

We spend our lives collecting memories, packing layer upon layer of everyday moments into the construction of a lifetime. Over time, our memories shift and change. Relationships that once felt familiar become strange. Recollections become inconsistent and fleeting. Our bodies are stationed upon the earth, fueled by its lands and resources. Yet, how can we preserve the everyday moments of our lives as we contend with the flawed abstraction of our memory?

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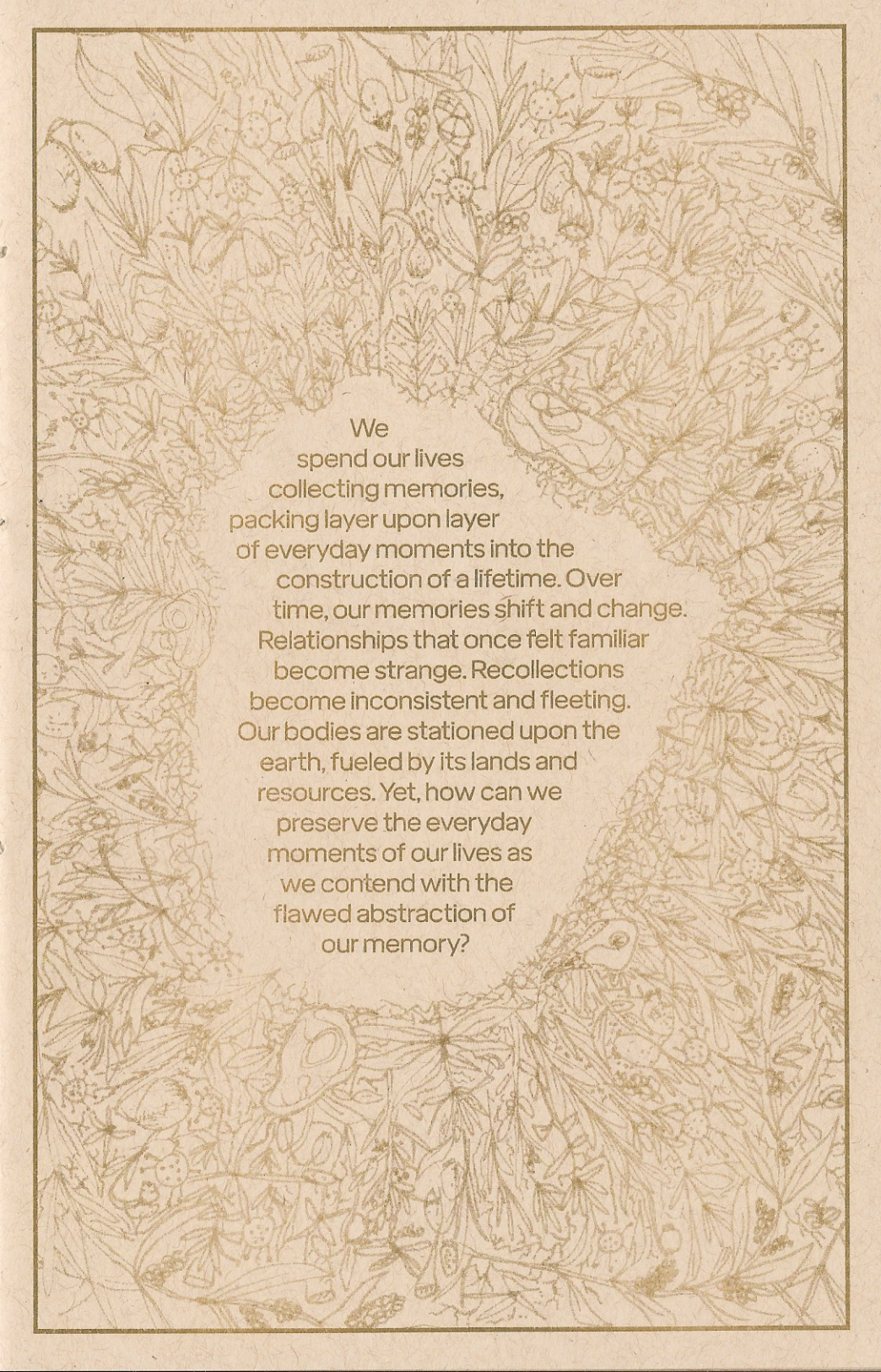
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Maria Simmons is a hybrid artist based in Guelph, Ontario. Their work investigates potentialized environments as they collect garbage, grow mushrooms, ferment plants, and nurture fruit flies. Through the creation of sculptures and multimedia installations, Simmons makes art that eats itself.

