Material Matters at the Coalface:
A socially-engaged art enquiry into the politics
of coal, space and place

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Abstract

“Material Matters at the Coalface” questions our human relationships with geological matter through a socially-engaged art enquiry into the politics of coal, space and place. Activating coal as “vibrant matter”, this project works with brown coal as a medium to investigate the role that coal plays in Latrobe Valley mining communities.

This project combined socially-engaged, participatory practice and practice-led artistic research with an ethnographic sensibility to investigate the community’s response to living in, and among coal. It aimed to create dialogue and better understand the complex web of changes affecting communities, who are in transition and impacted by the closure of coal-fired power stations and sweeping changes in power generation.

The research findings are presented through a written dissertation and durable records of the “COAL” graduate exhibition, which was staged at the VCA Art Space in Melbourne in February 2017. Unearthing coal’s performative material qualities, this exhibition put the gritty materiality of locally collected brown coal to work as an aesthetic medium in a series of visual artworks, performances and installations encompassing three interconnected galleries and 210sm² of space.

Questioning the physical, psychic and social relationships humans have with non-human matter coal, the “COAL” exhibition also included documentation of performative acts of labour, such as sweeping and cleaning, which were originally performed in public spaces, neglected historical buildings and empty deserted shops in Morwell. The resultant body of artefacts, performances and installations reflect a sustained material engagement with brown coal and socially-engaged arts practice with Latrobe Valley communities over the last three years.

The creative works are analysed and contextualised by drawing on a lineage of artists, writers and philosophers from the intersecting fields of social practice, art and anthropology, who have explored the political ecology of geological matter and the environment.

This investigation of coal’s role in the local community of Morwell demonstrates the increasing ecological impact of human beings’ commodified relationships to nature, place and matter. Departing from these site-responsive concerns and the context of peri-urban Victoria, coal’s political ecology acts as a microcosm, an allegory and visual
metaphor for much larger political and cultural situations. Moving beyond the impact of globalisation on local conditions, the project scrutinises deeply entrenched thinking, which “places man-as-subject at the centre of all relations.”

The research adopts a New Materialist lens to frame the project and foreground the agency of matter to questions such pre-conceived human-centric biases. As a heterogeneous, emerging cultural theory, New Materialism pays renewed attention to the central importance of matter in cultural discourse as a pathway to re-orientate human beings’ relationality with the material world. Responding to, and building on existing scholarship, debates and critiques of New Materialism, this research challenges binary perceptions, that coal is an inert resource to demonstrate coal’s vibrancy as an active agent in shaping experience and discourse.

Contesting anthropocentric definitions of temporality, performance and authorship this research endeavours to act as a cultural agent of change and assist the local community to make the long-term transition to a sustainable local economy and cleaner energy future that better supports jobs, communities and their long-term health.

The complex web of changes facing coal and communities in the Latrobe Valley are brought to the attention of a wider audience through art. The project was driven by a sense of optimism, that contemporary art and culture can create genuine dialogue, engagement and common ground between opposing and polarized views regarding climate change, so that communities can work together and re-orientate currently destructive social relationality with coal, to globally make the vital transition to renewable energy sources.

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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge, this thesis, "Material Matters at the Coalface", comprises only my original work towards the Masters of Fine Arts and it contains no material, which was previously published or written by another person, except where due reference and acknowledgements has been made and indicated in the text. This document contains no material, which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution.

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The thesis has fewer than 39,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, list of illustrations, maps, bibliography and appendices.

Hartmut Veit
August 2017
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This dissertation is lovingly dedicated to my mother, Elisabet Veit and in memory of my late father Gottfried Veit, who fought with life for what he believed was just.

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# Table of contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 1  
Declaration ...................................................................................................................................... 3  
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................................... 4  
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................................. 6  
List of Illustrations ........................................................................................................................... 8  
Prologue ......................................................................................................................................... 10  

## Introduction

Multi-facetted Research Questions ........................................................................................................ 11  
Multi-methods and intersecting Fields .................................................................................................. 13  
Structure and Outline of the Chapters .................................................................................................. 14  
“Eine Gedankenausstellung” ............................................................................................................... 15  
Forms of Representation and Documentation ...................................................................................... 18  

1. Chapter: Coal in Literature, Theory and Practice ............................................................................ 19  
The Binary Image of Coal ..................................................................................................................... 20  
The Anthropocene ............................................................................................................................. 22  
Practice Review: Socially-engaged Art Influences ............................................................................. 23  
    Maintenance Art ............................................................................................................................ 23  
    Social Sculpture .......................................................................................................................... 28  
Practice Review: Spatial Practice Influences ....................................................................................... 31  
“The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents” ........................................................................ 36  
Conceptual Framework of New Materialism ......................................................................................... 39  
A brief History of Materialism ............................................................................................................. 40  
Dialectic Materialism ......................................................................................................................... 41  
Mind Matter Dualism .......................................................................................................................... 44  
Dialectics and Sublation of Opposites ................................................................................................. 45  

2. Chapter: Methodology .................................................................................................................... 50  
Artistic Practice-as-Research ............................................................................................................. 50  
The Field and Research Context ......................................................................................................... 53
The performative Agency of Coal at Work ................................................................. 58
Coal in the Field and Studio ......................................................................................... 60
Art, Anthropology and the Everyday ............................................................................ 61

3. Chapter: The socio-political agency of coal ......................................................... 64
Context: The Mine Fire ................................................................................................. 64
“Sweeping Changes” Performances ............................................................................. 68
Coal and “Heimat” ........................................................................................................ 72
Taking Coal to Melbourne .......................................................................................... 75
Coal and Solastalgia ..................................................................................................... 79
The Social Life of Coal .................................................................................................. 84
The Omnipresence of Coal .......................................................................................... 87
“Black Carpet” Performance ...................................................................................... 91
Coal and Othering ........................................................................................................ 99
Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 106

4. Chapter: Coal’s aesthetic/empathic Agency .......................................................... 107
“Ehrfurcht –the Exhibit” .............................................................................................. 107
Coal disrupts linear Perceptions of Time ..................................................................... 112
Coal: an Arche-fossil .................................................................................................... 114
“Ehrfurcht –a Performance” ....................................................................................... 116
Being touched by Coal ................................................................................................. 119
Coal’s ephemeral Traces .............................................................................................. 121
Coal as the Author ........................................................................................................ 131
Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 132

5. Chapter: Coal’s cultural/ontological/philosophical Agency ................................... 133
The “Pneumoconiosis” Installation .............................................................................. 133
   Black Lung Disease ................................................................................................. 136
   Light and Space ........................................................................................................ 137
Framing “Pneumoconiosis” conceptually .................................................................. 138
List of illustrations

Figure 1: Venn Diagram (2017) Hartmut Veit
Figure 2: “Scott Morrison brings coal to question time”. The Guardian (2017)
Figure 3: “Coal. It’s an amazing thing” YouTube video (2015)
Figure 4: Climate Guardians at COP21, Paris. (2016) Photograph: Clim-Acts
Figure 5: Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance Outside (1973) Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts
Figure 6: Wang Renzheng (2015) ©AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbei.
Figure 7: “The History of Others: The trial”, Terike Haapoja, (2014)
Figure 8: Joseph Beuys on his lecture "Jeder Mensch ein Künstler - Auf dem Weg zur Freiheitsgestalt des sozialen Organismus" © By Rainer Rappmann www.fiu-verlag.com ,CC BY-SA 3.0
Figure 9: Ted Purves & Suzanne Cockrell, “Temscal Amity Works. California (2004- 2007)”
Figure 10: Walter De Maria, The New York Earth Room (1977) © The Estate of Walter De Maria. Photo: John Cliett
Figure 11: Nicholas Mangan, “Dowiyogo’s Ancient Coral Coffee Table”, (2010) coral limestone from Nauru, Photo: Nicholas Mangan. Michael Buxton Collection
Figure 12: Kauri log from Loy Yang mine, Latrobe Valley. (2017) Photo: Andrew Curtis
Figure 13: The Hazelwood Mine. Photograph: ©Engie
Figure 14: “COALounge - Commercial Road”, Morwell. (2015) Photograph: Hartmut Veit
Figure 15: “COALounge - Tarwin St”, Morwell (2016) Photograph: Hartmut Veit
Figure 16: “COALounge – Commercial Road”, Morwell (2016) Photograph: Hartmut Veit
Figure 17: “COALounge – Commercial Rd”, Morwell (2014) Photograph: Hartmut Veit
Figure 18: Hartmut Veit, “Sweeping Changes” (2016) Photograph: Sudeep Lingamneni
Figure 19: Herald Sun, “Hazelwood Mine Fire”, (2015) Image © Herald Sun
Figure 20: The Guardian, “Morwell mine fire ‘beyond comparison” (2014) Photograph: Mike Keating/Newspix/Rex
Figure 21: Hartmut Veit, “Sweeping Changes”, Performance with mobile sculpture, Morwell (2016) Photo: Sudeep Lingamneni
Figure 22: Hartmut Veit, “Sweeping Changes” performances, Morwell (2016) Photograph: Sudeep Lingamneni
Figure 23: Hartmut Veit, “Sweeping Changes”, Morwell (2016) Photograph: Hartmut Veit
Figure 24: Hartmut Veit, “Sweeping Changes”, Mobile cleaning cart (2016), VCA Art Space
Figure 25: Hartmut Veit, “Untitled”, Morwell, Loy Yang Power-station (2015)
Figure 26: Hartmut Veit, “A Tale of Two Cities” (2017) ’COAL’ exhibition, VCA Art Space
Figure 27: Hartmut Veit, “A Tale of Two Cities” (2017) ‘COAL’ exhibition, VCA Art Space
Figure 28: Hartmut Veit, “Untitled’ –Sweeping Changes” Photograph: Sudeep Lingamneni
Figure 29: Hazelwood image from Climacts website. (2016) https://climacts.org.au/blog/
Figure 30: Hartmut Veit, “Untitled’ (Artist book and video)’, (2017) ‘COAL’, VCA Art Space
Figure 31: Coal Dust Storm, (2014) Image © Latrobe Anonymous
Figure 32: Hartmut Veit, “Char in catfood bowls” (2016)
Figure 33: Hartmut Veit, “Citizen coal dust monitoring” Newbry (2016)
Figure 34: Hartmut Veit, “Untitled”, Coal attic installation (2017)
Figure 35: Hartmut Veit, “Black Carpet performance” (2015) Image: Elizabeth Allen
Figure 36: Hartmut Veit, “Black Carpet performance” (2015) Image: Hartmut Veit
Figure 37: Hartmut Veit, “Black Carpet performance” (2015) Image: Elizabeth Allen
Figure 38: Hartmut Veit, “Black Carpet performance” (2015) Photographs: Elizabeth Allen
Figure 39: Hartmut Veit, “Black Carpet performance” (2015) Photograph: Elizabeth Allen
Figure 40: Hartmut Veit, “Black Carpet performance” (2015) Photograph: Elizabeth Allen
Figure 41: Hartmut Veit, “Black Carpet performance” (2015) Photograph: Elizabeth Allen
Figure 42: “This is Hazelwood” Poster, Gabrielle de Vietri/Will Foster, Climarte, Melb (2016)
Figure 43: Hartmut Veit, “Ehrfurcht – the exhibition” (2017) VCA Art Space, Gallery 1
Figure 44: Hartmut Veit, “Ehrfurcht – the exhibition’, (2017) VCA Art Space, Gallery 1
Figure 45: Hartmut Veit, “Excavating coal from Hazelwood Mine” (2016)
Figure 46: Hartmut Veit, “Transporting coal from Hazelwood Mine”’(2016)
Figure 47: Hartmut Veit, “Arche-fossil”(2017) Photograph: Hartmut Veit
Figure 48: Hartmut Veit, “Ehrfurcht – the performance” (2017) ‘COAL’, VCA Art Space,
Figure 49: Hartmut Veit, “Ehrfurcht – the performance” (2017) ‘COAL’, VCA Art Space,
Figure 50: Hartmut Veit, “Untitled”, Performance in COALounge #1, (2015) Morwell
Figure 51: Hartmut Veit, “COALounge #1”, (2015) Morwell
Figure 52: Hartmut Veit, “Untitled”, Coalprint, (2017) VCA Art Space
Figure 53: Hartmut Veit, “Untitled”, Coalprint, (2017) VCA Art Space
Figure 54: Hartmut Veit, “Untitled”, Coalprint, COALounge #1 (2015) Morwell
Figure 55: Hartmut Veit, ‘Untitled’, Coalprint, (2015) COALounge #1, Morwell
Figure 56: Hartmut Veit, “Untitled”, Coalprint, COALounge #1 (2015) Morwell
Figure 57: Hartmut Veit, “Untitled”, Coalprint, COALounge #1 (2015) Morwell
Figure 58: Allora & Czadilla, “Landmark Footprints” (2001) Puerto Rico
Figure 59: Hartmut Veit, “Pneumoconiosis” (2017) ‘COAL’ VCA Graduate Exhibition
Figure 60: Hartmut Veit, “Pneumoconiosis” (2017) ‘COAL’ VCA Graduate Exhibition
Figure 61: Hartmut Veit, “Pneumoconiosis” (2017) ‘COAL’ VCA Graduate Exhibition
Figure 62: Hartmut Veit, “Pneumoconiosis” (2017) ‘COAL’ VCA Graduate Exhibition
Figure 63: “Gottfried Veit, ascending from the mine”, Radium Hill, SA. 1957 © Elisabet Veit
Prologue

The continued mining of coal and its environmental impact is subject to intense public debate and the topic of countless scientific studies around the world, however in art, coal remains an under explored material and subject.

My motivation to explore coal’s materiality through socially-engaged art grew out of a desire to become directly involved in mitigating one of the main causes of climate change and a frustration with the efficacy of traditional forms of art-making to go further than just drawing attention to this important environmental issue. Whether we like it or not, through the sheer complexity and interconnectedness of society today, we all consume and benefit from products and services generated through mining fossil fuels such as coal. We are therefore all complicit and involved in the destruction of the earth’s atmosphere, which is vital for life on earth. The fundamental logic of capitalism treats deposits of fossil fuels such as coal as an inert resource, with extraction, to make profits, the logical consequence. Climate change and the environmental crisis created through extraction and burning of coal is “inextricable from social, political, and economic forces.”

Responding to these conundrums I expanded my existing art practice with coal beyond the relative safety of my studio into the field and complexity of the public sphere. Examining ethological relations – that is human behaviour and social relationality with coal, the research relied upon direct material interventions that engaged the materiality of coal in a situated, emergent study at the site of coal’s extraction and exploitation. This seemed a logical way to gain and ground new knowledge in lived experience.

Growing up in remote mining towns, as son of a miner, I’ve lived through mine closures. Informed by these personal experiences my research bears witness to the struggles of communities affected by the Hazelwood Mine fire in 2014 and the ongoing challenges of transition in power generation it faces through the closure of the Hazelwood coal-fired power station. This socially-engaged project is testament to art’s capability to advance dialogue between opposing dialectic worldviews and promote a revitalised ethics of care based on respectful listening and prudent ethical stewardship of the earth’s resources.

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Introduction

The thesis “Material Matters at the Coalface” is a socially-engaged art enquiry into the politics of coal, space and place to better understand the complex web of changes affecting Latrobe Valley communities in transition.

Multi-facetted research questions

_Collaborating_ with coal as the medium, this research investigates the role coal plays in Latrobe Valley mining communities to ask: how might the work of coal’s materiality articulate a political ecology within participatory, socially-engaged spatial practice?

Or in a new materialist sense: how might coal’s vibrancy as an active agent shape experience and cultural discourse, effect human empathy and provoke social and political change? New materialism as a heterogeneous, emerging cultural theory has been described as an understanding or theory of the world asserting that all entities and processes, including human beings, “are composed of – or are reducible to – matter, material forces or physical processes.” Through adopting this framework, the research aims to extend creative intra-action between the artist and the material brown coal in the studio into the field to investigate the socio-political _agency_ of coal.

A central term in this research is Karen Barad’s term _intra-action_. For Barad, intra-action “signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies” whereby “…agencies are only distinct in relation to their entanglement; they don’t exist as individual elements.” In contradistinction to interactions, which rely on the assumption of separate entities and agencies, which work on each other, Barad’s concept of intra-actions is based on

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3 Paul Robbins, _Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction_, vol. 16 (John Wiley & Sons, 2011). Political ecology explores relationships between political, economic and social aspects in regard to environmental concerns and subject matters. Environmental issues and phenomena associated with coal’s materiality are examined through the prism of the political


5 Barrett and Bolt, _Carnal Knowledge: Towards A'new Materialism'through the Arts_.


agency emerging through co-creation and mutual entanglements with each other in a complicated apparatus.

To explore the multiple agencies and complexity of coal’s entanglement with human beings, the project employs the analogy of the diamond – a more compressed form of carbon (and the cut and polished surfaces of its crystal structure). The different facets of coal are viewed and explored through the prisms of the following set of questions:

1. Socio-political
   How can creative collaborations with coal re-activate dialogue in the community to aid recovery following traumatic mine fire events and ongoing affects and dis-ease of living next to the source of coal’s extraction? How may coal’s social and political agencies be put to use to gain new insights into the complex web of changes affecting Latrobe Valley communities in transition? How may the encounter with coal provoke socio-political dialogue?

2. Aesthetic/empathic
   How may coal’s material agency shape aesthetic experiences and affect human empathy? How can coal’s materiality challenge anthropocentric definitions of temporality, authorship and performance?

3. Cultural/ontological/philosophical
   How might coal trouble deeply entrenched binary ways of thinking, shape experience and cultural discourse? How do ontological dichotomies and traditional philosophical frameworks, which position human beings at “the centre of all relations,” underpin exploitative relationality with coal?

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8 The word agency (from Latin ‘agentia’ ‘to do, to act, to manage’) describes the capacity of an entity to act in the world, including unconscious, involuntary behaviour, or purposeful, directed, intentional action.


10 Barrett and Bolt, *Carnal Knowledge: Towards A’new Materialism’through the Arts.*

11 Relationality describes the forever changing aspect of being-in-the-world, and being in relationship with the world; how we co-emerge and become in relation to others.
Human beings have physical, psychic and social relations with coal. The material essence of coal in art practice directly challenges binary perceptions, that coal is an inert resource to foreground coal’s vibrancy, as an active political agent. People generally respond to coal in very powerful and polarised ways: coal is either totally rejected out of hand or cherished for its power and benefits. Human attitudes and beliefs are shaped by social relationality with the material world. The thesis argues, that relationality is informed by complex, historically and culturally conditioned worldviews, which lead to often divisive and polarised debates regarding the environment, ecology and climate change.

**Multi-methods and intersecting fields**

Latrobe Valley community responses to living in and among coal are explored through a methodology, which combines socially-engaged and practice-as-research methods with an ethnographic sensibility. It is thus informed by theoretical debates and practice developments in the following three diverse fields: Social practice, art (spatial practice), and ethnography/anthropology.

![Venn Diagram](image)

Figure 10: Veit, Venn Diagram. 2017

Despite their own distinct individual histories, the boundaries of these three intersecting disciplinary fields are fluid. Like raindrops falling on a pond, creating concentric patterns, each field generates ripple-like intra-actions\(^\text{12}\), wave-like patterns of interference, which mutually inform and influence each other. My research is located at the confluence, within the overlap and between these disciplines.

\(^{12}\) Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*.33
Within a broader field of related cultural enquiries, my project locates itself within the emerging field of Environmental Humanities, which, as an interdisciplinary area of scholarship, contextualises the scientific investigation of environmental studies through a focus on narrative, political ecology, aesthetics and ethics.

The study is influenced by my personal beliefs and shares with Environmental Humanities the worldview that human beings are part of a much larger living ecosystem that is subject to universal ecological laws and that both the organic world and its inorganic components are seen as a single system of interconnected parts. What follows from this, is an enlarged and more inclusive concept of justice, which embraces the notion that the non-human also has rights.

**Structure and outline of the chapters**

The research and its findings are presented through this written dissertation and durable records of the creative works presented in the “COAL” exhibition, which was staged within three interconnecting exhibition spaces of the VCA Art Space in February 2017. The dissertation consists of an introduction followed by five chapters and an epilogue.

Chapter one positions the research and praxis at the intersection of, and within the overlapping fields of social practice, art and anthropology. Building on a long tradition of ecological performance artists, such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Jo Hansen, I map out a genealogy of intersecting artists, writers and theorists who have explored the role of geological matter within ecology and the environment through social practice. Following a discussion of the binary representation of coal and an artistic audit of relevant influences the project is contextualized within the material turn and a literature review and discussion of relevant texts associated with materialist texts is provided.

The second chapter presents the methodology and multi-methods employed. A combination of socially-engaged and practice-as-research methods is paired with an ethnographic sensibility to obtain new findings in the field and the studio. A set of iterative art ‘collaborations’ with coal were devised and included the setting up of temporary pop-up art spaces labeled “COALounges”, sweeping and cleaning practice and participatory, ecological performances.

Following the triadic structure and spatial organization of the three interconnected galleries in the “COAL” exhibition Chapters 3, 4 and 5 explore the sub-questions.
Chapter 3 investigates the socio-political effects of coal. It describes, discusses and analyses the findings and artworks presented in the main space one first enters. This gallery space featured “A Tale of Two Cities” (a trailer full of coal, ipad monitors and a live webcam link to Morwell); documentation of fieldworks (hand-made artist book, video, photos, roof attic display) and the mobile “Sweeping Changes” cleaning cart sculpture.

Chapter 4 explores the aesthetic and empathic affects of coal through the works in the interconnected gallery to the left of the main entry. The entire floor of this gallery was lined with white paper and contained a large, 1ton heavy boulder of brown coal displayed on a pallet jack. This installation and the associated one-off performance that took place in this space is titled “Erfurcht”, a German word, which loosely translates as “awe”.

Chapter 5 examines the cultural, ontological, and philosophical dimensions of coal through a discussion of the installation in the third gallery, located at the right side. Lined entirely with black fabric, this room installation, titled “Pneumoconiosis” (black lung disease) featured a large dead tree sculpture shaped like a pair of lungs hanging upside down from the ceiling, a ceiling mounted dust machine, which dispensed dust motes synchronized with pulsating red and blue lights, and a soundtrack of heavy breathing. Falling dust motes reference Epicurians’ unpredictable swerve of atoms and early Greek concepts of matter. Following this, New Materialist approaches are scrutinised regarding their potential to challenge deeply entrenched Cartesian and binary ways of thinking.

A conclusion presents what has emerged and been achieved through the research.

“Eine Gedankenausstellung”

The “COAL” exhibition presents and embodies an important part of this research. Following Brad Haseman, I decided the most appropriate form to represent coal and the research findings from the field was through my exhibition and sculptural installation practice. Haseman states:

The second characteristic of practice-led researchers lies in their insistence that research outputs and claims to knowing must be made through the symbolic language and forms of their practice…. This insistence on reporting research through the outcomes and material forms of practice challenges traditional ways of representing knowledge claims. It also means that people who wish to

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evaluate the research outcomes also need to experience them in direct (co-presence) or indirect (asynchronous, recorded) form.¹⁴

Documentation and the written word alone can never truly represent the materiality and agency of coal. The findings and concepts of the research are therefore presented through exhibition as medium to enact what Bruno Latour described as “eine Gedankenausstellung”⁻¹⁵ – a thought experiment and exhibition of philosophical ideas: “...For me there is absolutely no difference between doing an exhibition, writing a piece of philosophy or doing fieldwork with ethnographic method, or writing a play. For me this is the same thing...”¹⁶

Latour, in his large-scale exhibition “Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy,”¹⁷ brought together over one hundred artists, scientists, sociologists, philosophers and historians to address the problem of representation in politics and question how things are made public. He created an assembly of all the different types of political assemblies, so that visitors may compare and recognise the diverse representational techniques and tactics they employ.

Inspired by this approach, my “COAL” exhibition attempts to enact democracy through bringing together and facilitating communication between opposing and dissenting political voices, and to include, perhaps controversially, the political agency of coal’s materiality. Many people have preconceived ideas and opinions about brown coal but, have never seen, touched or experienced it in the flesh.

In the “COAL” exhibition, visitors to the gallery are permitted to touch the large coal boulder and freely intra-act with coal dust on the floor. Traces of movements and actions are inscribed fleetingly on the soft stone and in dust, thus reminding us of the transience of human existence. Such embodied, inter-subjective experiences between coal and

¹⁴ Ibid.5


¹⁶ ibid.

humans potentially enables processes of cognition to occur and facilitates the exploration of temporarities and timescales between humans and geological matter, that we never really think about. Following this line of enquiry, the German concept of “Ehrfurcht” (which loosely translates as “awe”), and the phenomenon of psychological projection are discussed.

The “COAL” exhibition was conceived as a meeting place to gather a public around coal - to give coal a space and a representational voice – to make public - and expand the definition of politics and democracy “to account for those things beyond the human.”

Representing my findings through the medium of exhibition activates the power of aesthetics to facilitate and enable direct access to embodied, experiential knowing. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes, “the aesthetic has the potential to shake up our habit of not thinking about our habits.”

Encoded within the spatial organization and use of the three intersecting galleries lies a deeper symbolic and philosophical intention to address deeply entrenched binary habits of thinking. Gallery 1, to the left was created as a totally white space in contrast to Gallery 3, at the right, which was a completely black room lined with black theatre curtains and shrouded in darkness. The large, main gallery connecting the black and white spaces, represents an allegorical third space – an in-between space – it allegorically connotes a neutral zone, in which contrasting opinions and contradictions are allowed to co-exist.

Coal, through its materiality, has the capacity to shape cultural discourse and raise complex ontological and philosophical questions about how knowledge systems influence the nature of human beings’ ethical relationship with coal.

As Latour states, “… philosophical concepts do not start from above and then go down – philosophy is not medium-free.” Presenting the research findings through “eine Gedankenausstellung” enables the philosophical and cultural dimensions of coal’s

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20 ibid
material labour to be experienced physically, psychically and socially.

The space is the concept; coal is the concept; coal’s materiality within the space is political as well as philosophical. Employing the agency of brown coal as a vehicle, the exhibition attempts to sidestep dialectic binary representations of geological matter and re-orientate human collective attitudes towards geological matter away from one based on exploitation to one of prudent care for the earth and responsible stewardship.

**Forms of representation and documentation**

There is a direct correlation between chapters 3, 4 and 5 and the spatial organisation, and works shown in each of the three galleries in the VCA Art Space. The works encountered upon entry are directly related to the first set of sub-questions (the socio-political) in chapter 3, the second set of findings (aesthetic/empathic) discussed in chapter 4 relates to works in the second gallery (to the left), and the installation in Gallery 3 (at the right) corresponds to the third set of philosophical questions in chapter 5.

Aesthetic sculptural practice, which is socially-engaged and participatory, manifested itself first as temporary sculptural installations in Latrobe Valley community based sites. This situated practice in regional Victoria is then brought into the city and into the art institutional space of one of Australia’s leading universities to engage with a totally different audience, context and discourse.

The “COAL” exhibition is documented through as a durable record, which consists of a set of 3 videos and an electronic artist book, which accompany the written exegesis to present the collaborations with coal in a visual form.
1. Chapter: Coal in literature, theory and practice

This first chapter locates my research and praxis at the intersection of social practice, art and anthropology, within a lineage of artists, writers and theorists, who have explored the role of geological matter within ecology and the environment.

A practice review reflects upon a selection of relevant socially-engaged and material art practices, which have enriched and shaped the project. Following an introduction on the binary representation of coal, an artistic audit references important artist practice influence in two distinct sections: public socially-engaged projects and studio-based material art practices. The polarized views between social practice and material art practices, regarding the necessity or futility of creating material art objects provides a point of departure to introduce the topic of binary oppositions. The debates between Claire Bishop and Grant Kester explore the apparent contradictions of combining a material based art practice with a participatory socially-engaged practice in this research.

A brief literature review provides context for the project and locates the artistic practice-as-research within the conceptual frame of New Materialism and the material turn within humanities. Several theorists and writers, such as Karen Barad, and Jane Bennett, introduce the potential of New Materialism, as a set of diverse heterogeneous cultural theories, which are explored in relation to dialectics and Karl Marx's historical materialism.

The binary image of Coal

Coal, in the public realm and imagination, has historically been represented in binary terms. In Australia, coal is either promoted in a positive light by industry and governments, who advocate for large-scale mineral excavation or it is vilified and presented in negative terms by political activists/artists concerned about the environment in the opposing camp.

On 9 February 2017 Scott Morrison brought a lump of black coal from the Hunter Valley to question time in parliament. Emphasising the energy competitive advantage, employment and prosperity coal has delivered to Australian businesses, he accuses the opposition of having an “ideological and pathological fear of coal.”

