

# Lay me in the sawdust

*Anna Noel*

Critical Materiality  
Fall 2023





Lay me in the sawdust is a critical exploration of the wood lifecycle.

*A tree – part of an ecosystem that is built from its surroundings and is a fixture of a natural community.*

*A fallen branch – a piece no longer connected to the life source, but that carries a unique history.*

*A working material – taking a natural element and reinterpreting it for different use. Using the wood as a means for creative expression.*

*An experiment – finding new options for woodworking waste rather than discard.*

Honouring the life of the wood and continuing the process of care through material transitions that are often neglected.

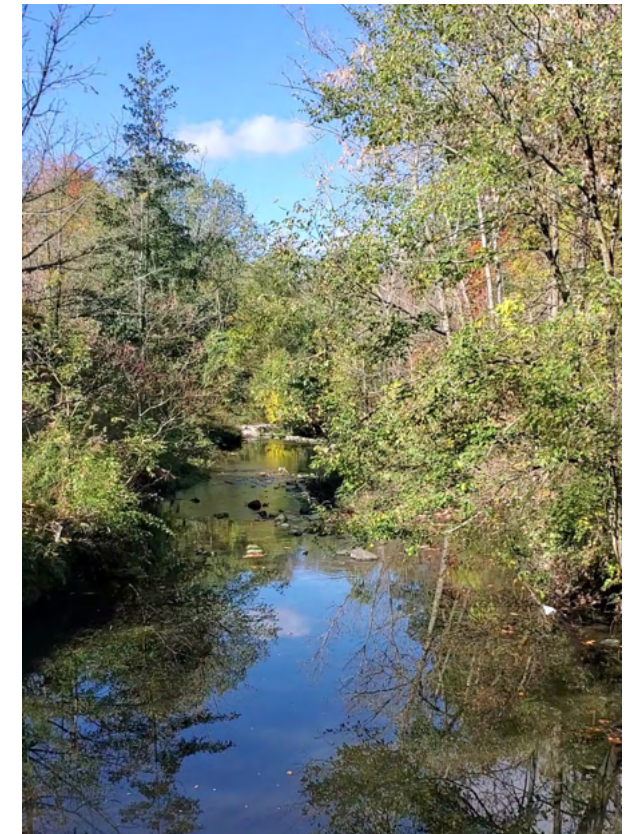


The Taylor Creek, flowing west to join with the Don River. Red wing black birds, cardinals, red and grey squirrels. It's October 12th, leaves from other trees are starting to change colour. The sun shining onto the bark while leaves and branches cast shadows.

## Field Research

Connecting family and my personal history to this project was important. My mom is a wood carver and artisan. She comes from a long line of builders, lumberjacks and crafts people. Throughout my life I have seen her carving and began doing it alongside her a couple years ago. For this project I wanted to know the origin of the wood I used, and have it be significant in my personal history. During the fall break on my return to Toronto, I went on a walk in the valley near my house where I grew up. A place I'm very familiar with: I know the course of the river, where the paths connect, diverge and lead to, and what animals spend their time in that space. I catalogued the sounds I heard, how the space was being used by humans and animals, and what relationships the trees had to the land and to each other.

It was calm and beautiful. The sunlight was shining through the leaves and casting shadows onto the tree bark. It was not much sound besides bird song. Occasionally a cyclist or dog walker would pass by. Trees I identified were Silver Maple, Black Walnut, European Ash, Alternate-leaved Dogwood, Common Buckthorn, Norway Maple, and Box Elder. I walked past a huge Silver Maple that's between the Taylor Creek river and main walking path. I sat under the tree, looking at how it connected to its environment. Where the roots led to, where the canopy covered, the patterns on the bark and shape of the leaves. I have walked past this tree countless times, but had never gotten to know it in this way. There were some branches that had fallen from a recent storm and as I walked around, I began collecting them to incorporate into this project.



# Research through Conversations

Xavier Fernandes

While visiting family in Orillia, ON, we went to visit Xavier Fernandes, a painter, sculptor and wood worker who was part of an open studio weekend. He specializes in lathe-carved wooden bowls, cutting boards, candle holders and tables. We discussed his love for wood and all the possibilities he has when creating with it. He locally sources his wood and knows the origin of his pieces. Much of his work is made with black walnut, butternut, maple, and spalted maple. His creative process focuses on revealing natural patterns in the wood grain to create sculptural forms. It is important to him to create heirloom pieces that will be passed down. Each piece should have a specific purpose and be cared for by the user. He uses each piece of wood very intentionally and uses as much as possible. For offcuts from large projects, he creates small objects like rings and bottle stoppers, or uses the small pieces for shape and pattern experiments. With his sawdust waste, he burns it, mixes it with glue to create a strong filler, or uses it in gardening. When I brought up my plan for this project and about my wood working ethos, he suggested I experiment with creating blocks of sawdust biocomposite that could be used similarly to a regular block of wood that could be carved and shaped.

