

The Air
of the
Now and
Gone

The Air of the Now and Gone

Maude Arès, Christina Battle, Erin Johnson,
Colin Lyons, Caroline Monnet, Cynthia Girard-Renard,
Niloufar Salimi, Hanae Utamura

Curated by Kirsty Robertson and Sarah E.K. Smith

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Thank You

Ross Gay

If you find yourself half naked
and barefoot in the frosty grass, hearing,
again, the earth's great, sonorous moan that says
you are the air of the now and gone, that says
all you love will turn to dust,
and will meet you there, do not
raise your fist. Do not raise
your small voice against it. And do not
take cover. Instead, curl your toes
into the grass, watch the cloud
ascending from your lips. Walk
through the garden's dormant splendor.
Say only, thank you.
Thank you.

Walk
through
the garden's
dormant
splendor

Kirsty Robertson and Sarah E.K. Smith

Crisis, catastrophe, and disaster abound in contemporary discussions of climate change and its impacts. Such sentiments are so pervasive that we seem to have tipped into what author Cal Flyn describes as “a *yearning* for the apocalypse.”¹ A slide into apathy and despair given the extent of the damage seems inevitable, while calls for hope offer only an empty retort. Are there alternatives?

“Thank You,” the poem by Ross Gay that gives this exhibition its title, reminds us we are all connected to each other and to the natural world:

the earth’s great, sonorous moan that says
you are the air of the now and gone²

Recognizing an embodied connection between past and future means you might still “curl your toes into the grass” and feel the earth, the land and the air, all while reckoning with the challenges facing our planet.

Exploring our kinship with the natural environment, *The Air of the Now and Gone* seeks to engage with other responses beyond

the pervasive oscillation between hope and despair—empathy, wonder, joy, persistence, interdependence, attentiveness, connection and flourishing. The artworks featured in the show complicate optimism by seeking out more nuanced feelings through which to experience and understand the environment in this moment of crisis. We join the artists in drawing attention to the emptiness of “hope” as a concept, which serves only to distance problems or place responsibility for them on to others.

In *The Air of the Now and Gone* we offer a series of questions for how we might encounter the future. How do we acknowledge, address and engage with climate change? And how are we supposed to feel about it? What other responses are possible? The artworks ask visitors to refuse to look away from the wicked problem of climate change while offering a spectrum of resonant and unexpected responses to it. Fostering deep understandings and kinship with other beings, the exhibition reveals existing entanglements we often choose not to see. Our approach is not rooted in optimism or naiveté but seeks to move beyond

hope to engender radical engagement rooted in a forthright acknowledgement of current circumstances.

Hanae Utamura's sculptures, crafted using glassmaking techniques, capture "ancient air" from deep-sea sediment. These works reveal the rhythmic "breath" of glass forms that echo the Earth's geological processes, the deep time and **persistence** of rock formation, and her own breath—an interplay that is caught in repetition until the glass shatters.

Cynthia Girard-Renard's *Tryphon* is a large mixed-media installation anchored by a monumental papier-mâché sculpture of a Sperm Whale, which floats dreamily in the gallery. It memorializes a beloved whale who died in 2009 after becoming entangled in crab trap cables in the St. Lawrence River estuary. The installation serves as both a tribute and a call for **empathy** in creating more harmonious relations with animals.

Colin Lyon's etchings and sculpture delve into the speculative and often hubristic realm of geoengineering, critiquing humanity's attempts

to manipulate nature. His work, incorporating seeds from the maligned-yet-resilient Tree of Heaven, highlights the dual potential of human intervention to salvage and destroy, while evoking a sense of **wonder** at the tree's capacity to phytoremediate damaged soils.

Niloufar Salimi's intimate portraits of Poison Ivy highlight the resilience of this famously noxious plant that is now known to be **flourishing** under conditions of climate change. While toxic to humans, Poison Ivy is not so to other species. Its support for damaged ecosystems, Salimi suggests, shows a need for interspecies cooperation.

Erin Johnson's video installation *Tomatoes* envisions a world steeped in queer love, abundance and **joy**. The work, which takes its name from the fruit, is a lush and sensuous communal feast that celebrates desire and collectivity.

