A Guide for Formlessness

THESIS

Presented in partial fulfillment for the Degree Master of Fine Arts in the Graduate School of the Ohio State University

By

Alana Yon

Graduate Program in Art

The Ohio State University

2016

Master’s Examination Committee:

Associate Professor Suzanne Silver, Advisor
Professor Laura Lisbon
Associate Professor Amy Youngs
Professor Ann Hamilton
Abstract

I work between chaos and control, science and art, materiality and the self. My work challenges notions of beauty and breaks down systems of hierarchy. By giving agency to material, I speak for those things which cannot speak for themselves. My agency and the agency of the material blur across edges. I look to matter that exists along the periphery in an attempt to cultivate growth and knowledge. The work transforms and responds to the environment through processes of growth, decay, and fermentation and enacts a sensory experience. This is a guide for revealing the formlessness that exists in the world which strives to answer the question of how we manifest an awareness of self and material agency.
Vita

2012………………………………………………..B.F.A, Lipscomb University

2014-2016…………………………………………Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of Art, The Ohio State University

2016…………………………………………………..M.F.A., The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Art
# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................. ii

Vita ......................................................................................................................... iii

List of Images .......................................................................................................... v

A Guide For Formlessness ....................................................................................... 1

Chapter One: Materials ........................................................................................... 2

Chapter Two: Processes ........................................................................................... 6

Chapter Three: Control/Containment ..................................................................... 8

Chapter Four: Cultivation ......................................................................................... 10

Chapter Five: Recognition ...................................................................................... 15

Chapter Six: Beauty ................................................................................................ 17

Chapter Seven: Experience .................................................................................... 21

Chapter Eight: Space .............................................................................................. 24

Conclusion ............................................................................................................... 28

Appendix: Images .................................................................................................. 30

Bibliography ........................................................................................................... 35
List of Images

Image 1 A Thing Grown is a Thing Made.................................30
Image 2 Mushroom Tent..........................................................31
Image 3 Mushroom Tent detail...................................................32
Image 4 A Thing Grown is a Thing Made.................................33
Image 5 A Thing Grown is a Thing Made.................................34
A Guide for Formlessness

I make this or it makes itself. Through its growing, it is making. How do I respond to the nature of the material? How am I involved in the making of the work? How much control should I have? How is my touch in the work? How is my body in relation to the work?

These questions are addressed through chapters characterizing my work and practice with headings such as materials, processes, control/containment, cultivation, experience, recognition, beauty, and space. All of these point to a recognition of material and human agency as both distinct and inseparable. The work is described through material, process, and cultivation, laying out what it is doing to challenge notions of beauty, define modes of control, explore various spaces, and create a sensory experience. Through philosophers, art critics, artists, art historians, an anthropologist, and a mycologist, I weave through notions of what it means to make art and work with processes out of my control.
Chapter One: Materials

“Materiality is a rubric that tends to horizontalize the relations between humans, biota, and abiota. It draws human attention sideways, away from an ontologically ranked Great Chain of Being toward a greater appreciation of the complex entanglements of humans and nonhumans.”

-Jane Bennett, philosopher

In my practice I work with processes in an attempt to reveal the growing, discoloring, and decaying that take place. The work goes through transformations. It is important to consider the demands of the material and the material demands of the process. These demands set up parameters for me. How do I engage with boundaries? I begin with the material.

-straw-

Wheat straw is an agricultural leftover. This leftover is a remnant of harvesting wheat. I’m interested in straw as a leftover, for its association with farming and other agricultural processes, and for its inherent nutritional value. As a material, straw is difficult to contain or manipulate. Straw has a shiny, yellow color to it that can be likened to gold or blonde color. Since it is a fiber, it has visual associations with hair and in particular fair hair.

________________________

1 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Chapter 8 “Vitality and Self-interest”, 112
**handmade straw paper**

In the straw paper I have made, I’m interested in seeing what happens when straw is heavily manipulated into one surface. The flat surface has the potential for many things to take place. Handmade paper is associated with art practices and ways of making. The paper is a surface for drawing, staining, or placing other materials. I’m interested in using the paper as a platform for transformation to take place. Straw paper has the same fibrous qualities and color associations as straw. The surface feels cleaner as it has been manipulated and beaten to pull apart the fibers and spread them into one surface.

