

# ***Gathering: Icons for a New World***

Senior Honors Thesis Statement

By

Jason Lord

This document accompanied the thesis work in exhibition at

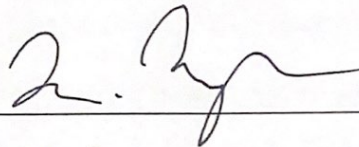
Lump Gallery in Raleigh, North Carolina for the

University of North Carolina Department of Art from

March 4 - April 10, 2022

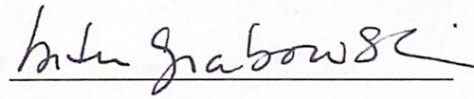
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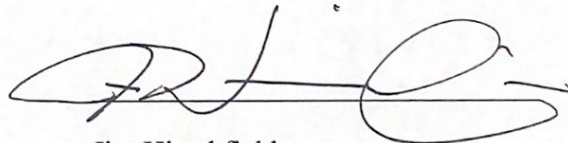
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## Gathering

*Gathering* is a collection of sculptural assemblages paired with a multi-channel, spatial sound installation that investigates the concept of rebirth and what it means to exist in a culture of disposability. The exhibition opened at Lump Gallery in Raleigh, North Carolina, and ran from March 4th through April 10th, 2022. The name is intentionally equivocal; I made this work through the act of gathering, but it also represents a coming together of disparate entities—a congregation. *Gathering* was the culmination of my undergraduate Honors Thesis work at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill from August 2021 through April 2022.



Opening night of *Gathering* at Lump Gallery in Raleigh, NC

This paper lays out the making of, and the ideas behind, *Gathering*, which falls within a larger, ongoing body of work started two years ago called *Pilgrimage*. The main body of this paper will describe in detail the formal considerations I made on my way to the exhibition of *Gathering* and the connections it

has to my personal history. This section describes the specifics of making the work from November until now, April 2022. The supporting documentation can be read in appendices, which more broadly examine *Pilgrimage*<sup>1</sup> and detail my explorations between June and November 2021, including material investigations, conceptual meanderings, and other research

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A

conducted for *Gathering* and its predecessor, *The Indeterminate Geometry of Wandering*<sup>2</sup>. These two installations are connected—throughout the work I’ve developed over the past two years, there is a heavy reference to wandering, ritual, and transformation. Another way to think of this period is as an essential step in my transformation from a jaded schoolteacher and frightened visual art dabbler to an engaged, emerging artist.

*Pilgrimage* is a collection of artifacts, visual reflections, and aural phenomena rooted in a two-year daily walking ritual. As I walk in the city of Durham, North Carolina, the repetition of my breath and my body’s movements sometimes pulls me into a metaphysical trance. While performing this walking prayer, I gather things: thoughts, images, sounds, and discarded objects. Durham’s ground holds many of these objects--rusted railroad equipment, springs and joints, hardware, small flags, old bottles, a handle grip, a baby carriage wheel--and I gather them as my ritual. These objects were once designed and then constructed for a purpose, a *raison d’être* in their first lives, and now they lay on the ground, sometimes for decades, in a second incarnation. Through my practice, the objects now enter a third life. Since early 2020, I have been navigating an intense confluence of walking, thinking, and making artifacts; I am puzzling out my place in the world and how things work in it, and the work I make directly responds to these puzzlements. In the case of *Gathering*, I am considering how we as human beings navigate the concepts of purpose, value, and materiality in regard to other beings, including objects. A key component of *Gathering* is a reflection on spirituality and religion, particularly as I reflect on my Catholic upbringing and its legacy on my adult understanding of the unseen universe. Making *Pilgrimage* in general, and *Gathering* in particular, has been transformative for my art practice and has

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix B

entailed much experimentation<sup>3</sup>. I now see three foundational elements which all come into play in my work: the head, the heart, and the hands. I consider each work intellectually as it sits in a larger context and as it addresses concepts. I evaluate what part of it is connected to my spirit that tugs at an invisible truth or feeling I'm working on or working out. Finally, I consider the making of the work, both in process and craft. I borrow the idea of the trinity as I consider each of these three facets of my work. Does it matter to anyone else, does it matter to me, and how did I make it? My evolving spiritual and art practices adopt this new Head/Heart/Hands lens—my own trinity.

The installation is in a narrow rectangular room—two thirty-four-foot and two ten-foot walls. There are three major components: sacred icons, secular sculptures, and sound. As you enter the room, you see twenty-seven small sculptural assemblages on black, custom-built pedestals—two wooden blocks attached by a thin metal rod ranging from twenty-four to forty-eight inches in height. They are staggered throughout the space, with a clear aisle through the center of the room for visitors to physically navigate the work. On the far, short wall, a wooden assemblage is placed on the ground, flanked by two assembled sculptures. An elevated wall sculpture, *Dolorosa* (or *Creekbed Mary*), hangs on the short wall nearest the entrance, also flanked by two assembled sculptures on the floor. At each of three locations on the two long walls, there is a six-inch white floating shelf, four feet above the ground, upon which fits a small black speaker. Through a Bluetooth connection to three mp3 players, the speakers play pre-recorded sound compositions on loops of varying lengths. The perpetually changing combinations of these looping recordings make for a unique aural experience; one could experience the installation many times and never hear the same soundscape, much like the ephemerality of a walk. The

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix C

sound is integral to the world-building aspect of this work and adds a crucial layer of transformation to activate the space and evoke a sense of activity among the icons.

