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Making with and Thinking through Compost

Gwenyth Chao

gwenythchao@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-9167-7580

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Making with and Thinking through Compost

by Gwenyth Chao



About the Artist

Gwenyth Chao's (www.gwenythc.com) art praxis asks: how can art be a portal to potential futures that follow capitalist ruin? Driven by experimental possibilities, Chao's projects explore how material reconstitution can be informed by an ecological awareness and how transdisciplinary processes can generate new ways of knowing. She has exhibited work in galleries across Canada and was a fellow at the Vermont Studio Center and an Artist-Researcher at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Chao's research-creation practice is funded by the Ontario Arts Council, the BC Arts Council, the Canada Council for the Arts and the Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council.

Making with and Thinking through Compost

Gwenyth Chao

*Philosophically and materially, I am a compostist, not a posthumanist. Critters—
human and not—become-with each other, compose and decompose each other, in
every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in ecologically
evolutionary developmental earthly worlding and unworlding.*
—Donna Haraway

Slimy ridged bodies are squirming around. A cloud of winged black dots buzz and hover about. There is an odor that smells like many microscopic corpses rotting. The ecosystems of these maggot-infested food scraps that colonize our green collection bins can be seen as a more efficient and sustainable microcosm of my research on composting. However, efficiency and sustainability lose their clout outside of capitalist and economic models of thinking. What is the use of producing things as fast as possible or maintaining our current consumption quota of resource depletion in the face of the planet's deteriorating health? The focus on human societies, needs, and perspectives has led to animals, plants, and minerals going extinct; the planet can only sustain the current human way of living for so much longer. In one example, the BBC reports that our planet may run out of many rare earth metals, like gallium and indium, within 100 years and yet these metals are necessary components of our medical thermometers, LEDs, solar panels, microchips, and even fire sprinkler systems (Gill 2022). It is at the cusp of these near extinctions that my work materially speculates on our planet's potential futures. I create sculptural installations that iteratively respond to the conditions of living symbiotically with animal kin and plant life in the ruin of our current climate urgency. This re-imagining situates itself in depleted sites where capitalist extraction has exhausted the land of our current materials and sources of sustenance.



Figure 1. Chao, Gwenyth. */stāj/*, 2021. A site-responsive mixed media installation of a lab-kitchen-studio research space. Photo courtesy of the artist.

My research works with and through composting as a metaphor, an emergent transdisciplinary process (see Fig. 1), and an artmaking material. In early 2022, I attended the Vermont Organics Recycling Summit (VORS) as part of my residency at Vermont Studio Center. I witnessed a gathering of chefs, farmers, scientists, government councilors, researchers, and teachers all composting in their own sphere. The experience gave me a comprehensive understanding of many compost-related considerations: from how to finance composting systems to how to integrate composting into the school curriculum. VORS did not mention art or the metaphorical possibilities of composting as a process. This experience wove together my previous strands of thought on compost and grounded my research in how art can think through composting as a way to reworld with waste.

Almost like alchemy, composting can transform decay into nutrient-rich material albeit slowly. At its more “efficient” timescale, where conditions are near ideal and organic matter is strictly vetted, a well-managed compost pile will still take the lifetime of a dragonfly, or approximately 4 months to decompose matter (Hu 2020). More commonly, compost piles with unshredded and unvetted material will take the lifetime of a worker termite, or approximately a year or two. In contrast to the fast-pace set by

the techno-optimists in our world, composting is slow and messy, microscopically breaking down while entangling other bodies in its process of becoming.

Composting involves bodies and bodies are porous. Materially, my work begins at the human body. The food scraps I collect, such as vegetable fronds and eggshells, are designated as organic waste in the human culinary sphere. The artmaking materials—gels, pastes, putties, paper—I make from the food refuse are deemed safe and ingestible for human bodies. As such, my research resonates with political theorist and philosopher Jane Bennett’s proposition that eating is perhaps actually “an encounter between various and variegated bodies” (Bennett 2010, viii). In encounters between bodies and their relations to plant life, there is an underlying ethics of care in my work. Unlike vegetables or fruits purchased at a grocery store, my practice works with food refuse collected from the community. While my process is partly driven by material exploration, I am less interested in creating art materials out of specific foods and more concerned with the possibilities that emerge from revaluing the organic waste that’s produced in the cycle of consumption and digestion. In my installations, I am regurgitating the undesirables collected from kitchens in my community into drawings in space (see Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Chao, Gwenyth. *Apodeme of a line*, 2022. Detailed view of the installation. Ingestible biomaterial made from purple cabbage, orange peels, mizuna flowers, onion skins, cherry blossom petals, methylcellulose. Photo courtesy of the artist.