Harold Mackenzie

Harold has been in my life since I was little. He is the dad of my childhood best friend and for the past couple years has been helping my family renovate our house in Toronto. He is a carpenter, electrician, plumber and overall handyman who has a love for wood working and has developed a deep understanding of how to use wood. In his wood working practice and construction, sustainability takes shape in where he sources the wood and in making things strong and durable enough to last a lifetime. Aside SPF lumber for regular construction, Harold has local sources for all other wood he uses. He sources maple and ash from Mennonite communities in the St. Jacobs, ON; cherry and walnut from a local lumber harvester in Tilsonburg, ON; and hard maple in Peterborough, ON. We discussed how throughout history, people turned to working with wood when other materials did not fulfil a certain objective. Intertwined with the history of wood working is innovation - creating new tools and methods out of necessity, which then turns to creating for cultural and decorative purposes as well. Harold has given me many pieces of his locally sourced wood out of care for my practice and continuing the tradition of wood working across our families.

## Narratives of Soil

Wendy Teo Atelier and Eliza Collin

Narratives of soil explores the process of working with soil and exploring how it has been used traditionally and how it is being used creatively presently. The intention is to examine how we can contextualize our landscape by seeing what soil can reveal within the context of climate change and globalization. The book is a result from the authors' material research project and NOS Forum that looks at projects of reflective soil, translucent soil, 3D printing with soil, soil batteries and mud dyeing. Wendy Teo and Eliza Collin address questions like "How does this [soil] really help to bring back the ancient memory that we have?" and "It was all about how I can change this material as little as possible; how can I use it as it is and then how do I return it back to as it is through the process of using it and gaining from the material?". A key point was how they examine how soil's simplicity inspires a level of respect for its characteristics and for its source, and how technology can work in unison with the material instead of aiming for its transformation.

Although the project focuses on another material, the methodology of research and attention to care and sustainability for a material I found extremely inspiring, and helped shape my research. It shows multiple examples of how one material can be reinterpreted for a variety of design purposes, but with simplicity and accessibility at the heart. It also inspired me to create a book for my project that would bring more of the research and thought behind the physical objects into a lasting form.

# Idea Development and Planning

## So... WOOD... WHAT AM I TRYING TO GET AT?

Sept 20 2023

- natural - sustainable life path if not intercepted by chemicals
- what goes into growing a tree? - what goes into strengthening wood?
- create sawdust, now what? - what are my shapes?

## WHAT ARE MY SHAPES?

inspired by the natural material or inspired by the tools  
 am I just using wood because of climate anxiety?  
 is it a cop out or a genuine exploration into a material I feel a connection to?

### wood working's origins and history

mechanical / manual

natural vs. unnaturally originated form  
it's not a juxtaposition, it's a progression

### where do my shapes come from

I think it's intrinsic  
straight up curiosity and intuition

a piece of wood is not a blank slate - now or  
- nutrients, sun, soil, water, BUGS, birds, leaves, 'further animals

wood is a home  
 a tree is a home  
 a home is built from wood  
 making wood objects for a home

wood is a home  
 wood as a home

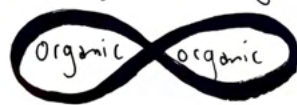
manual → fully manual  
now mix of mechanical & manual

value?

plywood?

fuel

natural world into the human-built world  
 organic ↔ organic  
 organic → organic



OCTOBER 5 2023

- Go to the Don
- Talk to Harold about wood & his sourcing
- Talk to people @ the Fanny wood store
- Find some wood carving artists & ask about their practice
- Talk to the mother
- What kind of environmental sensing is good for a tree?
- electronic pulse/signal
- Meditate? about wood
- ask literally everyone about how they feel about / feel connected to wood

spotted maple slab

document everything

### What is important for me to make?

wood is/as home is/as/has  
 wood is/has life

scrips CUCCER wood  
 not plywood.  
 natural form.

