Sequestered Elements

by

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Abstract

This exhibition and accompanying essay explore objects of cultural significance from my home, the island of Newfoundland. The objects and my connection to them have inspired both my approach to installation and materials. Growing up and living in Newfoundland for most of my life has shaped my artistic output in ways I continue to discover, not just in terms of subject matter but also in the act of making my art work. I see my artistic practice as one that expands on the rich tradition of creating things – tools, furniture, shelter, vehicles – from whatever is lying around. This traditional way of making objects is inextricably linked to Newfoundland’s identity, as a place that celebrates resourcefulness in the face of scarcity.

Lobster traps, fishing nets, small houses, anchors, boats, warm clothes, rubber boots– these are some of human-made objects that dominate Newfoundland’s visual imagery. In my sculptural work I recreate and reflect on these objects as part of my cultural identity. I change their contexts by modifying their materials and introducing contemporary mass-consumer objects into their traditional forms. In this process the objects reveal their origins and layered complex meanings. I have chosen fishing nets, lobster traps, killicks, and ugly sticks as a point of departure in this exploration. These objects are often proudly displayed in front yards, homes, sheds, gift shops, and restaurants as part of the visual culture and environment. They have many functions; they are practical and often related to economic and industrial purposes, but they also function as displays and decorations denoting a region and a people, providing a physical embodiment of culture. Newfoundland has a unique culture of creativity which is present in these objects and embodies a distinct cultural aesthetic.
Lay Summary

This paper supports Sequestered Elements an exhibition of electronic sculptures referencing many culturally significant objects of Newfoundland, Canada. Citing examples from personal experiences, news articles, and events this thesis looks at how Newfoundland’s geographical and cultural position has created not just unique objects but a unique relationship to them as well. The artwork follows a path of inquiry as to how handmade and mass-produced objects are used and re-purposed using an ad-hoc approach to building in a place where resources can be scarce but creativity is abundant.
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**Introduction**

The image shown above has stuck with me throughout my degree, it shows something which is uniquely Newfoundland. The people could look vaguely north American, the weather is foggy like many coastal regions, but what truly stands out is the object (the home being floated). This house is being moved to a new location during Newfoundland’s resettlement of rural communities to more urban centers to cut federal government costs. When challenged with a difficult predicament, this is the sort of ingenuity and resourcefulness that really defines life on
the island. It is through the use of objects that I have found what I believe it means to be a Newfoundlander.

This thesis and accompanying exhibition explore cultural objects from my home, the island of Newfoundland in Canada. Growing up and living there for most of my life has shaped my artistic output in ways I continue to discover, not just in terms of subject matter but more specifically in how I work with materials when making my art. The people of Newfoundland are a mixture of cultures, mostly English, Irish, Scottish, French and First Nations. Challenges of geography, climate, and isolation dictated how and what they made – building shelters, technologies, vehicles, and other objects in accordance with restrictions and allowances of rugged land, harsh weather, and scarce resources. I believe that Newfoundland has a unique culture of creativity which is present in many everyday objects found there. I hope that by creating art that speaks to the material culture of Newfoundland I can further expand on the relationship between people and objects in a place that inspires me.

Lobster traps, fishing nets, small houses, anchors, boats, warm clothes, rubber boots – these are some of the human-made objects that dominate Newfoundland’s visual imagery. In my sculptural work I recreate and reflect on these objects in an attempt to explain their origins and meaning. Why are they here? What are they telling us? It is through artifact analysis that I hope to explore a broader social analysis. As you will see for my sculptural art work I have chosen the following objects: the net, the lobster trap, the killick, and the ugly stick. I have organized sections explaining how I have researched and recreated them, and I have also included information on how they are made and how they function. These objects have many functions. They are often practical, serving a utilitarian function related to basic survival but they also function as displays and decorations denoting a region, a people, and a culture. It is very normal,
for example, to see fishing equipment displayed in front yards, people’s homes, and sheds. These objects are important to me and while living in Newfoundland I have seen many objects used as part of a subsistence economy and decoration. These culturally meaningful objects are not unique to Newfoundland (E.g. fishing nets are used all over the globe) but are uniquely significant to its culture through the way they are used. Things do not need to originate from or be constructed in a place to be culturally important to it. The invention of the gas mask for instance is often credited to Newfoundlander Cluny Macpherson, but we do not see gas masks displayed in homes or front yards as a sign of cultural pride. On the flip side you may see lobster traps originally designed in Massachusetts, USA or made-in-china buoys hung and displayed with considerable esteem.

Because my artistic practice is mainly focused on human-made objects I have been drawn to writing about material culture. “Material culture” is a very inclusive term which encompasses writing and theory about physical objects, resources, and spaces. This means it includes both the naturally occurring and the human-made objects: both natural environment (the weather, land, ocean, animals, and resources) and the human-made objects (houses, tools, and vehicles) which facilitate life. I feel this distinction is an important part of what first got me interested in creating sculptural work. By recognizing the idea that we transform nature into objects that create a mirror, we can use this to understand who we are (Miller 58).