**cardboard**

Cardboard is an easily accessible material that I can reconstitute into processes of recycling and growth. As a highly manipulated material, like the straw paper, it has a flat surface that has the potential for many things to take place. There is also a perforated middle section that allows moisture and air to flow through. This is conducive for specific types of growth on its surface. When wet, cardboard begins to look like a skin. The idea of how water changes its color over time and the ways in which wet becomes dry can be seen in the work. The object or surface looks like an old piece of paper or artifact from another time or possibly a scroll that has been laid out. In certain moments, the cardboard also has the appearance of a moldy slice of bread that’s been sitting out for a while.
The stains on the cardboard take different forms each time the cardboard is sprayed with water. The stains are amorphous and organic. The seeping of water throughout the cardboard changes the stains on the surface. The water is simultaneously reflecting light and staining the cardboard.

When placed on the table it begins to look like an experiment or a dissection is taking place. This dissection is a study of the skin and its many layers. The cardboard was once a single piece but has now been taken apart and separated into its many layers that start to look like layered leaves or waste material for compost. The idea of something growing underneath the surface becomes more evident.

-soft plastic-

Soft plastic can be easily manipulated into sculptural forms with various levels of translucency and thickness ranging from a milky, thin sheet to a clear, thick surface. The interaction with light creates reflective surfaces in the clear plastic and diffuses the light throughout in the milky plastic. This translucency is very important in its interference with what can be seen through it or within it. The plastic acts as a screen that interferes with your perception. Along with its visual qualities, plastic physically separates the outside from the inside, the front from the back, or one side from another side serving to isolate the spores in the air and maintain a controlled environment.
-kombucha scobys-

I grow these skins as an artifact of the fermentation process. The scoby grows to the surface area of its container to protect the environment underneath. Comprised of cellulose, these skins are a kind of paper that I am able to grow and manipulate. They resemble a type of skin or fruit jerky. They look as though they are of the body. Light passes through the skins and illuminates them creating an amber glow. At times they seem as though they are leftover specimens from a preservation process, or they reference food and the preparation of jerky or rawhide.
Chapter Two: Processes

I want to understand the power of particular materials around me by working with processes of growth, decay, evaporation, containment, cultivation, and fermentation. The specific materials are oyster mushrooms, kombucha, and cardboard. These materials are constantly in process and because of this are alive as they enact their own agency.

-oyster mushrooms-

Oyster mushrooms are complex in their process requiring particular environmental conditions for growth. The success of the work does not depend on whether the oyster mushrooms grow but rather what happens when the material starts to change and undergo a transformation. With each iteration the oyster mushrooms reveals more of itself and what it needs in terms of moisture, temperature, nutrition, and sterilization of the environment, substrates, and water.

-kombucha-

I make ceramic vessels for the fermentation of kombucha. The vessels are a container holding and protecting liquid and solid substances. They frame and contain a process of transformation in which liquid becomes solid. Time is marked by stages of growth. Within one to two weeks, the culture develops a thin membrane along the surface. Within two to four weeks, the membrane grows
thicker resembling skin. The longer the culture remains along the surface, the thicker it gets. Within two months it can start developing patches of bumps. The process is not exact and does not happen the same way every time. The culture is replenished daily with sweetened black tea for consumption.

-cardboard-

Cardboard has layers. There is potential for growing and changing underneath the surface of the cardboard without completely revealing that growth in the work. There is a process taking place underneath the cardboard that requires coaxing to reveal itself slowly. The water itself has encouraged the growth of mold along the surface.
Chapter Three: Control/Containment

I experiment with various ways of control always aware of my touch in the work. In moments of control, my touch is like the seam in a plastic room or the lining of kombucha skins on top of each other. In some work, there is extreme control, like making ceramic vessels containing the fermentation of kombucha. My extreme influence in the work makes me feel uncomfortable. I’m trying to find that balance between myself and the material essence of my work. In working with ceramic vessels, I become more aware of my touch trying to control. The edges contain the liquid substance and take away from the muck and filth. What happens when the work is about the material and the process takes over, when it is in between control and non-control? How does the work change from a distilled form to a corrupted form? The work is between chaos and control.