## WOODPECKERS BEAVERS

beaver dam?  
 house construction methods?

sawdust paper  
 moulding material

why not just burn it

how have people historically been inspired by nature in their wood carving?

how are wood carvers/carpenters inspired by nature in their work?

INTERPOLATIVITY  
particular luxury

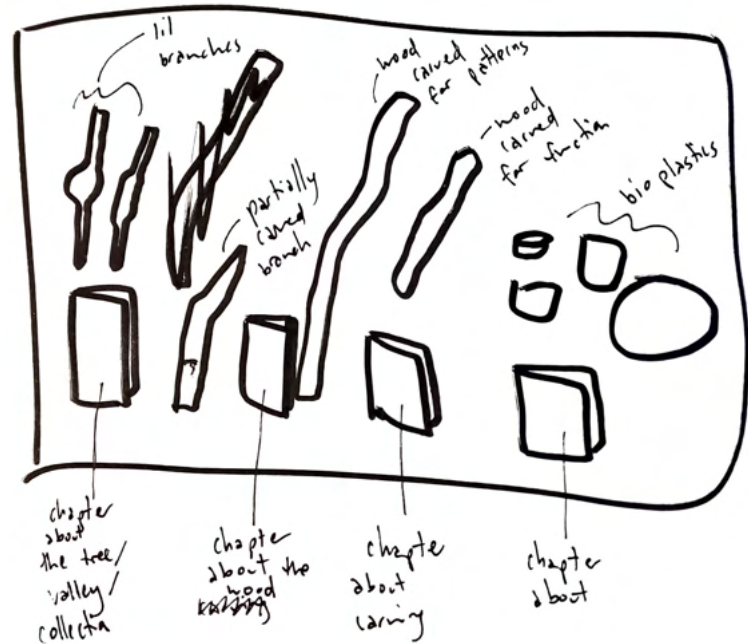
DO I OWN THE TOOLS  
 WHICH WITH I'M CREATE TORNADO STYLE

Who else carves wood?  
 carve wood, use wood as a home

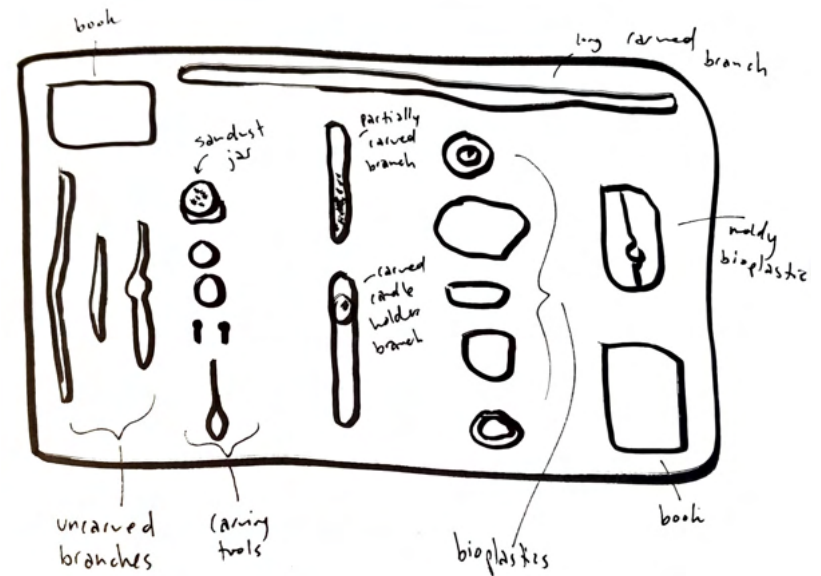
ASK EVERYONE ABOUT WOOD & THEIR RELATION TO IT

birds  
 squirrels

## Initial table plan



## Final table plan



## BRANCHES

What am I going to make?  
 the focus is mainly on the material exploration, so the objects don't matter quite as much?  
 but that's not my point  
 I want to push myself in what I physically create  
 but also push my ideas that'll help a future for sale practice

### Option ●

- carve a wooden mould of objects I want to
- using sawdust biocomposites, make multiples of 'mass' produce the object
- then sand-dust objects!

### Option ▲

- carve wood - make object
- using sawdust, make biocomposite block
- carve sawdust biocomp block into object

### Option ■ - not really another option, but another thing

- one biocomp using bark + moss dust
- one biocomp using actual carved wood dust

Wood as a necessity - turning to wood when an initial material doesn't cut it

Wood object as an heirloom piece

I don't wanna make something important



The branches I collected off the ground came back to Montreal with me on the train.