In the context of variegated bodies and especially composting, the notion of a body cannot be contained by a boundary like a skin. Widening the scope of what bodies are, queer theorist and philosopher Jasbir Puar writes:

We leave traces of our DNA everywhere we go; we live with other bodies within us, microbes and bacteria, we are enmeshed in forces, affects, energies, we are composites of information. Assemblages do not privilege bodies as human, nor as residing within a human animal/nonhuman

animal binary. Along with a de-exceptionalizing of human bodies, multiple forms of matter can be bodies—bodies of water, cities, institutions, and so on. Matter is an actor. (Puar 2012, 56)

Through Puar’s understanding of a body, the analogy of composting becomes even more robust as it symbiotically fuses multiple bodies (of soil, bacteria, and microorganisms) in its becoming-with. Embodied knowledge also takes on multiple new meanings when decentered from the human perspective. *from a detritivore’s senses* (see Fig. 3) is a sculptural installation that imagines what can be sensed from the bodies of the detritivores, the primary composters in many of our ecosystems. This research emerged when I was making my first sound piece; integrating sound was an experiment to bring out the timescales of metaphorically composting the materials in my making process. I became curious about how worms experience sound and learned that they have no ears. Instead, their moist bodies allow them to sense the vibrations of sound and teach them to survive against predators who may make tapping sounds in their hunt. In response, I composed my sound piece imagining what noises worms would make in their daily lives on a micro level underground. Moving away from making art for human consumption, my editing took into consideration the frequency range of 100 to 5000 hertz that worms can perceive in contrast to the 20 to 20 000 hertz humans can hear.



Figure 3. Chao, Gwenyth. *from a detritivore’s senses*, 2022. Soil from the artist’s garden, eggshell, green tea, coffee grounds, xanthan gum, bluetooth speaker playing sound piece for worms. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Contrary to a conventional understanding of bodies as fixed entities, perhaps it is more accurate to say that “bodies are unstable entities that cannot be seamlessly disaggregated into identity formations” (Puar 2012, 56). What is fixed is that bodies break down. But what can emerge if art is made for non-human bodies? Decomposition is necessary for composting. Similarly, decomposition is inevitable considering that my art materials are ingestible and made from organic matter. The work’s deterioration is then performing and recognizing that timescales—from the life cycle of an object to the lifetime of different bodies to the planet’s deep time—are a multiple and fluctuating phenomenon in the perception of experience.

Soil Amendments (see Fig. 4) was the first experiment in my research to create artworks for a body of soil situated on a gallery’s site. In collaboration with Yardspace Gallery, we measured the quality of the soil to analyze its health and then brought in nutrient supplements that were mixed into the garden bed before being made into a soil plinth for my biodegradable work. Over the course of the exhibition, the sculpture and plinth weathered the elements and gradually decomposed. In *sieving through the body* (see Fig. 5), I dug up and sifted 7.5 cubic feet of soil through my fingers to remove detritus and rocks for 13.5 hours. The litter was then sorted and pinned as material specimens in one speculative future where the land by Vermont Studio Center’s Gallery 2 becomes depleted and panning for extinct materials is commonplace.



Figure 4. Chao, Gwennyth. *Soil Amendments*, 2022. Gelatin, sphagnum peat moss, peat humus, compost, perlite, gypsum, calcitic lime, mycorrhizae. Photo by Heidi Holmes.



Figure 5. Chao, Gwenyth. *Sieving through the body*, 2022. Mixed media installation of littered materials including a melted smoke detector, Styrofoam, glass, plastic, rubber, chewing gum, and wine cork. Photo courtesy of the artist.

My research is composting. Borrowing from assemblage writing that shifts its focus from content to organization, my research is interested in how bringing multiple materials and processes together creates relations that give rise to concepts. My practice speaks through multiplicities, sometimes contradictions, in its speculations of potential ecologies that can actually thrive in capitalist ruins like the matsutake mushroom (Tsing 2015, 3). Similar to the symbiotic ecologies within compost piles, my sculptural installations are emergent processes of becoming-with that resist the notion of finality. The compost pile encourages generative, multi-directional ways of thinking, symbiotically embracing multi-modal sharing between different bodies. Thinking through compost means that “we can never fully know what an assemblage or a multiplicity can do, as its agencies are involved in creating ‘patterns of unintentional coordination’” (Tsing 2015, 23). In speculating about potential futures of our planet, I am asking us to allow the dominant ways of thinking to decompose so that we may have a chance to reconsider the world through a hybrid experimental lens that can exist outside of capitalist gain.

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