This political performance was the latest act in a long theatrical play of previously made pro-coal speeches, which include Tony Abbott’s now famous and divisive media comment, made in 2014, at the opening of a new $3.9 billion coal mine in Queensland. He said that coal shouldn’t be demonized: “Coal is good for humanity, coal is good for prosperity, coal is an essential part of our economic future, here in Australia, and right around the world.” The timing of the Minerals Council of Australia national TV advertising campaign “Coal. It’s an amazing thing” after the Hazelwood Mine fire couldn’t have been more offensive to many in the adversely effected Latrobe Valley communities.

Such campaigns highlight the deeply-polarised debate and divide between resource-income addicted Governments and big business, for whom coal is a cheap commodity, which represents billions of export dollars and taxes each year, and those, who are sincerely concerned about the damaging irreversible effects, that the burning of fossil fuels such as coal, gas and oil has on climate change and global warming.

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A local Melbourne creative action group opposing coal, the Climate Guardian angels, the founding act of ClimActs, a small group of women aged between early 20s to mid 70s, who stage highly visible art-inspired activist performances at events such as COP21 Paris (2016) to create publicity for their opposition to the digging up of coal and burning of fossil fuels, which is irreversibly destroying the world’s climate. Their use of angel iconography and white costume “highlight(s) the vital role of guardianship of precious natural resources, both human and non-human, in addressing the global threat from climate change.” ²⁴ Interestingly, in this case, diametrically opposed worldviews are even visual presented in binary terms (white angel costumes versus dark business suits) and are also reinforced by the different (female) gender of the protagonists and deeply entrenched male/female power differentials, i.e., female activists self-funded their trip to Paris, while predominantly male executives of large corporations were paid to be there.

These diametrically opposed forces and worldviews are engaged in an ideological stand-off and tug of war that swings back and forth. A war of ideas, concepts and actions that to date has lead to a socio-political stalemate caused by these binary opposites.

These examples demonstrate that human relationships with coal are underpinned by human-centric, deeply entrenched ontological dichotomies and philosophical concepts.

The “Great Acceleration”\textsuperscript{25} in human activity since the beginning of the industrial revolution in the 1750s is characterised by changes in the earth’s systems, such as greenhouse gas levels, ocean acidification, deforestation and rapid decline in biodiversity. It is testimony that the concept of self-importance and elevation of the human species above all else, ignores that humans are part of a complicated entangled network and apparatus. This, I argue, has ultimately led to the current environmental ecological crises described with the term \textit{Anthropocene}.

\textbf{The Anthropocene}

Human’s destructive influence on the earth, captured in the highly debated label for a new geological era called the Anthropocene has seen the emergence of new aesthetics endeavours, publications and exhibitions characterized by multi-disciplinary collaborations and curators, which attempt to narrate interconnected contemporary global realities. This thesis on coal contributes to that field.

In 2000, the atmospheric chemist and Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen popularised the term Anthropocene to argue that it should replace the current geo-historical era \textit{Holocene} in

order to acknowledge the influence of humanity’s collective destructive impacts on altering the biosphere. Various scientists propose different starting dates for this new geo-historical epoch: some point to the Neolithic Revolution, 8000 years ago with its agriculture and animal husbandry practices, while others nominate 16 July 1945 with Richard Oppenheimer’s first test of the atom bomb. This research agrees with Crutzen and takes the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th century with coal’s sweeping impact and the commercialisation of the James Watt steam engine as the starting date for the Anthropocene. The following artistic audit references important artist practice influences in two distinct categories: public, socially-engaged and studio-based material projects.

**Practice review: Socially-engaged art influences**

This socially-engaged art project was influenced by two major historical antecedents: the eco-feminist inspired performances of Mierle Laderman Ukeles and the concept of *social sculpture* by Joseph Beuys.

**Maintenance Art**

My practice builds on a long tradition of ecological performance art by feminist artists such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Jo Hansen. Ukeles wrote a *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*, 26 which relates domestic cleaning processes as a conceptual art strategy to civic maintenance and ecological restoration.

Her *maintenance art* performances such as “Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance” synthesizes art and life within the contexts of social, political, environmental, and feminist theory. 27 With its origins in the activist milieu of the Civil Rights movement and first wave of feminism in the 1960s, Ukeles and Jo Hansen (another ecological performance artist) translated and brought hereto invisible, hidden maintenance work, cleaning and dusting performed daily by countless, unpaid female workers into the aesthetic realm of art.

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Figure 5. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance Outside, (Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts), 1973. https://timeline.com/mierle-ukeles-cleaning-museum-64d274a0a19e
Jo Hansen, a contemporary of Ukeles in the 1980s created a performance-based ritual of daily sweeping the footpath outside her residence, which expanded to her sweeping the entire neighbourhood block and collaborating with city cleaning workers. Later this performance morphed into a citywide anti-litter campaign supported by local government.

These domestic cleaning processes has since been referenced, imitated and re-enacted by other conceptual artists mainly in an art gallery and institutional context, which appear to objectify ordinary daily life. Glen Seator’s “Sweeping”, Carey Young’s “Body Techniques (after Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Outside, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, 1973)” from 2007, and Rirkrit Tiravanija’s cooking (another domestic chore) come to mind. Many of these artists were inspired by Relational Aesthetics, a theory of art by the French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud, who defines relational art as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and the social context, rather than an independent and private space.”

Originally conceived as a strategy to overcome hyper-consumerism through the staging of small, shared communal events, Relational Aesthetics has since been heavily critiqued for celebrating pretentious “moments of togetherness and obscuring the very real divisions that split the world with happy rhetoric of participation.” Moving beyond Relational Aesthetics, which primarily operated within the narrow confines and sphere of institutional artspaces (for elitist art audiences), my relational practice situates itself within a regional community, with whom it directly engages in everyday life, to create a dialogue around coal.

This project extends Ukeles’s cleaning manifesto further into the community and the field of ecology to heed it’s clarion call for earth maintenance and ethical stewardship of the earth: and acknowledging that “the role of the artist for Mierle Laderman Ukeles is not privileged and detached: art must play an activist role in empowering people to act as agents of change”. Ukeles’s maintenance art process was recently (in 2015) appropriated by the Chinese artist Wang Renzheng, known as Jianguo Xiongdi (which translates as “Brother Nut”).

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28 Nicolas Bourriaud et al., Relational Aesthetics (Les presses du réel Dijon - Quetigny, 2002).113


He drew attention to Beijing’s out-of-control air pollution in 2015 through a 100 day long performance, in which he spent four hours each day holding up an industrial vacuum cleaner to symbolically clean the air from fine carbon particles, which originate from burning coal, vehicle exhausts and industry.

He collected 100 grams of dust, which he mixed with clay to form a brick as a symbol of Beijing’s air pollution. Surprisingly, this project was not conceived or framed as a socially-engaged practice. There would have been ample opportunity to engage with the public, some of who thought he was a high-tech city street cleaner. Brother Nut reports: “Some people thought, 'Wow, Beijing’s really awesome. Now they've got air cleaners like this. They asked me how much money I made. Some thought I was selling vacuum cleaners.”

Unlike Beijing’s actual street cleaners and the futile labour within Greek mythology by Sisyphus, who was condemned to eternally repeat his action, Nut Brother’s theatrical performance was a temporary act. It had the potential to go further and directly address...
the unrecognized labour of street sweepers or the politics that give rise to pollution, but under the guise of “awareness raising,” modernist notions of artistic authorship appear to have motivated this work. “Naturally, this speaks about how social engagement rarely leaves the artist himself out of the picture.”

In the Australian public imagination air pollution and smog caused by burning coal is often thought off only as a problem experienced by countries like China, India and developing nations.

Amy Balkin through her “Public Smog” work embraces a global, planetary view in her repeated attempts “to establish a ‘clean air’ park in the Earth’s atmosphere open to public use.” Balkin addresses climate change, and environmental justice through challenging current legal, financial and political frameworks. For this work, she retired carbon dioxide offset credits she purchased from official emissions trading schemes on the international market to create ‘clean air’ parks as a public domain. Although impossible to actually visit, this work makes the point that everyone is entitled to have access to clean air. It creates an important counter-narrative to expose, that air, like coal, is a political construct, which is “legally and financially manipulated by polluting entities and nation-states, who continue to sabotage attempts to ameliorate climate change.”

In her participatory performance, titled “The History of Others: The trial,” the Finnish artist Terike Haapoja stages a courtroom lecture and simulated judicial enquiry into the legal status and personhood of non-human beings. Primarily concerned with animals and animal welfare, Haapoja’s piece has direct implications for this dissertation, if one were to consider extending such ethical and legal rights to the geological matter coal within a planetary framework (or in an artwork). After all, coal was once a living plant capable of photosynthesis and carbon is the element common to all known life. Affording coal basic legal rights rather than just treating it as resource that can be owned may sound rather utopian, but considering that, the natural rights of the Earth have actually been legally


33 Andrew Brown, Art & Ecology Now (Thames & Hudson London, 2014).228

34 Ibid.
enshrined in the national constitution of Ecuador, and that New Zealand's Whanganui River was recently granted legal status as a person after a 170-year battle in 2017 could such a deliberation not lead to a revitalized ethics of care and more responsible stewardship of the earth?

Social Sculpture

Joseph Beuys’s concept of social sculpture is the second major influence employed in this research. Famous for his statement “everyone is an artist,” Beuys expanded the concept of art to emphasise art’s potential as a dynamic agent to transform society and bring about social and environmental change. His concept of social sculpture embraces Wagner’s idea of Gesamtkunstwerk and was shaped by his own utopian belief that society as a whole should be regarded as one huge work of art, in which “every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor, or architect of the social organism.”

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37 Caroline Tisdall, "Art into Society," *Society into Art* (1974).48
Beuys often used natural materials such as fat, felt, wax, which would erode over time, quite differently to other contemporaneous conceptual artists, (i.e, Arte Provera). He aimed to harmonise nature’s forces and civilization and cultivated a special association with materials, which he repeatedly used throughout his career for their personal symbolism, magic and therapeutic power. However, while he employed natural materials for their potential to transform humans, his aims were far more radical: “his notion of art rests upon a notion of human creativity which inherently contests those binaries of Western philosophy upon which disciplinary boundaries rest.”

Indeed, David Adams contends that Beuys is a radical ecologist:

An approach to ecology worthy of the epithet ‘radical’ is one that does not limit its concerns to ecological systems within the natural world. Radical ecology also sees these in connection with larger patterns of human life: social forms; economic theories, practices and interests; political and legislative history and method; control of information and communications media; and, indeed, the underlying philosophies and teleologies of Western civilization. By this definition, the German artist Joseph Beuys (1921–86) was not only a radical ecologist, but also the pioneer investigator of the role of art in forging radical ecological paradigms for the relationship between human beings and the natural environment.”

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Philosophically my project draws on Beuys’s social sculpture concept to include the non-human, and coal in particular, as an active agent of social and environmental change within society. Within a socially-engaged art project it aims to extend to coal democratic rights and treat it as equal agent and partner in a new iteration of social sculpture.

In their three year project, “Temescal Amity Works” American art academics Ted Purves and Susanne Cockrell created a community store in Temescal, their own neighbourhood in Oakland, California, in which they freely shared food obtained from backyards, which had cultivated by a community, dominated by Italian-American immigrants.

They collected and exchanged produce from these backyards with the help of a custom designed, hand-built, steel pushcart and made the produce available through the Reading Room, a store, which became a community hub, where they also collected and published stories, held jam making sessions and held movie nights. This work, as a social sculpture, reflects a move away from the conceptual to a direct engagement with a community through social practice. It “…drew upon historical models of mutual-aid societies, barn raisings, DIY collectives and urban communism” and was informed by their shared interest “in how a specific community built relationships through personal and casual economies.”

was able to discuss the social sculpture aspect of this work directly with them. It provided a useful model for my practice and inspired the creation of a series of “COALounges” (temporary, ephemeral pop-up shops) and building a mobile cleaning cart sculpture titled “Sweeping Changes” as a dialogue-creation machine for my situated, socially engaged in the Latrobe Valley.

**Practice review: spatial practice influences**

This section positions my research within a field of similar material and formal art practices. Although coal has featured prominently within the practice of some well-known conceptual artists (i.e., Joseph Kosuth, Marcel Broodthaers, and Robert Smithson), it has generally been an underexplored material and subject within conceptual art. Not a single major contemporary art exhibition in Australia has explored coal.

In 2012, *Manifesta 9*, the roving European Biennial of Contemporary Art was staged in Genk, Belgium, a major centre of coalmining in Europe. It focused on coalmining thematically to raise “questions about the enduring significance of material production for contemporary art as well as the impact of coal – on the history of modern art.”

Titled “The Deep of the Modern,” this large survey exhibition by the Mexican curator Cuauhtémoc Medina excavated the rich history of modern art. It was, very befittingly, held in abandoned historical mine buildings. A three hundred and nineteen page *Subcyclopaedia* alphabetically documented a fascinating array of different work and ideas connected to the history of modern art. However, despite its claim to embark, “…on a critical attempt to foster interdisciplinary and intergenerational dialogue between the history of the site and the sometimes overlooked memories of the mining communities,” it appears there was not a single socially-engaged project or commission, that actually dialogically engaged with the local community of 65,000 people, who were seeking new economic opportunities after the closure of its three coal mines.

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41 Artist residency: “*Forms for Encounter and Exchange: An artist field school*” at Laughing Waters. Residency with Professor Ted Purves and Professor Susanne Cockrell from San Francisco and California College of the Arts Faculty. Held at Eltham, Victoria, Australia. Nillimbik Shire, Eltham May 2015


43 Ibid.17
Before realising large scale Land art projects in the deserts of the American south-west Walter De Maria created “Erdraum” (which translates as Earthroom) in Munich in 1968. In 1977 another iteration of this work, “The New York Earth Room”, was installed permanently through the support the Dia Art Foundation in New York. 197 cubic meters of earth filled a 335m² room to a depth of 56 cm and weighed 127,300 kg. The work can be viewed, but not entered, through a wide doorway and a sheet of thick glass, which holds the soil in place. Walter de Maria’s “Earthroom”, occupies very expensive real estate in one of the wealthiest metropolises on earth, whereas my pop-up “COALounges” in the peri-urban Latrobe Valley town of Morwell are temporary occupations of derelict commercial spaces outside of any art institutional context. The “Earthroom” is a fascinating and powerful installation, albeit one that fetishes the earth itself as a rarefied art object, that one is not allowed to enter or engage with (unlike Olafur Eliasson’s recent “Riverbed” work – a complete landscape, with a small creek, in the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art), which one could walk in). Unlike Walter de Maria’s “Earthroom” there is no barrier to entry to my “COALounges”, which were designed to be easy accessible to bring residents in touch and facilitate dialogue with the ‘unearthed’ geological material coal. People were encouraged to touch coal, which was allowed to spill out into the street.
In a similar vein, Melbourne-based artist Nick Mangan’s “Nauru – Notes from a Cretaceous World (2010)” utilises the island’s unique geological matter as a sculptural material to make a statement about environmental depletion through resource extraction, in this case phosphate deposits from bird poo on top of coral limestone. His methodologies are not informed by participatory socially-engaged practices, however we both employ sculpture and spatial installation practices to critically explore similar concerns such as extractive mining, dissonances between humans and geological time, human relationships with the natural environment and the complex political effects of the global economy on local situations. His large survey exhibition, titled “Limits to Growth” at MUMA (Monash University Museum of Art) in 2016 was named after a famous book first published in 1972, in which computer simulations explored the potential limits of exponential economic and population growth based on finite resource.44

Describing this installation, Mangan states: “…they are entirely sculptural actions, only they do not produce static sculptural objects. For me, these gestures are actions that narrate and animate the temporal features of the material in question; they unearth the stories held within the material.”45

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Another exhibition at the MUMA in Melbourne, titled “Converging in Time” featured installations by Open Spatial Workshop (OSW) members Bianca Hester, Terri Bird, and Scott Mitchell and literally opened three days prior to my own graduate exhibition ‘COAL’.

The museum catalogue states, “Converging in Time continues OSW's sculptural investigation into the forces of material formation. Drawing on earth sciences research ‘and studies of the Anthropocene, this new exhibition explores the relationship between the mineral make-up of a site and the societies they produce and sustain.”

The OWS project explores similar territory and subject matter as this thesis, however the methodologies and the manner and depth of enquiries regarding “…the mineral make-up of a site and the societies they produce and sustain” could not be more different. In contrast to their formal, conceptual art installations, which, I would argue, tends to fetishize geological matter, my work represents a continuous, long-term, socially-engaged enquiry with coal embedded in Latrobe Valley mining community over many years.

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47 ibid.
The “Converging In Time” show itself is a highly conceptual, sculptural object-based exhibition, which relies heavily on stunning sourced specimens, like an old Kauri log fossil, mined from Museums Victoria permanent collection. The show randomly mixes “objects chosen by the artists for their ability to produce naturally abundant geological forms even as seemingly banal as a large rock symbolises their intent to technologically transcend the usual dialectical models for form and content.” 48 How that explores the relationship of site and community is unclear. Displays of geological objects and specimens are broken up with wall-sized videos projected from the ceiling. The juxtaposed specimens are open to multiple readings, interpretations and reference so many different frameworks; it is difficult to apprehend coherent sense. Giles Fielke observed: “Overcoded and disorienting, ‘Converging In Time’ intends to knock viewers off their everyday temporal axis with its complex arrays of material metaphors desperately seeking representation.” 49

For an exhibition that claims to explore human relationships with site-specific geological materials, there is a distinct lack of any human presence. The same critic observed: “Importantly, there are no longer any people to populate the world imagined by OSW for Converging In Time. People just get in the way.” 50

Social practices, in contrast have been accused of often bracketing out the aesthetic influence of matter altogether in their endeavor to make people the primary medium of their investigations. This can result in subconsciously and unintentionally reinforcing human-egocentric viewpoints regarding geological matter through social practice.

“The Social Turn: Collaboration and its discontents” 51

A question for this research (and social practice more generally) might be: What is the matter with matter in social practices?

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to map out a complete genealogy of what has been described as the social turn in art. In 1998, Nicolas Bourriaud’s book Relational

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49 ibid

50 ibid

Aesthetics\textsuperscript{52} sparked a rich discussion of socially-engaged art practices and since then a succession of new publications by Grant Kester (2004)\textsuperscript{53}, Pablo Helguera (2011)\textsuperscript{54}, Shannon Jackson (2011)\textsuperscript{55}, Nato Thompson (2012)\textsuperscript{56}, and Claire Bishop’s \textit{Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the politics of Spectatorship} (2012)\textsuperscript{57} have created a rich tapestry of discursive positions. These have led to new forms and further developments in the emerging field of socially-engaged art. Despite their distinctly different goals, approaches and methods, these practices share three common elements: First, the work is co-created through interaction with a specific community; second, social practice itself is an aesthetic form, based on participation\textsuperscript{58}; third, they emphasize and value process over the final outcome. Many social practices embrace a non traditional art and aesthetic form that is based on interaction and gatherings of people, such as protests, festivals, schools, workshops and conferences.

Claire Bishop maintains that social practices have been predominately judged by ethical and moral criteria and the methodology they employ, rather than the aesthetic aspects of their project. Citing works such as Alys’s \textit{Faith Moves Mountains} from 2000, Bishop champions artists who are not “…positioning themselves within an activist lineage, in which art is marshaled to effect social change….” but “…attempt to think the aesthetic and the social/political together, rather than subsuming both within the ethical.”\textsuperscript{59}

Emphasising the importance of reciprocity and social justice, Grant Kester, on the other hand values the transformative act of participation in itself as a positive outcome of

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\textsuperscript{52} Bourriaud et al., \textit{Relational Aesthetics}.

\textsuperscript{53} Grant H Kester, \textit{Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art} (Univ of California Press, 2004).


\textsuperscript{56} Nato Thompson, \textit{Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011} (MIT Press, 2012).

\textsuperscript{57} Claire Bishop, \textit{Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship} (Verso Books, 2012).

\textsuperscript{58} Tom Finkelpearl, \textit{What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation} (Duke University Press, 2012).

\textsuperscript{59} Bishop, ”The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents.”25
“dialogical art” (which is the term he uses to describe “…the creative facilitation of dialogue and exchange”). In regards to aesthetics, Kester endorses dialogic art’s move away from creating art objects and states, that artists he interviewed remain skeptical “…about the compromised position of art in modern society: its reduction to a fashionable commodity, its role in legitimating corporate wealth”.

Claire Bishop responds:

“In the absence of a commitment to the aesthetic, Kester’s position adds up to a familiar summary of the intellectual trends inaugurated by identity politics: respect for the other, recognition of difference, protection of fundamental liberties and an inflexible mode of political correctness. As such, it also constitutes a rejection of any art that might offend or trouble its audience.”

The battle lines are clearly drawn. There is much value in interrogating the construction of these binary oppositions directly through practice with coal, precisely, because within socially-engaged art practice coal’s divisive nature “…undermines the ontological and epistemological categories in which we, the western subjects have been living. As such, discomfort with knowing, living contradiction and paradox, ambiguous truths…” are all brought out and thought through material interventions and provocations with coal. Using coal aesthetically brings out its political role to disturb and challenge, what Jacques Ranciere has described as, the “distribution of the sensible.” Drawing on Ranciere’s rethinking of the relationship between art and politics through the concept of dissensus, Bishop emphasizes the complexity that can be generated through the tension of art and the everyday. Coal’s material agency, simply through its presence in a socially-engaged project is capable of creating dissensus but can also, as a physical object, concurrently aesthetically represent what Claire Bishop described as a “mediating third” within participatory art. Bishop explains:

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60 Kester, Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art.8

61 Ibid.

62 Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents."25


“As such, it has the capacity to communicate on two levels – to participants and to spectators – the paradoxes that are repressed in everyday discourse, and to elicit perverse, disturbing and pleasurable experiences that enlarge our capacity to image the world and our relations anew. But to reach the second level requires a *mediating third term* – an object, image, story, film, even a spectacle – that permits this experience to have purchase on the public imaginary.”

To comprehend the complexity of people’s relationship with coal, and its efficacy as a “mediating third” required a site-specific study. Drawing on the work of artist Miwon Kwon, the site of Morwell in the Latrobe Valley is addressed as a social framework and inter-subjective space, which is shared between humans and geological matter. This project is therefore also located within a long genealogy of site-specific practices such as the Situationist International’s concept of psychogeography (which Guy Debord defined as “the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment on the emotions and behavior of individuals”), the site-specific practices of Lucy Lippard, and the concept of situated knowledge by Donna Haraway, who stated: “I am arguing for the politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims.”

**Conceptual Framework of New Materialism**

A continuous investigation of New Materialist cultural theory and philosophical ideas in connection with art is interwoven throughout the various chapters to inform the questioning of human relationships with the geological matter coal.

New Materialism, as a heterogeneous, emerging cultural theory, pays renewed attention to the central importance of matter in cultural discourse as a pathway to re-orientate human beings’ relationality with the material world. With links to French feminist theories and Continental Philosophy, New Materialism has been influenced by a lineage of ideas that builds on the work of earlier philosophers such as Benedictus Spinoza, Henri

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Bergson and Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari to the present day thinking of Barad, Rosi Braidotti, and Isobel Stengers and a growing list of many others. What binds them all is an attempt to side-step dualism and a belief that human exceptionalism is not conducive to solving the dynamic problems that it has created in the world.

It is beyond the scope of my project to undertake an exhaustive genealogy or cartography of New Materialism as a field – this has already been successfully undertaken elsewhere by Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin71. Central to this thesis is a focus on New Materialism’s ability to question preconceived human-centric biases regarding the vitality of coal, or put differently, a concern with the agency of coal’s matter.

Against the backdrop of various critiques of New Materialism by different authors (Sara Ahmed, Nikki Sullivan, Claire Colebrook, Justin Clements et al) I follow Barb Bolt’s line of enquiry and draw on the three “problematics” raised by Andrew Poe (in his review essay of the book, New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics)72 as a guide to structure the theoretical analysis of this practice-led project. Poe addresses what he sees as the aesthetic, political, ethical limits and speculative nature of New Materialism. Highlighting the anxieties and instabilities of the self, experienced by the modern subject, Poe’s first point addresses, what he regards as the mainly speculative nature of New Materialist theories. He claims these fail to manifest themselves sufficiently into direct political consequences, thereby weakening the potency of ideas.

Poe’s second concern is how New Materialism understands and articulates the relationship between the aesthetic appreciation and the materiality of non-human matter. He asks whether, “we, as those who perceive the aesthetics, are thereby always doing work on the world” and “whether there remains an aesthetic dimension to things”73. In my understanding this questions whether “things in themselves” have an aesthetic dimension that is independent from our human cognitive perception, discernment, projection, theories or taste.

71 Dolphijn and Van der Tuin, "New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies."


73 Ibid. 161
Poe’s third point is concerned with the political and ethical dimensions that arise from New Materialism and the potential consequences of extending (or projecting) ethical behavior towards non-human matter. He asks “what could or should stop us from extending agency indefinitely?” How may changing our ethics regarding coal affect our lives and influence our individual lives/living standards?

Barbara Bolt draws on Heidegger’s rethinking of causality and the relationships between form and matter to question the underlying assumptions of Poe’s arguments. Responding to Poe’s challenges, these thesis foregrounds the agential nature of coal in art practice to provide a heuristic pathway to explore these arguments. The efficacy of New Materialism’s theoretical, top down concepts is tested and grounded in art practice.

A brief history of materialism

Inspired by naturally occurring phenomena, such as dust motes dancing and colliding with each other in a shaft of light, the “Pneumoconiosis” installation discussed in Chapter 5 conceptually creates parallels with early Greek atomistic materialist theories that lead from Epicurus’s concept of the unpredictable swerve of atoms all the way to new Materialist concepts in the 21st century. Defending Epicurus’s atomistic conception of the world, Lucretius called this movement of atoms clinamen, a Latin name meaning ‘incline’ describing a tendency to lean towards each other. The ancient concept of the clinamen describes the interconnectedness of things and in the 21st century has inspired the vibrant materialist approach of political theorist Jane Bennett and the American feminist/physicist Karen Barad with her concept of intra-activity.

De Rerum Natura (On the Nature of Things), a famous didactic poem praising Epicurean physics written by the Roman philosopher Lucretius, poetically describes the solidity and concrete nature of physical matter “but he warns us at the outset that this

74 Ibid.
75 Barrett and Bolt, Carnal Knowledge: Towards A’new Materialism’through the Arts. 5
77 Titus Carus Lucretius, De Rerum Natura, vol. 1 (D. Bell, 1866).
matter is made up of invisible particles.”78 Characterised by the Italian author Italo Calvino as “poetry of nothingness”79, this poem about the invisible – whilst asserting the corporeality of physical matter, declares: “emptiness is just as concrete as solid bodies.”80 Here, dust motes swirling in a shaft of light in dark space are a poetic metaphor, observed in the visible world, for atoms, which deviate unpredictably from straight paths, thereby creating infinite new unexpected potentialities, “ensuring freedom both to atoms and to human beings.”81

**Dialectic materialism**

Historically there are important connections between these early Greek forms of atomism, (considered the basis of materialist philosophy) and politics. The doctoral thesis of the German philosopher Karl Marx for instance concerned the atomism of Epicurus and Democritus.82 Out of these philosophical enquires Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels developed dialectic materialism, a philosophy of science and nature based on a materialist conception of history, in which historical progress is understood as a dialectical process. In this philosophy, raw materials such as coal are considered a productive force and the material base, which through collective labour produce the necessities required for human life.83 As such, human existence is dependent on social relations with the material world for its survival. The excavation and combustion of coal to produce energy enabled the industrial revolution, radically increasing economic activity and transformed living standards to supply the material requirements of rapidly increasing populations. The *Communist Manifesto*84 Marx and Engels wrote together in 1848 was made possible through the financial support and income Friedrich Engels, the son of a prosperous German cotton mill owner, earned through the coal-fired, steam engine

79 Ibid.9
80 Ibid.8
81 Ibid.9
driven fabric mills of Manchester, where he was sent to learn the family business. The industrialization and mass production enabled by coal, fueled capitalism and created widespread suffering among the working class, which had become increasingly alienated from the domestic comforts of their traditional community life. Marx and Engel's revolutionary thinking and 'materialist conception of history' responds to the industrial exploitation of coal and the struggles between different social classes it helped to create.

In response to the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's dialectic idealism Marx and Engels applied the dialectical method to study the material base of production (such as coal) and associated economic problems. Rather than understanding history as an idealist metaphysical reality to which human beings were subjected, for Marx/Engels “…consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production.”

Marx goes beyond philosophical contemplation to emphasise the importance of (human) action to change society. In Marxist terms coal is regarded as the material base, however the following excerpt indicates that he actually recognized the experiential force and vibrancy of matter. Marx states, “man, by his industry, changes the forms of materials furnished by Nature, in such a way to make them useful to him. The form wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, everyday thing, wood.” Marx goes on to describe the table, as it transcends its materiality and takes on a new life as a commodity, in anthropomorphic terms, “It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but in relation to other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain, grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than 'table-turning' ever was.”