These experiments often juxtapose preservation and transformation through fermentation—a process which allows living organisms to metabolize matter while preventing spoilage or decay. The artist's early work began in custom clay vessels (*Preservation Instinct*, 2021) and glass carboy containers (*They Eat Each Other's Bodies*, 2021), where collections of mop bucket water, ceiling leaks, found botanicals, and food waste were combined, fermented, and changed over time. Similar ideas quickly fed into the next, pushing the artist beyond studio limitations and into wild landscapes as they chased the transformative potential of yeast.

Anoxic Memory was born among mossy sphagnum vistas—specifically delving into old-growth forests, peat bogs, and mires found across Northern Europe and Canada. Researcher and poet Abbi Flint describes peatland as a place of contestation and contradiction. From the dangerous to the health-restoring, the real to the imagined, the extractable to the preserved, the living and the rot—we can find our past and present in the mire!

Canada houses 25% of the world's peatlands, storing its highest density of these carbon-rich landscapes across Northern Ontario. *Anoxic Memory* aims to reconstruct these magical spaces, transforming the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington into an active peat mire. Visitors are welcome to traverse the bog, discovering the natural biology and fantastical mythos found among its layers.



Bog /bôg,bäg/
noun

1. a peat-making wetland with a water source that is not in contact with mineral soil—such as rainfall.
2. spongy, acidic, and low-nutrient environments betwixt wet and dry; earth, water, sky; solid and fluid; life and death; preservation and decay.

Wetlands are unique ecosystems. They are places where water becomes the driving force behind organic life. Each is diverse, varying widely across region and climate. Marshes regulate flood water from adjacent systems. Fens are fed freely by mineral-rich riverways. Swamps emerge from over-saturated soils. Despite their waterlogged reputation, these seemingly desolate wastelands embody the world's most productive and diverse ecosystems. They are crossroads between water and earth.

Peat bogs, in particular, play a vital role in preserving the environment. These spongy landscapes trap large quantities of carbon emissions and methane gas. When harvested, these deposits produce energy and fuel. Peat has been harvested by hand using specialized tools for thousands of years. Like many fuel industries, modern mechanization has dramatically accelerated the destruction of these landscapes in the name of capital gain and profit.

As humans, we sometimes have a difficult time conceiving the effects of the Capitalocene. It can be hard to put overarching ideas of waste, climate change, extraction, and pollution into perspective. However, these monumental concepts must be broken down and chewed on in order to truly be seen and recognized². *Anoxic Memory* digests

these concepts, relating carbon to unprocessed memories—things stored away that are potentially hazardous if forcefully released.

As you enter the mire, you encounter the bog's primary three strata, spread across each floor of the exhibition space: Anoxic, Oxic, and Atmospheric.



Anoxic /a'näkik/
adjective

1. pertaining to the absence of oxygen.
2. a vacuum.
3. a preservation agent.

Visitors enter the gallery through the Anoxic Layer—the deepest depths of the bog, where memories are buried. Here, it is dark, without exterior sunlight. It is a profoundly unfamiliar space that is not so much a place of sudden shock but a time capsule of threatened existence or a realization streaked with anxiety, not unlike a memento mori³. Inside this layer, materials are actively pressurized and transformed, like many ancient leathered bodies that have been preserved, documented, and exhumed from the compressed, acidic, and oxygen-free depths of boglands across Northern Europe⁴. The room smells fruity, earthy, and sour.

Butter sculptures rise like oily stalagmites from the floor—mimicking premodern practices of interring butter or animal fats within a peat bog. The cool, low-oxygen, high-acid environment made it ideal for preserving perishable food before modern refrigeration. These sculptures represent unmetabolized things that can be stored and kept.

Keepsakes and jewelry are vacuum sealed and submerged into carboys scattered across the floor—artifacts of vernacular memory. Inside, they ferment, bubble, brine, feed, pressurize, and become new. Some connect through winding networks of clear tubes, forming a web of combinations and relationships⁵. Different stages of the fermentation process can be seen depending on when the work is viewed. Their materials and memories are in flux.



Oxic /äksik/
adjective

1. designating a process or environment in which oxygen is involved or present.
2. that which holds the potential to support life and, in doing so, can hold life's mysteries.