Oyster mushrooms assert their agency as they are contained in various environments. They demand specific conditions in order to grow. What happens when I make work taking the necessary precautions and steps that a scientist would take? How does my way of making change the work? Growing fungi with the small knowledge I have has led to many unexpected outcomes. Approaching the work as a scientist creates many obstructions. As a scientist, I use specific equipment to sterilize material. My boundaries are the petri dishes in which I in-
oculate the agar and grow fungi. The hood, which circulates clean air for less contamination, is a small space which doesn’t allow for working with large materials or big surfaces. Once taken out of this environment, the fungi is at a high risk of contamination. How do I transition from this space to my space?

There is a tension between growing mushrooms for optimum results versus growing mushrooms for an art experience. Working with a material like mushrooms allows me to explore these different worlds. The fungi creates a common interest and is a process in which mycologists are particularly interested. Even though I’m attempting to work the way a scientist would, I want to find ways of implementing it into something much different. I don’t see science and art as separate areas of exploration. They overlap in ways that are interesting and revealing. Working with similar processes, scientists and artists create, experiment, and observe. Science explores biological processes in an attempt to understand nature. Art works in much the same way taking many different forms drawing attention to the visual in nature.
Chapter Four: Cultivation

“A gardener..., is a creator who calls into existence. But what existence will it be? That is the question of cultivation of the art or skill of the gardener.”

- Edyta Supinska-Polit, philosopher

Cultivation is a way to enter the work where it must continually be replenished. Artist Teresa Murak tends to her art as a gardener physically engaging with it to bring about a change. Philosopher Edyta Supinska-Polit writes about the art of Teresa Murak in an article entitled Seed and Growth: The Art of Teresa Murak. Supinska-Polit says of Teresa Murak, “her early works with seed are about growth and cultivation...Attention, protection, loving, care, and patience engender growth, which leads to existence, the purpose of creation.”

I give daily care to the processes in my work. It is a nurturing attention that is a way of interacting with the world. What does it mean to create? How do we engage with the world physically?

_____________________

2 Edyta Supinska-Polit, “Seed and Growth: The Art of Teresa Murak, 321
Through careful observation and considered engagement, I become aware of my body and how it interacts with the growing of mushrooms or the fermentation of liquid. Time passes, and tending is constant. Through cultivation, my body has access to the work, but I must also separate myself from the work and create boundaries.

I have to consider boundaries in many different ways.

1. In working with liquid I use carefully crafted vessels as containers or construct provisional spaces that allow the liquid to spread. The scale of the work changes requiring me to interact differently with each. On a gigantic scale, a lot of labor and liquid is involved. In a 14 ft x 17 ft room filled with kombucha, I am able to completely enter the work by walking through the wet substance touching it with my hands and feet. The liquid reaches beyond my body. I lose control of the work. It becomes messy. Working smaller I can contain the edges and control the form. The fermented liquid enacts a tiny world as a primordial substance that gives life.

Kombucha is an ecosystem of bacteria and yeast that must be replenished with sweet tea to survive. The bacteria and yeast feed off of the sugar and ferment. On a large scale, this tending is a huge task. The liquid evaporates at a
faster rate and requires constant renewal of sweet tea. Fermentation happens at a slower rate because of the large surface area. These subtle considerations require attention on a different level. Dry, warm air in the room causes the skin to dry out fast and stop fermenting. Wet, cool air keeps the culture alive longer and allows for slower fermentation. I am aware of environment, of changes in particular spaces. In a dry, warm room, my skin is dry and itchy. I relate my skin to the skin of the kombucha where both respond to the air around them.

Directions for making kombucha

Scoby (Symbiotic Culture of Bacteria and Yeast), mother culture
Black Tea or Green Tea
Sugar
Water

Step One- Boil water, and add sugar. Once the sugar has dissolved, place tea bags in the sugar water.

