

What Water Knows

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Every time we breathe, we pull the world into our bodies: water vapor and oxygen and carbon and particulate matter and aerosols. ... To be a human means to be the land and water and air of our surroundings. We are the outside. We are our environment. We are losing, with the increase in aromatic hydrocarbons and methane and carbon, the animals and plants and air and water that compose us.¹

In the lead-up to the inaugural Toronto Biennial of Art in 2019, *The Shoreline Dilemma*, I could step outside of my apartment and stand in the middle of my residential intersection, looking south to Lake Ontario. I couldn't quite smell it, or feel the moisture of its air, or hear the crashing of waves and clambering of pebbles and refuse, but I could sense its state of being by the presence or absence of white caps and how turbid or vibrant its blue-green hue was. As a whole, it almost never freezes, and in the alchemy of the winter sun, the surface becomes a sheet of gold. But despite the fact that Toronto is a waterfront city, daily interaction and attunement to this body of water is a rarity for residents of an urban centre that in 1966 erected the "mistake by the lake" that is the Gardiner Expressway, a crumbling, concrete superhighway that effectively severed vital access to the shoreline and the lake, a sustaining element of human and more-than-human life.²

¹ Heather Davis, "The Land and Water and Air That We Are: Some Thoughts on COP21," *SFAQ: International Art and Culture*, March 15, 2016, <https://www.sfaq.us/2016/03/the-land-and-water-and-air-that-we-are-some-thoughts-on-cop-21/>.

² Laura Kane, "Gardiner Expressway: a brief history of Toronto's 'superhighway'," *Toronto Star*, February 5, 2014, https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2014/02/05/gardiner_expressway_a_brief_history_of_torontos_superhighway.html.

I would stand in my intersection and imagine a time, around thirteen thousand years ago, when I would have been underwater and the land was *still* the water, when Lake Ontario was the prehistoric proglacial Lake Iroquois, and when the shoreline *still* licked the edge of what is now Davenport Road, that high ridge that laterally bisects the city. If I had travelled back even earlier, to the Pleistocene epoch,³ I would have been more than a kilometre under the Laurentide Glacier, a sprawling sheet of ice that helped shape the land that carries me today.

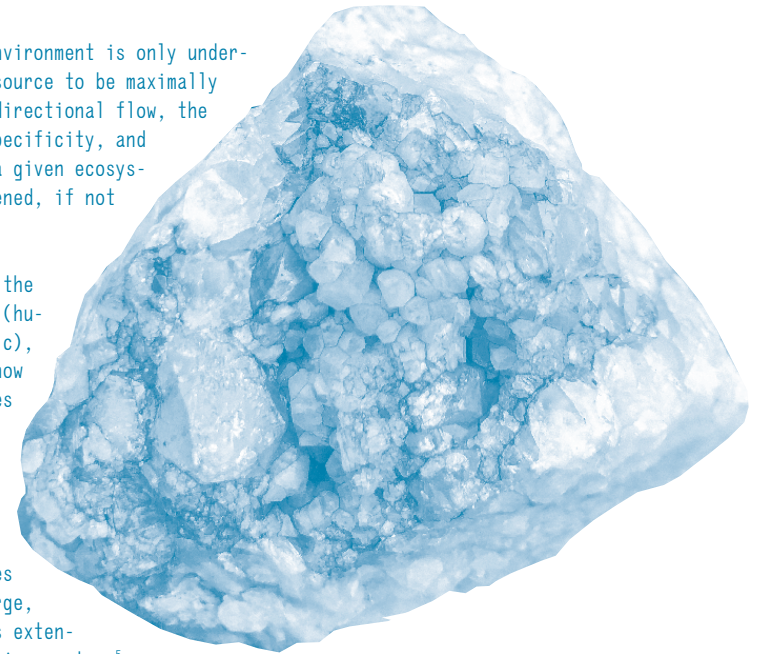
Changes in the contour of Lake Ontario's edge and its relationship to the land have occurred over varying scales of time. As noted, geological shifts have unfurled over the course of millennia. Human interventions, by comparison, have been executed in what is an instant. At the beginning of the twentieth century, most of the land south of Front Street was an active harbour that would later be subject to infill as part of the aggressively rapid development of an ever-expanding urban sprawl. Today, the Toronto Harbour Commission Building, erected in 1917, serves as a present-day marker for what once would have been waterfront in the area surrounding Union Station. Ironically, Canada's busiest transit hub is divorced from the city's now-hidden meandering waterways and aqueous passages that, prior to colonial settlement, had facilitated the movement of Indigenous people for thousands of years as they fished, traded, and engaged in social and spiritual gatherings. The forced extension of the land into the lake at various moments throughout the twentieth century serves as one example of the ways in which domination and control are exerted over a territory through infrastructure, a wielding of power resonant with the very ideology of colonialism.⁴

