A Fallow Year

An Exhibition of photographic self-portraits and performance to camera works

by

Elise Victoria Popa

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in

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

A Fallow Year explores the development of agency and self-determination post heartbreak through an intuitive skating practice and the building of an outdoor ice rink on a farm just outside Stratford, Ontario. Within the exhibition, I present a video documenting the building of the rink, a series of photographic self-portraits and a set of performance to camera works. In these performances, I used a first-person body-mounted camera to give a visceral sense of intuitive movement, a perspective that emphasizes the fluid motion of skating (inline or figure) as a way for me to regain autonomy by connecting with my own body. The documentation that follows the process of constructing the rink, explores how the physical movement of repetitive maintenance tasks provides a sense of mental rest. The exhibition reveals the parallel between the physical labour, care and maintenance that went into the building of the rink and the investment one makes to take care of themselves, which also includes a great deal of care, labour, and maintenance. Utilizing the analogy of an agricultural fallow season to mirror my period of relational and emotional rest, *A Fallow Year* portrays a year of regenerative self-healing and renewal.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to begin by thanking the faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Waterloo for facilitating an environment in which critical discourse and experimentation are encouraged, leading to a great deal of growth interpersonally and artistically.

This work wouldn't exist without you, thank you for your generosity – Jean

To my committee, thank you for your guidance, knowledge, and open hearts – Cora & Tara

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For keeping me company while at Jean's farm – Oscar, Turkey, Frida, Lulu, Crow, & Ash

Land Acknowledgement

I was born and raised in Aurora Ontario, on the traditional lands of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Wendat peoples. My father is a first generation Canadian of Croatian-Albanian descent and my mother is of fifth generation Irish-German settler ancestry. Every summer, my family and I would spend weeks at a time at my grandmother's house in Huron-Kinloss, Ontario, located on the traditional territories of the Annishinaabe (Ojibway/Chippewa), Haudenosaunee (Iroquois), and Neutral (Attiwonderonk) peoples. We would visit the farms still within our family, my brother and I riding horses and running through the fields.

At the beginning of my second year within University of Waterloo's Master of Fine Arts program, I learned that our faculty librarian Jean Stevenson is the caretaker of her family farm located in St. Pauls, Ontario within Perth County, situated on the traditional territory of the Annishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Attiwonderonk (Neutral), and Wendat peoples. Upon Jean accepting my proposal to build a rink on her family farm, my dear friend and fellow artist Paige Smith and I visited the farm for the first time on October 24, 2025. I felt an immediate sense of familiarity and comfort at Jean's farm, undoubtedly due to the many summers spent playing on similar lands throughout my childhood. Huron-Kinloss and St. Paul's both fall within the region of southwestern Ontario, which is characterized by a combination of relatively flat to rolling, highly fertile agricultural plains.

As a Canadian artist of multigenerational settler-farming ancestry, building an ice rink on land I feel personally connected to, it is of upmost importance to me that I engage with the land in a way that is sincere and respectful. To do this I not only reflected on my own relationship to the land but also my family's history on these lands. Through these reflections I was able to see how colonization has impacted my personal relationship with the land. Spending many hours on familiar farm fields over the course of this past year, I developed a new appreciation of the land's generosity. There is a sentiment from *Braiding Sweetgrass* which I believe perfectly encapsulates this appreciation, Potawatomi botanist and author, Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, "Even a wounded world is feeding us. Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy" (385). The lands benevolence is what I came to know throughout this past year, for which I am eternally grateful.

Dedication

To my Nona, Maria, and my Granny, Eleanor, thank you for showing me how to go on.

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Figure 1: Digital image of me on my cousin's farm in Huron-Kinloss taken in 2013.

Quote

A place is a piece of a whole environment that has been claimed by feelings.

(Gussow 27)

Introduction

A fallow season in agriculture is when the land is left to rest. The soil is unsown, allowing it to regain moisture and nutrients. This period of rest results in stronger crops the following year.

My thesis exhibition *A Fallow Year*, presented at the University of Waterloo Art Gallery, tells the story of my own personal fallow season, encapsulated through the building of an ice rink and an intuitive movement art practice. Through a photographic portraiture series, first-person body cam videos, and skating performance-for-camera works, I articulate the development of agency and self-determination post heartbreak. Like a fallow season, this was a period of regeneration, a time of healing. This was a year that felt like I was starting from scratch and it is from this place, set within an agricultural context on a farm in southwestern Ontario, that this body of work begins.

This thesis research paper is divided into four primary sections; 1. Methodology; 2. Drawing as Performance: Mark-Making as Meditation; 3. Developing Agency and Self-Determination through Working on the Land: Labour, Care and Maintenance; 4. Weather, Body/Terrain and Duration, each speaking to the different methodological approaches, art historical and contemporary art relations, mediums, formal choices, and various themes present within the works.

Prologue: Once a Skater, Always a Skater



Figure 2: Digital image of me figure skating during a competition taken in 2011.

I have been skating for as long as I can remember. Throughout my childhood I figure skated three to five days a week depending on the season, with some off-ice conditioning sessions sprinkled in. I also played soccer and ran both cross-country and track-and-field throughout elementary and high school. My body was in frequent movement. I was always happiest this way.

Skating was the way I disconnected from the dysfunction within my life, the enormity of my emotions, and spinning thoughts. I've always struggled with mental health and skating is a relief from this mental activity and a meditative practice for me. It immediately anchors me in the present moment. When I skate, I feel like myself.

