic instantly picks up the sound and it's almost as if the magpie is sitting right in front of me. I move in a bit but the magpie is startled and flies off. I try pointing the microphone at the flies, but it's difficult to catch a direct sound because they are constantly moving. It's almost better to just stand still and let them fly in front of the microphone. Flies are so much a part of this experience. I have become so used to their presence, that I swat them away without even thinking about it now. Later in the afternoon, I take the microphone back down to the road and set out with my trolley. In my last performance here, I pushed the trolley down this road. I'm now holding the microphone with one hand and pushing the trolley with

the other. My auditory experience with this place varies greatly from my visual experience. There is texture and tone. It's not a concrete linear experience – the sounds shifts and the tones change with each step as I push the trolley.

In his book Sensuous Geographies, Paul Rodaway, discusses how our visual experience differs from our auditory experience. He says: “An auditory world unfolds like a tune, a visual world is presented already complete like a painting.”³⁶ Out here in the bush, with my headphones on, I have an embodied understanding of this. The auditory landscape and my interaction with the trolley “unfolds like a tune”. Many of these sounds I was unaware of during the initial performance. The terrain is varied and the sandy earth beneath my feet makes it difficult to push the trolley. In the past, I've always found the trolley noise overwhelming, the landscape seemed completely still compared to the loud clanging movement of the trolley, but with my headphones on I am able to focus on the subtle shifts of my bodily movement and the ambient noise. I point the microphone down at my feet and it focuses on the soft crunching of the foliage underneath. I can still hear the trolley movement, but now it's more focused on its lower parts. Much like my feet the wheels move across the earth. In the softer patches they actually move through the earth and I can hear the subtle tonal shifts in this movement. I've never thought of texture in relationship to sound, but this landscape seems to accentuate sound's ability to create a texture. It feels like more of an inner experience. Maybe it's because I'm so used to relying on my eyes and the visual information they constantly present. Focusing on the sound here has created cracks and fissures in my preliminary visual experience and opened up a

³⁶ Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies*, p. 80.

*more intimate auditory relationship with the landscape. It has also enhanced my haptic experience with this place, forcing me to think more deeply about it.*³⁷

Walking as knowing and not knowing

As mentioned above, my preliminary walks are much like sketches. Thinking about them in this way frees me up to pay attention and take in the details of a place before I commit to a full-blown performance with camera crews, props and costumes. These unfettered walks allow me time to absorb and observe the most basic elements of a place, the way the air smells, the colours and textures of the earth, vegetation and the human-made structures that break the landscape. Observing and taking in these basic elements frees my mind, and often before the walk is over, I am inundated with performance ideas. The resultant work emerges from a range of agential ‘intra-actions’, which I define as a bodily interaction with the non-human elements of place.³⁸ In the chapters that follow I explore this further in terms of my interactions with materials and processes.

Walking as creative research opens up a corporeal connection to place that simultaneously shifts my practice between the knowing and unknowing. The knowing

³⁷ From Creative Practice Journal Entry: *Sounding a Mungo Dune*

³⁸ Physicist Karen Barad coins the term **Intra-Actions** to replace ‘interactions, breaking away from an assumption of pre-established bodies and instead thinking through forces and constantly shifting agential ‘things’. See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2007 and Adam Kleinmann, ‘Intra-actions: An Interview of Karen Barad’, *Mousse*, 34, 2012, p.77

stems from my prior research, and repeated corporeal investigations. The unknowing embraces the continual changes that occur in a place even over short periods of time while walking. No two walks were ever the same. Even if I walked the same path two days in a row, my perception of the place shifted as did my attention and physical interaction. Lesley Duxbury, artist and researcher from Melbourne Victoria, discusses the state of 'not knowing' in her article 'If We Knew What We Were Doing', the title of which originates from a quote by Albert Einstein, '[if] we knew what we were doing, it wouldn't be called research, would it'.³⁹ Throughout the article Duxbury stresses the unique contributions artists make to the field of research through the use of their inimitable and sometimes 'idiosyncratic methodologies' that 'open up the problem or focus to possibility rather than probability'.⁴⁰ This PhD project embraces this idea of unknowing as part of its methodology, with the creative outcomes emerging directly out of an experimental walking practice.

Duxbury's ability to adapt to and create her own distinctive research methodologies for her creative research is instructive. Her PhD research investigated 'atmospheric phenomena...and the way weather permeates our lives'.⁴¹ Duxbury's investigations were deeply influenced by her personal encounters with environment. Her research interests extend to a deeper examination of the world through the senses. She says:

³⁹ L. Duxbury, 'If We Knew What We Were Doing,' *Scope* 4, no. 1 (2009): 97. The original source for this quote comes from, Tomi K. Sawyer. "If We Knew What We Were Doing, It Wouldn't Be Called Research, Would It?" *Chemical Biology and Drug Design* 71, no. 1 (2008): 1–2.

⁴⁰ Duxbury, p. 97.

⁴¹ Duxbury, *If We Knew What We Were Doing*, p. 98.

I use the phrase 'the ways we see the world' deliberately to denote not only the physical act of looking, but also the relationship of seeing to perception, of using the senses to acquire information about one's surroundings.⁴²

This sensual gathering of knowledge informs Duxbury's practice, is akin to my own. So too, walking is an essential, generative aspect of Duxbury's creative methodology. For example, her piece *Lost(for)words) – 24 words for snow* (2008), evolved out of a long remote walk in the Canadian Arctic. Prior to the walk Duxbury found herself stranded on the small island of Qikiqtarijua. While Duxbury waited for the weather to clear, she explored the island and interacted with the local Inuit population. Through this opportunity for investigation Duxbury became familiar with the culture of the island. It was here that she discovered that the Inuit people had multiple words for snow. After returning to Melbourne Duxbury did further research and discovered that there were actually twenty-four words for snow. She then began experimenting with materials that might embody ice and eventually happened on wax. She discovered that when refrigerated the wax visually mimicked the materiality of ice. The finished piece included twenty-four wax panels each with one of the 'Inuit words for snow'.⁴³

Walking, Duxbury's primary mode of transport informed this work as well as her broader creative research practice. In regards to walking and her research she says:

⁴² Duxbury, *If We Knew What We Were Doing*, p. 98.

⁴³ Duxbury, *If We Knew What We Were Doing*, p. 100.

In the context of research it may seem incongruous to include the simple act of walking, but it turned out to be not only an essential activity through which I gathered information from my project but also the way in which I have continued my research.⁴⁴

In my own research, walking has given me awareness of the material aspects of a place. On a walk along a dirt road from my flat in Irymple to King's Billabong on the Murray vineyards lined the road during the first couple of kilometres. At first, I was simply enamoured with the visual elements such as the ever-changing shades of green in the vineyards and the red dirt on both sides of the road. However, as time progressed, I discovered other sensual landmarks, that seemed almost like rural street signs. On the left-hand side of the road there was a black olive tree, and when the olives were ripe, they would drop onto the road. If I stepped on them, they splattered black purplish fluid and the squish beneath my boots was strangely satisfying. A little further down the road there was a tree with pink berries, the texture of which was slightly dryer and firmer as they would crackle and pop beneath my feet. My haptic knowledge of this place expanded over time, as I became accustomed to its distinctive textures, smells and sounds. I was compelled to rely on my body's innate corporeal ability to read a place and process this knowledge.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Duxbury, *If We Knew What We Were Doing*, p.98

Duxbury continues this discussion (and how walking spring-boarded her creative PhD research) in her chapter 'The Eye (And Mind) of the Beholder' in, L. Duxbury, E. Grierson, D. Waite (ed.) *Thinking Through Practice: Art as Research in the Academy*, RMIT Publishing, Melbourne, 2007, pp. 17-27.

⁴⁵ Máire Eithne O'Neill, "Corporeal Experience: A Haptic Way of Knowing," *Journal of Architectural Education* 55, no. 1 (September 2001): 3-4 Includes a good discussion on haptic knowledge.

Walking also acts as a way to investigate place and reflect upon the elements of that place during my preliminary processes. Duxbury discusses this in 'The Eye (And Mind) Of the Beholder', where she articulates how walking became 'a space for reflection.'⁴⁶

Duxbury articulates:

[my] main inspiration, if it can be called this, was the natural atmospheric environment that enveloped me and became a part of me, simply by breathing in and out.⁴⁷

Duxbury refers to writer Rebecca Solnit's ideas on walking as a contemplative state, and a 'rhythm of thinking.'⁴⁸ For Duxbury this generative process results in photographic and text-based works that layer the visual experience of landscapes and skyscapes with the contemplative interiority of language.⁴⁹

[Walk 1 - Trolley Ambulations: Camel Pad Track \(2014\)](#)

As the research developed further via the *Once upon a wander* series and the theoretical research, locations around Mildura and the River Murray acted as a

⁴⁶ Duxbury, 'The Eye (And Mind) of the Beholder' p.19

⁴⁷ Lesley Duxbury, "The Eye (and Mind) of the Beholder" (RMIT Publishing, 2008), 19.

⁴⁸ Duxbury, 19.

⁴⁹ This is an approach that underpins Duxbury's practice, drawing in language from scientific and meteorological observation, Romantic poetry, philosophy and the lexicon of words around atmosphere and environment. These are layered and combined with digital photography, prints and relief forks, as in the evocative *Phenomena of the Sky* works that include *Skyblue*, 1998, inkjet and relief prints, each 80 x 60 cm, and *Wonder (between the eye and sun)*, 2005, inkjet and screen print, each 75 x 95 cm. These are also grounded in explorations of specific, identified sites, such as the sky and land of Siglufjörður in Iceland, as explored in a collaborative exhibition with Paul Uhlmann: *Breathing Hemispheres* (skies 66.1100° N, 18.5300° W), Blindside Gallery, 2016.

springboard to venture further afield and to undertake the first durational performance work of the research, *Trolley Ambulations: Camel Pad Track* (2014), in the Camel Pad track in Hattah National Park, a site rich with layered history. Unlike the exploratory walks of *Once upon a Wander*, this walk was planned, researched and incorporated the use of material props and interventions in the form of the shopping trolley. The writing below comes from a creative practice journal entry of this experience:

Walking through sand is like walking through snow. The sand beneath my feet shifts, gravity pulls me to the earth and my body unconsciously lifts them through the warm, slick, sand. My feet slip and slide as if they're in cold, icy northern hemisphere snow. At times I struggle to stay upright. The grocery trolley I push slides along like a sled displacing the heavy smooth sand as it goes. The wheels refuse to turn in the sand and I must constantly readjust my body and pull or push the trolley.

The preliminary walking here was my first experience of walking in desert sand. Although I had never experienced this before there was a familiarity to it. Strangely I did not equate it to sand itself, but to the heavy, wet, weight of northern hemisphere snow, the antithesis of desert sand. I began, then, to realise the significance of corporeal knowing and the body's ability to retain corporeal memory even in altered situations. The site of the Camel Pad Track was suggested to me by local Mildura artist Daniel Downing, and is significant for its local history. Used as a salt transport route 100 years ago, Afghan camel teams carried their cargo of salt from the Sunset Country

to the Murray River, where supplies were exchanged for fresh water and goods before loading onto paddle steamers.⁵⁰ This is when it first occurred to me that I should walk with a grocery trolley (a material and subject I had worked with in my practice in the United States).⁵¹ I knew I wouldn't be able to harvest salt, but the historical connections to the consumption of salt in the area resonated with the trolley's links to consumerism.

Beyond recording my body's responses in writing, the performance-walk was self-documented with a Gopro camera attached to my chest.⁵² I spent a week experimenting with documentation, attaching the camera to the trolley itself, a bike helmet and then finally a chest harness. I did multiple test walks with the camera. By the time I was done, the track was littered with my footprints and trolley marks and felt like my outdoor studio. On my first run of the track with the trolley, I was startled by how difficult it was to push the trolley through the varied terrain, which included both desert sand and then Mallee Bush. There was something oddly satisfying about the corporeal challenge of moving the trolley through this terrain. I had to completely

⁵⁰ Visit Victoria, 'Camel Pad Track', <http://www.visitmelbourne.com/Regions/The-Murray/Things-to-do/Outdoor-activities/Walking-and-hiking/VV-Camel-Pad-Track.aspx>

⁵¹ This was a standard grocery store trolley borrowed from the Mildura IGA. I later bought this trolley from the store and refurbished and customized it for the Lake Mungo performances. This is further discussed in chapter 2.

⁵² The documentation for this piece was exhibited in the Mildura post-grad show *Praxis* in 2014. The video installation included a trolley filled with Murray River rock salt. The video documentation was played on a personal DVD player, which was placed in the baby seat of the trolley.

focus on my movements, shifting the trolley around objects, lifting the front and or back to navigate around holes and crevices in the track.

In hindsight, this performance informed many of the later decisions that were made in this research. The walk tested both my stamina and endurance. Through this experience, I came to understand my own body's ability to adjust to a harsh arid terrain. In his emphasis on the importance of remaking our relationship with place, Paul Carter describes how our instinct to build up our environments and ignore the many layers beneath our feet suppresses the earth's agency:

Our relationship to the ground, is culturally speaking, paradoxical, for we appreciate it only in so far as it bows down to our will. Let the ground rise up to resist us, let it prove porous, spongy, rough, irregular – let it assert its native title, its right to maintain its traditional surfaces.⁵³

Carter reflects upon our colonial tendency to ignore the vitality of the layers of earth beneath our feet in urban environments. It was not until I removed myself from these built up environments that I discovered the textures and layered sedimentation of the earth beneath my feet, the dust, the rocks, the sandy red earth and the all-consuming dunes and eroded natural sedimentation that existed in the remote areas at Mungo. Over the course of this practice-led PhD, I have walked many kilometres in urban, rural and remote areas. Through the practice of walking with a grocery trolley in these diverse environments I have come to understand the ever-shifting nature of the

⁵³ Paul Carter, *The Lie of the Land* (London ; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1996), 2.

ground beneath my feet. The urban surfaces are built up with concrete and steel, but in the bush at Mungo, discovered the wild and innate earth had an agency of its own. In *Trolley Ambulations: Camel Pad Track*, as in the major performance-walks at Mungo, there were multiple moments when I felt the ground fighting the trolley's progress, pulling the wheels down into the soft malleable earth and blocking our movement. However, the slow arduous movements brought forth a material understanding and respect for this place.

Conclusion

Walking within the field of contemporary art varies widely, with artists drawing from a diverse range of subjects, mediums and places, but the thread that links all of these artists is the direct bodily connection to place. Within the context of this framework, artists draw upon the process-oriented nature of walking, and the embodied sensual knowledge contained within the action of walking. The focus on Cardiff and Duxbury within the context of this chapter is important because of their varied approaches and bodily engagement with place. Cardiff engages her participants, immersing them in the subtle elements of place through the use of voice and visual cues, contained within recordings, videos and other media, deepening the participants' bodily experiences with place as they walk. Researching Cardiff's work drew my attention to the subtle elements contained within a soundscape and encouraged me to experiment with the use of sound in this project and voice in the writing that followed (*Sounding a Mungo Dune*). Duxbury on the other hand embraces the unknown, using walking as part of an investigative process in a foreign and remote landscape. The work she produced

after this walk relates directly to the experiences of place and culture that come from these investigative walks. I relate to Duxbury's use and experimentation with materials and the investigative nature of her walking practice.

Within the context of my own work I use walking as an investigative process that leads to the performance-based walking, which is enriched by the research-based work. My work differs from both Cardiff's and Duxbury's in that the physicality of my body and its relationship to place are key elements in the final creative output, the videos and still images focus on the corporeal interactions with place, drawing attention to the subtle textures and inclines. The trolley itself adds to these interactions, slowing down the walks and forcing me to contemplate each and every movement. This chapter investigated this generation of knowledge of place through the body when walking, and the attention brought to walking through performance. This connection was addressed through the work of Rodaway on the sensual and haptic connection of bodies and place. Through my performances and documentation I discovered the innate bodily connections through the historical and cultural elements contained within a place. In the case of the Camel Pad Track the historical knowledge about the track and the arduous process of moving the trolley through this diverse landscape drew attention to the colonial past of this country and the significant differences between the built- up environments and the natural elements of this place. Although this embodied knowledge is often felt before it is realized, the body learns and provokes questions through the sensual knowledge gained through a place.

Chapter 2, PROPS: LABOUR AND AGENCY THROUGH OBJECTS

The loose red earth beneath my feet sends plumes of dust in the air with every step. The earth here is soft and the trolley wheels move through it instead of gliding over it. The ice blocks at the bottom of the trolley basket collect the red dust and then drip it back into the sea of silky dirt beneath. Progress is limited. I push, pull tug and even kick at the bottom of the trolley fighting both earth and trolley. In this moment this arduous task seems almost impossible. But something deep inside my body compels me to continue. Each movement requires instantaneous thought and evaluation. Sometimes I'm able to push from the back of the trolley. Other times I have to move to the front, walk backwards and pull with all my might. There is nothing straightforward about this predicament and as we slowly move through this place, I feel and see the innate precarity of the situation and simultaneously begin to question my own body's limits.

Introduction

As my walking practice develops through this research, a key object enters as a co-conspirator in my performances, the shopping trolley. This chapter explores this in detail, firstly as a metaphor of consumerism, and then as a material object with its own agency. The trolley entered my creative research early in this project, I walked with it, refurbished it and interacted with it in multiple environments. Through these experiences, I began to question the interconnecting threads of this object, its meanings, and its material properties, and its potential to further my research as a key

prop, as I ask the question: how does the use of props change the way that agency and labour of the body are experienced in an experimental walking practice?

In my practice, I most often walk with a grocery trolley: an intrusive artefact that calls attention to itself but also acts as a prosthesis that changes my body's movements and interactions with a place. I consider the trolley as a material object, and contextualise this through discussion of political theorist Jane Bennett's work on 'vital materiality.'⁵⁴ Bennett's theories surrounding vital materiality have influenced both the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis and the way I have approached materials in my creative practice. Her methodological approach and scrutiny of things their movements and relationships to contemporary politics and culture have compelled me to pay particular attention to the materials and objects I have encountered in my creative practice. In this chapter, the work of walking artist Francis Alÿs generates my discussion of walking as a means of finding place, in foreign places, and the futility of labour. So too, the work of Richard Long, specifically the labour and physicality embedded in site specificity, to unpack the role of bodily and material interaction as a way of coming to knowledge of place. I become invested in my trolley through a process of refurbishment, that responds to the precarity of my experimental walking performances and their site, and explores how an object/prop can inform a walking practice.