The ecosystem created by Maude Arès's *Le dedans de ce qui fuit (La gravité organise les hasards)*, underscores the fragile and unpredictable relationships that sustain life,

with dripping water, clay, leaves and plant detritus serving as subtle reminders of the delicate ties of **interdependence** shaping our environment.

Christina Battle's textile installation manifests an archive of Edmonton's climate extremes and a meditation on the temporal dimensions of the climate crisis. Through soft, domestic forms, the artist's **attentiveness** to the details of crisis transforms the dire realities of climate change into deceptively comforting objects, shifting our focus to the intricacies of air and its impacts.

Caroline Monnet's works emphasize **connection** by placing industrial materials like concrete, Tyvek, tar paper and Kevlar into conversation with natural and cultural references. Combining modernist aesthetics, Anishnaabe worldviews, Greek philosophy and themes of change, her sculptures and wall-based work engage with broader discussions about land use, housing and environmental impact.

The ongoing effects of capitalism and colonialism strongly shape the complexities

explored by the artists in this exhibition. The Métis technoscience scholar M Murphy argues that we live in “alterlife,” which they define as “a historically new form of life that is altered by the chemical violence of capitalism and colonialism,” wherein the effects of catastrophe are unevenly distributed and experienced.³

These ideas are taken up by Siobhan Angus and Elaina Foley in their contribution to this publication. They offer a meditation on air and breathing amidst multiple connected crises: “The atmosphere is heavy with grief and rage,” they write. “Yet hope walks hand in hand with both.” This hope, they note, is not mere optimism but an embodied purpose that “carries the weight of uncertainty” and the need for action nestled into fragile evocations of possible futures.

In the face of the “wicked problem” of climate change, which precludes easy solutions, how can we move forward? How can we hold space for both joy in the beauty of the world and horror at its devastation? This exhibition brings together new and recent works by artists who refuse detachment and

simultaneously complicate idealism, using unexpected emotional responses to disaster to engage deeply with the pressing challenges of environmental crisis, biodiversity loss and human-land relationships.

The artists teach us how to hold joy in a time of crisis, how to focus on thriving species under conditions of disaster and how to build good relations in an uncertain world. Their works find resonance with the vignettes presented by Kristi Leora Gansworth in her contribution to this catalogue, which foreground Anishinaabe *onáchigewin* (prophetic teachings) and *inákonigéwin* (a concept that denotes action and consequence). These she shares as strategies for developing worldviews in line with the Earth's spark.

As Ross Gay points out, the air of the now and gone has cycled through the lungs and cells of all living beings and we are amidst water that has evaporated and fallen over millennia. We find ourselves confronted with the vastness of the world—its simultaneous strength and fragility—and recognize the kinship of our small lives with the immensity of the universe.

Say “thank you, thank you” as together we
“walk through the garden’s dormant splendor,”
awaiting new awakenings.

1. Cal Flynn, *Islands of Abandonment: Life in the Post-Human Landscape* (London and Dublin: William Collins, 2021), 315.
2. The essay and exhibition titles draw from this poem by Ross Gay, “Thank You,” in *Against Which* (Fort Lee, New Jersey: CavanKerry Press, 2006), 71.
3. M Murphy, “Alterlife in the Ongoing Aftermaths of Chemical Exposure,” michellemurphy.net. See also, Murphy, “Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations,” *Cultural Anthropology* 32:4 (2017): 494–503.

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The Weight of Air

Siobhan Angus and Elaina Foley

Breathe this world while you can

Inhale, exhale. Breathable atmosphere extends 12 kilometres above the ground. As Eva Horn reminds us, air is the “medium of life,” it forms the “condition of possibility.”¹ It is the thin, fragile membrane that binds us to the earth, to each other, to the unknown future. Increasingly, the present feels haunted by this unknown future: a steady refrain of tipping points warns of the collapse of a stable climate—1.5°C, 2°C, 3°C.² Yet 86% of climate scientists expect warming to exceed 2°C this century, with 58% believing there’s at least a 50% chance it could surpass 3°C.³ The spectre of a future we are forging—one shaped by ExxonMobil, Chevron and BP—narrows the horizon of possibility. The air we breathe is also a conduit, it reveals our porousness. **Inhale.** Microplastics. Sulfur dioxide. Volatile organic compounds (VOCs). Perfluorinated compounds (PFCs). Smog. The elemental entanglements of an increasingly synthetic world. Atmosphere stretches up into the sky, but also pulls us closer to the edge.