Preface: Responding to Heartbreak by Taking to the Ice

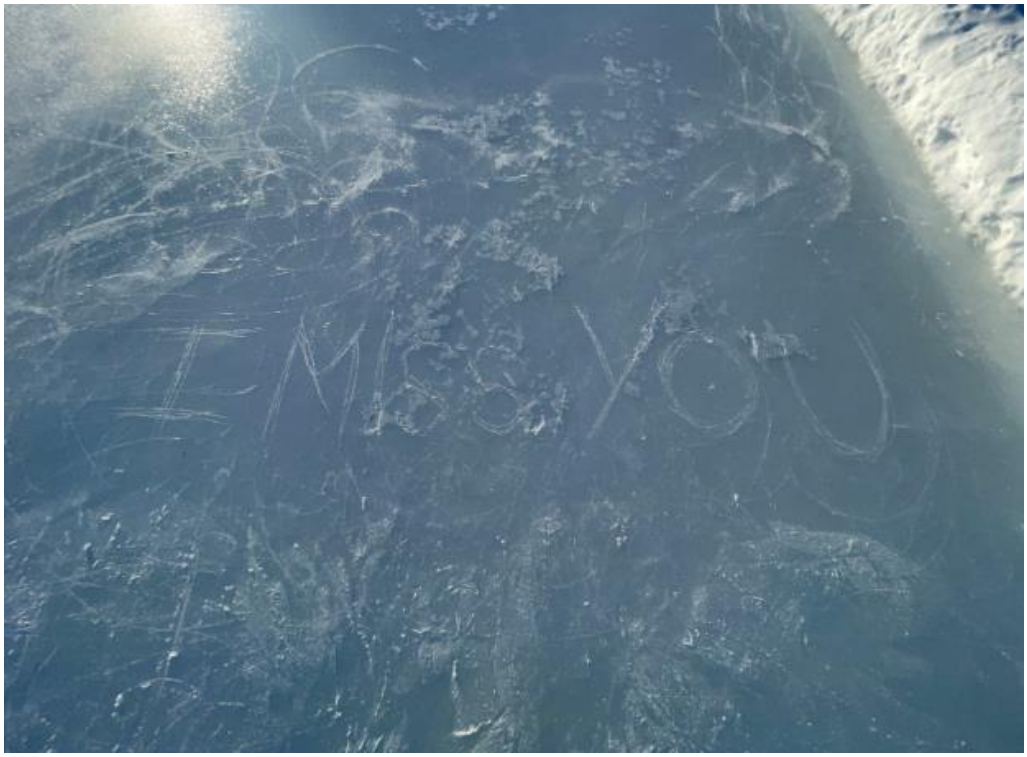


Figure 3: Elise Popa. *I Miss You*, colour photograph. 26 February 2025



Figure 4: Elise Popa. *I Miss You*, video documentation still. 26 February 2025

In February 2025, the morning after the end of a pivotal relationship in my life, I went to an outdoor ice rink near where I lived. At the time. I was overcome by grief. Seeking relief, I followed my impulse to go skating. As I stepped onto the ice, I realized how smooth and reflective it was, causing the lines from my skates to be visible following each glide. Noticing these marks, I paused to set up my camera, capturing the process of inscribing the message “I Miss You” into the ice with my figure skates (see *Fig.* 4). This gesture of using my blades to carve into the ice was therapeutic, expressing how I felt that day, as well as a way for me to move forward after a personal loss. It was this desire to skate that not only helped me move through heartbreak but also led to the development of my intuitive movement art practice and the creation of my own safe space to do so; an outdoor rink situated on the familiar farmland of southwestern Ontario.

Methodology

Intuitive Movement & Presence Through Skating (Figure & Inline)

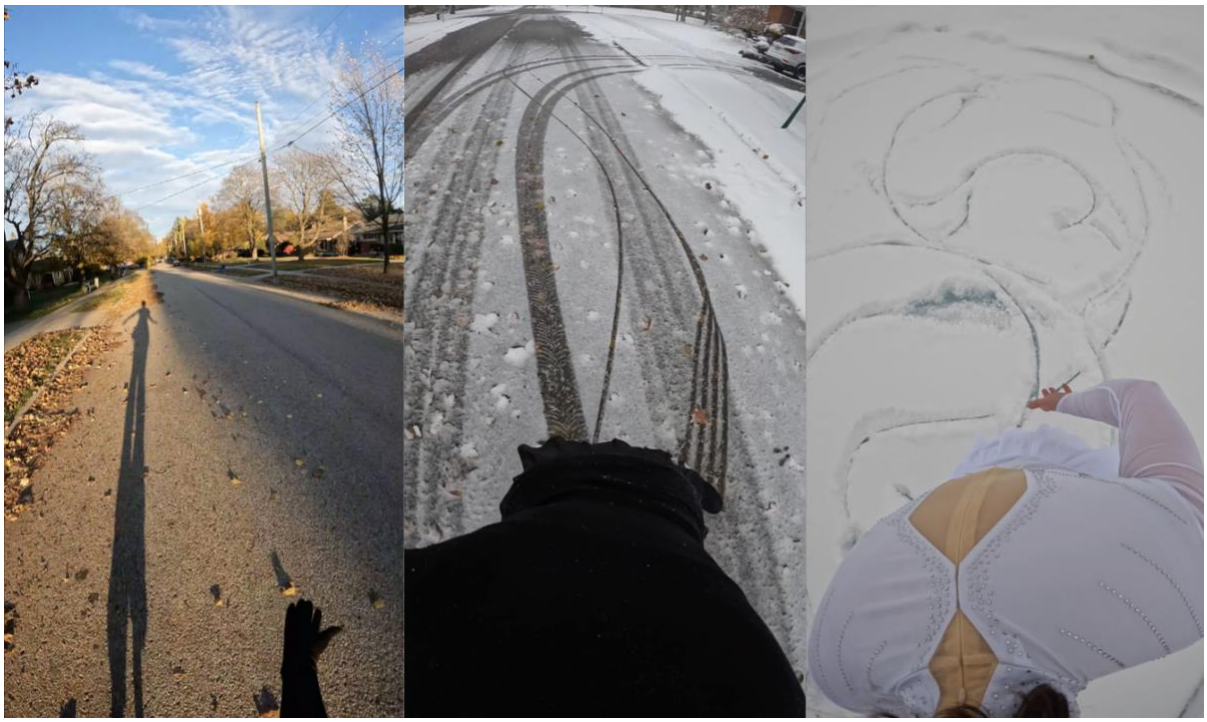


Figure 5: Elise Popa. *Flow*, *Tracks*, & *Traces*, performance video stills. October 2025 – February 2026

For me, intuitive movement is about presence and becoming, tying the bodily gestures to time and space. It is forward movement both externally (in my physical world) and internally (in my inner world). Primarily a term associated with yoga, dance, and physiotherapy, I borrow "intuitive movement" from these practices in relation to self-healing. Intuitive movement is the practice of connecting with your body and listening to its internal cues to discover not only what type of movement you'd like to engage in but also the intensity and duration of it (Buscetta). The French philosopher, Henri Bergson, argues within his book *Matière et mémoire (Matter and Memory),* that through sensory-motor action and physical movement, consciousness anchors itself in the present moment, stating "my present consists in the consciousness that I have of my body. Having extension in space, my body experiences sensations and at the same time executes movements" (178). This notion of movement as a way of experiencing time through consciousness reveals how the "present" is a lived, sensory experience of the body. As someone with high anxiety, this is why I find intuitive

movement healing; it re-centers the mind in the present moment. Intuitive movement is closely related to innate movement; however, a key distinction is that with intuitive movements there is a bodily awareness of the present moment in space and time, whereas innate movements are, those which are subconscious, automatic, and instinctive, such as walking, the way children move or stretching upon waking up (St. Louis 1). The form of expression my practice takes is rooted in intuitive movement on skates (figure and inline[1]) where the camera captures the lyrical quality of my physical gestures in the trio of short films *Flow*, *Tracks*, & *Traces*.