### Aesthetics and Catholicism: The Head

I grew up as a member of the Parish of St. Patrick's Church in Wallingford, Vermont. On Sundays, the whole family would don uncomfortable clothing and pack into the station wagon. My dad would (now, inexplicably) drive us the half-mile to Mass. The church was small, a stone building with a plethora of tall stained glass windows, between which were 14 frescoes depicting Christ's journey on the day of his death: the Stations of the Cross. The stations are a staple feature for Catholic spaces and invite reflection on Christ's last day, from his condemnation to death to his body laid in the tomb. The stations have specific prayers and meditations associated with them. They are meant to be experienced sequentially; one would begin at Station One on one wall and work one's way around the periphery of the church through Station Fourteen. St. Patrick's of Wallingford, like the many other Catholic spaces I've seen throughout the northeast United States, Spain, France, Germany, Italy, and the Republic of Georgia, is a formal space for formal worship. Though St. Patrick's is humble, the instruments of ritual, like censers, braziers, holy water fonts,



collection plates, and many arcane objects of indiscernible purpose, are ornately decorous. On one end of the church is the central double door, and at the other is the altar and its accoutrements. In larger cathedrals and churches, the altar and pulpit are often in the center of vast interior spaces and surrounded by pews for parishioners to occupy. Depending on the day or occasion, the pews could be sprinkled with family clusters and individuals or be full, with the overflow of congregants relegated to the balcony with the organist. On occasions of Confession, one would enter the church and experience a hushed emptiness. The acoustics of St. Patrick's were as one might expect of a small, high-ceilinged, stone and wood building—open, echoing, reverberant, with limited sonic intervention from rugs and tapestries.

I went through the requisite schooling and received the sacrament of Confirmation, the third of three Catholic rites of initiation (following Baptism and Communion). To be confirmed, I had to choose a patron saint to guide me and whose name I would officially take in my Catholic identity. My Catholic name is Thomas, after Thomas Aquinas, the thirteenth-century Italian friar and priest who philosophized about intention and perception, two essential themes in *Pilgrimage*. Having undergone the three rites of initiation, the Catholic Church asserts that my body was infused with the Holy Spirit, one of three branches of the Christian Trinity along with Father and Son. As a young person, and even now, the enigmatic potential of the Holy Spirit always held more interest for me than the Father or Son mythologies. I still believe that there are truths that cannot be seen with our eyes, heard with our ears, or empirically proven in any other way.

A traditional Mass is conducted by a celebrant—a bishop or a priest, typically—who acts as a proxy for Jesus Christ. For *Gathering*, I invite the viewer to be the celebrant, their body centered

in the space. One may make meaning of the work through objective, subjective, or any other points of view. I do not intend this work to contain some didactic message about Catholicism, recycling, or anything else. The work does reference Catholic spaces and iconography. After productive conversations with my thesis committee and a studio visit with the American sculptor Donald Lipski, I shifted away from the recreation of Catholic spaces, instead drawing from my familiarity with them, combining and transforming elements into something new. Through the making of this work, I explored and reflected on my spiritual history, various religious traditions, and my purpose both as an individual and as a component of larger systems. I imagined and started to construct a syncretic, animistic framework that blends concepts and symbolic elements from various religious practices. *Gathering* is an assembled, spiritual world of intersection, connection, and reverence for both the ephemeral and the enduring.

I see these assembled sculptures as holy icons, with communal halos, looping sound compositions made from field recordings, and sounds recorded directly from the objects. The halos construct a complex, polyrhythmic world that mirrors the urban environment: a rhythm of repetition interspersed with improvisation. Some of these found objects were simply abandoned--obsolete cogs in a progress machine--and others were expelled, tossed out of a stolen backpack, or hurled from a speeding baby stroller. Some may be fugitives, liberating themselves from an abused chassis on a pot-holed street. These objects tell us stories and ask us questions about impermanence, value, and materiality.

The concept of trinity is important to this work, both in the number of icons (three times three times three), sound compositions, and how the works in *Pilgrimage* have shifted my creative

process and art practice. While *Gathering* is an artifact from my walking ritual, the greater work, I have begun to understand, is a ritual of mourning. I am letting go of some things. For Catholics, the final stage of mourning is a return of the body to the earth. My two years of walking, thinking, and feeling have both returned my body to the earth and laid the groundwork for a perceptual realignment. I call this personal transition my “undeading,” an ongoing ceremony of engagement with the world, and a resurrection. In order to make space for new frameworks, old frameworks must be reconsidered, if not outright eliminated, and I have taken this opportunity to build a syncretic spiritual practice, complete with rules and icons, that borrows from several traditions to create something new.

#### Embracing the Discarded: The Heart

*Gathering* is about witnessing the discarded, about reclamation and resurrection, but mostly, this work is about compassion. To engage in compassion for something or someone, we first bear witness to them. We acknowledge something or someone as a piece of a complex world with validity, purpose, and potential. Compassion is a practice. As we build capacity for it--to witness a rusted-out tailpipe and give it new life as an act of love--we can exercise it on other things and other people. These saints are the saints of empathy, understanding, and compassion. Their message: that anything can be treated with tenderness--even a jagged and corroded crowbar or disintegrating mitten; even the imperfect, the outmoded, the discardable; even you and me, even on our worst days.



