Sympathy for the abject: (re)assessing assemblages of waste with an embedded artist-in-residence

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ABSTRACT
The assemblages of (post)industrial neoliberal society include the production of vast quantities of post-consumer materials categorized as waste, which for many appears to vanish from everyday spaces. But rather than make it disappear in any final sense, recycling and disposal processes simply move it in new forms into new places within the global flows of waste. In urban contexts, the abject category of waste must be expelled from the sanitary spaces and subjectivities of daily routines, yet its corresponding absence in everyday perception obviates the urgency of action. One approach to unbundling the abject residue of contemporary society without instigating catastrophic rupture of social orders is through the aestheticization of the expelled. Artists working in the realm of abjection can serve as agents disrupting and redefining boundaries and social imaginaries of the status quo. In this paper we examine an artist-in-residence at the Edmonton (Canada) Waste Management Centre, arguing that the Deleuzian assemblages erasing the material consequences of garbage can be short-circuited in a municipal setting by redistributions of aesthetic experience. In this case, the artist residency embedded in human and mechanical assemblages of waste disposal allowed the artist to transform materials into an aesthetic spectacle recategorizing the abject as sympathetic and a vital component of social and spatial discourse.

Introduction: slow catastrophe and the artist
The world generates four billion tonnes of waste per year, some of it managed by a $433B industry which collects, transforms, and moves vast quantities across cities, states, and continents (Acuto 2014), and a surprisingly large amount of which eludes management and containment altogether. As the abject “living dead of capitalism” (Dickson 2007) waste provides shadow referents to “things, people or activities that are separated, removed and devalued” (Scanlan 2005, 10).

Despite its looming material consequences, garbage remains something of an indiscernible entity. One of the necessary conditions for garbage, in Western neoliberal urban contexts, is its relocation from residential and industrial sites of production to settings peripheral to the vast majority of citizens who produce it. The abject, as Julia Kristeva (1982) writes, must be excluded in order for the social body to survive, thus creating the potential for trauma and social instability in its unregulated encounter; waste must be expelled from a functional system (see also Douglas 1966). In his concept of base materialism, Georges Bataille (1985) proposes that encounters with what he calls base matter—the excluded materials of social and intellectual order on which categorical stability depends—destabilize social hierarchies (Noys 1998). Base matter entails the figureless, unformed experiences at the limits of understanding, and the excluded material consequences of social regularity, or as Bataille puts it (Bataille 1997, 163): “Base matter is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations, and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations”. Like Kristeva’s abject (1982), the homogenous, assimilated and rationally utilitarian output of Bataille’s “great ontological machinery” is subject to transgression by the heterogenous, rejected and disorderly (Marchak 1990; Tyler, n.d.). Abject matter may vanish from the everyday, but it remains contingent and unpredictable as it transforms—for example, when material waste dissolves as leachate contaminating soil and groundwater, or when greenhouse gasses or particulate matter escape into the atmosphere—which can foster emergent beings and processes that disrupt ordered terrains and infrastructures. As an assemblage of practices and procedures including materials, norms, policies, human and non-human agents, the garbage produced by waste management systems will always exceed attempts to control and plan (Hird, n.d.; Reno 2016; Gray-Cosgrove, Liboiron, and Lepawsky 2015; Kaika and Swyngedouw 2000). The waste management industry is, at its foundation, an industry of
subtraction—or, perhaps more enigmatically, an industry that produces absence. Garbage quarantined spatially and ecologically in order to “disappear” the abject residue of our industrial and daily activities in an effort to preserve their homogenous, assimilated utility.

One approach to unbundling the abject residue of contemporary society without instigating catastrophic rupture of social and ecological orders is through the aestheticization of the expelled (Seegert 2014, 4). Art works concerned with waste or trash include environmental artists, land artists, conceptualists, and activists creating spectacular images of trashscapes and installations (Surak 2016; Williams 2010). In the spirit of Walter Benjamin’s ragpicker who sparks new perceptions of society from juxtapositions of apparently unrelated items, the artist working in a realm of abjection might serve as agent of disrupting and redefining boundaries and social imaginaries of the status quo. Enter the embedded artist-in-residence at a municipal waste facility. Embedded artist-in-residencies describes the (re)location of artists and their practices into non-art-based institutional settings with the aspirational goal of organizational transformation and/or artistic development and advancement of career (Lithgow and Wall 2017). Working with the detritus of consumer production, artists of the early to mid-twentieth century assembled found objects into new forms suggesting new meanings, eventually exhibited in mainstream galleries. The phenomenon of artist residencies situated in waste management sites dates back to at least 1976, when Mierle Laderman Ukeles (1969) began to work with the New York City Sanitation department, demonstrating that imparting value and meaning to “abject” materials and concepts transforms notions of the value of related labour as well (Ukeles 1969). Since 1990, San Francisco’s Recology—at the Recycling Centre and Transfer Station—has hosted artists to, in part, educate the public about consumption and recycling practices (Burgess 2016; CNet 2017). Philadelphia’s Recycled Artist in Residence program (RAIR) since 2010 is situated within a construction and demolition recycling facility, encouraging artists to consider their practice in terms of sustainability and materials flow, and involves live public events and tours (Heidenry 2017). In Canada, the city of New Westminster, B.C., launched a residency program at a Solid Waste and Recycling facility in 2017, which according to the artist encouraged framing the ways we think of consumption and waste aesthetically, while offering the potential to see art as a career rather than a sideline (McLellan 2018).