3 The Pleistocene Epoch is a geologic era best known as a time during which extensive ice sheets and other glaciers repeatedly formed on the landmasses and has been informally referred to as the "Great Ice Age" beginning approximately 2,580,000 and ending 11,700 years ago. Freezing and expanding, or melting and shrinking, the Laurentide Glacier was dynamic and ground away at the land through erosion and "isostatic rebound," the process of the rising and falling of land in relation to the pressure exerted by the ice versus water in its liquid state.

4 In attempting to understand the complex story of Toronto's shifting shoreline and its watersheds, I continue to look to the writing of Max Liboiron, who so brilliantly articulates, that "many people understand colonialism as a monolithic structure with roots exclusively in historical bad action, rather than a set of contemporary and evolving

And when an environment is only understood as a resource to be maximally used in a unidirectional flow, the complexity, specificity, and relations of a given ecosystem are flattened, if not eradicated.

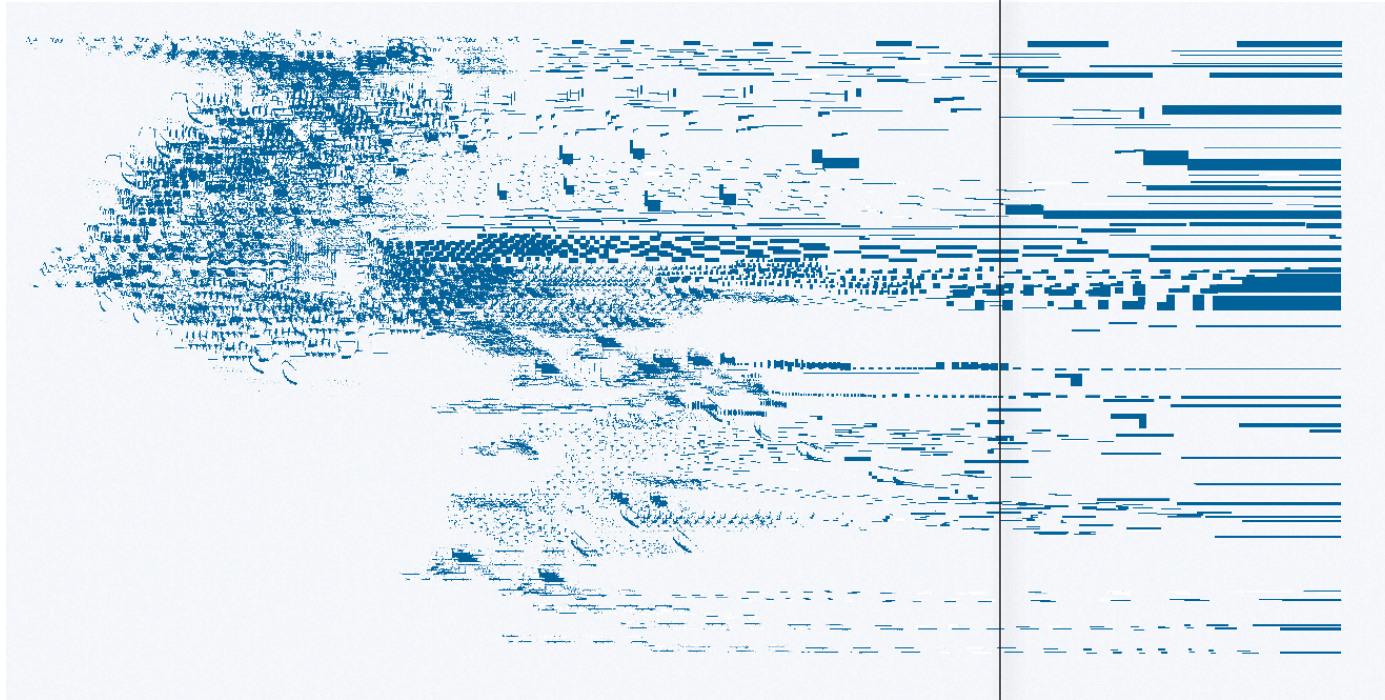
Regardless of the scale of time (human or geologic), the story of how a place changes can be read through the constitutive elements of an environment. Sometimes this looms large, like Toronto's extensive urban ravine system,⁵ a topographical remnant of the aforementioned erosion of glacial melt. Other times it is more subtle, as is the case with the lake's buried tributaries, which make themselves known through seasonal flooding and soggy basements, the quiet sound of water rushing underground, or the recognition of certain hydrophilic plant species that mark former river beds.⁶ It was not until I had experienced a Lost Rivers walk by founder and remarkable watershed thinker Helen Mills that my attention was drawn to these examples of the traces and remnants of buried