When I came out as a gay man in the mid-nineteen-nineties, the Catholic Church and I let each other go, though I suspect the parting of ways was easier for them, having had so much practice. This had a ripple effect on my family, most notably on my parents who also left the Church. Since then, Ed and Elaine Lord have tried a number of sects and denominations, often lamenting the loss of the familiar and comforting rituals of Mass. Even before the parting of ways, as an adolescent beginning to learn about the world outside my hometown, I became repelled by the robotic call-and-response of the congregation. Though the prayers had long been transformed from Latin to English, I was still reciting many prayers and creeds without any real sense of what they meant other than that following the rules was good and everything else was not. Through my making of *Pilgrimage*, I have begun to understand the powerful role of repetition in ritual. The walking ritual has me understanding patterns in a new way. Often, I think of my experiences as a musical score; my daily walks have been a constant reflection on the dance of repetition and improvisation, a balance of unity and variety. I have also come to respect the peace that can come with following rules—in this case, following my own rule of walking at least five miles a day, no matter what the circumstance. There can be no interior negotiation if the rule is non-negotiable, and that has been a liberating gift. In an era of information bombardment, with an expectation of immediate engagement, we negotiate so much, all of the time. Knowing that I will walk—that it's already been decided—has been a mitzvah. There is room for rules, and there is room for unthinking repetition, in an examined life. Ritual can be anchoring and repetition can be emancipatory.

In one sense, following my own walking doctrine has led me to empathize more with religious people. Though religious (and political) institutions can be corrupt, serving the desires of a few

rather than the needs of the many, the individuals comprising them are like me: desiring, if not always seeking, meaning and belonging. After some significant reflection, there remains some room for debate over who discarded whom in the Great Catholic Departure. Relationships, and their endings, are complex and sometimes protracted for many years.

### Working with the Materials: The Hands

All of the work in *Gathering* is made of discarded materials. The dominant component in most of the icons is pecan wood. The boards were milled from a one-hundred-year-old pecan tree felled on the grounds of the Carolina Inn in Chapel Hill and given to the University Of North Carolina Department of Art and Art History by Tom Bythell through his Carolina Treecycling program, as facilitated by Jim Hirschfield. I worked with Tom independently to select and gather some other types of discarded wood, though I didn't elect to use them in the exhibition. Though the tree was healthy enough, its proximity to the Carolina Inn meant that it was deemed a threat, and the tree was tagged for removal. These boards were cut, shaped, and sanded with both hand and power tools, with attention paid to the color, texture, and curvature of the grain. All of the other components used in the icons were found objects, gathered from the streets and abandoned lots of Durham, North Carolina. Over the course of two years of walking every day, my messenger bag over my shoulder to hold any discoveries along the way, I've accumulated a large number of discarded objects. A high percentage of these objects are made of metal, though there are items of plastic, fabric, wood, paper, and other materials. Metal is enduring, albeit impermanent, and displays its "lived experience" well on its surface. Oxidation reminds us that this is a durable, albeit impermanent, material.

I would have liked to keep the icons infinitely ephemeral by just stacking and recombining the components, as I did in a photographic series, but gravity and other physical limitations urged me to at least make some temporary adhesion happen with these works. I experimented with many ways of joining the components of the icons with varying levels of success. I tried, and used, many adhesives, including PVA glue, cyanoacrylates (superglue, RapidFuse), white school glue, and epoxy. I tied, stapled, nailed, stacked, and wired components to other components, using found hardware and the discarded objects themselves to join wood pieces. This was certainly the most durable way, as evidenced by a cataclysmic studio mishap that took out eight sculptures like dominoes with one unfortunate table bump. Valuable lessons were learned.

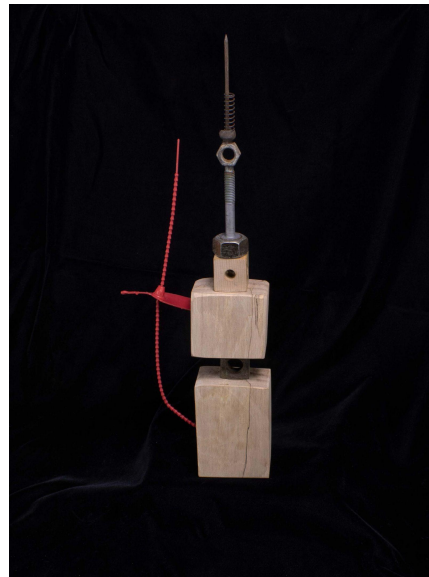
The fact that the objects were at one time discarded is crucial to my thesis. As I considered what it means to discard a material object in an increasingly disposable world, it became impossible to ignore the many ways we discard and devalue human beings as well. I think about the incarcerated, the queer, the “funny-looking”, the disabled, the indigenous—in our hierarchical world where power is afforded by comparison, the continuous list of the devalued is long. I reflect on my own complex relationship with this hierarchical structure; the advantages of being a cis-gendered man, being white, and being mostly able-bodied, as well as the disadvantages of being queer, growing up poor, and living with an invisible disability. I think of these intersecting identities as components and of our holistic identities as assemblage.

The pedestals, which are integral to the installation but not part of the work, are constructed of purchased lumber and a combination of found and purchased metal rods. I designed them to mirror or accentuate some of the qualities of the icons themselves, namely the idea of objects

being stacked, with an emphasis on verticality. Initially, I had planned to keep the materials raw, but the value of the pecan and the pine was too similar—visually, the pedestals became part of the icon, which was never my intention. I chose to paint the pedestals black as a nod to some of my formal exploration of the icons through photography: images shot in dramatic light against black velvet, a reference to seventeenth-century paintings like *Our Lady of Sorrows* by Giovanni Battista Salvi da Sassoferrato.



*Our Lady of Sorrows* by Giovanni Battista Salvi da Sassoferrato<sup>4</sup>



*Detail from Gathering* by Jason Lord

## Sound Halos

The halo, as an emanation, shows up in art throughout time and across religions, sometimes in intersecting aureoles and mandorlas (or body halos). The presence of a halo suggests a spiritual elevation and implies reverence for the halo-haver, the opposite of being forsaken or discarded.