Substituting “wood” for “coal” (after all coal originates from organic plant matter), what I propose is that, in a New Materialist view, coal has agency and impacts on other entities within a system of relations (both as material and as a commodity). Inherent in coal’s

85 Barbara Freese, Coal: A Human History (Basic Books, 2016).80
88 Ibid.
materiality lays dormant a variety of future manifestations and potential material transformations. Coal thus has agency, which can become distributed within a system of relations; it is ‘non-innocent’ and has the capacity to perform actions rather than just being at the receiving end of something happening to it.

Commonly understood as an “action or intervention producing a particular effect”\(^8\), the use of the term “agency”\(^9\) has a particular nuance in new materialist theory. It refers to the ability of matter within complicated interconnected assemblages to exert its influence upon the world. In her book *Vibrant Matters* Bennett argues that objects and matter have “thing-power”, the ability to “manifest traces of independence or aliveness outside of our ordinary awareness.”\(^9\) Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari and their concept of “material vitalism”, in which vitality is embedded in matter-energy relations\(^2\), Bennett “acknowledge(s) the distributive quality of agency within the complex network of human/non-human assemblages.”\(^3\) She claims things (and I would argue coal) are capable of producing effects that draw attention to the ethical questioning of humans’ conduct toward the material world. Coal, I argue therefore can be seen as in Bennett’s words “as possessing its own immanent, intensive resources for the generation of form from within.”\(^4\) Coal’s vibrancy is thus an active agent, shaping experience and discourse.

**Mind and Matter Dualism**

Western philosophical enquiries refer to dualism as a range of views that regard mind and matter (body) as two distinct separate ontological categories. “By the neo-materialists’ view, such psychic dualism translates to moral and political dualism, via the experience of

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\(^8\) [https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/agency](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/agency)

\(^9\) The word agency comes from the Latin word ‘agentia’ meaning ‘to do, to act, to manage’ and describes the capacity of an entity to act in the world. It can describe an unconscious, involuntary behaviour, or purposeful, directed, intentional action


\(^3\) Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*.

\(^4\) Manuel DeLanda, "Deleuze and the Open-Ended Becoming of the World" (paper presented at the Chaos/Control: Complexity Conference, University of Bielefeld, Germany, 1998).4
Considered the father of Western philosophy the French philosopher, mathematician and scientist René Descartes is famous for his “Cogito ergo sum (I think therefore I am)” statement. For him, matter and the body, unlike the mind lack the capacity of thinking; body and matter have material properties but behave like a mechanical machine. The mind (or soul) however is superior and has innate knowledge obtained through a higher source. It is immaterial, follows its own laws and controls the body/matter. In every day, Cartesian influenced understanding, coal has certain material properties and is regarded as being inert and separate from human beings. What however happens when a New Materialist view is adopted and coal is considered not to be inert but reconceptualised as being dynamic interconnected, constantly changing and becoming?

The philosophical concept of monism describes a range of heterogeneous theories, which maintain that there is a unifying central principle as the origin of “things”. The potential value of New Materialism as a new metaphysics is its monistic perspective that can overcome traditional dichotomous thinking manifested in mind/body, subject/object, nature/culture, idealist/materialist categories. This paper leans towards a materialist definition of monism, in which matter is primary, and the mind and human consciousness emanates through interactions with the material world in contrast with dualistic thinking, which leads to the unsustainable exploitation of the material world as “a passive resource for use by active humans.” My experience with coal’s vibrancy in artworks and Latrobe Valley communities directly challenges binary perceptions that coal’s matter is only an inert resource. People generally have polarised views about coal: it is either regarded negatively or appreciated for its benefits. These attitudes can result in divisive and polarised debates regarding the environment, ecology and climate change. New Materialism’s monistic approaches regarding matter have the potential to go beyond dualist concepts of the world to re-orientate current dynamics of human mastery and promote a revitalised ethics of care of the earth’s resources.

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97 Vladimir Il’ich Lenin, "Materialism and Empiro-Criticism," (1908).17

98 Barrett and Bolt, *Carnal Knowledge: Towards A'new Materialism'through the Arts*.3
This study can only concern itself with select facets of New Materialism’s ontology – a key aspect is its rejection of dualism and an approach, which “pushes Dualism to an Extreme”99. This exegesis embraces the thinking of Deleuze/Guattari and New Materialist proponents, who preference Spinoza’s monist approach in opposition to Cartesian dualist ways of thinking to “invoke one dualism only to challenge another. We employ a dualism of models only in order to arrive at a process that challenges all models.”100 101

**Dialectics and the Sublation of Opposites**

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions.102

The French philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist Bruno Latour compellingly argues against the existence of dichotomies such as between nature and culture, unmasking them as a device of dialectics. His actor network theory controversially puts human and non-human actors on the same relational footing. Within his “Parliament of Things” they have the ability to participate and influence each other in networks and complicated systems.103

The practice of reconciling binary opposites – and keeping apparently contradictory modes of knowing in productive tension – is at the core of this study into human relationality with coal. Knowing through embodied physical practice with matter - and New Materialist theoretical frameworks mutually inform and co-create each other.

Coal’s connections with the environment can be contextualized in a political economy as a causal chain of events and chains of explanations. In making these connections however an editing and selection of data occurs to create a linear, sequential narrative that is somewhat arbitrary. Systems, assemblages or networks, in which matter and

99 Dolphijn and Van der Tuin, ”New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies.” 115 NB: this expression first used by Bergson (1896)

100 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. 20


humans are engaged, are now so complex that there is an increasing non-linearity of responses. Appealing to intuition the concept of a relation between cause and effect is a commonly accepted abstraction. One could argue for example that through the Hazelwood mine fire, coal literally came alive. Its destructive force was unleashed and overpowered human systems put in place to control it. Therefore coal, through its material action within an assemblage directly challenged the commonly embraced view that it is inert and lifeless matter. The political theorist Jane Bennett cites the electricity power grid blackout in the USA in 2003 to describe how assemblages are made up of many types of different actants, some humans, others nonhumans. As will be demonstrated in the following chapters, my art practice with coal not only engages in a dialogue with other people but also is also a direct dialogic process with matter itself. Social practice with communities, who live at the coalface of coal’s extraction have unearthed a variety of contradictory relationships and attitudes in regards to coal.

Dialectics, as a method of reasoning asserts that the nature of reality is an evolving process, interconnected and inherently contradictory – and that the true nature of the world can only be comprehended through the understanding of its contradictions. In contrast to the idealism of Hegelian dialectics (which actually is a model of ‘thesis - antithesis-synthesis’ further developed by the German Philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte from the influential ideas of Immanuel Kant) for Marx “…the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought.”

Where Marx’s materialist philosophy and political economy is based on a critique of Hegelian dialectics (thesis-antithesis-synthesis) and a reaction to Hegel’s understanding of civil society, New Materialist philosophy builds on the notion of “intra-action” constituted between entangled agencies (Barad). As Barad shows us, it produces an embodied understanding and acknowledgement of materiality in constant flux across complex distributed material-discursive apparatuses, which produce phenomena. Instead of dialectically accentuating and focusing on the differences between old reductionist and


\[106\] *Capital. I: 14*, Karl Marx, Marxists Internet Archive, Retrieved 4 June 2017. "*Afterword (Second German Ed.)*"
mechanistic visions of the material world (in which matter was supposedly always rendered passive and static) the new forms of materialism informed by recent developments in physics, such as quantum physics (which emphasises matter to be active and dynamic) acknowledges that these movements build upon each other historically. For example in 1704 B.C.E John Toland, a freethinker and Irish-born philosopher corresponded with Leibnitz to argue that activity is the “essence of matter” [and] “that matter is necessarily active”. Barad’s concept of intra-action importantly introduces the concept of agency, not as something the object possesses but a dynamic relationship it is engaged in with other entities and which affects all participants to produce differentially. Dialectics doesn’t take into account this dynamic aspect of matter, nor does it address the subjective position of the author within the apparatus as someone not in full control over everything that occurs. Therefore, while dialectic materialism is valuable it is not an adequate enough framework for this project.

Oppositional thinking therefore can reinforce the very binary contradictions dialectics attempts to ‘overcome’. Hegel himself uses the German term “das Aufheben des Widerspruchs” (which loosely translates as “sublation of the contradiction”) to reconcile binary differences. The German verb “aufheben” has ambiguous triple meanings: it means “to pick up” and, but also “to keep” and “to preserve.” On the other hand it connotes “to overcome” and “to sublate.” Responding to both Hegelian and Marxist interpretations of dialectics the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre introduced a third possibility to solve this impasse caused by dialectical thinking. Based on his understanding that “Space does not exist “in itself”; it is produced.” Lefebvre created the concept of a three-dimensional dialectic, in which space is relational and the product of a complex social construction of values and meanings, which in turn affects perception and spatial practices. Lefebvre refers to these three dialectically interconnected processes as the “perceived space” (experienced through spatial practice), the “conceived space” (representations of space), and the “lived” space (spaces of representation). Embracing the multiplicity of these distinct relational social spaces (or moments) Lefebvre however resists the temptation to reconcile them into a Hegelian synthesis to “focus on the contradictory, conflictual, and, ultimately, political character of

\footnote{John Toland, *Letters to Serena* (Bernard Lintot, 1704).}

the processes of production of space. "109 Lefebvre rejects and transforms the closed logical judgement that propositions can’t be both true and false at the same time with his three-dimensional dialectic to respond with a "simultaneous yes and no." 110 Lefevbre’s three-dimensional dialectic is thus a suitable framework to negotiate and understand the contradictions and complexity of coal’s intra-actions experienced through situated art practice in the field.

The Swiss geographer and sociologist Christian Schmid states that Lefebvre’s three-dimensional dialectics "…can be understood as a contradiction between social thought, social action, supplemented by the third factor of the creative, poetic act." 111 Following Lefebvre, my socially-engaged practice with coal in Latrobe Valley communities constitutes a first moment rooted in the everyday. This is contradicted by the second moment: the abstraction of knowledge through analysis expressed through language and the written word. In the third moment, spatial installations with coal as creative and poetic acts sublate and transcend the two previous terms, not in a traditional synthesis, but through dialectically interconnecting the three moments. Schmid, following Lefebvre asserts, that "…it links three moments that are left distinct from each other, without reconciling them in a synthesis – three moments that exist in interaction, in conflict or in alliance with each other." 112 Traditional Hegelian and Marxist dialectics sublate binary contradictions (thesis and antithesis) through synthesis. Lefebvre’s triadic dialectic however doesn’t result in a classic Hegelian synthesis. Schmid asserts "Logical and analytical reason, coherent, strictly formal discourse, cannot capture the becoming, the movement of the sublation in the creative act." 113

The discussion and analysis of various facets of coal in the following chapters demonstrate that Morwell, as a town is constituted by its relation with coal. The combined

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110 Schmid, "Henri Lefebvre’s Theory of the Production of Space: Towards a Three-Dimensional Dialectic." 28

111 Ibid. 33


113 Schmid, "Henri Lefebvre’s Theory of the Production of Space: Towards a Three-Dimensional Dialectic." 31
steps and processes that enable the production of energy through combustion of coal, the transmission lines, the networks of streets and supplementary businesses, the pubs and gathering places and so on have all shaped and made the town what it is today. In terms of political ecology viewed through dialectics, humans and the non-human entity coal are entangled and constituted by their dynamic relationships to each other. How these relations change with the recent closure of the Hazelwood Mine in future will largely depend on how this relationship is re-negotiated.

Through the process of investigating the socio-political role coal plays in Latrobe Valley mining communities by 'collaborating' with coal’s materiality via socially-engaged spatial practice this research and the resultant works in the “Gedankenaustellung” transcended binary dichotomies of body and mind. Following Lefebvre’s ideas, the subjective experiences of everyday living become spaces of representation.

Schmid sums up the dynamically changing relations with coal and becoming up well: “In Lefebvre’s view, the work of art alone is the unity of the finite and the infinite, endlessly determined and living.”114

Chapter 2: Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology employed to explore the research questions. The project combines an artistic practice-as-research methodology with a socially-engaged “ethnographic sensibility.” This methodology embraces practice-led research methods, which are “intrinsically experiential” and “not only place practice within the research process, but lead research through practice.” These practice-led research methods are combined with socially-engaged and ethnographic methods, in the field and studio, to present new knowledge.

Working with locally sourced brown coal, a series of art methods were specifically designed and supported by well-established, traditional ethnographic methods, to generate unique data and findings. Unlike other socially-engaged projects, in which people are the main focus, in this investigation the material brown coal plays a crucial and central role. In fact, this art practice-as-research was a series of iterative ‘collaborations’ with coal, which informed and enabled situated, socially-engaged art practice in the field, and material intra-actions with coal in the studio, to unearth multi-faceted and complex relationships human beings have with coal.

Artistic Practice-as-Research

This is also an artistic practice-as-research project. Artistic praxis is employed as an alternative form of research to generate new knowledge, which is primarily informed by a continuous reflection upon lived experience and the process of doing and making. Artistic praxis (following from Nelson on practice-as-research) is thus referred to as the processes, by which thinking and theory are enacted, embodied, emplaced and realized through making (poiesis) and doing. Robin Nelson refers to it as an iterative process of “doing- reflecting- reading- articulating-doing.”

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117 Haseman, "A Manifesto for Performative Research."

118 Robin Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances*
On reflection, my practice-led research methodology for this project, whilst building on my previous professional practice, actually evolved and was refined through an emergent as well as experimental process of doing as the project progressed. Responding to the multiple facets of coal’s material agency and the research questions, that arose from them, necessitated that what Carole Gray would argue were “the research strategy is carried out through practice, using predominantly methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners.”\(^{119}\)

In addition to using interviews as a method of qualitative research (described later in this chapter), the practice–led aspect of my research is conducted much more within a performative and improvisational paradigm\(^{120}\), which required me to respond creatively to the site, the material, the social context and the continuously changing challenges arising out of dynamic situations and the demands of the practice. For example, significant events and political changes occurred in the Latrobe Valley during the three-year duration of my socially-engaged practice and fieldwork there. This included the aftermath of the Hazelwood Mine fire, followed by two government mine fire enquiries, extensive ongoing public information and community consultation processes, local and state government elections, a change of State Government and a host of other national and international developments, that all impacted on the local population, which culminated in the ultimate closure of the Hazelwood Mine in March 2017 (at the end of the research period). This highlights that knowledge, generated by this study, is emergent, experimental and relational; and that a different practice and mode of inquiry may well result in different outcomes and forms of knowledge. Robin Nelson calls this knowledge that comes from experience as “liquid knowledge.”\(^{121}\)

The challenges of operating within such a dynamic landscape and continuously changing circumstances, was seen as a unique opportunity to study the multi-faceted material agency of coal under different conditions. However, this also necessitated the creation of a methodology, which was centered around a practice of “collaborating” with coal’s

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\(^{120}\) Haseman, "A Manifesto for Performative Research." 7

materiality through a series of iterative art tactics. These multiple methods with coal generated new findings in the field and studio environment. Socially-engaged art collaborations with coal in the field included:

- Coal installations, interventions and performances (inside shops and heritage buildings)
- Public sweeping and cleaning performances (in streets and public places)
- “Black carpet” participatory public performance (public places)
- “COALounges” (Coal+Lounge)- temporary pop-up art spaces (empty shops)
- “Sweeping Changes” cleaning cart performances (in streets)
- Roof attic project through working with DHHS (Roof spaces of private residences)

Studio based art collaborations with coal included:

- Sweeping and cleaning performances to create temporary coal paintings
- “Foot” printmaking with coal dust
- Carving and mold making
- Artist book design and production
- Photography and video production
- Multimedia, lighting and installation experiments

These experimental “collaborations” with locally sourced brown coal activated the material agency of coal, as the prime medium to create social dialogue, participation and encounters at the place of coal’s extraction. Seen in isolation, these approaches, in themselves, are not new. Their efficacy, however, consisted in their unique combination.

These artistic methods, described above, were teamed up with ethnographic methods, such as fieldwork, participant observation, and informal and semi-structured interviews to add to my own fieldwork and studio experiences of coal and include the perspectives of many “others” whose lives are shaped or somehow transversally intersect with coal. Responding to the “crisis of representation” [and] “critique of ethnographic texts as text”,122 rather than writing up these voices and perspectives from the position of a detached observer and following the standard conventions of ethnographic writing, this thesis and the exhibition attempts to present its findings in a more visually engaging and poetic way. This “ethnographic sensibility” acknowledges and allows the subjective voice of the researcher to be present. It is inspired and best described by the poetic

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representations of the human condition in the ethnographic work of Renato Rosaldo,\textsuperscript{123} who directly connects his poetic and ethnographic practices.

**The field and research context**

In order to contain the scope of the research, I narrowed the study area to focus primarily on Morwell in the Latrobe Valley in Gippsland, two hours from Melbourne. I situated my practice and field research in this town of 14,000 people as it was most directly exposed to the effects of open-cut coal mining and coal-fired power generation. It is surrounded by 3 open-cut coalmines and coal-fired power stations: Yallourn, Loyang A & B and Hazelwood (which is the closest and located only a few hundred metres from Morwell).

![Aerial photo of the Hazelwood Mine and Morwell](image.png)

*Figure 13. “The Hazelwood Mine and Morwell” Aerial photo courtesy of Engie ©*

The research context was heavily influenced by a variety of extraordinary events such as the Hazelwood Mine fire in 2014\textsuperscript{124} at the beginning of the research period and the


closure of Hazelwood mine and power station by its multinational owners by the end of March 2017. Nearly a thousand jobs were lost directly with many more local businesses are anticipated to closed, placing additional pressure on local communities, which have already been severely affected by long-term structural change and economic decline over the last few decades.

The streetscapes of Morwell are characterized by a plethora of vacant, and often derelict, commercial properties of all shapes and sizes. Many have been on the market for so many years, that the owners have given up trying to find a new buyer or tenant and are therefore boarded up with plywood, while others still remain hopeful and display “For sale” and “For Lease” signs. The faded, often dilapidated signs of previous businesses still adorn many of these places and are testimony to the decline of previous successful business ventures – they speak of a once proud, vibrant and thriving regional town, and of times of optimism, when the SEC, coalmining and power generation provided successive generations of workers with plenty of well-paid employment.

“COALounges”

In order to establish a local base and studio for my art praxis I set up a series of temporary pop-up art spaces, which I called “COALounges” in Morwell’s town centre.

Sometimes I branded these ephemeral places with a small, designed logo affixed to the shop front windows. At other times, I relied on word of mouth to promote these spaces, which were designed to lounge around and hang out with coal. These unique ephemeral spaces allowed me to present temporary installations and exhibits with coal in a non-institutional environment. In a town where people are accustomed to shops closing, one gets noticed immediately when occupying and setting up a new business.

Through establishing these pop-up art spaces I was able to forged a valuable working collaboration with Associate Professor Rose Monacella from RMIT and her “Transiting Cities: Re:Activate Latrobe Valley” project, which was funded through RMIT’s Office of Urban Transformations Research (OUTR). The support and connections through of this group and Voices of the Valley, a local activist group, enabled me to obtain rent-free (or minimal rent) premises for a period of time to set up my various “COALounges.”

Through these contacts I was also able to coordinate the staging of my coal exhibitions and installations to coincide with local cultural festivals such as the Latrobe Valley Winter
Night Festival in 2015 and 2016, which were organized and co-funded by Re:Activate. These festivals and local markets brought many people from the wider Latrobe Valley to Morwell to create a buzz and hive of excitement. On one occasion hundreds of people streamed through my pop-up gallery within one evening, whereas on normal evenings the main streets are mostly deserted after dark. During these times my “COALouges” often became an impromptu free venue for busking and musical performances and a place to party for local artists, a meeting places for activist groups and local residents and a place to stay for visiting artists and collaborators – a space openly accessible to all.

The location of my pop-up “COALouges” was transient and continuously changed throughout the project because I was either paying little or no rent and I could never obtain permission for these places for long. Despite always returning the premises in a cleaner state than I found them some owners withdrew their premises fearing the dirtiness and negative perceptions associated with coal will harm their abilities to eventually sell or lease the building.
Figure 15. “COALounge” in Tarwin St, Morwell, Image Hartmut Veit

Figure 16. “COALounge” in Commercial Road, Morwell, Image Hartmut Veit
The “COALounges” were also places in which I lived during the project. I literally slept rough on the floor in the back of these shops, often without any electricity and joined the local gym to use their showers and facilities as I was unable to also afford paying the surprisingly high rent charged for anything halfway decent in town. And as any well-seasoned world traveller knows becoming a too regular house guest for more than a few days at an given time can push the best friendships into undesirable territory.

Inspired by both Michel De Certeau\textsuperscript{125} and Henri Lefebvre,\textsuperscript{126} through living in, and actively participating with this community on a daily basis – in everyday life – enabled me to explore the many encountered contradictions surrounding coal, and establish genuine new friendships and deepen existing connections. Being embedded in the town’s local fabric through living and working in the community, as an artist, allowed me to gain insights in an inductive, multifactorial and holistic fashion over lengthy time periods.

Additionally these “COALounges” also provided me with a safe space from which I conducted emic and etic field research\textsuperscript{127} using ethnographic methods, such as open-ended interviews, informal interactions and participant observation. Within anthropology, emic and etic are known as two distinct approaches to field research, that can complement each other. Emic approaches examine how people think from the perspective of local subjects – often by a researcher like myself who is embedded in local culture whereas the etic approach focuses on local observations by the anthropologist from the perspective of the (outside) observer. Through my long association with the Valley through various art residencies, living there for extended periods of time (which included voting in local and Federal elections) and previously studying for my Masters at Monash University’s Gippsland Centre for Art and Design (GCAD) in Churchill over many years, I was uniquely positioned to use both emic and etic approaches. In that regard my constant travelling back and forward, between Melbourne and Morwell is an apt metaphor for switching between these two modes. However, despite employing ethnographic methods, as an artist I have taken the liberty to push ethnographic methodological


\textsuperscript{126} Henri Lefebvre, \textit{Critique of Everyday Life}, vol. 2 (Verso, 1991).

\textsuperscript{127} Gretchen B Rossman and Sharon F Rallis, \textit{Learning in the Field: An Introduction to Qualitative Research} (Sage, 2003).
boundaries, and follow George Marcus’s line of reasoning to question the research process of ethnography itself.\textsuperscript{128} Rather than simply succumbing to the established practice of faithfully and accurately representing a given reality observed in the field through writing up the fieldwork to create an authoritative ethnographic monologue (such as a paper, book or film etc. to present the research findings), my project acknowledges that ethnography is also fictional and relies on “…the centrality of subjectivity to the production of knowledge.”\textsuperscript{129} What I mean with that is that I consider it important to clearly understand how I am also involved in the constitution of place-making through my own my emplacement in the Latrobe Valley. I want to comprehend how the material agency of coal influences people, place and situations through, not only speaking and observing them, but also concurrently reflecting on and analysing my own subjective sensory and embodied experiences. The general public’s perception of Morwell is one commonly associated with socioeconomic disadvantage, poverty, and social effects of addiction. My social engagement as a situational practice\textsuperscript{130} required vigilance and mindfulness to see things as they really are and not as one imagines them to be. It must work against perpetuating and reproducing negative, stereotypical perceptions connected with place.

The performative agency of coal at work

The temporary occupation of these shops was an important aspect of my socially-engaged art practice. Using brown coal as a medium I staged art encounters between brown coal and ordinary, non-art members of the local community.

I would often cover the floor of the space with paper and simply drop coal dust directly onto the floor. People entering and visiting the makeshift gallery then spread the coaldust around, thereby creating constantly changing ephemeral abstract images written in coal.

These performative art collaborations with coal acted as a bridge and conduit to connect coal, as a geological material, with human beings (who tend to be preoccupied with living everyday life and socio-economic concerns) rather than being interested in exploring new


\textsuperscript{129} Sarah Pink, \textit{Doing Visual Ethnography} (Sage, 2013). 3

\textsuperscript{130} James Oliver and Marnie Badham, "Re-Presenting the Everyday: Situational Practice and Ethnographic Conceptualism," \textit{Laboratorium. Журнал социальных исследований} 5, no. 2 (2013).
cognitive perceptions and challenging existing stereotypical projections regarding matter.

Figure 17. Inside a COALounge. Image: Hartmut Veit

Many people in the community were intrigued about how I was using coal. A local journalist, who grew up in the Valley commented:

I thought it was great. I'm not an artist but I appreciate what it does. It challenges people. It causes them to think differently about certain issues. Umm, you tell stories, and it captures, you know, sort of little historic pieces as well. So I, when I first heard what you were doing, well I thought, that's something different. It's new. It's relevant. It's like relevance is really a very important factor, and I don't necessarily think that art is doing its job if it's not challenging people. Yes so umm, yeah, no, I thought it was great and I was intrigued more than anything. 131

Moving beyond exhibiting in enclosed, art institutional spaces, white cube galleries and museums, with, and for, elitist art audiences, my material art provocations with coal, were actual interventions in the everyday fabric of the town's social life. Coal's material agency and simple presence created conversations, opportunities for dialogue, and at times even

131 Interview #03, Partial transcript in Appendices, 35:30
heated discussion within the community, which will be discussed later in chapter 3. Coal, normally taken for granted, abstracted, not seen or simply ignored in the daily life of the community is suddenly brought centre stage to be an actor on equal footing with humans. The field of socially-engaged art is expanded to include the non-human, once living, material coal. The immanent closure of the local mine brings with it the challenge (and opportunity) to collectively re-imagine human relationships towards coal, thus, following Kester, activating the building of new relationships through dialogue.\(^{132}\)

**Coal in the field and studio**

Building on a long tradition of ecological performance art I performed public acts of labour (i.e., sweeping and cleaning) in public spaces, neglected historical buildings and deserted shop fronts in Morwell to explore reactions and relationships people have with coal directly in the streets of Morwell.

Brown coal for this research was obtained directly from the Hazelwood open cut mine through excavation, working directly with Engie, the French listed company and mine owner and its workforce, but also through sweeping and collecting omnipresent coal dust from the streets of Morwell and obtaining coal ash from roof cavities in Morwell through working with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and its appointed contractors. This material was then employed to stage encounters with coal through temporary pop-up exhibitions, installations, and performances along with more enduring artworks and documentation of processes.

The various “COALounges” were temporary bases from which I ventured out into the community. For this purpose I built, a custom-designed mobile cleaning cart sculpture titled “Sweeping changes.” It carried all the necessary equipment required for public cleaning performances and collecting omnipresent coal dust from the streets of Morwell to facilitate dialogue with the community (discussed in chapter 3).

In addition to these field-based explorations, my studio-based art processes explored coal’s aesthetic materiality and agency. Material intra-actions with coal in the studio and the field were observed, reflected upon and diarised to make sense of auto-ethnographic encounters with coal. Studio art processes working with coal included sweeping, contemplative interactions with coal, carving, painting, object making with molds,

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\(^{132}\) Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. 
assemblage with found objects, artist book making, photography and video to document processes and performances.

Figure 18. Hartmut Veit, “Sweeping Changes” performance, 2016, Morwell. Photo: Sudeep Lingamneni

As a socially-engaged project, documentation was vital. Over the three years of the project, thousands of images and countless hours of video footage were amassed. The studio provided important time away from the field to reflect on what had occurred in the field and create videos, artist books and photographic prints for final presentation.

**Art, Anthropology and the everyday**

There is a long history of cross-disciplinary research and dialogue between the fields of art and anthropology. In regards to ethnographic methods this study draws on concerns raised by various authors and theorists within the last two decades and is specifically informed by the “ethnographic turn” in art,\(^{133}\) and the “crisis of representation” in anthropology and sociology.\(^{134}\) Since then, and perhaps constrained by their respective


\(^{134}\) Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography: A School of American*
disciplines, both artists and anthropologists have grappled with, and appropriated each other’s methodologies. Some of these cross-disciplinary engagements and discussions have been well documented by Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright, who advocate that there should be “…more experimentation in the fields of practice between art and anthropology.”

The affinities between art and anthropology have been further influenced by a re-imaging of the classical, near-mythic Malinowskian encounter and contemporary questioning of fieldwork as a classical research practice by authors such as George Marcus. He is highly critical of ethnographic fieldwork as a traditional form of knowledge-making and its contribution to the politics of representation. Directing his attention to site-responsive art practices of performance, installation, and event-based conceptual art movements (with their origins in Dada, Surrealism, Situationist International and Fluxus), he argues anthropology can learn from the openness, improvisational and experimental nature of such art practices as inspiration for alternative models of fieldwork.