land relations that can be maintained by [well-intended environmental science and activism] and even good deeds." Max Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2021), 6.

5 Toronto's ravines form the largest urban ravine system in the world. Even in the face of exponential growth in the density and sprawl of the Greater Toronto Area, the approximately 110 square kilometres resist development.

6 I cannot fully express my gratitude for the work that has been done and continues to be done by Lost Rivers Toronto, a resource and group of hidden estuary historians who have led public walks since 1995. On a walk of Bickford Park with Helen, I remember her pointing to the mature weeping willows that lined what would have previously been the river banks of Garrison Creek. For more, see the Lost Rivers website, <http://lostrivers.ca>.



water systems that are hidden in plain sight throughout Toronto. In early 2020, as my partner and I moved from our proximity to the city's West End waterfront further north to Bracondale Hill, I became aware of another form of the marking of former tributaries in the landscape. Every day since our move, I have walked across the plaques embedded in the sidewalk of my neighbourhood that mark the former riverbanks of Garrison Creek. Prior to colonial settlement, the sidewalk would have been connected to oak, pine, and locust forests along the then *beach* trail, now Davenport Road, with its signature, previously mentioned high ridge. The area was originally a significant artery for hunting and travel for Indigenous peoples, but through the nineteenth century, the land had been cleared for agricultural and residential development before its burial in the 1920s, having become so polluted with sewage and refuse that it was a threat to "public health."

All water on this planet is always already there, just endlessly transformed and transforming, circulating in their own processes of self-renewal and turn-over. This is a matter of the hydrological cycle, a biogeochemical cycle describing the continuous movement of bodies of water to the atmosphere and back to the ground again. The earth neither gains nor relinquishes the water it harbours, which means the water that makes up and sustains human and more-than-human bodies and environments carries with it at least 3.9 billion years of history—an incomprehensible number of instances of aqueous reorganization, redistribution, and relocation. For example,

a water molecule that enters Lake Superior will take approximately 329 years to generally travel westward through each of the Great Lakes and arrive at the mouth of the St. Lawrence Seaway. If it does not exit the lake in some other way—through evaporation, runoff, entrance into water supplies, groundwater, or held over winter as ice—it will spend 186 years in Lake Superior (which is the largest of the interconnected Great Lakes) versus 7.5 years in the smaller basin of Lake Ontario.⁷ The water entering Lake Ontario today is thus 331 years into its journey through Erie, Huron, Michigan, and Superior, transforming the waters of Lake Ontario into a witness, a retentive time capsule for one of the world's largest surface freshwater ecosystems.

⁷ John B. Theberge, *Legacy: The Natural History of Ontario* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1989), 321–322.



For time immemorial, water transforms in and through our bodies as a crucial element of biological functions. This bodily thing I call *mine* is, has been, and will continue to be a part of the open hydrological cycle, a fluid continuum that works at every conceivable scale. I am undeniably dependent on and entangled with the waters of Lake Ontario as they move in and through me day in and day out, by way of the city's water treatment plants and mass of invisible network of water main pipes. Municipal water, wastewater, and stormwater infrastructure are out of sight and out of mind, as is the energy used for pumping. I am connected to more global waters, in meteorological systems much larger than myself, or in the way the food that nourishes me is grown, processed, and moved through international supply chains. These examples are merely a drop in the bucket when it comes to the waters that are ever-present in the systems and structures that support daily life.