## Research Question

Once a piece of wood is in the hands of a designer/craftsperson, it has already lived a full life. How can its properties and abilities be best respected during during the creative process, as to continue its life in a meaningful and sustainable way?





As I began the thought process of where I wanted this project to go, I did not only want to focus on the end result of the biocomposites/bioplastics that would be made by my carving practice. I wanted to explore the depth of a piece of wood, with environmental and traditional histories of a piece. I needed to find a purpose of why I was doing this - why is a piece of wood important enough to focus on for the duration of this project?

A piece of wood is not a blank slate, it has a complex history that begins in the place it grows. With the branches I collected and brought back to Montreal, I first examined their physical properties. One had a large burl in the middle, another a sunscald, and they all had varying colours and types of lichen. There were three layers, the core, a sub-layer of bark, the the outer layer of bark with the lichen.



## Carving Process



Linoleum knife  
used for stripping  
tree bark.



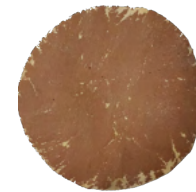
Wood block  
printing  
chisel used  
for stripping  
tree bark.



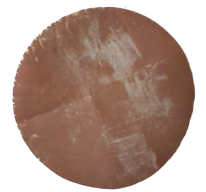
1"  
Sphere  
rotary  
burr



1/2"  
Cylinder  
rotary  
burr



220 grit  
sandpaper



400 grit  
sandpaper

When I was planning on what to carve with the branches, I struggled with wanting what I made to be symbolic and useful.

I wanted make something to best showcase the characteristics of the wood through the process of revealing what's beneath the surface. I wanted to work on a few objects that would have a significance, either in their form or in their aesthetic quality.

As I was removing the bark, I noticed how many patterns were in the wood, especially large amounts of spalting. I let the location of the tree influence how I carved: the tree is beside a river, so I looked for natural river and island forms in the wood. I carved to accentuate these forms and patterns in each piece of wood as a reflection of its origin.

The carved branches are both useful and decorative, and reflect care for the tree, care for the environment and care for the creation process.



Branch carved to demonstrate the process of removing tree bark, carving and sanding to achieve a smooth surface.



Branch carved to showcase natural features as well as hold a tealight. A usable and decorative object.



Using the material intentionally and using as much of a piece as possible.



Through the process of carving, one reveals the wood grain and patterns.



Learning from the material, both in physical characteristics and how to use it.



Developing a richer method of care for materials. There's always more depth to a material than what's at face value.



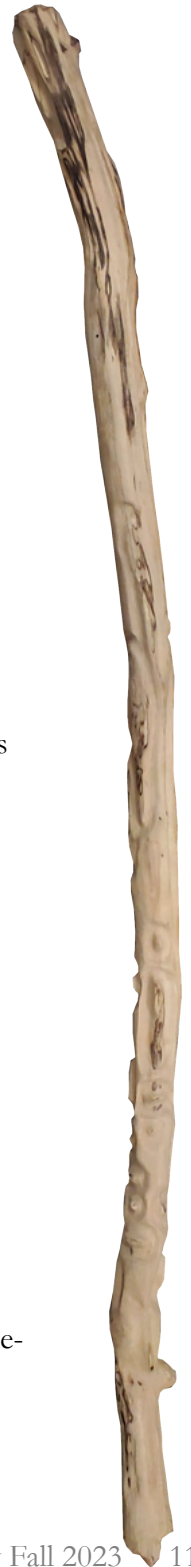
Branches from a tree by the river – finding rivers, paths and islands in the wood.



Exploring carving as a cultural, historical and familial art form. Looking at the importance of wood throughout history and finding new ways to explore its abilities.



What feels most natural to create? How can I fulfill the desire to create while lessening my environmental impact?