Do not sleep in delusion

There are days when air does not promise relief. **Exhale.** When air reminds us we are

not all in it together. 9 minutes 29 seconds—the amount of time Derek Chauvin knelt on George Floyd’s neck. In Gaza, Palestinians inhale white phosphorus and choke on the particulate matter of a society incinerated by US-made Israeli weapons.⁴ In Louisiana’s Cancer Alley, DuPont is fined \$480,000 for releasing benzene—a known carcinogen—into the atmosphere while DuPont reports a profit of \$1.62 billion.⁵ Similarly, benzene emissions from the INEOS Styrolution plant near Sarnia prompt Aamjiwnaang First Nation to declare a state of emergency, ultimately leading to the decommissioning of the plant.⁶ As artist Christina Battle emphasizes, the climate crisis is not distributed equally. Class, race and geography shape the conditions of possibility.

Do not labour in despair

The crises are here. Not as the abstract stories, metaphors and allusions that blanket headlines, but as thick smoke from a world on fire. The intellectualization and deliberation of rising waters is a project with an end date, the veil that has dropped before us was not precluding sight of some distant apocalypse, but an ongoing disaster, with roots in our

ways of life. It is the story of their olive trees burning, your water poisoned, our future taken hostage by the extractive systems that promised growth but delivered only rot. As full as my heart and head and body and grief become, I am not drowning in information because information is not a hurricane, nor a bomb, nor a militia, nor a chemical weapon. I can be clearer: I feel underneath something heavy, knowing loved ones wade through hallowed places; knowing my feet are on dry ground.

Inhale.

For some days, this earth will not promise relief

Fall into bed and wake up to the noise. Carbon sinks are refusing to hold debt any longer. *There's 25° Celsius forecasts this week, New York's 2024 performance of autumn. Covid XEC variant infections should require a 10-day quarantine period, according to the NHS. But no one masks on my morning commute: not the D, N, or R train.* These tired refrains. These cursed awarenesses.

Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* describes how psychological pain finds a referent in

art and literature, while physical pain begets breakdowns in communication, producing a suffering that cannot be translated.⁷ We might take her observation as a moment to consider how explaining the psychological pain of watching disaster inch closer has become the defining experience of climate change, rather than a grappling with established systems of governance that sustain themselves by producing real and material violence. **Exhale.** I hear these habits of proximate fear (it's getting closer!) click on in my thoughts sometimes, even as I know that ten years of my hometown's drought and smoke-choked summers mean the crisis has already been waking, rising to work, living among us.

but awaken the spirit

Hand to my heart, I understand how easy it is to collapse under the weight of this knowledge. Yet it is both a burden and a guide, so that you might learn where you are in the world and how that place came to be. Learn the land as a way of loving it, of loving yourself. Of a love that looks like justice for kin and comrades and enemies besides.

strengthen the heart

The atmosphere is heavy with grief and rage. Yet hope walks hand in hand with both. It is not optimism: hope does not promise that things will get better. Instead, it carries the weight of uncertainty, a quiet conviction that things must change, because too much is at stake for it to be otherwise. This is the hard hope of resistance and transformation, the kind that demands action, that refuses to look away.

Go forth to one another

Fallen leaves blanket the ground in Ottawa and New York, both shelter and nutrient in this time of collapse. For a season, plants will lie dormant and animals hibernate. Nature's rebounding rhythm of death and rebirth reminds us that life emerges from even the most hostile conditions.

and make something that will last,

Occasionally, we catch glimmers of a more just world. Land and water protectors at Unist'ot'en and Standing Rock. Students organizing, teaching and living in Palestine solidarity encampments. There are ways to create a world rooted in love, in accountability, in

collective survival. A world that acknowledges its contradictions—its beauty, its destruction, its possibility. Art, too, can invite us into that future, offering not comfort, but clarity. It does not hide the fire or the muck, but calls us to sit with it, to witness it, to refuse to look away.

without death's insurance.