Halos in art have transformed over the centuries, sometimes portrayed as a glow, sometimes rays

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<sup>4</sup> Sassoferrato on Wikimedia

of light emanating from a figure's head, and even as a physical disk, with perspective, during the height of naturalism in the Italian Renaissance<sup>5</sup>. I thought about gold as a material for halos in Christian iconography--how the material was a precious commodity meant as both a material sacrifice and an exertion of wealth and power. I wondered what material these found saints, long-forsaken objects passing decades on the ground and out of use, would want as their halos. I concluded that the halo needn't be material but rather an emanation or expression of time. The original concept of the sound halos involved each icon emanating an individually produced sound composition. As one looked at each icon, one would also hear its distinctive sound. Physical proximity would place the volume of the icon's halo hierarchically above the sounds of the others, even while each halo would remain audible at all times. It was important that the sounds associated with the icons carried the same weight and lived within the same framework as the physical components--each valued as an individual and essential to the collective work. There were some obstacles to realizing this idea--primarily mechanical--but nothing insurmountable. In the end, I chose to approach the sound component more simply. After consulting with three different sound engineers and UNC music professor Lee Weisert, I came to the understanding that to preserve the integrity of the sound compositions, I would need to use a lot of cables--a balanced audio line running from my digital interface out to each powered speaker, and a power cord for each speaker. I look forward to solving this problem in a future iteration of this work. In the context of this timeframe and the physical space of Lump gallery, I chose to eliminate that visual noise.

The sound compositions I used are each twelve-track loops that employ field recordings from my walks, including footsteps, birds, frog song, motor vehicles, windchimes, and other ambient

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<sup>5</sup> Papageorgiou

sounds. I also suspended a number of the metal objects that I had gathered from strings and rubber bands in my studio, playing them with strikers like percussion instruments. Additional recordings include me singing a short section of a Gregorian chant, translated into English, and my whistling of the tune “Blue Moon.”

Blue moon, you saw me standing alone

Without a dream in my heart, without a love of my own—

Blue moon, you knew just what I was there for,

You heard me saying a prayer for someone I really could care for

Sometimes I would think of this lyric as I looked at the objects on the ground. I am still uncertain as to who I think was praying to whom between the discarded object and myself. Through this period of spiritual reincarnation, I used these objects on the ground as a focus for my looking, and perceptual realignment, much like worshippers use icons as foci for their prayer. The Gregorian chant is an overt nod to Catholicism and hymn—through formal choices like the inclusion of sacred music, I provide a viewer some nods toward Catholic practices without demanding that anyone see the work through that lens. I also created an original music composition for the installation. This piece is spiritually charged and reflects the choral tradition of the Church, but also resists some European musical ideas while adopting some others, including polyphonic choral tone clusters from Asia and polyrhythms of Western Africa. Like so much else about this work, this composition is a customized assemblage—plucking specific components from various places, removing the chaff, and combining them to create something new—a hymn made my own. I generated and edited all of the sound components using Adobe Audition and Logic Pro X, both programs that were new to me for this project. I used a Zoom

audio recorder for most field recordings, though a few of the samples are simply audio tracks stripped from videos I took with my phone. By the end of the project, I considered the icons as emanators working together to broadcast a message across the earth: “We are here,” say the abandoned objects, vestiges, and relics of a disappearing material world, “we have not forsaken you.” For this reason, I made the aesthetic decision to emphasize the verticality of each icon, presenting them as conduits or antennae working individually and jointly to communicate over long distances. I constructed the pedestals to accentuate this verticality while echoing the stacking effect in many of the sculptures.

#### Form and color

My idea for the icons was always to take discarded, quotidian objects and elevate them, figuratively and physically. The forms of these icons evolved while I worked with the material. I considered form, texture, line, and color palette among multiple formal considerations. Some pecan components were shaped and placed to invoke an image of stacked stones, present throughout history and place as an act of spiritual intention. Some stacked stones are cairns, marking and memorializing a body or bodies laid to rest in the ground beneath or near it. At various points, they were influenced by the sculptural work of Constantin Brâncuși and Alain Kirili and the assemblage works of Bettye Saar, Renee Stout, and Lonnie Holley, among others. I used the pecan, in many instances, as a means to showcase the form of the found object. The work started taking on a verticality that fit my concept of icons as conduits to the unseen world, often depicted as sky and heaven in Christian art.

The work of *Pilgrimage* is connected to my walking and my body as it moves across the earth, where I find these objects. Most of the icons contain a single element of red, drawn from the Hindu concept of Chakra, which is a wheel-like energy system embraced through spiritual practice. The Muladhara Chakra, or the root chakra, is connected to the body and the earth and is associated with the color red. In Zen Buddhism, the circle, or Enso, represents a freeing of the mind through physical action and the idea of eternal life through rebirth. Enso is sometimes depicted as a broken circle; in this iteration, it embraces imperfection and its inevitability. I have used the idea of Enso in these icons, in some cases through the use of the broken circle, and in other cases, the use of imperfectly circular forms like an octagonal metal lug nut. Other than the shaping of the pecan boards, I placed no interventions on any of the materials used to make the icons. Things are seen as they were initially seen by me when I noticed them; red objects were red, and rusty objects were rusty. The icons are often constructed on a slight angle—bent, off-kilter, queer—as further homage to the concept of wabi-sabi, or embracing imperfection and variation from the “ideal.” The saints of the discarded do not strive for perfection, but for authenticity and acceptance.