The authors Daniel Miller, Graham Harman, Charles Jencks, and Nathan Silver have been instrumental in my artistic process. Their material culture writing draws heavily from the philosophical work of Bourdieu, Simmel, and Marx, and pushes towards an understanding of both the natural and the human-made worlds, constantly interacting and affecting one another. These theories about things are the most helpful lens to understand the material world, but I
believe sculptural art is the most helpful medium to experiment with and experience them. I have also relied on the writing of Robert Mellin and Gerald Pocius, who specifically situate Newfoundland within a discussion of concepts about material culture, architecture, and creativity.

For the purpose of my research I am interested in objects. While there is no shortage of academic writing disputing the definitions of “object”, “thing”, “material”, and “artifact”, these terms are more commonly used in everyday language for separating the animate from the inanimate. The word object is defined in object-oriented ontology as “…irreducible in both directions: an object is more than its pieces and less than its effects” (Harman 53). I see the possible benefit of a definition which for philosophical purposes broadens our understanding of objects to include events and people. However, when I use the word object, I am referring to the way it appears in everyday language, having the connotations of something physical, solid, durable, inhuman or entirely inanimate (Harman 51). I also refer to objects as being part of “subsystems of meaning” when they are combined ad-hoc with other objects, attaching themselves to a series of references but they are fundamentally still recognizable within a larger context.

Newfoundland was the first point of contact by Europeans in North America, it was the first place colonized by the British, it played a role in two world wars, and ultimately it lost its status as a self-governing dominion in 1934. Its history is immensely complicated and I have attempted to resist the urge to discuss all aspects of Newfoundland history and cultural identity that — however interesting in their own right — are too large for the focus of my creative practice. My focus is on the people and the objects of Newfoundland and for me there is no better way to examine material culture than through sculptural art work. It is the medium best
equipped for an exploration of the physical, one that brings me in immediate contact with materials by exploring and altering their formal qualities and contexts.
2.1 Creativity and Ad-hoc Making

“The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves.”

- Carl Jung (Jung 112)

My research and personal experiences of material culture in Newfoundland shows evidence of a multitude of factors that have shaped the objects of Newfoundland; its inhabitants came from many different cultural backgrounds, its natural environment is harsh and unforgiving, its wild and rugged geography, lack of many natural resources and arable land, and isolation from other places and populations both internally (within the island) and externally (with respect to the rest of Canada). These factors are very influential on their own, but I believe many of them culminate into a single factor worth highlighting: the very few materials from which to create new things. This is why living on “the rock” I grew up surrounded by people who have built things with inspiring ingenuity, repurposing found objects for everything from addressing basic needs like food and shelter to objects repurposed specifically for social experiences, leisure, or aesthetics. Seeing first-hand the ways in which Newfoundlanders build, make, or create objects makes me believe that some limitations have led to a unique cultural relationship with objects that I feel both privileged to be a part of and responsible to examine closely and share.

This way of making is best understood as “ad-hoc” or “adhocism”. In the realms of visual art, architecture, and design it is a well-established style and philosophy. A primary text on the subject, Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation by Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver covers examples of all things ad-hoc from political movements to the duck-billed platypus and has
inspired me to look at examples of Newfoundland material culture through this lens. The second quality of the Adhocist Manifesto states “In culture, combinations that display themselves, and explain their use and origins, are especially adhocist.” (Jencks and Silver xix). I found this point especially applicable given that the objects I have selected often display themselves through function but also function through their display.

These objects are sometimes a one-off creation, simply meeting the needs of a single individual and other times they are adopted by an entire community. Some of the examples I have found are pragmatic solutions to real problems but also spirited design efforts with aesthetic qualities not to be underestimated or passed off as primitive or ignorant.

I learned early on in my life about the objects of the people who first inhabited Newfoundland, sometimes through stories of friends or relatives and often through the arts. Visiting sites like L’anse aux Meadows as a child I was able to see the moss huts of the Vikings who were the first Europeans to reach North America over 1000 years ago. I attended the unveiling of monument created by Gerald Squires to commemorate the life of Shawnadithit, the last known Beothuk. Later in life I learned spruce root basket making from a local woman in my community. I grew up with an interest in how Indigenous people and early settlers made the island their home by creating a personal environment from the subsystems at hand. Even though these early inhabitants of the island are no longer alive the objects they have left behind show traces of their culture and skills at improvising and creating.

Some of the earliest and well-known examples of ad-hoc provisional creations in Newfoundland come from the Beothuk, who had faced many challenges as settlers encroached on their hunting grounds and forced them inland. While generally avoiding contact with Europeans, they would build tools with metals traded and often taken from abandoned fishing
shacks (Marshall 337). They even created their own anvil stones for reshaping metals. The metals from spoons and scissors would become hunting tools like arrowheads and harpoon tips. Unlike traditional stone tools, the newer refashioned metal hunting tools could be re-sharpened. The Beothuk eventually became skilled ironworkers. They would also cover their dwellings—mamateeks—with canvas sails from settler boats replacing their traditional birch design (Polack).