⁵⁴ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

Trolley as icon of consumerism

The shopping trolley has become a symbol for consumerism, albeit an unruly consumerism, with the potential to go off track. Shopping trolleys grace the aisles of grocery store outlets all over the world encouraging consumers to fill their baskets. In the recently remodelled Pak N Pay in Sandton, South Africa you can enjoy a coffee at the coffee bar, pick up a fresh squeezed juice, or sip on a hand-crafted beer, all within the confines of this enormous superstore. In stark contrast, in the city of Baltimore Maryland (my former home), large areas of the city are considered food deserts. These low-income areas have limited numbers of grocery store outlets. Thus, consumers without cars are forced to walk long distances to purchase fresh produce and other staples, since the only markets near their homes are convenience stores that carry packaged foods and prepared meals.⁵⁵

It is this potential to critique consumerism that has underpinned the appearance of the shopping trolley in the works of sculptors, installation artists and photographers, who critique the ethics of consumption, express the agency of the shopping trolley, or simply revel in its design aesthetic. Sculptor Duane Hanson's *Supermarket Shopper* (1970) uses a "real" shopping trolley to heighten the hyperrealism of its middle-class female shopper of the 1970s, with a scarf wrapped around her head and pink plastic curlers peeking out the front. The trolley itself captures the excess of American consumption – stacks of Swanson frozen dinners, a large box of chocolate chip cookies, Coca Cola, Purina dog food, and a variety of other typical middle-class staples and junk

⁵⁵ "Food Deserts and the Policy Power of Maps," accessed November 9, 2019, <https://www.governing.com/topics/health-human-services/gov-baltimore-mapping-food-deserts-johns-hopkins.html>.

food. In turn the corporeal weight of both the woman and the trolley manifest the overconsumption of the era. While Hanson's sculpture literally portrays the excess of consumerism, artist, curator, lecturer and researcher Tom Sowden's artist-book *Fiftytwo Shopping Trolleys* delves playfully into the material individuality of the trolley and its ever-evolving designs. Sowden isolates the trolleys on the page of this photo-book that directly references Ed Ruscha's first photobook *TwentySix Gasoline Stations* (1962). Each individual trolley is presented valorized as a portrait, each unique in their colour, style and the composition of the image. On the other hand, in his book *Homeless People* (2004), Sowden focuses on the rogue trolley outside the context of the grocery store. These abandoned trolleys are left in awkward positions, for example on the edge of a pier, or in the bushes on the side of the road. The odd placements of these "homeless" trolleys conjures the movement that proceeded their abandonment. The trolley left sitting on the end of a pier, could have easily been pushed into the water, thus the viewer is left to wonder, why the trolley thief stopped just short of the final splash. But in spite of the displacement of these trolleys, the viewer is never left to question what they are looking at. The trolley's iconic looks always identify it as a mobile object of consumerism that has infiltrated the urban landscape and in doing so it has become a socially diverse object that continually interacts with its human and non-human counterparts both inside and outside its retail outlet.⁵⁶ Similarly, Australian photographer and filmmaker Matthew Sleeth's photobook *Call of the Wild* also contains images of abandoned grocery trolleys in the urban environment. Like

⁵⁶ Catherine Gudis, "Pushed around : Material Culture, Dispossession, and the American Shopping Cart," *History and Material Culture*, September 2017, 146, doi:10.4324/9781315165776-7.

Sowden's book these images focus on the unique placement of abandoned trolleys, leaving the viewer to wonder how and why each trolley was abandoned. In stark contrast, Brooklyn, New York, painter and installation artist Soumiya Lakshmi Krishnaswamy's *Divine*⁵⁷ *the Drag Shopping Cart* (2010) exudes the excess of suburban consumption. An exotic rarity in urban New York City, where space is such a profound commodity and consumers buy in smaller quantities, in Krishnaswamy's eyes grocery trolleys only exist within the context of the outer limits of the city and the excess of suburbia: '...Big things, and Big Box stores, and Super Markets, where they buy Lots of Things that are Shiny and Wonderful and Big!'. Krishnaswamy's trolley is thickly encased in pink and silver glitter from the push bar to the wheels, to the baby straps in the front of the trolley. This thick crust of glitter and glue exudes the excess of suburban consumption. This connection to consumption is central to all these examples of the trolley as a motif in contemporary art.

Image removed due to copyright

Figure 2 Soumiya Lakshmi Krishnaswamy *Divine the Drag shopping Cart* (2010)
Exhibited in *Everything Must Go*, Anne Arrundel Community College Gallery,

⁵⁷ It should be noted that "Divine" is a reference to the star who acted and co-directed with Baltimore filmmaker John Waters from 1966- 1988.

The shopping trolley first came into my work whilst undertaking my Masters program in the USA. My neighbourhood in Baltimore was always littered with abandoned shopping trolleys that were strewn everywhere: hanging off curbs, sitting in the middle of the sidewalks and lounging in alleyways. I videotaped myself shopping in the supermarket and harvesting vegetables from my community garden into the trolleys. The final videos were shown on small screens in the front seats of the trolleys during my MFA thesis show. These containers for sustenance highlighted the contrasts between the convenience of processed foods and the labour involved in whole foods, bringing to awareness the contradictions involved in nourishing the human body and linking back to consumerism via the trolley's iconic appearance. A year later the shopping trolley crept back into my creative practice, whilst looking for alternative ways to grow edibles in this urban environment. By lining the shopping trolleys with coco fibre, I was able to plant portable gardens containing everything from lettuce and carrots to strawberries, tomatoes and zucchini. This experimentation led to a twelve-cart installation that involved planting and maintaining the piece. The mundane labour involved in this installation compelled me to reflect upon the significance of everyday tasks, and the simple movements of my body as I watered, pulled weeds, planted seeds and harvested the produce. These essential daily tasks were simple and satisfying and resonated with my audience. Although the sustainable nature of the installation was often a topic of conversation, the trolley's iconic design continually emphasised the inextricable links between, production, consumption and consumerism. I explore the materiality of the trolley further below, beginning with a textual reflection on the trolley's material agency as imagined from the trolley's own perspective.

We often live tame, repetitious lives within the confines our retail outlets. In our natural consumerist habitat, we consistently interact with both people and things. We glide up and down the white slick linoleum aisles and patiently wait while our hand-picked consumer selects his or her products and places them in the depths of our baskets. Most of us find comfort in these banal social interactions with customers, store clerks and each other. Our lives are never dull. Regardless of our whereabouts we are social material beasts that thrive on human and object interaction. The grocery store is our home. We love the familiar sounds, textures, weights and smells of the material objects that line the shelves, freezers and refrigerator cases of our home. We all have favourite items, some of us enjoy the sweet crackle of lolly packaging, others savour the cool weight of canned goods, the sweet aromatics of bakery items or the moist weight of fruits and vegetables. But the best part of our day is when our customers wheel us out to the parking lot. The rough asphalt tickles our rubber wheels and the temperature shifts awaken our feral sides. Customers tend to leave us in odd places where we are often able to roll off on our own and crash into each other. Sometimes we even have contests to see how far we are able to roll without crashing into something. The wildest among us, run into cars and chase people if we can manage to free ourselves from the curb or post we are propped up against. Eventually the trolley wranglers come out and round us up. But even this roundup is enjoyable for most of us because we are allowed to nest within each other and slither through the parking lot like a giant serpent. We find comfort in the interconnected nature of this process. With that said, some of

the more rogue members of our pack prefer to avoid the roundup all together. They carefully roll behind trees or telephone poles on the outskirts of the parking lot and wait for similarly rebellious humans to free them from their grocery store bondage. After our store closes at midnight, these rebel trolleys wait for their human counterparts to push them down hills, ride them through the alleyways, and roll freely through the wild urban environment. Some end up back in our store parking lot and fall back in line with the pack. Others, are overturned and left on sidewalks or nature strips. During the day these truant trollies often congregate on street corners. Many are never recovered and live out the rest of their lives in feral bliss, waiting for the sun to go down so they can once again ride savagely through the streets.

The morning after I wrote the above text, I was driving through a neighbourhood near the university. This particular neighbourhood was usually littered with a few trolleys. But that day they were everywhere - overturned on front lawns and nature strips, sitting in the middle of the footpaths and lounging on the curbs. It was almost as though they had set out to show off their radical 'material agency'.⁵⁸ The experience forever changed the way that I look at trolleys and their mysterious movements about the city. Although it is nearly impossible for trolleys to move about without a human hand, it is rare that one sees the action that proceeds the abandonment of a trolley. Discarded trolleys are the remanent of a carnal action, their physical position, circumstance and surroundings, provide hints that stimulate the imagination of urban

⁵⁸ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, ix.

dwellers. The use of the first-person preamble to this section, allowed me to insert myself into the life of a trolley and to imagine the tactile and sensual experiences of this material object. I embarked upon this writing with an open mind allowing my personal experiences with the shopping trolley to lead me, simultaneously learning about this unique mobile material object's agential interactions both within the confines of the shopping centre and its experiences as a material agent in urban centres around the world. In the early months of this project, the trolley's mysterious movements were a great source of wonder and frustration. I had never seen a trolley move in the urban environment and continually questioned how these movements occurred. But as I moved through the process, I embraced the uncomfortable feelings of knowing and unknowing this material object and eventually allowed it to lead the research.

The complex mobile materiality of the trolley, compelled me to consider a research methodology that would allow me to explore the trolley through its links to consumerism, its mobile existence in an urban environment, and its relationship to my body and the Mungo landscape. These interconnecting threads all linked back to the durability and shifting mobility of the trolley in this project. New materialism endeavours to draw attention to the ontological nature of matter both organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate. This philosophical movement draws from both philosophy and science to address "the material underpinnings of daily life."⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Ian Buchanan, "New Materialism," in *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2018), <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198794790.001.0001/acref-9780198794790-e-778>.

This new materialist methodology has been developed by many researchers such as political theorist, Jane Bennett, who delves into the “vibrant materiality” of things defining this as “the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans, but also to act as quasi agents. Early in my candidature I connected to Bennett’s ‘thing power’ on the significance of things and how they affect the human discourse surrounding matter itself. I was intrigued by her slow and close examination of “things” and theoretical breakdowns of the objects she investigated. Reading Bennett over and over again, writing and then interacting with the river, the trolley and the ice block shifted my thinking and compelled me to pay close attention to the materials I was working with and begin to breakdown their agential qualities, and further examine the connecting threads of their vitality. For example, I became familiar with the durability and mobile agency of the trolley as I refurbished it, breaking down the heavy steel and then welding back together. It was through these material interactions with the trolley, that I began to understand how it was able to exist in and move about the urban landscape for days, months and even years. Some of these material encounters also later inspired creative writing about the objects and materials I was interacting with. Some of these writings have been included in this thesis. As I refurbished the trolley, I moved through the Mildura community, picking up supplies and designing the alterations and learning how to weld. These diverse processes and actions drew attention to the sociality of materiality running throughout the performance.

Tracks of thinking

In this research project, the trolley was first used as part of the *Trolley Ambulations: Camel Pad Track* walk (as discussed in chapter one), and then (customised to suit the rugged terrain at Mungo) became central to the works produced at Mungo as a device for investigating the terrain and connecting my bodily interactions with the earth beneath my feet. The trolley accentuated the extreme terrains, adding additional difficulty and obstacles and supported the performance by holding the ice. On the Camel Pad Track and in the main walks at Mungo the trolley was both an aid and a hindrance, a support and an obstacle. It had a symbolic function, as a signifier of consumerism and colonialism, but was also an object that changed the way I understood my own labour and physicality in negotiating the landscape. Like the trolley, I was out of place at Mungo, and pushing and pulling it across the dirt and sand changed the way I understood my own agency and as well as my walking as research.

Walking opens things out: it explodes the sense of connections between disparate phenomena. The exertions of the body, the labour, the way stamina and endurance are foreground, focuses and aligns body and mind; this acuteness tunes me into my own stream of consciousness. American writer Rebecca Solnit speaks of the relationship of walking and thinking. She says:

The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts. This creates an odd consonance between internal and external passage, one that suggests that the mind is also a landscape of sorts and that walking is one way to

traverse it. A new thought often seems like a feature of the landscape that was there all along as though thinking were traveling rather than making. And so one aspect of the history of walking is the history of thinking made concrete for the motions of the mind cannot be traced, but those of the feet can.⁶⁰

My experience on the Camel Pad Track compelled me to consider my thoughts in relationship to the landscape, and the contrast between the drift of my thinking and the focused labour of my body. The trolley's loud clanking drifted into the silence much like my thoughts. The physical traces of my body and the trolley were more concrete and accumulative. The trolley's small wheels produced deep tracks that accompanied my own footprints in the soft sand and soil along the track.

These movements of both body and mind on the earth beneath my feet and the vastness of space in front of me, encased both my feet and the small trolley wheels and drew us both into the earth. At times we skidded across the earth avoiding crevices. I had to tilt and sometimes even lift, the trolley, leaving very few markings behind. The tracks were a record of these movements recording both movement and time. In retrospect, I realize this vulnerability stemmed from the ephemerality embedded in the footprints and markings that were left behind. The elements, wind, rain and movement of the sand, had created an ephemeral record, which would eventually be absorbed back into the sand and walked over by the human and non-

⁶⁰ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 5–6.

human visitors and inhabitants of this place. The stream of consciousness thoughts that floated through my mind came and went.

Much of the time these thoughts came in the form of questions that encouraged further research into the history of the track. For example, my struggle with the empty trolley often seemed futile, but this struggle compelled me to question the experience of the 'Afghan cameleers'⁶¹. Did they struggle along this track? Were there accumulative traces of their presence on the track and how long did these traces remain? Further research revealed that these "Afghan camaleers"⁶² were often used from "1880 - 1920s because they were more economical than other forms of transport".⁶³ Apparently, "Camels cost little to feed, could go for days without water, didn't require shoeing and an Afghan cameleer's pay was 75% cheaper than a European teamster."⁶⁴ Much of this research was done during the two-week period of time I was walking the track and continually infiltrated my thoughts as I pushed, pulled and dragged the trolley along the trolley back and forth along the track. The corporeal learning and sensuous knowledge that was gained while walking was starkly different than the historical research I was doing. It was through my body I came to know the physical elements of the track. The trolley accentuated my body's encounters with the

⁶¹ Derrick Stone, *Walks, Tracks and Trails of Victoria*. (Victoria: CSIRO PUBLISHING, 2009), 37.

⁶² Stone, 37.

⁶³ Stone, 37.

⁶⁴ Stone, 37.

earth beneath my feet, the textures, the smells and the corporeal experience consistently opened my mind.

My movements were futile — but ironically ‘productive’ in Camus’ sense. I had walked the track without a trolley and done other multiple walks in the area, but I often felt like something was missing. As I walked I became aware of how my body’s interaction with this topography was jogging my memory. For example, the way my body struggled with the hot slick sand and reminded me of the weight and slippery texture of northern hemisphere snow. Even the way my trolley reacted with the sand threw me back to childhood memories of pulling a sled. In fact, the trolley seemed to mimic a sled; its wheels refused to turn in the sand and I constantly had to readjust my body’s position in relationship to the trolley in order to move the wheels forward along the path. Although the trolley complicated my movements, it required me to pay attention to the subtle elements of this place. As I reflect back on my experience at the Camel Pad Track I am now aware of my body’s role in this preliminary project and understand the innate corporeal knowledge that my body stored. Although I struggled to interact with the sand, the soft dirt, the trolley and the other elements, my body spontaneously responded and reacted to the elements of this new place. It also adjusted the trolley that I pushed and pulled along the path. These movements were so automatic that they felt choreographed. It was my body’s automatic sensual responses that moved me forward step by step.

Walking and the power of futility

My creative practice in Australia has developed out of a desire to understand the social, cultural, political, and historical aspects of the places I traverse in Mildura region of Victoria and Mungo National Park in Eastern New South Wales. The Belgian-born, Mexico-based artist Francis Alÿs's work has been central to this research in his relationship to walking through a foreign environment, undertaking acts of futility, and pushing along an ice block. Alÿs's work begins with preliminary processes of observing the culture, people, politics and history of a location, which he then distils into futile, everyday actions. These actions are then performed to interact with, disrupt and/or draw attention to unique cultural urban experiences. Alÿs's interactions in foreign environments resonate strongly in my practice, in particular the presence of futility. Of his preliminary experience in Mexico City, Alÿs says, "The city turned into an open laboratory for testing and experimenting in all kinds of contradictory directions. I was new in town. Nobody cared. I had nothing to prove to anyone but myself."⁶⁵ These early observations enabled Alÿs to delve into the culture of Mexico City while still acknowledging the preconceptions he carried with his European background. In an interview with Richard Ferguson, Alÿs goes onto say: "It gave me an enormous sense of freedom and an open-ended time frame to build a language, an attitude, away from the world and culture (European) that I saw as saturated with information."⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Cuauhtémoc Medina et al., *Francis Alÿs* (London: Phaidon Press, 2007), 13.

⁶⁶ Medina et al., 13.

In his performance *Turista* (1994), Alÿs stood at the border of the cathedral in Mexico City with a sign containing the word “turista” (‘tourist’) amongst a line-up of local service and craftsmen including: Plomero: Plumber and general gas, Electricista: Electrical technician, Turista: tourist (Alÿs), Pintor y Yesero: Painter and Plasterer, Coladeras Caños Fregaderos: Scaffolding Pumps Sinks. In regards to this performance Alÿs says: “I was denouncing but also testing my own status, that of a foreigner or gringo. How far can I belong to this place? How much can I judge it? Am I participant or observer?”⁶⁷ These questions and observations were formative in the evolution of Alÿs’ continued interactions with place both in Mexico City and elsewhere.

Francis Alÿs, *Turista*, Mexico city (1994)

Alÿs’s notebooks are filled with questions and ideas that often lead to walking actions in Mexico City and abroad. These notebooks act as workbooks/sketchbooks that allow Alÿs to shift between words and images. In an interview with visual artist Carla Faesler, Alÿs discusses the interdisciplinarity of his preliminary processes and his notebook:

⁶⁷ Medina et al., 13.

It's a mix of words, sketches and drawings that throughout the pages form a rebus, a hieroglyph. When I can't find the word I'm looking for, I substitute it with a figure or a visual sign, but when I can't express something through pictograms the words take over. ... It's a constant dance between words and images.⁶⁸

Alÿs is not bound by medium or process in his performance works and consistently chooses a range of materials. He may use a block of ice (*Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing*, (1996), a Volkswagen beetle (*Rehearsal I*, 1999–2001), or a toy dog on wheels to interact with (*The Collector*, 1991-2006). From 1990 to 1992 he walked the streets of Mexico City with a magnetic toy. The absurdity of the action started local discussion about the project. Alÿs explains:

*After three days people started talking about the crazy gringo walking around with his magnetized dog, but after seven days the story, the anecdote had remained even though the characters were gone.*⁶⁹

These indirect interactions with the local people and places created stories that eventually merged with the culture itself. As in my own research, the investigation and practice are interdisciplinary assemblages as they respond to the unique situation of coming to knowledge both cultural and geographic. As this knowledge is always

⁶⁸ Francis Alÿs and Carla Faesler, "FRANCIS ALÿS," *BOMB*, no. 116 (2011): 66.