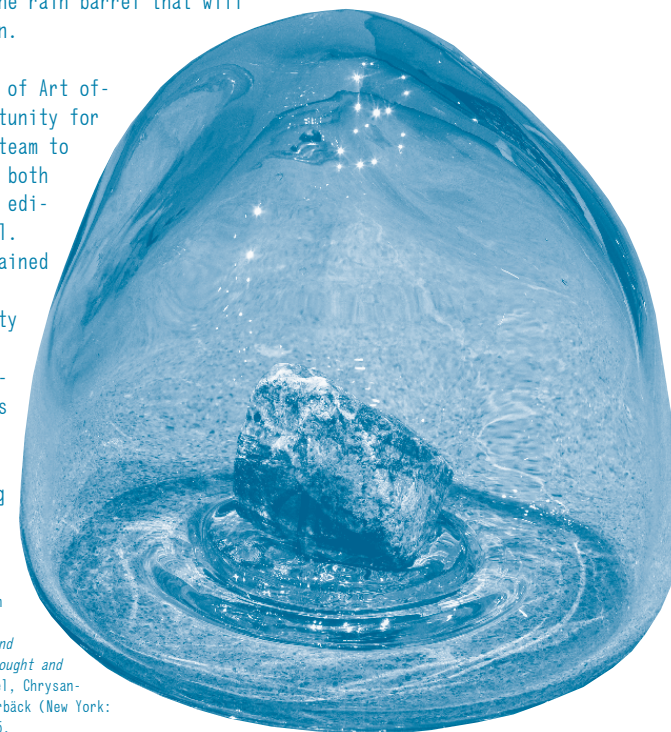
Looking to processes like the hydrological cycle allows me to wonder how I might learn with water, with the lake, and all that it knows and remembers. In this vein, I have long looked to feminist scholar and environmental humanities thinker Astrida Neimanis with her proposition that humans are themselves bodies of water, aqueously entangled across time and space:

As watery, we experience ourselves less as isolated entities, and more as oceanic eddies: I am a singular, dynamic whorl dissolving in a complex, fluid circulation. The space between ourselves and our others is at once as distant as the primeval sea, yet also closer than our own skin—the traces of those same oceanic beginnings still cycling through us, just pausing as this bodily thing we call *mine*. Water is between bodies, and of bodies, before us and beyond us, but also very presently this body, too. Our comfortable categories of thought begin to dissolve.

Water entangles our bodies in relations of gift, debt, theft, complicity, difference, and relation.⁸

The use of analogy here in framing the body as a body of water, as a part of the hydrological cycle, is deceptively simple. Yet, it signals a significant ideological shift that denies human exceptionalism and the separation of nature and culture, instead connecting the lake, my body, other more-than-human bodies, and the atmosphere as a part of a fluid continuum. The water in my fleshy fluid-filled vessel is just visiting and is a part of the kinship I share with the Great Lakes, with wastewater in the sewers below, with the sweat and spit that has washed down the drain, with prehistoric glaciers, with the storm system that moved through last week, with the water collected in the rain barrel that will be used in the garden.

The Toronto Biennial of Art offered the rare opportunity for the same curatorial team to work together across both the first and second editions of the Biennial. This fostered a sustained engagement between curators with the city and its perpetually transforming communities and with artists themselves. Within this scenario, what might shift in taking



8 Astrida Neimanis, "Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water," in *Undutiful Daughters: Mobilizing Future Concepts, Bodies and Subjectivities in Feminist Thought and Practice*, ed. Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni, and Fanny Söderbäck (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 85.

up water not as a literal subject but also as an elemental metaphor to inform curatorial methodology, process, and practice? Could aqueous attunement provide an opportunity to rethink process and practice as cultural producers, build curiosity in public discourse, and influence a broader social and cultural imaginary, too?⁹

