



gentrifier, i

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context and summary:

Cities are contested spaces, always in motion and ever changing; nevertheless contemporary utopias idealize space as empty of contention as they enforce coherence and conceal differences (Rugg, 2010, p. 177). Disciplines in the social sciences have studied urban change with a predominant focus on social and spatial dynamics creating a dominant narrative of gentrification: activation, appropriation, buildings, demolition, development, displacement, erasure, eviction, land speculation, meaning-making, morphology, people, regeneration, renewal, revitalization, space, place-making...

Coined by Lefebvre in 1968, the *right to the city* encompasses the effort of urbanites to have an active role in the shaping and worlding of their cities: alternative and participatory governance models, housing rights, informal urbanisms, new modes of citizenship(s), open-access data, social economies...

My research-creation project, **gentrifier, i**, seeks to address two elements often overlooked in the study of this phenomenon: the political ecology of materials associated with contested sites, and the personal/fictional (sub)narratives around the subject matter.

Working with sound, installation, and performative gestures, i attempt to better understand urban change through a process-oriented, site-specific, and materially-engaged process. The project explores three principal notions: 1) site as process, 2) cities as place of contestation, and 3) urban sites as arenas of dissonant socio-spatial narratives.

A number of sites in Montreal/Tio'tia:ke were selected and studied, from which i collected materials closely linked to construction, contestation and urban change processes: topsoil from the Mont Royal, construction sand from a “Mile-Ex” condo development, and contaminated soil from the *Bâtiment 7* grounds in Point-Saint-Charles. As the project developed, i decided to collect materials from sites that have personal significance to the poetry i write: rocks from the Mile End train-track crossing, tallgrass from the *Champ des Possibles*, and calendula/nasturtium flowers from a Mile End alleyway.

These materials act as portals that unlock memories, identity-formation processes, and feelings.

Furthermore, **gentrifier, i** became an opportunity to enhance my research-creation practice; allowing me to refine approaches to site-specific art, and providing clues on how to use sound, installation, and performance as research method. Through this process i was able to reflect and experiment on my current creative practice around word, sound, and place. Informed by situated design methods (see Simonsen, Jesper, et al., 2014), urban sound ecologies (see Groth and Samson, 2013), memory, and embodied urban explorations i have been creating poetic-soundscapes. The current course and project was able to introduce material engagement into the creative process forefront.



research questions:

_How does a site-specific and process-based engagement with materials can produce a new experience of contested urban sites?

_Can the *right to the city* be revisited through a material-engagement process?

_How can materially-engaged site-specific installation/sound/performance art be used as a tool and method for critical urban research?

_What are the tensions and findings that arise when studying sites as processes of contestation from a diversity of disciplines/narratives?

_How are narratives embedded-in and embodied-through the materials/materiality in urban spaces?

_What are the (sub)narratives surrounding urban change?

keywords:

site, urban change, socio-spatial narratives, right to the city, meaning/place-making, materiality.

research and inspiration:

gentrifier, i is a site-specific project, in which *site* is understood as the place or position occupied by some specified thing (Kaye, 2000, p. 2). My project is based on the notion that, just as materials are never static, a site is *in process* as the systems within it are in constant movement and change. Furthermore, Claire Doherty proposes to move from the concept of site-specific, into one that better encompasses the complexities of a site's place, locality, time, context and space (2009, p. 13), and to rather think in terms of *situation-specific* - a conception inherently non-static. She then proposes to use situation, as a means of rethinking the ways in which artists respond to, produce, and destabilize place and locality (idem).

These ideas and propositions provided the theoretical foundation on how to approach my sites, but also on how to think, conceptualize, and explore ideas of place, and my positionality as an artist-researcher individual in relation to them.

The work of Henri Lefebvre (1991) and David Harvey (2012) around the notion of cities being contested places was central to my project. They offer insight on the economic, political, and social structures and historical shifts that generate contestation in cities today, for example the rise of political liberalism and decentralized (digital) economies, local and global real estate speculation, the rise of the inner city as suburban lifestyles become less attractive, demographic shifts, and so on. Similarly, Judith Rugg (2010) examines how the homogenizing discourses of modernity, tourism, and urban regeneration exclude various forms of *otherness* as space is socially produced but denied (p. 177), and what the role of site-specific art is within those scenarios.