⁶⁹ Ibid

bound to remain partial and incomplete, the search for it is somewhat futile, such that futility and absurdity underpins the practice. There are many examples of futility in Alÿs' work. For instance, in *Barrendeors (2004)* Alÿs organized a line of street sweepers to push garbage through the streets of Mexico City until the mass became so large they were unable to push the garbage any further. Critic Grant Kester suggests that Alÿs's interest in futility is directly connected to the geopolitical issues of the state, in the Latin American political context and more specifically in Mexico City itself.

Alÿs, has also worked with ice. In the walking performance *Paradox of Praxis 1. (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing) (1997)* the artist pushes a large block of ice through the streets of Mexico City, until it melts, over a nine-hour period of time. Throughout the performance Alÿs' body is in constant contact with the ice block. He begins bent over pushing it and then switches between pushing with arms to pushing with his legs and kicking with his feet. He adjusts his body position over and over again as the ice block continues to shrink. The block leaves a trail of erratic wetness. The marks left behind are uneven as the ice reacts to the varied surfaces throughout the city. Sometimes the marks are large and wet, other times the wetness left behind is minimal. The varied surface mould and shift the bottom of the ice block which in turn, once again shifts the liquid marks left behind. As the ice block becomes smaller the marks left behind are almost non-existent. The ice shrinks to the size of a small stone that Alÿs is able to kick across the pavement with ease. At this stage the wetness that is left behind is negligible, almost non-existent and invisible to the eye of the camera. Finally, Alÿs stops and the ice block rests in front of a group of children

who watch as the remaining ice melts into a small puddle, which in time will evaporate leaving only the memory of the solid object that began the performance.

The edited video documentation of the performance focuses the labour and ephemeral object interaction. *Paradox of Praxis 1. (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing)* focuses on a temporal object that will shrink and change over the course of the performance, engaging with the performer and capturing the attention of people on the streets as it continually shrinks in size and changes shape throughout the performance. The video is cut to focus on the subtle elements of the ice blocks changing nature and Alÿs' bodily responses to those changes. Additionally, the use of jump cuts, which are a style of editing that move the viewer ahead in time abruptly have been used. The use of this type of cut, permits the viewer to witness the comparative shrinking of the ice block and the shifts in the intensity of the bodily labour involved in moving the ice block through the streets. The close-up shots shift the perspective to allow for a deeper understanding of the experience from perspective of Alÿs, the ice and onlookers. This shifting perspective relates to the ideas of ice, time and object interaction discussed in this thesis. In the early parts of the performance the viewer sees Alÿs' cold, wet, reddened hands as he moves the block. The shifting weight of the object is apparent throughout the performance, but the surfaces that it gles over have little effect on its movement. At one-point Alÿs, tips the now mid-size ice block down a set of cement steps. The block is small enough, that It would be easy for him to simply pick it up and and carry it down the stairs, but instead he pushes and then carefully tips it down each stair. He does this with care, as if he is moving a fragile object. Both hands are in constant contact with the block of ice. The

movement insinuates his attachment to the object and his understanding of the fragile materiality of the ice. Like many of Alys' performances this piece has a link to Latin American politics. Art Historian Mette Gieskes discusses these links, she says,

Another instance of productive unmaking, Paradox of Praxis is a parody of unproductive hardship involved in the daily survival tactics of many labouring people in Latin America, playing out the disproportionate relation between maximum effort and minimum outcome.⁷⁰

Gieskes goes on to discuss how the performance "explores the question of whether art can lead to true change or whether art really is without purpose."⁷¹ In both instances, Alys' interest in futility is a key element of the performance. The temporality of both the performance and the ice block itself link back to cyclical time – the freezing, melting and evaporating that occurs all while Alys is pushing and/or kicking the ice block through the streets of Mexico City.

Futility itself has been prevalent theme in my creative practice portion of this project, as I have discovered that the apparently futile practice of aimless walking harbours within its key insights into the relation between body, place and knowledge. I have

⁷⁰ Mette Gieskes, "The Green Line: Potency, Absurdity, and Disruption of Dichotomy in Francis Alys's Intervention in Jerusalem," in *The Imagined and Real Jerusalem in Art and Architecture*, ed. Jeroen Goudeau, Mariëtte Verhoeven, and Wouter Weijers (Brill, 2014), 55, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctt1w8h335.8>.

⁷¹ Gieskes, 55.

come to embrace these seemingly futile actions. Walking as a creative practice turns the definition of futility on its head. Often the action might seem useless, but sometimes embracing a futile action can bring awareness to deeply buried, social, cultural or political issues. Walking with the grocery trolley continually slowed my ability to move across the Mungo landscape. In my own mind I questioned the futility of the action and the miniscule amounts of water I was leaving in the landscape as I deliberately moved across it. My hope was that the video documentation of the performance would draw attention to the lack of water at Mungo and compel the viewer to question the significance of the traditional owner's connections to the previous inhabitants of this place. In the second performance the remote eroded landscape highlighted the evidence of the ancient waters that continually rose and receded. This was in stark contrast to the futility of the water that dripped from the ice in my grocery trolley and was almost immediately absorbed by the dust and sand beneath my feet.

The myth of Sisyphus has been applied by many critics and commentators to the work of Alÿs, with its deliberate expending of energy on physical tasks with no direct purpose or function.⁷² My walks across Mungo with the trolley of melting ice fall into the same Sisyphean futility. Delving into the myth of Sisyphus can unearth some of the questions that I find most pertinent to my own creative walking practice and that of

⁷² Kerr Houston, "Francis Alÿs: A Story of Negotiation," *Art Inquiries* 17, no. 1 (2016): 74.

Allys. Sisyphus⁷³ a mythical Greek character reaped havoc while on earth, constantly irritating the gods with his abominable human behaviour. When death finally overcame him, the gods punished him with the eternal labour of pushing an enormous boulder up a steep incline. Each time he reached the top, the boulder would roll back down and Sisyphus would begin the rolling process again. Sisyphus' punishment was endless, repetitive labour without purpose, which conventionally we would assume to be a cruel fate. However, existential philosopher Albert Camus radically reinterpreted this condemnation to futility. To Camus, Sisyphus was the "absurd hero...as much through his passions as through his torture."⁷⁴ For Camus it is Sisyphus' descent, the actual return to the boulder at the bottom of the hill that interests him most. He says,

That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.⁷⁵

Camus goes on to acknowledge that the complex tragedy of the myth is Sisyphus' consciousness of his condition: "Sisyphus proletarian of the gods, powerless and

⁷³ There are numerous versions of the Greek myth of Sisyphus, my narrative, comes from the information contained in: Kinsey, Brian. *Heroes and Heroines of Greece and Rome*. Tarrytown, SINGAPORE: Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited, 2012. P. 287 – 288 .

⁷⁴ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays*, [1st American ed.]. (New York: Knopf, 1955), 120.

⁷⁵ Camus, 121.

rebellious knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent.”⁷⁶ So one might ask, is possible that Sisyphus ever experienced happiness, joy, or even mere satisfaction in his mountainous underworld domain? According to Camus, within futility lies freedom.

At first the struggle may have seemed insurmountable, but with each step Sisyphus became more familiar with both his rock and his mountain. He began to understand the consistency of the soil or clay beneath his feet and the weight and shape of his boulder. During his initial ascent, Sisyphus’ struggle must have been intense. He may have fought to find a proper foothold. Gradually, he became more and more familiar with his own purgatory/place. It is difficult to ascertain the emotions that Sisyphus may have felt as he watched his boulder roll down the mountain, but there must have been a momentary sense of relief, before the reality of his situation hit again. In Sisyphus’ case, the gods set the parameters for his torture, based upon his mortal sins. He had little choice in regard to the mountain or the boulder, but he did still have options in regards to his path. Camus sheds light on this when he discusses Sisyphus relationship to “his rock”⁷⁷: “ All Sisyphus’ silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment silences all his idols.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Camus, 121.

⁷⁷ Camus, 123.

⁷⁸ Camus, 123.

Time passes differently once a task becomes futile. In the repeated moment, Sisyphus moves outside of functional ideas of time. It is this aspect of Camus' Sisyphus, that is, the move outside of purposeful time, that art theorist Boris Groys invokes when discussing Alÿs' work, specifically *Politics of Rehearsal* (2007). Groys identifies in the work, 'wasted, non-teleological time that does not lead to any result, any endpoint, any climax as the time of rehearsal'.⁷⁹ For Groys, this is identifiably contemporary practice, in that it is always present. Arguably, this also means that knowledge of matter and site is also constantly present. A mountain is a three-dimensional form and thus it seems that Sisyphus had choices about his path. On his first trek up the mountain Sisyphus must have been fully consumed by the task at hand – pushing with all of his might and trying to find a new foot hold with each step. But with each subsequent trip, he came to know his mountain and his boulder a little better. He understood the soil beneath his feet and found new ways to grip, press and push his boulder up the hill. One might also imagine the satisfaction and relief that he felt as he watched the boulder roll back down to the underworld time after time.

In my own creative walking practice, I have the opportunity to set my own parameters. These develop out of bodily contact and observation of a place. In terms of the Mungo performances, I walked portions of all three sites before each performance. The trolley that becomes my accompanying object, is refurbished with large rugged wheels that would allow it to traverse the Mungo terrain more easily. One of the most frustratingly

⁷⁹ Boris Groys, 'Comrades of Time', *EFlux Journal*, #11 - December 2009

futile moments of the performances occurred at the first site during the performance *Basin Ambulations: Melt*. I had pushed the trolley into a small gully. The earth was soft beneath the wheels and the ice blocks had started to melt. I attempted to move the trolley up the hill. I pushed from back, then pulled from the front, but the trolley and earth beneath its wheels seemed to just fight harder against my body's limited strength. The attempts to make any progress up the hill were futile. Each time I gained a few centimetres the trolley would fight against my bodily strength and roll back a few centimetres. Eventually I had to admit failure and readjust my intentions. I had hoped to push the trolley to the predetermined site, but I didn't have the strength or the endurance. I abandoned the trolley at the bottom of the gully, packed the ice blocks into my shopping bag and hiked the rest of the way into my site. It was a minor setback of only a few metres, but it forced me to contemplate my own bodily limitations in relationship to the trolley and the rugged Mungo terrain. The futility and failure of the moment became even more apparent, when I began sifting through the video footage that captured the moment from multiple angles.

How do I reconcile my own failure to complete a simple task? This brief moment seemed like an eternity to me. Time itself seemed to swirl around my bodily limitations, taunting me with its endlessness. Gravity was not my friend and fought mightily against the trolley's tangled wheels.



Basin Ambulations: Melt(Video Still)

Reflecting back to Sisyphus one might gather that some of the “complex geographical experiences” of his life may have helped him creatively engage with the three-dimensional space created for him in the underworld. Did the texture of the mountain — damp earth, rocky ledges, and shrubbery — impact the experience with his boulder? Did the boulder change over time, growing larger as it lifted the varied textures of the mountain? Did it shrink as it rolled back down to the foot of the mountain? Did this frustrate Sisyphus, or did he eventually grow to enjoy these, corporeal challenges? Through empathetic engagement we are able to gain a deeper understanding of futility in Sisyphus’ situation and then delve into and engage with the futility of a situation. Apparent futility can offer a space for reflection and embodied knowledge free from the demands and expectations of conventional, productivist thinking.

In retrospect I realize that my experience at Mungo was filled with both emotional and physical futility. As I pushed the trolley through the Mungo landscape I was filled with frustration, progress was slow and I constantly had to think about every single foot step and movement. I questioned my bodily intentions, and often felt like I would never see the end of this walk. As I finally approached the sand dune at Mungo, its presence in the distance gave me hope. I knew that I would abandon the trolley and continue on foot. The potential of an unfettered trolley free walk was what kept me going. When I finally reached the dune, packed my ice blocks in my shopping bag and began to climb the dune. I felt freed. As I approached the top of the dune a silence encased me and it was this hush that created both a sense of satisfaction and emotional relief.

In her article 'Corporeal Experience: A Haptic Way of Knowing', Marie O'Neil sheds light on the body's relationship to place by applying psychologist Edwin Boring's theories of somasthesis, the "recognized the sensibility of the body to itself"⁸⁰. O'Neil goes onto explain that "Somasthetic and haptic perceptions are gained through corporeal activity and physical work. They allow us to know places in intimate and unself-conscious ways that visual sensibilities cannot describe."⁸¹ My creative walking

⁸⁰ O'Neill, Máire Eithne. "Corporeal Experience: A Haptic Way of Knowing." *Journal of Architectural Education* 55, no. 1 (September 1, 2001): 3–12. <https://doi.org/10.1162/104648801753168765>.

⁸¹ O'Neill, "Corporeal Experience," 4. It should also be noted that O'Neil discusses the roots of haptic perception, "Haptic perception is a term used in psychology to describe a holistic way of understanding three-dimensional space. The word *haptic* from a Greek term meaning *to lay hold of*, is used to

practice both in the United States and Australia has consistently shaped my corporeal relationship to place. I now understand these walking experiences have allowed me to gain a “more complex geographical”⁸² understanding of each place. Since, most of these walking performances have taken place with an empty grocery trolley, I have come to know these places through my own corporeal labour. Moving the trolley required slow deliberate movements, which encouraged me to ponder the transformation of the Mungo landscape from ancient water culture this arid desert landscape that I now traversed. This awareness related to my bodily connections to the land and its own agency which in turn compelled me to listen and think about the traditional owners the Paakantji/Barkindji, Ngampaa, and Mutthi Mutthi and their ancestors that existed here hundreds of years ago. My haptic connections to the earth, and liquid dripping from the ice blocks and the dusty porous earth beneath my feet seemed to encourage deep listening throughout the performance.

This critical juncture informed a decisive moment. Do I continue with the trolley, what is its purpose? To me, the material superpower of this object is its mobility and durability. But it had failed me, or had I failed it?

describe the various sensibilities of the body to its position in the physical environment. The holistic system of environmental perception goes far beyond visual spatial perception and refers to a more complex geographical experience. It involves the integration of many senses such as touch, positional awareness balance, sound, movement and the memory of previous experiences.” P.3-4

⁸² O’Neill, 3.

The trolley was invented in 1936 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, by Sylvan Goldman the owner of two food store chains, who had noticed that his patrons stopped shopping when their baskets got too heavy⁸³. By adding wheels to the trolley, Goldman changed both the material agency of the shopping basket forever and, with a little coaxing, the shopping habits of his consumers. The trolley evolved over time and there were modifications made by other inventors, one of the most important being “the telescoping trolley”⁸⁴ that allowed trolleys to nest within each other; the patent for this was given to Orla E. Watson, co-inventor.

This brief history of the shopping trolley is explicitly bound in its links to consumer function. In his essay *Of Habit*, French philosopher Felix Ravaisson defines “acquired habit”⁸⁵ as a “consequence of change”⁸⁶. However, Ravaisson’s rigorous study of habit

⁸³ Some sources claim this date 1936 others say 1937 Terry P. Wilson, *The Cart That Changed the World: The Career of Sylvan N. Goldman*, 1st ed, Oklahoma Trackmaker Series (Norman: Published for the Oklahoma Heritage Association by the University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), 78 Also see; Andrew Warnes, *How the Shopping Cart Explains Global Consumerism* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019), 61–64; James M. Mayo, *The American Grocery Store: The Business Evolution of an Architectural Space*, Contributions in American History, no. 150 (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1993), 148 Lists invention date as 1937.

⁸⁴ Warnes, *How the Shopping Cart Explains Global Consumerism*, 73 .

⁸⁵ Mark Sinclair, *Félix Ravaisson: Selected Essays.*, 1st ed.. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2016), 31.

⁸⁶ Sinclair, 31.

does not merely focus on “acquired habit”;⁸⁷ the core of his argument stems from “habit that is contracted owing to a change with respect to the very birth of it.”⁸⁸ I bring Ravaissou into the conversation here in order to draw attention to the intrinsic links of the trolley’s initial invention to consumption as well as its eventual influences on the habits of shoppers around the world and their ever-increasing needs for more and more consumption. Turning back to Goldman’s iconic ‘ah-ha’ moment, it is clear that there were a series of events that led up to the moment, opening up the door for Goldman to give birth to his initial trolley design and eventually change the “habits” of shoppers all over the world. This change was linked to “self-service grocery stores”⁸⁹, which first emerged in America as early as “1916”⁹⁰ allowing shoppers to purchase pre-packaged goods and control the amount of time that it took them to shop. In

⁸⁷ Sinclair, 31.

⁸⁸ Sinclair, 31.

⁸⁹ Self-service shopping refers to the shift from clerk-based shopping, where the customer ordered items from a clerk that weighed and collected these items from behind a counter and then presented them to patrons. Self-service shopping shifted both the architecture and the habits of shoppers as they were able choose pre-packaged items as they moved through the shop. Gudis, “Pushed Around,” 128–129 See the following sources for further information on this. ; Chapter 3 The Silent Salesman provides detailed information on early self-service food stores Rachel Bowlby, *Carried Away: The Invention of Modern Shopping* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 31–48; Kim Humphery, *Shelf Life: Supermarkets and the Changing Cultures of Consumption* (Cambridge ; Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 66; Provides detailed information on the rural general store and clerk based shopping Richard S. Tedlow, *New and Improved: The Story of Mass Marketing in America* (Boston, Mass: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), 184.

⁹⁰ Gudis, “Pushed Around,” 128.

essence the shoppers' buying habits shifted and changed as both the architecture of the store and the system of shopping changed. It was through the shifts in consumer habits that the invention of the trolley became a possibility. Historian, Catherine Gudis, also discusses the lead up to the invention of the trolley in her article *Pushed around: Material culture, dispossession and the American Shopping trolley*. Gudis discusses the development of self- service shopping, that turned consumers' shopping habit into a "haptic commodity encounter."⁹¹

Goldman provided his customers with a mobile container in doing so, he opened up the opportunity for his consumers to adjust their past habits. Instead of shopping for small amounts often, they were able to make larger purchases, consume more and in some cases even waste more. The shelf life of produce was not extended, so one can only imagine that even though consumers were buying more, they were most certainly wasting more, because many did not initially realize how quickly some of their purchased items would expire. Thus not only were their consumerist habits changed, but their modes of consumption. In Goldman's haste to produce a mobile object for his customers he neglected to consider the far-reaching ramifications of enabling the material object to move about. Over time Goldman's invention evolved. The contemporary trolley is much lighter and sturdier, thus enabling it to move more easily about shopping centres and the urban landscape where it has become ubiquitous and, arguable, its own material agent.