In 2018, the City of Edmonton appointed Leanne Olson as artist in residence at the Edmonton Waste Management Centre (EWMC) for 9 months (later extended to 1 year). Ms. Olson worked on site, interacted with employees, engaged with members of the public passing through on educational tours, photographed, videoed and audio recorded the many different waste handling facilities managed by the EWMC, and produced a body of work directly influenced by her experiences during the residency. In this paper, we argue that the social imaginaries of garbage in a neoliberal, urban context in a mid-sized Canadian city were in part short-circuited by Ms. Olson’s embedded residency at EWMC. Our findings emerge from a Deleuzian analysis of embedded residency as a coming together of assemblages that produces lines of flight interrupting conventional practices and perceptions in an industrial waste-handling facility and for the artist herself. Among the many kinds of short-circuit observed, were changes to professional art practices in response to emergent perceptions of artistic outcomes in terms of waste stream potentialities. Another important line of flight suggested an epistemic shift in perception from “garbage as abject” to empathy for garbage, a changed discourse that emerged among staff at the EWMC, with other waste engineer professionals at an industry conference, and within the educational discourses engaged with the public during tours at the site. Empathy for waste reclaims it within categories of meaningfulness, dislodging it from its conventionally assumed status as “disappeared” and opening up possibilities for new futures.

**Aesthetics & trash: the toxic sublime**

Mike Crag (2012) believes that the aestheticisation of waste holds garbage in stasis between categories of production and dissolution, capturing moments of entropy; Michael Thompson (1979) similarly notes that object value is not absolute but transient between possession, rubbish and transformation. John Scanlan (2005, 14–15) writes that “the act of conceptualizing garbage actually transforms it into something else,” a tangible way to examine possibilities of renewal highlighting the transient status of waste by blurring distinctions between art materials and garbage.

These moments and interstices of addressing the materiality of garbage with aesthetic discourse resist total absorption into either the “invisible” repositories created by the garbage industry or categories of practical use within the economy. Olson’s artform is photography, which in the case of a waste facility involves the visual representation of what in effect cannot be seen. Thomsen (2015) explores the potential utility of visual imagery to connect viewers with dynamic social-ecological contexts, representing the impacts of environmental change, but much of visual garbage art is concerned with redeeming trash to aesthetic value rather than systemic political advocacy. Toxic sublime images of wastelands and
garbagescapes, such as the work of Edward Burtynsky, though aestheticizing environmental crisis, can result in a sense of helplessness and fear, with human agency usually out of the picture (Peebles 2011; Hodgins and Thompson 2011). Feldman (2009) points in contrast to Mierle Ukeles’ performances as artist in residence with the New York City sanitation department, which involved direct contact and learning from workers, and environmental experiences linking citizens to trash as part of a complex, dynamic living system embedded within larger economies, bringing humans back into the picture. The aestheticization of what has already been categorized as unwanted opens up possibilities for new ways of thinking about the meaning of garbage post ipso facto its arrival at the place where, for all intents and purposes for most citizens, it has already disappeared.

**Assemblage theory of embedded artist-in-residencies**

For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the assemblage is an array of productive relations and agents driven by desire which produces unexpected connections, recombinations and multiplicities of knowledge and action as they form, expand, and encounter other assemblages. The concept of garbage as assemblage reflects embodied materials and practices evident in public policies and practices and socio-spatial boundaries (Hawkins 2006). Overall, it is the assemblages of garbage working in the context of social norms and orders of knowledge that both represent and produce the residue of the valueless, that which is without category or function (Scanlan 2005). Materials become garbage when previous assumptions of value and identity dissolve and the object is dismissed as part of everyday life, essentially becoming nothing and falling into the broad and abstract realm of formlessness and absence.

The placing of an artist within a non-art-based institution for the purposes of creative practice and interaction within organizational routines (what we describe as an “embedded artist-in-residence”) can also be understood in Deleuzian terms as a bringing together of disparate assemblages (Lithgow and Wall 2017, 2018). In an embedded residency, the artist must relocate their daily practices to a host organization whose primary activities have little to do with art as a praxis or commodity. The goals are often ambiguous but generally related to both artistic exploration and growth, and organizational transformation and innovation.