Gentrification has become the dominant narrative to describe current urban change: real estate developers and City administrations antagonistic to neighborhood associations and housing rights activists, as the displacement of people and communities, and the loss of private/public community spaces takes place due to increasing rents and land speculation. Factors affecting the structure of social capital networks which once made particular places unique and lively (see Hammond and Janssen, 2016).

As mentioned earlier, gentrifier, i intentionally explores two elements often overlooked within the macro-phenomena of urban change: the political ecology of materials associated with contested sites, and the personal/fictional (sub)narratives around the subject matter. To further explore these elements i turn to David Gissen, Anna L. Tsing, Deleuze and Guattari, and Moira and Makris.

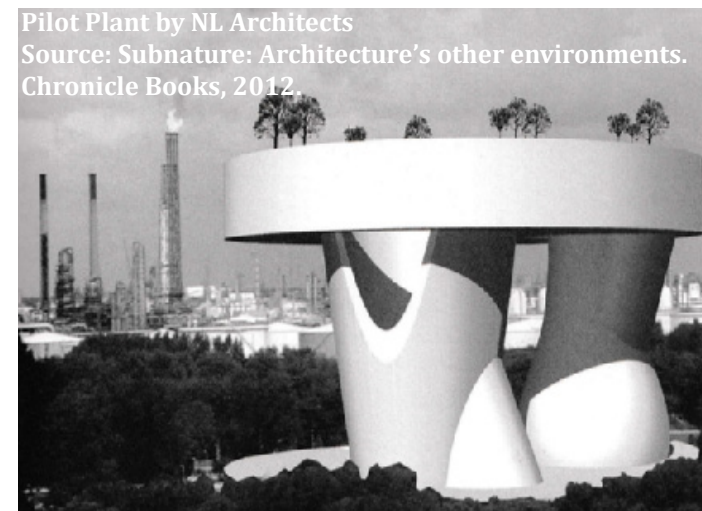
David Gissen (2012) uses the concept of subnature to refer to those relegated, undesirable, threatening elements (natures) in our environments. Just as weeds, crowds, dust, exhaust, gas, and dankness can be seen as *queer* to the desired *natural order*; so can, i argue, certain (sub)narratives about our understanding and lived experiences of urban spaces and processes be relegated and equated to the category of the filthy, feared and *subnatural*. And indeed, there seems to be a main-narrative about urban change dominated by the vision and philosophies of City administrations and real estate developers, in contrast to those of organized citizens and activists fighting for social and affordable housing.

As Gissen exemplifies with NL Architect's *Pilot Plant*, which brings people closer to the smoky chimneys in industrial Rotterdam, places can be resignified, subnatures can become exotic, attractive, and desirable under certain conditions, contexts (or decontextualizations), and situations. Which makes me wonder, *if i am to explore gentrification from the personal/fictional/mythical, are there strategies or possibilities of destabilizing the main narrative through (sub)narrative exploration and creation?*

Anna L. Tsing (2015) examines in her book chapter "Contamination as Collaboration" how our *selves* are created through *histories of encounter*; purity is not possible, she argues, our names, languages, bodies, and environments have all been created by mixing and contamination and as this contamination carries on, new worlds and directions may emerge (p. 27). Tsing's premises resonate with what Lefebvre and Harvey mention about the ever changing nature of cities' physical and cultural structures through processes of contestation; so then, *how can i examine and approach narrative creation through contestation?*



Demonstrations of may 1968 in Bordeaux, France, Rue Paul-Bert. Source: Wikimedia Commons.



Pilot Plant by NL Architects
Source: Subnature: Architecture's other environments.
Chronicle Books, 2012.