An audio installation calls visitors into the gallery's stairwell—the Oxic Layer, where bog biology meets human rhythm-making. Bogs stir fear. They are dark and liquescent liminal spaces that act as an uneasy transition zone between the wet and the dry, the living and the dead. Like many watery environments, boglands attract people who seek contact with the supernatural world. Some report glowing lights, will-o'-the-wisps or fool's light, bubbling up from the bog's surface. These orbs form as methane gases are released from the bog's depths, igniting upon contact with oxygen. Others used boglands as sacrificial spaces or a place of offering. John Stilgoe writes, "the wilderness is the spatial correlative of unreason, or madness, of the inhuman anarchy informing our folktales."⁶

Many of these legends include supernatural sounds. Witnesses report voices echoing across the bog—ghostly calls that some relate to the sound of a baby's cry. An infant's

wail sends vibrations deep into the marrow of one's bones. It is a mournful roar of the soul or a primordial cry for the instinctual caregiver. It attracts the listener like a siren pulling sailors out to sea. Simmons isolates a baby's cry here, dividing its auditory frequencies into an unfamiliar drone. The track pulls visitors up through the gallery as they ascend to the bog's surface. It evokes primal feelings of discomfort and alarm, recalling myths of other curious explorers who made similar journeys across ancient bogs, pulled by the disembodied sound of a baby's cry.

Atmospheric /ˌatməˈfɪrɪk/

adjective



1. Of, or relating to, or occurring in the atmosphere.
2. marked by, or creating, a distinctive mood—typically of contemplation or nostalgia.

Finally, visitors emerge into the sunlit Loft Gallery—the bog's Atmospheric Layer. They encounter an immersive pond installation. Its oblong waters reflect the “eye of the bog.” These pools open the wetland's surface to compressed peat layers below, forming irregular lakes and waterways. A thermal camera captures activity in the exhibition's lower gallery, documenting the anoxic layer through the lens of metabolization. Its images bubble up to the atmospheric surface, where they dance like flaming lights symbolizing growing heat and methane gasses trapped below.

This is a place of contemplation, where memories can be released as opposed to submerged. Scents diffuse from the water, pulling remembrances from human senses. Photosynthesis occurs. Plants sprout and die. Humans come and go. Myths are made. Memories are preserved—or perhaps let go.

Memory /ˈmem(ə)rē/

noun



1. the faculty by which the mind—and other mechanisms—store and remember information, experiences, and people.
2. something remembered from the past—a recollection, a fragment.
3. that which is familiar, codified, pleasurable; inconsistent, painful, fleeting.

As Simmons writes, “Humans have a better chance of changing our behaviours and systems if we acknowledge that our lives, our environments, our histories, our memories, and our very bodies exist within an interwoven web of dependency in which we are constantly being pressurized or pressurizing, forming and reforming through a process of merging ourselves with others.” We have the transformative power of the bog within us. Through realizing and embracing our interdependence, we can become lichenized versions of humanity, in which we metabolize, create, transform, and preserve what matters.

Anoxic Memory provides a hospitable setting where different organisms can grow, meet, affect, recall, and preserve. It asks us to consider our relationship with memory and how this relationship can shift over time. It positions us upon our depleted planet and reminds us of that which sustains us despite our extractions. It questions if we as people can be preserved or whether our experiences are destined to become unplaced artifacts scattered about the depths of the earth. The nature of memory is frightening, but in its precarity, may we find all that makes life possible.



Notes

¹Abbi Flint and Benjamin Jennings. "Saturated with Meaning: Peatlands, Heritage and Folklore." *Time and Mind: The Journal of Archaeology, Consciousness and Culture* 13, no. 3 (November 30, 2020): 283–305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1751696x.2020.1815293>.

²Maria Simmons. "Rat, Plastic, Wood." *UWSpace*. August 19, 2021. <http://hdl.handle.net/10012/17221>

³Annie Proulx. *Fen, Bog & Swamp: A Short History of Peatland Destruction and Its Role in the Climate Crisis*. (Toronto: Scribner, 2022).

⁴For example, Tollund Man who lived during the 5th century BC. You can learn more about him here: Biographics. "The Tollund Man: The World's Most Famous Bog Body." *YouTube* video, 18:20. April 8, 2021. <https://youtu.be/sZFZg0jyFAw>.

⁵David Kearns. "Irish Bog Butter Proven to Be '3500 Years' Past Its Best Before Date." *University College Dublin*, March 14, 2019 <https://www.ucd.ie/newsandopinion/news/2019/march/14/irish-bogbutterproventobe3500yearsastitsbestbeforedate/.mo>.

⁶John R. Stilgoe. *Common Landscapes of America, 1580 to 1845*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 11.



Biography:

Maria Simmons (she/they) is a hybrid artist who investigates potentialized environments through the creation of living sculptures and installations. Her work embraces contamination as an act of collaboration. She collects garbage, grows mushrooms, ferments plants, and nurtures fruit flies. She makes art that eats itself. She holds an MFA from the University of Waterloo and a BFA from McMaster University. Simmons has recently exhibited with Trinity Square Video, Centre3, Xpace, and The Plumb. She has completed residencies at Mustarinda (Finland), BioArt Society (Finland), Silent Barn (USA), and Factory Media Centre (Canada).

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