The “assemblage”, as described by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), is a range of productive relations through which subjective impulses—that is, desires—make sense. All social reality according to Deleuze and Guattari, is an outcome of assemblages, from very basic forms of assemblage (a baby and its mother and their relations of feeding) to much more complex assemblages, such as capitalism. In the Deleuzian framework, the foundation of human experience is comprised of outwardly extending, and connection-seeking flows of desire.

Assemblies of desire form differentiated kinds of territorialized space. “Striated spaces” are those organized by rules, hierarchies, taxonomies and regulation, while “smooth spaces” allow greater flexibility in the formation and interaction of new connections and assemblages (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Flows of desire move along molar lines of segmentarity and regularity; along molecular lines which tend to overcome the limitations of molar lines; and “lines of flight” which are the unexpected and unpredictable flows of desire that emerge when one assemblage encounters another (ibid.; Lawley 2005). Assemblies are always and perpetually breaking down, making new connections, being remade and made anew—a fluid dynamic out of which social realities emerge (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

Corporate and governmental organizations present striated spaces—that is, environments where “all its components, by their positions, their functions, and/or their actions, are all carrying out the objectives of this system” or what is sometimes described as organizational coherence (Cayla 2006, 328). An assemblage framework helps to reveal the AiR’s potential and limitations for social and structural transformation within organizations built on highly regimented and ordered spaces designed to ensure longevity, profitability and administrative efficiency. Within these striated assemblages are “virtual potentialities” that offer possibilities for institutional change (Lawley 2005, 43). A municipality, for example, must be able to innovate and adapt to change without, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 160–1) have said, throwing the “strata into demented or suicidal collapse”. In this context, embedded residencies present an assemblage of relations bound in the artist’s professional practices and discourses of art legitimacies, juxtaposed within the organizational assemblages of the host—in this case, a municipally funded and managed waste facility site for a city with a population of 1.2 million in a neoliberal, western democratic context. The artist’s day-to-day presence at the facility introduces into that environment relations and priorities overtly conditioned by aesthetic considerations—in Olson’s case, the praxes and discourses of fine art of photography.

Aesthetics is a notoriously difficult term to pin down and is used to refer to a wide range of experiences. We have elsewhere described and defended the relevance of aesthetic experience to discursive legitimacies (Lithgow 2012, 2013, 2017). In a nutshell, aesthetic experience presents opportunities to escape, destabilize and challenge conditions of possibility for
In other work, we have identified three distinct aspects of residency assemblage (i) Contexts, (ii) Contact Zones and (iii) Productive Frictions (Lithgow and Wall 2017, 2018). Contexts describe the conditions initially intended to shape the residency experience and outcomes, reflecting molar lines and encompassing individual, cultural and organizational expectations and obligations. Contact Zones arise when one set of assemblages come into play with another set of assemblages—the artist’s worldview and praxis with the host organization’s worldview and praxis—and through this co-existence produce opportunities for unexpected and unprecedented interactions best described by molecular lines in the overlap of artistic and corporate sensibilities. And finally, Productive Frictions embody what Deleuze and Guattari called “lines of flight”: the unconventional, unanticipated but hoped-for disruptions that occur during a residency. Productive frictions are neither planned nor predicted; they reflect ongoing tensions between the play spaces and real-world contexts of the residency; they contribute in meaningful ways to both artist and organization; and as the name implies, they can present uses of resource that work against, in particular, organizational impulses towards efficiency.

The embedded residency at the Edmonton Waste Management Centre (re)located the professional practices of artist Leanne Olson into the ongoing, day-to-day operations of the waste facility, not only bringing together the artist’s and facilities molar lines of organization through the temporary establishment of a “play space” where the artist could explore her sensibilities in the new context, but—as described below in greater detail—allowing for unique and emergent sensibilities that affected both artist and facility employees alike.

**Embedded artist-in-residence: structural reorganization from the inside**

The Edmonton Waste Management Centre (EWMC) is an award winning facility that maintains an active educational and promotional program. Despite prior successes in innovation and technologies, in 2018 it was facing upgrading and operational challenges and the city launched a public consultation for improvement (Bascaron 2016; Bartko 2014; City of Edmonton 2018; Cook 2018; Ostad 2016). In was in this period that the EWMC created an artist-in-residence opportunity, the product of both internal curiosity and external support. Michael Robertson, the Material Recovery Facility (MRF) Contract Manager, made the initial inquiries: “I started looking into how we could commission somebody to make something out of anything that we have on site. I wasn’t really looking for a specific individual or a specific type of
work.” His goal for the residency was vague and yet targeted: to have a body of work made onsite, to engage with the Edmonton public and to “primarily focus on the tours that we have on site, because we do a variety of school tours throughout the year. And using those tours is an opportunity to enhance and change the message that we’re providing to those students with the artist in residence” (personal communication, 20 November 2018). The embedded residency was viewed as part of the EWMC’s mandate to educate the public about municipal waste and “about the strategy and the objectives of the operation … but also, to promote the brand of the facility as well as a service, as an international identity in the industry as well … Having somebody create art from what we have on site here,” Robertson explained, “was an opportunity to present our message to a different audience in a different way and to really capture something about this site that hasn’t been done previously.” (personal communication, 20 November 2018).