The idea of interdependence, assemblage and integration of processes and narratives surrounding space can be furthered - and expanded to the realm of intangible socio-spatial narratives - by looking at Deleuze and Guattari's work on the *body without organs* and Moira and Makris' work on socio-spatial narratives. Deleuze and Guattari (in Smith, 2018) argue that all parts, processes, and environments are produced, produce, and become simultaneously - offering insight into how assemblages, arrangements and configurations of the parts create and sustain a much larger and complex organism. In addition, Moira and Makris (2018) examine how personal and collective cultural memory leaves footprints over the urban fabric (both tangible and intangible), equating the city to a palimpsest. In other words: understandings, actions, and narratives around urban change are created by dissonant forces and voices, that are nonetheless equally necessary to create our current urban fabric.

These theoretical foundations as well as my creative process were nourished by reviewing the ideas and practice of artists C. A. Conrad, Tim Etchells, Hans Haacke, and Hilary Powell. In their work, i found inspiration and stimulating takes on the themes and methods i was exploring.

Hans Haacke's participatory art project "*der Bevölkerung*" (To the Population) brought soil from each election district of Germany, to be mixed and used in the creation of a garden at the *Reichstag's* northern courtyard - spurring heated debate around topics of identity and nationalism.¹ Historically, soil-related rituals and artifacts have been protected from spilling, contamination, and mixing (see Lange-Berndt, 2015) - i believe that in doing so lies the strength of this piece, as well as the inspiration for my own project.

What would happen if i carefully collect each material from their original site, only to mix and contaminate them with each other later on? Could this function as a symbolic act of contestation of the materials' herstories, embedded narratives, power-positionalities, and qualities? Could i learn about dissection, contestation, integration from this process?

1, Information consulted on the project's official website, www.derbevoelkerung.de.

Tim Etchells' "*Nights in the City*" explores socio-spatial narratives and approaches to site through performance, urban exploration, and multi-medium documentation ranging from photographs and typewritten-letters to participatory happenings. Etchell's piece explores and plays with the different narratives co-existing within urban space: *from the official and the historical to the personal, the mythical and the imaginary*² as the artist takes the audience on a guided city tour by bus, acting as a tour guide that combines fictional, historical, and personal events into the same urban fabric.

This particular piece instigated me to think of the ways in which i could, in and through my poetry, combine multiple narrative layers of the significance tied to the sites and the materials i was exploring; particularly the personal.

Hilary Powell explores themes of politics and poetics of space, and the political ecology of materials through interdisciplinary exploration - principally architecture and chemistry. In her piece "*Deconstructing Demolition*" the artist works with processes, materials, sites, and people;³ creating - among her diverse practice - a series of poetic texts for several materials found at demolition sites like steel, asbestos, and copper in which she mixes scientific, sociohistorical, and contextual elements of the materials.

2, <https://www.forcedentertainment.com/projects/nights-in-this-city/>

3, <https://hilarypowell.com/urban-alchemy/deconstructing-demolition/>

I am warrior metal of sword and
performing cosmic dance and
and haemoglobin. Body and blood
rusting planet above. Warlords
abandoned to anaemic landscape
my metamorphosis was hard-f
Surprised by Vulcan into revolution
might and munitions. Iron muscles
the weight of wonder. Terra firma
I traverse rivers, withstand oceans

Earth, air, fire, water. Molt
money. The price that we pay. D
the bugger back. The Rother and
Going hammer and tongs. Thunder
Scorched skin on calloused hands
and deafened ears. Beating, shouting
reverberate across a geography
ancient and industrial ballads. From
to the railroads. To motherfucking

STEEL

and spear. Knife-wi
meteoric fall. Han
ood. I am forged f
and weapons of
apes. Discovered i
ought. Iron Age o
ution. Destroyer a
e. With carbon, o
ma soars as super
ans, shelter millio
en rivers of flame
Dead fish, rancid
nd Don. Afan and
mp. Thump. Thuc
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y of inequality. Mi
Poems to freight t
n' Detroit

When i first encountered Powell's Materials.Stories (in Campkin et al, 2016) i was captivated by how she was able to integrate the poetics of space, the materiality of things, and her own positionality in the ecosystem of demolition+construction processes. Her poetic-storytelling work was a source of inspiration, as it spoke from the 'i' (personal and collective) and included elements tying her self, the materials, and the sites she explores in a sometimes surreal yet relatable fashion.