If I carry through this analogy of the hydrological cycle, recognizing once more that all water is already there, just endlessly transformed and transforming, I realize, in an expanded sense, that this is a lesson on the circulation of all matter.¹⁰ Anyone who has worked on an exhibition will know that every decision comes at a material cost, often high and paid for by the environment, if not in the production and installation of artworks, then in the disposal and waste that follows. There is a paradox at the heart of engaging a public

9 Amitav Ghosh has been a guiding thinker for me in the significance of this potential shift, particularly through his writing in *The Great Derangement*, where I am reminded that while “the individual conscience is now increasingly seen as the battleground of choice for a conflict that is self-evidently a problem of the global commons, requiring collective action ... the scale of climate change is such that individual choices will make little difference” unless we change collective imaginaries to support actions. Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2016), 133.

10 What follows is an extension and exploration of the generative possibilities of hydrological thinking as an abstract conceptual framework. However, I would be remiss not to note that artists in the 2019 and 2022 Biennials have also taken up ideas of water and hydrology more literally as a subject. For example, Tsēm ā lgharas and Erin Siddall’s *Great Bear Money Rock* (2021–2022), wherein the lingering radioactivity of Great Bear Lake carries a history of uranium mining; or in the case of Susan Schuppli’s *Learning from Ice* (2019–ongoing), the ways in which water is a material witness, containing data that has captured changes in the earth’s climate across epochs.

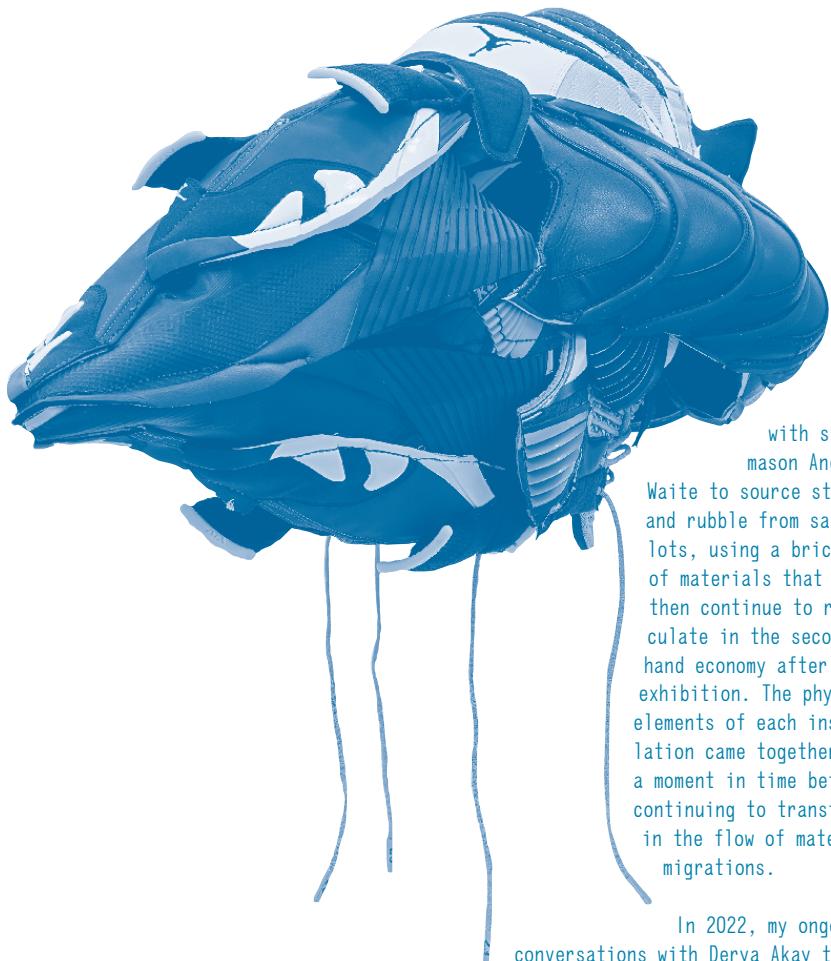


with critical issues of our time, like climate change, while producing a large-scale contemporary art event. But I am interested in staying with the trouble inherent in exploring creative means to minimize unnecessary harm in the production of artworks and exhibitions. Given that the Toronto Biennial focuses on supporting new commissions, I understood my role as a part of the curatorial team to question the material impacts of artwork production and to encourage practices of salvaging, material recycling, and redistribution of matter in a city that is constantly in a state of flux and (re)development.