Leanne Olson, the artist, is a photographer whose “photo-based art practice centres on documenting impermanence and adaption to changing environmental conditions” (Olson, n.d.). Before arriving at EWMC, she had completed two previous residencies, one in Banff and one in Toronto. The Edmonton Arts Council (EAC) provided the external support for Olson’s embedded residency at EWMC. The EAC is a municipally funded, arm’s-length organization tasked with managing Edmonton’s $14 million annual cultural budget. Since 2008, the city’s cultural policy framework has promoted and supported arts as integral to civil society, quality of life and social cohesion, and launched a program of artist residencies within municipal operations in order to recognize “the important perspective artists bring to general civic discourse and planning.” A new 10-year policy framework in 2018 celebrates outcomes including an AiR at the cemetery and the recently completed landfill residency (see City of Edmonton 2018; EAC 2008, 2018).

The EAC, with EWMC and the artist, formalized the residency in a Letter of Agreement that outlined expectations and guidelines, including producing a final exhibition of artwork. Olson was expected to use the EWMC as a primary location for her work, to hold photography workshops with city staff and/or the public, and to network with other artists in the community. There were no explicit instructions for day-to-day activities or artistic production. For Olson, it was a rich opportunity to have “dedicated time to work on my artwork which is hard to achieve in other life forms—to have an income, to have a place to work, to have time to work, to have flexibility and freedom to work and to have space and to have a subject” (personal communication, 9 March 2018).

The generous stipend provided by the EAC freed Olson’s time from earning other income, and was a key aspect of immersion in the Context. It allowed her “the time to experiment and explore” aspects including sound, video and projection in her artistic practices beyond photography and her comfort zone and equipment. The unstructured temporal context allowed a creative “mental leap to … have that freedom … to just play … ” (ibid.). Similarly, the Context presented a new way of engaging with the subject, “to learn from the site itself, and … my dialogue with the site … What does this location need?” And finally, Olson brought expectations to the residency of creating a final exhibit of work, one that she hoped would travel beyond the city because: “I think a lot of the concepts that are happening at this site are translatable … anywhere” (personal communication, March 9, 7 June 2018 2018).

While her time was not formally structured by the organization or demands on site, Olson found it necessary to develop some routines of shift schedules, checking in and out, scheduling visits to different parts of the facility, and to follow safety protocols. Conforming to work schedule routines and safety conventions helped her feel more part of the EWMC setting, a process that disrupted her typical pattern of working alone in remote landscapes (personal communication, 9 March 2018). As well, she adopted the material “costuming” of everyday working life with hardhat and safety vest, permitting her physical access to restricted spaces while aligning her presence with the interests and constraints of every-day staff, in contradiction to the stereotype of the artist removed from quotidian concerns (personal communication, 7 June 2018).

The Context encompassed a structure including expectations for the facilities’ normal, uninterrupted functions during the residency while she imported her artistic sensibilities and practices. This is the striated space of the host organization, and aspects like shift schedules and safety protocols reflect the molar lines of desire making up the striated workspaces of the facility. The striated spaces of Olson’s prior professional life required her to work at non-art-related jobs to pay the bills, to maintain a studio, and to produce images that reflect at least in some respects contemporary fine art photography discourse legitimacies. For example, Olson’s landscape work must navigate a wider, contemporary interest in reimagining landscape photography in western fine art discourses (O’Neill 2012). This was not a primary consideration within the residency space that broadened the audience to on-site staff and to the public through tours and later exhibits.

Into these contexts were introduced the molecular lines of the residency—the expectation for Olson to encounter staff and operational activities, for staff to accommodate her activities and assist where feasible,
to deal with waste materials in her creative work, to produce a body of work for exhibition at the end of the residency, to give photography-related workshops to staff and/or the public, and to be salaried for the duration of the residency. Olson also expected to have time and resources to explore other techniques and technologies during the residency, and to share her work from the residency with communities of interest outside of Edmonton.

Situated outside of her everyday contexts of work and art making, the artist experienced new temporal contexts of autonomous practice and a radically unfamiliar spatial environment in an industrial, contingent system of technology, nature and human labour. These contexts constituted and were constituted by the Contact Zones at work during the residency.