The repurposing of objects was also common in the artifacts of European settlers to the island as well. When English, French, and Irish settlers arrived they were faced with a lack of material to create new objects, especially compared to their countries of origin. Newfoundlanders at the time of settlement were often pluralistic in occupation. They were first and foremost fishermen but also seal hunters, lumberjacks, boat builders, masons, and carpenters (Peddle). This meant that their skills and occupations would lend themselves well to ad-hoc creations. One particularly unique pocket of adhocism can be found in the objects of Irish settlers of Tilting on Fogo Island, Newfoundland. The houses in this area are similar to farm house designs found in Ireland but instead of being built from stone they are built from local spruce and fir. Their design is Irish but the materials are uniquely Newfoundland. Even in modern times on the outside of these houses some residents create a red colorant made from cod liver oil (Mellin, “Tilting” 104). While this is intended to decorate the wood with a distinctive blood red color it also serves as a sealant protecting it from rotting.

The modernist view of contemporary urban building is one which aspired to permanence (Mellin, “Newfoundland” 8). This sharply contrasts the way homes are constructed in settlements in Newfoundland. Robert Mellin describes them as “… temporary, fragile, and even nomadic character in form, construction, materials, and use, requiring frequent maintenance... perch tentatively on the land without changing it, leaving no traces when they were moved or
abandoned” (Mellin, “Newfoundland” 8). Traditional Newfoundlander buildings show a certain respect for the land they belong to, building in ways that would by modern standards show a preciousness of materials, heavily relying on recycled supplies, and with little impact to the environment. Instead of a permanent building we see constructions that constantly change with the land, and are consequently ad-hoc or built in a combination of stages over time.

The furniture of Newfoundland shows other examples of ad-hoc creating. Mellin says furniture in Tilting can be described in three ways, “evolutionary, hybrid, and reuse.” (Mellin, “Tilting” 128). Furniture in Newfoundland is especially unique in outport communities where furniture makers normally design their pieces after models and designs from the places they migrated from. Some models were copied exactly. In many cases, furniture styles from different cultures were combined ad-hoc to suit a specific need or context often with bizarre results (Peddle).

The ad-hoc nature of Newfoundland’s creative culture is also found in its language. Newfoundland English is a recognized collection of accents and dialects unlike any English spoken elsewhere in Canada. The language itself is predominately a mixture of Irish and English dialects. One of my favorite examples is the word “dipper”, a word defined as a saucepan for collecting berries. When it comes to the activity of collecting berries in Newfoundland there is no specific single-purpose vessel used for the task. Instead berries are collected in whatever object is at hand and a pot with a handle from the kitchen is the most commonly used tool available; so much so that a saucepan becomes a dipper entirely based on how it is used. The word “chummy” has an even more flexible definition, it is commonly used to describe hammers, wrenches, knives or any tool whatsoever when there is an understanding between two people about what it is. Its only definition is a contraption which does not need to be described.
For a contemporary example I would like to share one from my own experience. When I lived in St. John’s Newfoundland, my neighbors would put fishing nets over their garbage to protect it from sea gulls and crows. To a visitor to the city this might seem like it is a cute decoration whose main reason for existing is to display the cultural connection to the fishing industry but I soon discovered there is a very practical reason. I lived on a very steep hill where no garbage can would be able to stand upright and even if it could, on a bad day the wind was so strong it could take it miles from the house. The large, heavy fishing nets would hold the garbage in place and protect it from pests. The ad-hoc net functioned better than a garbage can ever could in this environment.

Objects are used ad-hoc like this a lot in Newfoundland. The ability to look at a resource and turn it into an object of alternate use is what kept people alive. It is a skill shared by all cultures that have inhabited the island. This ability to improvise is now culturally ingrained in modern day Newfoundland. When these objects are viewed as a whole a consistent ad-hoc theme appears as a unifying vernacular style or aesthetic.

A very common insult in Newfoundland is to call someone “useless”. This is perhaps true for many places but use and function is of the utmost importance to Newfoundlander. By looking at some of these objects we can see a strong pride in the cleverness it takes to adapt and recycle objects. This is further emphasized by the fact that many of these objects stay in their ad-hoc format. The subsystems of each object are not removed or hidden, they embrace their references and do not exist as a prototype of midway point to a more seamless solution.