The artworks in this exhibition ground us in the here and now. In what has passed and what is yet to come. In a world both enchanted and compromised, contaminated yet pulsing with life. We are reminded of what has been taken, but also of how to resist. To connect with the world is not only to sink into its good material graces, but to feel how it burns. **Inhale.**

1. Eva Horn, "Air as Medium." *Grey Room* 73 (2018): 9.
2. Seth Wyness et al. "Perceptions of Carbon Dioxide Emission Reductions and Future Warming among Climate Experts." *Communications Earth & Environment* 5:1 (2024): 498.
3. Ibid.
4. Alan Arms and Marija Ristic, "Identifying the Israeli army's use of white phosphorus in Gaza," *Amnesty International*, October 13, 2023.
5. Mark Schleifstein, "DuPont plant in Louisiana fined \$480,000 for release of cancer-causing chemical," *The Advocate*, October 28, 2024.
6. Melissa Roushorne, "INEOS will not restart plant and moves up closing date." *The Journal*, October 24, 2024.
7. Elaine Scarry. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1985).

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**Sacred
Mirror,
Blood of
the Earth**

Kristi Leora Gansworth

These vignettes reflect on Anishinabe *onáchigewin* (prophetic teachings) and *inákonigéwin*, a concept that denotes action and consequence, sometimes translated as “law.” From these teachings and understandings, we come to see that people live in a generative universe where repetition and ceremony are the nature of the Earth realm. Each stage of life grows from ongoing conditions in the natural world, fused to cycles and seasonality.

The First Ones

Ságíhidiwin-love. This is it: to be loved and to love. Both are always possible, and desired.

To begin, two related life forces: *nibi*, water; *wáwásamówiziwin*, the spark. Each carries its infinite mysteries. Water, blood of the Earth, travels through all life, in the spines of all. Water is in the trees and flowers and ferns, in the space between joints, fluid of the brain. Textures of water form trails where fish migrate, surfaces of water stand still, sea sprites rise and dance with the wind. The magic of water: umbilical water, paradise river

and then the ocean. Or which is which? Which comes first? All the unspoken forms of water: ice, mist, sleet, raindrop.

And now the spark. It may be translated as “electricity.” Infinite pulses of electric current are everywhere,¹ a symphony of being alive. Each note counts and is unique. It was said to me once: *Life is a dance you know*. Life is also a *spark*—think about the nature of fire, heartbeat, Earth’s core.

It was water who taught me to listen, to learn the medicine of one’s own spark, a lifelong teaching, to hear these sounds and to listen for the pulse in others. The spark and the water are symbiosis, each dancing together in us and the first laws involve knowing the Earthly nature of song and dance. It is a duty to know all things are in motion and life is singing all the time. Songs are carried by sparks across the many waters who support animation, vitality, all of us.

Time Unfurling

Time is alive. Like a blanket of intertwined threads, each moment binds to the next. *Kagítáwenindam* suggests the value of being

judicious, wise. Earth is a place of seasons: *sígwan*– spring, *níbin*– summer, *tagwági*– autumn, *píbón*– winter. Their stories live in the movement of planets and stars. There is comfort in the certainty of seasonal rotations: this, too, shall pass; ever-flowing are the changes brought by death and rebirth.

Earth and other planets move, as do animals and birds, migrating across sea, sky, prairie. During spring, a certain fern grows and when she blossoms, spiralling patterns of ancient presence are revealed through her leaves. They exist in the coiled fiddlehead top that expands to sword-shaped arcs. Spring's greatest joy is found in the unfurling, a meadow of ferns spreads across the land, encoded memory of what it is to open the self and reach for light.

There is also the joy of the flowers, expressions of colour connecting valleys and ponds, building clusters and rhizomes, softening the sting of the thorn, the bitterness of some medicines. Ferns and flowers form a blanket of light glowing under the coming and going of the moon's glow. Maybe seasons are the primary language of the Earth's spark.

A Refuge of Stars

To see and learn intimately the violence of this realm, its passive and active forms, its hidden and banal atrocities. Human infrastructure carries a “gauntlet of threats”² that brutalize some of Earth’s most ancient residents. *Sóngideyewin* is sometimes said to mean bravery, to have a strong heart. Stars and comets burst through veils and layers of night sky under which fish migrations peacefully transit layers of ocean and river. In the timelessness of constellations, it is remembered: all living things once began in gestation, in darkness. To live is to be in and of the mother’s body, the mother’s waters, Earth’s waters, bounded by a ceiling of stars.