Figure 6: Robert Rauschenberg. *Pelican*, performance documentation, Rauschenberg and Alex Hay on roller skates and Carolyn Brown on Points. 1963

In an interview with Alessandra Nicifero, and Alex Hay, a rollerblading performer in Robert Rauschenburg's choreographed performance *Pelican* (1963), Hay remarks how he, "hadn't skated in years and years and years, but you don't forget it" (MoMA). This recollection illustrates the muscle memory involved in intuitive movement. Although *Pelican* is a choreographed dance piece, it was

[1] I will be using the terms "inline skates/ inline skating" and "roller skates/ roller-skating" interchangeably throughout this research paper.

created in the 1960s when performance art gained popularity, breaking the barriers between visual art and dance. *Pelican* was debuted as part of a showcase presented by Judson Dance Theater on May 9, 1963, at the America on Wheels roller rink in Washington, D.C. The Judson Dance Theater created, "performances that evolved from these workshops that incorporated everyday movements—gestures drawn from the street or the home; their structures were based on games, simple tasks, and social dances. Spontaneity and unconventional methods of composition were emphasized" (MoMA). The spontaneous quality of the choreography and inclusion of everyday gestures was the forerunner for intuitive movement as performance art. In observing the dancers auditioning to roller-skate within *Pelican,* Rauschenberg recollects how many of them, "froze, and it was very awkward. They needed a kind of abandon to actually do it. You see, in their thinking, dancers have an ongoing dialogue between themselves and the floor, and I had put wheels between them and the floor. They couldn't hear the floor anymore, and their muscles didn't know where they were" (Lepecki 13). This is a key difference between dance and skating; dancers rely on contact with the floor to move naturally. Friction against the floor is necessary. In figure skating, we utilize ice to minimize friction so we can glide. This makes gliding essential to moving more intuitively. Figure skating as my most effortless form of embodied movement (something developed since childhood) is exemplified in *Traces* through the many twirls and smooth shifts between forwards and backwards skating.

Intuitive movement is also experienced through our senses. The philosopher and theorist Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues in his influential text *Phenomenology of Perception* that the body is fundamentally open to the world, stating that "In short, my body is not only an object among all other objects, a nexus of sensible qualities among others, but an object which is sensitive to all the rest, which reverberates to all sounds, vibrates to all colours, and provides words with their primordial significance through the way in which it receives them" (275). This denotes that the body is an open system and as humans we are constantly taking in information through our bodies. The early performance work of French-Canadian artist, dancer, and performer, Françoise Sullivan, captures this notion of intuitive movement being linked to our external environments impact on the sensory experience of the body. In reflecting on her creation of the ground-breaking performance piece *Danse dans la neige (Dancing in the Snow)* Sullivan shares how, "the entire countryside seemed to whisper… I was just dancing with my feeling of the landscape. I let the rhythms flow. I perceived the space of day – cut it and shaped it" (Enright 1). Sullivan's performance portrays how she moves from a space of intuition, her body being sensitive, as Merleau-Ponty theorized, to the world around her.

Sullivan's membership with the 1940s Montreal-based artist group *Les Automatistes* influenced her approach to dance as the group embraced a non-figurative method of art-making that prioritized spontaneous, subconscious gestures in dance, painting, and poetry. In discussing *Danse dans la neige* in an interview with Louise Arcand for Radio-Canada Archives, Sullivan says, "So what I tried to do by applying/transposing the principles of automatism: it was to dance to put myself into a neutral state and to let the movements come, to let movements emerge" (Arcand). To allow movements to "emerge" one must be present with their body and listen to its internal cues. Sullivan discusses this in her public talk *La danse et l'espoir (Dance and Hope),* which focuses on the emancipatory potential of dance, as she writes, "Through automatism, the dancer rediscovers in his body these points and tensions, and as he follows his own individual impulses and dynamisms,...launching that body into time, space and gravity" (113). Thus, after many years of practice to become comfortable moving with the friction of the floor or gliding across the ice, the artists ability to move naturally anchors their intuitive movement as a spatialized form of presence. Contemporary dance choreographer, Xavier Le Roy, discusses how dance has the, "capacity to demonstrate that the body is an 'open system of exchange', ready for all kinds of metamorphosis, revealing a forever unfinished and unfinishable self, and occasioning the event of becoming" (Lepecki 22). Within my own art practice, I use Le Roy's notion of dance as an event of becoming through the creation of my performance-based drawings. This notion of the body in constant flux, open to becoming, is what intuitive movement has given me. In *Flow*, *Tracks*, & *Traces*, as I propel myself forward through time and space, listening to my internal cues and taking in sensory information from my external environment, I glide through physical and emotional landscapes, moving onwards from past hurt.



Figure 7: Françoise Sullivan. *Danse dans la neige*, performance documentation, 15 1/4 × 15 1/4 inches, Photographed by Maurice Perron, 1928 © National Museum of Fine Arts of Quebec, Quebec

Weather-Watching & Failure



Figure 8: Colour photograph taken by Jean Stevenson on 9 January 2026

Throughout this past year, my relationship with weather and failure grew through the building, care, and maintenance of my ice rink. Since the success of an outdoor rink relies on daily weather patterns and broader seasonal climate shifts, I had to become a weather-watcher with habits like sticking my hand outside my bedroom window in the morning and checking the daily and long-term weather forecasts at night. However, weather is unpredictable and this lack of control forced me to embrace failure as a methodology. My first failure was during the second week of January 2026 when the temperatures rose above 0°C. As the warmer temperatures held for the entire week, all my progress melted away (see *Fig.* 8). With failure, the sentiments of playwright and poet Samuel Beckett became my personal manifesto: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better” (Le Feuvre 17). I applied this notion of “failing better” as I moved forward in the rink build, care, and maintenance process. The faults of the vagaries of weather, combined with my rink building inexperience, made failure a constant encounter that I eventually learned to accept.



Figure 9: Elise Popa. *Build 03*, colour photograph, 10 December 2025.