If an analogous lesson from hydrology is that humans and more-than-humans, all water and matter, are entangled in the fluid condition of the world, it seems fitting that site-specific artworks might be comprised of found or pre-existing materials that come together for a temporary exhibition before continuing to circulate. Water thus reminds me to release preconceptions of fixity and embrace the fluidity of cycles.

Two commissions in 2019 come to mind that embody these conceptual links to cyclical processes. Adrian Blackwell’s *Isonomia in Toronto? (harbour)* was built entirely of salvaged ash wood from Sawmill Sid, an enterprise whose practice of carbon capture takes trees felled by the municipality and ensures they are processed into large planes meant for long-life end products (rather than wood chips, which release a greater amount of carbon back into the atmosphere). In the case of Curtis Talwst Santiago’s project *J’ouvert Temple*, he worked





with stonemason Andrew Waite to source stone and rubble from salvage lots, using a bricolage of materials that could then continue to recirculate in the second-hand economy after their exhibition. The physical elements of each installation came together for a moment in time before continuing to transform in the flow of material migrations.

In 2022, my ongoing conversations with Derya Akay toward their Biennial commission, *Queer*

Dowry, continue to orbit these questions of waste and impact in relation to artistic practice. These concerns have long been a part of their work in processes of salvaging, reclaiming, or working with found or “scrap” materials. Together, we continue to ask questions related to, for instance, common practices of artwork packing and the material sources and processes we rely on to do so: Could these processes and practices not be reimagined as a part of the work itself? How might an artist insert

themselves within these fluid and relative cycles of ongoing material transformation? Dana Prieto’s commission, *Footnotes for an Arsenal*, is intended to break back down into its constitutive materials as an ephemeral meditation on the impossibility of remediation in the face of land contaminated by toxic byproducts of industry. For the materials that make up their respective installations, the duration of the Biennial might be understood as a confluence—two or more flowing bodies of water joining into a single channel for a time before splitting apart and continuing to move across time and space.

It is conversations with individuals like Derya and Dana that allow me to focus on the thinking and being that support artistic and curatorial practice and collaboration. In his manifesto for the twenty-first century, artist and curator Rasheed Araeen argues that this is the role that artists could inhabit on a damaged planet: “[I]t is in fact artistic imagination, not art objects, which, once freed from the self-destructive narcissist ego, can enter this life and not only offer it salvation but put it on the path to a better future.”¹¹

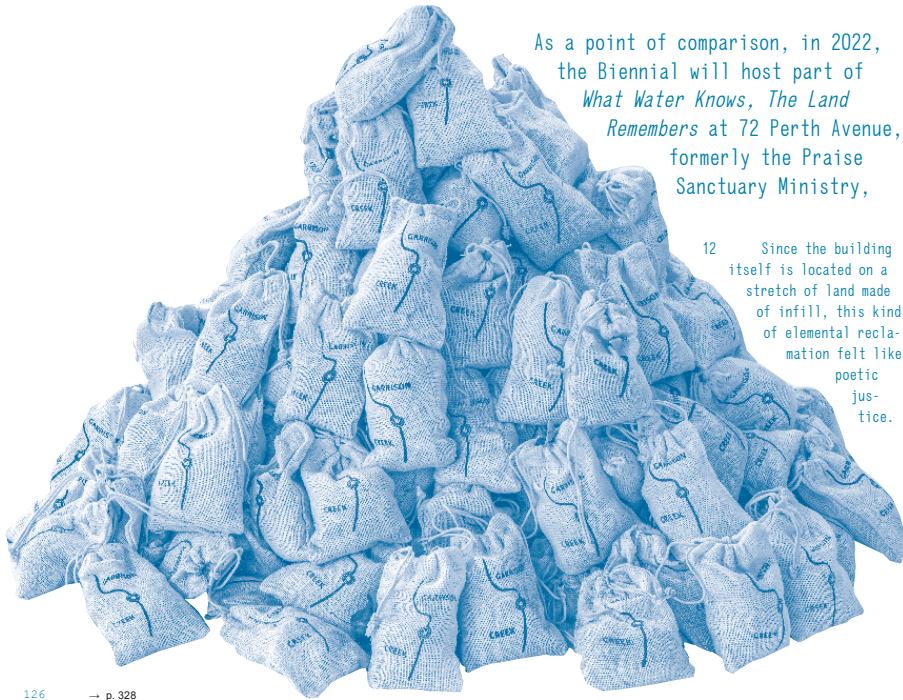
It is not just the materials that go into artistic production that allow for thinking through the footprint of exhibition-making. Given the cycles of development and Toronto’s crisis of space and affordability, can exhibitions sites make use of the skeletons of industrial decline in the interstitial moment between when a building is vacated and when it is inevitably demolished? I still remember clearly the first time I visited what would become the largest exhibition site for the inaugural Biennial exhibition, *The Shoreline Dilemma*, at 259 Lake Shore Boulevard East. This nondescript building tells the history of the Port Lands’ economic and industrial history, starting in 1945 from the time of its first tenant, the Standard Chemical Company (which produced methanol, formaldehyde, and charcoal). By 1954, the building was divided into a warehouse and showroom and leased by oil and electrical supply companies and a series of car dealerships. In 2018, the most recent tenant moved into a new facility, and the