Why do so many Newfoundland objects remain ad-hoc in combinations that display themselves? It would be tempting to explain this as just being a necessary economical choice to keep things ad-hoc and that would certainly be true for the past. But these objects do not
necessarily need to stay ad-hoc anymore. The skills, ability, time, and money to smooth them into beautiful modern designs are arguably all there. They stay ad-hoc because this way of making is revered and part of the culture itself. It started from necessity and became a culturally ingrained building style. I never feel more accepted and loved in Newfoundland than when I make something useful out of things that are readily available. I have also felt doubt cast over creations that appear pretentiously urbane or sophisticated. The artwork I create holds onto and displays this culturally ingrained way of making.
2.2 Objects as Cultural Display

As discussed, many of the objects that make up the cultural image of Newfoundland are not used for their originally intended purposes; many are repurposed or combined with other objects ad-hoc. Newfoundland has a strong connection to the ocean. It shares this connection with many of the Atlantic provinces of Canada that rely on the water for survival. When looking at objects related to the fishery it is helpful not just to look at how they are used but how they are displayed when they are not used. In this section I will share some objects whose functions have transformed from utility to decorative.

Fishing is and always has been the dominant industry of Newfoundland; it was what sustained most life there. More than simply a form of employment, the ocean represents a way of life bringing with it the certain skills and ways of making. For this reason, objects that reference the fishing industry are treated with particular reverence. Some of these objects might be very familiar to people who have lived in other coastal parts of the world. However, not everyone might know these objects and their histories and uses. People who come from a rural inland agricultural culture might draw comparisons to how farming equipment, tractors, horse tack, or trucks are displayed there.

Fishing equipment reminds me of where I am. It comfortably locates me in the history of a place, and has an aesthetic beauty and charm rooted in a romanticized vision of home. In Newfoundland I have seen lobster traps on front lawns, fishing buoys hung in gardens, and all type of ad-hoc or readymade folk art made from recognizable fishery-related subsystems. These types of coastal nautical displays can sometimes serve obvious commercial applications. This would be the case for decorations in a seafood restaurant that hangs fishing equipment on its
walls. It becomes a decorative element to frame the customer experience of seafood restaurants and fish markets. The object functions to reassure customers with familiar and trustworthy cultural symbols. In this setting, objects are more often old or worn out and sometimes obsolete contraptions. It is easy to see how these objects might be used to frame a dining experience in a romantic or nostalgic way, distancing the consumer from the realities of an often-unsustainable or pollution-heavy industry. With this in mind, outside of the commercial setting, these objects also function in similar ways but also provide a sense of community life.

One peculiarly interesting example that really captures the reverence for these objects is the lobster trap Christmas tree. This type of display has shown up in Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island, and has been documented by many news organizations. Sometimes they are used as fundraisers for food banks and charities. They are

![Figure 2](image.png)

*Figure 2.* The tree stands outside the church in the centre of the town.

(© 2018 Steve Bruce by permission)
often a community project or sometimes just an individual effort (Randell). In each case the display shows lobster traps stacked on top of each other, covered in Christmas lights. In some cases, buoys are placed on the tree bearing the names of fishermen who lost their lives at sea (Macdonald). Events are often held in front of the lobster trap tree where musicians play music and readings and speeches are given. The tree helps create a moment for the community to gather and remember loved ones during the holiday season (Bruce). In some cases, it can even be accessed through a webcam so community members living away from home can view the display.

The lobster trap Christmas tree represents more than just a clever ad-hoc creation. On the surface it is an assemblage of industrial objects. In this configuration and use it is also a symbol of the community engagement and unity that I felt growing up. The transition in function from utilitarian lobster trap to symbol of community pride is remarkable. It shows that an object’s meaning is largely dictated by its use and context. In small rural areas community co-operation is an integral part of everyday life and historically important to survival. People in these communities know and rely on one another. It is easy to see how Newfoundland might fit a more collectivist model of society when looking at the lobster trap Christmas tree. Even when fishing is done for the holiday socializing and community activities seem to take precedent over individualistic forms of leisure. (Pocius 272). The lobster trap Christmas tree happens because people need it to. It is built for the purpose of bringing people together.

Still, fishing equipment might have negative connotations for some people and might be considered symbolic of an unsustainable industry polluting the planet and endangered certain species. If these same objects are found in fishing communities all over world why might they be so revered in Newfoundland? Gerald Pocius, (author of A Place to Belong, a book on material
culture in Calvert, Newfoundland) touches on this when he examines Newfoundland objects 
“while Newfoundlanders use many of the same modern objects as the rest of North America 
their daily culture remained remarkably different." (Pocius 13). This is further expanded on in 
his book by how the people of Calvert decorate the outside of their homes with lawn ornaments. 
Typically, in North America one might see purchased mass-produced plastic objects as lawn 
decorations, like plastic flamingoes or gnomes. He notes the lawn decorations in Calvert, 
Newfoundland are being hand-made out of recycled materials, such as bleach bottles (Pocius 
258). He notes the use of many mass-produced materials: “I had seen the objects of the modern 
world used in many small Newfoundland communities, but in ways vastly different from their 
makers’ or designers’ original intent.” (Pocius 15). In this sense he sees an object’s use or its 
function, not its origin, as the key to understanding its cultural significance. This creative way of 
making and appropriating objects is the process by which culture is created and maintained. Use 
and function is where evidence of culture is truly located in a region that brings out unique ways 
of creating and using objects. While the objects themselves are often globally ubiquitous they 
become culturally meaningful through their use and functions.