The (in)compatibilities of garbage & the fine arts: contact zones

The Contact Zones of an embedded residency are significantly shaped by physical geographies. Olson’s primary studio was located in the Materials Recovery Facility (MRF), one of a dozen buildings located at the EWMC site and which houses the immense warehouse space of the tipping floor—where garbage trucks dump their contents before any sorting takes place, to the keen interest of birds and rodents—and the main educational area, where visitors—primarily school tours—find educational resources and interpreters. The studio was a high-ceilinged, windowless room approximately 1500 square feet, lit with bare florescent tubes, and with concrete floor and walls, partially filled with broken machinery, unused desks and chairs, and a rack of staff safety clothing and gear. The studio space occupied one-half of the room, where there was a desk, a couple of chairs, a shelving unit, and bare walls which Olson used for hanging images. She also used the open floor space to accumulate waste debris from the facility to explore as media on which to print images. Pointing to the hybrid nature of the residency reflected in fluid categories of spatial meaning, the door to her studio space had two signs: “Storage” and “Leanne Olson, Artist in Residence” (see Fig. 1).

The room was out of the way, but also accessible to passing educational tours and other passersby who occasionally visited, as well as to media and curious academics. However, due to her dominant feeling of isolation, soon after commencing the residency, Olson began exploring the larger site outside of her studio space for working. The EWMC facility occupies 233 ha and encompasses 10 different waste management operations including solid waste processing, converting waste to biofuels, materials recovery, landfill gas recovery, e-waste and construction material recycling, organics processing, advanced energy research, a leachate treatment plant and biosolids lagoon. The different physical settings at the facility presented specific and unique contexts for her creative work. As a landscape photographer, she saw the waste management site as another kind of landscape made up of the “discarded … skins or shells of packaging of society [and the] contrast of all these materials living in this location …” (ibid.)

A few months into the residency, she reported having toured various sites and feeling very embedded in the operations … living with the subject in a different way than I would have in another project … The color palette, the sounds, the process, the operations, the … energy of the place …

As a result, she developed a range of themes and approaches to each, inspiring several distinct bodies of work (personal communication, 7 June 2018).
Her explorations exposed broader temporal and spatial flows of urban waste linked to the EWMC. For instance, an employee directed her to the early twentieth-century site for the municipal dump in the river valley, once the urban periphery for discarded waste, much of which is now resurfacing with erosion in the heart of the developed city. Olson also visited the town of Riley, where rural waste facilities receive landfill materials from Edmonton, so “I got to see the ... end of the story ... for the materials from here.” (personal communication, 20 November 2018).

As noted, an important aspect of the Contact Zones in Olson’s residency was interaction with EWMC employees at different locations in the facility. She began exploring alternate workspaces and new interactions and relationships with staff, working in the administration building or just “hanging out ... bouncing some ideas back and forth” in dialogue. These interactions played an important role in shaping how she experienced and conceptualized the facilities’ operations, building a rapport with the people handling the materials before she went out onto the floor, taking the images and then coming back, projecting them, editing them, looking through them ... [T]o talk to the people who actually are doing the work ... informs [my] work ... (personal communication, 9 March 2018).

For instance, she spent some time speculating about consumer purchase decision-making as being somehow connected to the later decisions of sorting materials on a conveyor belt for recycling.

And then [the staff] say, “It’s not—it doesn’t.” ... So like that’s a whole ... trajectory that I was on that just got ... debunked by the person who actually does it (ibid.).

Robertson also observed this aspect of Olson’s residency and her connections with staff in various locations outside the studio space. Her presence in everyday workspace enabled them to approach her spontaneously or casually and talk to her ... about what she’s doing—and that would give a chance for them to talk about their own experiences on the site. In some cases, they ... talked about their own art and their own photography ... (personal communication, 20 November 2018):

Olson felt that her creative work was also enhanced by encounters yielding new epistemic and discursive insights due to

the language that’s used on the site and the ways that things are described ... the staff can conceptualize something in a way that I can’t yet, so to hear someone summarize something really succinctly for a process ... that’s been really helpful ... (personal communication, 9 March 2018)

As employees came to know Olson’s residency routines and practices, they drew her attention to things that might interest her, an “offer of help” that was also a sharing of interest in the aesthetic potential in their work surroundings as different materials passed through and unexpected associations occurred. One worker told her

“Oh, you would’ve liked this: there was a handcuff just ... clinging ... to the shovel and making it louder.” ... People will tell me about the birds too. Like, did you know where these birds were today?” (personal communication, 7 June 2018).

In sum, the temporal and spatial conditions of the residency placed the artist outside of her normal routines in terms of the heightened allotment of energies to artwork and the physical location of the facilities on the edge of the city, marked by freeways, oil refineries and open fields. Contact Zones emerged through the physical proximities and encounters facilitated both by her studio location accessible to public tours and by her interest in exploring alternate, informal work locations which brought her into contact with employees.