Following, and inspired by the methodological advances of Sarah Pink’s sensory ethnography, my own art practice-as-research embraced contemporary notions of spatial, embodied, sensory emplacement. Through physically locating myself and my socially-engaged practice in the everyday life of a community shaped by living in and amongst coal, I reflected on my own embodied and other people's sensory knowing, emplacement and relationship with coal.

Situating my arts practice in the everyday, and in Morwell as the specific location my research with coal (an abundant local material that shapes the place of its encounter), deliberately blurs the distinction between art and life, between human and non-human. “Collaborating” with coal’s materiality to create social engagement explores, represents and produces location as an outcome. As a situated, embodied, participatory and socially-engaged project it finds itself within a long list of similar practices described by

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*Research Advanced Seminar.*


137 Sarah Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (Sage, 2015).
Nato Thomson as “Living as form”\textsuperscript{138} and by the American conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth as a "socially mediating activity" [which] "depicts' while it alters society."\textsuperscript{139} Continuous reflection on social practice and observed everyday relationships with coal dynamically re-informed embodied and emplaced action in the field. Following Oliver/Badham’s line of reasoning my participatory social practice, like: “…ethnographic fieldwork can, and perhaps should, be a generative, creative intervention that disrupts cultural hegemony and normative, oppressive representations of social relations.”\textsuperscript{140}

This chapter described the methodology and multiple methods employed to investigate the material agency of coal. Iterative “collaborations” with coal through socially-engaged art practice in temporary occupied public spaces and mobile sculptures were augmented with ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation as qualitative data collection methods to unearth contradictions, multi-faceted and complex relationships human beings have with coal observed in the everyday. The resultant body of artefacts, performances and installations explored in the next few chapters reflect a sustained material engagement with brown coal and socially-engaged arts practice with Latrobe Valley communities over the last few years (2014-2017).

\textsuperscript{138} Thompson, Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011.  
\textsuperscript{140} Oliver and Badham, "Re-Presenting the Everyday: Situational Practice and Ethnographic Conceptualism."; ibid.
Chapter 3: Coal’s socio-political effects

This chapter gives the context of the community in which the research developed and describes and analyses key works in the VCA Art Space 2 to interrogate coal’s socio-political agency and the ongoing affects and dis-ease of living next to the source of coal’s extraction. The works are presented as installations with coal and artifacts of social engagement that took place in Morwell over the last three years, commencing in 2014 just after the traumatic Hazelwood Mine fire events until this mine’s closure in March 2017.

Context: The mine fire

9 February 2014. It was 40 degrees, a hot Sunday, with wind gusts of up to 100kph when the open cut coalmine next to the Hazelwood Power Station caught fire. It erupted like a volcano and burned out of control for 45 days. Hampered by problematic access, outmoded and deteriorating firefighting infrastructure and inadequate government policies and responses firefighters, paramedics and local residents were hopelessly overwhelmed by the destructive force of coal. The thickness of the brown coal seams provided a sheer inexhaustible supply of fuel. Even when the visible fire was extinguished, the underlying coal seams remained hot and posed a huge danger.
Coal can combust instantaneously, remain burning underground and create new fires.

The fire only took
the lid off of what
was already there.

But now, no one
is able to forget.
I see it as survival
And I see the Valley as the abused partner
in a state-wide relationship

A victim will never speak out
if it means upsetting their security
or the person who looks,
after them.

People here won’t speak out.
They have to be brave,
They have to wake up,
come out of the fog, before anything can happen.

Tara Dean, courtesy of “Our Power” documentary\(^{141}\)

Smoke, toxic gases and coal ash covered the small town of Morwell where 14,000 people live only a few hundred metres from the mine. Residents during and after the mine fire reported being literally numbed out through the air that they breath.

A friend of Tara described her reaction to the smoke:

The smoke and ash affected Tara’s cognitive functioning straightaway: she felt disorientated, scattered. And nauseated. Then she started having kidney trouble, followed by a sinus infection that wouldn’t go away.\(^{142}\)

The smoke from the Hazelwood mine fire caused many in the Latrobe Valley to experience breathing related problems such as asthma. Coal dust, as suspended particulate matter (during the fire and generally as smog) contains a mixture of solid particles, dust, smoke, pollen, soil particles and much finer particular matter (PM 2.5).

\(^{141}\) Our Power, directed by Peter Yacono (Melbourne: Peter Yacono Films, 2017), Film. http://ourpowerdoco.com/ © Peter Yacono

\(^{142}\) Doig, The Coal Face. (Australia, Penguin Random House Australia, 2015), 144.77
These not only reduce visibility but PM2.5 particles are so small that they move through the alveoli of the lungs and across the blood barrier directly into the bloodstream, to cause heart attacks and brain aneurysms.

Matter is so ubiquitous and omnipresent, it is often only noticed when things break down – run out – or stop working. Through the mine fire, coal literally came alive. It’s destructive force was unleashed and overpowered human systems put in place to control it. Coal’s material metamorphosis exerted its vital influence on people, place and atmosphere, necessitating the performance of critical actions, speech and movements.

Positivism has shaped our current understanding, predicting, and controlling of matter. It is a philosophical theory of science that only accepts scientific knowledge gained through mathematical models, which interpret experimental observations through logic and reasoning to formulate abstract concepts about the material world. However the histories of science and positivism themselves are testimony, that these understandings are merely temporary abstract and collective representations, constructed by humans to make sense of the world. Positivism rejects intuitive knowledge and metaphysics to claim that all "processes are reducible to physiological, physical or chemical events," [and that
these] “social processes are reducible to relationships between and actions of individuals,” [and that] “biological organisms are reducible to physical systems.”

However it often transpires that, the so called facts in the objective world are the result of historically and socially mediated consciousness (i.e., the earth was once deemed to be flat) and with each new technological advance our comprehension of matter itself shifts, and often makes quantum leaps. There may well be other laws, principles and relationships in the world, which we have yet to discover.

Judging from the Hazelwood mine fire event in 2014, the application of scientific methods governed by laws of cause and effect were not able to fully account for coal’s material agency nor predict it’s resistance to control measures put in place to contain its influence.

The ensuing politics of assigning blame does not recognise the underlying complexity and agency of coal, or to paraphrase Jane Bennett, “acknowledge the distributive quality of agency within the complex network of human/non-human assemblages.” Discussing a similar incident (the electricity black-out in the USA in 2003) Bennett asks, “…should we persist with a strategic understatement of material agency in the hopes of enhancing the accountability of specific humans?”

Bruno Latour in his Actor-Network Theory (ANT) critiques human ego-centric worldviews to emphasis that events, effects and situations observable in the world are the outcome of complex entanglements between people and non-human matter and things as actors, which produce socio-political outcomes.

The mine fire marked the starting point of my fieldwork enquiries in Morwell. Locating the research in a concrete place, I was hopeful that I could excavate and reveal ignored, forgotten, and overlooked relationships with matter and place.

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144 Bennett, "The Agency of Assemblages and the North American Blackout."

145 Ibid.

146 Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*. 
“Sweeping changes”

“What the map cuts up the story cuts across.”

In setting out to build myself into the community (both the human and non-human community) and extend the practice further into public space I crafted a custom-designed mobile cleaning cart sculpture titled “Sweeping changes” from recycled bicycles, wheelchairs, and other found objects. As a dialogue creation machine this mobile sculpture was a welcome conversation starter and was prominently featured in my “COAL" exhibition as an artifact of these engagements.

In her book Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West, Lucy Lippard emphasises the importance of lived experiences of a specific place and advocates “that you should take responsibility for the place you find yourself in.” My public acts of cleaning were more than just a symbolic act of solidarity with the residents in the Latrobe Valley following the 2014 mine fires. Sweeping and cleaning signify how much healing is still needed in the community. Allegorically, it also highlights

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148 http://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/qa/lucy_lippard_interview-52240 April 2017
the enormous task ahead of humanity to address the complex task of reversing damages inflicted on the earth. The act of sweeping thus reveals issues of labour economy and power differentials. Sweeping and cleaning are associated with the mundane, the poorly paid worker. In this case, the unpaid labour of the socially-engaged artist.

The act of cleaning up is also an act of disguise – the meticulous cleaning of a crime scene to remove incriminating evidence. It is interesting to observe who is doing the cleaning. Private corporate companies and individuals generally profit from mineral extraction. However, the costs of remediation and rehabilitation are mostly incurred by the community and taxpayers. There are currently over 50,000 abandoned mines in Australia. Many are contaminated, pose safety risks or are losing their value as places of cultural and industrial heritage.

I am not a person who naturally enjoys being in the spotlight. Public performances of sweeping and cleaning the streets of Morwell were challenging for me and accompanied by feelings of trepidation and vulnerability.

Knowing that I am,  
the woman from the New Age crystal shop  
asks: are you the coal guy  
sleeping in the shop?  

It’s a small town.

Enabled by the “Sweeping Changes” mobile cleaning cart, my intention of participant observation and informal impromptu interviews was to investigate coal’s influence on place and people. People from all walks of life approached me as I was cleaning the streets. I didn’t need to direct these conversations as the context of my art practice of sweeping provided ample openings – the main task was to listen and document these before moving on. Unheard local voices were thus given space to activate fragile and fluid local histories and allow multiple views, contradictions and perspectives to emerge.


Figure 22. Hartmut Veit, “Sweeping Changes” performances, 2016, Morwell. Photo Sudeep Lingamneni
A lifelong local resident recounts:

Yeah, so coaldust – ghee – the old days, every day your shirt would be black, especially, because it would sort of settle on you, and that is despite you being active. It’s not like you’re standing still. It’s like you are a walking, environmental trap for it. …. I could smell the coal in the air though – and for me it is actually comforting, ‘cause it’s warmth, ‘cause in our day briquette heaters where the most available heating source. Yeah that’s right. And it still does because it provide electricity, which keeps you warm.\textsuperscript{151}

Such individual, shared stories, when read together with others, created a much larger narrative about the collective experience of living with and among coal in the Valley.

Figure 23. Hartmut Veit, “Sweeping Changes” 2016, Morwell. Photo: Hartmut Veit

Testament to the multicultural nature of Latrobe Valley many Sudanese have moved to the country town of Morwell, which in contrast to their war-torn country of origin, provides them with a relative safe space to raise their families. Coalmines are not seen as a

\textsuperscript{151} Interview #10, Partial transcript in Appendices
negative but valued as aspirational future employers. Motivated by a search for job prospects and better opportunities for their children the availability of cheaper housing has enabled many Sudanese families to develop a new life in the Latrobe Valley.

The spatial practice of walking and sweeping is also an act of “poiesis” – step by step, stroke by stroke, linkages and meaning between stories and places were established. Conversations capture experiences of “lived place”, creating a dynamic notion of space that has relevance for stories of belonging and representations of “Heimat.”

Figure 24. Hartmut Veit, “Sweeping Changes” Mobile cleaning cart, 2016, exhibition in VCA Gallery 2.

**Coal and “Heimat”**

Despite being surrounded by three open-cut coalmines, residents of Morwell have adapted in their own personal ways to living with the daily realities of coal. According to environmental psychology principles, place attachment is shaped by individual personal experiences and increases with the length of residence in a particular location. As Chiara Rollero and Norma De Piccoli note: “Both place attachment and identification lead to a positive perception, respectively, of the place and its inhabitants.”152 Some people have

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152 Chiara Rollero and Norma De Piccoli, "Place Attachment, Identification and Environment Perception:
such a strong identification with Morwell that they dispute coal’s presence in their living environment even though their town is literally built on coal. Morwell’s town planning laws envisaged that the entire town may need to be relocated to gain access to coal underneath (like the mining company town of Yallourn, which was closed and removed in the 1980s to make way for mine expansion).

The environmental philosopher and eco-feminist Val Plumwood has described such transient and tenuous relationships with land as a mal-adaption. She refers to this identification as a false consciousness of place based on idealized notions of “Heimat.” As one’s home place of dwelling this German word connotes the usually positive identification and association people have towards the place where they live.

The community in Morwell lives on the edge of a 5km long open-cut brown coal mine with a perimeter circumference of 18km. This is a very polarised community: on one hand it is characterised by low average educational participation and work skills; entrenched, intergenerational poverty; a 19% unemployment rate, with even higher youth unemployment. Widespread drug and alcohol abuse and lack of opportunities render Morwell one of the most socially disadvantaged communities in regional Victoria. It is telling that the second largest industry (after mining) is the social welfare sector.

On the other hand, those who have full-time jobs in the mine can earn hundreds of thousands of dollars per annum. Many of the older people, who experienced Morwell as a once thriving country town prior to the privatisation of the SEC in the early 1990’s still have very strong positive associations to Morwell.

One elderly resident expressed her hopes:

I think Morwell will remain a little famous town sitting there. Because it’s a beautiful spot. The country itself is so beautiful, its such a beautiful area.153

The community in Morwell was still reeling from the loss of 750+ direct jobs through the closure of the Hazelwood Power Station when the closure of the local Carter Holt Harvey Timber mill in Morwell saw another160 people loose their employment in May 2017. There is an increasing rift between affluent Melbourne and towns in the Latrobe Valley. In


153 Interview #2, Partial transcript in Appendices
contrast to Melbourne, which is marketed and has been repeatedly voted as “the world's most livable city” Morwell is referred to by some locals as “Mordor”, the fictional place of foul, polluting industry and evil tyranny in Tolkien’s imaginary tale *Lord of the Rings*.

In her place-based critique *Shadow Places and the politics of dwelling* Val Plumwood observes and discusses a split between often romantised home places (i.e., Melbourne) and ignored places, such as Morwell, which are marginalised and unrecognised despite providing the economic, ecological and material support to enable the existence of the former. Coal has brought many economic benefits to the region, but exposed through art interventions, idealised notions of place, home and belonging reveal issues of power, ethics of place and environmental justice.

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Taking Coal to Melbourne

During the research period the coal-fired power stations in the Valley provided 84% of all electrical power in Victoria. Bringing coal to Melbourne was a conscious attempt to render visible what is, for most Melbournians, invisible.

This complex web of coal’s entanglements between local and global realities, between different temporalities, materiality and abstraction was articulated through my installation “A Tale of two Cities”, displayed in the VCA Art Space in Melbourne.

Figure 26. Hartmut Veit “A Tale of two Cities” (trailer with brown coal, ipad screens with live webcam to Morwell), 2017, VCA Art Space, Gallery 2.

Embedded in an old trailer full of brown coal excavated from the Hazelwood Mine, are iPad screens with a direct 24hr webcam link to Morwell. The eight chimney stacks of the now shutdown, coal-fired power plant are clearly visible in the distance through a small camera installed in a back lane of Morwell. It connects two different locations, realities and temporalities. The exhibit with it’s screen-based representations, invisibly (but directly) powered by the energy created through the burning of the very material in which
it is physically embedded references Charles Dicken’s familiar novel, to *tell a tale of two cities*, which could not be more different. This exhibit connects regional Latrobe Valley with the Melbournian metropolis it helps to sustain, and acts as an immanent microcosm, visual allegory and metaphor for much larger political and cultural situations. Bringing ‘dirty’ brown coal into a white cube gallery space in Melbourne represents the extraction, migration and transmutation of geological matter from Latrobe Valley to the metropolis – the migration of site and concepts from one space to another – however it also references coal’s mobility as carbon within the carbon cycle, within ecology and a global/planetary context.

This strategy is somewhat aligned with Robert Smithson’s “Site and Non Site,” in which “Site” was a physical place and landscape one could visit and experience, whereas “Non Site” employs the gallery as a container for the abstract work. Smithson’s “Non Site” (exhibits) thus sought to conserve meaning of the original site after removal to the gallery to address the condition of displacement. The intention of my exhibition and thesis aims to extend Smithson’s “Site and Non Site” concept much further.

Allowing Melbournians to interact and experience coal directly in an embodied way and gain first hand experiences with it’s materiality through the exhibition as medium, in “*eine Gedankenausstellung*” enables them to better understand the temporary installations and social engagements that have occurred in the field – in the Latrobe Valley. The strategy of both working with the local community in Morwell and relocating coal to Melbourne was a conscious attempt to render visible what is, for most Melbournians, invisible.

The direct sensorial nature of coal in the exhibit can be experienced through the artwork. This counterbalances abstract knowledge and general consensus attitudes about coal, which are shaped and mediated by technology. In his book, *Spatial Aesthetics: Art, Place and the Everyday* Nikos Papastergiadias claims that the politics of art exists not only in the work, but is influenced by and “has implications that precede and go beyond

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the artists’s individual attention.” Art, he maintains, is informed by the context of its spatial and social environment and other people’s experiences and ideas. Papastergiadis describes a new ‘spatial aesthetics’ in which art concerned with the everyday is increasingly abstracted and extended by new modes of communication, networks and technology mediated by the omnipresence of screen-based images. These, he states, shape “the complex entanglements between local and global ideas of place.”

Figure 27. Hartmut Veit, “A Tale of two Cities” (close-up), 2017, VCA Art Space, Gallery 2

The “A Tale of two Cities” work connects social and material-aesthetic practice with Jussi Parikka’s concerns of post digital aesthetics, which acknowledges that the seemingly immaterial abstractness of the digital world is actually embedded and reliant on physical, and material assemblages in the real world. The iPad devices embedded in coal for example require energy (which in Victoria still comes from burning coal) to successfully transmit images. They “demand a supply of minerals and earth materials to sustain the

159 Ibid.
160 Ibid.
current political and economic structure of computing." Coal’s presence in an artwork is a direct reminder of the material foundation of technology. As Jamie Allen and David Gautier note, “A post-digital materiality, or elementary shows the desire, the need, to bring the digital euphoria that erupted twenty years ago down to size, down to protocol, down to its gritty, grimy details.”

My project aims to re-orientate our human relationship with the earth and does not resist what Parikka described as, “the temptation to see the underground defining the cultural; reminiscent of a Marxist perspective on base and superstructure.” Until society obtains its energy predominantly from renewable sources (such as wind and sun), raw materials such as coal, are still the vital material base required to facilitate and enable culture and the digital computational world. Despite wanting to be an advanced technology-driven economy, Australia still largely depends on the exploitation of coal and other geological matter to provide economic prosperity. Coal therefore remains the material base that underpins the relations of production, as it was first articulated in Marx/Engel's historical materialism. This form of materialism emphasises socio-economic relationships, as a means of production and insists on radical social change.

Viewed from a contemporary, new materialist perspective, the focus of historical, dialectic materialism on the socio-economic interpretation of history appears too anthropocentric and ignores the posthuman call for a renewed ethics and justice based on a reconceptualisation of what is human and human’s place within the interconnected web of life. According to Donna Haraway, post-human thinkers attempt to “embody different identities” [and] “understand the world from multiple, heterogeneous perspectives.” Such post humanist concepts inform post digital realities, symbolised by coal’s material presence in my “A Tale of two Cities” installation. The digital screens rely on the material base and agency of coal to provide the necessary energy to bring them to life.


163 Parikka, "Earth Forces: Contemporary Land Arts, Technology and New Materialist Aesthetics."12

164 Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective."
Descartes mind-body distinction has shaped liberal humanism. This conceptual separation of the mind and the body is increasingly becoming problematic in the 21st century through the blurring of divisions between the human body and new information technologies. In the words of Katherine Hayles, “the posthuman offers resources for rethinking the articulation of humans with intelligent machines” [to emphasise] “the importance of information technologies in shaping contemporary worldviews as it does to human brain function.”

In light of a rapidly increasing world population requiring ever increasing resources I argue that this situation is further complicated by an urgent need to account for the inclusion of non-human ancient geological realities, which form the material basis for both humans and advanced manufacturing required by new technologies.

### Coal and Solastalgia

The toxicity of the smoke, had a disorientating effect.

“why didn't they leave”?

like bees at the hive, you smoke them, they go all docile.

They didn't really know what was happening to them, they were definitely being poisoned.

And nobody was helping them, no body.

Ron Ipsen, courtesy of “Our Power” documentary

Coal’s omnipresent materiality affects human being’s emotional wellbeing and influences people’s sense of place and belonging. These aspects are interrogated through philosopher Glen Albrecht’s concept of “solastagia” which concerns itself with the existential distress experienced through environmental change, whilst living in a home

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165 Katherine Hayles, How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics (University of Chicago Press, 2008).287


environment. This term contrasts with “nostalgia”, which is a melancholic condition experienced by people who are separated from a place they love. Albrecht’s coining of the term derives from his own lived experience of distress in the mining towns of the Upper Hunter Valley in Australia. He describes “solastagia” as:

…the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault (physical desolation). It is manifest in an attack on one’s sense of place, in the erosion of the sense of belonging (identity) to a particular place and a feeling of distress (psychological desolation) about its transformation. It is an intense desire for the place where one is a resident to be maintained in a state that continues to give comfort or solace. Solastagia is not about looking back to some golden past, nor is it about seeking another place as ‘home’. It is the ‘lived experience’ of the loss of the present as manifest in a feeling of dislocation; of being undermined by the forces that destroy the potential for solace to be derived from the present. In short solastagia is a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at home.168

In a diverse multicultural community, each individual will naturally possess a different level of resilience according to their personal history, physical constitution, mental stability, age, and so on). Morwell residents have experienced significant impact through the mine fires and negative affects in relation to the closure of the Hazelwood mine and local saw mill. Close to a thousand workers and many more associated small businesses, suppliers and families have lost their employment, adding additional uncertainty to that faced by this community. Some of the older, highly paid mine workers who have worked fulltime will either retire, relocate or both, leaving those behind who have nowhere else to go.

100-metre thick
layers of coal in the mine
still bear the scares
of the dredger’s teeth.169

Morwell, once part of a thriving energy producing region failed to recover from the privatisation of the State Electricity Commission (SEC) in the 1990s. The subsequent casualisation of the workforce created compliant workers afraid to assert themselves out of fear of losing scarce income. Empty commercial premises line the streets of Morwell attesting to wide spread economic decline.


Another local voice:

…Or is it going to be a ghost town? Like Morwell. When I look at Morwell I am astonished, Morwell used to be such a vibrant, really great place to go to. When I walked around the streets of Morwell recently, and all the remaining shops that were there are two dollar shops, op shops, and a series of Centrelink, Anglicare, lawyers, legal services and lots of drug and alcohol problems…  

Some have been trying to sell their homes, for years now, to recover the money they paid for the property – without much success. Fed by such feelings of disempowerment, any changes to the environment are generally being perceived in a negative way.

Solastalgia describes the distress of those who remain – those who are not able, or for various reasons won’t relocate from their home environment under siege by environmental changes. Their place-based suffering is accompanied by a sense of powerlessness and incapacity to escape or change the environmental injustice to which they are subjected. The normal attachment and bond that people feel between their home

170 Interview #12, Partial transcript in Appendices
and their sense of being is broken down and replaced by feelings of alienation, isolation and disconnection. An elderly resident who lives near Morwell describes her experiences of losing her home due to mine expansion:

…Beautiful old home. I was my home. I was our home. It was taken for Loy Yang"…" it was demolished. That was my last family home that I knew. It was sad for all of us. So I’ve had dreams all my life. About the old house. I dreamed I was up in my night cotton, looking through the window”…" I’ve never replaced that old home, I think I want our old family home – but’s gone. It’s been demolished and its terribly sad. And I think, I’m…, it really makes me want to weep, to think about it”…”But I keep dreaming all my life , I keep dreaming about this. And this old house. I’m searching and its disguised, it’s not recognisable as the house, but I’ve realised that it is the house and under the walls that have disappeared, the steps that go to nowhere, and so I still have those dreams about the old house. It’s sad. And all the homes I lived in since haven’t given me that.¹⁷¹

In Morwell, “dis-ease” (as in, feeling ill at ease) experienced by those I talked to was generally associated with loss of income, general economic decline of the area, friends moving away, aging, and declining health in addition to an expansion of mines as was the case of Albrecht’s own lived experience of distress in the Upper Hunter Valley. The same elderly resident describes the situation of her daughter:

Because of young people moving away. And the other thing is that if they wanted to move away, they couldn’t because they couldn’t sell the house now, could they. So it leaves people in a situation they can’t get out of. it’s a big worry for them, and those with young children. So people feel quite trapped and powerless to change their situation. Yes, that’s the worst.¹⁷²

Solastagia may also be an apt description of how climate change affects people. Does one really need to live in the vicinity of an open cut coalmine to feel the impact of radical environmental change brought about by human induced climate change events? If we expand the concept of solastagia and bring it together with another concept – that of the Anthropocene, where humans’ irresponsible behaviour has caused permanent changes to the earth’s pedosphere through radically increasing greenhouse gas levels, ocean acidification, deforestation and biodiversity deterioration - then many of us concerned about the environment perhaps suffer from a permanent sense of alienation, loss.

¹⁷¹ Interview #12, Partial transcript in Appendices

¹⁷² ibid.
disconnection and disempowerment as symptoms of our inability to live in harmony with the earth and the material world.

Addressing the complex web of changes affecting Latrobe Valley communities in transition, Naomi Klein labels towns like Morwell as “sacrifice zones” or “middle of nowheres.”

Klein describes them:

For a very long time sacrifice zones all shared a few elements in common. They were poor places. Out of the way places. Places where residents lacked political power, usually having to do with some combination of race, language and class. And the people who lived in these condemned places knew they had been written of.  

In a world where the movement of capital is global, Klein advocates that changes in our economic system are vital to combat climate change. The majority shareholders of Engie, the company, which owns Hazelwood Mine are located in Paris and Japan. Economic disinvestment decisions made in overseas boardrooms, such as the closure of Hazelwood directly impact on local situations. Morwell, like many other, once thriving, but now forgotten mining towns around the world, needs to develop new strategies that go beyond extraction of coal to ensure its survival. Klein maintains, that “protecting and valuing the earth’s ingenious systems of reproducing life and the fertility of all of its inhabitants, may lie at the center of the shift in worldview that must take place if we are to move beyond extractivism. A worldview based on regeneration and renewal rather than domination and depletion.”

The social life of coal

Coal always comes with a social stigma. Throughout history communities of miners and their families have been ostracised by the wider society. John Ulric Nef notes that:

Coal created a new gulf between classes. The medieval peasants and artisans, whatever their disabilities and trials may have been, were not segregated from their neighbours to anything like the same extent as were the coal miners of the

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174 Ibid.

175 Ibid. 424 (emphasis added).
seventeenth century in most colliery districts".\textsuperscript{176}

Latrobe Valley mining communities are not isolated like these 17\textsuperscript{th} century English miners, who, according to Barbara Freese, "even developed 'somewhat different habits and speech.'"\textsuperscript{177} However through the necessity of shared corporation and working together mining communities have developed the same "fierce sense of solidarity,"\textsuperscript{178} that led to miners being some of the strongest supporters in the development of labour movements in England and America. It should therefore come as no surprise that many in Latrobe Valley communities identify with, and are fiercely protective of the power industry that provides their livelihood. Some oppose and resent, what they regard as the misrepresentation of power stations in the media and political propaganda by Melbourne-based activist groups. I had an informal conversation with a group of off-duty miners in the spa of the local gym, in which they collectively objected to the use of, what they claim are highly photo-manipulated images (such as the one below) which exaggerate emissions from Hazelwood’s chimneys.

Figure 29. image from Climacts website. November 3, 2016. \url{https://climacts.org.au/blog/}

Local confidence in the media is also undermined when journalists, (probably through a lack of local knowledge) falsely attribute a photograph of the Yallourn power station as being an image of the Hazelwood power station.\textsuperscript{179}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{176} John Ulric Nef, \textit{The Rise of the British Coal Industry} (Routledge, 2013).2:166
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{177} Freese, \textit{Coal: A Human History}.45
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{178} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}

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A resident of Morwell describes her experience:

…when I was a kid, I didn’t realise that there was more than one power station, the three that, look the same, I just thought were the same, um, they were cloud machines, - kinda darkly ironic, [laughs loudly], that’s just something I don’t even think I told her about, that was just me thinking about things, cause they were always pumping it out and then they blend into the clouds, and you know, cloud machines…

During my time as an artist/researcher embedded in the Latrobe Valley it struck me how many locals were reluctant to share their stories “on the record” and speak publically about coal for fear of repercussions. Employed people, Council and mine workers in particular were fearful of losing their work. However, in order to change our worldview and relationship with coal, it is important to examine how we conceptualise coal. Within capitalist systems of exchange, commodities such as coal are political agents and according to the social-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, “commodities, like persons, have social lives.” 181 What exactly is this social life of coal? Appadurai provisionally defines commodities as objects, which have economic value. For him, political relations become apparent in moments of exchange, where one is able to observe coal’s “socially relevant features,” 182 (i.e., it’s importance for human social relations through electricity generation, steel production). These features determine the value of coal as a commodity within systems of exchange. However, through focusing solely on exchange as the determinant of coal’s value, he overlooks other aspects of coal, which are present even when coal is not traded as a commodity.