### Creekbed Mary

One example of the push-pull phenomenon I have experienced having multiple advisors is whether Creekbed Mary belonged in this work. The answer to me has always been “obviously, yes,” but not all of my committee members were as





sure. Regardless, she holds the altar space in the gallery, and I approached the making of this work in a slightly different way than I did the icons. This sculpture is primarily one piece of detritus dragged from Ellerbe Creek in Durham—a partially destroyed grocery cart whose metal tendrils had acted like a net, catching rags and paper in the creek for some untold time. As this fantastic object dried and its entanglements cured, it lost some of its color. Rather than present this object exactly as I found it, I chose to apply some limited ornament to it, reintroducing a bit of color. I am always struck by the hybrid pagan ornamentation of some high Catholic holidays like Easter, embracing fertility and renewal through rabbits and spring flowers, and Christmas, with its trees and firelight. I used dried flowers, string, and a crudely manufactured wooden rosary to adorn the madonna figure. By combining this human-constructed skeleton with natural materials, I further investigated the tension between the built and natural environments I had been exploring on foot. A dried flower can simultaneously symbolize a beginning and an end; both a relic of the old and an icon for the new.

### The Role of Ritual

Byung-Chul Han defines ritual as “symbolic techniques of making oneself at home in the world.” Most of us engage in ritualistic work practices, whether we like it or not. A weekly or daily schedule upholds a ritualistic practice. My spiritual experience as a young Catholic was heavily steeped in ritual. At some point in my pre-adolescent years, my oldest brother and I would walk to church on our own while the rest of the family did whatever they were doing. When he, six years my elder, went to college, I would go alone, enjoying both the righteousness of this act and also the ritual. Years later, when I began my walking ritual, I reflected on other

ways I'd embraced ritual in my adult life and that other people I know embrace ritual beyond a weekly religious service. I started to go to an online Saturday Drawing Club, initiated by Bill Thelen. Like my daily walks, this weekly activity became a non-negotiable custom. I traveled and would return from a hike or museum visit early in order to log in to Drawing Club. In March of 2020 I started eating breakfast and have eaten the same thing almost every day: a bowl of cereal, a banana, and a cup of coffee. I maintain three to five boxes of cereal in my kitchen at any given time; each day, I have the same staple cereal with some other combination of the other cereal—repetition and improvisation, like the space in a church service where the hymn or homily always goes but the content itself may change. I saved the stickers from my bananas and made a series of books documenting this ritual. I also participated in a bookmaking ritual of my own design, where I made a new book every day for fifty days. There were rules, like in all of my rituals, and like in my Catholic framework—rituals within rituals.



## Themes of Transformation

The concept of transformation has been fundamental to this work, and possibly to all of my work. As the world has been changing quickly, in sometimes unrecognizable ways, so have my body, mind, and spiritual core. In the beginning, I started exercising. I delimited my intake of unhealthy food and drink. I lost unhealthy weight and reversed a blood pressure problem. This habit became an almost ascetic, monk-like practice. As I reestablished a connection to my body, other things started to fall into place. I learned about Taoism and Zen Buddhism, and some of

these very old ideas made sense to me at this moment. I have come to see everything as impermanent, including political situations, physical places and structures, our bodies, our points of view, and the planet. I see things differently now. Everything is a system, or an assemblage, made of smaller quanta. I find this notion as spiritually liberating as others seem to find in the monotheistic Abrahamic faiths, which have never truly made sense to me. Transformation figures importantly in Catholicism and appears in the Bible often. Most notable to the Catholic faith is the idea of transubstantiation—the belief that through ritual magic, the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine are materially transformed into the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ. In some sense, my understanding of the material world as mutable is as old as my Catholic experience. The other key transformation is that of resurrection—the transformation from death to life. Through my work with *Pilgrimage*, I explore personal rebirth through a walking ritual. Through *Gathering*, I provide the opportunity for abandoned objects to be reborn too.

This project has been transformative for me personally and in regard to my art practice. I started the project as a submerging artist, resistant to being called an artist, and I am ending the experience unequivocally as an emerging artist. I still have a lot to learn, which excites me. I see, hear, feel, and think differently now. I approach craft differently, and I have more confidence in my point of view. Not only was I afforded the opportunity to guide my own process, but I was given much support by the art department and its faculty. Through a twist of fate, I was able to use an incredible studio for almost the entire year, with easy access to other spaces in the Hanes Art Center. I used materials from Carolina Treecycling when lumber was expensive. Mostly, I was given the gift of time—to experiment, research, and reflect on what I was making, learning, and doing. I marvel when I consider the thousands of hours of walking, thinking, reading,

writing, and making that have gone into this project since March 2020. It's hard to imagine doing this work without the immense amount of support I've been given. Specific thanks go to my advisor, Mario Marzán, who met with me many times to listen to my ramblings and help me to think broadly about what I was doing, as well as my insightful committee members, Jim Hirschfield, Beth Grabowski, and Joy Drury Cox. Joy and Lien Truong offered excellent guidance in the early part of my work. I appreciate the ongoing support of Bill Thelen, who first helped me to think of myself as an artist, and George Jenne and Team Lump for the leap of faith in showing my work in a space that embraces ideas before commodification. This project was supported by the Salisbury Family Excellence Fund administered by Honors Carolina. Thanks also to the UNC Department of Art and Art History for supporting my work with a grant from the Pearman Fund and the administration of the Alexander Julian Prize, a subsidized Chancellor's Award. Other key players have been my electronic music professor Lee Weisert, Alexa Velez and Mark Soderstrom with technical support and encouraging words, sonic advice from Alyssa Miserendino and Ian McCarthy, as well as Lisl "Eagle Eye" Hampton, who often spots the best discarded objects on our walks together. Many thanks to Donald Lipski for taking an hour out of his life and esteemed career to talk with me about my project and offer great advice. No list of acknowledgments would be complete without Rob Rucker, my lovely partner, who endures so much, not the least of which is rusty metal chunks littered about the house and snake skeletons on our back patio.