Step Two- Once the sweet tea is room temperature, pour inside a glass or ceramic container. Other materials for the container are acceptable if the kombucha is not going to be consumed.

Step Three- Place the scoby and excess liquid from the scoby with the sweet tea.

Step Four- Cover the opening of the container with a porous fabric.

Step Five- Allow a couple of weeks for fermentation.

Step Six- Continually add more sweet tea as the sugar is consumed and the liquid evaporates.
Fungi exist in different forms spreading as spores, traveling as mycelium, and at times revealing themselves as bodies. How do these stages visualize themselves in the work? Oyster mushrooms eat any organic substance. This opens up the possibility to work with many substances to cultivate a space for growth and consumption. I provide the material for the mushroom to begin growing. The mycelium grows in between the material and forms its own object. Over time bodies begin to form.

I have to consider environmental conditions for the mushroom such as diffuse lighting, sterile substrates, high humidity, and warm temperatures. Oyster mushrooms can easily become contaminated by mold in the air. Once this happens, the mold is competing with the mushroom for food. The mold will eventually take over and stop the mushroom from growing. I work to find ways to isolate the mushroom that will give it a chance to establish itself before it has to compete with other fungi. This push and pull is something that cannot be controlled.

Mycologist Paul Stamets says, in his book *Mushroom Cultivator*, “contamination is a fact of life for every cultivator.” In Stamets’ book, *Mycelium Running*, he addresses ways for growing fungi in many different spaces. He is trying to get away from the laboratory and create mushroom interventions outside, working in makeshift spaces that cannot be as easily controlled. Stamets defines
loose parameters for growing mushrooms outside where defaced sites are re-
claimed or large plots of land are repurposed as mushroom farms. Letting go of
the control allows for unplanned happenings.

Directions for containing spores in the air

Organic substrate
Nutritional yeast
Sugar
Water

Step One - Boil one to two cups of water. Once the water is boiled, add two parts nutri-
tional yeast to one part sugar.

Step Two - Pour liquid over the substrate allowing it to cover and soak through the mate-
rial.

Step Three - Let it sit out for a couple of hours. This allows for spores in the air to land
on the substrate.

Step Four - Place substrate covered in liquid substance in a contained environment such
as a fish tank with a covering. The environment must be comprised of surfaces that can
be sterilized and remain mold free.

Step Five - Water the environment daily with distilled water.

Chapter Five: Recognition

“A thing/the thing is made.”

-Eva Hesse.

Sometimes the work doesn’t grow. The material is enacting its own agency. Philosopher Jane Bennett refers to this as vital materiality, which is “the inflection of matter as vibrant, vital, energetic, lively, quivering, vibratory, evanescent, and effluesscent.” The work is not just about the agency of the material but about my power and the power of the material entangled together. How can I create something that enacts both of our agencies? Jane Bennett refers to these kinds of interactions as “agentic assemblages.” These assemblages are a way of being in the world by acknowledging a complexity of interactions and an overlapping of events.

5 Eva Hesse quote Briony Fer, Eva Hesse: Studiowork, 140.
6 Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter, Chapter 8 “Vitality and Self-interest”, 112.
7 Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter, Chapter 8, “Vitality and Self-Interest, 111.
Anthropologist Mary Douglas describes the power of recognizing things which are outside systems and boundaries. In her book *Purity and Danger*, she explores notions of purity. Cleanliness is a construct that gives power to those materials which are considered unclean. They have power because they are seen as dangerous. Douglas specifically speaks to ideas of form and formlessness to understand the power of materials and rituals. They exist beyond boundaries. “So many ideas about power are based on an idea of society as a series of forms contrasted with surrounding non-form.” Douglas goes on to say, “There is power in the forms and other power in the inarticulate areas, margins, confused lines, and beyond the external boundaries.”

8 I am working with materials on the edges and existing in between trying to enact ‘agentic assemblages’ that demand attention.