It is here that New Materialism, as a new cultural theory offers new ways of “seeing the social and the material as co-constitutive forces.” 183 Art practice with coal puts New Materialism to work and test’s its theoretical assertions through working directly with the non abstracted, agential qualities of matter within a complex, interconnected web-of-life

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180 Interview #11, Partial transcript in Appendices, 6:57


182 Ibid.13

forms and structures. In privileging human beings’ social relationships, subject-identity and human political organisations as the most important political agents, however, socially-engaged art projects similarly risk reinforcing existing anthropocentric tendencies.

The omnipresence of coal

One of the common themes that emerged from my public engagements was the omnipresence of fine coal dust in the streets and homes of Morwell.
The above image is not an image of a mine fire. Entrusted to me for use in this thesis by someone who lives near the Hazelwood mine it illustrates what happens each time a gale force wind blows from the Bass Strait through the Latrobe Valley. Fine brown coal dust becomes airborne and blankets nearby properties and towns such as Morwell.

Other residents have reported precipitation of char after rain, which is also a frequent occurrence in Gippsland. Char is the fine material that remains after the burning of coal in the nearby coal-fired power stations. Invited to inspect a home near the Yallourn power station following rain I observed fine deposits of char in cat food bowls, on childrens’ toys and on literally every flat surface around the house.

A Morwell resident recalls her first conscious experience of coal:

…well like it has always been around, like it’s always been dusty, but I never attributed that to coal, as such. Um until…, coming home and mum’s saying – look – well where I grew up was, up on Connan Street [Morwell], which is at the bottom of the big hill, and walking home from school, you could – you can’t see it now because it’s all overgrown – but you could actually see the open-cut, when they extended it, … excavated it,… so you could see the wind, kinda get
trapped in there and pick it up, and spread it over the town, so that, like mum would run out – and like – “there’s towels on the line” – there’s a – you know – there’s washing on the line, and it’s a big priority – I must – I just washed it!” totally, [Laughing], and then, when there were these kinda dust storms, well you could see it all over the back porch,… but that’s kinda always been the case, and the discussion around it is now very different, because we’ve had the mine fire.\footnote{184 Interview #11, Partial transcript in Appendices,}

The boundaries between human bodies and matter, between individuals and the environment are a lot more fluent and less rigid than we imagine. Coal does not remain outside of our bodies. In her book, When Species Meet the feminist philosopher Donna Haraway observes, “human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such,”\footnote{185 Donna Jeanne Haraway, \textit{When Species Meet}, vol. 224 (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2008).3 Protists are single-celled organisms with a nucleus.} Humans continuously ingest and absorb micro organisms, matter and substances from the environment into our bodies and cells. Jane Bennett elaborates:

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Figure 32. Hartmut Veit, “Char in catfood bowls” 2016 Photograph: Hartmut Veit}
\end{figure}
My ‘own’ body is material, and yet this vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human. My flesh is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners… the bacteria in the human microbiome collectively possess at least 100 times as many genes as the mere 20,000 or so in the human genome… we are, rather, an array of bodies, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes.\textsuperscript{186}

Microbiomes is a term used to define all the microbes in a community. Researches by microbial ecologists (such as James Meadow et al) have found that our own specific “cloud of dust” surrounds each human being.\textsuperscript{187} Through analysis of DNA from bacteria in the air this research clearly detected and established that humans all have individually different dust plumes, made up from a cocktail of thousands of different types of bacteria, microscopic organisms and microbes, specific to each person. Akin to a fingerprint this individual dust signature is so unique that in future it may enable forensic scientists to identify a perpetrator by analyzing the microbial dust cloud left behind at a crime scene.

As part of my research I invited residents to donate vacuum cleaner bags full of household dust for future artworks. During the dust collection process some residents expressed concerns about what the dust might say about their household and how well they clean, while others, suspicious that dust may divulge deeply personal things were concerned that their dust might be used as forensic evidence.

Distrustful of governmental departments some residents have taken to monitoring and documenting the continued presence of coal dust and char in their homes through using transparent ‘sticky tape’, placed over horizontal surfaces such as tables, BBQs and windowsills at different times of the day, over consecutive days. These samples are stuck onto A4, then archived in binders.

It is evident that coal dust is omnipresent in the Latrobe Valley. Along with the millions of microbes inhaled with each and every breath (and which do not seem to be detrimental to human health) residents in Morwell actually breathe in air that is characterised by its own unique cocktail of microorganisms mixed with fine brown coal dust.

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\textsuperscript{186} Bennett, \textit{Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things}.112-13

Additional research suggests that humans not only have individual dust signatures but that different geographic locations also have unique and distinctly different microbiome communities. Morwell, as a town thus has a unique dust signature, which contains coal: residents are thus breathing in dust particles from fossils originating from Carboniferrous plants millions of years ago.

“Black Carpet” Performance

During the 2015 Latrobe Valley Spring Festival in Traralgon, I staged a public art performance and intervention with coal dust titled “Black Carpet”. I chose the forecourt outside the old Traralgon Court House because of its classical symmetry and its previous function as a place where justice was deliberated.

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188 John Chase et al., “Geography and Location Are the Primary Drivers of Office Microbiome Composition,” *mSystems* 1, no. 2 (2016).
Figure 34. Hartmut Veit, Untitled (Coal attic installation), ladder with coaldust, coal/resin sculptures, vacuum cleaner bag, photograph), 2017.
Referencing the red carpet traditionally rolled out for distinguished visitors, I wanted to highlight the omnipresence of coal, raise environmental justice issues and show how coal’s contribution to climate change was being swept under the carpet. Similar to Mick Douglas’s “Sal De Sal”\textsuperscript{189} work, performed with pink salt from the Murray Darling region at the 2015 PSI#21 Performing Mobilities Conference (at which I was also a presenter), the public was invited to participate and walk on a carpet of coal dust, which I had sieved directly onto the pavement. After collectively walking together over coal, in a humourous nod to the practice of fire-walking participants were invited to sweep up coal, leaving the pavement cleaner than before. General passersby and members from “Voices of the Valley”, a local activist group (formed in response to the Hazelwood mine fire) participated, making the performance a success. A spirit of team building, togetherness and solidarity eventuated effortlessly and organically.

\textsuperscript{189} sal de sal (circulation #0007), Mick Douglas, 2015, \url{http://www.mickdouglas.net/project-page/sal-de-sal-2015/}
As is often the case with community festivals, a range of other events were scheduled concurrently throughout town, and in this case another local artist (XY) had organised an art exhibition of her students’ work inside the Courthouse. Objecting to my use of coal outside the building, XY made appeals to local Council and festival organisers to stop my performance. Having obtained all required Latrobe Valley City Council approvals, permits and insurances, and supported by the organisers, my event went ahead successfully, without causing any interruptions to the exhibition inside. However still displeased XY and her friends posted social media comments, one of which read as follows:

There was a fire in the mine at Morwell that that burnt for a month with coal dust filling the air that affected many, many, many people’s health…now this idiot…calling himself an artist lays coal dust outside an art show that people walk through to get to the show…what was in the Spring Festivals mind to allow him to do this ‘so-called ‘art installation? An absolute disgrace…some one needs to examine very closely what goes on in Traralgon. Why did the Spring Festival Committee allow this to happen?...beats me.(GM)\textsuperscript{190}

GM did not witness my event and her social media posts were erroneous on many levels. I deliberately left a three metre “coal-free buffer zone” in front of the building, enabling visitors unencumbered access to the inside event (without contact with coal). The tensions were caused by the political nature of the performance and the material agency of coal. The divisive and contentious agency of coal highlights the polarized nature and divisions extant within Latrobe Valley communities. “Why are you rubbing coal in our faces, there is no coal in Traralgon,” was another erroneous comment. It ignores the fact that the Loy Yang open cut mine and coal-fired power stations, located just 6km south on the outskirts of Traralgon can literally be seen from the tower of the Courthouse building. Frequent, fierce gale force winds blow directly from Bass Strait and can transport fine material over hundreds of kilometres. Coal, through it’s material presence and agency in an ephemeral work created dissensus and upset people’s identification with place and “Heimat”. Coal (and the artist using it) were perceived as political, confrontational and a threat to individual physical, psychic, emotional and social wellbeing.

\textsuperscript{190} Social media post, Facebook, November 2015.
Figure 36. Hartmut Veit, “Black Carpet” performance, 2015. Image: Hartmut Veit
Figure 37. Hartmut Veit, “Black Carpet” performance, 2015. Image: Elizabeth Allen
As asked about the perception of coal’s use in my eco-performance one observer stated:

…Oh, I think it’s a fantastic thing. It’s extremely controversial. The experience of that young family that we saw, who had never seen coal. When you handed it to them and they touched it, they felt it. They went Wow! This is amazing! This is
coal. And then the reaction of an art group to an installation [Black carpet], to an installation of coal dust was – NOT IN MY BACKYARD! Or how dare you bring that dirt into our community! When the dirt is already there! But when you put it into people’s faces, they are extremely confronted by it. They are offended by it. They are enamoured by it. It is really polarising. I think it’s fantastic. I think it’s great. And putting that material into the front, in front of people’s faces where they have to be, where they are [inaudible], and they have to think about it, umm and think about their own personal relationship and what to do with it… It’s confronting, it’s highly politicised, your artwork, I guess. Which is a good thing. I think it’s a good thing. Umm and I,… because it is a polarisation, it does show how conflicted the community is as well.191

Figure 39. Hartmut Veit, “Black Carpet” performance, 2015. Images: Elizabeth Allen

Drawing on Jacques Rancière’s discussion of dissensus, aesthetics and politics,192 this incident demonstrated the socio-political agency of coal’s materiality and highlighted the interconnectedness of ethical, aesthetic and political issues. Coal polarises debate. Coal not only represents dissensus but creates it. As the reactions to my temporary intervention with coal in a public space show, coal’s innate political agency can directly

191 Interview #12, Partial transcript in Appendices, 43:51
192 Rancière, "The Thinking of Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics."
challenge issues associated with its effects in the world from being swept ‘under the carpet’. I regard the dissensus created by coal’s socio-political agency as a positive effect - it opens up the potential for real discussions in the community, rather than supporting people to remain non-engaged.

Instead of trying to resolve these apparent contradictions, which are also mirrored in extant debates about social practice between Claire Bishop and Grant Kester these binary positions provoke discussions about future action and directions. New aesthetic representations of coal thus enact and activate differences of opinion to map binary oppositions and paradoxical complexity, which have been experienced in the field, as the very foundation of the political within collaborative social practice.

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Figure 41. Hartmut Veit, “Black Carpet” performance, 2015, photo: Elizabeth Allen
Coal and Othering

I am implicated in the research, through my personal history and subjectivity as the son of a miner, which, despite best efforts to the contrary can subconsciously influence directions and outcomes. This is a common dilemma for socially-engaged artists.\textsuperscript{194} However well-intentioned, the temptation exists for artists (and activists alike) to subconsciously regard themselves as the ‘canary in the coal mine’, as someone with superior insights and needs to enlighten others. As Hal Foster identified in his seminal essay, \textit{The artist as ethnographer}\textsuperscript{195}, artists, employing ethnographic methods in the field can reinforce the status quo and regard communities they work with as different, marginal, or as “others.”

Attempting to guard myself against such projections of alterity and seeing the communities I work within as different, I have come to comprehend myself as being part of a diverse, non homogenous community that is fluid, forever changing and diverse. I am aware that my involvement in the local community, making art with and about brown coal, and being featured in local media has affected the situation and conditions under observation.\textsuperscript{196} Working socially-engaged in public places already changes how people react to my work and its preoccupations, with each iteration of practice.

In Quantum Physics, Heisenberg’s “Uncertainty Principle” describes the ‘observer effect’ and how direct observation affects the situation being studied. It found that energy was not continuous and that light either behaved as a wave or a stream of particles depending upon what the observer is looking for. If Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle” is applied to culture and the perception of social situations encountered by the artist in the field then we have to acknowledge that the artist’s presence can transform the object of study and that another observer may experience and interpret the same situation quite differently.\textsuperscript{197,198} Drawing on her doctoral background in physics Karen Barad’s concept of

\textsuperscript{194} Clifford and Marcus, \textit{Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography: A School of American Research Advanced Seminar}.

\textsuperscript{196} Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer."

\textsuperscript{196} See media reports in Appendices.


\textsuperscript{198} Clifford and Marcus, \textit{Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography: A School of American}
“agential realism” postulates that phenomena in the universe are based on agency and the performative nature of their intra-actions.\textsuperscript{199} Rather than impartially observing situations from a safe distance, knowing comes from “a direct material engagement with the world”.\textsuperscript{200} This direct engagement and intra-action with other (social and material) agents poses real challenges for non-local activists, ethnographers and artists, when embedded in the fabric of a local community: how can the researcher avoid projecting or reinforcing social stereotypes, marginalisation and subconsciously othering others?

In Melbourne, the intersection of art, environment and politics has seen new curatorial projects by organisations such as Climarte, a Melbourne-based activist association. In 2016, they commissioned eleven Australian artists to originate poster concepts that engage the community on climate change\textsuperscript{201} One of these posters titled “This is Hazel Wood” (HW) was created by Melbourne artists Gabrielle de Vietri & Will Foster. It depicts a photograph of an old, heavily wrinkled woman holding a cigarette in her left hand. She appears uncertain, vulnerable, but defiant as she peeks out from underneath seven rows of type, set in Helvetica Bold capital letters, which read: “THIS IS HAZEL WOOD. SHE HAS BEEN SMOKING FOR FORTY YEARS. IN 2014 SHE SET HERSELF ON FIRE FOR 45 DAYS. SHE’S KILLING EVERYONE AROUND HER. WHY IS SHE STILL SMOKING?” Laid over her head like a giant thought bubble partially obscuring her, she furtively glances to the left - in the opposite direction of our habitual Western reading pattern, thereby visually suggesting a person with a backward orientated view.\textsuperscript{202, 203}

Employing the short-hand visual language and rhetorical effect typical of the poster medium, the HW poster was designed to make the debate around climate change less abstract through personalising and representing the Hazelwood coal-fired power station.

\textit{Research Advanced Seminar.}

\textsuperscript{199} Barad, \textit{Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning.}

\textsuperscript{200} Ibid.49

\textsuperscript{201} Climarte, https://climarte.org/artclimatechange-2017-announcement/


Figure 42. “This is Hazel wood”, Poster by Gabrielle de Vietri/Will Foster, Climarte, Melbourne, 2016.
as an old woman, who smokes. However, local health-workers, miners, local artists and residents who were interviewed regarding this poster were offended. The following comments from a senior nursing team leader and community health practitioner articulate their concerns:

But what’s inappropriate with this poster is the fact that they have called this woman Hazel Wood; now people smoking choose to do it, and become addicted; it’s not done to them. And that’s important to remember. This speaks to me of victim blaming, that – to personalise it in a human way and anthropomorphising a mine, and an industry – it says to me that the people of the Valley are complicit in it – that they are – choosing to do – to do damage- to cause damage – or are too stupid- but that’s a whole other layer…

She [de Vietri] showed it to people in town basically, she didn’t show it to the people, who lived locally - who would have been extraordinarily offended. I’m offended! I was offended because I’m an educated healthcare professional person, um… I am politically engaged and aware – and the way I am portrayed – as a run down, blamed victim. Basically it says to me: she deserves what she gets. And this type of artwork – or these types of statements don’t protect the people who live here. It doesn’t support them, as part of the bigger community. These people have supported our lifestyle and they have been the quiet faceless people behind the energy that has allowed Melbourne to go ahead and become what it is. Or Victoria, in fact, to become what it is. And do we just leave them stranded now? Do they just get left behind? What support are they going to get? How is it going to be cleaned up? Who’s going to pay for that? What can be injected into this community in terms of employment? Opportunities? Or is it going to be a ghost town?

It [the poster] divorces the people who live in the cities and who use the power – it abrogates their responsibility for this whole demand for massive amounts of power as well. We are all complicit in this. Um, but we get of scot-free because Hazelwood is the problem. She’s the problem. And she’s doing it to herself, and she’s doing it to us all…

These local voices speak out against the mine’s personification, which they claim metaphorically blames and shames a hard-working community, who has provided fellow

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205 Interview #12, Partial transcript in Appendices, 21:29

206 Interview #12, Partial transcript in Appendices, 28:56

207 Interview #12, Partial transcript in Appendices, 26:03
Victorian citizens with electrical power for more than half a century. To them, the message the HW poster semantically sends, is one of stereotyping and "othering" Latrobe Valley communities in general, and Morwell in particular, as an old careless, uneducated woman, who is unconscious about her actions, not only damaging herself but everyone else in the process. Connecting the negatively perceived stereotypical image with the traumatic mine fire through the wording “SHE SET HERSELF ON FIRE FOR 45 DAYS”, to them also displays a lack of recognition, cultural sensitivity and compassion for the suffering and plight of their regional community, affected in on-going ways by the 2014 Hazelwood mine. A recent Government funded, Committee for Gippsland study recommends the portrayal of positive images and messages of the Latrobe Valley to assist local residents in their recovery after traumatic events and transition to a cleaner energy future.  

Direct discussion with Gabrielle de Vietri confirmed that her intention was to critique the mine’s contribution to climate change and not the community. She indicated that she never visited Morwell, the Hazelwood mine; nor does she have any connection with Latrobe Valley communities, or sought their feedback. The photograph selected to represent the Latrobe Valley was not an actual local person but a generic stock library image obtained online from Corbis, a Bill Gate’s owned American photographic library.

Talking about Hazelwood’s polluting aspects on her website de Vietri says "surprisingly, not many people know about its existence." This is a curious statement given that Hazelwood has been in the media, subject to civil actions, public demonstrations and worldwide attention at least since 2005, when activists chained themselves to large coal excavation machinery. A quick google search yields 82,700,000+ results. Since the Hazelwood Mine fire disaster in 2014 Hazelwood has also been catapulted into extensive, very public national debates with almost daily and weekly national media coverage. Posters are a perfect medium for short, attention grabbing messages and simple concepts – they therefore are easily subverted by artists and organisations for their own political aims rather than having to engage in a continuous working relationship with a


209 Recorded Conversation with de Vietri at the Climarte Poster Project Forum, Carlton, May 17, 2016  

community to bring about lasting change. The artist, anarchist and activist Josh MacPhee sums it up nicely: "I am tired of artists fetishizing activist culture and showing it to the world as though it were their invention." 211

Hal Foster’s original critique of artists as ethnographers, who are “flown into town in order to engage the community targeted for collaboration by the institution”212 conceptually extends and is applicable to such art practices claiming to operate at the intersection of art and politics. Informed by the discourse of institutional critique, Foster’s astute observations from 1996 (over 20 years ago) are still pertinent today; take for example his following remark (and substitute "ethnographic" with "activist") “these pseudoethnographic critiques are very often commissioned, indeed franchised.”213 In this case by Climarte, which only displayed the Hazelwood posters in Melbourne to city-based audiences – basically preaching climate change to already converted city audiences.

This poster is an example how instrumentalised artist-activist initiatives often fail to reach across ‘the divide’ to speak to those at the other end of the political spectrum. If artist-activists are not connected with the community that they purport to ‘talk about’, art loses its potential ability to galvanise the very collective actions and stated aims such endeavours wish to achieve. Indeed, through othering regional communities associated with coal this HW poster by de Vietri/Foster creates a dynamic in which cultural endeavours, despite their best intentions, do little to create genuine dialogue, with the result of preaching to the already converted. This, coupled with, and reinforced by the ‘echo chamber’ effect of social media (twitter, instagram etc mainly used to promote such events) results in people merely receiving and consuming information, which supports their already existing biases and opinions.214 Brett Hogan, the director of “Energy and Innovation Policy” at the Institute of Public Affairs labeled the HW poster “a blatantly political campaign”, that squanders public taxes to ignore the contribution of Latrobe

211 Davis, “A Critique of Social Practice Art: What Does It Mean to Be a Political Artist?”.

212 Foster, " The Artist as Ethnographer." 306

213 Ibid.306

214 Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N Cappella, Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment (Oxford University Press, 2008).
Valley communities. However politically motivated this comment may be, such reactions are nevertheless testimony to how cultural campaigns that aim to increase awareness can have a detrimental effect, actually increasing binary oppositions, further polarising the current climate change debate rather than creating genuine dialogue around coal.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have set out to demonstrate how my research utilises the innate political qualities of coal to create temporary installations, interventions, and provocations with coal in public spaces. I’ve shown how this solicited a myriad of different public and private responses. The omnipresence of coal was demonstrated, showing how coal activated fragile and fluid local histories allowing multiple views, contradictions and dissensus to emerge. Stories of belonging and “Heimat” were disrupted through solastagia, highlighting the existential distress experienced through environmental change. Some of the broader challenges and complexities facing activist/artists working at the intersection of art, environment and politics have been drawn out through the example of de Vietri/Foster to demonstrate how easily alterity is created and social relations can become instrumentalised, demonstrating how social engaged practice situated within a community and force field of competing local, state and national interests can be compromised by the capitalist situations, in which it is embedded.

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215 “Coal poster satirising Hazelwood power station fires up IPA boss” Herald Sun, May 8, 2016
[www.heraldsun.com.au/news/...poster...ipa.../3601ab6726af0f0c421f55]
Chapter 4: Coal’s aesthetic/empathic affects

... I get it all wrong,
I read you for some kind of poem.
Covered in lines, the fossils I find,
have they no life of their own?
So can we pretend, sweetly,
before the mystery ends?
I am a man with a heart that offends
with its lonely and greedy demands.
There’s only a shadow of me
in a manner of speaking I’m dead...

Sufjan Stevens, “John My Beloved”

This chapter explores coal’s ability to shape aesthetic experience and affect human empathy through analysing three different coal artworks presented in the VCA Art Space. The first work, “Ehrfurcht - the exhibit”, a monolithic coal sculpture, explores dissonances between human and geological time. The second work “Ehrfurcht - the performance” creates a meditative performance activating the first work to enquire into coal’s performative aspects. The third works examined are coal’s ephemeral traces left behind in Gallery 1 (and “COALounges” in Morwell). A discussion of these abstract marks created through sweeping and footprints explores coal’s aesthetical agency and issues surrounding authorship. How coal’s materiality challenges anthropocentric definitions of temporality, performance and authorship is discussed throughout the chapter.

“Ehrfurcht - the exhibit”

My “COAL” graduate exhibition in the VCA Art Space prominently featured “Ehrfurcht” a 1ton brown coal boulder exhibited on an industrial pallet jack in the centre of the floor lined with white paper, transforming the entire first gallery into a performance space. Coal dust lying on the floor documented every movement and action.

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVZUBMUekck
Visitors were encouraged to interact with the exhibit, touch it, sit down, meditate, pick up a broom and engage in performative sweeping. These actions produced ephemeral, evocative and abstract traces in coal dust, which were documented photographically.
The pallet jack is a man-made tool, which enables heavy objects to be moved and lifted by a single person. Allowing it to remain in situ as part of the sculpture communicates the
dominance and influence of industrial technology over our way of “being-in-the-world” – a nod to Heidegger’s interpretation of “techné” in his famous lecture, *The Question concerning Technology*. Derived from ancient Greek, “techné” loosely translates as “art” or “craftsmanship” and has given rise to the modern concept of technology. Heidegger critiques the ‘means to an end’ understanding of technology to emphasise it’s essence, as one which poetically reveals human’s domination against nature.

Figure 45. Hartmut Veit, “Excavating coal from Hazelwood Mine” 2016.

The coal boulder was excavated with the help of miners directly from the Hazelwood Mine, then transported to Melbourne via a trailer hitched to my ute. Bringing dirty, dark coal into the clean, pristine, white cube space of an art institution is both a political act and an aesthetic decision. It not only highlights the excavation and displacement of geological material but foregrounds coal’s material aesthetics and temporal aspects rather than the form of the sculpture.

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Figure 46. Hartmut Veit, “Transporting coal from Hazelwood Mine” 2016. Photo: Hartmut Veit
Coal disrupts linear perceptions of time

The brown coal monolithic in the "Ehrfurcht" installation is approximately 30 million years old and thus brings together two totally different temporalities and realities in ‘real time’ – human time and geological time. Can the aesthetic appreciation of geological matter and time generate respect and deeper understanding of human being’s environmental and ethical obligations towards the material world?

Coal’s matter, as a persistent archive of past geological events is recorded through the stratified sedimentation of layered organic matter, compressed over millennia. The geological concept of strata was de-territorialised and extended by Deleuze/Guattari\(^\text{218}\) to enable coal, as the non-human to speak on its own terms. Through its dominant role in the “Ehrfurcht” exhibit coal’s ancient past is brought into the present thereby demonstrating art’s capacity to disrupt linear conceptions of time.

In her lecture, “Towards a Mineral Ontology of Contemporary Art,” Amelia Barikin\(^\text{219}\) speaks about “…art’s capacity to break out of temporal borders…. to be anachronic – to cross timezones.” [She describes] “Art as an uneasy collaboration between human and non-human forces.”\(^\text{220}\) She talks about how we subconsciously understand time to be linear, with one event chronologically flowing seamlessly into the next. The human journey from birth to death, is understood as a linear progression with each moment different; in the words of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, “No man ever steps into the same river twice.”\(^\text{221}\)

However while time can be broken down in identical mathematical units and measured by mechanical devices such as the clock, In Time and Free Will\(^\text{222}\) Henri Bergson maintains

\(^{218}\) Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, 39-74


\(^{220}\) Ibid.


that the relationship of time, space and causality are mobile, fluid and a non-linear processes and that their understanding is distorted through scientific, mechanic measurements by science. For Bergson, man’s inner life’s is akin to a non-linear duration – no two moments are ever experienced as being the same. Each person’s cognition of coal’s undeniable geological presence in the “Ehrfurcht” exhibit, of it’s ancient temporality experienced in the now, will be different, each and every time they engage with the work. Barikin maintains:

Art can help us to escape from linear conceptions of time and to resist conceptions of time as a relentless flow orientated only towards the future. Art is valued for its potential to create eddies in the river of time, to generate pockets of stillness, or sound or silence, in which it is possible to return to lost moments and recuperate lost structures, to redraw fading memories and make alternative chronologies.223

The “Ehrfurcht” brown coal monolith is a living and breathing, continuously changing entity. Some parts are cold to touch, evaporating moisture, growing fungus and lichens, other areas are cracked, drying out and crumbling to dust. For the late-nineteenth-century Russian scientist Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky,224 credited as the founder of the biosphere concept, organism such as coal were, “special, distributed forms of the common mineral, water … Emphasising the continuity of watery life and rocks, such as that evident in coal or fossil limestone reefs, Vernadsky noted how these apparently inert strata are 'traces of bygone biospheres'.”225

Ever present change is thus the fundamental characteristics of the universe, and comprehended through the intuition of human imagination. Bergson, through his concept of continuous and discrete multiplicity opposed dualistic and deterministic beliefs that effects are the direct sequential result of prior causes.

The co-existence and multiplicity of human and geological temporalities accessed in the now can be experienced through the “Ehrfurcht” exhibit as an embodied, continuous unfolding of various rhythms of life.

223 Barikin, Sound Fossils and Arche-Fossils: Towards a Mineral Ontology of Contemporary Art.


225 Bennett, Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things.
Coal as an arche-fossil

Coal is what Quentin Meillassoux describes as an arche-fossil, where “materials indicate the existence of an ancestral reality or event; one that is anterior to terrestrial life.” Coal,

226 Quentin Meillassoux, After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency (Bloomsbury
as an ancient fossil existed prior to the formation of human life and Meillassoux explores the consequences of a historical world without human beings – a world and time prior to human thought. Meillassoux addresses our human tendency to project ideas and thoughts onto forms and matter through his concepts of absolute “contingency” and the “correlational circle”. “Contingency is thought as an absolute, as a property of the in-itself rather than of observable reality” [whereas correlation is defined as] “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.”

Applying Meillassoux’s concept of and existence of the arche-fossil to coal, radicalises contingency to push beyond his correlational circle into the realm of metaphysics and what we can’t see. Basically, everything in the universe is so uncertain and contingent on correlating and verifying facts, that one cannot think of something outside of human thought. Meillassoux searches for a new kind of absolute knowledge that lies beyond what can be correlated through facts. However we are incapable of truly comprehending and thinking coal, as we can only know things about matter as far as it relates to our faculties or processing of knowledge. This problematizes the self-evidence of existing knowledge we possess regarding coal and unsettles the process of our continuous becoming and our being in the material world. The geological temporality of coal predates the advent of human existence, thought and possibly will outlast the human species. Coal, as the fossilized carbon of ancient Carboniferous forests is understood not only as an object-as-record and trace of past life but it’s agency points to “chttonic” forces we have yet to fully comprehend. Meaning “beneath the earth”, the word “chttonic” both refers to our still incomplete knowledge about ‘matter’ and how unconscious impulses and desires of human beings’ material depths can lead to destructive relationships in the other, material world. A subterranean world, which both causes and influences but also is disturbed by mineral extraction; one which exerts its influence on a planetary scale. Ancestral realities, which existed long before the evolution of human consciousness, challenge the authoritative power of human subjectivity and anthropocentric definitions of temporality.