Pibón: winter is a time when one is asked to make peace with things as they are, the wonder and the violence of it all. In dreams, a trail of flower petals forms, flowers bloom behind a woman walking through the destruction of her homelands and ancestors, layers of time exhumed and demolished in a singular day. A village was here; a village crushed to dust; ancient resting ancestors are awakened to make way for dreary buildings.³

Prayers and memories join the space between sea and sky. Songs and offerings bring dreams of a different day, a day where the diversity of life between the dimensions is honored. Humans were not given the right to destroy and dominate the lives held by the Earth. And yet.

For belonging, one can look to the stars, living maps imprinted with the codes of this realm and the knowledge that life is both oriented to certain points and always growing, moving. An instinct exists in some animals to move in silence, seamless, bound to the night and its harsh airs, its kind starlight. Night is the best time to travel, if you can bear the solitude and make friends with those who guard the corners of dark matter that come alive when sunlight is away.

At night, breathing with ancient ones is the action of knowing kindred light deep inside and all around. Night is a time to cherish soft orbs of twinkling brightness written by agents of the cosmos. They form a sacred path: *chibekana*,⁴ the path of souls. Perhaps the night sky is the real heaven—although that is certainly not

the right word, it is in the open night that the stars and the people might see each other most clearly.

Bone Memory

Tebwewén is to know the truth: the human family also travels. From all corners of the four directions, we live together now, although some of us forgot and forget who we are, where we come from; dehumanization of other persons including animals, birds, plants, rocks, is now everywhere. It is necessary to speak tenderly of scars which have raised over injuries on skin and on the Mother's body, in a person's body: pain embedded between fascia, marrow, inhaled air.

Arthritic diseases are increasingly common in Indigenous populations, perhaps related to the loss of access to medicine teas, fatty fish, the nutrients offered in the generosity of animals and plants.⁵ The bones remember a different way.

Not all hauntings are troublesome; some arrive with the fondness of recalling joy and gratitude for what it was to hold human life, to hold and nourish the water of life, to live the

life animated by a body fused with water and electricity and the endless cells that spark and lead new stories.

A spirit can be kind, if it chooses, it can choose to teach, it may look for those who will impart its messages by lending time, energy, sacred sparks of its own life, to tell their stories. To animate memories carefully honoured and buried deep within layers of the Earth's body. Some ancestors are remembered in ceremony, a recognition of their time with Earth, and perhaps all people once remembered this truth of enduring connection.

On Clairvoyance

It may not be clear that *kwayakwàdizi*, honesty, is distinct from truth. Honesty is perhaps more subjective, in one translation, and asks a person to be clear about what they see. Clear seeing. A traumatized experience is now normal. In other times, when the place of this moment was covered in ice and moonlight, slick sheen and dark matter, eels were migrating through deep volcanic valleys that are part of the underwater realm, the most protected, beloved womb near the core of the Earth's body.

The young people of today are learning, it is estimated over 99% of eels die when they travel into Earth's rivers. Today, Ontario is a place where migrating eels have "no habitat deemed to be safe."⁶ And so now, our attention goes to fish and birds, moose, wolves, eels. The fronds, sacred hearts of the spring season, the ones whose gentle spirit shines a crystalline light when sunlight hits her edges, among the grasses and deep shadows of the forest.

The sky is a mirror, the eel is a mirror, the water is a mirror, the natural world our first mirror. A river shines and one can see their own face reflected on the water's surface, like a ribbon of black reflective obsidian resting on the Earth.

Summer is a time of silver. The piercing light of silver sun rays and slick top of a winding river oscillate a colour between silver and gunmetal. Reflections of clouds spread slowly across the ever-flowing spring waters; it appears at times that water is still, though water is never still even if slowed to a pulsating hum. When the sun is brightest it looks as if there is a split line in the horizon.

Eternal Skies and Seasons

All things change: *Tabasenindizowin* refers to humility. In fall time, *tagwagi*,⁷ there is a world in passing and everywhere are chances to imagine the next cycle which is coming: “imaginaries can also open up possibilities beyond the one-world world.”⁷ Leaves appear to fall effortlessly from trees and remind us of our intertwined path, Earth a site of interment and birth. This is the season when standing in the yellow-orange glow of a shedding birch grove teaches one about the nature of holiness. To be clear, the death is holy, the moment is holy, all is holy.