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## Appendix A

### Pilgrimage

Since early 2020, I have been navigating an intense confluence of living life and making art. Most of the time that I'm not creating artwork, I'm looking at or thinking about its development. At the very least, I am puzzling out how things work in the world or what kind of life I want to lead in the world, and the work I make is a direct response to these puzzles. Because the artwork I produce deeply connects to how I respond to the world, it can be challenging to disentangle the work from my day-to-day life, mainly as it manifests into a walking practice, which is, on some level, irrefutably performative by nature. The pieces I create often feel like artifacts from my walking meditations, none of them discrete, all connected by a common thread.

To carry light like pollen  
To be a blinking cursor  
A messenger, a circuit,  
A strand between two places.

To be a dot in motion  
To draw a map of dreaming  
To step an incantation--  
To walk is to pray

In March 2020, I began a daily walking practice. The COVID-19 global pandemic was just unfolding in North Carolina. The disruption of everyday life left a void that, for many, felt harmful, but for me, it left space for new ways of being. Suddenly without a commute and with

much of my coursework transitioning to an asynchronous platform, I devoted hours each day to wandering the streets, trails, parking lots, cul-de-sacs, and forests of my home city of Durham, North Carolina. I took photographs and made recordings of my time spent walking, documenting peripheral spaces in and around Durham—paying close attention to the experience of the world on foot. I started with my neighborhood and then moved on to others. I traveled through strip malls and Jiffy Lube parking lots, cemeteries, shopping malls, and residential quarters. From Lakewood to Golden Belt, looking at and listening to the city, I walked for hours at a time. My daily walks became a ritual of body and mind. I was moving at a different pace--a human pace--and I started noticing things outside my body, in the actual world of trees and insects, shouting men and double-stroller moms, and an astonishing amount of construction and demolition. While I walked, I witnessed joy-riders and whole families on bikes for the first time, litter and road bric-a-brac, noise, and complicated colors. I experienced wind, waffle cone smells, bad paint choices, streetlamps, and slivers of moon. I learned how the same shadows dance with and around each other at different parts of the day, in different months of the year. As I got to know the patterns of the place where I live—the timing of traffic lights and the habits of six AM joggers—I noticed more and more: the texture of asphalt, bark, moss, the colors of moving water, the rhythms of crying, laughter, my breath, as I remembered what my body could do.

In addition to a reconnection with my body, the first year of my *Pilgrimage* was also about place. I wasn't born in Durham or even the American South, so the city has not always felt like my home, even after living here for almost thirty years. I've lived in my current house since 2008, and I was surprised to experience a greater sense of belonging when I explored the area slowly,



on foot. As I walked into unfamiliar neighborhoods, I became curious about them. I viewed maps, new and old, from Durham's city and county websites. I researched Durham's history as a train depot, farming country, and industrial leader in tobacco production and textile manufacturing. Durham had been a significant economic hub for African-American businesses. Some of these histories were still visible through worn architecture, road placement, and the relative wealth of various neighborhoods, now shifting once again in a powerful wave of gentrification. I learned about redlining and the purposeful destruction of the historically black and economically successful Hayti neighborhood through the construction of the Durham Freeway<sup>6</sup>. As I spent time looking at these spaces and learning their histories, I felt a greater connection to Durham. The artifacts I picked up on my walks also connected me to the city, representing an additional layer of human interventions on the landscape. A crumbling brick, a battered brake caliper, a railroad spike, a losing lottery ticket—all of these objects were evidence of lives lived in this place. Human bodies laid the railroad track and stacked bricks to create tobacco-drying warehouses; these bodies lived here, too.

I hadn't intended to begin a daily ritual, and I certainly had no plans to take any spiritual journey. As my perceptions shifted and I engaged in this increasingly automatic walking, an ambulatory meditation, I changed. Day by day, step by step, breath by breath, my body, brain, and human spirit began to rewire. I made artwork about what I saw and experienced—assemblages of found objects. A paper quilt made of sewn cyanotype images, a cardboard dream vessel, and many other creations all derived from an increasingly intertwined partnership of walking and artistic practices. I mention this because I can't conceive of the work I present in *Gathering* without considering its relationship to my walking practice or the changes it has brought about for me.

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<sup>6</sup> Hower

The way that I consider all of this work as a form of *Pilgrimage* has been shifting. In the beginning, I was simply thinking about a walking ritual that was simultaneously connected to a spiritual world. As I read more about pilgrimage, including Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust* and *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, I started to understand that there were multiple journeys at play. Solnit quotes Thomas Merton: "The geographical pilgrimage is the symbolic acting out of an inner journey. The inner journey is the interpolation of the meaning and signs the outer pilgrimage. One can have one without the other. It is best to have both." I noticed that there were times that my thoughts were still while my body was in motion, and conversely there were moments of physical rest while my mind disentangled thought or memories. Even while sometimes either my body or my mind is at rest, the holistic experience of living significant parts of my days, weeks, and months as a walking thinker or thinking wanderer has been the "both" to which Merton is referring.