⁹¹ Warnes, *How the Shopping Cart Explains Global Consumerism*, 29

Urban dwellers find multiple uses for the trolley outside of the supermarket, rolling their purchases home or carrying large objects about. However, the trolley is not a small recyclable object, that can simply be disposed of, so it is most often discarded and abandoned in the landscape. Since the trolley is sturdily built to carry heavy loads and it simply litters the landscape with its presence until someone finds it useful again. Gudis discusses how the homeless of Los Angeles use the trolley to carry about their belongings, making their lives more mobile so that they can pick-up and move about at a moment's notice⁹², avoiding police raids and other urban dangers.

But trolleys are not always utilitarian. Mischievous humans often push, ride and or leave them in odd places where they accumulate. One example of this is the Port Augusta pier in South Australia. In September of 2018⁹³ five hundred trolleys that had been pushed off the pier and accumulated over time were discovered at low tide.⁹⁴ They Mayor of Port Augusta Sam Johnson said, "People had found 'fun and humour' throwing trolleys in the water". These hidden underwater trolleys accumulated barnacles that were hazardous to swimmers. The mass of trolleys was removed by crane from Port Augusta. Strangely the barnacles that had formed on the trolleys

⁹² Gudis, "Pushed Around," 126.

⁹³ Gudis, 26.

⁹⁴ Boisvert, Eugene, and Isabel Dayman. "Jumping Warning as 500 Trolleys Found off Port Augusta Wharf." Text. ABC News, September 22, 2018. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-22/jumping-warning-as-500-trolleys-found-port-augusta-wharf/10294154>.

transformed them into one interconnected mass exuding the material vitality of excess, consumption, durability and mobility in one unified body.

Trolley Refurbishment

Reflecting back to my early walks with the trolley, I realized that the trolley was going to need an enhancement in order to withstand the Mungo terrain.

One way that I explored and interacted with the trolley's material agency in my work was through customised enhancement. The refurbishment of the trolley forced me to focus on the material qualities of the trolley and their connections with the experimental walking performances at Mungo that would follow. I had sought permission to do the walk from the Aboriginal Elders; they supported the walk but were concerned that the small thin wheels of the trolley might damage the landscape, due to the weight of the 70-kilogram ice block I would be carrying. Thus, it was necessary to refurbish the grocery trolley and replace the wheels. Through my experience walking with the grocery trolley and my preliminary investigations in this material object I was aware of its heavy-duty industrial build. Through my research I discovered that the contemporary shopping trolley is built with "68m of a steel cage covered in Telfon"⁹⁵; this steel cage is created by a machine that spot welds "heavy

⁹⁵ "What's Hidden Inside Shopping Trolleys To Make Them Cost \$131 Each? | Gizmodo Australia." Accessed June 20, 2018. <https://www.gizmodo.com.au/2016/03/whats-hidden-inside-shopping-trolleys-to-make-them-cost-131-each/>.

duty steel and carbon wire”⁹⁶ and the bumpers can handle a “48km/h crash”.⁹⁷ Additionally I discovered, industrial trolleys are built to hold up to a “160kg”⁹⁸. Thus, it seemed that the trolley’s industrial build would be sufficient to traverse the landscape at Lake Mungo. However, the day we cut the trolley basket off its base, I wasn’t sure we would ever get it back together again. Bits and pieces of the trolley were scattered all over the floor and its future seemed uncertain. But as we began to weld it back together a transformation occurred. Local Mildura artist Daniel Downing assisted with the design and welding of the trolley. The process involved disassembling the trolley, removing the small trolley wheels, cutting off portions of the trolley and then welding it all back together.

Multiple drawings were done, and the pieces of steel were collected from the local steel shop. As I collected these materials I was once again struck by the physical weight of each individual piece. Standing in the steel shop watching the sparks fly, as my steel rods and rebar were cut to size, I thought about the density and weight of the material I was purchasing. When the young salesman handed me the pieces of steel I was once again startled by the weight of the objects. The rods’ cool cylindrical shape felt surprisingly heavy in my hands. The ends of the rods and rebar had rough vertical marks and were still warm from cutting. These unique markings embedded the young

⁹⁶2015 رمضان مسلسلات. *How It’s Made - Grocery Carts*. Accessed June 20, 2018.

⁹⁷ “What’s Hidden Inside Shopping Trolleys To Make Them Cost \$131 Each? | Gizmodo Australia.” Accessed June 20, 2018. <https://www.gizmodo.com.au/2016/03/whats-hidden-inside-shopping-trolleys-to-make-them-cost-131-each/>.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

salesclerk's process-oriented, physical participation in the project. As I took part in this exchange, I began to feel an extreme connection to the physicality of the freshly cut steel. These interactions with my materials and the people who processed and sold them gave me insight into the inner workings of this small rural community and created a connection to both this particular place and the materials that would inevitably be fused into the re-constructed trolley.

The trolley was broken down into its most rudimentary pieces of steel and hardware. When we were finally ready to begin welding, I was given a mask to protect from the bright flames and long gloves to protect from the sparks. As Downing demonstrated the process I was intrigued by the simple back and forth movements of the torch. Finally, when I held the torch in my own hands, the flame and the slow meticulous fusing of the two metal surfaces seemed remarkably natural – reminiscent of stitching with a needle and thread. Bit by bit the trolley was welded back together and finally the new rugged wheels were attached. The basic physical elements remained but, as we fused the bits and pieces of the trolley back together it shifted from being a utilitarian object of consumerism to a customized mobile sculptural prop, capable of moving through a rugged remote landscape. The trolley height was customized to my body's 158 cm frame. The transition to the thick wide rugged wheels made the trolley impractical for use in narrow grocery store aisles. The basket and handle stayed intact and referenced the trolley's previous relationship to commercial consumerism. Thus, the trolley remained reminiscent of its former self, but the material alterations shifted both my relationship to the trolley and its material purpose.



Figure 3 Trolley in mid- refurbishment process (2015)

After the trolley had been refurbished, I experimented with pushing it in the urban environment on multiple surfaces. I was aware that I had shifted the material agency of the trolley through this process, but I was not yet aware of the relationship to my experimental walking performances at Mungo with the trolley's deep-seated connections to consumerism and its enigmatic existence in the urban landscape. Material walking directly correlates to the simultaneous reaction of the body's interactions with a place. Walking as a work of art is closely related to performance in that the work of art produced is ephemeral and only exists in the moment of its creation. However, there is also a simultaneous corporeal knowledge that is gained through the body with each step. This process involves movement and interaction with a specific place. Adding the trolley to my experimental walking practice created an

additional layer of awareness, forcing me to interact with both the object and the physical and geographical aspects of a place.

In the case of this particular trolley I knew its anatomy well. The shift from small rubber grocery store wheels to large wheels had shifted its ease of movement in certain circumstances but complicated it in others. It was through movements of my own body and this trolley that I came to know the landscape of lake Mungo. Often the trolley's agency shifted my bodily movements. Without the trolley I was able move with ease. I still experienced the physical and geographical element of this place, but with less attention to detail. The trolley compelled me to focus on the subtle shifts in texture beneath my feet and even the subtlest incline could force a shift in walking position or the amount of effort it took to push the trolley. The addition of the swivelling castor wheels on the front of the trolley significantly impacted my movements in certain situations. It wasn't until I arrived at Mungo that I realized that the large swivelling caster wheels at the front of the trolley had taken on a life of their own. If I pushed the trolley in straight path without any obstacles, I had no problems, but as the terrain changed this became more and more difficult. The front of the trolley was narrower, so when the wheels needed to swivel at extreme angles, they would bang up against each other and lock. Sometimes it only took a minor adjustment a slight kick or push against the wheels and they would move back in line. But if I was on an incline or pushing through softer dirt or sand the wheels would bang up against each other often and I would have stop and reposition myself and the wheels.



Figure 4 Video Still Basin Ambulations: Lake Mungo (2015), front wheel tangle

This new behaviour was something that I had never encountered in a grocery store. Through the process of refurbishing, I had shifted the material agency of the trolley. This unintentional shift in agency altered my movements throughout the performance. As I worked through each of the performances, I slowly became acquainted with the trolley's newly acquired agency and the movements needed to untangle the wheels. The conglomeration of movements, bodies and agencies of the trolley, the ice block and my own body, intermittently interacting and reacting to the physical, material and geographic element at Mungo, created a strange mobile assemblage with only ephemeral traces of the bodies and objects left behind. When I looked back at the footage, many of these spontaneous movements seemed choreographed, but as my body adjusted to the new wheels' agential wanderings, these movements became an innate element of the performance. Within these walks, then was a process of labour between my body and the material form of the trolley

and labour of the trolley across the landscape. Throughout both performances there were multiple times when I felt deeply connected to the ancient inhabitants of this place. Most of these connections were deeply visceral and occurred when I walked the dunes without the trolley placing blocks in the remote landscape. The silence and isolating wind engulfed my movements. Additionally, the bleached earth and eroded dunes drew my attention to the evidence of the ancient water culture. It was here that I began to realize that the memories of this of this ancient culture were deeply embedded in the landscape itself.

The labour of walking and its effacement

The creative labour of walking artists has been concealed in much contemporary practice that utilizes walking as a methodology. The work of Richard Long is important to my research here, in terms of the hidden labour contained in the works. The audience rarely sees the action behind the earthworks and sculptures that Long creates, they are left behind as a trace. Long has used walking as a medium since his earliest works in the 1960s, such as *A Snowball Track* (1964). He uses natural materials to create site specific installations and creates his walks all over the world in a variety of geographic locations. Long's body has travelled step by step throughout the world. While there is bodily labour inherent to Long's work, that labour is not explicitly figured. He does however hint at the labour involved in his works through his titles, for instance in his piece *A Line Made by Walking* (1967) In Long's walking piece *A Line Made by Walking*, Long deliberately uses this repetitive bodily motion to create a line through a field of grass. Anthropologist Tim Ingold discusses how Long "...has not cut

the line with his boots, nor has material been deposited – as, for example when lines are painted on grass to mark out a sports-ground.” His simple step-by-step bodily motion leaves a trace. The bodily intimacy of the gesture is embedded in the footpath he creates as he walks back and forth across the grass. Although Long’s body is ever-present in his work, it is absent in the documentation of the work. In the case of this piece, the viewer might question how many times Long walked across this grassy field in order to create his line. Did he walk quickly or did he move slowly and deliberately across the grass? Did he drag his feet? March? Or stroll? How long did it take for him to form this line? And what did he think about while he was making this repetitious movement? Was he only interested in the traces his body was leaving behind or did his mind wander to human and non-human inhabitants of this place and their relationship to the landscape or the political and cultural elements of this place? These are questions that Long rarely answers and leaves his viewers to wonder about.

However, there are rare occasions when the viewer is let into Long’s process and the labour involved in it. In a series of short videos Long allows the videographer into his process, highlighting the inner processes involved in the making of his works. The videos home in on the labour and bodily interactions. The first video *Le Paysage Comme Sculpture* (The Landscape of Sculpture) shows a close-up of Long’s body, moving through parched earth in a circular motion. Eventually, the camera closes in on Long’s foot and a trail of dust is revealed as small bits of gravel scatter under his feet. The most surprising part of the video is the scratchy sounds that his foot makes as he moves across the rough gravelly earth. Eventually the camera pulls out to a wide

angle to show the full circular spiral that Long is creating. The video provides a rare insight into Long's making process and the role that his body plays in this work.

Long's body is moving in response to the earth as his feet move through the dirt and he is also shaped through a reciprocity of making. In the finished work we see the remnants of Long's bodily movements.

This speaks to Long's attachment to the materials and the earth that he touches as he creates his works. He says, 'It's the touching and the meaning of the touching that matters' thus thoroughly connecting to his own individual haptic experiences as he interacts with his materials. In the finished piece the viewer only sees the image of the circle, Long's body is completely absent from the piece and remnants of his bodily actions in the earth create the piece that is shown in the gallery.

In the second video, *Richard Long : Rencontre avec un lieu [Meeting with a place]*]the camera reveals Long moving stones around in a rocky terrain. Once again sound is a key element in this video. The stones rattle and clatter as Long moves them about the landscape. It is not immediately apparent what he is creating, it simply looks like he is displacing rocks in a somewhat organized manner. Suddenly the camera pulls back to reveal Long clearing the stones in the form of a circle which stands out as a negative space in this rocky environment, revealing the arid earth beneath. The video provides insight into Long's process. In stark contrast, his piece *Small White Pebble Circle* (1987) is created specifically for the museum. He sends specific instruction and the museum

staff replicate the piece in the gallery. The instructions are not displayed, but are very specific so that the gallery staff can create the work:

To make this work, the pebbles, of roughly even size (between fifteen and twenty-five centimetres wide), are poured in one or two layers in between circles drawn on the floor. The surfaces are then smoothed with the fingertips. Long has specified that there should be an even density of stones in each circle, writing, in his installation instructions, ‘the whole work should look balanced and circular’⁹⁹

The contrast between the making of these two works is striking: one precise and planned, the other intense and intimate. But even at a distance touch is integral to Long’s installations. He specifically instructs the installers to smooth the surface of the pebbles with their fingers. The haptic sense has always been a key element in Long’s work. He is conscious of the movement of each object and the specific bodily encounter and labour involved in the movement of these objects. He says: “Kicking stones to form a line for example is different than placing them in a line and also enjoyable in a different way”. Thus, it is not only the labour of the walk itself that Long is concerned with; it is the corporeal movements required to create each site-specific installation along his walking route. It is attention to the detail of this hidden labour that most closely relates to my own work.

⁹⁹ (*Small White Pebble Circles* certificate, gallery records, Tate Archives, London).

SITE LINK: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/long-small-white-pebble-circles>

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While Long in large part conceals his body, the figuring of corporeal movements is central to my performances. The traces that my grocery trolley and I leave in the earth vary in depth and width depending on the texture of the earth. On hard compacted surfaces my footprints and the wheel marks from the trolley are faint and in some cases almost non-existent. In soft soil or sand our tracks are deeper and wider. Looking closely at these tracks, I can tell whether I have been pushing or pulling the trolley, by the placement and direction of my footprints. My human tracks are spaced by the length of my stride, which embed information about the size of my body in the trail. The trolley wheels roll or slide along depending on the consistency of the earth beneath them leaving a series of script-like lines in the in the sandy soil.

To return briefly to my first performance walk, *Basin Ambulations* (2014), along the Camel Pad track in Hattah National Park, the traces of my performance are relevant here. I walked back and forth on this track with my trolley multiple times over a three-week period, leaving multiple lines (from the trolley wheels) behind me. These lines are inconsistent, varying in depth and width. With the benefit of hindsight, I see the different levels of labour in these lines. When the trolley was impossible to push, I moved to the front and pulled. This action is recorded in the earth with my deep footprints, as well as the deep sliding trail the trolley wheel lines, left behind. These traces became an ephemeral record of the walk. Over time the elements will disappear in the soft sand and earth, but the memory of the walk will remain embedded in these materials, along with the step-by-step motion of the human and non-human inhabitants of this place. These marks are a by-product of the labour of these performances. There are no intentional patterns, but they remain as a temporary and

partial record of the walk. This theme of labour continued into the final performances at Mungo, it was through my own body that I experienced these places. The trolley continued to act as a object/prop, that force me to engage with the places I traversed with it.



Figure 5 Video still from *Trolley Ambulations: Camel Pad Track*(2014)
Trolley Tracks(Gopro Camera footage)

Final Mungo Performances

The final Mungo performances included, *Basin Ambulations Lake Mungo*, and *Basin Ambulations: Melt*. Documentation of both of these performances is included in the final thesis exhibition *Material Walking: Corporeal interactions and place* in the form of video. *Basin Ambulations: Lake Mungo* is a single channel video, that is projected in

the gallery. This section focuses on the conceptual underpinnings and material details of the two performances.

Basin Ambulations: Lake Mungo

Precarity is ‘a condition of existence without predictability or security affecting material or psychological welfare.’ My first Mungo performance, *Basin Ambulations: Lake Mungo*, was a trolley walk where I walked across the desiccated Mungo lakebed, pushing a trolley, with a seventy- kilogram ice block in the basket. The performance was laden with unpredictability and dependent on the material processes and social interactions comprising my preparations. The initial interactions with the Elders from the Paakantji/Barkindji , Ngampaa, and Mutthi Mutthi tribes had sparked my interest in the geological time contained within the eroded Mungo landscape. These first interactions with the Elders occurred during my preliminary walk at Mungo, with the *Unmapping the End of the World* artists. The experience provided a great deal of insight into the history and significance of Mungo. The Elders discussed the importance of the remains of Mungo Man and Mungo Lady. Additionally, the group spent several days walking and listening to the elders as they discussed the significance of the remains that had been discovered here and what this meant to the Aboriginal people. It was during this time that I began to think about the possibility of doing a walking performance here at Mungo. The premise of the performance itself was to bring water back to the parched landscape. Through the preparation process and the performance itself I came to understand the precarious nature of the materials and my own white position as a white woman in this landscape,

with this radically out of place refurbished grocery trolley with large wheels and the seventy kilogram ice block.



Figure 6 Basin Ambulations: Lake Mungo (2015), Video Still
Videographer: Kieran Mangan

Basin Ambulations: Melt

My second performance took place on the back roads of Mungo where most tourists are not allowed. The performance consisted of two phases and involved additional labour and trace elements. I pushed the grocery trolley, filled with oddly shaped Murray River ice blocks to two separate locations, then carried the ice blocks into the more fragile areas of the Mungo landscape to be placed in a series of diverse locations. Each leg of the journey contained a different set of physical and material challenges in this remote area. On the way to both locations I struggled with the trolley, due to the soft earth and the large front wheels that seemed to battle each other. The ice blocks melted fairly rapidly in the dust kicked up from the trolley wheels. Each leg of the journey had different challenges. Pushing the trolley was physically challenging and

the rate at which I was able to push was not fast enough to keep the ice blocks from melting, the sense of urgency that encased me with each step was overwhelming and the trolley and the earth beneath my feet tested both body and mind over and over again.