Publishing, 2010).10


“Ehrfurcht - the performance”

“Ehrfurcht – the performance” was a one-off public, 20 minute long performance by seven performers (1 male, 6 females) dressed in white protective overalls and dust masks.

Silently emerging from behind the black curtains of Gallery 3, holding lit sandalwood incense, they advanced single-file in a slow meditative procession lead by the male through the main gallery space to silently enter Gallery 1. Circumnavigating and gently touching the soft, still moist coal monolith (“Ehrfurcht – the exhibit”) in a clock-wise direction a number of times, they attached their burning incense sticks to the base of the boulder. After sitting down cross-legged in silent meditation on round meditation cushions facing the coal monolith for fifteen minutes, they collectively created an evocative soundscape using Tibetan singing bowls and projected their voices in a choir-like reverential chant. After chanting for approximately five minutes they rose and circumambulated the coal boulder once more – their movements fleetingly inscribed in a fine layer of coal dust lying on the floor. They slowly and silently left this room in single-file procession, crossed the main gallery and disappeared into Gallery 3 through black curtains, thereby concluding the performance.
Familiar with the ritualistic and esoteric nature of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition through my personal meditation practice the “Ehrfurcht” performance references symbolic objects.
(Tibetan singing bowls), actions (circumambulation, touching the earth) and meditation, and chanting practices originally designed to attain spiritual enlightenment. Employed in the performance they focus the mind, empower devotion and respect to re-orientate human relationships with coal. Juxtaposed against the dirty, negative and anti-aesthetic image of coal, the white clothing contrastingly symbolizes protection and purity but also mourning for the damage done to the earth. My act of leading the procession as a man, perhaps paradoxically, signifies that men must be the first ones to relinquish domination over the earth and embrace the importance of nurturing and care for the earth – values traditionally associated with women and represented through the exclusive use of females as fellow performers. The “gesture of touching the earth” has special meaning. Buddha famously summoned the earth as his witness, touching the ground before attaining enlightenment. Positioning coal centre stage and making it the object of meditation and devotion in an artwork requires the performers and the audience to focus their awareness on the relationship between mind, body and the material world. Human domination over coal is challenged requiring us to develop empathy for the earth from which it originates and treat it as a “beings-in-common.”

Rather than advocating for a nostalgic return and a union with an idealised state of nature (which may never have existed), this performance through ancient meditation practices explores forms of deep listening (such as ancient Indian “sattipathana” meditation and “dadirri,” an Aboriginal indigenous practice of silent listening to land and country) based on respect to the earth by simply “being with” coal and bearing witness. It is outside of the scope to discuss the concept of mindfulness, which has its roots in ancient Buddhist Vipasanna meditation practices or analyse the Australian Indigneous practice of “dadirri.” However, I was mindful of these references that could be drawn from the performance. The title of the performance “Ehrfurcht” is a German word, which commonly translates as “awe.” However it is a compound noun, made up with “Ehr” which comes from the verb “ehren” and means to “honour”; and the word “Furcht”, which means to “fear”. The title “Ehrfurcht” therefore advocates for an ethical abiding with the forces of nature to demand that we deeply honour coal and should metaphorically fear its wrath if we don’t.

Our habitual looking behavior shapes how we see coal. The “Ehrfurcht” works propose that, we hone and use all our senses (smell, touch, taste, hearing) to empathically relate to coal’s aesthetic properties and work with its agencies rather than against them.

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Originating in Greek “em” + “pathos”, the word empathy comes from the German word “Einfühlung”, which literally means ‘feel into’. Empathy, as the capacity to “feel into things” can be extended to include inanimate objects, art and even coal. As Coplan and Peter Goldie have observed: “No form is so unyielding that our imagination cannot project its life into it”.\textsuperscript{230} Whilst the process of personal projection into coal might seem problematic and regressive from a purely ‘scientific’ point of view, from an ethical standpoint the re-imagining of our human relationship with geological matter may lead to a revitalization of ethical stewardship and repair of the environment.

\textbf{Being touched by coal}

For most people coal is a symbol and its material agencies are mediated and abstracted through language and images. Indeed Phillip Vannini quoting Tim Ingold “…argues that materiality is a useless abstraction: it is a concept we impute to things because we do not bother to hold them in sufficient regard for what they are and what they do.”\textsuperscript{231} When we appreciate art we tend to focus on the object created rather than the material, from which it is made, prompting Tim Ingold to claim, that the actual “materials, it seems, have gone missing”\textsuperscript{232} This mirrors my experience: I aesthetically appreciate what coal does through the process of manually working with it. Having learnt that coal is active all the time, echoes Jane Bennett’s view of matter being vibrant and having, “Thing Power: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.”\textsuperscript{233}

Building mindfulness meditation into art practice increases awareness of the constant stream of information bombarding our nervous system and how this affects our body and minds. It’s not so much a clearing of the mind but an opening up, a recognition and insight into our own unique set of circumstances and conditioning that we bring to the engagement with coal – such a unique and ‘alien’ material. Performative interactions with coal enables us to become more aware of what we psychologically reject and push away in ourselves. Once we open up and confront uncomfortable realities within, we become

\textsuperscript{230} Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, \textit{Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives} (Oxford University Press, 2011).584


\textsuperscript{232} Tim Ingold, \textit{Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description} (Taylor & Francis, 2011).

\textsuperscript{233} Bennett, \textit{Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things}. 6
more receptive to matter in the external world. The body and the environment are not separate, isolated entities but our human bodies and nervous systems co-evolve with the environment in which we dwell. There is a reciprocity of sensation - as we touch coal we in turn, are touched by coal.  

The anthropologist Tim Ingold talks about “the slippage from materials to materiality.” Following James Gibson’s tripartite scheme, which divides the environment into surfaces, substances and medium, Ingold argues that surfaces:

…are interfaces between one kind of material and another – for example between rock and air – not between what is material and what is not. I can touch the rock, whether of a cave wall or of the ground underfoot, and can thereby gain a feel for what rock is like as a material. But I cannot touch the materiality of the rock. The surface of materiality, in short, is an illusion. We cannot touch it because it is not there. Like all other creatures, human beings do not exist on the ‘other side’ of materiality but swim in an ocean of materials. Once we acknowledge our immersion, what this ocean reveals to us is not the bland homogeneity of different shades of matter but a flux in which materials of the most diverse sorts – through processes of admixture and distillation of coagulation and dispersal, and of evaporation and precipitation – undergo continual generation and transformation.

There is wide-spread agreement in the peer-reviewed, global scientific community that climate change is human-induced and real. The world’s ecosystem is in a delicate balance that is upset through the extraction of coal. Coal has a unique molecular makeup but in new materialist understanding its agency originates from its intra-actions and entanglements within a constantly changing surrounding. Brown coal becomes black coal if compressed long enough through geological compression and heat. Ingold suggests that “… every living thing, our human selves included, is irrevocably stitched

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237 Ingold, "Materials against Materiality." 7

into the fabric of the world.”

For Bennett affect is not a quality unique to humans but extends the concept of affect to “technologies, winds, vegetables, minerals.” [She maintains that], “life draws attention not to a life world of human designs or their accidental, accumulated effects, but to an interstitial field of non-personal, inhuman forces, flows, tendencies, and trajectories.”

Bennett understands matter (which she calls material bodies) to be part of much larger assemblages of interacting bodies and forces that are in themselves part of much larger networks of agency and assemblages, which include humans. Human bodies, thus form only a part within a much larger assemblage or system of bodies; their interactions and interdependence mutually affecting each other in such a way that it is difficult to demarcate boundaries between bodies. As she notes: “The body is the net result of thousands of years of sedimented evolutionary history, and it is naive to think that this history does not affect human behaviors at every level of thought and action.”

The coal monolith at the centre of the “Ehrfurcht – performance” silently dominated the room, exerting it’s powerful aesthetic presence to challenge human-egocentric definitions of performance and humans as the ones who are doing the work. Appreciating coal’s unique aesthetic qualities through affect can influence our ethics and politics regarding geological matter. Coal thus acts on us, inviting us to take action and become ethical stewards of the earth.

Coal’s ephemeral traces

People who visited the paper-lined VCA Art Space and various “COALounges” in Morwell leave behind ephemeral traces in the fine coal dust that tell stories of social engagements. Temporarily inscribed records of intra-actions with coal create aesthetically evocative and abstract images, which document human movements and the “flows of process.”

240 Bennett, Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things. 61
241 Ibid.
242 Hayles, How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics.284
The initial motivation to put sheets of paper down on the floor was to protect the floor and make the job of cleaning up the disused commercial shops I temporarily occupied in Morwell from 2014-2017 much easier. After using these spaces for ephemeral art installations I often was forced to vacate these buildings in just one day. Coal’s fine particulate matter, once unearthed goes everywhere and it’s oily substance is difficult to wash off and remove from the body, walls and floors. It can take a whole day of repeated cleaning to get the space reinstated – often, with the help of local friends (thanks Steph!) I was able to leave these spaces cleaner than I found them in.

Figure 50. Hartmut Veit, “Untitled”, Performance in COALounge #1, 2015, Morwell
Figure 51. Hartmut Veit, “COALounge #1”, 2015, Morwell
Figure 52. Hartmut Veit, “Untitled”, Coalprint, COALounge #1, 2015, Morwell
Figure 53. Hartmut Veit, “Untitled”, Coalprint, 2017, VCA Art Space
Figure 54. Hartmut Veit, “Untitled” Coalprint, 2017, VCA Art Space
Figure 55. Hartmut Veit, “Untitled”, Coalprint, 2015, COALounge #1, Morwell
Figure 56. Hartmut Veit, “Untitled” Coalprint, COALounge #1, 2015, Morwell
Figure 57. Hartmut Veit, “Untitled”, Coalprint, COALounge #1, 2015, Morwell
Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla’s “Landmark Footprint” work is a historical antecedent for my coal prints. Made on a Puerto Rican island, which, for 60 years, was used by the United States for military operations, local residents voiced their protest against the American occupation of their land through the imprints of their feet on the beach sand. Engraved thongs featured anti-American imperialist images and messages, which covered the beach as they were walking. The ephemeral traces of their absent presence metaphorically comment on historical, cultural, and political realities extant in Central America.

![Image of footprints in sand](image)

Figure 58. Allora & Cazadilla, “Landmark Footprints”, 2001, Puerto Rico

In my work fine coal dust captures and traces every movement. In Derrida’s view, traces are the “…mark of the absence of a presence, an always-already absent present”244

Unlike Allora & Calzadilla’s work, the imprints of ordinary shoes left behind in coalprints in the itinerant pop-up “COALounges” in Morwell or the VCA Art Space are not signs of civil disobedience. In contrast, they can be regarded as the material discursive and semiotic

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traces of our collective complicity and tenuous relationship to the material world. The ephemeral images recorded in coal dust become a philosophical allegory of our human condition, our materialist attitudes and how we are all complicit. We all leave our ecological footprint. We all consume vastly more than we need.

**Coal as the author**

In a Baradian sense, sweeping is a temporal intra-action with coal. In Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism, objects and things emerge through their intra-actions within complicated apparatus, which produce phenomena. Subject and object emerge through their relationship and entanglement with everything else rather than possessing inherent agency. This points to a new way of thinking causality. Visitors to the pop-up space activate coal’s material properties within a complex, and seemingly dormant apparatus. Coal particles, through the forces of cohesion and adhesion actively cling to the soles of human feet and distribute themselves through space. Human intentionality and movement interferes with matter - authoring the creative work without the need for me, as the artist, to be present.

Sweeping coal to clean a space is akin to stroking and caressing it. If one does it too fast, then the fine coal dust becomes mobile and airborne which can be detrimental to one’s well-being. The act of sweeping therefore needs to be performed with great care, mindfully. The broom becomes an oversized brush and the floor the canvass.

Drawing on the German philosopher Martin Heidegger’s seminal lecture, *The Question Concerning Technology*, this act of painting with a broom can be regarded as a tool-enabled technique. In contradistinction to modernist formalist concerns (which put matter into the service of the artist-as-genius) the staged encounters and active collaboration with coal in my “COALouges” embraces the Heideggerian concept of “techné”, as a “bringing-forth” and letting the aesthetics of the artwork emerge out of the visceral qualities of the material itself.

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246 Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*.

247 Ibid.
Following Heidegger, the broom can be regarded as an instrument, which expresses the causal relationship between humans and technology (through sweeping). It is thus a means to an end. The craftsperson draws together the four different Aristotelian “causes”, which are considered to be: matter (change caused by coal’s material movements), form (change through changing shape and appearance of form), the agent of change (in this case the operator/the broom) and an end purpose (i.e., cleaning, and the creation of an image). Through uniting these four Aristotelian “causes”, the sweeper brings something new into appearance. In Heideggerian terms she is “bringing-forth” the poetry of coal (poiesis) or “brings (coal) out of concealment into unconcealment.” Coal is thus involved in a process of revealing, what ancient Greek philosophers have called “aletheia” (which translates as truth). Coal reveals the truth.

Coal thus has agency and speaks in its own aesthetic voice. Evocative diffractive patterns simply emerge through the agency and behavior of coal particles. Coal exposes our seemingly inescapable universal tendency to create meaning and to identify familiar and recognizable images within the random information of framed compostions. Acting like complicated Rorschah tests or abstract expressionistic action paintings they play with our established cognitive patterns of perception inducing apophenia and “agenticity” defined as “the tendency to infuse patterns with meaning, intention, and agency.” What then are they telling us? That depends of course, on who is doing the listening. To me, coal’s silent presence and powerful performative effects challenge anthropocentric notions of authorship and demonstrate against its exploitation as a mere resource for industry.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explored coal's ability to shape aesthetic experience and affect human empathy through the analysis of three types of coal artworks. Drawing on Quentin Meillassoux's concept of arche-fossil and Henri Bergson's duration I have shown how coal disrupts linear perceptions of time. Employing Karen Barad's concept of intra-action, Jane Bennett's vibrant materialism and Martin Heidegger's interpretation of techné in The Question concerning Technology, I have demonstrated how coal's agency challenges anthropocentric definitions of temporality, performance and authorship.

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248 Ibid.

Chapter 5: Coal’s cultural/ontological/philosophical dimensions

In the two previous chapters I have examined how each ‘space’ in my “COAL” examination exhibition tests commonly held preconceptions about the coal.

The chapter begins with a description and discussion of the “Pneumoconiosis” installation in the third gallery of the VCA Art Space. This is followed by a discussion of Andrew Poe’s three “problematics” of New Materialism to explore how a new materialist framing of coal might “trouble” deeply entrenched binary ways of thinking, shape experience and cultural discourse. Through this work ontological dichotomies and dualist philosophical frameworks are interrogated to test whether and how their human-egocentricity underpins exploitative relations with coal. This final chapter concludes my investigation into finding ways to change habits of thinking about coal to and to re-orientate thinking. It challenges current power dynamics of human mastery over coal and hence aims to promote a revitalised ethics of care based on respectful listening and prudent ethical stewardship of the earth’s resources.

The “Pneumoconiosis” installation

In the ‘COAL’ exhibition, the gallery to the right of the VCA Art Space was transformed into an immersive installation called “Pneumoconiosis.”

Entering through black velvet theatre curtains, one is immediately enveloped in disorientating darkness, heightened by the space being lined with black fabric. Softly pulsating red and blue spotlights gently flash on and off in unison with the ebb and flow of a soundtrack of human breathing to illuminate a dead tree hanging upside down from the ceiling. The lighting and soundtrack creates the illusion of a breathing tree – its bare trunk and branches shaped to suggest a human lung complete with a central bifurcation to the smaller distal airways. The intermittent clicking sound of a ceiling mounted, mechanical ‘dust dispenser’ alerts one’s attention upwards where dust motes, illuminated by a singular cone of light, gently float downwards through the tree branches.

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134
Featuring an upside down tree, “Pneumoconiosis” shares formal similarities with “Forst” a work by the German sculptor Michael Sailstorfer, exhibited in the Berlinische Galerie in 2012. Through the staging of material displacement Sailstorfer’s installation intercedes the viewers’ perception to critique the cultivation of nature for commercial objectives. Similarly, my exhibit goes beyond exploring issues of organic forms in a cultural, institutional space to address the mobility of coal within the carbon cycle and show that the movement of coal, once excavated, is circular – coal metamorphises from its solid earthbound state to airborne CO\(^2\) in the atmosphere. The symbolic power of art is mobilised to highlight the detrimental health effects of coal (dust) on human beings and introduces philosophical and neo-materialist discourse.

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251 Berlinische Galerie: Michael Sailstorfer. Forst - Vattenfall Contemporary 2012, YouTube video, 5:15, May 25, 2012  [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxOLSxHe_ts](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxOLSxHe_ts)
The 2008 “Inhale-Exhale” durational sculpture by the Finnish artist Terike Haapoja explores similar terrain recording CO₂ emissions of living soil, enclosed coffin-like within a plywood and glass vitrine through embedded sensors, which convert them into audible
sounds, that play back the sounds of breathing. Both Haapoja’s “Inhale-Exhale” and the “Pneumoconiosis” work acknowledge that earth’s geology is involved in complex entanglements with the biosphere, and that the interplay between oxygen and CO₂ with earth bound matter has profound, transformative effects on geological matter itself. Grasses, plants and trees take up CO₂ from the air to carry out photosynthesis and “breath out” oxygen. Growing leaves in spring remove CO₂ while decaying leaves in autumn return it back into the atmosphere. Through the different seasons the biosphere is effectively breathing “huge synchronized annual breaths.”

Omnipresent dust in the gallery is collected daily through a ritualistic vacuuming of the floor to load the ‘dust feeder’ mounted at the base of the tree on the ceiling. This allegorical act of taking dust from the ground to suspend it in space illustrates the cyclical forces of nature and the mobility of carbon. It poetically demonstrates how coal inevitably becomes airborne once excavated from the earth. The general perception of performance in art is that it is strictly limited in time; it has a beginning and an end. Once excavated and “unleashed” coal however continues to repeat its performance in the carbon cycle endlessly with or without the influence of human beings. Coal thus challenges the notion that matter’s performance is only transient and ephemeral. Once disturbed and mobile, coal’s continued performance haunts the places and bodies in which it settles.

A chain of events and an exchange occurs between our bodies and the environment in which we live. The line between the human and non-human becomes blurred. Ontological boundaries become porous. Matter and human/non-human entities share the same air—the air that I breathe in now, becomes the air in your lungs with your next breath—exchanging, co-mingling and transforming it with our flaking skin cells, and other genetic material in the process.

David Abrams elaborates, “Each organism partakes of this awareness from our own angle and place within it, imbibing it through the nostrils or through the stomata in plant leaves, altering its chemistry and quality within each individual before we collectively breathe it back into the surrounding world.”

Freese, Coal: A Human History. 183

Black Lung Disease

The title of the installation is "Pneumoconiosis", a medical term that connotes a lung disease characterized by coal dust-induced lesions in the lungs. Similar in nature to asbestosis and silicosis, it is commonly referred to as "black lung disease". It is regarded as an occupational illness experienced by coal miners. Until recently this deadly illness was considered eradicated in Australia. However, there are now 19 confirmed cases in Queensland and a parliamentary inquiry is currently underway which has started to include port workers, who do not work in the mines but are nevertheless exposed to coal dust. The "Pneumoconiosis" installation draws attention to and considers the Morwell community and all those subjected to breathing in coal dust may also be at risk.

Latrobe Valley brown coal contains chemical elements such as carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, sulfur and many more potentially toxic elements that can, in certain concentrations, cause health problems in humans, especially when altered and concentrated through combustion. Sulfur and nitrogen oxides in coal for example can cause respiratory illnesses and create acid rain; carbon reacts with oxygen to create CO2, a greenhouse gas; selenium can be absorbed by plants, enter the food chain through be passed from grazing animals to humans. In China, people have suffered from selenium toxicity through eating corn grown in selenium-rich coal. Once exposed and excavated from the ground coal’s agency effects and alters relationships within interconnected and distributed networks.

Light and space

In 2001 the British artist Martin Creed won the Turner Prize with his installation titled:


“Work No. 227: The lights going on and off.” This minimalist work consisted of a bare, empty room in which the lights continuously came on for five seconds to bath the space in light – and then turned off for five seconds to shroud the space in darkness, creating a psychological effect in the visitor.

Creed’s work shifts the attention of viewers away from objects (there are none) to the empty space itself. Ephemeral, sensory perceptions and direct phenomenological experiences of light, sound, temperature and space are foregrounded. Informed by the activated, empty spaces of American Minimalist artist Robert Irwin’s 1970s installation “Fractured Light – Partial Scrim – Ceiling – Eye – Level Wire,” Creed uses the same lighting effects. Whilst employing similar lighting tactics my work “Pneumoconiosis” directs the visitor’s embodied perception away from the now darkened space, where black fabric lined walls receded away even further into darkness, to theatrically spotlight the tree as a central object and symbolic mis-en-scène. Narrative, “the organic” and emotive associations are reintroduced into minimalistic space, to draw attention to the central theme of binary oppositions (on/off, light/dark, in/out breath, mind/matter, nature/culture).

Framing “Pneumoconiosis” conceptually

Upon entering, sensory darkness envelops the visitor in an elegiac embrace – creating an almost dreamlike experience and state. It is as if one has suddenly been transported underwater. The impressions from the outside world fade away and one is left with the sound of breathing, much like a diver under water. Akin to a scene encountered in a dream the tree as an archetypical image is symbolically inverted. Rather than growing up from the ground it is uprooted and hangs suspended from above, suggesting an ancient ceremony, forgotten narratives, or a violent act. How did it get here and why is it upside down? Removed from its natural environment and transported into a cultural space, memories of previous interactions with plants, organic forms and nature are evoked, inviting a chain of conscious and subconscious associations.

Cognitive perception is directed to the act of breathing. Left alone in the dark with one’s thoughts and the sensation of our own breath researchers have observed that changes in breathing occur through auditory stimulation and different types of sounds and music.\textsuperscript{258} It would therefore not be surprising if visitors of the “Pneumoconiosis” installation were found to be subconsciously synchronising their breath with that of the exhibit. The combined effects of sound, light, space and objects irrevocably immerse the spectator somatically – they become part of the work. The tree and dust particles dancing in the beam of light metonymically reference nature and natural phenomena to operate both phenomenologically and symbolically on the observer.

Here subject and object, practice and theory, light and darkness are not separate entities but reciprocally co-create each other. The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty claims that “the thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it, and can never be actually in itself because it stands at the other end of our gaze or at the terminus of a sensory exploration which invests it with humanity.”

Feminist and post-structural critiques of phenomenology have since sought to problematise the “neutral”, engendered and abstract status of a seemingly universal subject that perceives. The “Pneumoconiosis” exhibit seeks to implicate and activate within this spectator/participant a critical attitude regarding deeply held ontological and binary views about matter. Immediately to the left upon entering the space, marked by two hanging fluorescent safety vests a small workstation area, with a laptop, cables and audio visual programing equipment alludes to an abandoned power station control room and the silent absent presence of human beings. The technology controlling the entire display is not concealed – it is exposed to address allegorically yet another dichotomy: “nature” controlled by “man.”

Similarly, quivering motes of dust are an allegory for atoms at play. The direct experience of breathing, together with the symbolic binaries of darkness/light and in/out breath, theatrically set the stage for an enquiry into abstract philosophical concept of dualism, which maintains that there is a separation between mind and matter/body. The ‘Pneumoconiosis’ exhibit introduces the effects ontological dichotomies have to shape human relations with coal, whilst concurrently exposing and problematising the orchestration of these polarised binaries as a device of dialectics.


‘nature’ and ‘man’ are terms used here as generic placeholders for a range of interconnected concepts which have been described as ‘naturecultures’ (Donna Haraway) or as ‘collectives’ (Bruno Latour)
Figure 62. Hartmut Veit, “Pneumoconiosis” detail, 2017, ‘COAL’ VCA Graduate Exhibition
Cartesian and binary ways of thinking, I argue, have led to human exploitative relations with coal – diametrically opposed worldviews contribute to an impasse within the climate change debate and add to the current environmental ecological crises described with the term Anthropocene.

Black and white spaces express these binary opposites. As a spatial structuring and organisational device they conceptually introduce ‘thesis – antithesis and ‘synthesis’ as a way to sublate differences. Gallery 1 was a totally white space with white walls and white paper lining the floor, but in its centre features a dark coal boulder.

At the other end of the interconnected galleries, Gallery 3 is a closed off space, shrouded in darkness behind black theatre curtains. Black fabric lines the walls and a white spotlight in the centre of the room completes the picture. Gallery 2 separates and connects these two opposing spaces as an in-between space – a gray zone in which ideas and exhibits with coal mingle.

These spatial allegories in the “COAL” exhibition directly inform the following discussions regarding New Materialism.

**Three problems with New Materialism**

The political scientist Andrew Poe is positively inclined towards New Materialism and welcomes it’s renewed emphasis on materiality and the fundamental challenges and promises it raises for contemporary politics. However he voices three “problematics” regarding New Materialism.\(^{262}\)

Poe’s first concern is that political consequences raised by new materialism haven’t been sufficiently acted upon, resulting in New Materialist ideas remaining too speculative. Second, Poe sees inconsistencies and problems with the relationship between aesthetics and materialism. Third, he observes that despite its potential, New Materialist discourse has not yet resulted in more inclusive democratic outcomes.

My analysis of these concerns builds upon the scholar Barbara Bolt’s responses to Poe’s challenges in the introduction of her book *Carnal Knowledge. Towards a ‘New Materialism’*

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143
through the Arts 263 in which she questions Poe’s anthropocentric assumptions underlying his arguments. I will briefly address Poe’s three concerns to further contextualise how my art ‘collaborations’ with coal interfaces with the theoretical discourses of New Materialism.

Poe’s first concern

Poe is concerned that the speculative nature of New Materialist theories fail to manifest themselves into direct political consequences, thereby weakening the potency of those ideas. New Materialist discourses question human exceptionalism and superiority thereby eroding the egoistic self’s sense of importance over matter and other non-human agents. Poe identifies these as the underlying reasons, which cause the modern human subject to experience anxieties and instabilities regarding her sense of the self. This disempowering effect on the self, undermines the sense of individual and collective political responsibility felt by the human subject towards non-human agents. Poe maintains that “one of the advantages of the subject-centred model … is that it, in confirming that this subject is capable of committing actions in the world, re-confirms itself through such actions and thus relieves anxieties of being.”264 He observes that New Materialism “preys on those same self-anxieties” [and like] “the humanist subject assuages the anxieties of the conscious self that hopes it can be unified into a stable whole again.”265

The process of reconciling contradictions and sublimating the anxieties of the self through a neo-materialist inspired monist perspective and Hegelian dialectics promises a tempting synthesis. The completeness of Hegelian synthesis however is but a temporary sequenced illusion of a non-alienated stable, whole and re-integrated state. Each new synthesis eventually becomes a new thesis and the process continues. This synthesis is an idealist conception – it only takes place on a thought level and not in reality. Yet coal’s contradictory nature and agencies are not fictitious but real. The contradictions and problems associated with human’s exploitative relationship with coal needs to be grasped and dealt with in the actuality of everyday life. My socially-engaged art practice at the source of coal’s extraction and exploitation draws on Ranciere’s rethinking of the

263 Barrett and Bolt, Carnal Knowledge: Towards A new Materialism through the Arts.3-7
265 Ibid.161
relationship between art and politics through the concept of dissensus, and Claire Bishop’s emphasis on the complexity that can be generated through the tension of art and the everyday. Coal’s material agency, simply through its presence in a socially-engaged project is capable of creating dissensus but can also, as a physical object, concurrently aesthetically represent what Claire Bishop described as a mediating third within participatory art. Following Bishop, coal as a mediating third, in turn connects with the political geographer Edward Soja’s ‘thirding-as-Othering’, a term he employs to describe Lefebvre’s strategy of three-dimensional dialectic. Lefebvre describes it: “After all, since two terms [thesis/anti-thesis] are not sufficient, it becomes necessary to introduce a third term…. The third term is the other, with all that this term implies (alterity, the relation between the present/absent other, alteration-alienation).”

“Reflexive thought and hence philosophy has for a long time accentuated dyads, including hose of the dry and the humid, the large and the small, the finite and the infinite, as in Greek antiquity. It also accounts for those that constitute the Western philosophical paradigm: subject/object, continuity-discontinuity, open-closed, etc. Finally, in the modern era there are the binary oppositions between signifier and signified, knowledge and non-knowledge, centre and periphery…. [But] is there ever a relation only between two terms….? One always has Three: There is always the Other.”