I considered the idea of "dark pilgrimage"<sup>7</sup>, which connects to the idea of "dark tourism"<sup>8</sup>, a journey to a site of trauma or catastrophe. While the concept is partially true for me as I revisit my religious upbringing and some previously unresolved tensions, I think what's universally more true is that this journey has been, in many ways, more homecoming than anything else. Walking returned me to my body. First, it returned my legs and lungs. When I made North Carolina my home in the mid-nineteen-nineties, I had been an athlete. Twenty-five years later, my body suffered from neglect born of a sedentary lifestyle, with unhealthy consumption habits,

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<sup>7</sup> Olsen and Maximiliano draw parallels between dark tourism and pilgrimage, noting the regular overlap between the two concepts and physical locations

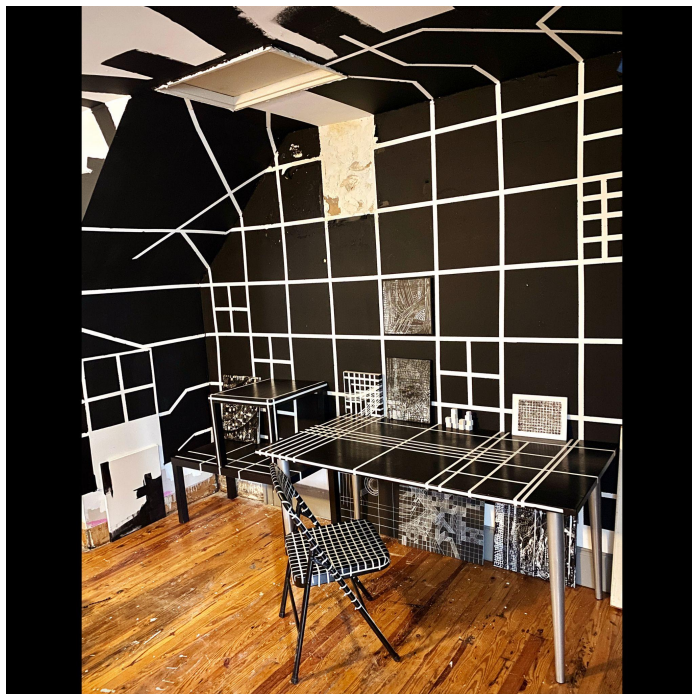
<sup>8</sup> In recent years, there has been an upswing of interest in dark tourism—Lennon and Foley outline its history in this foundational text.

including a nicotine addiction satisfied through smoking cigarettes. Walking up a hill had become a small challenge. Eventually, after I began my walking habit in 2020, I started running regularly, returning some other muscle groups to me. As I walked every day, my ears returned to me. The access to information provided by a rapidly growing internet world had provided constant stimulation and packaging of information into short soundbites. Throughout the start of the twenty-first century, my ears and eyes got used to filtering through so much information that I believe it built a self-defense mechanism on my senses like a callous protecting an area of chafed skin. While moving my body slowly through Durham spaces, I started listening and, eventually, hearing the truth of the world around me. My eyes returned to me as I looked and saw the world again. I thought of the idea of home. Each day I left my home to walk for hours, and I always returned to my house. I reflected on the many houses I've occupied and revised my definition of home. There is one original home, and it has skin, breath, and bone. While some pilgrims journey to a specific site, often housing a venerated icon, structure, or relic, others have wandered with no fixed destination. I find myself somewhere in between, wandering through spaces while striving to experience my body as home.

## Appendix B

### The Indeterminate Geometry of Wandering

March 10th, 2022, marked two complete years of walking a minimum of five miles every day, regardless of weather, mood, or external pressures— fifty-six hundred miles—never a day missed. One year after I started walking, I began a series of grid-based drawings that would become the foundation of an artistic residency at Attic 506, an artist-run space in Carrboro, North Carolina. From June through September of 2021, I engaged in a daily ritual of drawing and making. As the foundation of my exploration, I used the visual structure of the grid. Drawing intuitively within a grid was a perfect analog to my walking explorations—as each street intersection provides a new choice for moving, so do the line intersections of a grid. I treated each square as both an individual and as a part of the larger structure. Each new square provided the possibility for the continuation of a line, a change in direction, or both.



This work began with the physical act of unlocking a door, followed by a series of other small tasks like dragging a table up a flight of stairs, stealing a folding chair, and drawing a grid on it with masking tape. Each task was a component of the larger work: transforming a space. The

residency was an all-in exploration of the visual structure of the grid and its components: squares, right angles, and intersecting perpendicular lines. I drew eighty 8” x 8” grid drawings. I made 15 copies of each, eventually joining them into sheets of wallpaper that covered the walls and ceiling of the room, acting as a springboard for other visual and material explorations. As walking had become an ascetic practice for me, I also chose to delimit my output for this project to primarily black-and-white images, which I stuck to for the first three months of the residency, until small areas of red began to appear in the work.

This residency was an exploration of the grid, but it was also an exploration of wandering, and the grid became the network through which I wandered. I meandered between thoughts, concepts, and media, allowing each idea to land as it would, and moving on when I found resolve. Through this intense work, I began to think about and research different beliefs about the metaphysical world, especially looking at complex systems and the ways they can be broken into smaller components. In both scientific and spiritual practices, there are building block units: quanta, gluons, atoms, dharmas<sup>9</sup>, and other foundational particles or waves that combine to make larger units, ultimately stacking or cohering to become a molecule, a skin cell, or a Lexus.<sup>10</sup> I started to think of all of my work as some form of assemblage– its language, material objects, governments, everything a collection of borrowed ideas or particles. Through these considerations, I began to explore the element of looping and layering with music and sound, approaching each wave as a unit and seeing what I could produce by doubling, halving, or staggering wavelengths to create new and unique sound experiences. This sonic investigation was the foundation for the sonic halos in *Gathering*.