These objects have been created by Newfoundlanders but it is equally important to 
recognize the influence of the objects to shape people. Culture cannot exist in a vacuum; objects 
also exist to inform us about who we are as much as we exist to create them that way. Without 
all these objects displaying and reinforcing culture there would be no culture at all. The material 
components of an object–its medium and physicality–are key to understanding its cultural 
significance. The concept of materiality provides the starting point for most studies of material 
culture. Yet we often view material and culture as two separate things, one as being physical and 
the other intellectual (Tilley 1). I see this separation of ourselves from our objects as a limitation
as it distances us from the responsibilities share. If we do not see ourselves as part of the physical word, then what responsibility do we have to keep it sustainable and prevent pollution? To better understand and care for the material world, we need to see it as being part of us and us as part of it. I find the way objects are re-used and recycled in Newfoundland an encouraging culture of sustainability because the lack of materials at hand results in an appreciation and respect the objects and their relationship to us.

The book Stuff, by Daniel Miller discusses the notion that objects create people as much as people create them. This book has been very influential in my understanding of objects in my artwork and in my life. He insists on the object’s role in creating us (Borgerson 156). Miller creates a dialectical theory of material culture where he eliminates any separation of subjects and objects (Cooper 145). Graham Harmon’s discussion of object-oriented ontology (OOO) starts with an ontology where people and objects are also treated with equal weight. Similarly, we see that this philosophy does not give special status to ourselves over objects. When I reflect on my own experiences in Newfoundland, I know that objects give me something physical to point to when understanding my own culture. To be able to envision who you are through the objects that surround you is an important part of feeling a sense of belonging to a culture. In this sense Newfoundland’s culture is so distinct because of how well it can use the language of objects to protect and promote itself. A strong relationship with objects that appreciates and understands their influence strengthens culture and human relationships.

A lobster trap is what people make of it. If we decide it is purely utilitarian then that is what it will be. In Atlantic Canada people have decided it can be so much more; it can serve the purpose of remembering loved ones, raise money for people in need, be a proud cultural symbol, and bring people together during the holidays.
2.3 Methodology and Making

Newfoundland has many contemporary artists showing work on the island and internationally. Many of them have a practice focused on the island’s material culture, communicating their own interpretations while shedding light on traditional objects. In 2013 I moved from Corner Brook, Newfoundland to St. John’s where I was working in the cultural sector. There I learned that there were many artists creating work about Newfoundland culture and its objects. I share many research and methodological approaches with these artists but have my own specific areas of interest and focus.

Pam Hall is an interdisciplinary artist, who has worked with many local communities across the island in an attempt to share local knowledge. Her work has explored the fisheries, the body, female labour, place-making, and local knowledge. She is focused on knowledge-holders and unlocking local information directly from the source. Her artwork and writing privileges the lived experiences of the people of Newfoundland who become collaborators, sharing recipes, construction plans, and all the secrets that make up material culture.

In her project *Towards an Encyclopedia of Local Knowledge*, her appreciation for Newfoundland culture shows a way of seeing local knowledge as being as important as academic knowledge and material culture as being as important as art. She says “The readymade urinal of Duchamp was, after all, only transformed into art once he claimed it as such, by placing it in a gallery. The boat at the wharf, while beautiful in form and impressive in craft, seems only to be art if encountered in a context that specifies it as such.” (Hall 10). By changing the context of an object, we can view it in new ways, blurring the lines between academic and practical knowledge.
and between art and life. Putting Newfoundland objects in a gallery gives them a context that specifies a meaningful investigation. Much of her artwork situations itself in the act of sharing culture, this is an aspect of art making I feel particularly akin to. I often find myself making references to ad-hoc creations that need explaining or further dialogue beyond their sculptural representation and this thesis has been an important part of that. By changing the contexts and functions of objects I can similarly create a new frame that is helpful in understanding them, creating a situation where local knowledge is shared and new discoveries and connections are made.

Traditional skills and practices have become an important part of my methodology. In Newfoundland, life involves a heightened connection to nature often through hunting, and foraging for resources. Culture has changed and these skills are no longer necessary for survival. By empowering myself with traditional skills like net making, carpentry, and fishing, my methodologies for art making are combatting the loss of traditional knowledge. Documenting and sharing my work and skills helps these skills translate into academic settings, art spaces, and communities where they can be expanded upon by others.
Many Newfoundland artists work by referencing specific cultural objects. Will Gill’s artwork “The Green Chair” involves a traditional Newfoundland chair installed on the rugged coast of Maberly. This work pits a man-made chair against the natural elements. The chair rusted, grew seaweed, froze over, and eventually broke. This sculpture captured the attitude towards man-made and natural objects as experienced in Newfoundland. It shows the acceptance that objects will not last forever in this environment and that permanence is not an obtainable or practical aspiration. It is important to note that my work starts similarly with human-made objects but is more focused on the relationship between people and objects. This style of chair,
originally made of wood, was instead constructed out of metal. Its materiality has changed in order to better express the relationship between people and objects. I similarly change the constitution of objects specifically their ad-hoc subsystems to divert my sculptures’ narrative towards its construction.