Chapter Six: Beauty

How do I challenge notions of beauty? Kombucha scobys are both translucent and cloudy. They are visceral and ephemeral enacting moments of disgust and brilliance. Time passes and the material changes. It is soft and sticky and over time becomes hard and brittle responding to the environment. Our bodies change in much the same way, revealing a vulnerability in the work as it goes through its stages. When wet, the scoby looks as if it is the shell of a living organism, the skin of a body, or the membrane around a sack of fluid. The scoby resembles these biological forms but in itself has no form. The form is in its edges which are shaped by the container. In that sense, it has no definable form. In the catalogue Formless: A User’s Guide, Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois reference Georges Bataille in his refusal to define formless stating that it is an operation. Bataille says, “It is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world.”

---

This operation is a declassification that Krauss and Bois transfer into an art historical context. Krauss and Bois use the concepts of Bataille to identify four operations that perform this action and to organize their 1996 Pompidou exhibition in terms of horizontality, base materialism, pulse, and entropy.  

“Modernism is grasped against the grain”, which is a mainstream, idealistic system of classification that has been challenged throughout art history. Modernism is continuing to be challenged, and the operations that Krauss and Bois lay out are still relevant today. My work begins with material and is about material agency. I am trying to negate hierarchy, while acknowledging that it is everywhere in the world around me. Matter exists in a lowly, other realm. I am working with matter in which “we have no idea, what makes no sense, what ‘has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm’”.

This defies conventional reasoning and speaks to a ‘base materialism’ that is ingrained in us. The material is both scatological and seductive, both repulsive and appealing.

12 Bois and Krauss, 29.  
In this contrast of disgust and attraction there is a difficult beauty. Beauty reveals our natural impulses towards materiality unencumbered by the hierarchical systems we have put in place. Ideas of art and beauty have long been discussed among scholars, philosophers, critics, and artists. Rather than getting caught up in notions of embracing or rejecting beauty in art, I want to challenge it. Beauty can describe the visual or the emotional, the seen or the unseen. There is beauty in the formless, the lowly, the other, and that beauty comes from the power of the material. There is beauty in the material’s ability to cause such visceral and instinctual reactions.

Horizontality is a way of existing that engages with modes of hierarchy in terms of orientation. What is horizontal is lesser. Horizontalizing engages the body in a different way. In experiencing the work, the viewer might observe the physicality of the work in a more visceral way. In most cases the viewer is looking down on the work as it spreads outward. With my kombucha pieces, there is an endless possibility of moving outward. Gravity impacts the liquid and increases its own natural proclivity to spread.

The mushroom work also engages in horizontality. The material that the mushrooms eat can be placed in piles, spread along the floor, or stuffed into sacks. The straw and grain have weight. Even the way in which mushroom mycelium grows speaks to an expansion as they seek out more nutrients to consume. Mushrooms reveal themselves through their forming. Their mycelium cre-
ates objects without spaces and gaps. They are delicate and strong as they go through stages.

Entropy is a movement toward disorder. By allowing the processes I work with to follow their own agency, they become less controlled. They flow through cycles of decomposition, recycling, seeping, shedding, evaporating, and drying out. Our bodies go through these same processes. They are un-contained in their own rhythms, and as time passes move towards an inevitable state of disorder. This movement towards entropy is a natural and real certainty of life and all living matter.
Chapter Seven: Experience

“I have found a place where I can work with sourdough. I reach deep into a swamp, pull out the soft material and embed the sourdough inside…”  

- Teresa Murak, artist

We physically engage with the world through our senses. We touch, see, smell, hear, and taste constantly and simultaneously. Through our senses we are learning and understanding our surroundings in a way that challenges Western notions of knowledge exchange. Art critic and Fluxus expert, Hannah Higgins, author of *Fluxus Experience*, writes about the idea of experience through the works of Fluxus artists. In Fluxus you and everything around you become entangled during an experience. It is difficult to separate yourself, which shows how experience has a “capacity to create a sense of continuity with the world.”

Higgins delves deeper into this concept of what a Fluxus Experience could be in the first chapter entitled *Information and Experience*. Fluxus work engages with notions of how we see and feel.