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<sup>9</sup> “In Buddhist [metaphysics](#) the term in the plural ([dharmas](#)) is used to describe the interrelated elements that make up the [empirical](#) world.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*

<sup>10</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*

Some folks amen  
Some folks yeehaw  
Some folks namaste  
Some folks draw

Some folks read, others pray  
As mysteries they ponder;  
As for me, I lace my boots,  
Step outside, and wander.

I opened the Drawing Room space to the public every weekend, and a variety of people came in to talk with me, connecting with the work I was making. Saturday afternoons became a ritual of connection during an otherwise disconnected time. The “opening” of the work, which happened in mid-September, was an invitation to come into the space to connect with other people who were also experiencing this anti-curated, three-dimensional sketchbook of everything I’d been making for several months. I produced many drawings during this time, and I began to place found objects in grid-like shelving units that I had discovered on the street and hauled across Chapel Hill, up into the Attic. Though I removed these objects when I opened *The Indeterminate Geometry of Wandering*, these shifting arrangements of objects became the foundation for the icons and sculptures of *Gathering*.

## Appendix C

### Explorations for *Gathering*, Curation, and Future Iterations

#### Material and Conceptual Explorations

Between the Attic 506 residency and the making of *Gathering*, I did a lot of exploring in my studio in Hanes Art Center, a space generously provided by the department for me to make this work. As I disentangled thoughts and ideas from my Catholic upbringing, I considered the components that contributed to the visual language I observed in the church, which was one of craft, formality, an economy of color, and occasionally, opulence. My approach to exploring this language was initially rather concrete. I observed and made figurative images of saints, played around with types of halos, experimented with creating rosaries, crucifixes, and other objects that are specifically emblematic to the Catholic and/or Christian visual frameworks. I reflected on both the rosary and the Stations of the as emblematic of a pilgrimage or journey, with a sequenced path with elements of both repetition and variation.

I became interested in the early encaustic icons, using wax as the binder for pigment. I experimented with wax, particularly pouring it on paper, wood, and some of my found objects. I also dipped objects in wax, and some of the wires used in *Dolorosa* were dipped in wax and then salt, another material I researched that led me into thinking more about pagan spiritual practices. I realized that while I was borrowing elements from various spiritual traditions, I was engaging in world-building, experimenting with particular components from various complex systems,

extracting them, and recombining them to create something that worked for me. Rather than “throw the baby out with the bathwater” as I detached myself from Catholicism and Christianity, I chose to salvage what seemed useful as I dug into my own spiritual investigation. I am still assembling this spiritual practice and religious framework, and I expect that I will continue to do so. In addition to wax and salt, I experimented with oil, another important ingredient to many spiritual practices, including Catholicism, to observe its ability to transform paper and other fibrous material from opaque to translucent—this is useful as I continue to think about layering and how it can portray simultaneity. I made maps, drawings, sound collages, and objects that brought me forward to the work seen in *Gathering*.

## Curation

The two installations that bookend the period described in this paper demonstrate a shift in my approach to curation. *The Indeterminate Geometry of Wandering* was a three-dimensional sketchbook, with barely any element created during the residency edited out of the display. It was my brain on view. I bore all in *TIGOW*, and when it came time to install *Gathering*, I had eliminated many components. I used approximately five percent of the objects I’d collected. Back in September, as I sorted and organized found materials, displaying them on my studio's bulletin boards and shelves, I wondered if this was simply a curation project. Could simply displaying these objects in an organized way serve to make them special? At one point, I had planned to include large prints of photographs I had taken of the icons as well as saint cards of the photos, sized and printed to the same scale that one might receive as a prayer card at a Catholic Mass or funeral. It pained me to cull it, but that component had to go, in service of a



cleaner space to showcase the discarded object icons. Going into installation week, I had planned to have some work on the walls that I deemed less visually unobtrusive than the photographs—specifically poems written in forms that evoked the image of sound waves rising vertically. Throughout this project, I addressed some concerns and inquiries through poetry, ranging from narrative to lyrical to compact rhyming couplets. There are sixteen poems total, which in the end, I chose not to include in the exhibition, but that I have sometimes included in publicity material. Once I was in the space and could see the multiplicity effect happening with the shadows on the wall, I knew that the walls needed to stay bare of image or text. The forms of the icons, and their shadows, were enough. With twenty-seven icons and six other sculptures in the exhibition, it probably couldn't be called a minimal installation, but the individual pieces do have minimalist qualities. I considered suspending every piece of metal I'd found on the ground over the past two years, of which there are probably at least a thousand—I may still do that at some point. However, I had set out to exercise some restraint, and I did.

### Future Iterations of *Gathering*

I think this body of work has more lives to live. I would like to see it realized with the icons having their distinct sound halos, in a space where the requisite cables can contribute to the concept. Separately, I would like to install the icons and gradually disassemble them over time, each day detaching and suspending some components by monofilament or returning the objects to the earth. Ultimately, the entire room would just consist of separate components in the space. I would like to make a performance of assembling and disassembling the icons hourly, daily, or continually for a number of days. I would like to build hundreds more of these icons and

assemble them into a shrine. I will trace the shadows of the icons, shift the pedestals and light, and trace the new shadows until the walls fill with them, overlapping. I would try powdered graphite, ink, and paint. I would make field recordings of the locations of these objects, where I found them in the world, and fully incorporate them into their sound halos. I will place these objects, assembled as icons, back in the world. These objects have more lives.