Technology plays an important role in my artistic strategy. Dan Flavin’s work figure’s largely in my use light as a mechanism of attraction. Flavin was a pioneer of light-based art installation whose work focused on light as a way to create an immersive experience. His sculptures were often created in editions, taking over a space with the presence of a grouping of objects. I take much inspiration from this style of installation and many of my sculptures aim to attract people with light and are similarly installed in groupings of objects that are closely positions and closely related within the gallery or environment.

Figure 4. Sequestered Elements at UBCO’s FINA Gallery (© 2018 Joe Fowler)
Materiality is a key part of my methodology and it is important for me to be in close contact with physical objects. Tim Ingold makes attempts to better understand materiality by questioning the methods of many material culture academics asserting that, “to understand materiality, it seems, we need to get as far away from materials as possible.” (Ingold 2). His inquiry into material culture studies leads him to believe that there are specific advantages to working directly with materials. By working directly with the objects in question I am able to place myself in the position of creators, designers and builders. This ultimately leads to a stronger and more personal understanding and appreciation of how things are made.

When it comes to making my own ad-hoc creations, my sculptures are not sourced from materials found in nature, they are made from things purchased from big box stores – cheap, mass produced materials, like processed lumber and fully assembled electronics. I am still working directly with materials but my subsystems and resources have changed from those of my ancestors. In this sense I treat objects as materials and materials as objects, making things from things which are already made. Ingold discusses how we perceive materials by saying “we see the building and not the plaster of its walls, the words and not the ink with which they were written.” He writes that objects do not last as long as materials. Objects can dematerialize. His main point is that an object’s materiality emerges from its involvement in its total surroundings, to the viewer (Ingold 15). The ad-hoc nature of the objects I have chosen to make sculptures of means that they bring opportunities for different discussions depending on their constitutions. Objects that relate to the fishing industry become an opportunity to discuss sustainability or pollution. Subsystems from other cultures become an opportunity to talk about globalism and the changes in these subsystems mark the passage of time.
3: Artistic Production

3.1 The Net

I began my exploration of the material culture of Newfoundland by looking at fishing nets. They are simple in their design, consisting of woven fibers in a grid-like pattern with a twisted braid that provides tensile strength. In my ongoing exploration of netting I am analyzing issues of the environment, survival, and community. I am focusing on this skill as a traditional craft and I am creating nets by hand. It is a skill that was used throughout history for carrying supplies, protecting crops, the making of hammocks and clothes, hunting, and most importantly to my interests, the fishing industry. The netting patterns in many of my projects were designed to make the most of expensive materials in a time before things could not be cheaply mass-produced. This craft pushes me to explore its meaning in a contemporary setting where materials are cheaper and these skills are no longer necessary for survival.

I have exhibited these nets under the title *Ghost Nets*, which is in reference to fishing nets that have been left or lost in the ocean by fishermen. These mass-produced, large scale nylon nets, cause a lot of environmental damage, entangling wildlife and eventually breaking down and adding to the microplastics and that end up in our food supply. This project is about asking what has been gained or lost when we change the way we make things. Why is a mass-produced object that accounts for the majority of plastic in the ocean a revered cultural symbol for many coastal regions?

Learning traditional methods of netting has given me a new appreciation of traditional
knowledge and the value of passing along empowering culturally meaningful knowledge. This knowledge literally “teaches a man to fish” as the saying goes. If we lose this knowledge, we lose an amount of self-reliance and sustainability. By understanding past and present ways of making I am able to create work that keeps knowledge going while also being aware of the harmful, wasteful, and polluting qualities of large-scale industries.

It is my belief that craft informs life and life informs craft, this would suggest our manufacturing techniques reflect our attitudes but can also enforce them. I am combining contemporary, one-time-use, mass-produced materials, with traditional methods of making that were informed by a scarcity. These contrasting dualities can be fascinating, between scarcity and abundance, environmentalism and capitalism, hand-made and manufactured, community and individual. All these ideas enter the conversation when working with netting this way.

**Figure 5.** Dental Floss Net (© 2018 Joe Fowler)
Many of my nets are made from dental floss. This one-time-use, throw away material is perfect for a ghost net. Floss is manufactured on an industrial scale in huge quantities. It is of little monetary value and is dispensed and disposed of daily, often flushed down toilets where it eventually reaches the ocean.