The first time I parked the trolley and hiked up the sand dune I was stunned by the silence, the wind was blowing and there was the wild smell of remoteness in the air. I packed the assorted sized Murray River ice blocks, into my black shopping bag and I could feel their cool wetness against my body as they continued to melt. The silence was almost deafening, I could hear and feel my body's movements, but other than that it was the magpies and foliage. The earth beneath my feet on these sand dunes seemed almost fragile compared to the red dirt I had pushed the trolley through. I knew there was a precariousness to my situation. As I placed each dripping ice block in the Mungo landscape at the top of the dune. I began to question how and if this would affect the fragile environment and if its material precarity could or would shift anything in this fragile arid environment. Since the ice blocks were placed in the Mungo landscape and then left to melt, I did not see the evidence of the melt. However, my curiosity was peaked about the melting process and compelled me to begin a series of ice installation experiments. Through these experiments I discovered that when the ice blocks were placed on soft or porous surfaces similar to the environment at the top of the dune they left imprints of their shrinking shapes. These experiments took place after the initial performances and eventually led to the installations, *Material Interactions with Time: I and II* (2020). Both of these installations are further discussed in Chapter 4. It was through the objects (or props) that I came

to understand the precarious nature of the performances: the precariousness of the material elements of the project including my own body's endurance and strength.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the shopping trolley both as a metaphor of consumerism and as a material object with its own agency. It argues, that the use props/objects can enhance the, meaning and labour of a creative walking practice. The trolley's unique mobile agency is also explored through new materialist methodology, where the 'vital materiality' and 'agency' of an object is central. My experimentation with creative writing has been used as methodological approach to gain a deeper understanding of the unique mobile agency of the trolley, both in its consumerist habitat and the urban landscape. By inserting myself into the 'life' of the trolley, I gained a deeper understanding of its material interactions both in the context of consumerism and as an unruly mobile object in the urban landscape. Bennett's theory of 'thing power' encouraged me to investigate the deeper environmental and political implications of the trolley's mobile escapades in the urban landscape, which lead me to the environmental devastation caused by the discarded underwater trolleys in Port Augusta. Through these investigations, I gained a deeper understanding of the impact of the trolley's durable mobility in urban environments. The ease at which trolley moves is beneficial to the consumerist industry. But in the urban landscape this mobility opens up a host of contemporary ecological and environmental issues.

In terms of my creative walking practice, the trolley has shifted my body's interactions with place and compelled me consider the labour and significance of props within the context of my walking practice. In this chapter I have explored the work of both Richard Long and Francis Alys. My analysis of Long has focused on the hidden labour contained within his work and his attachment and interest in materials. Long's bodily interactions with place are rarely revealed, but there is labour in the work that he makes; moving stones, pacing back and forth across a grass field and dragging moving his body in a circular motion while dragging his foot. Alys's work has also been central to my research in relationship to walking in a foreign environment, interacting with props/objects as well the works relationship to futility. In my own work the trolley is has compelled me to question Camus' theories on futility and the relationship of my own bodily labour in relationship to place.

Chapter 3, WATER: CONNECTING WITH ACTANTS

Walking along the banks of the Murray River is a sensual experience. The textures beneath my feet are ever changing. Sometimes the earth is dry and dusty with tree roots running through it. Other times it's moist and sticky or wet and sandy and occasionally there is rough gravel bound up in this moistness. The air has a wet watery scent and there is a wildness to it, conjured by the enormous amount of varied foliage, and gum trees along the banks and the vast number of non-human inhabitants that interact with the river. Immersing myself in the cool flow of the river itself allows the constant movement of the fluid to flow through every crack and crevice of my body. The smell and the slightly acrid saltiness of the its wet coolness conjures memories of other freshwater experiences. Reading about the Murray is one thing but experiencing its vast presence is a completely different experience.

My initial walks along the Murray River took place in and around the greater Mildura area. The Murray is important to Australia because of its significance to the traditional owners and the agricultural industry. This Chapter explores my use of this location in this research. Through walking here, I gained a deep understanding of the interconnected nature of the fragile eco-systems that exist in and around the Murray. This close examination and material interaction with place, propelled me to question what the source of the river was. How far did the water have to travel? What living and non-living actants did it encounter as it moved through its riverbed? Much of the

Mildura region is parched and desert-like and it rarely rains, so the Murray itself is a vital part of the culture and economy in this region.

This questioning, observation and interaction with the river led me to collect water, and ultimately make the ice blocks that would later travel to Mungo and become part of the experimental walking performances that took place there. Through this research at the Murray, my practice deepened in focus, and began to consider: how the materiality of water connects to the environmental concerns of the Murray. In this chapter I ask how considering this water and ice as non-human actors in my performance rethinks the relationships at this critical site.

The walks along the Murray occurred without a grocery trolley, a purposeful choice which allowed my body time to acclimate to this place, listen and pay attention to the river and surrounds. As discussed in Chapter 1, walking's exploratory nature forms the basis of my process-oriented approach to creative practice. It was through these walks, that I began to question the significance of the river and its vast connections to both the Mildura area and the greater Murray Darling basin. This chapter further contextualises this investigation, and its relation to my creative process, through the theories of Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett, whose concepts of active matter help to frame the research as a process of relationality and exchange. This process of material investigation into water and waterways as a series of relations is unpacked through the work of artists Bonita Ely and Mark Dion.

As with the performance work that resulted from this process the Murray River water is an active participant and force in Mildura and the surrounds, and in the creative research. The materiality of the river is an integral element of this research and the water collection process resonated with the theoretical underpinnings revealing a multitude of material connections. The section that follows details the collection process and its direct links to the theoretical framework contained in this chapter.

Water as relations

Much of the Mildura region is parched and desert-like and it rarely rains. In some of my early walks that occurred in orchards just off the banks of the river, I found myself intrigued by the water line and followed the drip hoses in the orchards, to the irrigation ditches and finally down to the river. As I thought about water, I began to see the many interdependent relationships that exist in this place; the most immediately visible being the legacy of human use and exploitation of the water as a resource. Water's life giving function draws together colonised and colonised at the Murray, in what ethnographer Margaret Somerville has described as, the 'mutual entanglement of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in matters of water and country.'¹⁰⁰ Human geographer Jessica Weir emphasises the ecological devastation that the regulation of

¹⁰⁰ Margaret Somerville, *Water in a Dry Land: Place-Learning Through Art and Story*, New York: Routledge, 2013, p.15

the Murray has caused, where water has become a commodity, that is bought and sold to farmers on a daily basis.¹⁰¹

The matter of water intertwines ancient histories with the present crisis of the Murray and surrounds. The traditional owners have a more complex holistic view of water, which has evolved over thousands of years through their relationship to Country, as summarised by Weir:

Indigenous people speak about water as a web of relations within which life, spirit and the law are connected, whereas the moderns have created a far narrower vision of water as a resource to be stored, regulated, and allocated for human consumption and economic production.¹⁰²

Delving into both the Indigenous holistic thoughts around water and the contemporary human degradation brings to light the many issues surrounding the Murray and its links to agricultural production through the installed weirs and locks along the river. Throughout her book, Weir brings in the voices of the traditional owners, and argues that a complex 'binary discussion' surrounds the river, a traditional living with and a capitalist use of. Gaining an understanding of these binaries was an essential part of my research and informed the decisions that I made about the walking

¹⁰¹ Jessica K. Weir, *Murray River Country: An Ecological Dialogue with Traditional Owners* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2009), 39.

¹⁰² Weir, 49.

performances at Mungo. I began to wonder if it was possible to reframe the colonial capitalist value of water. How would I do this? Could it be removed and stored elsewhere? What would it mean to dislocate the water from here, and re-locate it elsewhere, perhaps to the arid Mungo landscape? This tension between the control of water at the Murray and the long history of the Mungo site is at the centre of my material and performative investigation of relationality between time, bodies and matter.

In an attempt to dismantle the binary structure of indigenous and colonial water use, I collected the Murray River water, removing it from its traditional colonial path which, moves through a series locks and weirs and is bought and sold as a commodity. The water was then transported to its freezing locations (the Mildura icehouse, first performance and my home freezer in the second performance). Shortly before the performances I hauled the ice blocks to Mungo. In both performances the melting process was key to the distribution of water in the landscape. However, my distribution methods varied slightly between the two performances. In the first performance, *Basin Ambulations: Lake Mungo*, I pushed a single ice block across the bed of Lake Mungo. The water from the melting ice block was dispersed as I walked across the lakebed and then remaining block was left at the base of the Mungo the ancient lakeshore. In the second performance *Basin Ambulations: Mungo Melt*, I froze the river water into a variety of shapes and sizes (this process is detailed later in this chapter). As in the previous performance, the blocks melted as I pushed them in the trolley across the landscape behind the Mungo lakebed. Additionally, I place blocks along the way and then parked the trolley at two different locations and walked the

blocks into the ancient ice age landscape, placing them as I went. The water for the ice blocks was not purchased, but removed from the Murray River, and distributed in the ancient ice age landscape and breaking the binary of Indigenous and colonial water use.

This relational tension can be located in Latour's concept of 'modern thinking'. Latour's discussion revolves around the modern European world's transition to binary thinking that allowed the world to mobilise 'active forces' without accounting for the 'delicate web of relations'.¹⁰³ It is this type of binary thinking that has allowed the "moderns to rob the world of resources"¹⁰⁴. At the Murray, this disconnect has happened between the traditional owners and settler/colonial authorities, which in turn has instigated the agricultural regulation of the Murray.¹⁰⁵ The European farming model¹⁰⁶ depleted the Australian soil rapidly, forcing the need for irrigation and fertilization to maximise agricultural potential. This degradation continues unchecked.

The natural flow of the Murray has created 'ephemeral lakes'.... that became water storage.... A system of locks and weirs were installed to regulate the flow. A system

¹⁰³ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 39.

¹⁰⁴ Latour, 41.

¹⁰⁵ Weir, *Murray River Country*, p. 3

¹⁰⁶ The Chaffey brothers of Canadian descent were contributors to the European model of irrigation. See Owen Peake and Richard Venus, "Chaffey Brothers Irrigation Works in Australia," *Australasian Journal of Water Resources* 23, no. 2 (July 2019): 116–128, doi:10.1080/13241583.2019.1606475.

such as this runs contrary to traditional owners' thinking around water. They do not think of the river simply as a resource, but part of an interconnected respectful relationship to 'Country.' Yorta Yorta man, Lee Joachim, discusses the importance of the 'Barmah-Millewa lake' (on the Murray). He reveals:

To us we consider it to be the kidney of our people. And the flooding regime that needs to come through those kidneys and out to the land, flush the land, cleanse it so it flows on.¹⁰⁷

Joachim's blending of the lake and kidneys emphasises the importance of this natural cleansing of the lake and the surrounding land that supports his people. It is this weblike interconnectedness that is so important to the traditional owners and their relationship to the Murray. Water's importance to the sustaining of life, and its inherent interconnectedness, gives it a unique position, as Weir says, "Water encapsulates landscapes insinuates borders, provides images that inspire artists and comes in a variety of colours, shapes, smells qualities and sounds."¹⁰⁸ In the Murray's water, this sensuous agency moves across time, place, and matter.

Collecting the Water – interconnections of matter

Through my creative practice and research, I have come to understand the complexities and intricate connections of the Murray River. Walking along its banks I have interacted with the water — touching it, wading through it, smelling it, peering

¹⁰⁷ Weir, *Murray River Country*, 13.

¹⁰⁸ Weir, 74.

through it — and eventually began collecting it for my performances. Regardless of my movements and actions the river continued to flow around and through any open space it could find. I watched branches, leaves, and rubbish fall into the river. Leaves were whisked away swirling and twisting. Branches snagged on the bottom, but still the river moved seamlessly in and around these solid masses. Extreme heat and flooding rains alter the flow. The Murray's movements are ceaseless. These insights informed the selection of Murray water as a key component of my performances.

I collected the water for the first Mungo performance, *Basin Ambulations: Lake Mungo* in August of 2015. The water was harvested in 20 litre buckets. As I dipped my first bucket into the river I was startled by the intense yellow colour of the water. Even now when I look back at the documentation images, I find myself stunned by the contrast of the almost mossy green hue of the river against the stark yellowness of the harvested water (Fig. 7-8). Although these shifting changes in colour may have simply been due to the changing light and reflections on the water. They enticed me to question the living and non-living inhabitants that existed in each bucket. I noticed sticks and leaves and occasionally small fish as I filled the buckets. As I decanted the water into smaller quantities the colours changed again. I questioned these phenomena of interconnectedness through Latour's Actor Network Theory as a way to understand the role of matter as an active force in my research.

The interconnectedness of place encompasses a vast array of human and non-human actors and actants constantly connecting, reacting and impacting on each other in complex systems and networks. In this section I will discuss Latour's Actor Network

Theory in application to my research and creative practice experiences in the Murray. This theoretical component is an investigative process that continually interconnects with my practice-led research and the collection of the Murray River water that eventually formed the seventy- kilogram ice block that I took back to the arid Mungo landscape. In *Reassembling the Social: An introduction to Actor Network theory* (2005) Latour follows a line of inquiry that moves away from an anthropocentric view that prioritizes human agency above all other entities, instead he places human and non-human actors and actants on an equal plane. Actor Network Theory (ANT) sits within



Figure 7 Murray River Water Collection 2015



Figure 8 Murray River Water Collection 2015

the discourses of New Materialism which ‘displaces humanism to consider dynamic assemblages of humans and non-humans.’¹⁰⁹ Latour theorises and defines an actor as ‘what is made to act by many others,’¹¹⁰ attempting to move beyond the identification of the term with human entities. For Latour, it is never really clear exactly whom or what is responsible for an action. Instead, actions and meaning are shaped from relationships between actants, defined as ‘something that acts or to which activity is

¹⁰⁹ Annelies Kamp, “Actor–Network Theory” (Oxford University Press, 29), 1, <https://oxfordre.com/education/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-526>.

¹¹⁰ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social an Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 46.

granted by others'.¹¹¹ These relationships are at the centre of Latour's theory, and ANT, as the term network suggests, is less interested in identifying the properties or motivation of each actor (human or non-human entities) or ascribing them to pre-existing categories then tracing the way that actantial interactions shape the world around us. ANT is thus a process or methodology that lends itself to the observational methodology of material walking, as it encourages investigation without preconceived outcomes:

Using a slogan from ANT, you have 'to follow the actors themselves', that is try to catch up with their often wild innovations in order to learn from them what the collective existence has become in their hands, which methods they have elaborated to make it fit together, which accounts could best define the new associations that they have been forced to establish.¹¹²

It is through these complex networks and assemblages, that Latour redefines the social. For example, he discusses how, 'some assemblages are built out of social stuff instead of physical, biological or economical blocks, much like the houses of the Three Little Pigs were made of straw, wood, and stone.'¹¹³ Latour's interest in the social does not only include specific things, it is the interlinking connections *between* things

¹¹¹ Bruno Latour, 'On Actor-Network Theory. A Few Clarifications', *Soziale Welt*, 47, no. 4, 1996, p.373. Latour draws on the semiotic term of actant to challenge the anthropocentrism of 'actors' and emphasise actions and relationships.

¹¹² Latour, *Reassembling the Social an Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, p.12

¹¹³ Latour, *Reassembling the Social an Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, p.43.

contained in the assemblage that interest him most. So too, in this research, the plethora of 'things' that swirl around the Murray as it moves through its bed, are key actants in my creative work, including the river itself, and the greater Murray Darling basin and surrounds. Much like the actor on stage, the river continually moves [acts] and interacts with human and non-human actants [variables], creating an inter-relational network of social, cultural, political and environmental actants.

The term social, for Latour, indicates the relational quality of actors, 'a trail of associations between heterogeneous elements.'¹¹⁴ Beyond the human, the social is, 'a type of connection between things that are not themselves social.'¹¹⁵ For example, Latour sees a supermarket as social, not just considering the ties between a group of items on a shelf or aisle, but encompassing the modifications and organization of items through the whole store including pricing, labelling and packaging. In the context of this research there are a multitude of 'social' connections between the Murray river. Broadly speaking there are the components of the water, the local environment, the context within the Australian landscape and Indigenous knowledge, and broader cultural and political factors. Overlaying these relations, I began my research and creative work: walking in the area, collecting the water, transforming the water and relocating it elsewhere, culminating in a performance that includes the lakebed at Mungo, my own body and a refurbished grocery trolley. Each element of the project

¹¹⁴ Latour, *Reassembling the Social an Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, p.5.

¹¹⁵ Latour, *Reassembling the Social an Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, p.5

has a myriad of “social” connections contained within it all linking and interlinking throughout the project.

The water I collected from the Murray ran through multiple weirs and locks, connected with the human inhabitants, vegetation, and animals. Storms have washed human and non-human waste, pesticides, chemicals and rubbish into it. Trash and chemicals contained in the runoff from agriculture along its banks are also washed into this mix. The collected water was then taken to a local icehouse in a freezer truck and frozen in the walk-in freezer. Each interaction involved bodies, touching, lifting, conversing, while they moved the water from the river to the freezer. All of these ‘social’ connections formed a web of inter-relatedness, that is explored throughout the research project.

Performing actants

The interactions between myself (the artist), water (the Murray river) and the plethora of other actors are drawn together as key material actants of the performative outcomes of this research. Bonita Ely has also investigated the material interactions of the Murray in several works including *Murray River Punch* (1981¹¹⁶) and its reprise, *Murray River Punch: The Soup* (2014). Ely’s work vividly draws attention to the material qualities of the Murray river as a form of ecological critique. Ely’s writing on

¹¹⁶ Ely, Bonita. 1981, *Murray River Punch*, Rundle Street, Mall, Adelaide. Experimental Art Foundation residency

her own work has drawn on Taoist philosophy to break down the distinction between human and nature, approaching the political and ecological concerns of the Anthropocene with a call to greater sensitivity by artists.¹¹⁷ In the 1981 work Ely collected ingredients directly from the Murray River, and prepared, cooked and served the punch first to the audience in the George Paton Gallery in Melbourne and then in the public space of Adelaide's Rundle Mall, both hundreds of kilometres from the river itself. In the reprise of 2014, the work was performed at Melbourne contemporary art space Gertrude Contemporary.¹¹⁸

Murray River Punch: The Soup draws upon feminist performance strategies of humour and satire to play with the setting of a laboratory to draw attention to the continual degradation of the Murray. The deployment of the scientific space of the laboratory plays out the dangers of the oppositional relationship between human and nature that has led to the degradation of the river area.¹¹⁹ Through unusual preparation methods Ely and her assistant, artist, Emma Price investigate the plethora of curious ingredients they have amassed. Upon entering the gallery the viewer was confronted with a table containing a gas burner, large soup pot, and bottles, flasks, bowls and plastic bags

¹¹⁷ Bonita Ely, *Change and Continuity: the influences of Taoist Philosophy and Cultural Practices on Contemporary Art Practice*, PhD thesis, University of Western Sydney, 2009

¹¹⁸ Ely, Bonita. 2014, , *Murray River Punch -The Soup*, Gertrude Contemporary Melbourne, Victoria.