As darkness deepens, moonlight spreads over the surface of water. It is beginning to freeze, *pagwanekijigong*,⁸ the hole in the sky, glows over the eastern skyline, a reflection of the ancestors who passed back and forth through the cosmos and those who will make their way to the sit among the tendrils of fern that will grow from the death of these leaves.

The Circle, or the Center

Manàdjìyàn is among the first and most forgotten laws: Respect. Stories of Anishinabeg

carry elemental truths of life: it is said that the maker, the dreamer, the giver, took care of things in a certain way in order for human life to begin. Among other events, the maker “sent his singers, in the form of birds, to the Earth, to carry the seeds of life to all the Four Directions.”⁹ Creation stories are perhaps the most important. Where does a story begin, where does a life begin, the song of a bird, where does it begin?

And now. Where does a story of devastation begin, more importantly where does it end. The first stories hold such beauty, obligation, to honor the dignity of all that was given. Now. There is such rage, lands engulfed in fire, crumbling effigies of a fading civilization, tattered signage written in languages that travelled across the oceans, reflections of the sounds that have come to live and grow from this place.

To be alive now is to know that a war has been declared in the name of all people. It is not the first war, an inheritance, a node perhaps in the genealogy of wars. For those who are not warlike and whose only counter is to become

peace, it is prudent to remember the cyclical nature of being.

A small plate of food is shared with guardians who watch from the treetops. A grandmother's voice is heard: *migizi, wisin-i*¹⁰ and they do, swooping down to retrieve the blessed meat. The children, their legacy, are safe in the vision of this offering, a vision of life continuing and support between species, a moment of peacemaking with the blood of the earth.

Each tree has a song, the heart of each child has its own song. Protecting life is a duty of the inner sanctum, to respect the precious tendril of unfurling even if its eventuality is to die again and emerge as life eternal. Weaving stories in a cloak of light and darkness is the nature of living in time with the Earth.

1. Timothy Jorgensen's 2021 book *Spark: The Life of Electricity and the Electricity of Life* discusses the many forms of biological electricity inherent to the human body.
2. This quote is drawn from the work of two scientists discussing fish mortality and migration. Karin Limburg and John Waldman, "Dramatic declines in north Atlantic diadromous fishes," *Bioscience* 59:11 (2009): 960.
3. In the 2021 report *Where Sussex Drive Meets the Kichi Sibi: History and Pluralism at 330 Sussex*, the Center for Global Pluralism discusses the construction of downtown Ottawa, where "the remains of Algonquin ancestors may be in the mortar of the Parliament Buildings" (p. 36).
4. Also called the Milky Way.
5. Cairistin McDougall, Kelle Hurd and Cheryl Barnabe, "Systematic review of rheumatic disease epidemiology in the indigenous populations of Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand," *Seminars in Arthritis and Rheumatism* 46:5 (2017): 675–686.
6. Tim Haxton, "Cumulative Downstream Turbine-induced Mortality and Thresholds for Facilitating Upstream Passage of American Eel," *River Research and Applications* 38:3 (2022): 518.
7. Mary Bunch and Dolleen Tisawii'ashii Manning, "Thinking Across Worlds: Pluriversal Potentiality," *Public* (Toronto), 34:68 (2023): 16.
8. Also known as the Pleiades, or Seven Sisters, in other cosmologies, this constellation's name translates to "hole in the sky."
9. Edward Benton-Banai, *The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Red School House, 1988).
10. This phrase is an invitation: "Eagles, come eat."

Kristi Leora Gansworth is Anishinabe-kwe, a band member of Kitigan Zibi and Indigenous geography scholar.

A note from the curators

This publication exists in digital and printed formats. The paper version is produced using a risograph, a sustainable production method that is energy efficient, low waste and uses environmentally friendly inks. It is part of our attempt to shift conventional exhibition design and production toward more sustainable practices. The paper version was printed at the Centre for Sustainable Curating at Western University and bound with the assistance of the MacOdrum Library Book Arts Lab at Carleton University.

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Thank You

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