Recycling in the West is normally envisioned as a large-scale industrial process. We have created a large-scale industry (Recycling) to remedy the problems of another large-scale industry (Pollution). My netting project imagines the use of small-scale recycling. This type of recycling happens on an individual level and is part of many ad-hoc creations I have discussed earlier. Working this way considers the tactics and solutions for combatting environmental problems. Ultimately, the dental floss net has helped me illustrate the duality of fishing equipment I have discussed earlier, that it is both environmentally harmful and a culturally meaningful object.
3.2 The Lobster Trap

I chose to work with the lobster trap because of its ubiquity in Newfoundland; it is an object you might likely see every day as you drive along the coast. They often appear stacked on top of one another, up against a shed or on a wharf. This is an object that has had little to no change in terms of its physical qualities and appearance but has undergone a lot of changes in terms of its cultural meaning. In the early days of the fishing industry, Atlantic citizens considered lobsters and other shellfish to be exclusively "poor people's food" (Johnston, 56). Now of course it is the exact opposite, lobsters are a symbol of culinary extravagance and the traps themselves have become not just symbol of heritage and cultural identity, but a lucrative industry.

The North American lobster trap was not invented in Newfoundland. It was invented in 1808 by American Ebenezer Thorndike in Massachusetts but its importance to the island is great. It is not uncommon in Newfoundland and other coastal regions in Canada to see lobster traps as purely decoration: in people’s homes, on their lawns, and in restaurants. The traps were traditionally a hand-made object, and their design shows ingenuity, recycling, and resourcefulness. The main outer structure is built from lath, a material used in housing. I have seen examples where it is recycled from old torn-down homes or sheds. Lobster traps sometimes also use hinges from recycled rubber tires and its curved “bows” are traditionally made form balsam branches (Canada Explore).

Part of my re-building of this object has seen the use of 3D modeling programs. As I distance the object from its handmade past, I also distance it from the culture it symbolizes and
its nostalgic appeal. These lobster traps are no longer built by the communities living under the circumstances of scarcity which once dictated their design. Instead they are digital produced, calculated using high-end computer technology. These traps have no signs of use; they appear clean and sterile, free from any ocean wear and tear. My lobster traps have lost their traditional function and are purely for display.

![Light Up Lobster Trap](image)

**Figure 6.** Light Up Lobster Trap (© 2018 Joe Fowler)

These traps also play with the idea of cultural performance. I have discussed earlier that the lobster trap can often appear in seafood restaurants as a decoration but also in a community display, the lobster trap I have built exists somewhere in between. I installed LED lights on the ribs of the cage and they are programmed to play an animated light show. This sculpture became about creating a hyperbolic symbol, exaggerating its decorative value and eliminating its original function. When doing so the results is a sort of Las Vegas lobster trap that feels similar to a billboard or neon sign but also similar to the lobster trap Christmas tree as it becomes a glowing object people can gather around.
3.3 The Killick

The anchor is an important nautical symbol. It can commonly be found tattooed on the arms of fishermen or sailors. In Newfoundland sometimes large iron anchors are abandoned along the coastline, other times they are intentionally placed in a garden on private property as decoration or in a public space sometimes as monuments to remember loved ones. Newfoundland has a particularly symbolic anchor with a very old design that pre-dates the advent of metal work. This anchor is called a killick.

Killicks are a type of stoned weighted anchor for small boats (Blackmore 170). These objects are found all over the world in any coastal area where small boats are used and need to be moored and metal anchors are not available. While their designs differ globally depending on the substrate they adhere to, they are amazingly similar, always consisting of a wooden cross and a rock to help it sink. The design shows an order of materials repeated in ballast lockers, which are wooden cages that house rocks in order to hold the foundation of fishing stages and wharfs in Newfoundland (Mellin, “Tilting” 158).

Today killicks are most often used for display. In fact, the town hall in Torbay, Newfoundland had a giant 16-foot replica of a killick built from wood and fiberglass. You can even find tutorials online on how to make a killick for your home garden so you too can have piece of Newfoundland culture in your garden.

What makes this object so interesting in relation to my practice is the killick becomes an example of an object which changes dramatically in appearance over time. Originally made from wood and rocks of the natural environment and then later from processed wood lumber and steal
objects, often whatever heavy object might be at hand. This means that over time mass-produced, industrial objects become the center of its weight. Some killicks created in the 80’s and 90’s started to contain cement, hot water heaters, engine blocks or other heavy industrial equipment. This interruption in the traditional design is an interesting phenomenon. What does it mean when mass-produced, factory-made products replace rocks as the most logical subsystems to synthesize an ad-hoc product?

Firstly, I think it shows how much the objects of Newfoundland have changed. More mass-produced objects built in other countries are simply available. But more importantly it suggested an attitude. In the case of my killick sculpture, treating a microwave like a rock shows a sort of acceptance of these two objects being the same. Many mass-produced objects have their function literally reduced to that of a weight when they break and become obsolete. This almost seems like a joke but for a boat a weight is a practical and appreciated use and killicks are seen are beautiful and displayed with admiration.