Within the organization, new routines of scheduling and protocols engaged her in striated situations that helped to structure her activity without detracting from the “smooth” spaces she experienced or generated in her work. The molar lines of work schedules and physical movements through the facility encountered the molecular lines of Olson’s mobility, creating new and unprecedented interactions between Olson’s residency practices and staff routines and personnel. Her mobilities also encompassed sites offsite, an unexpected outcome (line of flight) linking the waste facilities in one location to other geographic locations and undermining any sense of containment attached to the EWMC. As Olson described it “This is really like kind of an airport for the materials, and then they go all these other places.” (personal communication, 20 November 2018). The different facilities at EWMC also created different Contact Zones for the artist, each with its own “different palette” of colour, sounds, processes and energy. As we will describe below in more detail, lines of flight suggested by her interactions with employees included new (for Olson) kinds of language and ideas for describing and understanding EWMC activities and outcomes and a stronger sense of belonging at the facility.

Empathy for waste: productive frictions & the idea of living materials

Olson’s interactions with the different facilities and locations on site and with employees in their daily routines produced Productive Frictions especially interesting in epistemic terms, but also significant in terms of Olson’s professional practices. One of the
Productive Frictions had to do with employees’ interest in her photography practices in relation to their own, showing her their camera equipment and asking for advice and instruction and occasionally accompanying her on shoots. Again, she felt that her presence prompted employees to experience their surroundings slightly differently, to see everyday objects and scenes through fresh eyes in the way that she did, with a sense of wonder ... that’s probably refreshing ... I guess it’s a different way of thinking, of processing the world, ... and then also trying to turn it into something else and ... communicate about it and express it ... (personal communication, 7 June 2018).

This is a phenomenon of embedded residencies that has been noted in many studies, sometimes called the “mirror effect” which describes a common outcome of residencies being host employees “seeing differently” their own routines and daily operations (Antal 2009; Antal and Strauß 2009; Barry and Meisiek 2010; Styhre and Eriksson 2008).

Another important and unexpected outcome for Olson was the several invitations to give several artist talks and present at conferences on waste management, developing her confidence in public speaking and exchanges about her work with a variety of visitors and audience. This unexpected benefit of the residency prompted and supported her application to (and subsequent acceptance into) a graduate program in fine arts, which was not a previous ambition (personal communication, 20 November 2018). The expansion of her sense of potential for development as a professional artist also reflects a broadening of practice through creative exploration during the residency as she began exploring different media for producing and displaying images. Working with “different technology [including] a projector more and ... thinking more about sound and video [has been] a shift in my practice that ... would have taken a lot of time to happen on its own because of resources and just attention ... it’s changing how I take photos ... ” Although she had considered avoiding making material objects that would enter the waste stream, toward the end she had “made a real shift to wanting some physical objects at the end of this instead of just having it all be digitally consumed” (personal communication, 7 June 2018). The appeal of tactile, bounded and literally framed products drawn out of the overwhelming current of tangled, amorphous waste reflects the ways that consumer agency offers some sense of meaning amid the constant barrage of postmodern production.

Another important and unexpected change in her creative practice, and one that she identified as an influence on her growing interest in graduate studies, was the expanded availability of uninterrupted time which allowed her to focus differently and develop ideas, undistracted by commitment to “multiple jobs, multiple head spaces” (ibid.) More than simply access to quantitatively expanded time, this was a distinct change in the quality of that time, now unbounded by deadlines and transitions between studio and day jobs (personal communication, 20 November 2018). The term “head space” points to the ability to maintain a particular cognitive and aesthetic focus yielding insights and launching new lines of flight.

One of the most interesting productive frictions had to do with shifting epistemic perceptions on the part of the artist and management employees in their understanding of garbage as a category of meaning. Olson began to experience garbage and waste in an altogether different epistemic context to the one she understood before entering the residency, and different to the one known to employees and managers encountered at the EWMC facilities. She began to consider the array of items pushed into piles or sorting bins as nostalgic bearers of past human values and relationships that were now just discarded ... I’ve been thinking about these objects that they’re in their senior citizen phase of their life, if they still have more phases before this one ends (personal communication, 7 June 2018).

What she describes as a “senior citizen phase” is part of a larger epistemic shift away from garbage as abject—and concurrent perception of EWMC as final outcome and resting place for garbage materials—and towards recognizing waste not as something to be managed and expelled, but to be handled with care. She gave a talk to a conference of waste industry management professionals in which she discussed the issue of empathy for waste or ... end of life phases. [S]ome of the feedback ... was that that was a refreshing way to talk about it ... I guess my role is just another way to interpret it (personal communication, 20 November 2018):

Michael Robertson, who also attended the conference, agrees that the idea of empathy is important to Olson’s work in broadening understandings through her images that evoke a new way of seeing the site and the material that [staff] don’t typically [notice in] a day to day workplace ... we take for granted the contents. She ... starts to create conversations about ... what is that material, where it came from, and what it means ... having these more in depth considerations that the employees wouldn’t normally have [in their routine tasks] ... (ibid.)