Figure 10: Elise Popa. *Tend / Mend*, video still. January 2026

In my first attempt at building, I used snow to close the gap between the wooden frame of the rink and the ground, evident within *Build 03* of my photographic series (see *Fig.* 9). So, when the temperatures rose and all the snow that was reinforcing the edges of the rink melted, there was

nothing left to contain the layers of ice within the interior of the rink poly. After the temperatures dropped below 0°C from January 11, 2026 onwards, I began to build the rink back up from nothing. At 00:33 in *Tend / Mend* viewers see my attempts to rectify this weather-related failure, as I lay pieces of quarter inch plywood between the ground and the wooden frame, to close the gaps (see *Fig.* 10). This is one example of the many efforts made to "fail better".



Figure 11: Andy Goldsworthy. *Ice Star*, colour photograph, Scaur Water, Penpont Dumfriesshire, icicles and saliva, 30.3 x 29.7 inches. 1987

An artist that embraces weather related failure, and watches weather patterns daily, is British land artist, sculptor, and photographer, Andy Goldsworthy. Based on a farm in a small Scottish village, Goldsworthy creates many of his works on the surrounding farm fields, including his icicle sculpture *Ice Star*. In an episode on the Fresh Air Archive with interviewer Terry Gross, Goldsworthy discusses the way his ephemeral works are created, stating that the process is, "very much an intuitive journey that starts with the day and the weather and depending on what's happening. So, it's a response to that day and what is seasonally or climatically around at the time" (Gross). This illustrates how Goldsworthy is always having to adapt how he works based on the weather. He goes on to describe

how he created his ice sculptures by breaking the icicles and refashioning them into shapes that wouldn't occur naturally. Due to Scotland's fickle weather, Goldsworthy shares how when making *Ice Star* he was dependent on the weather staying cold for long enough, sharing that, "if it stops freezing, the work collapses" (Gross). The collapse of the sculpture due to rising temperatures is a real possibility, portraying how failure is inextricable to both the creation of these works and their eventual decay. In examining the inevitable failure of his ice sculptures, Goldsworthy expresses that, "failure is really, really important... they just collapse and fall and that this is, you know, what I accept" (Gross). Goldsworthy's welcoming of failure is evident in his cyclical phases of building and rebuilding that mirror nature itself. As within *Tend / Mend,* the acceptance of failure is clearly articulated through the many acts of rebuilding and maintenance tasks. In this way, the making of *Tend / Mend* and *Ice Star* is only possible through the embrace of failure as it's intrinsically linked to weather.

Drawing as Performance: Mark-Making as Meditation: *Flow*, *Tracks*, & *Traces*

Performance art is an ephemeral art form characterized by live-ness, physical movement, and impermanence. It is an art form that relies on the present moment; it exists for a moment in time and then it is over. Often, photographs and videos of the performance become the only record of the event. Dance is similar to performance art in its inescapable corporeality as dance, "demonstrates concrete possibilities for embodying-otherwise – since a dancer's labour is nothing else than to embody, disembody and re-embody, thus refiguring corporeality and proposing improbable subjectivities" (Lepecki 15). Dance, like performance art, is an embodied form of art that allows its participants to redefine themselves through movement that grounds them in present-minded consciousness. Through my innate comfort on figure skates and rollerblades, I enter the present moment through intuitive movement. As someone who experiences a great deal of anxiety, especially after a period of personal loss, I began to skate again in October 2025 after years of being off my skates. This is when I created *Flow*.

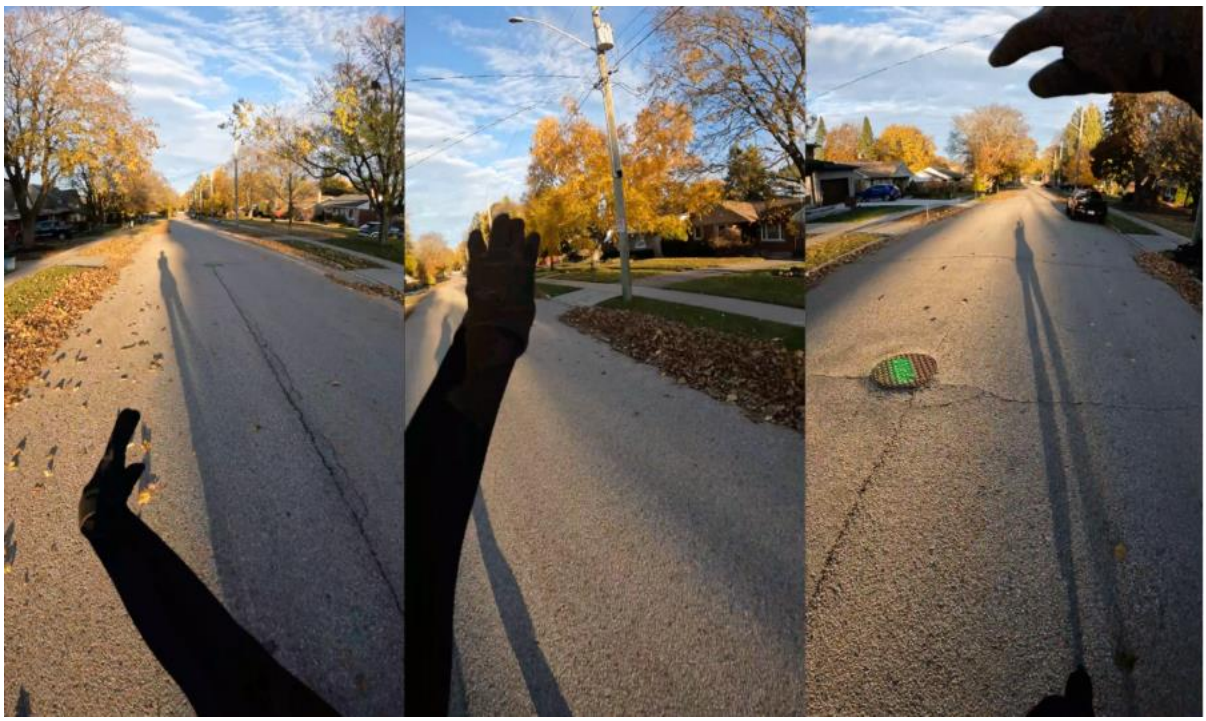


Figure 12: Elise Popa. *Flow*, performance video stills. October 2025

Flow is a 44 second single channel, performance to camera and drawing as performance piece, that portrays the movements of my own elongated shadow and arms as they enter and exit the frame. As the year stretched on, intuitive movement through skating, on and off the ice, became a way for me to move forward in my life and force myself out of mental inertia. When skating, I was less in my mind, and more in my body. Through this, skating became meditative for me, and my gestures became more fluid as I began to trust my body again. This progression is made evident in the video *Traces*, where there's more diversity within the movements. The path left behind me on the ice is also indicative of this growing comfort. In this way, mark-making becomes a meditative act and the gestures themselves create the drawing. Andrew Forster, artist, curator and author of *Aspects of the History of Drawing: The Performative Line*, wrote "Drawing is taken to be any practice that explores the performance of space, including visual mark-making and dance" (1). With this understanding that art is not only visual but spatial, *Flow*, *Tracks,* and *Traces* are clearly drawing as performance and performance to camera-based works.