# Bioplastics Process



Collecting sawdust from the Concordia CTC Wood Shop

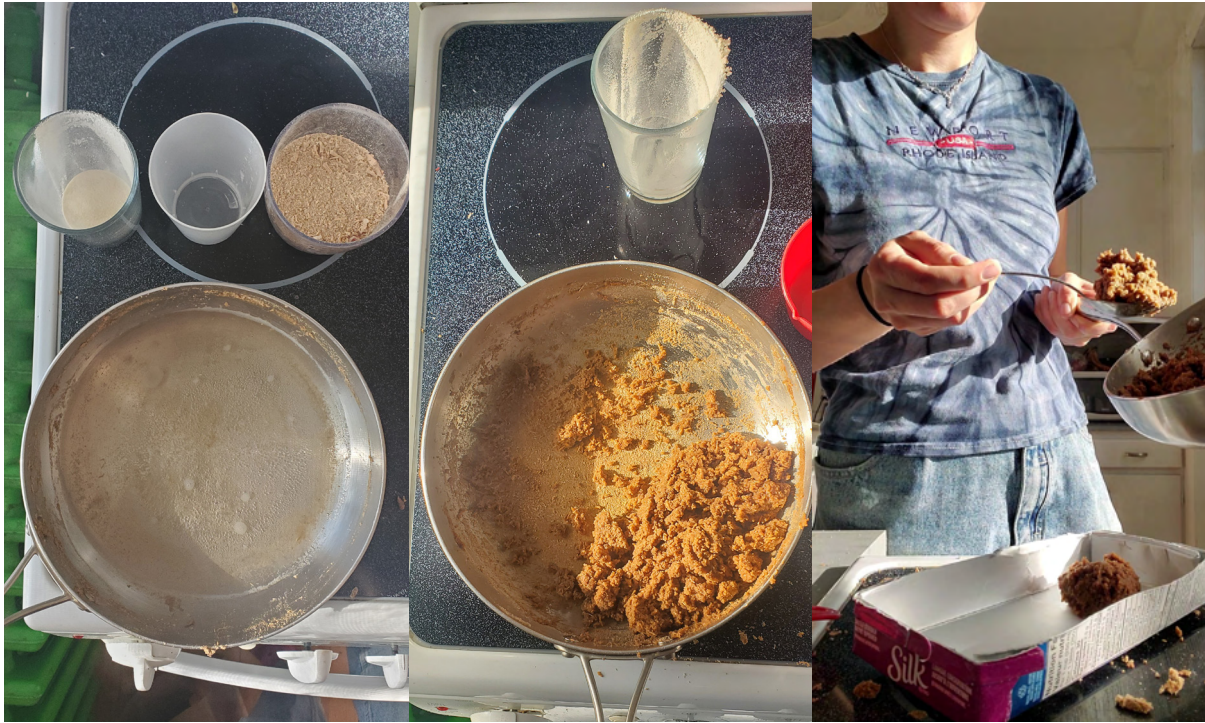


Making biocomposites in the BioLab using calcium carbonate, sodium alginate and sawdust



First samples of biocomposite and biopalstic with gelatin and glycerin





Making bioplastics at home and at the BioLab.

Experimenting with varying ratios of gelatin, glycerin, water and sawdust to see which creates a most successful final result.

I prepared the sawdust and tree bark pieces by grinding them in a spice grinder to a fine grind.

Some samples I pressed into molds of clean milk cartons and coffee cups, some I pressed into a thin sheet with no boundaries. I then experimented with hand building with the bioplastic to create a bowl-like form.

The samples with higher gelatin were heavier, darker in colour and took longer to dry. The samples higher in glycerin were more brittle and did not compact together as well as those with higher gelatin.



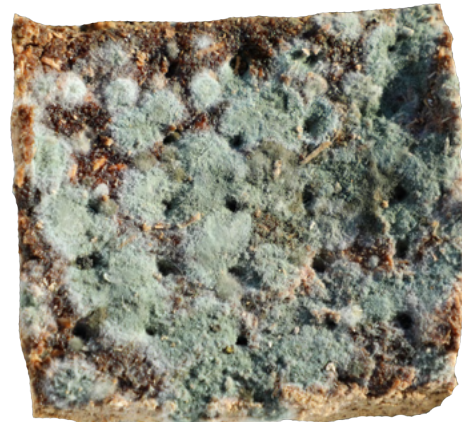
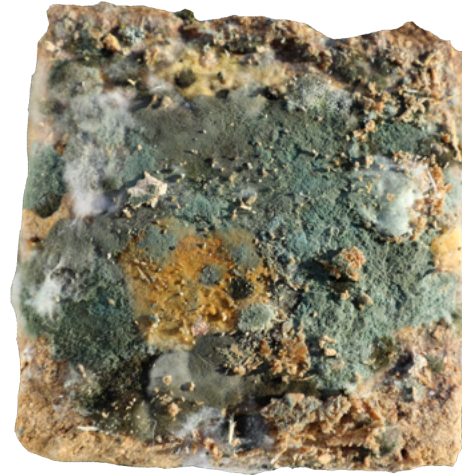
When dry, all samples shrunk but became extremely solid. Thicker samples did not warp much, but thin samples spread into sheets warped a lot. Using the force of my hands, I could not break or bend them.