C.A. Conrad's work and exercises on (soma)tic poetry as well as their *Right to Manifest Manifesto* have been a source of inspiration for my research-creation methods and process for some time. The poet's ideas and exercises provide a framework for exploratory and embodied methodological approach to creative writing (see Conrad, 2012).

Building a foundation on the poet's proposed methods and work trajectory, i incorporated notions of materiality and material engagement, in order to create a poetry not only situated in the personal/symbolic, but also integrated with what Jane Bennett (2010) calls thing-power. In other words, could i use Conrad's (soma)tic poetry exercises to attune myself to the vibrancy and power of things and materials in the city?

process, development, production:

The project's process, development and production can be divided into several stages that will be further discussed. While they are presented in a manner that reflects the general timeline of the project, these overlapped and co-occurred during the overall process.

site and situation:

Several urban sites with elements and herstories of contestation were selected, materials were collected in mason jars, and site-visits were conducted at different times to better understand the sites. Photographic documentation, field recordings and personal reflective-analytical voice notes were generated. This initial stage produced the beginning of a sense of intimacy with the sites, and an expanded understanding of the materials' positions, herstories, and relationships with their environments. i then began to reflect on the multiplicity of actors and voices around the bigger phenomenon of urban change and morphology. Stories of gentrification, struggle, urban development, community organizing, art-activism, and macro sociopolitical pictures came into being.





Construction work taking place at the Durocher/Beaubien construction site.



Contaminated soil mounds at the contested grounds adjacent to Batiment 7.

material engagement & exploration:

Inspired by Tim Ingold (2013) and Petra Lange-Berndt's (2015) ideas on the qualities of materials and playful approaches to materiality, i began tinkering with the materials in an unstructured exploratory fashion: touching and smelling them, spreading them out in surfaces, producing sounds with them by letting them fall or through friction.

While reading Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, i started constructing structures with the materials, particularly spherical balls and playing with lights and the shadows they produced: creating the illusion of shape-shifting liveliness coming out of them, and discovering some of the materials were able to 'hold' naturally, while others disintegrated immediately.