Figure 13: Shiraga Kazuo. *Challenging Mud*, performance documentation, 1955 © Shiraga Fujiko and Hisao and the former members of the Gutai Art Association

As such, my work could be considered in conversation with work by Japanese abstract painter, Kazuo Shiraga. In *Challenging Mud* (1955), the artist performed this work by writhing his body in a large patch of thick mud. As a member of the Gutai art movement, Shiraga's focus was on reinvigorating the idea of painting from an avant-garde approach (Osborne 60). As his body flails against the mud, Shiraga transforms painting into a full body, embodied experience. In this way, Shiraga's actions can be, "viewed as transforming 'painting' into a process-oriented and time-based activity, which remained only in the form of photographic documentation, as the record of an event" (Osborne 60). Similarly, *Flow*, *Tracks, & Traces* transform drawing into an embodied experience that is both time-based and process-oriented, the videos themselves serving as the record of the event. Shiraga's body flailing against the mud reveals how gesture is essential to mark-making. In the same way, the lyrical arm movements evident within *Flow* reveal the inextricable link between expressive motion and drawing. As I glide down the road the gestures themselves become marks made. Furthermore, the casted shadow figure is an ephemeral mark in and of itself. Thus, gestural movements make drawing an embodied, time-based experience.



Figure 14: Shaun Gladwell. *Yokohama Lineworks,* performance video still, 2005 © Shaun Gladwell and Anna Shwartz Gallery

Flow shares an affinity with Shaun Gladwell's *Yokohama Lineworks*, a sixteen-minute journey of Gladwell navigating the streets of Yokohama, Japan while on his skateboard. In discussing this work**,** the artist states that he was attempting to, "perform an experimental drawing or tracing in which I was both drawing and being drawn by road markings" (Ashburton Art Gallery). Gladwell's work marries skateboarding and drawing as he traces the existing drawing of the street with his board. *Yokohama Lineworks* was filmed with a handheld camera, taken from Gladwell's perspective. *Flow* and *Tracks* are likewise "drawn by road markings" as I curve around potholes, large cracks, and storm drains. These obstacles influence my movements, but this is also about safety, as I am always looking ahead to see where it is safe to travel and I periodically look behind to see where vehicles may be.

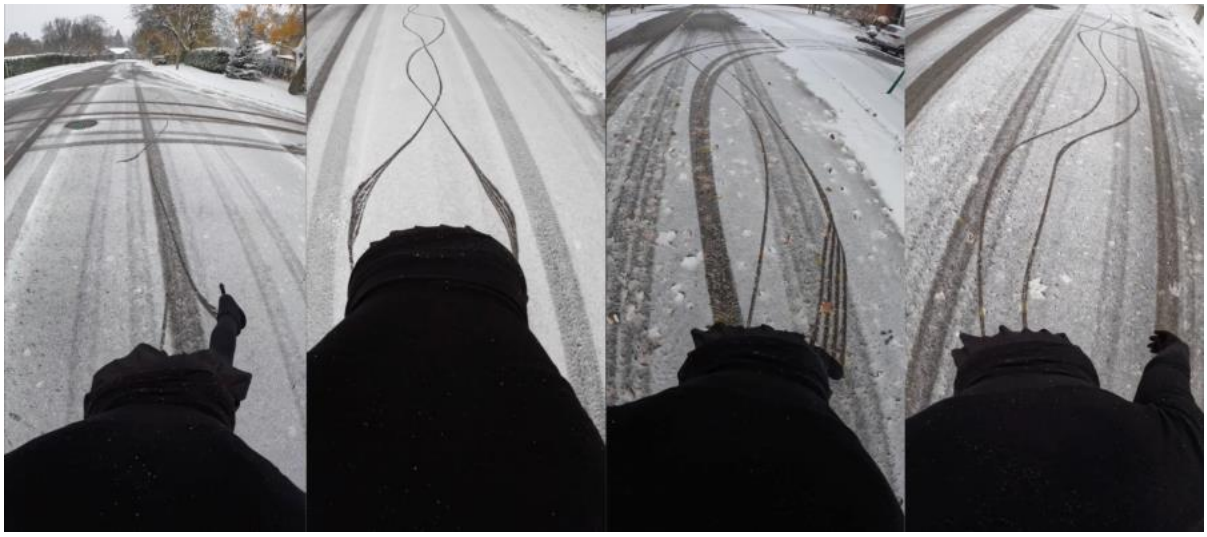


Figure 15: Elise Popa. *Tracks*, performance video stills, November 2025

As with Gladwell's work, the camera also allows the audience to see and experience the journey. Viewers get a sense of bodily movements and movement through space by filming with a hand-held camera, creating a sense of destabilization. Similarly, within *Flow*, *Tracks*, & *Traces* I wore a GoPro camera mounted to my helmet, to heighten this sense for the audience—the feeling of being in my body. It does this visually through the movement of the camera, the first-person point of view, and the presence of my figure. The vantage point of the camera creates a feeling of vertigo within the viewer. Wearing the camera also means that parts of my physique are almost always present. As my arms cross in and out of view, the camera captures the true expression of the gesture. From a neuroscientific perspective, such embodied engagement occurs within an audience when camera movements that mimic human locomotion stimulate the viewer's sensorimotor system causing the

viewer to, “reconstruct the same locomotion mentally” (Yilmaz et. al 2). This reconstruction leads to a much stronger emotional and visceral engagement with the work, as it more readily allows viewers to enter both the film’s world and the skater’s world.