¹¹⁹ Bonita Ely, *Change and Continuity: the influences of Taoist Philosophy and Cultural Practices on Contemporary Art Practice*, PhD thesis, University of Western Sydney, 2009

containing strange ingredients; horse dung with fungus growing from it, glass shards, murky green river water, and used dunny paper, sealed in a Ziploc bag.

At the beginning of the performance, Ely recites her 'Eulogy to a drought', a satirical poetic description, of the current state of the river, and references some of the ingredients gathered for her soup. She describes the 'blue green algae blooms, flooding rains, dry cracking riverbeds, drained lakes' and 'urine coloured water with a kind of beautiful rainbow scum on top found at Bottle Bend near Mildura VIC'.¹²⁰ Her satirical depiction references beauty at times, but also draws attention to the complexity of the environmental network of non-human actants at play within the river itself. Ely's collection and transportation methods became an investigative strategy that continued to develop throughout the performance. For example, she explains how she came across a pile of horse dung that she collected in a plastic container, which after a few days "sprouted this beautiful fungus."¹²¹ Ely then slices up the horse dung, puts on gloves and crumbles the dung into the pot. Throughout the performance both Ely and Price engage with the materials haptically as they make spontaneous sensuous decisions based on the texture and feel of the ingredients (See figure 9 for recipe).

Touch is a way to know place, what Rodaway describes as haptic [touch] geographies, where " 'the tactile receptivity of the body, specifically the skin are closely linked to

¹²⁰ Liang Luscombe, *Bonita Ely and Emma Price Performing Murray River Punch at Gertrude Contemporary*, 2014, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/98502981> 1:48-2:10.

¹²¹ Luscombe 1:48-2:10.

the ability of the body to move through the environment and pick up and manipulate objects.’¹²² Ely and Price’s performance engages with touch geographies in a curious manner. During the preliminary process, Ely evaluates the appropriateness of the material objects she encounters on the banks of the Murray, questioning and touching each object as she goes. Throughout, the performance these collected items are further scrutinized through the intimate sensuous handling of the materials. Each elemental ingredient has a unique sensory profile negotiated through touch, ‘ the most intimate sense...for to touch is to be touched.’¹²³ and both Ely and Price are immersed in this reciprocal tactile engagement throughout the performance. Their discussions surround the textures; the roughness, the smoothness, the elasticity and the porosity – of each ingredient allowing them to dissect the microcosmic elements of the Murray. This troupe of Murray River material objects erupt into the gallery

¹²² Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies*, 41.

¹²³ Rodaway, 41.

Image removed due to copyright

Figure 9 Bonita Ely 2014, Murray River Punch -The Soup, Recipe Gertrude Contemporary Melbourne, Victoria.

performing along with Ely and Price, releasing a stream of peculiar odours and producing a series of unpredictable sounds. As the performance unfolds the ingredients reveal themselves as actants in the ever-shifting networks and systems contained within the Murray. This complex assemblage of elements have been personally collected by Ely, who has purposefully drawn out elements that have been fundamentally altered by human contact in order to focus the performance on the impact of human actants on the river.

Much like Ely's work British artist Mark Dion's work acts as an assemblage, and draws attention to environmental issues. Dion is a contemporary British artist working with found materials recovered from specific sites. Dion's work deals with taxonomy, ecology and place, borrowing from a diverse group of methodologies. He explains:

I work as an archaeologist or biologist; I'm not really claiming to be that person. Nevertheless, I'm shadowing their methodology. In some ways examining the sort of trapping of authority and at the same time I do have a relationship to the history of the discipline itself.¹²⁴

These methodologies direct Dion's work, but his artistic practice and reworking of disciplinary processes gently critiques the limitations of these traditional research frameworks:

¹²⁴ "Methodology, Mark Dion," Art21, accessed June 9, 2020, <https://art21.org/watch/extended-play/mark-dion-methodology-short/>.

There are a lot of tools that artists have that the scientist doesn't have, humour, irony, metaphor. These are sort of the bread and butter of artists.¹²⁵

Dion is a collector and organiser of 'things'. Many of his installations are collections of objects, organised into categories and exhibited as installation. In the work *Tate Thames Dig* (1999), Dion took on the role of archaeologist, managing a dig on the banks of the River Thames, in central London. This tidal river shifts its flow in and out on a daily basis, lifting the debris from the banks and re-depositing it with each movement of the tide. Dion led a varied group of volunteers that worked different areas of the river.¹²⁶ Some the items found included industrial shipyard nails, 'credit cards, suicide notes and a riot of plastic – the arms legs, heads and torsos of dolls...'¹²⁷ All of these items were meticulously sorted over the course of a month, categorized by material (such as glass, plastic) and sorted by colour. Dion's cataloguing and categorizing draws attention to the distinctive material qualities of the masses of human and animal matter found along the banks of the Thames river.

This meticulous sorting and categorisation draws attention to Jane Bennet's theorisation of the 'material vitality' of things. In *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of*

¹²⁵ "Methodology, Mark Dion."

¹²⁶ Iwona Blazwick, "Mark Dion's 'Tate Thames Dig,'" *Oxford Art Journal* 24, no. 2 (2001): 105–112.

¹²⁷ Blazwick, 105.

things, Bennett closely examines ‘inanimate objects’¹²⁸, that are often disregarded as ‘passive stuff’¹²⁹ in the context of the binary that clearly separates the inanimate world and the vitality of life. Bennett ponders things, saying:

I will turn the figures of ‘life’ and ‘matter’ around and around worrying them until they start to seem strange, in something like the way a common word when repeated can become a foreign nonsense sound.¹³⁰

It is through these slow and thorough material observations and estrangements, in dialogue with a wide range of philosophers and theorists that Bennett’s ideas surrounding material vitality come into being. As a political theorist Bennett’s aim is to draw attention to the trajectory of matter’s vitality that continually moves both alongside and through humanity or life, to rethink the dynamics of power and agency in contemporary life. In the context of the book, Bennett, explores vital materiality through a variety of lenses exploring “the movements and effectivity of stem cells electricity, food, and metals” and their relationships to human “political life”.¹³¹

Bennett’s interests lie in how these ‘things’, move through, in, and around humanity influencing behaviours and attitudes toward both human and non-human entities.

¹²⁸ Gulshan Ara Khan, “Vital Materiality and Non-Human Agency: An Interview with Jane Bennett,” in *Dialogues with Contemporary Political Theorists*, International Political Theory Series (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2012), 42–57, doi:10.1057/9781137271297_3.

¹²⁹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, vii.

¹³⁰ Bennett, vii.

¹³¹ Bennett, x.

Through this thinking, Bennett scrutinizes and breaks down the binary discussions embedded in the politics and “material vitality” of things. This ‘thing power’ — a key term of vital materiality — is examined thorough an encounter with some trash on the street in Baltimore, Maryland. It is through this personal encounter and intense scrutiny of, “one large men’s black plastic work glove, one dense mat of oak and pollen, one unblemished dead rat, one white plastic bottle cap, and one smooth stick of wood, that Bennett sees the material vitality and the interconnecting elements of these inanimate objects that “shimmer and spark” compelling a mind-shift that allowed her to see the objects as “vibratory – at one moment and disclosing themselves as dead stuff and the next as live presence: junk then claimant; inert matter, then live wire.”¹³² But it was through this material trajectory that Bennett was hit with a visceral reaction and understanding of “how American materialism, which requires buying ever increasing numbers of products purchased in ever short cycles is anti-materiality.” In doing so Bennett is able to break of the binary thinking that connects the inanimate and the vitality of life. In the context of my own work, I have delved into the materiality of Murray river water through the collection process. During my first trip to collect water, I was entranced by the bright yellowish green colour. It was my initial encounter with this vibrant fluid that led me to Ely’s performance *Murray River Punch: The Soup*. Both the performance and the recipe itself delved deeply into the contents of the river and the ecological and cultural issues that are contained in the water that flows through the Murray Riverbed. Returning briefly to Dion’s work, his fastidious

¹³² Bennett, 5.

attention to the minute detail of things foregrounds a similar ‘thing power.’ The ‘digs’ draw attention to materials that were formerly considered rubbish. Like Dion, I use a variety of tools and methodologies to create my work, and pay close attention to material agencies and how they shift and change in different circumstances.

Often these projects require research and planning and I sometimes need to learn new skills.¹³³ I was required to adapt as I went along. When I collected water from the river I used two slightly different methods. Initially I used large containers and collected the water in large quantities and transported it home on the same day. The movement of the water both in the collection tubs and in the riverbed emphasized its unique material qualities. As the icehouse owner and his assistant moved the tubs into the truck that transported the water to the icehouse, I was stunned by the material weight of these now fluid objects. The water sloshed around so much that it ran out of the back of the truck and left a trail all the way to the icehouse. Later, I collected water over a longer period of time, using smaller bottles so I could collect and transport the water to my kitchen for freezing. There was a specimen-like element to this water collection process that I related to. Often, I would have leftover water that would sit in a kitchen cabinet until I was able to purchase more freezing containers. This water became a strangely interactive part of my everyday domestic routines and when I finally removed the ice blocks from the freezer to transport them to Mungo, I felt

¹³³ For example, in the preparations for the Mungo performances as I refurbished the trolley I had to learn how to weld. See chapter 2 for more details.

extremely connected to these small frozen objects that seemed to take on a life of their own, becoming fellow actants, in my performances.

In hindsight I now see that my investigation of the materiality of water has evolved throughout both the creative practice elements of this project as well as the more theoretical and written investigations of this thesis. Turning back to Ely and Dion for moment, their works include large assemblages with a multitude of elements that are constantly interacting with each other. I have come to see assemblage within the context of my own work with my body, the trolley, and water. These came together when the ice from the Murray water was loaded into the trolley and taken to Mungo as a participant in my performances.

[Walk 2 - Basin Ambulations: Lake Mungo \(2015\)](#)

Basin Ambulations: Lake Mungo (2015) was the first of two experimental walking performances that took place at Mungo National park. In this performance, I walked a seventy-kilogram ice block across the bed of Lake Mungo and left it on a hill just below the lunette at Mungo (the edge of the lakebed). Where I had begun to feel a kinship with the water as it was collected, it was not until the actual day of the performance that my body, the ice block, the trolley and the Mungo landscape began to interact. In the early moments of the performance, I found myself worrying about the technical issues. Would the trolley make it across the lakebed? Would the ice block be stable enough to stand in the trolley or would it tumble to the ground and shatter? I questioned my own body's strength and endurance. Although I had walked much of

the performance route previously, I had not done it with the trolley and ice block. Thus the performance itself was a series of spontaneous interactions with, the materials and the place itself.

There were elements of uncertainty. As the ice block was placed in the trolley it began to wobble, but then steadied itself as the trolley began to move. A few minutes later we hit some rough ground and the ice block toppled onto the front of the trolley. I was concerned it might shift the weight and topple the trolley, but the large modified wheels help steady the trolley and distribute the weight of the ice block. It was these spontaneous interactions, between the trolley, the ice block and my own body, that became problem-solving moments. I had to adjust my body and push or pull the trolley, but eventually I was able to move through the performance with confidence.

It was through the performance itself that the objects truly began to display their material agencies. Both the trolley and the ice block began to interact with the varied terrain, the heat, the wind and even the flies; insects and other wildlife that crossed our path added movement and sound to the performance. As the performance progressed and I became more comfortable with the weight of the trolley and the melting ice block, my thoughts wandered to the more theoretical aspects of research and the connections that were occurring within the context of the performance. Looking back to Latour's Actor Network theory, I began to see the actors and actants that had interacted throughout this process and brought us to this moment in time. I had interacted with each of the objects I was traveling with over a long period of time and was aware that their material agencies had shifted. The trolley itself was

refurbished to fit my smaller frame. Additionally larger wheels were added, so that it could move across the rough Mungo terrain. Each of these individual materials interacted with a series of actors and actants both during the refurbishment process and in the context of their own creation connecting the project to a larger assemblage. The Murray River ice block also interacted with a series of human and non-human actors and actants within the context of the river itself and was now melting at a rapid pace in this remote ice age landscape and returning to its fluid origin. The heat of the day ensured that it would cyclically melt and evaporate.

The interconnecting agency of these materials and my own body connected to a larger assemblage through the trolley's links to consumerism and consumption, the river water connected to industrial agriculture and vast number of human and non-human actants that it had connected with on a daily basis since leaving its original source. Once the water was removed, it had been frozen in a commercial icehouse interconnecting with the icehouse workers and other objects in the freezer all of which linked to consumerism, consumption and the human body itself once again connecting the materials to a larger assemblage.

The performance was documented and exhibited in the *Mildura Palimpsest Biennale, everywhere all at once...here* (2015). The single channel video was projected on a gallery wall and the floor of the room was covered with red dirt. Strangely Mildura was unseasonably warm the night of the opening and the room itself was extremely hot adding to the ambience of the video shot on a very warm day at Mungo in September. In addition to the video, I installed the shopping trolley in an adjacent atrium area. The

floor of the atrium was also covered in red dirt and the ice block melted over the course of three days during the opening. I replaced the ice block several times during the run of the exhibition.

The video documentation of *Basin Ambulations: Lake Mungo* captured the trajectory of the performance, relaying its duration and detailed movements. I worked with two Mildura based photographers, Jess Avery and James Price who rendered additional perspectives of the experience. The images depicted singular moments in the performance, and in the brief pauses that occurred throughout. For example, one of the photographers captured a close-up image of a single drop of water on my one of my boots. A series of prints was developed, that focused on these singular moments to provide additional insight into the performance, and the ever-shifting materiality of the ice block and its relationship to the solid commercially produced trolley. For example, the photographers were able to capture close-ups of the ice block melting into the grate of the trolley. The videographer struggled to capture the drops of water streaming out of the trolley due to the light, but the still image with a single stray drop of water captures the movement of the melt as it falls to the ground and inadvertently lands upon my boot. The stillness of these singular moments connects back to the form of documentation, linking the Murray River to the Mungo landscape through a single drop of water on my dust covered boot.

Relating to Ice

Ice is a transformational object with a constantly shifting materiality, which cyclically moves from solid to liquid to gas. Each transformation happens, in slow gradual shifts over varying periods of time. Journalist and artist Mariana Gosnell describes the multitude of textures, forms and strengths that ice inhabits - its variable nature and idiosyncratic shifts in materiality signalling the intricacy of its sometimes-capricious agency:

It is more brittle than glass. It can flow like molasses. It can support the weight of a C-5A transport plane. A child hopping on one leg can break through it. It can last 20,000 years. It can vanish in seconds. It can carve granite. It can trace the line of a windowpane scratch. It can kill peach buds. It can preserve mammoths for centuries, peas for months, human hearts for hours.¹³⁴

Gosnell draws attention the shape-shifting materiality of ice. Over the course of this project, I have observed and interacted ice in multiple ways, observing it at different stages of both freezing and melting. In this section, I will discuss the water collection and freezing process, for the second performance, *Basin Ambulations: Melt* (2016). The water collection process for this particular performance, occurred over several months.

¹³⁴ Mariana Gosnell, *Ice: The Nature, the History, and the Uses of an Astonishing Substance*, University of Chicago Press ed. 2007 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 4.

This slower method of collecting and freezing allowed time to think and write about the process and link to other elements of the project. For example, as I learned about the regulation of the Murray and the transition from river water to commodity, I began to think of the ice blocks as bits of water that could be bought and sold, which in turn connected to the trolley's direct links to consumption and consumerism. This realization compelled me to consider the shapes and sizes of ice blocks I was freezing. I began to vary the shapes and sizes of the ice blocks in relationship to objects that I encountered as I shopped in my local grocery store in Mildura.

Initially these were small scale experiments that took place in my freezer amongst the frozen peas and veggie burgers. But as the freezer began to fill, I started to notice that the ice was popping and snapping every time I opened the freezer door. Eventually I could hear it squeaking and cracking even when the door was shut tightly. Admittedly this was sometimes unnerving in the middle of the night, but eventually the noise forced me to begin to question the transient nature of the material as it transformed from a liquid to a solid state. In the first iteration of this performance, I froze one large ice block in the Mildura icehouse. I had no contact with the ice block while it was freezing, so my intimate interactions with these smaller ice blocks revealed their peculiar material agency.

Thinking about what this 'communication' might mean to my research, I thought about this popping, crackling and fizzing of the ice as 'agential qualities'. The sounds shifted and changed as the ice transformed from solid to liquid. Although I had never

encountered *natural* Murray River ice during my time in Mildura, I had lived most of my life in the northern hemisphere where I encounter *wild* ice in many forms. It was a natural sensual experience. I felt it beneath my feet every winter, on solid slippery patches the sidewalks, and in thin crusts over the gutter waters. But the Murray river ice I created for this project was different. It did not come with the cold. The varied sized blocks froze at different rates, but always seemed to freeze from the outside in. The larger blocks could take up to seven days to freeze solid and sometimes had liquid centres. If I shook the containers, I could see the water jiggle in the middle of the ice blocks. Eventually when these ice blocks froze solid, I began to see bubbles and star burst patterns that had been captured in the freezing process. The blocks also expanded within their containers, moulding themselves to new, organic forms. These ice blocks shifted their materiality over the freezing process, and compelled me to begin to question, the ice's relationship to time, and material's constant shifts as it froze and then melted in the performances.

Conclusion

Water has always been a central element in this project, this chapter has contextualized these investigations and its relation to my creative process. As I have examined the interconnecting links of the Murray's history and relationships to the traditional owners' historical links and holistic understanding of the river, I began to see the multifaceted connections to the Murray's current ecological crisis. It was through this research that I began to see the potential for the Mungo performances, that would allow me to displace the water to an arid location. It was in the early

moments of this project's becoming that I began to see the complexity of the Murray's materiality as I collected water for the ice blocks that would later travel to Mungo. Latour's Actor Network theory provided a theoretical framework that allowed me to see the Murray as actor that continually interacted with a multitude of human and non-human actants, which were all a part of a larger assemblage.