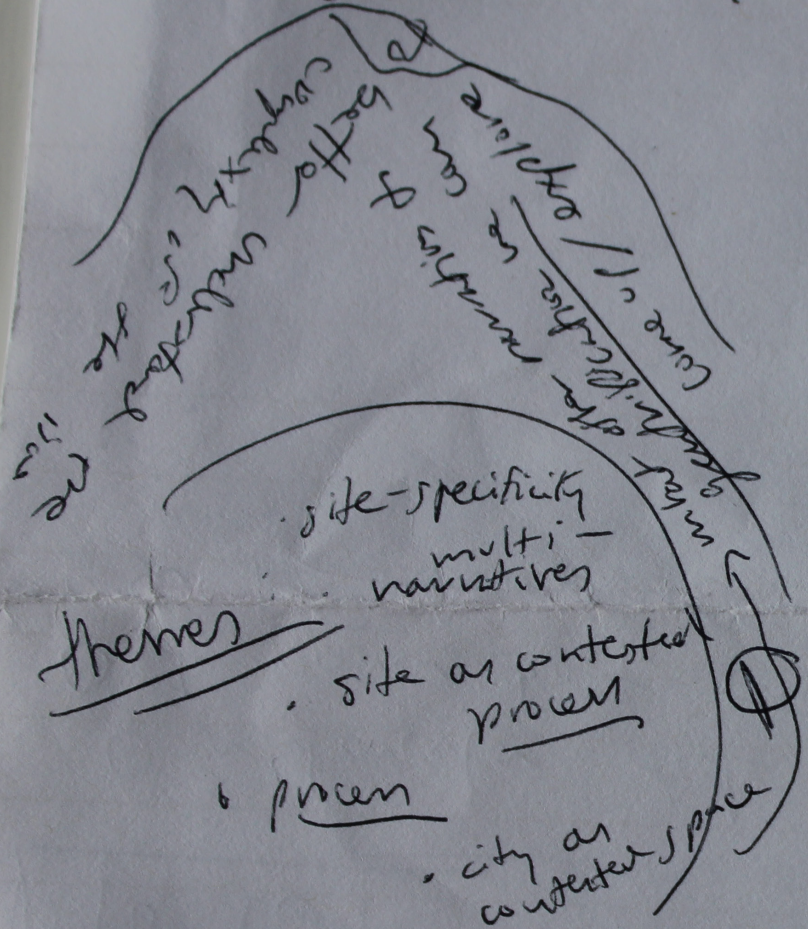
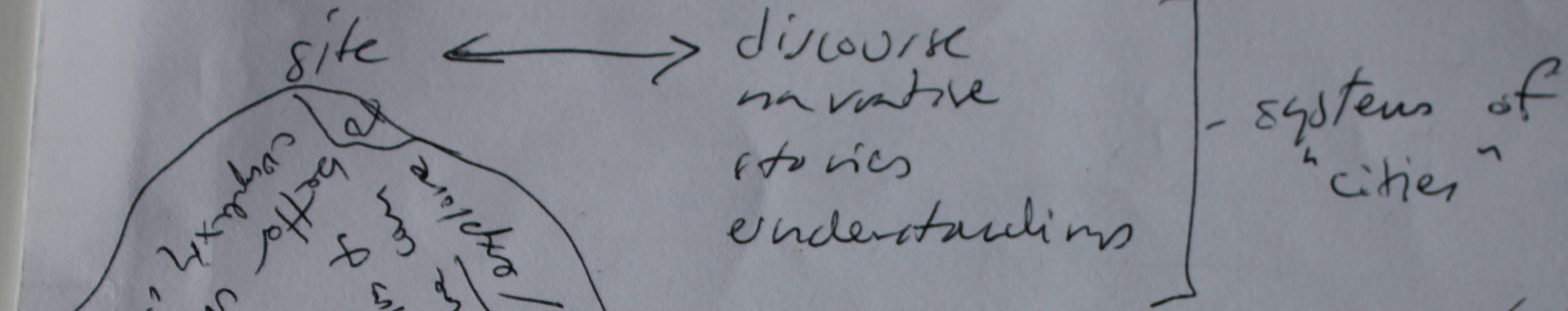
Questions around a viable fashion to present them in an installation began to materialize: contained or spread, separated or mixed, altered or in a natural state? And overall, how do these materials and their particular properties relate to bigger questions of urban change and contestation? What are the political economies and herstories around these materials - especially as they relate to my research subject matter, and creative practice?



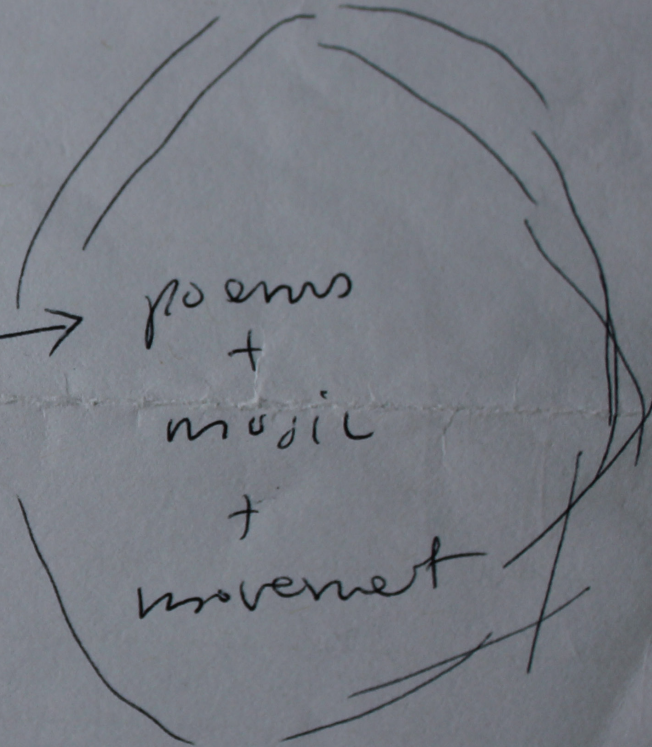
Playing with materials and light.



Constructing "balls" with the materials.



site enters memory / identity formation



process

studio-time,

writing poems, (draft #1)

iteration in studio

recording on tape!