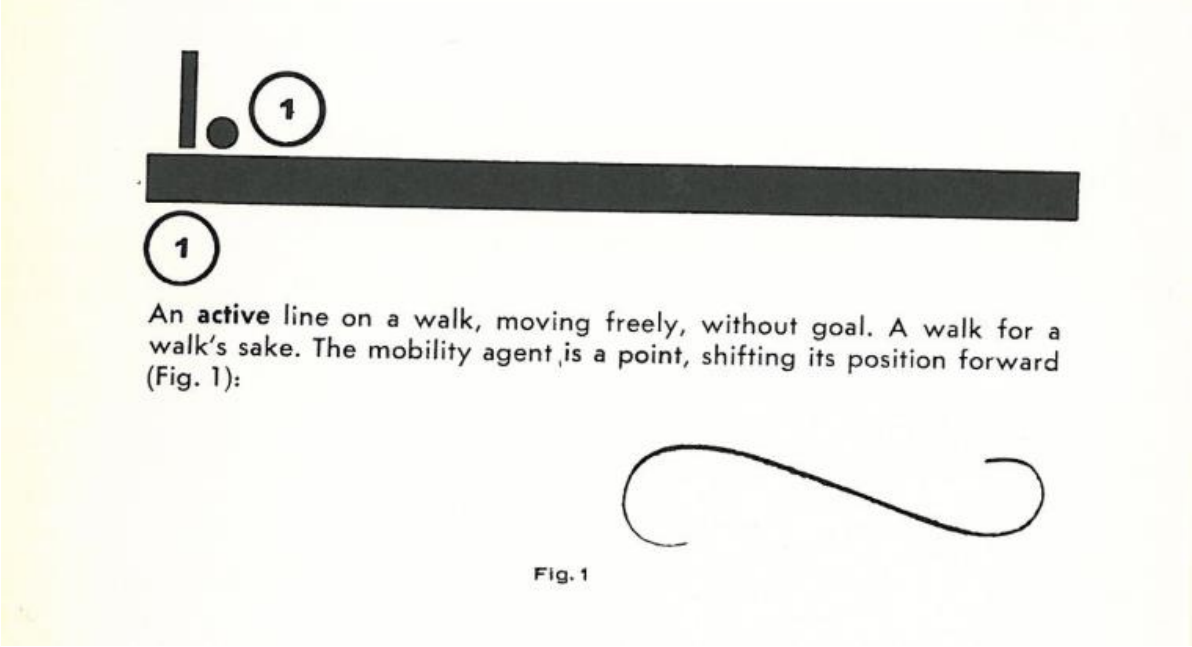


Figure 16: Paul Klee. Figure 1 from Klee’s *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, 1953

In Paul Klee’s influential *Pedagogical Sketchbook* he discusses drawing as, “an active line on a walk, moving freely, without a goal. A walk for a walk's sake. The mobility agent is a point, shifting its position forward” (16). Klee is illustrating how drawing is about becoming; it becomes through forward movement. Therefore, drawing is innately spatial. *Tracks* and *Traces* portray a physical line made visible from the subject's outward gesture. These works correspond with Kimvi Nguyen’s three-hour performance *Islands* that was a part of a Draw to Perform event in 2016. During *Islands* Nguyen drew small, repeating lines around the audience members’ feet. Brooke Carlson, also an artist, analyzes certain Draw to Perform 2016 performances in *Moving Marks* and she discusses that Nguyen’s one rule for herself throughout *Island* was to, “continue marking until the audience member moves or walks away” (60). Through this approach, audience members become increasingly aware of the space they occupy, and of their spatial experience of others. Nguyen’s marks not only act as a record of time but also as a measurement of audience member’s movement through space (Carlson

60). The lines both signify what once was and what is, orienting performative drawing as a medium of becoming.



Figure 17: Kimvi Nguyen. *Islands*, performance documentation, charcoal floor, 2016. Photographed by Manja Williams. © Draw to Perform

Similarly, in *Tracks* & *Traces* drawing is performed spatially, through time, making what once was and what is coexist. *Tracks* is a 1 minute 5 second video in which I draw while inline skating down the hill of a snowy road. This drawing through space is influenced by the icy road and its obstacles, almost leading to a fall when my rollerblades slip at 00:11 in the work. However, I continue 'drawing' down the road. In *Traces* the gestures are braver and the movements more fluid. Skating alone on my own personal rink, situated on farmland, allows for less restricted movements, especially since I didn't have to watch for traffic or road obstacles like in *Tracks*. The ice rink acts as a container for freedom in this way; it is a safe space for bodily expression. While the lines in *Tracks* are all moving forwards in the same direction and they consist of elongated curves, the lines in *Traces* are more spiral-like, consisting of tighter curves due to the many turns performed. *Traces* is the most meditative drawing I created. *Tracks & Traces* are displayed side-by-side in the thesis exhibition, timed in sync with one another, playing on a loop. In this case, the loop represents the never-ending

process of becoming. Since there is no beginning nor end to the video, the marks made are always in a state of unfurling.



Figure 18: Elise Popa. *Traces*, performance video stills, February 2026

Developing Agency & Self-Determination through Working on the Land: Labour, Care and Maintenance: *Build*, *Tend / Mend*



Figure 19: Elise Popa. *Build*, colour photographs. October 2025 – February 2026.

Build is a series of self-portraits situated amidst farm fields. As a female artist, it visually represents the process of building an ice rink for myself. I chose to include various tools from the rink building process when capturing each image to represent a sense of agency. Their inclusion challenges historically patriarchal and colonial associations of the female body as land, as well as the traditional narratives of women within portraiture such as the female form as the male artist's muse, a passive object for his gaze, the female body has been depicted in relation to land through metaphors of fertility, nature, and colonial expansion (Elkin 11). Additionally, the female body, like land, was seen as a passive, fertile territory to be owned, mapped, and exploited (Elkin 12). Film theorist Laura Mulvey discusses the male gaze in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) stating that, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and

displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (11). Throughout the twentieth century, however, a transition began in which female artists reclaimed their agency through the medium of photography. This was done by feminist artists, particularly within the 1970s, such as Francesca Woodman.



Figure 20: Francesca Woodman. *House #3*, gelatin silver print, 6 5/16 x 6 3/8 inches. 1975-76 © Woodman Family Foundation

Woodman fosters agency by reclaiming the notion of the female body as land, interrupting the male gaze through her self- portraiture photographic practice. Woodman does this by defying the trope of the passive female body, instead actively merging her own body with the environment its photographed in. With this action she takes control of her own image and body. For example, in *House #3* from the Abandoned House Series, Woodman photographs herself within the corner of an abandoned house, with wallpaper peeling onto her crouched figure under the windowsill: her semi-visible form blurring with its environment. Woodman employs bodily movement and long exposures to blur her figure, challenging the idea of the female body as fixed, observed "land" and instead

renders it as a fluid part of the space, giving it a sense of agency. Although her body appears blurred in motion, Woodman is making eye contact with the viewer, "want[ing] viewers to recognize that she is the creator of this scene before us and it was an intentional act to present herself as such" (Matthews 26). In my series *Build*, the female artist/subject (me) asserts her body in space – on the land – also prompting a challenge to give agency back to the female body. Like Woodman, I also maintain a direct gaze with the audience, conscious that my picture is being taken and knowing someone is looking at me.