Ely's performance *Murray River Punch – Soup* further drew attention to the host of actants contained within in the Murray River water that I had been examining. Through her performance Ely drew the actants out of the river, examined and interacted with them and then allowed them to show their materiality in the bubbling assemblage she created. Examining Ely's performance, broadened my understanding of the ever evolving actants that are constantly performing and interacting with the Murray River itself. Dion's work on the other hand, drew my attention to the vitality of 'things' and the power of close observation surrounding the materiality of objects. Bennet's close attention and unpacking of the vitality of 'things' also provided a theoretical framework to unpack Dion's work. The research surrounding these complex theories, ideas and artists, significantly informed the way approached and interacted with my own work. The Mungo performances, *Basin Ambulations: Lake Mungo* and *Basin Ambulations: Melt*, were a springboard for the more theoretical research and writing and allowed me to unpack the complex issues surrounding Murray. The performances themselves were linked to the interconnecting agency of the materials and my own body, the threads of meaning started to unfold as walked, pushed, pulled and dragged the trolley through the Mungo landscape.

Chapter 4, ICE/MELT: THE TEMPORALITY OF TRANSFORMATION

In the darkness the frigid air circulates. The Murray River water chills and slowly begins to form tiny crystals. These shifts occur at a glacial pace accumulating and shifting the textures of the fluid. The liquid mass contained in the rectangular tub gradually begins to form a crust of ice crystals that first accumulate on the sides of the tub and progressively creep to the centre. The liquid beneath this fragile crust is steadily transforming into a thickened slush filled with a sea of ice crystals. Little by little they attach themselves to the crust above and the sides of the container steadily creeping towards the liquid centre. As it freezes, it encapsulates the minute matter, sticks, algae and anything else that was contained in the water. The frozen solidity is fragile, it will take weeks for it form a solid frozen bond, but as it shifts towards the centre it creates the skeletal structure that will eventually form a solid block of ice.¹³⁵

Chapters two and three of the thesis have outlined the importance of water to this research and its materiality in differing forms. This final chapter now elaborates water's final transformation — also a key element of my performances — from ice back to water; the melt. This transformation of the solid back to its liquid form is contextualised through philosophies of the duration of time, in the work of French

¹³⁵ From creative practice journal, was also influenced by Gosnell, 1–7.

theorist Gaston Bachelard in order to unpack the significance of time's relationship to both the ice melt and durational performance itself.

Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) is central to this discussion of time's relationship to place and in its capacity to materialise geological time. It is at the site of Mungo that the time of ice and the geological time of the landscape connect creating a relational and durational assemblage of the vitality of matter.

Throughout this project I have experimented with ice in a numerous ways – freezing it, performing with it, listening to it, feeling it, and now, watching it melt. Through each experiment I have learned a little more about the agential qualities of this material/object. I learned that ice melts at different rates in different locations and temperatures, and that it has a tendency to slide in its own melt on non-porous surfaces. I also learned that the sounds an ice block makes are enhanced by the rate of melting. This chapter explores experiments in sounds, through the works *Melt: Sound* (2017-2019) and the works for the final exhibition *Liquify: Acoustic*, and *Material interactions with Time I and II*, which all manifest the duration of time through sound, and material trace. As a material agent, ice personifies time, expanding as it freezes and shrinking, spreading and evaporating as it melts. It is interconnected with the physical movement of time through its continual and discreet material movements and sounds. Through the action of the melt, this chapter considers the understanding of time that comes with site based durational performance and the performer's experience of time.

Melt: Sound

My experience with the freezing process for the Mungo performances, piqued my interest in the sounds contained within the ice blocks. I began by freezing one microphone into the ice block and then allowing it to melt in its container in my office. I then used headphones and a recorder to listen and record the sounds. At first the sounds were extremely subtle, just barely fizzing, but as the ice continued to melt and sit in its own liquid the sounds got progressively louder and shifts between fizzing and popping and cracking. I played around with microphone placement for a few weeks, freezing several microphones in an ice block. Finally, I took an ice block outside on an extremely hot day and melted it directly on the warm cement. I had two microphones frozen into the ice block and had both plugged into the same recording device. Once again, the sounds were very subtle in the beginning and I could hear a very slight fizzing. But as the heat began to take its toll, the ice blocks began to melt faster and the sound became more variable; a low fizzing with intermittent popping and cracking. Eventually one of the microphones melted its way out of the ice block making a strange creaking sound followed by a pop so loud that I had to turn my headphones down. It was in this moment that I began to question what conditions I would need to create in order to draw out the sounds the ice was making without a microphone. These investigations took place during a post-grad exhibition that inspired the final exhibition installations.

Liquify: Acoustic

After the Mungo performances, I tested the aural potential of ice by freezing microphones into ice blocks. I began to wonder if it was possible to capture the sound of the ice without using technology. This led me to a series of experiments with ice blocks in the trolley. These experiments occurred during the post-grad show *Praxis (2019)* in the Phyllis Palmer Gallery on the La Trobe Bendigo campus. This experimental piece involved a trolley that I placed in a large tray of sand. I then filled the trolley with ice block in a variety of shapes and sizes. As the ice blocks began to melt, they started to emit a series of subtle sounds. When first placed in the trolley the blocks emitted fizzling sounds and then gradually began popping and cracking. As the ice blocks melted, they began dripping against the metal frame of the trolley. This interaction enhanced the sound of the drips. As the melt continued the ice blocks shifted and changed physically – melting into each other and the sides and bottom of the trolley. The now shrinking blob of ice was continually shifting, changing and dripping, both into itself and the bars of the trolley adding to the fluctuating sounds that were coming from the entire piece. Some of the drips eventually dried or overlapped with other drips adding to the sound. The drips also shifted the colour and texture of the sand beneath the trolley. As I watched the ice melt in this controlled environment, I was able to observe the ice blocks shifting materiality and listen to the collaborative sounds being released from both trolley and ice. The trolley amplified the sound of the ice blocks and made them audible. In the final thesis exhibition *Material Walking: Corporeal interactions and place*, the ice blocks will be infused with Murray River water interlinking this installation with the previous walking performances.

Materialising Time

As I observed the diverse sizes and shapes; round, rectangular and square, of the ice blocks melting at fluctuating rates, I began to see these objects as material personifications of time. In her article, 'Fatally Confused: Telling the Time in the Midst of Ecological Crisis', philosopher Michelle Bastian discusses the different ways in which we mark time, and the material objects that we rely on to help us do this:

The conventional clock is far from being the only tool for marking time. Instead a great variety of material objects are tracked or monitored in our efforts to coordinate ourselves with what is important to us.¹³⁶

Some of the examples Bastien includes are the sun's movements in the sky and shifts in the 'composition of layers of rock.' These material objects allude to time and can be used as 'markers of time.' In relationship to my ice block investigations it is the rate at which the ice blocks melt that connect to time and this is directly related to very specific variables, such as the temperature of the environment and the surface on which they are placed. These variables and the ice blocks' material agency are not reliable markers of time, it is the inconsistent variable time embedded in these ice blocks that directly relates to the human experience of both time and duration.

¹³⁶ Michelle Bastian, 'Fatally Confused: Telling the Time in the Midst of Ecological Crises', *Environmental Philosophy*, 9, vol. 1, p.28

My understanding of both time and duration have evolved through my practice-led research, both through the performances and my material experiments with ice. I have learned that time is an enigmatic element of the human experience that differs vastly from the mechanical measured experience of clock time. Gaston Bachelard thoroughly and eloquently unpacks the intricate theoretical frameworks surrounding time, the instant and duration in his book *The Intuition of an Instant* (1932). Bachelard locates his emphasis on the tension between the instant and duration between the theories of Gaston Roupnel and Henri Bergson. Bachelard sums up the two theories, “For a Roupnel supporter, an act is above all an instantaneous decision and it is this decision that bears all the charge of originality. But “for Bergson, an action is always a continuous development that posits an underlying duration between a decision and its goal (each more or less schematic) – a duration that is always original and real.”¹³⁷ For a durational performance artist, this idea of experience and the instant is an integral part of the performance and the multitude of instantaneous decisions that must be made throughout the performance. It is this micro-second this meagre moment that determines how we experience time. In terms of duration Bachelard discusses how:

¹³⁷ Gaston Bachelard, Jean Lescure, and Eileen Rizo-Patron, *Intuition of the Instant*, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 11.

Time is noticed solely through instants; duration is a dust cloud of instants or, better yet a group of points organized more or less coherently by a phenomenon of perspective.¹³⁸

In my own experience with durational performance, I have discovered that my perception of time shifts throughout a performance. Some of these instants involved, my bodies simple movements or the thought that came before the movement. Looking back on the performance I now realize that my conscious mind was only able to hold onto small collections of 'instants'. Time shifted throughout the performance, moving more slowly when I was struggling to move the trolley and quicker when I began to see the final destination. It was in the most physically challenging moments, that I became aware of time or the 'instants' accumulating. The human experience of time is individual and personal. Durational performance artists often bring to awareness their personal experiences of time through their work. One example of this is the artist Techching Hsieh. Hsieh's one-year performance, *TimeClock Piece 1980-81*. In this year-long performance Hsieh punches a timecard every hour for one year, never leaving the room of the time clock for more than one hour. Thus Hsieh always had to be conscious of his personal proximity to the time clock. Duration was documented with a timecard punch in and out at the beginning of every hour, and a photo is taken with each numerical time stamp, showing Hsieh's hair growing throughout the year and his face aging. The documentation of the piece shows not only the instants when he punched the clock, but also the thirty-five times he failed to check in, these missing

¹³⁸ Bachelard, Lescure, and Rizo-Patron, 9.

cards appear as blank spaces, moments in time that existed, but were not recorded. Looking back to the Mungo performances, I now realize there were thousands of 'instants'. Some of these required instantaneous decisions. At other times, the instants required interactions with multiple elements, my trolley, the ice blocks and the geographic elements of this place. Much of this happened simultaneously along with questions that arose over and over again, why am I doing this? What is the purpose? Looking back upon these questions, I now realize that, the purpose of these walks was multi-faceted. Through the durational walking performances at Mungo , I gained a deeper understanding of both the human experience of time and the depth of geological time contained within the Mungo landscape. Navigating this remote landscape with a grocery trolley, challenged both body and mind allowed me to come to know the subtle physical elements through my own body.

The shifting nature of time in a durational performance often hinges on the type of action, or work, carried out by the performer. Most often this work is repetitive in action or in some cases inaction. In 1960 artist Walter De Maria wrote a short essay on the importance of meaningless work as an art form. He argues that:

Meaningless work is obviously the most important and significant art form today. The aesthetic feeling given by meaningless work cannot be described exactly because it varies with each individual.... By

meaningless work I simply mean work which does not make you money or accomplish a conventional purpose.¹³⁹

This is extremely applicable to durational performance, because many durational performances leave the viewer with no physical product. Likewise, melting ice evaporates, leaving no trace of its presence.

Without documentation, performance is one of the most ephemeral forms of art. The actual performance does not live beyond its initial conception. Even if the performance is repeated, it will never be exactly the same, there will always be slight nuances alterations and even mistakes that cannot be matched exactly. In her essay titled 'When Time Becomes form', performance artist Marina Abramovic discusses her experience with durational performances. She says:

I have had my share of long durational performances and I know that when you are working in this way, psychological and physical changes take place. You are affected by duration. Your perception and your reality becomes different.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Kristine Stiles and Peter Howard Selz, eds., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, California Studies in the History of Art 35 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 526.

¹⁴⁰ Marina Abramovic, "When Time Becomes Form" in Amelia Groom and Whitechapel Art Gallery, eds., *Time: Marina Abramovic, Giorgio Aamben, Emily Apter ...*, Documents of Contemporary Art (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2013), 95.

In reference to De Maria and “meaningless work” she says, “ the idea of spending time and not making a result, this is really essential, and it is so difficult to talk about. It is like soft matter that we can’t explain. Something else takes place.”¹⁴¹ This idea of duration and time as ‘soft matter’ emphasize the complexity of the experience of time. In the Mungo performances, I experienced time without looking at a conventional clock, fully present in the performance experience, making momentary decisions and experiencing it instant by instant as, I pushed, pulled and dragged a trolley across the arid landscape. It is this act of being present, fully experiencing the performance, instant by instant that shifts and skews the experience of time in a durational performance.

Slow time

Over the course of this project my understanding of time has shifted from a simple understanding mathematical clock time which involves seconds, minutes and hours, to a deeper understanding of the human experience of time. This transformation occurred through my physical interactions with materials, the performances, the theoretical research and writing as well as direct interaction with other artists’ works. The unification of writing, theory and art as an approach to practice is central to the material investigation in this research. In the work of land artist Robert Smithson, this is explored in a similar process of reflective writing and material investigation. Through

¹⁴¹ Marina Abramovic, ‘When Time Becomes Form’ in Groom and Whitechapel Art Gallery, 95.

description he brings to life both the place and the materials that he intermingles with and uses during the installation and building of his artwork *Spiral Jetty* (1970). Interaction between materials provides the form of the work and is central to its understanding – though the site, the basalt rock, the changing salt levels and water – all of which act to make the work shift and change. Smithson's investigations of matter in contact, such as the vivid red produced by the bacteria in salt lakes, informed the choice of the site for *Spiral Jetty*, and the specific material form of the site then in turn shaped the final work. These various forms of contact between materials, between research and site, between planning and action and mind and matter, are central to Smithson's distinctive methodology: He discusses these interconnecting threads,

The earth's surface and the figments of the mind have a way of disintegrating into discrete regions of art. Various agents both fictional and real somehow trade places with each other – one cannot avoid muddy thinking when it comes to earth project or what I will call abstract geology.¹⁴²

Smithson builds his formulation of 'abstract geology' with a series of geological metaphors for the working of the mind: 'cliffs of thought'; 'stones of unknowing'; 'gritty reason.' The slow nature of geological time implied within Smithson's writing draws out the nature of coming to knowledge through artmaking on site.

¹⁴² Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson, the Collected Writings*, Documents of 20th Century Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 100.

This movement seems motionless, yet it crushes the landscape of logic under glacial reveries. This slow flow makes one conscious of the turbidity of thinking, Slump debris slides, avalanches all take place with the cracking limits of the brain.¹⁴³

What Smithson describes above, as the 'geological miasma' of art/thinking is suggestive of a greater form of knowing, an ontology that challenges the boundaries between subject and object. In *Spiral Jetty* this 'abstract geology' is the coming together of Smithson's thinking/research and the landscape/matter of the Great Salt Lake. Additionally, Smithson's reference to 'motionless movement' here reflects his interest in 'crystalline geometry and non-biological time.' This lack of movement is directly related to the term 'Time Crystals' 'which he used as a metaphor for endlessness and as visualization of static frozen time.'¹⁴⁴ This frozen time was captured from a multitude of angles in his work and writings constantly challenging his viewers and readers to question the significance "time" embedded in his work. For Smithson time was never linear, it was, as art theorist Amelia Barikin has described of his approach, 'an organic flow from the past to the future, Smithson, built, wrote and filmed time as fractured, dislocated, displaced – crystallised.'¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Smithson, 100.

¹⁴⁴ Smithson, 3.

¹⁴⁵ Amelia Barikin, *Robert Smithson: Time Crystals, Robert Smithson: Time Crystals* (Monash University Publishing: Melbourne, 2018)., 10, accessed March 21, 2020

From the gyrating space emerged the possibility of the Spiral Jetty. No ideas, no concepts, no systems, no structures, no abstractions could hold themselves together in the actuality of the evidence...No sense wondering about classification and categories, there were none.¹⁴⁶

Moving beyond the capacity for language, Smithson's process stresses the interconnectedness of art making beyond the individual artist. Simon O'Sullivan discusses Smithson's encounter with the landscape in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's Body without Organs (BwO). The BwO's underlying connection is constitutive and constituted and is not limited to the subjective or individual.

The body without organs is non-productive; nonetheless it is produced, at a certain place and a certain time in the connective synthesis, as the identity of the producing and the product...The body without organs is not the proof of an original nothingness, nor is it what remains of a lost totality.¹⁴⁷

As O'Sullivan iterates the BWO has underlying connections to the 'rhizome,' Deleuze and Guattari's metaphor for the interconnectedness that exists within the BwO. Rhizome is a 'biological term' defining an interconnected 'root system'¹⁴⁸ it is this interlinked depth that connects and interacts with multiple elements within the

¹⁴⁶ Smithson, *Robert Smithson, the Collected Writings*.

¹⁴⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem and H. R. Lane, London: Continuum, 2004, P.9

¹⁴⁸ (O'Sullivan, p.12)

context of the BwO. For O'Sullivan, art like Smithson's can be thought of as a BwO, where the potential for a reciprocal determination is always in tension with the fracturing of this synthesis:

Art might be a name for these experimental modes of being, these strange and exciting (and sometimes frightening) 'new' images of thought, although art can also be and often is, the name for those BwO's which have precisely been blocked botched or otherwise broken. This amounts to saying that the dangers of transcendence, are everywhere and always accompany experiments and adventures in thinking immanence.¹⁴⁹

Framing *Spiral Jetty* through the BwO locates it as a site of relationality (rather than through its relationship with its actor/artist). Thinking these relationships apart from the artist allows for a consideration of the durational time of the performance beyond the performer's body, the possibility to consider the time between actants in the performance, as between the ice, water and earth. It draws up the land itself as a vital matter in the performance, whose geological time is pushing back or against the experience of time of the human body.

Smithson's investigations into time as a material and geological movement, resonates with my work in the landscape at Mungo. I had no preconceptions about what I was about to experience, but the first time I walked up over the dune at Mungo I was completely awestruck by the absolute stillness and fragility of ground beneath my feet.

¹⁴⁹ Simon O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought beyond Representation* (Houndmills [etc.: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 116.

The light undulated across the bleached and crusted sand at the top of the dune. At first it felt solid beneath me feet, but as I began to walk I could feel it crumble from the weight of my movement. There was a strange dichotomy between the geological past and presence of this place, that was once a thriving water culture and now thousands of years later it is an arid desert that contains only visual clues of the lakes repetitious rising and falling in the geology of this place. Time was skewed and still. I began to see the multiple temporalities that existed both within the rhizome the interconnected web of relationships connecting back to the temporality of the elements of these performances; my body, the ice block and the enduring trolley that would eventually fight its way through the all-consuming elements of this place. All of this sifted in and out of my immediate awareness. The temporal nature of my body and the rapidly liquefying ice blocks that I would carry would leave meagre traces in the earth. It was these multiple temporalities that compelled me to question the validity of my presence in this place and the links that connected me to the whole.

Whereas Smithson broke deeply into the earth's surface and removed the necessary basalt rock and earth to create his inspired form, my interventions at Mungo were temporary. There were moments when the trolley did displace the earth and I left a trail of water. I interfered with my body, not earth moving machinery. As I came to know the dunes that I walked and roads that I traversed. I understood that the traces of my body and the ice blocks would eventually be consumed by the elements. The footprints would disappear into the dune within a day or two and the deep tracks of the trolley would eventually be absorbed into the soft earth. The trail of water and the

melting ice blocks left behind would evaporate leaving only temporary traces. The slow erasure of undifferentiated time would eventually erase all traces of the performances. Although I connect to Smithson's initial exploration and unknowability of the elements, I struggle with his invasive methods of imposing an abstract order on the ecology of this place. Turning back to my own work, it was my intention, to not only walk the landscape at Mungo, but to experience its time, albeit briefly, through my body.