Figure 7. Microwave Killick (© 2019 Joe Fowler)
The killick I have created is only for display. It is built from a brand-new microwave, dimensional lumber, and nylon rope. It suggests the possibility of function but ultimately like my lobster trap represents through the use of modern materials a warped cultural artifact that can no longer serve its original intended purpose. When objects are created ad-hoc they are built from whatever is available. Globalization is evident in the killick’s change in appearance, it demonstrates a more interconnected but always resourceful and creative Newfoundland.
3.4 The Ugly Stick

Craft stores and gift shops are very common in Newfoundland. These stores are a great place to examine the relationship between people and objects. They will have the old pink, white, and green Newfoundland flags as a nod to the past and they might even have a Newfoundland dog on the premises. They always have objects that reference fishing industry. These might be tiny wooden dories, miniature lobster traps, seal skin figurines, palm sized killicks. You will likely find a lot of humorous trinkets, like small mirrors title “Newfie ID” with the words “Yes’ By Das Me” written on them. One object found in these stores is particularly funny. Other countries know it as the monkey stick, zob stick, or lagerphone. In Newfoundland it goes by the name the ugly stick.

The ugly stick is about four feet long, attached to it are bottle caps, tin cans, bells and other noisy materials. It is a musical instrument played by hitting the stick or vibrating its attachments. What makes the ugly stick different from the other objects I have discussed is that its function is a social one. (Though tourists to the island are often told they are used for scaring bears away). The ugly stick does not help acquire food or provide shelter its purpose is a social one. It usually accompanies guitars, fiddles and accordions in traditional Newfoundland music. It is also composed of mass-produced subsystems which you could find anywhere in the world, things mostly seen as trash, old coffee tins, bottle caps, nails, and other found objects.
The ugly stick I have created performs itself and is called *The Automatic Ugly Stick*. A windshield wiper motor was employed to drive the stick up and down causing it to make its patented noise. It is connected to a motion sensor that causes it to perform for whoever is standing in front of it. I have a recorded performance of myself playing a traditional Newfoundland song alongside the sculpture. The song I chose is called *Mussels In The Corner*, it is one of the most popular and beloved traditional Newfoundland songs and can be heard keeping tempo in many craft stores.

The animating of this object is a way of exposing the dual ways it displays culture. The ugly stick is an object that performs culture in a non-literal sense, looking at it in a craft store we can see it embodies the ad-hoc elements of Newfoundland design but when it becomes played (or in this case plays itself) it quite literally performs culture through movement and noise. In its

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**Figure 8.** The Automatic Ugly Stick (© 2019 Joe Fowler)
most natural form, the ugly stick looks like modern art. Its subsystems are visible, it hides nothing (except maybe its purpose), showing you what materials are available to the people who created it. It represents a connection to objects that allows for this type of resourcefulness. It shows once again that Newfoundlanders build wild and amazing things with very little for the purpose of bringing people together.

Figure 9. The Automatic Ugly Stick (Performing Mussels in the Corner) (© 2019 Joe Fowler)
Section: 4 Closing Remarks

In the sculptures created for *Sequestered Elements* I reference many real Newfoundland objects. My artwork brings attention to their practical and cultural functions through re-imagining their ad-hoc qualities. The objects I make are fictional versions of their real-world counterparts, in that they are not naturally occurring in their normal environment and under their normal conditions. These sculptures are however, not implausible. Much of what encourages me to create them is that these objects seem so unlikely and unusual in their original forms. It is only under the specific conditions of life in Newfoundland that these objects would exist and function in the ways they do. Though unlikely, a net could be made of dental floss, a killick could contain a microwave, lobster traps could be animated with light, and an ugly stick could play itself if the situation required it. I feel that these alterations are no more implausible and no less implausible than their real-world counterparts (as humorous or exaggerated as they may seem). I think that is what first drew me to these objects. The more you notice them, the more unusual they seem. As I uncover their origins and functions more questions emerge.

Some of these creations come from wondering how these objects might further change as time goes on. While globalization has brought and continues to bring more intercultural objects between geographies, the objects of Newfoundland have maintained a strong ad-hoc style through their use, even as their subsystems change.

The objects of Newfoundland in their natural form are sculptural and beautiful. They naturally contain metaphors through their combinations, and consequently, naturally have the look of contemporary art. Putting them in the gallery has given me the opportunity to discuss them with people who have no knowledge of their meaning to Newfoundland. In doing so, I have
learned that Newfoundland shares its proclivity and appreciation for ad-hoc creations with much of the world, especially older and more rural places where the desires for a seamless design and more modern looking objects appears to be less strong. The cleverness to create new objects of older existing subsystems is a method of survival, a way of making, and a form of cultural expression that I will continue to explore through visual art. In doing so I hope to share with others the spirit of resourcefulness that may hold answers to issues of environmentalism, community, and local knowledge all within the relationship between people and objects.
Works Cited