① balls look like

② & "catalog" jars

③ mixing / comp cataloging

read about MFL navigation.

Visual maps to give sense to the project's process.

interdisciplinary experimentation:

i experimented with interdisciplinary methods, creating music and poetry informed by the material engagement, site visits, poet C.A. Conrad's (soma)tic poetry exercises, and theory. As a result of playful interactions with the materials, theoretical notions were tested creating sounds, poems, performative gestures, and installation prototypes. For example, during a couple of sessions i focused in particular materials and guided my creative-process (writing, composing, moving) around their particular properties and qualities: granularity, texture, colour, smell. Other times i composed music playing with the capacity of the materials to conduct electricity (as perceived by my input instrument cables), and created a choreography/installation using the materials and my own body.

After a couple of iterations i came up with my final draft for the poem **gentrifier, i** which combined the historical, the personal (my lived experience and relationship to the sites), as well as other narrative elements that gave importance to the materials, and the materiality of urban space - particularly the selected sites.

Some of these installation-arrangements became an embodied response to my research questions: i explored the materials' borders and edges; i combined and transgressed them through mixing/contamination; i tinkered with potential ways to find stability and integration among them through interdependence.



Material engagement as prompt to music creation.



Testing the conductivity of the materials and producing percussive sounds with their inputs.

gentrifier, i
am the crane
that flips above the blue neon sky.
in-side your dreams of grandiose
i am the rock that pulls you
back to the center,
a dense gravity
wild in freedom, masterless & free
shared
like leather, rage, river.
(in old names, we return)
after the bulldozer (passed,
the earth breathed again,
saw the world changed
old friends gone, the same sky

Poem's original draft, in Concordia Stationery.



Experimenting with installation and performative gestures.

final documentation:

This creative-research process resulted in the creation of a poetic-soundscape, a collection of materials from my sites (in mason jars), and a set of installation-prototypes

To access the poetic-soundscape, please visit:
https://www.christianscott.ca/gentrifier_i



Collected/Extracted materials: tallgrass, rocks, nastertium and calendula flowers, contaminated soil, construction sand, mountain topsoil.





Collected materials: tallgrass, rocks, nastertium and calendula flowers, contaminated soil, construction sand, mountain topsoil.





Installation-prototypes to test theoretical notions:



borders, edges, centres : getting acquainted with the political ecologies, herstories, and qualities of the materials.



transgressing, mixing, contesting urban change.



: understanding/embodying



finding stability, integration, and co-existence within contestation
: assemblages of the personal, political, historical, and fictional.

final reflection:

Creative director Claire Doherty asks *how and where does artistic engagement with place begin?*⁴

gentrifier, i gave me the opportunity to delve into theoretical explorations of site, and to refine my methodological approaches to space and place; particularly as an artist-researcher utilizing arts-based research-creation frameworks.

By incorporating a sensitivity to materiality, and a focus on material engagement, my creative process was infused with a new element that permitted a different approach to art and research: sites, materials, processes, communities, narratives, research, and creation intertwined.

This project allowed me to position myself within the larger picture/phenomenon of urban change and to reflect on my personal framings and political subjectivities. In site-specific art, i encountered a powerful tool to disrupt and destabilize dominant understandings, narratives, and spatial orders surrounding the production of urban space.

4, Doherty, Claire, ed. *Situation*. MIT Press, 2009., p. 14.

In other words, **gentrifier, i** became an experiment on how to respond, from a political subjective standpoint, to today's processes of contestation, erasure, and appropriation of space, bodies, and narratives in cities, by bringing together the personal, political, and historical. Through word, sound, and materials i attempted to reclaim space and to rewrite and amplify sub(jective)narratives within the city-palimpsest; and discovered how deeply interdependent both dominant and subnarratives are.

In addition, this process permitted me to articulate a narrative of urban change that while being subjective, incorporates the materiality of urban space, and conceives of the "i" as collective and more than human.

In moving the project forward, i will a) keep refining the poetry/soundscape i created, b) further research the legal, political, cultural, and administrative ins and outs of the real estate development industry, as well as the community-led responses to development initiatives, and c) integrate new mediums of artistic creation such as video production and performance.

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