11 Rasheed Araeen, “Eco-aesthetics: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century,” *Third Text* 23, no. 5 (September 2009): 679–684.

building was left dormant and in a state of disrepair. While unoccupied in the depths of winter, the pipes burst and flooded the building to the height of my hips, the destructive potential of water evident in the damage incurred by the drywall and flooring.¹² It also seemed that the tenant had left in a hurry, with the refuse of office workers lying in wait. Fortunately, this included an entire storeroom of steel shelving units, which would be cleaned up and repurposed to find their way into the installations of Syrus Marcus Ware's *Antarctica* (2019), Embassy of Imagination's *Sinaaqpagiaqtuut/The Long-Cut* (2019), and the Biennial's Public Programming and Learning hub. The building's fate was still indeterminate at this time, with discussions that it would be flattened to fill the void left by industrial decline with the ever-escalating development of high-density residential real estate. Yet, for the span of ten weeks, these circumstances allowed an expanse of space and square footage that otherwise could not be found downtown and became a dynamic space of exhibition and programming for public use.

As a point of comparison, in 2022, the Biennial will host part of *What Water Knows, The Land Remembers* at 72 Perth Avenue, formerly the Praise Sanctuary Ministry,

12 Since the building itself is located on a stretch of land made of infill, this kind of elemental reclamation felt like poetic justice.



Church of the Firstborn Apostolic, a Pentecostal church now relocated to North York. Since the move of the congregation, the site has been rented out as an event space, gallery, and showroom. It is now slated to become a mid-rise residential building, with the Biennial as its potential last occupant. The proposed building is expected to be nine stories and include affordable housing. Situated next to the rail path, the passing trains are audible inside this former place of worship. I have walked past this building countless times in its vacancy without ever imagining what had been or could be. Now, in the liminal space between its past and future use(s),

there is the possibility of intervention for transformation,¹³ and becoming attuned to these development cycles enables participation in the flow of the ever-shifting context of the city.

Within forgotten or unnoticed spaces, there are always traces of the past presently available if you look closely, and engagement with these traces can make visible unresolved tensions lingering in the present. What water knows is all around us, in this place we call Toronto, as the shifting shoreline and the lake's tributaries encourage me to reflect on and problematize the epistemological paradigms that are offered to make sense of and build the watery world or worlds around us. Yet, as the reflections in this text are pooling and coalescing at the time of writing, these ideas are also coming together for mere moments, from the lived experience in this body of water I call mine, before dispersing and continuing their movement through hydrological cycles of their own.

13 The strategy of taking up vacated spaces is one of many when thinking expansively about how to work in and with the specificity of a place. To me, this is intertwined with the question of how an arts organization can work with the rich and vast network of existing institutions in the city to ensure we can reuse or recycle elements of exhibition presentation (like plinths, vitrines) that are so often custom-made for single use before it makes its way to the landfill.