Woodman also tells the viewer that the image has been crafted by its maker through her use of props. Shards of broken ceramic pieces to the right of the subject's body and matches spread out to the left of the subject's foot imply "the way in which the pieces form a semi-circle indicates that they were arranged" (Matthews 27). The traces of the artist's hand and the element of staging communicates the artist's participation in the creation of the image. Within *Build* I incorporate different tools in each image. For me, the tools not only indicate the stages of the rink build but are also a way of representing myself as an active figure in relation to the land and within the context of portraiture.

Labour, as Mulvey describes, is also a means of control: "an active/passive heterosexual division of labour has similarly controlled narrative structure," leading to a split between spectacle and narrative which supports "the man's role as the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen" (12). In *Build,* I upend this control by reclaiming agency of a traditionally male narrative – building outdoor ice rinks for the purpose of hockey, a likewise male dominated sport. I intentionally disrupt this traditionally male-coded space by positioning myself as the author, builder, and active participant within it. Here, the female subject is the one "making things happen," visually enhanced by the intentional incorporation of tools/props. I hold a mallet in *Build 02*; I hold a shovel in *Build 03*; I hold a water bucket in *Build 04*; I hold a water hose in *Build 05*; and I am the rink re-surfacer in *Build 06*. Intentionally choosing the same composition throughout *Build* – the uniform direct gaze, forward-facing standing stance, subject holding a different "prop" each time –communicates agency. In this way *Build* interrupts the male gaze within portraiture and the traditional notions of female body as land. The female subject/artist establishes themselves as an independent, active force, cultivating their own story.



Figure 21: Elise Popa. *Tend / Mend*, video stills. January – February 2026

Returning to care: although the pose and use of tools as props were staged in *Build*, the development of agency and self-determination through the building and maintaining of the rink were not. Throughout the "rink build" process, captured in the video work *Tend / Mend*, I began to also care for myself, to build myself back up post heartbreak. In this way, the rink became an extension of self. Within a fallow season, the winter is a time of deep rest when the soil is left idle (Government of Canada). This stage is characterized by less visible activity but is when most of the work is done internally as the soil regains its moisture and nutrients (Government of Canada). This is as true for the land as it is true for the self. During this season, in building the rink, I embraced the agency of fallow. It is in this season of deep rest that I committed myself to the care and maintenance of the ice rink, learning the value of failure – a condition that I began to recognize as an artistic methodology.

Other mistakes that weren't an outcome of weather were patching the holes I made in the rink poly evident at at 03:36 of *Tend / Mend*. This error was made in a split second as I attempted to hold down the tarp from powerful winds with a piece of wood that had a nail in it. At 05:26 the viewer sees me removing large shards of glass from the surface of the ice while it is in the midst of freezing after it was flooded a second time. Viewers then witness me attempting to fix the mistake of the second flooding at 06:00 as I use a steel ice scraper to try and smooth out extremely rough ice. Through

failing repeatedly, I learn to let go of mistakes and try again, to take actions that embrace failure as a methodology for care.



Figure 22: Lee Mingwei. *The Mending Project*, Mixed-media interactive installation including table, chairs, thread, and fabric items, 2009-2018. Photographed by Yoshitsugu Fuminari. © Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

Contemporary visual artist Lee Mingwei embraces the concept of failure and fragility within his interactive installation and performance series *Rituals of Care.* In his piece *The Mending Project*, participants are invited to bring a damaged object or piece of clothing to be repaired by the artist. Instead of hiding the damage, Mingwei uses brightly coloured thread, treating the "failure" or damage of the item as a part of its history. In discussing his approach to mending, Mingwei states, "Unlike a tailor, who will try to hide the fact that the fabric was once damaged, my mending is done with the idea of celebrating the repair, as if to say, "something good was done here, a gift was given, this fabric is even better than before" (Perrotin 1). This celebration of the act of repair embraces failure. In *Tend / Mend*, I also do not hide the failures or the repairs. For example, I patched the white rink poly with black waterproof duct tape, making the repair visible.



Figure 23: Mierle Laderman Ukeles. *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside*, performance documentation, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, 1973. © Ronald Feldman Gallery

Developing agency through reclaiming labour and care is evident in both *Tend / Mend* and Mierle Laderman Ukele's *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside* (1973). Laderman Ukeles is a prominent maintenance artist and significant figure from the feminist art movement in the 1970s. Ukeles's labour works, "politicise and dramatise the invisible, precarious work, housework, reproductive work and care giving" (Knaup, et. al). In her piece *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside* she engages in an eight-hour long performance in which she scrubs the exterior steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum. This work highlights invisible labour, particularly in the domestic sphere, that systemically falls on the shoulders of wives and mothers. In an interview with Tom Finkelpearl, Ukeles stated, "Women were never invited to become a maintenance class, we were just told: 'You are like this. We know

what you think. We know what you are. You take care of us'" (Sigler 13). It is this expectation of women that Ukeles critiques in her work. Women are socialized to take care of men and children from a young age. Thus, part of developing agency as a woman is learning to do things for oneself, however systemically we are alienated from our labour. In Ukeles's *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!* she writes, "I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother (random order). I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also, (up to now separately) I 'do' Art. Now, I will simply do these maintenance everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them as Art" (3). Creating art from the same maintenance tasks Ukeles does as a mother was a way for her to reclaim her identity and a sense of agency. In Dave Beech's *Labour and Art*, he describes the concept of alienation from labour as one where a person is a "stranger to the product of his toil, since this product belongs to another" (Beech 224). Ukeles reclaimed not only her labour, but the product from it: her art.

While Ukeles's work is about the essentials of domesticity, I borrow this sense of reclaiming labour as a form of care, through building my own rink and in the process, I developed personal agency. Ukeles engages with the concept of futility in her work as she washes the entrance steps over and over, not only emphasizing the repetitive nature of maintenance tasks but also the way maintenance is only noticed when it fails, like when the steps inevitably become dirty again. In *Tend /Mend,* it was the acceptance of failure and learning to try again that grew my self-determination. The repetitive nature of maintenance and the innate failure within the work is further emphasized by displaying this video on a loop. As Margot Bauman explored in *The Loop as a Temporal*, "the loop contradicts the linear structure we typically associate with time" (1). By not having a definitive conclusion, a video loop removes the viewer's sense of finality, creating a non-linear temporality that feels endless (8). *Tend / Mend* utilizes the loop to communicate not only the futility in maintenance but also how it is through the repetition of failing and trying again that agency is built. Furthermore, *Tend / Mend* is projected onto a piece of rink poly, with pieces of the wooden rink frame resting against the wall in the background. These materials function as material evidence not only of the labour done but also the development of self-determination and agency.