Robertson expressed an aspirational optimism about the residency’s epistemic reorientation towards garbage and waste materials, opening doors to new ways of thinking and talking about management issues and futures. This is particularly powerful concerning the sense of connection to objects and materials we’ve discarded because...
the general public … don’t have a very in depth understanding of the system, and they don’t see the material after it’s been thrown away … But having a different message … that people are able to connect to, might help to motivate them into making the right behavioral changes that are needed to see improvements in the industry [and that] could [inform policy and decision-making at the facility in the future]. I think being able to value an object can … help us to tell the story about what it is that we’re trying to achieve … (personal communication, 20 November 2018).

Robertson was most moved by the sense of empathy resonating in Olson’s images as they captured domestic objects moving through the waste stream. For instance, … there was a stuffed toy … a Teletubby … And then there was … a soccer cleat, a shoe. And both of these things really stuck out … amongst this mass of largely indistinguishable material in bags and food waste and all of these things … And it was … striking, because [for workers] that particular toy is going to pass by in a matter of seconds and you’re not gonna think about it after that. But what she’s done in this case is captured it. And now it captured our attention … (ibid.).

(see Fig. 2). These epistemic transformations also included changes in the educational practices at the EWMC as the discourse of empathy for waste was incorporated into the discussions hosted by facility educators in public tours. For Robertson, it was an opportunity to share shifts in perspective and ways of thinking with visitors, supplementing the instrumental technologies and routines with aesthetic understandings (personal communication, 7 June 2018).

In terms of the production of content, the subject matter was of particular interest to Olson as a photographer of natural landscapes and objects. She described the residency at its outset as an opportunity for more intimate knowledge of the “skins or shells of packaging of society” that normally vanish from view when discarded, and which she would now confront on a vastly increased scale as a constructed landscape of refuse and treatment zones (personal communication, 9 March 2018). Her professional practices evolved with these epistemic shifts as her concern with and awareness of the material consequences of her artwork in the waste stream raised questions about how best to manage her own artistic outcomes. In producing images, she considered “do I print them, do I project them, do I wrap them around some scrap metal or some of the materials?” Reluctant to produce more material objects, she slowed her production as she thought about the full lifecycle of whatever I’m working with [and the consequences of different media and materials.] I don’t know if I will ever print on anything plastic again [although] I really love how plastic looks … I think I want the material to … last, but also be able to disintegrate (personal communication, 20 November 2018).

Using new materials such as paper made with recycled lint from the textile industry would not only carry images but become part of her artist statement, but I don’t think it’ll ever be waste-free, because even with the projections I’ve had to buy, you know, different technology … In the future, this will really change my decision-making process (ibid.).

In sum, the temporal and spatial conditions of the residency placed the artist outside of her normal routines in terms of time she was able to dedicate to producing artwork and the physical location of the.
facilities on the edge of the city, marked by freeways, oil refineries and open fields. Contact Zones emerged through physical proximities and encounters facilitated both by her studio location and its accessibility to public tours and by her interest in exploring alternate, informal work locations which brought her into contact with employees.

Within the organization, new routines of scheduling and protocols engaged her in striated situations that helped to structure her activity without detracting from the “smooth” spaces she experienced or generated in her work. The molar lines of work schedules and physical movements through the facility encountered the molecular lines of Olson’s mobility, creating new and unprecedented interactions between Olson’s residency practices and staff routines and personnel. Her mobilities also encompassed sites offsite, an unexpected outcome (line of flight) linking the waste facilities in one location to other geographic locations and undermining any sense of containment attached to the EWMC. As Olson described it “This is really like kind of an airport for the materials, and then they go all these other places.” (personal communication, 20 November 2018). The different facilities at EWMC also created different Contact Zones for the artist, each with its own “different palette” of colour, sounds, processes and energy. As we will describe below in more detail, lines of flight suggested by her interactions with employees included new (for Olson) kinds of language and ideas for describing and understanding EWMC activities and outcomes and a stronger sense of belonging at the facility.

**Discussion/conclusion**

Neoliberal waste management systems support assemblages of mass production founded, at least in part, on priorities of scientific and technological efficacy (Hawkins 2006) and which, among other things, encompass the production of vast and growing repositories and streams of waste, effluent and garbage. The artist embedded within these assemblages of waste and their excesses has the opportunity to extend aesthetic engagements with the abject to performative and affective levels, oscillating from the unwieldy sublime and toxic spectacular to the mundane. The medium for the artist in this case is both the objects of waste and their representation in photographic form, which in their own material life-cycles as images printed on paper, plastic or other media, inevitably play their own role in waste streams of the future. New and emergent circulation or mobilities of garbage discourse, as in the case of Leanne Olson’s embedded residency, lend new value to the materials of waste and their perception through epistemic short-circuits like “empathy” which allow for sensibilities to take shape that accept materiality as never actually out of place or absent but present in every move we make—not elsewhere, but spiraling through daily life. Rather than waiting helplessly for a technological fix to the garbage crisis, waste and its troubles emerge as linked closely with our own affective and emotional responses. The space of “trash” at the edge of our daily terrain and consciousness is made vital and articulate as an affective condition of everyday life (Ghosh and Jazairy 2014; Appadurai 1988; Echterling 2014; Ekerdt 2009.)