________

15 Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience, Preface*, XIV.
Higgins says, “if a piece is not about things but actually is them, then the signify-ing chain often applied to visual art in semiotic analyses needs to be modified to make physical or actual experiences central to the process of signification.”\textsuperscript{16} More importantly Higgins says that this mode of understanding “problematises the Western metaphysics” of Plato and Aristotle separating what we experience from what we know and think.\textsuperscript{17} This is something that has been discussed by many philosophers and art critics, but Higgins addresses this in the context of art making and art experience and in particular with the works of Fluxus artists.

Through making and experiencing the work, we gain knowledge of the world around us. There is no separation between subject and object. “Our bodies, far from limiting us in our encounter with the world, simultaneously give us access to what our senses perceive and link us to the whole universe of human perceptions.”\textsuperscript{18} The work cannot be fully understood without experiencing it.

My work requires a simultaneous sensory experience. The experience is where the work comes to life. In my piece \textit{A Thing Grown is a Thing Made}, the first stage is a room filled with fermenting liquid. You can smell the sweet pungency of the bacteria, yeast, and sugar.

\begin{flushleft}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Hannah Higgins, \textit{Fluxus Experience}, Chapter 1 “Information and Experience”, 36.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Higgins, 36.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Higgins, 38.
\end{itemize}
\end{flushleft}
As time passes the smell becomes stronger and permeates the entire room. When you breathe it in, you can taste it on your tongue. You imagine tasting the liquid, and your mouth begins to water. The liquid is cool to the touch, slightly sticky, and stringy in areas. The substance coats your fingers. You step inside and move through the liquid. Wading through the room, you see the liquid start to form small waves undulating back and forth because of your movement through it. Your body changes the piece in that moment in time. Going back a second time, you might have a very different experience in the room. In the second stage the kombucha has started to solidify forming a thin membrane of cellulose along the surface. You poke it with your finger and the lining bounces back. The membrane is impenetrable. There are bubbles and movement underneath the surface as the contained ecosystem continues to grow.

These are things that you cannot know about the work without experiencing it. Through images you can imagine how it might feel. You can see what it looks like at the particular moment the image was taken, but you do not know what the piece is doing and how your body can engage with the work. Everybody’s experience is different making it impossible to describe adequately with words.
Chapter Eight: Space

When these materials are found simultaneously in gallery spaces, alternative exhibition spaces, and outside, the work changes to engage its context. What does it mean for the work when it exists outside in relation to the gallery?

I have grown a scoby in a room approximately 14 feet by 17 feet. How do I make a work that gets away from its form? I want to remove the work from the container and focus on the contained. Within this room is an ecosystem where bacteria and yeast reside consuming sugar and transforming into a fermented drink. This process happens in two stages. Stage one, the liquid is poured into the room along with multiple cultures. Stage two, in one week the culture grows a new one covering the liquid to protect it. The film that has grown along the surface is made up of cellulose. The scoby is both dry and wet resembling skin on the outside and organs on the inside. The texture is sticky, smooth in places, and bumpy in others. The liquid feels soft and warm. The translucency of the culture absorbs light and glows like amber. The liquid spreads across the floor of the room. It fills the space like a lagoon. Below it is a pungent and sweet liquid. The vinegary, sweet smell of this substance permeates through the air. The culture must be maintained by constant renewal of sweet liquid.
At the Urban Arts Space I am working with processes and artifacts of processes. In my piece *A Thing Grown is a Thing Made* I have grown a scoby contained in a room approximately 14 feet by 17 feet. The work has grown to create what you see in the gallery as an artifact of the fermentation of liquid, the evaporation of water over time, and the forming of a solid from a liquid. The remnant of these changes has been carefully removed from the room in which it grew and placed in the gallery. The pieces are fragile, thick in places, and paper thin in others and look as if they could be eaten. The smell in the gallery is sweet and slightly vinegary. When touched, it cracks. When moved, it crumbles like brittle. It is a topography of its growing. The artifact reveals the history of its making. The pieces together feel as if it could be an aerial view of a place. The surface resembles scales, the formation of cells, and dried out skin. The material isn’t alive anymore, but it reveals moments of its aliveness.