Coal is the other. Its agencies originate contradictions and oppositions that create concrete problems locally and in the world, which cannot be solved through conceptual Hegelian synthesis. Without reconciling and conflating social thought and social action in a synthesis, my socially-engaged spatial art practice with coal draws on Lefebvre’s three dimensional production of space, integrating his concepts of perceived space (through the senses), conceived space (representation of space through thinking and knowledge) and lived space (representational space of everyday experience). My “COALounges” subverted existing power structures and represent an in-between space, a third space

267 “The Thinking of Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics.”
270 Ibid.143
(neither shop, nor commercial gallery, nor domestic space), in which conventional
dualistic concepts about coal could be challenged and in which contradicting opinions
within the community about coal could co-exist side by side and be exchanged. Here the
concept of exchange is not restricted to its historical origins (in commodity society) and
the physical trading of objects but extends to mental and social aspects such as
concepts, ideas, communication, debate, discourse, signs etc. Schmid contends that
“the exchange relationship also contains an affective aspect, an exchange of feeling and
passions that, at one and the same time, both unleashes and chains the encounter”.

The political consequences raised by New Materialism are attended through an ongoing
practice, which integrates Lefebvre’s dialectical trinity, his “trialectics of spatiality.” This
project may not resolve problems associated with coal but it endeavours to provide an
avenue for people to exchange, gather, interact, think about, and potentially renegotiate
their relationship with coal, as a diverse community with diverse opinions and move
forward together on a path of transition following the recent mine closure.

Poe’s second concern

Poe’s second concern is how New Materialism understands and articulates the
relationship between the aesthetic appreciation and the materiality of non-human matter.
He asks whether, “we, as those who perceive the aesthetics, are thereby always doing
work on the world” [and] “whether there remains an aesthetic dimension to ‘things’”.
What is at question here is whether ‘things-in-themselves’ have an aesthetic dimension
that is independent from our human cognitive perception, discernment, projection,
thories or taste.

In her book, Carnal Knowledge Towards a ‘New Materialism’ through the Arts bolts
questions the underlying assumptions Poe makes regarding the “human creation-of-
things.” Poe posits human beings as the active creator, who shapes or arranges

273 Schmid, "Henri Lefebvre’s Theory of the Production of Space: Towards a Three-Dimensional
Dialectic."

(Eds) Diana Coole and Samantha Frost . 161

273 Barrett and Bolt, Carnal Knowledge: Towards A new Materialism through the Arts.5-7

(passive) matter to her will. Bolt employs Heidegger’s re-interpretation of Aristotle’s form/matter synthesis and causality and his re-conception of relations between humans and techné in his seminal essay, *The Question concerning Technology* to advocate for a re-newal of human/matter relationships based on “co-responsibility and indebtedness”. This creates a shift away from Poe’s human-centric emphasis of creation to a neo-materialist one, in which matter has agency and artworks emerge through a joint collaboration between co-responsible entities in a more democratic fashion.

Aesthetics, as a branch of philosophy concerns itself with the nature of art, beauty, ugliness, the sublime and so on. At its core aesthetics is thus a culturally and historically conditioned human judgment. Brown coal is lignite, a sedimentary rock. As geological matter it is neither a commonly used art material nor thought to result in aesthetically pleasing artworks. Historically it is perceived in negative terms - through its material composition and high moisture contents it is a highly volatile substance. My previous art experiments included carving brown coal– works that rapidly disintegrated and crumbled to dust once exposed to the air. Through its continuous metamorphosis and shifting shape coal resists being made into lasting works of beauty and cultural artefacts.

However, as daily experiences of residents explored through socially-engaged art practice have substantiated, the agency of coal and coal dust, once excavated, has long lasting personal, local, global and planetary effects, which cannot be easily contained. Mineworkers (and this artist alike) have great difficulty in removing coal from their skin and clothes after contact with coal. The combustion of coal to create energy creates complex changes in weather and climate. Coal’s performative power experienced in the studio and performances in the field (described in chapters 2 and 3) resists the aesthetic manipulation and will of human creation to assert its own agency and authority.

In my practice, the material agency of coal is metaphorically excavated (from the ground up) through situated, emplaced, embodied and grounded art practice, and contrasts with the “top-down” discourses and culture theories about matter. The singular motif of coal’s vibrancy of matter in art practice addresses how matter is abstracted and has been rendered passive in cultural and theoretical debates. Coal is thus a perfect medium to challenge anthropocentric definitions of authorship, performance and matter and

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*(Eds) Diana Coole and Samantha Frost*. 161

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demonstrate the limitations of human aesthetics. Coal, in the eyes of many, may not be considered to have an aesthetic dimension however it’s performative power to influence human relations and shape cultural discourse cannot be denied.

**Poe’s third concern**

Poe is concerned about the lack of political and ethical consequences that result from New Materialist discourse. Questioning the limits of politics and ethical behavior towards non-human matter, he asks “what could or should stop us from extending agency indefinitely?”

The proposal to rename the current geo-historical epoch the Anthropocene, symbolically acknowledges the compelling geological impact humans have had on the Earth's ecosystems to date. The problems Poe raises are thus informed by urgent requirements to rethink the historically conditioned privileged position of the human subject in relation to the non-human. In regards to coal what is in question here is how humanist ideologies underpin attitudes of human exceptionalism, which are harmful and destructive for the ecological world. New Materialist discourse challenges this privileged human position and mechanistic views of matter as being inert and passive. It re-conceives matter as emergent, continuously becoming, self-organising with political agency whilst being emeshed and interacting within a distributed system of material assemblages with other entities, both human and non-human.

Poe makes an abstract challenge to political agents to consider the consequences and potential ramifications of New Materialism’s recognition of matter possessing agency. Considered on an individual level, as the political scientist Sharon Krause notes, “Materialist accounts of agency nevertheless pose challenges to the notion of personal responsibility that is so crucial to political obligation and democratic citizenship.”

Artworks with coal presented in Chapter 3 and 4 have attempted to demonstrate that in regards to exploiting the material agency of coal, we are all complicit on an individual level. How may a change in our ethical position towards the geological matter coal effect

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277 Sharon R Krause, "Bodies in Action: Corporeal Agency and Democratic Politics," *Political Theory* 39, no. 3 (2011).301
our individual lives and influence our current living standards? As human beings we have all benefited from coal’s use but are also adversely impacted by global changes in climate of our own making. Planet earth and matter existed long before human beings started to dominate the ecosystem, and in all likelihood may prevail even after the potential demise of the human species. The current ‘configuration’ of the material world provides human bodies the material basis and temporary conditions required for survival and the possibility to exercise human agency. Krause contends, that “a materialist view of agency can increase awareness of our often unwitting contributions to systematic inequalities of power and extend our political responsibilities in emancipatory directions, thus holding great promise for democratic life.”278

Coal does not discriminate – it behaves in a non-racist and democratic fashion to affect every person, thing and environment in equal measure but with different impacts. Coal in the form of dust is omnipresent in the Valley and careful examination through sweeping and cleaning art practice revealed a fine layer of coal dust in the streets of Morwell (chapter 3). Coal deposits its fine but tenacious layer of dust over every surface co-mingling with microbes from human beings, pollution, ordinary dirt and debris. Covering the towns of the Latrobe Valley with a delicate blanket of coal dust has a unifying effect. Perhaps it is time to honour and work with coal’s political agency, leave it in the ground, and accept the challenge to create the required technological advances necessary to sustainably facilitate human existence and prosperity.

Conclusion

Artworks and performance with coal remind us that as individual and collective political agents we are faced with choices. We may not endorse or identify with the liberal market economy and capitalist system we find ourselves, however in Australia at least, we have the power to choose what kind of energy, from what source and how much energy we decide to consume. Regarding matter endowed with a moral dimension through New Materialist cultural discourse “helps us see why material inequalities have such a deep impact on freedom”279 and can lead to concrete action and results if we exercise these choices wisely. Extending ethical and democratic rights to coal in an artwork is one thing. Acknowledging the agency of coal’s matter and influence on human beings requires a re-

278 Ibid.299

279 Ibid.
conceptualisation of artistic agency and human authorship. To extend these rights to geological matter within a planetary framework is quite another task. However as utopian as it may sound may this not lead to an important discussion regarding the need for a revitalized ethics of care and more responsible stewardship of the earth?
Epilogue

For many years she produced our power, a beacon in her time.
The power she made, would light the way in your house, and mine.
The Valley survives and is kept alive by the holes we dig in the ground,
The time has come to say good-bye after more than a 50 year run,
So, let's all have a drink to Hazelwood, lift your glasses high.

Let's all have a drink to Hazelwood, it's sad to watch the old girl die.
Let's all have a drink to Hazelwood, lift your glasses high,
Let's all have a drink to Hazelwood, it's sad to watch the old girl die.

Now all us, who work here now, we're unsure what to do.
But we won't give up, because we're made of good stuff,
we'll do what we have to do.
So as the dredges stop, the fires go out, the turbines cease to spin,
we'll all have to deal with the winds of change, as the winds a'blowing again
So, let's all have a drink to Hazelwood, lift your glasses high.

Let's all have a drink to Hazelwood, it's sad to watch the old girl die.
Let's all have a drink to Hazelwood, lift your glasses high,
Let's all have a drink to Hazelwood, it's sad to watch the old girl die.
Let's all have a drink to Hazelwood, lift your glasses high,
Let's all have a drink to Hazelwood, it's sad to watch the old girl die
Let's all have a drink to Hazelwood, it's sad to watch the old girl die

The Hazelwood song, Danny Boothman²⁸⁰

What has been achieved?
The creative works and thesis explored the vibrancy of coal and the role it plays in
Latrobe Valley communities through emplaced, situated and embodied socially-engaged
art practice with an ethnographic sensibility. As an in-depth case study, it demonstrated
how complex webs of changes and global forces in resources and energy markets
impact on local realities and communities.

The vibrancy of coal’s materiality was activated through the visceral and emotive
language of art to demonstrate the political ecology of coal and show how coal intervenes

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVBh0RPlx6E
in complex climate, political and social systems. The assertions of New Materialism, a new cultural theory/philosophy, were tested directly through coal and the entanglements of human/non-human agencies in a local mining community. The works and thesis thus advances the existing body of literature and art to challenge human ethical positions towards the continuation of coal’s material exploitation.

**How it was done**

Employing the analogy of the diamond, coal’s multiple facets were explored through the prisms of three sets of questions to address it’s socio-political, it’s aesthetic/empathic, and it’s ontological/philosophical aspects.

Located at the intersection of the overlapping fields of social practice, art and anthropology, a genealogy of artists, writers and theorists explored the role of geological matter within ecology and the environment. Following a discussion of coal’s binary image a discussion of Marx’s dialectic materialism established the relevance of New Materialism as a conceptual framework for the thesis.

The second chapter described how socially-engaged and practice-as-research methodologies were coupled with ethnography to obtain new findings. A series of Iterative, pop-up art spaces called “COALounges” in Morwell were employed as a base for participatory, ecological performances.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 employed the triadic spatial structure of three interconnected galleries in the “COAL” graduate exhibition in the VCA Art Space to interrogate the different facets of coal’s agency experienced in the field and studio.

Chapter 3 investigated the socio-political effects of coal through artworks generated in the Latrobe Valley and presented in Gallery 2, to demonstrate “collaborations” with coal’s innate socio-political qualities via temporary installations, interventions and provocations. Coal activated fragile and fluid local histories allowing multiple views, contradictions and dissensus to emerge. Stories of belonging and “Heimat” were found disrupted, highlighting solastagia, the existential ‘dis-ease’ experienced through environmental change. Some of the broader challenges and complexities facing activist/artists working at the intersection of art, environment and politics were drawn-out through the example of de Vietri/Foster to attest how easily alterity is created and social relations instrumentalised. This evidenced how social-engaged practice situated within a community and force field
of competing local, state and national interests can be compromised by the capitalist situations, in which it is embedded.

Chapter 4 explored coal's ability to shape aesthetic experience and affect human empathy through the analysis of three different types of coal artworks. These new images, representations and stories represent metaphors for much larger political and cultural situations showing the impact of national decisions and globalisation on local conditions.

Drawing on Meillassoux's concept of the arche-fossil and Bergson's duration authenticated how coal disrupts linear perceptions of time. Barad's concept of intra-action, Bennett's vibrant materialism and Heidegger's critique of form-matter synthesis were employed to substantiate how coal's agency challenges anthropocentric definitions of temporality, performance and authorship.

Chapter 5 examined the cultural/ontological/philosophical dimensions of coal through a discussion of the “Pneumoconiosis” installation in Gallery 3. Referencing early Greek concepts of matter, a discussion of New Materialist approaches was undertaken through examination of Poe’s three problematics. Lefebvre's three-dimensional spatial dialectic provided an avenue to reconcile, better understand inherent contradictions encountered and challenge deeply entrenched Cartesian and binary ways of thinking about matter.

**Lessons for the future**

Why is this research important? With Hazelwood now closed, future mine rehabilitation and the need to decarbonize the global energy system requires a re-orientating of human relationships with coal. During the first oil shock in 1973, Sheikh Ahmed Zaki Yamani, the former OPEC and Saudi Arabian Oil Minister, famously said, “The stone age didn't end because we ran out of stones.”281 The stone age ended because humans developed new technological innovations that improved efficiencies and made previous technologies obsolete. The research process/investigation itself was intended to act as a cultural agent of change and assist local communities in their long-term transition to a cleaner energy economy that better supports jobs and long-term health. This thesis goes beyond material art explorations of brown coal and a discussion of new discourses about matter. It bears witness to the plight of the local community's struggle to sustain itself. This

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exegesis shows how communities built around a geological resource are impacted by the materiality of that resource and the closure of the main industry the town relies upon. The Hazelwood Mine closure in March 2017 highlighted a continued lack of vision, foresight and viable long-term transition plans to support an entire region affected by the phasing-out of coal burning power stations. With the future coal mine closures around Australia a certainty, my research argues for a national plan to assist communities in their transition.

Meanwhile however, for the people of the Latrobe Valley, many questions remain unanswered. How will the Hazelwood mine be re-habilitated? With estimated clean-up bills of $750+ million, will Engie, the current owner stay committed and rehabilitate the mine? Where will people find new employment? What will happen to the town now that Hazelwood has closed? What will happen to the people who have nowhere else to go? Once all the enquiries and all the talks are over, communities affected by mine closures throughout Australia will be seeking help to regain the vibrancies of their communities. Once the coal dust settles – once the coal mines have closed – who will be left – and remain to help with cleaning up?

A difficult personal journey written in coal

This project has also been a difficult personal journey. Perhaps I subconsciously wanted to redeem my personal family history in mining? As son of a miner I have grown up and lived through mine closures in remote mining towns around the world including Australia, Papua New Guinea, Canada and Germany. My choice of working with the community in Morwell is also not coincidental but influenced by a difficult youth growing up, socially-marginalised, in a high-rise social housing estate on the outskirts of Ludwigshafen, a heavily polluted, industrial city in the Rhine Valley in Germany, which is home to BASF, the world’s largest chemical industrial company. Despite stringent safety measures chemical fires, gas leaks, explosions, accidental deaths,
evacuations and thousands of fatalities occurred over the life of this factory, which during my time employed 60,000 people in that city alone.

Grappling with coal’s aesthetic, cultural, socio-political, and ethical dimensions (and its dark matters), I’ve been exploring deeper issues such as human finitude and impermanence. I often think about my preoccupation with brown coal as an abstract form of vanitas art, which utilises coal’s materiality to emphasise an acute awareness of life’s brevity and the inevitability of our ultimate death. We generally think of life as a linear progression (i.e. from birth to death), whereas carbon, the essential building block of all life, behaves in a cyclical fashion. Brown coal’s continuous metamorphosis is also a perfect allegory for entropy, the aging process and the transitory nature of our human existence. Working with coal’s dark and dirty matter often makes me feel melancholic. My frustrated attempts to master and shape its materiality according to my whims and desires highlights the problematic human-centric identifications of the ego faced with its eventual and inescapable dissolution. The momentary nature of constantly changing abstract images discernable in coal dust on the studio floor, act as “momento mori”, urging us to remember and bear in mind – to be mindful - that one will die. But rather than pondering the soul’s immortality or the theme of the afterlife common within the Christian religious tradition of vanitas art, I speculate whether the cyclical mobility of carbon and its transformation into different physical states could be considered as endless cycles of material reincarnations of matter. Contemplating the karmic forces of being raised as the son of a miner (albeit one concerned with the damage down by human exploitation of the material world), I wonder whether we can escape the endless cycle of action and reaction. Can we break out of the prison of dualistic worldviews and thinking in dialectic opposites, which underpin human-egocentric behaviour of mastery over matter?

Conclusion

The history of coal is intimately linked with the rise of capitalism. The basic material needs of an exponentially growing human population are fanned by escalating consumption and the ‘cognitive-cultural economy’ of global capitalism, which increase the desire and pursuit for higher living standards to rapidly change the world’s climate. The feminist theorist Donna Haraway embraces a relational, multi-species view and understands capitalism not only as a social or economic system but as “a historically situated complex

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of metabolisms and assemblages.”\textsuperscript{283} The engines and processes of capitalism underpin this acceleration. It is characterized by habitat destruction, rapidly declining species and a depletion of human languages, cultures and indigenous wisdom traditions, which have developed over millennia in response to human beings adapting and cooperating with matter.\textsuperscript{284} As Naomi Klein points out, there exist other: “

…human systems that organised life differently: systems that insist that humans must think seven generations in the future; must be not only good citizens but also good ancestors; must take no more than they need and give back to the land in order to protect and augment the cycles of regeneration. These systems existed and still exist, but they are erased every time we say that the climate crisis is a crisis of ‘human nature’ and that we are living in the ‘age of man’.\textsuperscript{285}

New Materialism’s monistic approaches aims to disrupt deeply entrenched structures of binary thinking and challenge anthropocentric, historically conditioned Cartesian worldviews. However despite best intentions deeply engrained and historically conditioned habits preferencing the mind and it’s supremacy over matter are difficult to overcome in real-life, everyday interactions with the material world. As the American political theorist Paul Rekret observes, “We may no longer be Cartesian or Lockean in theory but in many important ways, we continue to be in practice.”\textsuperscript{286}

This study of coal within Latrobe Valley communities explores the exploitative use of geological matter as a mere resource for human consumption. New technological developments allow the human species to directly translate sunlight (and also other sources such as wind, the tides, earth’s core temperature) into electric power, which are renewable and sustainable. There is now no urgent human need (aside from economic profit motives) to burn the solar energy embedded in coal to create electricity. As human beings, we are interdependent on nature and other species with whom we share the planet. At this stage in history it is crucial to acknowledge that attitudes of human


\textsuperscript{286} Paul Rekret, "A Critique of New Materialism: Ethics and Ontology,” Subjectivity 9, no. 3 (2016).
exceptionalism and superiority have severely altered the earth's geology and ecosystems. It may also be prudent to reduce both collective and individual consumption and consider reallocating this planet’s resources on the basis of multi-species resource requirements rather than solely preferencing human needs.287

Deconstructing and overcoming conceptual dichotomies (such as human/nature) may be a first step towards giving “nature” and resources such as coal political, legal and ethical rights and representation, that in the long term may benefit all species. By whom, how and to what extent coal could be represented politically warrants another enquiry and is a worthy subject for future research.

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Creative works

The following durable records of the “COAL” graduate exhibition are submitted for the examination process.

- “COAL eine Gedankenausstellung” – catalogue submitted as a digital pdf file
- A collection of three video, which document the graduate exhibition:
  - “COAL – Eine Gedankenausstellung"
  - “COAL – The performance"
  - “COAL – Processes in the field"
Appendices

1. Appendices: Research papers given at international conferences

Throughout the research period, I was invited to present my ideas and research publically through giving conference papers at the following international conferences:


- Performing Mobilities: 21st Performance Studies International conference (the Australian program of PSI#21), Melbourne, Oct 2015.

- Performing Climates, 22nd Performance Studies International conference University of Melbourne. 5-9 July, 2016.

2. Appendices: Interviews – partial transcripts

During the research period a large number of interviews, notes, diary entries were made. What follows are some partial transcripts of select interviews quoted in the exegesis.

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Interview #02

Partial transcript

Semi structured interview conducted by Hartmut Veit in July 2014 with an older woman and artist MVI_0775. Lives in near Moe, duration: 39:31

“…this picture goes back before Loy Yang, that’s the old house. That’s the old house there. Beautiful old home. I was my home. I was our home. It was taken for Loy Yang. This is the view from the back of the house. And then this is the trump garden of the older house. That was 1950.

Q: and what happened to the house?
A: it was demolished. That was my last family home, that I knew. It was sad for all of us. So I’ve had dreams all my life. About the old house. I dreamed I was up in my night cotton, looking through the window. If we go out there now, I haven’t been out there for quite a few years

……..but in terms of the young people, like her daughter doesn’t have as much work, as she would want, she’s a teacher. A music teacher. Because people, I don’t know. Because of young people moving away. And the other thing is that if they wanted to move away, they couldn’t because they couldn’t sell the house now, could they. So it leaves people in a situation they can’t get out of. it’s a big worry for them, and those with young children. So people feel quite trapped and powerless to change their situation. Yes, that’s the worst.

And sometimes too, they don’t know what’s going to happen. You can’t plan anything.

Q: would you move or is this home?
A: oh, for me I’m here because of family, now. Because family moved towards, my brother and sister-in-law they’re a little bit further than me, they’ve gone to Lakes Enterance. But we’re all here. In this close area. And my sister sort of has come back. But we haven’t moved a lot, and I’ve moved a lot, and as I’ve said but I’ve never replaced that old home, I think I want our old family home – but’s gone. It’s been demolished and its terribly sad, And I think, I’m..., it really makes me want to weep, to think about it. My mother suffered a great deal, terribly because she was about little bit younger, not much younger than I am now, when that happened. And she lost her home. And had to go somewhere else, and her friends and so on were here and so. But I keep dreaming all my life, I keep dreaming about this. And this old house. I’m searching and its
disguised, it’s not recognisable as the house, but I’ve realised that it is the house and under the walls that have disappeared, the steps that go to nowhere, and so I still have those dreams about the old house. It’s sad. And all the homes I lived in since haven’t given me that. I want an old family home. I so want to buy another one. But I don’t feel at home where I am now. It doesn’t feel right. Yes, I like the old homesteads. 21:30

22:50 I write too, it’s just something. I’ve done a lot of work with Indigenous people, I’m actually an anthropologist and so. I’ve lived up in the communities and worked with people and have done a lot of writing about that you see. And I’d like to put it all together, it takes a lot of time. And I’m so busy, I’m working on too many things I suppose. And I’m working on present research going on like the DNA research and the things that are happening now are really exciting. And exciting for me, because of the things that they can do now, that they couldn’t do 20-30 years ago. And I had my DNA tested, and I’m a cousin to King Richard III, yeah really. They got his DNA ‘cause he was dug up, he was buried after the Bosworth , the Field Bosworth battle, were he was killed, he was buried in a cemetery, anyway it was all on the news, but they dug up his skeleton and reburied him in Leicaster cathedral, next year, so they got his DNA .....24:49

I see that they have to do something that’s nice. Like filling them with water, or make them in the future they’ll be beautiful gardens and maybe even houses on them. I see it all going. But I’m looking a long way ahead. I see the coal mines going. I thinks it’s a necessity. Something’s going to happen. I don’t think they can keep on taking out more coal because the earth is going to respond , they’ll have problems like cave-ins and sinkholes and things and eventually, and the people will speak up because they have other sort of coal seam gas mining coming in and they are talking about that and people are protesting. So I think it’ll have to be some other form of power, but I think Morwell will remain a little famous town sitting there. Because it’s a beautiful spot . The country itself is so beautiful, its such a beautiful area.

Interview #03 Partial transcript

Semi structured interview conducted by Hartmut Veit with a 23 year old journalist, who works for the local paper, lives near Morwell and has grown up in the Valley, been here all her life, on June 2016, duration: 35:30
Q: With me working with coal, how did you feel about that, when you first encountered that?
A: I thought it was great. Umm, I really, I’m not an artist but I appreciate what it does. It challenges people. It causes them to think differently about certain issues. Umm, you tell stories, and it captures, you know, sort of little historic pieces as well. So I, when I first heard what you were doing, well I thought, that’s something different. It’s new. It’s relevant. It’s like relevance is really a very important factor, and I don’t necessarily think that art is doing its job if its not challenging people. Yes so umm, yeah, no, I thought it was great and I was intrigued more than anything. Um, yeah …

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Interview #10 Partial transcript
Semi structured interview conducted by Hartmut Veit in June 2016 with a retired mathematician/local artist, who lived all his life in the Valley, resides in Morwell, duration: 1:23:11

Q: Background? A: I was born in Austria, we came to the Valley because dad was a, what do you call them? … an assisted immigrant, in 1956. And they were short of electricians, so … amm… so he worked in the open cut all his life. [Q: Hazelwood Open Cut Mine?] … am… It was Yalourn, yeah and later Morwell, which is why we moved. So I moved around a lot, cause I lived in Moe, Morwell, Yalourn, Newbrough, Churchill. I went to school here for 9 years here. The first three years were in [inaudible] … and came back to work here, after uni. So I worked here for seven years as well. Q: What did you study? A: I was a mathematician back then. [laughs]. Yeah, so coaldust – ghee – the old days, every day your shirt would be black, especially, because it would sort of settle on you, and that is despite you being active. It’s not like you’re standing still. It’s like you are a walking, environmental trap for it. Ehm and you know nowadays you hardly notice it. I could smell the coal in the air though – and for me it is actually comforting, ‘cause it’s warmth, ‘cause in our day briquette heaters where the most available heating source. Yeah that’s right. And it still does because it provide electricity, which keeps you warm. Q: so you don’t have a negative feeling about coal? A: No, actually none. I’m probably completely atypical. I’ve worked in the Open Cut [Hazelwood Open Cut Mine] myself for two years. Trades assistant. Because I was young and unqualified, any job really and going into the mine on a daily basis, yeah. And working with asbestos. I lined steam pipes using my hands to put on asbestos layers … [Q: adverse health problems?] A: Maybe. It’s hard to tell. What do you attribute you – you know my health is reasonable, dad’s still alive at 90. 92 and he’s well, like he was stronger than me a year or two ago. And he worked in the mine himself. Right at… he was
looking after the … you know the big dredgers, they run on rails and that’s all electric, so… yeah, that was his role.

Q: so what was your first experience of coal? A: Yeah, it was worst back then. Oh yes much worse. I came back… they started to fix, the worst was in the 60s and 70s because I was lecturing a Churchill at the then Monash, ehm… sorry then Gippsland Institute and at that stage they were starting to use precipitation filters and all sorts of stuff was introduced to get rid of the larger particles, because it was getting ridiculous. It was really bad. So they cleaned up their act a bit, but also our standards got higher. So people are still not pleased. And to be honest I think I can taste coal in the air some days. Certainly. Last night the final about the series on uranium, actually it was a Channel 9 thing, nd it was a series called something like ‘twisting the dragon’s tale’ or something like that , and ehm.. in Fukushima and what was the other place? And in the Russian, ehm anyway the two nuclear accidents – and like for some its an alternative that is proposed for coal here, cause all the other infrastructure required is already here. Well it’s not seriously contemplated, yet, but … the interesting thing is that trying to weigh up the health effects, and would you believe it, there is good evidence that coal is far worst than, … the Fukushima accident… lots of people died from the tidal wave. Not a single person documented to have died from radiation, despite the leak in Chenobyl, the best tally attributable to the disperion of radio-active dust basically is only 15. Yeah , now its well documented that going back to England for example with the coal mines and so on, and Black lung and so on, the death toll for coal was huge. Which ehm .. yet we worry about uranium … because we’re used to it. You get used to the risks that you are familiar with. [Q: so do you perceive coal negatively?] A: only strictly depending on circumstances. My whole family has been involved in coal. If we had asthma or something you’d feel very differently. Absolutely. No we’re lucky, I’m on the side of the hill away from the closest cuts. Which means we don’t get any coaldust. No. Well the house is possibly well sealed as well. I don’t even notice it in my garage. Which is not sealed. What I get is normal, kind of fiberous dust, dust that is just around. No, whereas when I was when looking at the houses to buy on the other side of the hill, and we’re only talking…ah…half a km away, there was coal coming down through the eves leaving traces on the walls as it fell. [Cinical loud Laugh. So despite their cleaning of the floor. So it depends very much were you live. And the orientation of the house, the wind, whether it is carrying it to you. I haven’t actually looked in my attic…But I haven’t got stuff coming down the wall. Hell no, I hate cleaning , so I clean, once every 3 or 4 months [laughs loudly] and never find any coal around our house, so it really does depend where you live, and interestingly that was one of the lessons of Fukushima. Some people have gone back into the prohibited zone because they were down wind, not upwind from the incident. And when they did a gigercount it was standard background whereas again a few kms
away in the other direction, it was 50 times the safe limit. It’s almost like a different microclimate, absolutely. So people should be told maybe. There’s no study done from house-to-house, street-to-street. No, but it wouldn’t be hard to do, if they wanted to. Its only a small population.