At the EWMC residency, temporal and spatial conditions brought the artist into contact with unfamiliar surroundings and schedules, and it located her within an organization made up of people whom she would not normally encounter, though her personal trash might. The striated conditions of a highly technical bureaucratic management machine softened to generate “smooth” spaces where the artist could explore alternative modes of production. Contact Zones included both formal and informal working spaces accessed as needed, and mobile transactions around the site and offsite at other “final” locations of waste, conferences, supplier venues, and arts organizations, as well as encounters with non-human denizens of the facility. The artist forged new connections between ideas, materials and practices that in some cases echoed those of the staff and administration, while in others introduced epistemic shifts—for example, from garbage understood as a category of the abject, toward seeing it as part of an unfinished cycle bound in feelings of association and inclusion. The logical, linear assemblage of the site incorporated through the residency an unplanned set of perspectives that affected public relations programs and employee thinking, and which may someday—according to a senior manager—influence policy. In these ways, Productive Frictions included conjuring of the extraordinary from ordinary discarded and treated objects through the short-circuiting assemblages of an artist’s aesthetic sensibilities and practices that witnessed—or more accurately, gave visibility to—the abject in unexpected ways. In this sense, what was expelled is reintegrated into ongoing ways of being, and the narrative ending of garbage (i.e. forever, invisible) at the dump, is destabilized—albeit in a local way.

Of some interest in a contemporary context, despite the waste facility having a specific geographic location and direct impact on the surrounding landscape and locality, indigenous relations appeared to play little role in this residency. When asked, both the artist and the Edmonton Arts Council mentioned indirect sources of consultation and consideration. In Leanne’s case, informal relationships with local indigenous communities and for the Edmonton Arts Council, an awareness informed formally by a municipal Indigenous Artist-in-Residence Program. The Arts Council and the artist both
expressed an interest in deeper exploration of the implications of indigenous relations for artist residencies in the future.

Unique to the embedded residency are the possibilities for allowing lines of flight to manifest unchecked within the magic circle of the residency, the territories of artistic mobility and production housed within the uninterrupted (more or less) routines of the host. The artist acts within the magic circle without (again, more or less: less in terms of safety protocols and shift schedules, more in terms of creative exploration) conventional organizational consequences, and it is this smoothing of the striated spaces of the host that affords the unexpected, the unplanned for, the unpredicted. In a business context, these emergent assemblages might be referred to as “innovation” (Vij 2016; Kraft and Ravix 2008; Harris 1999).

The importance of the link between organizational structure, epistemology and organizational transformation is not to be underestimated. The use of language is integral and inextricable from organizational operations; new language—even if weakly understood—can be an essential aspect of organizational transformation and change (Haridimos 2005; von Krogh, Roos, and Slocum 1994). A knowledge-based view of organizations links the rules, resources, roles, stories and skills on which organizational operations depend to the “epistemological dimension” of an organization, i.e. the meanings of things and how people know them (Seirafi 2013, 52). Epistemic deviation is a necessary component of how structural change occurs within organizational contexts. Empathy for garbage as identified and indeed created by Olson through her aesthetic work presents one such epistemic shift in a context where garbage is routinely understood and perceived as a diffuse, technically complicated, materially diverse and potentially dangerous, industrial problem. The new epistemic orientation was, by all accounts, warmly received by management, front-line employees, educational staff and waste management professionals and engineers from other industrial sites and organizations.

The Deleuzian notion of short-circuiting is one of the ways that aesthetic experience can accelerate the alteration of striated assemblages found in organizations. We can speculate that in the normal routines of garbage control at the Edmonton Waste Management Centre, empathy for garbage as a legitimate policy consideration would have—or would have had—difficulty making its way through the operational epistemologies that guide day-to-day decision-making at the facility. The artist’s magic circle in effect does an end-run around (short-circuits) the epistemic boundary-keeping that is part and parcel of how organizations maintain unity, operations and incentives and through which structures of consequence are sustained.

The EWMC residency as an assemblage of artist, community, employees, educators, and audiences provoked new lines of sight as well as lines of flight across a collective “slow catastrophe” of consumption and human agency within it. As abject waste and pollution are reintegrated into the social body through aesthetic intervention, the embedded artist in liminal spaces brings voice and light into the unspeakable and invisible.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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