*Mushroom Tent* creates an environment for the growth of oyster mushrooms that are beginning to disclose themselves through the consumption of organic material. The tent has air and gives form to the space it inhabits. Through its provisionality, each iteration changes depending on the space in which it exists. The windows above the tent give diffuse lighting for the mushrooms. The diaphanous plastic transmits light and makes the tent glow during certain times of the day. The plastic is melted together. String is singed into the plastic to give points of suspension. There is no secrecy in how it holds its shape. The tent fills
the space and allows for viewing all the way around it. There are clipped areas in the tent that reveal some type of access inside.

There are forms inside the tent and piles of material placed on the ground. Viewing holes through the tent allow for more detailed examinations of the oyster mushroom mycelium growing in and through material. One of the forms has been crocheted out of sisal. Crocheting reveals the making of the hand, mimicking the growing of mycelium. There are areas of contamination on the crocheted sack. Blue, green, and white colored growth is forming in the sisal. The white is mushroom hyphae. No bodies have formed yet on this particular piece. There are two other pieces along the floor containing oyster mushroom and straw. They are wrapped in cellophane that is comprised of cellulose. The cellophane has not begun to break down. If you look closely, you can see the white of the mushroom molding itself to the cellophane around it. Mushroom bodies are starting to grow inside the cellophane.

The space looks damp and warm with the sun shining through it and condensation on the plastic. A humidifier is on the floor pumping moisture into the air. These are the prime conditions for mushroom growth. Inside is a safe, damp space, but there is also contamination. Mold has found its way in and has started to compete with the mushroom. With this piece I’m interested in where my hand is in the work and where I start to lose control. Once I let go, do I need to take control back?
In the Urban Arts Space, these works are an attempt at speaking to another kind of beauty. They point to a world outside of the gallery that is growing, moving, and changing. Each piece could exist in any space. In working outside oyster mushrooms would not be contained in a plastic tent. They would start to grow in the ground and consume organic matter around them. Kombucha can exist on the floor in any space and will conform to the boundaries of that space. The kombucha becomes intimately involved with the specific space in which it exists. The provisionality of the work defies the notion of a fixed form in a gallery.
Conclusion

The material stands on its own. The degraded, lowly stuff of our lives says a lot about our way of being in the world by speaking to our interactions, our influences, and our ethics. Philosopher Jane Bennett says, “I believe that encounters with lively matter can chasten my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and re-shape the self and its interests.”19 I’m interested in this connection between all materiality and the self and its materiality. My studio practice revolves around these ideas of agency in materials and my place within that. Using materiality as a word to describe everything that exists “horizontalizes” human and nonhuman. Horizontalizing gives power to all bodies by flattening hierarchy and creating an equality among materials. It recognizes the complexity of natural processes and the entanglement of these processes in everything.

Artist Teresa Murak says, “I think about nature, and the thought becomes a part of nature. It all begins with self-recognition and an understanding of the essence of things. The desire to know the world begins to steer the mind once it has been awakened.”20

19 Jane Bennett, Chapter 8 “Vitality and Self-Interest”, 122.
Manifesting this awareness of self and materiality in the world points to the overconsumption and lack of respect for materials. We enact our excesses constantly and without regard to our influence. How do I continue to challenge my awareness of material influence? Giving agency to all that is around us anthropomorphizes the non-human. More importantly we begin to understand what agency can be and how various materials can interact and exist within the world.
Appendix

Images

Image 1 A Thing Grown is a Thing Made, Mushroom Tent, Studio Pieces, 2016,
MFA Thesis Exhibition at Urban Arts Space
Image 2 *Mushroom Tent*, 2016, sisal, cellophane, plastic, string, oyster mushroom, humidifier, MFA Thesis Exhibition at Urban Arts Space
Image 3 *Mushroom Tent* detail, 2016, sisal, oyster mushroom, straw, plastic, MFA

Thesis Exhibition at Urban Arts Space
Image 4 A Thing Grown is a Thing Made, 2016, kombucha, plastic, MFA Thesis Project at Hopkins Hall
Image 5 A Thing Grown is a Thing Made, 2016, scoby, plastic, MFA Thesis Exhibition at Urban Arts Space
Bibliography