Weather, Body/ Terrain, and Duration: *Build*, *Glide Fall Glide*



Figure 24: Elise Popa. *Build 01*, colour photograph, 24 October 2025.



Figure 25: Elise Popa. *Build 02*, colour photograph, 22 November 2025.



Figure 26: Elise Popa. *Build 06*, colour photograph, 24 February 2026.

Historically, the photographic image was seen as a moment frozen in time. Literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes discusses the photograph as an “arrest” or a “strange stasis” that interrupts a moment from the continuous flow of time (Barthes 91); the “name of Photography’s *noeme* will therefore be: “That-has-been,” or again: the Intractable” (Barthes 77). This description of a photograph as something from the past, something “that-has-been", freezing it within time, causes an image to become a static object. However, a photographic series transforms the singular static image into a viewing experience that suggests movement (e.g. the subject travels in and out of frame in Nancy Holt’s *Over the Hill*), as well as the passage of time, creating a sense of duration.

The six-image aspect of my work *Build* portrays a sense of duration through the evolution of seasonal time, beginning in early fall and ending in late winter. The presence of the figure in the land signifies the way the human body is deeply related to the natural world and the way it interacts with it. As such, *Build* is in conversation with Nancy Holt’s piece *Over the Hill* (1968).



Figure 27: Nancy Holt. *Over the Hill*, Composite inkjet print of 16 original slides on cotton paper, 40 x 40 inches, 1968. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2020

Over the Hill invites viewers to reflect upon "how the human body shapes our understanding of scale and time within the landscape" (Holt/Smithson Foundation). The series depicts a human figure, artist Joan Jonas, moving through the landscape of Pine Barrens. The four-by-four image grid installation allows viewers to get a sense of movement and duration as the figure progresses from the middle to the top of the hill. Eventually the figure moves over the hill and is out of sight in the final two images. Jonas's feet briefly mark the surface of the earth as she walks across the sand dune. In a similar way, *Build* portrays the progression of time through the human body's link to the landscape, particularly through the actions enacted upon the land. The progression of time is not only evident through the changes in the environment, such as the clouds and lighting transitions from darker to lighter, but also through the human actions taken. For example, *Build 01* shows the land full of tall grasses, whereas *Build 02* is completely empty of all plant material, leveled down to dirt. A grid installation is used for *Build* to allow the images to be read as a whole, showing the progression of time. Installed in a two-by-three format, the first three images are in the upper row, followed by the

next three images in the bottom row when the grid is read left to right. *Over the Hill* references the passing of minutes through film stills while *Build* references months through digital photographs. The sense of duration in *Build* is further exemplified through the weather and lighting in each photograph, as each image was taken at a different time of day. For example, *Build 01* was taken at 1:34 p.m. in the afternoon on a rainy day, influencing not only the richness of the autumn colours within the image but also the grey clouds and overall grey-toned atmosphere; *Build 03* was taken at 5:38 p.m. and depicts complete whiteness as the sky was overcast and the ground was covered in snow; and *Build 04* portrays a darker atmosphere as the image was taken at 7:20 p.m. in the evening, when daylight was already lost, due to the winter season. *Build (01–06)* illustrates duration in three fundamental ways—through daily weather changes, monthly seasonal shifts, and the human's mark on the land.



Figure 28: Elise Popa. *Glide Fall Glide*, performance video still, 24 February 2026.

Within an art historical context, duration can be contextualized through the medium of film. Art historian Erwin Panofsky theorized that film's technologically derived aesthetic is capable of the "dynamization of space" and the "spatialization of time" (Panofsky 154). This description links time and space as one within film. *Glide Fall Glide,* a performance for camera work, portrays duration through the medium of video, of the skating performance situated within the winter landscape. This takes us back to Françoise Sullivan's *Danse dans la neige*, which is a part of a series of improvised

dance solos the artist performed throughout the seasons. Although the original film of this ephemeral event has been lost, it survives in the photographs of Sullivan taken by Maurice Perron (see *Fig.* 7). Here, dance and seasonal time share an ephemerality. Similarly, in *Glide Fall Glide* I perform an improvised routine on the ice rink towards the end of winter. The conditions that day were extremely cold and windy, which influenced how I moved. As I skated, the wind pushed against me, either propelling me forward more fluidly or providing resistance against the direction I wished to move. This recalls, as curator and art historian Annie Gérin notes, Sullivan "let[ting] herself be animated by the wind" (64). Gérin goes on to describe *Danse dans la neige* as a "dialogue with the snow, performed in silence except for the crunching of Sullivan's steps on the brittle surface" (64). *Glide Fall Glide* was also performed in silence; the only sounds present are the blades moving across the ice and the wind. In the thesis exhibition, the audio within *Glide Fall Glide* is played aloud through a set of speakers, to sonically situate the viewer in a frozen, winter landscape. In *Glide Fall Glide* the skating figure seamlessly blends into the landscape as the white dress and tights fuse with the snow-covered farm field in the background. The footage is left intentionally untouched, resulting in a flatness that further merges body and land, both visually and conceptually. *Glide Fall Glide* is projected onto the wall to create a sense of airiness, likening itself to the wind, and visually signifying the merging of body and landscape. Consistent with Sullivan's *Danse dans la neige, Glide Fall Glide* is a visual and sonic experience that focuses on the relationship between skater and environment.

Conclusion

A Fallow Year conveys the process of moving forward, after a personal loss. It is a body of work about becoming, through the building of an outdoor ice rink and an intuitive movement art practice. This past year was truly fallow for me; it was a year I put myself back together. In this next phase of my artistic practice, I intend to develop the relationship I have with my own body further, and by extension, the natural world around me. I hope that intuitive skating will always be a part of my life. The other day as I was rollerblading, an older gentleman came over to where I was and told me, "Never give this up!". I told him I intend to skate for the rest of my life. I understand now all that intuitive skating gives me; a present mind, a path forward, a sense of agency, and an opportunity for self-acceptance. Following an agricultural fallow season there is a return to active cultivation; this next year I aim to sow seeds of presence, care, love, openness, and authenticity.

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