[Walk 3: Basin Ambulations: Melt \(2016\)](#)

As I walked in Mildura and surrounds, I looked for sites that I might be able to experiment with melting, to further understand the properties of ice. I began by melting the ice blocks in vineyards and eventually moved them to the riverside. Each melt was different. In the soft earth of the vineyards the ice blocks darkened the earth quickly as they began to melt. On less porous surfaces such as asphalt or cement the ice blocks sometimes slid about. I did very little documenting of these initial experiments, but would record my findings in my creative practice journal. Later, I began to think about ways to capture the movements of the melt and potentially the sound of the ice blocks as they melted. This led to an experimental ice block melt that took place at Mungo national park — *Melt: Mungo* (2016) — that involved a seventy-litre ice block melted on site and documented with a time lapse video.

After arriving at Mungo, I immediately placed the ice block in the landscape. One camera was placed on the ice block and set to take one shot per minute. I had obtained

two latex covered contact microphones and intermittently took soundbites of the block melting. This investigative process yielded a series of sizzling and cracking sounds. However, because the microphones were not embedded in the ice blocks, I was also picking up the sounds of the microphone sliding on the ice block and the subtle movements of my fingers upon the block. The ice was allowed to melt for twenty-four hours and its movements were recorded as it shifted, changed and melted into the ground. The digital frames picked up these subtle movements. The camera was turned off after dark and then turned back on just as the sun was beginning to rise, in order pick up as much movement as possible over the twenty-four-hour period. This experiment piqued my curiosity about the material agency of the ice and led to further experiments with sound.

From this work, the performance *Basin Ambulations: Melt* (2016) was developed. It offered an opportunity to explore the unique landscapes surrounding the actual Mungo lakebed. These landscapes were created as the Lake rose and fell during the ice age and have brought to light ‘a climatic clock.’¹⁵⁰

No other area of inland Australia combines a record of past environmental and human history spanning the last glacial period as explicitly as does the Willandra Lakes region. And although each

¹⁵⁰ Lawrence, Helen, *Mungo Over Millennia: The Willandra Landscape and It's People*, Maygog Publishing, Sandy Bay, Tasmania, Australia, 2014 10

basin in the system possesses its own special features, none displays its record with such spectacular clarity as Lake Mungo.¹⁵¹

I worked with the Willandra Lakes National Park ranger to identify appropriate sites for this performance. I received permission to shoot in two diverse locations that spoke to the unique history of Lake Mungo, and I planned to leave ice blocks behind in the landscape as I walked. The walking experience itself was distinctly more difficult and the terrain more varied than the previous walk. I recorded many of the experiences from this walk in my creative practice journal. The entry below describes my experience at the first location.

This road is even softer and sandier than the road to the previous site. The wheels sink into the sand and I find myself struggling to get up the hills pushing, pulling and readjusting the trolley and my body multiple times. Each movement is intentional. In my previous performance at Mungo there were moments where it was difficult to push the trolley, but nothing like this. The terrain continually forces me to slow down as I push and pull the trolley through the soft sandy earth. Finally, I arrive at the second site. The ice is melting at a rapid pace, so I pack as many of the blocks as I can into a black shopping bag and continue climbing the sandy dune on foot. My bag seems to weigh about the same as it might after a mid-size shopping trip to the grocery store (a heavy, but manageable weight). But as I climb the weight becomes more noticeable. My feet slip and slide in the ever-shifting pale sand and make it difficult to keep my balance.

¹⁵¹Lawrence, Helen, *Mungo Over Millennia*, 6

Walking back down the steep bank of the sand dune, my feet once again sink into the soft white sand and I remember the slow struggle that I had with the trolley. Slowness seems to be a theme in this body of work and the physical struggle embedded in this performance seems to resonate with the ever-changing physical and geographic erosion of this place.¹⁵²

In retrospect, I now see, this slowness seems to interact with the work in terms of time. The time that it takes the ice blocks to freeze and the time it takes them to melt. Even the subtle variations in melt time seemed more obvious in this environment and the way the ice block on the bottom of the trolley melt into the unrelenting steel grate at the bottom of the trolley and take on its gridded pattern, echoing material qualities of the trolley itself. It was through close observation of the subtle shifts in time and material that later led me to the theoretical investigations of time. The material elements of the Mungo terrain deeply influenced the pace at which I moved over the course of this performance.

Material interactions with Time I and II

Time has always been an element of this project, in the performances, in the materials and in the theoretical writing. Furthermore, two installations evolved out of a series of post-performance ice melt experiments that explored the malleability of the melting ice blocks and the remnants of moisture and physical markings left behind. I

¹⁵² Entry from Creative Practice Journal, April 2016

began by melting the ice blocks in a bed of sand, to record the material time through the moisture produced. I placed the ice blocks on a bed of dry sand and as they melted the moisture spread into the dry sand creating a material record of the event. In the early experiments I used a variety of sizes of ice blocks and as expected the larger the ice block the larger the spread. Additionally, through these investigations, I discovered that, if melted on sand, the ice block's shrinking materiality left impressions in the sand. These remnants of the melt differed in depth and width according to the size of the ice blocks. The impressions left within the confines of the shapes contained map-like structures of the water's movement and shifting weight of the ice block as it melted. It was almost as if the ice block had created a map of its own melt into the sand (See Figure 10).



Figure 10 *Material interactions with Time II* (2019)
Phyllis Palmer Gallery, La Trobe Bendigo Campus

The original placement of the ice block was clear in imprint in the sand and then as it began to melt and run, sand ridges formed within this, tracing the paths of the shifting shape of the underside of the ice block. In the first installation I melted one large ice block approximately seventy kilograms. The approximate melting time for this ice block will be three days, and, upon placement, it will immediately form a large imprint in the sand. The installation will then begin recording the material shifts and changes of the ice block as it melts. There will be approximately three ice blocks over the course of the performance, as one is finishing, another will be beginning to melt. The second installation will have a series of small ice blocks that will melt and be replaced over the course of the exhibition. Thus the sand will become a collage of melting ice blocks and impressions of these melts in the sand will accumulate over the course of the exhibition. (See Figure Y)



Figure 11 Material Interactions with Time II (2019), After the first round of melting
Phyllis Palmer Gallery, La Trobe Bendigo Campus

CONCLUSION

Ice's transformational material agency has been a vital element of both the creative and theoretical explorations of this thesis. Ice's ever shifting materiality has continually surprised as I observed it both in the confines of my freezer and in my trolley as I traversed the Mungo landscape. Many of my interactions with ice have occurred during my durational performances and influenced the creative and written research that followed the performances. This chapter has considered durational performance and the experience of time through the materiality of the melt. Bachelard's discussion of the 'instant' as a measurement of time, has informed my discussion about my personal experience with time during a durational performance and the constantly shifting perception of time throughout the Mungo durational performances. Over the course of these performances, I came to understand the connections between, the human experience of time and the sensual corporeal experience of geological time contained within in this place. The constant battle to move the trolley through the soft Mungo earth, seemed to slow time and stretch even the most miniscule measure of time, which in Bachelard's eyes is the 'the instant'.

Smithson's work has also been an elemental part of this part of this chapter. Through his writings and interactions, with material and place I have come to understand the significance of site and the physicality of reflective writing, a tool that I have also used in relationship to the Mungo performances. The geological time embedded in *Spiral Jetty* (2017) become an abstract geology in his writings about the experience.

Smithson's words strengthen his connections to the material elements of place and also relate to O'Sullivan's discussions about Deleuze and Guattari's BwO. My work differs from Smithson's in that he disrupted the site by digging deeply into the earth and disrupting the ecosystems continually through time. Walking has been a purposeful choice in this project, in that it allows me to tread lightly on the earth and interact with a place directly with my own body. The Mungo landscape is a fragile remote ecosystem with deep significance to the traditional owners and walking seemed like an appropriate action to use in such a significant place.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this practice-led research my place-based studio practice has evolved. It now encompasses a large body of experimental works, that embrace materiality, the interactive nature of walking, and its relationship to place. My intention with this work was to use walking as both an investigative process and as a means to create a series of experimental walking performances with a grocery trolley in order to gain a deeper understanding of the material aspects of a place. Many of the early works, were place-based performances and material experiments, that allowed me to come to know the agential qualities of the materials and objects that I would later interact with in the more elaborate place-based performances at Lake Mungo. My focus on walking as a way to connect to and understand place, led me to an examination of walking's placement within the field of contemporary art where walking is both used as an investigative process in artists' practices and the subject of works of art. My contribution to new knowledge in this field stems from the framing of my experimental walking practice and the small assemblage that I convened at Mungo; the trolley; the Murray River ice blocks; and my own body. After the initial Mungo performances, my research practice deepened extending to the human experience of both bodily time and the interaction the physicality of geological time. In turn this research connected back to Latour's Actor Network theory – a theory that emphasizes the interlinking connections between 'things'. In the case of this thesis and body of creative work, the assemblage is small, but both the objects and the action of walking connect to each other and a series of larger networks. It is the micro-

personal, such as my intimate bodily connections to the Mungo landscape that connect to macro-global experiences that connect culture and humanity to place.

My bodily experience with the Mungo landscape occurred both with and without the trolley over an extended period of time through both the durational performances and the investigative walks that occurred before and after the performances. The embodied knowledge that I gained from these walks informed the creative and theoretical writing surrounding the bodily experiences at Mungo. The experimental use of the trolley in my walking practice enhanced this bodily knowledge compelling me to interact with the elements of place, the textures of the earth beneath my feet, the subtle inclines the vegetation or lack thereof. The body's role in this thesis is unpacked but corporeal knowing goes beyond just the physical elements of a place. It allows one to listen, know and eventually gain an understanding of a place. It was through these walks that I began to pay attention to both the physical elements of a place through my body's interactions with it and the equally important interconnected thoughts that evoked connections, between the ecological, physical, cultural, historical and social elements of a place.

In turn the trolley, the object that accompanied me to Mungo drew attention to its own interconnecting threads to consumerism and consumption, both through its iconic looks and its durable materiality. The constant push and pull between the trolley, also created additional labour due to the soft Mungo earth. In this thesis I have discussed the hidden labour in the walking artist Richard Long, whose installations are filled with labour that is rarely seen by the viewer. In contrast the labour contained within in my trolley walks is overtly obvious in the documentation of the work. Leaving

traces of its own tracks in the landscape also the trolley acts as a vehicle that draws my attention to the subtle nuances of the landscapes that I traversed both at Mungo and during the preliminary walk on the Camel pad track.

The third interconnecting element discussed in Chapter 3 Water: Connecting with Actants is the Murray River water used to create the ice blocks that were carried in the trolley during the Mungo performances. The Murray River water is a central element in this thesis and is unpacked through my own experience with its materiality as I collected the water for the ice blocks and through Latour's Actor Network theory and Ely's Murray River Punch – the Soup performance. This performance was central in this thesis and in my understanding of the environmental crises surrounding the Murray River. Ely brings to life the actants contained within the Murray that perform along with her and her assistant, Emma Price. The complex assemblage of elements collected by Ely are drawn out through her interactions with them during the performance and also drew my attention to the actants that would be traveling in the Murray River ice blocks that accompanied me to Mungo. The work of Mark Dion is discussed in relationship to Bennett's discussion of thing power and vital materiality. Bennett's theories have been an integral part of the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis and the new materialist methodology I have employed throughout this thesis.

Interconnecting materiality is a consistent thread throughout the thesis, thus in the final chapter, chapter 4 ICE/Melt: The Temporality of Transformation discusses my interactions with ice, through melting, listening, touching and displacing this unique material object, that continually transforms and surprises me with its ever-shifting

materiality. Many of the works directly related to ice are experimental in both method and media, sound, installation and performance. This chapter also discusses my interactions with time and place in the Mungo landscape and through the work of land artist Robert Smithson. Slowness and time are also a theme in this chapter, both in relationship to the ice and the investigation of Smithson's encounters with shores of the Great Salt Lake and salt flats surrounding it. All of these interconnecting threads link back to the ice blocks slow cyclical transformation from liquid to solids and to gas, which eventually returns to the earth as liquid moisture. This transformation also links back to the ever-shifting landscape at Mungo.

Experimental walking has allowed me to interact with the small assemblage that I traveled with to Mungo. Throughout this thesis I have interacted with this group of objects, the trolley and Murray River ice blocks. The contribution to knowledge in this thesis is directly related to this assemblage, the displacement of the Murray river water, the trolley and my own materiality and displacement in this foreign landscape.

Future Research

Over the course of this project, I have seen the potential for furthering both the creative and theoretical research in regards to the material objects and theoretical frameworks I have worked with over the course of this project. In light of the recent global pandemic I have seen some of these objects transform over the course of a very short period of time. The writing below is an experience that I had with grocery trolley shortly after Australia went into its first COVID-19 lockdown.

Two weeks after COVID-19 hit I walked into the grocery store to pick-up a few things. I had been watching and reading the news and was stunned by how quickly an invisible threat, a microscopic virus, had changed the world. As I walked into the store that day and approached the trolley hub, a strange thing happened. I started to reach for the trolley and as I did this something stopped me. It was almost as if an invisible force had screamed in my ear, “don’t touch that it’s not safe!” It was such a visceral reaction, that I literally froze in my tracks. Finally, one of the workers noticed my ongoing dilemma, walked over and said, “Can I wipe that down for you.” I thanked him, profusely, took my trolley and began to move through the store. As I walked through the store that day, I noticed there had been some disconcerting changes to the floors and isles of the store. The biggest shift was the bright green decals that are placed on the floor all over the store with an image of a trolley on them “social distancing, 1.5 meters”. I began to notice other changes that had taken place in my neighborhood grocery store that day. The toilet paper isle had been decimated, there was not one single roll on the entire isle and there was a sign reading, “ZERO TOLERANCE, Aggressive and abusive behavior will not be tolerated. Our team is here to help not to be hurt.”¹⁵³ I was stunned! How was it possible that my local grocery store had turned into a battle ground over toilet paper? As I approached the self-service check-out line there were a series of large green dots on the floor indicating where I needed to stand, with the 1.5-meter trolley image on them. I suddenly found myself questioning how “clean” the self-checkout stations, screens, scanners and surfaces were. At this stage in the pandemic it was almost IMPOSSIBLE to find hand sanitizer and the

¹⁵³ Sign posted in the toilet paper isle in the Golden Square VIC

safety and familiarity of “things” and their surfaces had shifted so quickly my head was spinning from it all

I had always thought of the trolley as a playful material object that had moved about the urban landscape, beckoning its human counterparts with its mobility and usefulness.

I left the store that day feeling like the world had changed overnight. The enigmatic trolley I had been researching, refurbishing, walking and interacting with over the course of my practice-led PhD had suddenly become a symbol of the larger COVID-19 assemblage.

As the above grocery store experience unfolded, I began to see cracks in the binary thinking between human vitality and the inanimate, as well as the links to larger assemblages and networks outside this project. The pandemic had drawn my attention to new actants that were potentially interacting with the trolley. This experience occurred during the final write-up stages I began to see the objects I had performed with, investigated and written about shifting and changing before my eyes. Much of this is still evolving and no one knows what the actual long-term effects of this pandemic will be. My visceral reaction to the trolley that day, signaled a shift in my perception of the trolley’s materiality, which in turn compelled me to question the links that caused that reaction.

As I look to future research, I still see myself working with the materiality of the objects contained within this project, the trolley, the ice blocks, the Murray River and my own

body. In terms of the trolley I for see the potential for grocery store panic buying performances, tracking the trolley's whereabouts in the urban landscape with GPS tracking devices. Additional ideas, might include research surrounding food security both in relationship to the trolley and creative food storage ideas.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – LIST OF WORKS

WORKS DURING THE PHD CANDIDATURE

Once upon a wander... (2013-Present)

Series of walks (not exhibited)

Walk 1 : Trolley Ambulations: Camel Pad Track (2014)

Walking performance on the *Camel Pad Track*, Hatt-Kulkyne National Park, VIC

Materials: Grocery trolley, Murray river rock salt, personal dvd player, playing the video documentation

Self-documented with video and still images

Exhibited: *Praxis*, ADFA Gallery, Mildura, 2014

Liquify: Acoustic

Installation

Materials: Trolley, ice blocks, sand...sand is mounded

Acoustic sounds of cracking ice and drips - ice blocks replaced throughout the show

Exhibited: *Praxis*, Phyllis Palmer Gallery, Bendigo, 2019

Walk 2: Basin Ambulations: Lake Mungo (2015)

Walking performance Lake Mungo, Mungo National Park, NSW.

Materials: refurbished grocery trolley and 70 kilo Murray River Ice block, Red dirt

Video documentation

Videographer: Kieran Mangan

Video editor: Jason Heller

Photographers: James Price and Jess Avery

Exhibited: Mildura Palimpsest Biennale: *everywhere all at once...here*

ADFA Gallery, Mildura, 2015

Melt Mungo (2016)

Experimental ice melt

Not exhibited

Melt: Sound (2017 -2019)

Experimental sound melts

Not exhibited

WORKS IN THE FINAL EXHIBITION

Exhibition Title: *Material Walking: Corporeal interactions and place*

Venue: Phyllis Palmer Gallery, Bendigo, La Trobe Campus

Walk 3: Basin Ambulations: Melt Mungo (2016)

Walking performance Lake Mungo

Materials: refurbished grocery trolley filled with ice blocks of assorted shapes and sizes, then placed the landscape.

Video documentation: 3 channel video

Videographers: Kieran Mangan, Ben Gross

Editors: Jason Heller, Edwina Stevens

Liquify: Acoustic (2020)

Installation

Materials: Trolley, ice blocks, sand

Acoustic sounds of cracking ice and drips - ice blocks replaced throughout the show

Material interactions with Time I (2020)

Installation

Materials: Ice blocks, sand. Ice blocks replaced throughout the show)

Material interactions with Time II (2020)

Installation

Materials: one large ice block on a pile of sand. Ice replaced throughout the show

Additional Works (2020)

Photo Print Series: Basin Ambulations: Lake Mungo

Appendix 2 - MAP

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Other computer files or media, films, models, or any other material.

In practice-based degrees where installation, performance, exhibition or other event forms part of the examination, a durable record must normally be submitted online with the thesis. (Any specific disciplinary requirements that apply for examination and final submission are outlined in the Guidelines for the Examinable Components in the PracticeBased Mode)