Successful samples that did not develop mold. The two above used sawdust from the Concordia CTC Wood Shop, the three to the right used tree bark and carving scraps from the Silver Maple branches.



Mold grew on the outside of some samples, in particular ones with higher gelatin and that were formed with the tree branches when drying.

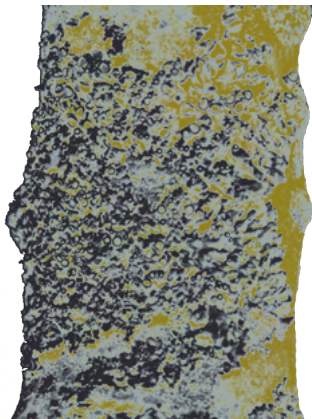
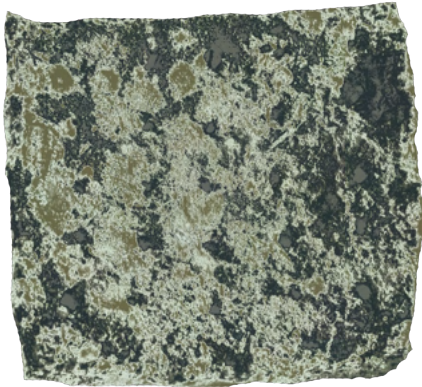
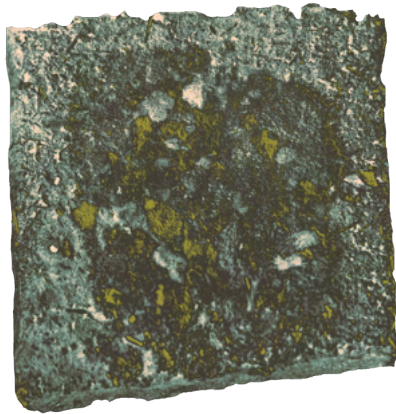


The mold that developed after a couple weeks resembled the lichen on the tree branches. This was an interesting development in the project. The life that had grown on the tree while it was a part of its environment was mirrored in a product generated from the material research. The samples using wood from the tree branches did not mold nearly as much as from my other sawdust samples.

I included tea tree oil in my second round of bioplastics, but I did not notice a difference in amount of mold created. Most samples were air dried, which also contributed to the molding process by not quickly removing moisture in a dry environment. The hand built structure was dried at 40 degrees C overnight and did not mold due to the dry and warm environment.

It was very interesting to see how life was determined and changed depending on the conditions around it. It was a reminder that when working with a natural material, life is at the core and will find its own way to be expressed. The material continued to live, which was a nice and unintentional realization since my intention was to continue the life of wood through wood carving (but not to grow mold, it would be good to make samples that aren't biohazards).





Graphic Explorations using gradient map and posterize to bring out different details and features in the textures of the pictures from the process.

## Book

Inspired by the Narratives of Soil book, I wanted to share the full story of this project beyond the physical wood and bioplastic pieces. The book is a collection of thoughts, pictures and intentions from throughout the project. It shows a visual representation of the full progression of the project from tree to bioplastic. It's another lasting artifact of the work and care that went into this presentaiton and critical mediation.



## Final Critical Mediation at 4th Space Concordia



The Critical Mediation presentation at the 4th Space allowed for open conversations about materiality through the lenses of matter, transition, divert, attune and cherish. With *Thanks for Tuning in*, we wanted to emphasize the connection of our senses with our materials, and how by attuning ourselves to our materials, we develop a closer relationship of care. The exhibit began with a multi-sensoral experience that gradually revealed the subject of each group member's project to the audience. First through an audio piece with sounds relating to each of our projects, then to a touch activity with an object from our projects hidden under a box for visitors to explore texture and feel, then to sight. Each group member then gave a walk through of their project, themes of which were discussed in a group round table afterwards.

As my first exhibit, it was a new and exciting experience to think about how to best display my objects to make my project intentions come across clearly. Working alongside my group members and discussing our projects together was very fulfilling - it was valuable to see how other students were exploring their materials and research objectives. As someone who would like to continue exhibiting in galleries in the future and holding space for creative conversations, this was a very enriching learning experience.