Q: So have you noticed people moving away? A: That is certainly the case. The population is less now than it was in the seventies. So, ehm. Well I get the feeling that people are slowly coming back because of the devaluation of the properties as a result of the fires. That happened in a massive way. After the fires I bought a completely renovated 4 bedroom, two bathroom house for $180,000 dollars. After the mine fire. It would have been a lot more before the fires. So there are winner and losers [Laughs loudly]. After the fires the prices plummeted, and they are starting to recover. But now we have rumours of closure. So that could keep it depressed.

….. They should have known about the fire danger, as it happened before. Yeah, they are very hard to put out once they getta hold. Ehm and there are cases in America where they are still burning a generation later. Regarding real estate I was actively looking and I’m pretty certain that’s changing again. Q: there seem to be a lot of empty shops? A:

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**Interview #11 Partial transcript**

Semi structured interview conducted by Hartmut Veit in June 2016 with a local mother, student and artist with 3 young girls, living in Morwell, duration: 34:18

… well, um, probably one of the first experiences –well like it [coal] has always been around, like it’s always been dusty, but I never attributed that to coal, as such. Um until, [….disruption by child…], coming home and mum’s saying – look, well where I grew up was, up on Connan Street [Morwell], which is at the bottom of the big hill, and walking home from school, you could – you can’t see it now because it’s all overgrown – but you could actually see the open-cut, when they extended it, um yeah excavated it, um so you could see the wind, um kinda get trapped in there and pick it up, and spread it over the town, so that, like mum would run out – and like – there’s towels on the line – there’s a , you know – there’s washing on the line, and it’s a big priority – I must – I just washed it, totally, [Laughing], and then, and then, when there were these kinda dust storms, well you could see all over the back porch, um, but that’s kinda always been the case, and the discussion around it is now very different, because we’ve had the mine fire. But it seems to me that, there’s the same amount of dust, that’s always been there – totally, but there’s um, a lot more conversation about it now, yeah – it’ll be interesting if, um that mine fire is actually is going to be the thing that, kinda brings all that, the bad air, into the conversation, and effects change. I think it – um, I’m not totally sure, but I think that it is
generating conversation is probably helpful, um, well yeah, it’s brought you here, you’re conducting research, and chatting about that. umm, yeah, I moved here, I moved in with my mum, when I was about 4, and I grew up on the same street, till I was about 16, yeah and then I moved out, but I was still in Morwell, and then I moved away for a few years, and then moved back…….[child interrupting]…..

Q: was coal ever talked about?
A: Well, not really. Well, only the …. [child interrupting]…..

My mum was a single mum, who didn’t work …. [child interrupting]….. Yeah, so she didn’t work…so it wasn’t … um, no just that, when I was a kid, I didn’t realise that there was more than one power station, the three that, look the same, I just thought were the same, um, they were cloud machines, - kinda darkly ironic; [laughs loudly], that’s just something I don’t even think I told her about, that was just me thinking about things, cause they were always pumping it out and then they blend into the clouds, and you know, cloud machines, yeap, [more laughing], …

….sometimes you can see it [the inversion layer], because we get out of town quite a bit, sometimes you can see, like the dome, like and that, this means, - that “you’re home” – [laughing]- that’s like this weird, kinda “welcome home” in the smog, yeah.

But then, I think, just those visual experiences and um, sensory experiences of mine, that I didn’t really grow up knowing [inaudible]…. I did have asthma, but um, I kinda just grew out of it. Yeah, well I guess my mum smoked for years as well, so, and in the house, and then um, and didn’t, um, you know it was 20 years ago, so that thinking then the thinking around that was different back then, and then of course she got new blinds so they couldn’t smoke in the house anymore. ..[laughing]… and so, given that environment, I don’t think that there was too much conversation around the effect that the coal was having, on our, um, on my asthma, or her asthma.

There used to be like, my only connection to those power stations and things like that were, when I friends, who used to go to the big SEC [State Electricity Commission] barbeques, you know, some we’ve always known that’s the industry around here and I know people’s dad that were there and, um, that was atenous connection. …[child interrupting…]

Q: where were you when the minefire hit?
A: We were in Newcastle, when we got the, um, …. Another coal town… [laughs out loud]…. But the’re in the process of regeneration, they’ve been through um, gentrified, …[… child interrupting….]. We were up, I think around January, we were up there for the first two weeks of it, and um, and my mum was still home, in the same street that I grew up on, and I rang her, and like checking in on her, and I was like trying to encourage her, to get, um, out of town, but,
um, she’s up on a hill, and so there was, a … it would come and go, the smell, yeah and the smoke, … I tried to encourage her to go and stay out of town, but she wouldn’t. Nah. Nah, Nah, we’ll be fine. She had to go to work as well, so that relocating wasn’t really an option – work continued. She worked in the daycare, so like parents still had to put their kids in the daycare, and she had to, you know, … it’s a funny kinda thing, life just kinda went on, um and there was all this media attention, but when we drove home, um, two weeks later, there was the really thick dome over the town, and you could smell it from about, well we were coming in from Lakes Enterance way, and um, so you sort of start smelling it from Rosedale, and we had the windows up, um and then, so it was quite ominous to return home to that dark smog. But then, I had friends that relocated because of asthma. But then when you sort of got into it, well I was working in a café, you just kinda have to get on with it, so the working part of the town continued, yeah, which was, well yeah, so the café that I was working at is in the centre of town, and the main business is over lunch, so people from around town on their lunchbreak, from the Council, um the […] child interrupting […] .. so and I was thinking about that and I kinda thought that … […] child interrupting […] .. it kinda shows resilience… the fact that everyone just sort of had to kinda had to get on with it. Like, and even there was like that relocation benefits and things like that as well, um, […] child interrupting […] we got a relocation benefit even though we come back two weeks later, and it was to get out of town, which is a great incentive – but it was like – a couple hundred dollars, um to stay in a caravan park outa town if that what you were going to do, if you had no other relatives or like it it wasn’t enough – it was sort of a token effort – and I think it was also exploited as well, people who genuinely needed it could get one of them but it others didn’t, so I think it would have been better to be means tested and maybe give more to the people who genuinely needed it more.

So you just kinda got on with it, like we would um, open up the house when it was about to clear, and then, within a matter of […] child interrupting […] so we would open up the house when it was aclear morning and then within the next, like it would change really quickly – well run, let’s close the windows! And you still need to get the fresh air in, um when you could, 19:28

…. Except when, um, so the coal around the house and sometimes the kids would have, like coal around their nostrils, and black around the nose, …. And when you pat the dogs, like they still needed to go outside and the [coal]dust would come off, and the car got trashed

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Interview #12 Partial transcript

Semi structured interview conducted by Hartmut Veit on 2 July 2016 with a senior nursing team leader and healthcare professional from Traralgon, duration: 50:28

….A: Coal, was just seen as a raw product that created the power. As a healthworker, we had the highest rates of asthmas, particularly childhood asthma in the State. I’m pretty sure that still stands. And when I was a young adult we would drive out of the Latrobe Valley, up into, at the back of Gormandale, going up the hill. And you could sit and see the smog. Right across the entire area. And because you are in a valley, it sits like a blanket. And it is in those moments that you realise that things weren’t good. And when as a health professional you are seeing all the asthma, and children, but just generally. But when you just came down and were in the soup – it’s a bit like a frog boiling in water, slowly. You don’t even notice it. In the end of the day, people probably saw he employment, and the education as more valuable than the risk. But at the same time the SEC when I was a kid, looked after their property, and they used to call it Slow- Easy – Comfortable, right, it employed lots of people. And there was a job for everybody. And I think that the infrastructure was really well looked after, and maintained. ….

The SEC, in my recollection, the SEC was an integral part of the community. They, like the APM, they were a massive employer. .. In the Latrobe Valley people don’t talk about the mine, they see themselves as power suppliers. The mine is called an open cut anyway. It’s never referred to as a mine. People don’t consider themselves as miners, because they are not miners. They generate power for the State. When I was in High School. It was the biggest recruiter of young people in the whole Latrobe Valley. And lots and lots of people went for jobs ther, I went for jobs there, …..

[20:56] …. There are a number of things, this poster, umm shows an old woman, that is smoking, and that we know from a health perspective that is not a good thing, because it causes cancer. They’re showing an old person smoking because she’s apparently been doing it for 40 years. So in that context it’s appropriate. ….. But what’s inappropriate with this poster is the fact that they have called this woman Hazelwood; now people smoking choose to do it, and become addicted; it’s not done to them. And that’s important to remember. This speaks to me of victim blaming, that – to personalise it in a human way and anthropomorphising a mine, and an industry – it says to me that the people of the Valley are complicit in it – that they are – choosing to do – to do damage- to cause damage – or are too stupid- but that’s a whole other layer – but there are a couple of things here:
She’s been smoking for 40 years, um… then, she sets herself on fire – She didn’t set herself on fire! That was an arson thing… – but the thing about this is that it (poster) says: ..she set herself on fire. She did not do that. The mine didn’t set itself on fire. No she didn’t. um and “she’s killing everyone around her” that’s a gross, outrageous statement! Is she doing that? The company that runs the mine, might be doing that, the company that runs the mine, that do look after the infrastructure, for fire-fighting might be doing that, - but this Hazelwood character is the community to me – the resident is not the one who has done that. She certainly didn’t set herself on fire. Why is she still smoking? Because the Government allows a private company to run a coal mine without fire-fighting equipment. To me this (poster) tells me that whoever made this poster, - looking at this old woman – she’s a historical relic – of poor health – poor behaviour – and she looks somewhat ignorant – and she looks somewhat pathetic, she looks somewhat, of umm, broken victim, but the text says that she’s causing all this. She’s also a perpetrator. So I think there’s a lot of mixed messages in this. And I think its, its also not taking into account, what we’ve talked about before, the fact that previously the corporate relationship that the old SEC had, um with the community, was probably symbiotic, I would say. You know. Um, and up till then it was really good. People came to the Valley, because it was a good place to be, and it was a good place to learn– umm we immigrated and we came for opportunity – and we ended up in the Valley and made it our home. So, uhm - the other thing about this poster Hart is that – um – it divorces the people who live in the cities and who use the power – it abrogates their responsibility for this whole demand for massive amounts of power as well. We are all complicit in this. Um, but we get of scot free because Hazelwood is the problem. She’s the problem. And she’s doing it to herself, and she’s doing it to us all. We’re all involved in that, so to me, - I think the lense is far too narrow, and it doesn’t look at all the complexities. But to me it just says the individual community member - Hazelwood – is the problem. She’s done it to herself – she’s made all these problems happen, she’s still continues to do so – and that’s to short, too narrow a lense to look at it through – and I think it misses the point, that one, there is this great historical relationship. Two, some of the changes, the Government changes - Government allowing the company to de-commission all the fire-fighting equipment- to allow, everybody to be killed around her, or to be burning out of control, for 45 days , allowed that to happen. And that now there is a disconnect between the community and the creation of power, because now it’s privately owned. It’s not a community asset, and the other thing that is happenening is this woman also looks like, that, she’s is also potentially the remnant of what’s going to be left when all these power stations are closed down and decommissioned. What’s going to be left? A very sad old "Hazelwood". Yeah
I think that’s quite cheeky. The other thing that I personally think is quite cheeky is that, when we did speak to Gabrielle, she hadn’t actually taken this to a focus group of people, who represent ‘Hazelwood’ (Morwell), um to see what their reaction would be. She took it to a focus group of people in Melbourne, up in the city, or she showed it to people in town basically, she didn’t show it to the people, who lived locally, - who would have been extraordinarily offended. I’m offended, I was offended because I’m an educated healthcare professional person, um I am politically engaged and aware – and the way I am portrayed – as a run down, blamed victim. Basically it says to me: she deserves what she gets. And this type of artwork – or these types of statements don’t protect the people who live here. It doesn’t support them, as part of the bigger community. These people have supported our lifestyle and they have been the quiet faceless people behind the energy that has allowed Melbourne to go ahead and become what it is. Or Victoria in fact. And do we just leave them stranded now? Do they just get left behind? What support are they going to get? How is it going to be cleaned up? Who’s going to pay for that? What can be injected into this community in terms of employment? Opportunities? Or is it going to be a ghost town? Like Morwell. When I look at Morwell I am astonished, Morwell used to be a vibrant, really great place to go to. When I walk around the streets of Morwell recently, and all the remaining shops that were there are two dollar shops, op shops, and a series of Centrelink, Anglicare, lawyers, legal services, Alcohol, Drug and alcohol problems – ohh and a very fancy railway station – ohh and god, yeah the Council building. Which is astonishingly attractive and the juxtaposition between that and the ghetto of some of the shopping strips – its disgraceful. I’m not currently familiar with what the unemployment rates are in the Latrobe valley, but I would expect, particularly in youth unemployment to be quite high. And when you are actually taking industry, and not replacing it with anything else, what’s going to happen? You’ve got all of this cheap housing, and people will go there because of the cheap housing – but they will be doing it – um on social security I suspect - if there is no work to be had. So there will be massive, massive costs to the community anyway umm. So the next step is going to be how one: how is the place cleaned up, how it is remediated, and how the mine – and the town – all of it – you can’t just do one and not the other – the mine can easily catch fire again - absolutely - yeah because there is plenty of coal in the ground, um and if that is not managed yeah its very (?), but not only that, how do you, do you just walk away? Is it another Chernobyl where its uninhabitable? And if you just close the door, and walk away.

And the imminent closure of the APM [Australian Paper Mill], that’s another nail in the coffin. I think Traralgon is relatively safe currently. Traralgon when there were some government services decentralised, they came down to Traralgon. There was new employment. Local Government, as well. There is probably enough there to sustain it. But for Moe and Morwell,
I’m not quite sure. It is a concern. I don’t know where it’s going to go… and I think there is a high level of anxiety in the community – and of course with that there will – that in conjunction with declining employment and opportunities, add to that the physical health effects of living near a coal mine, breathing in coal, umm you’re going to have a very sick community. Mentally, and physically. Living on despair and decline. It sounds really awful, it does. And, And Who’s responsible? That’s a good question! With the Poster it’s says they are responsible for it – it’s the residents. Because the mine and the residents are intimately linked. And have been for years. Well who’s responsible, you know, as an old socialist, we all are, the Government is and now also the organisation who owns the mine and who’s been profiteering – and to a degree the French Government as well. The coal itself, and this may sound like a strange thing, but I think, the thought has occurred to me that coal itself as a material is a complete innocent – in its pure state – it’s only um it’s only the baddie, the bad material – it is personified as the bad material because what we do with it. Right? It’s all about how we use it. What we do with it. And how we divorce ourselves from that relationship by, and I guess in a way, thinking about it when I was a child and young adult, I never thought about coal, never thought about it, except when I was in the powerstation passed out –never thought about it – like I said we weren’t coal miners – we were power generators, and – its an interesting…. Um …you know. that’s potentially a manufactured culture. [referring to SEC] But they were… socially responsible. But now ‘cause [inaudible]… but coal is also the abused and innocent too. Really. It’s a material. It doesn’t do anything. Except exists. But its how we treat it, it’s what we do with it. And our relations to it as well. It’s abusive, in a way. Umm that’s the irony isn’t it. The irony is it’s an open cut, it’s a visible sore. A visible scare on the surface of the landscape. And yet we still, umm don’t see it.

Q: How about what I do with coal in my artwork? Is it a good thing, or a bad thing?

Ohh, I think it’s a fantastic thing. It’s extremely controversial. The experience of that young family that we saw, who had never seen coal. When you handed it to them and they touched it, they felt it. They went wow! Wow! This is amazing. This is coal. And then the reaction of an art group to an installation [Black carpet], to an installation of coal dust was – NOT IN MY BACKYARD! Or how dare you bring that dirt into our community! When the dirt is already there! But when you put it into people’s faces, they are extremely confronted by it. They are offended by it. They are enamoured by it. It is really polarising. I think it’s fantastic. I think it’s great. And putting that material into the front, in front of people’s faces where they have to be, where they are [inaudible], and they have to think about it, umm and think about their own personal relationship to do with it….. It’s confronting, it’s highly politicised, your artwork, I
guess. Which is a good thing. I think it’s a good thing. Umm … and I, because it is a polarisation, it does show how conflicted the community is as well. [43:51]

[46:51] …You can’t just do that [shut down coal], unless you have something to go to, can you? As the man from Environment Victoria said, the stone age didn’t finish because they ran out of stones, they developed something better, so we could move away from that.. and we’re not going to run out of coal for a very long time. But it will close down because we have something better, and that’s where we need to focus our energy on. …..[47:33] We just need to get on and fix the problem that has been created by all of us.

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3. Appendices: Media published

During the research period I was interviewed and featured a number of times on local and national radio and in the local media. Some of these are presented here as they have influenced the field under observation.

ABC Gippsland

http://www.abc.net.au/local/photos/2015/07/07/4268881.htm

7 July, 2015 10:40AM AEST

**Melbourne artist turns Gippsland coal into art**

By Zoe Ferguson

Coal has been a staple of the Gippsland economy for decades, and one Melbourne artist is transporting lumps from the Hazelwood mine into galleries to change perspectives and raise awareness.

"I like the agency of coal - once it's out of the earth it's hard to control," said artist Hartmut Veit.

(Supplied: Hartmut Veit)
Hartmut says using coal in art can be a messy process. (Supplied: Hartmut Veit)
Melbourne artist Hartmut Veit wanted to create an artwork using coal in 2011 but found it hard to get his hands on it. "It was a long process of getting it, no one would respond or get back to me," he said.

"Then in 2013 I got hold of a person who was very helpful and I had to reassure them I wasn't going to dump it for political actions or give them a hard time for using it."

Hartmut finally established a relationship with workers at the Hazelwood mine and started making trips to the Latrobe Valley to get his new art material.

"I like the agency of coal - once it's out of the earth it's hard to control," Hartmut said.

"It's got bad press for being a negative thing, but as a material it's neither good or bad it's what we do with it. Once dug up it has a life of its own."

Using coal in art can be a messy process, Hartmut says, but it's worth it to reveal ignored relationships between people and matter.

"I put fine coal particles on the gallery floor and people walk on it and take it everywhere - so they interact with it, whether they know it or not, showing how complicit we can be with materials in our lives," Hartmut said.

"I also place lumps of it next to neon signs to convey it's converted into electricity."

**Consuming coal**

As his father was a miner, Hartmut grew up in mining towns around the world.

"In that environment you're at the forefront of the process and any issues, but in the city you just flick the switch and don't think about how it works - that's why I want to work in the Latrobe Valley so I can think about it and engage with the community," Hartmut said.
"We live in a fast moving consumer society where we just take a lot of these materials and things like coal for granted.

"Coal has been dug up to benefit humanity, and has a long association as a material that enables prosperity."

**Coal as art**

By placing coal in an art gallery transforms its context and its message.

"It allows people to ask what it is and raise curiosity - language is abstract so putting an object or material in a space that is framed by art, elevates the importance of it," Hartmut said.

"Art can reorientate our perception or relationship to a material - a lot of people talk about coal and politics but art can play a role in reshaping the perceptions and questioning these issues from a different angle." Hartmut says his intention is not to lecture, but to raise awareness of how people can be complicit in their daily actions. "I want to shift some philosophical underpinnings of how we look at coal," he said.

"I'd like people to be more mindful of how we live our lives and how we engage with the material world and if art can raise a bit of that awareness then it's already doing its job."

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**ABC NEWS**


**Hazelwood mine coal dust art exhibition opens as power station prepares to close**

ABC Gippsland By Laura Poole  (Posted 13 Feb 2017, 2:53pm 13 Feb 2017, 2:53pm)

**Coal footprints**

The opening of an art exhibition using coal from Hazelwood mine will coincide with the final weeks of Hazelwood power station's operation.

The brown coal mine, which has been labelled the world’s dirtiest by a conservation group, will close at the end of March in Victoria’s Latrobe Valley.

Victorian artist Hartmut Veit negotiated access to the mine through its French owner Engie, and has created strong images with coal, using coal dust particles in particular.

While a lot of his visual art draws on the dirtiness of working with coal as an art medium, Veit insists this is not a political message.

Veit spent years living in close proximity to the mine and collected rubbish and coal dust in the nearby surrounds.
Photo: Artist Hartmut Veit uses brown coal dust in his work. (Supplied: Hartmut Veit)

Photo: Veit's work uses coal and coal dust collected in Victoria's Latrobe Valley. (ABC Gippsland: Laura Poole)
"There seems to be a stalemate where nothing is changing fast enough, there's political inertia," he said. "I have a foot in both camps. I see myself as a bit of an activist but at the same time, my father was a miner, I grew up in mining communities and without some of the resources Australia wouldn't be where it is.

"I'm sort of a bit conflicted myself. So I can really relate to the people who are going to be affected by the mine closure, but at the same time I think it's time for electricity to be generated in a more sustainable way."

**Drawing attention to health effects**

Veit hopes his exhibition will start conversations about the future use of coal.

Tree branches hung upside down will make up one of the exhibits on display.

Veit is drawing a link between the origins of coal — trees decomposing over thousands of years — and said he also wanted to draw attention to the health ramifications of living near a brown coal mine.

He worked in [Morwell shortly after the mine fire in 2014](#), where some members of the community were evacuated due to black acrid smoke.

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**Photo:** Veit cleans streets in Morwell. He collected rubbish and coal dust in the Latrobe Valley to use in his exhibitions. (Supplied: Hartmut Veit)

Veit now works and lives in the same space, with his art studio also his home. The challenges of living in a studio where the medium of choice is coal dust include an element of mess.
"I'm looking forward to finishing this exhibition so I can clean it up a bit," he said.

"I live with the coal in the space and it's a bit of a love-hate relationship. Sometimes I don't want to see it any more.

"You breathe this stuff in and you spit out a lot of black stuff out of my nose.

"I try and protect myself as much as possible, but when you're living in it all the time it's sort of like a little microcosm of what really is the bigger cultural and economic situation."

The exhibition is on display at the Victorian College of the Arts from Wednesday.


Latrobe Valley Express
Swept away by coal
Emma Watson– 6 Jun 2016

Changes: Hartmut Veit has recently opened a pop-up space in Morwell's Commercial Road, named the COALounge, where he'll display an upcoming work, 'Sweeping Changes'. photograph Hayley Mills

From dust to diamonds; from coal to clean.
German native and now Latrobe Valley resident Hartmut Veit is embarking on a project to transform coal dust into diamond sculptures. After researching the controversial yet somewhat practical material for years, Hartmut wants to produce pieces that reflect a transitioning community.

It is political art, but he insists he is not a politician.

Perhaps he is more like a storyteller, describing the valuable mineral formed at high temperature and pressure under the earth's mantle as a "symbol of the resilience in the community".

"A community under great pressure sort of really comes together," he said.

Hartmut hopes to collect dust from Valley streets and locals, mix the dust with resin and eventually create individually-named coal diamond sculptures, "the size of a teapot, perhaps".

There could be a diamond named 'hope' or 'rose of the Valley', but first their creation lies in the hands of Latrobe Valley residents.

"Let's just see if the community wants to come forward and give me their old vacuum cleaner bags full of dust," Hartmut said.

The artist has placed a collection bin outside his current pop-up space on Morwell's Commercial Road, where an exhibition of his coal-related artwork is on display.

The aptly-named COALounge is open for an hour from noon on Mondays, Tuesdays, Fridays and Saturdays - blown-up prints of previous coal artwork line the walls. Hartmut is planning to produce the diamond sculptures in time for this month's Latrobe Valley Winter Night Festival.

Regardless of whether he makes the deadline, he'll have works-in-progress on display in the space, including the mobile cleaning device he's making to perform acts of cleaning Valley streets.

He has named the upcoming work 'Sweeping Changes', reflecting the period when "we're obviously very reliant on coal" but there's also a "need to take communities with you and change industries".

"I grew up in mining towns around the world and our family was always uprooted whenever the mines closed," Hartmut said.

"So I know from firsthand experience quite well what it feels like... the young people leave, the schools close and all those things.

"I hope that won't happen here. It doesn't feel like it will. But there's always that danger that can happen."

Hartmut is set to complete his Masters this year, based on research of the human relationship with geological material, using brown coal as an example.

He acknowledges not all will accept his work - it can confront people, challenge them - but he highlights his own experience as the son of a miner.

In the meantime, he's inviting the contemporary art audience and general public to check out his pop-up art gallery, have a chat and perhaps drop off some dust. "A piece of artwork can really sort of start creating these emotional responses," he said.

"That's really all you can hope for with art - to use it as a vehicle to increase thinking, awareness, change minds."
Dirty work: Artist Hartmut Veit’s has been using coal in his artwork to highlight issues around climate change, coal mining and how people use electricity. photograph tom morrison
NOT all art is a pretty picture on the wall.

In fact, it can be gritty, challenging, political.

Those are the words of Melbourne-based artist Hartmut Veit, who has been using coal to highlight issues around climate change, coal mining and how people use electricity.

"And how we take material things for granted," Mr Veit said.

"People vilify the material, but it is actually how people use the material that causes the damage."

As part of performances and an art installation at the weekend, Mr Veit physically swept coal dust from public spaces in Traralgon, portraying how "coal has a life of its own".

He called on the community to help him leave the "public space cleaner than it was", hoping for people to engage with his work.

He recognised his art form may cause debate, but said he didn't want everyone to agree.

"Coal is a very political material, so when you work with it, it brings up all these issues," he said.

Mr Veit grew up in different mining communities across the world, as his father was a miner, and hopes to base himself in a Morwell studio.

He is working towards a PhD with the Victorian College of the Arts, studying the "layered and complex" themes of coal.

Currently travelling between Melbourne and the Latrobe Valley, he plans to make the city population care about the "issues people of the Valley face".

"A lot of people talk about coal, but never really engage with it in the way I as an artist do," he said.

"People are often surprised to see coal and it astonishes me.

"At the same time I am trying to get them to think and question some of their assumptions."

Mr Veit's weekend performances and art installations were part of this year's Latrobe Spring Festival.

He invited people to walk over the scattered coal dust, or Black Carpet as he named it, while two rooms of the VRI Hall featured coal paintings and coal light installations.

"It (coal) is not a black and white thing - it is enormously useful and has really given us the lifestyle and affluence we have had, but we can't continue to do this," Mr Veit said.

"People are discussing fossil fuels and carbon and the people in the Valley are at the forefront because the mines may close.

"I really just want to find out what people think of coal, how it's affecting their lives."
Latrobe Valley Express


Coal to tell the story

Farrah Plummer - 4 Aug 2014

On Thursday, a Melbourne-based artist drove to the Hazelwood open cut mine to collect his material of choice for his latest sculptures and drawings - a carload of brown coal.

For Hartmut Veit, coal is not only a power-generating fossil fuel, but capable of capturing the stories of the Morwell community in the wake of the February mine fire.
"I'm trying to find a certain beauty in it too and pushing the material to what it can also do, rather than just seeing it as something that you dig up and burn," Mr Veit said.

In the 'Vibrant Matter' community recovery project, to be launched this Thursday at Latrobe Regional Gallery, Mr Veit will use coal to create life portraits and abstracted sculptures of those affected by the disaster.

A broad spectrum of the community including firefighters, families, the elderly and working professionals will be interviewed as part of the work, and their voices and stories recorded to share their experience of the blaze.

"The first goal is to work with the community and facilitate a sense of healing and see how the community, five, six months down the track feels after what's happened with the fire," Mr Veit said.

Not foreign to the Latrobe Valley, Mr Veit received his Master's degree in Visual Art at the Gippsland Centre for Art and Design, now part of Federation University.

The artist has also been in consultation with clinical psychologist, Rob Gordon who specializes in working with people affected by emergencies and disasters.

Mr Veit said people affected by disasters often didn't have the language to deal with it.

"Through art, people start exploring something that they might otherwise stay away from. They can start developing the language around it, to better understand what's actually happening," Mr Veit said.

However, he stressed the project was not a therapy session and hopes to capture the lingering issues that remain in peoples' systems following the events.

"I hope what will come out is that people live in this community for different reasons and they see value in living here.

"It's often forgotten when you go through a traumatic time - the good things."

A free public information launch will be held on Thursday from 6pm to 7pm at the Community Information and Recovery Centre.

Free group workshops and individual sessions will be held on Wednesday, 13, 20 and 27 August and 3 and 10 September from 10am to 3pm. Expressions of interests close today and can be made by phoning 5128 5700.
Author/s:
Veit, Hartmut

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Material matters at the coalface: a socially-engaged art enquiry into the politics of coal, space and place

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