Alana Bartol, *Dowser*, 2016, archival inkjet print, 39.5 cm x 26.33 cm
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Dowsing for Remediation, with Alana Bartol

I first encountered Alana Bartol's work in 2017 sighting an image of her in blue coveralls disguised as an oil and gas industry worker, levitating a branch above the ground in a desolate environment. As part of her *Orphan Well Adoption Agency* (OWAA) (2017–ongoing) project, the artist performs as a dowser for the fictive agency, visiting orphaned oil and gas wells across so-called Alberta to read the ground's levels of contamination while advocating for the public to symbolically adopt these neglected wells—which number in the thousands across the province.[1]

I learned then that dowsing, also known as water witching or radiesthesia, is an embodied practice of divination long used to detect entities underfoot: water sources, mineral ores, oil, and even lost objects. Using an instrument—such as a forked branch, a pendulum, or alternatives—the practitioner locates the desired entity by being attentive to the chosen tool's movements in response to asking yes and no questions while hovering it above the ground. Bartol descends from a long line of water witches on her mother's side, adept at detecting sources of groundwater. After learning of this matrilineal history in 2013, the artist began incorporating the divination form into her art practice as a method with which to navigate her relationship to place and read sites of extraction, activating her body as a conduit to listen to what contaminated lands are saying.

Bartol initiated the OWAA project shortly after moving to Mohkínstsis/Calgary, as a way of engaging with the realities of failed remediation in the region. In a conversation surrounding the 2021 group exhibition "Groundwork" at Critical Distance Centre for Curators that featured works from the project, Bartol, alongside Ileana Hernandez Camacho, Tsēmā, and I, thought about the ways that land-based actions can challenge the colonial-capitalist mindset of extractivism[2] and transmit site-specific dispatches from the land. Bartol explained that, as a white settler in so-called Canada, she sees dowsing and making art as connected practices of asking embodied questions to do so, querying: "How do [I and other settlers] actually relate to land, and how do we understand what it's already communicating? How do we understand a relationship to land that is not just one-way [but] reciprocal?"[3] In a video call with the artist this spring,[4] she elaborated on how dowsing is her way of trying reaching the contamination resulting from extraction on stolen Indigenous lands has spread, which informs her inquiries. She sees this work as being about undoing settler-colonial Western ways of thinking about the land as something that is owned, that one can take from without reciprocity.

Alongside her ongoing work around the oil and gas industry, Bartol brought these questions to consider the history of coal in the south-west of the province. Through a multipart project with the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery in 2020, she developed a new body of work around coal mining in Crowsnest Pass—located west of Lethbridge at the foot of the Rocky Mountains in Treaty 7 territory—which grew into the exhibition "Processes of Remediation: art, relationships, nature," curated by Josephine Mills and presented at both the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery and at the Dunlop Art Gallery in 2021. While developing this work, Bartol maintained the blog dowsinganddigging.com, where she wrote and shared documentation about her on-site research. Coal mining was the reason for the formation of Crowsnest Pass and its lifeblood throughout the 20th century; today, there are numerous ghost towns and historical sites in the region, including memorials to those who lost their lives in some of the worst mining disasters in Canadian history.[5] Although visitors to the Pass can visit interpretation centres and museums about the region's history, Bartol explains during our call that "it's acknowledged in this very odd kind of uncritical way… To say that this is a significant site, how do we really understand that significance, and how do we learn from it?" Digging beyond the narrative of compulsory extraction commemorated throughout the Pass, Bartol's research over the spring and summer of 2020 entailed visiting abandoned mines not part of the ing in them," she recounts, to confront what seeps outside the state narrative. The resulting "Processes of Remediation" exhibition investigated what coal mining has meant for the land, water, and more-than-human species of this ecosystem while considering how this extractive legacy haunts our present.

A starting point to Bartol's investigation into coal was the story of Martine de Bertereau, also known as the Baroness de Beausoleil. Born in the late 1500s, she was a French mining engineer and mineralogist—one of the first women recorded occupying this profession in France. Working alongside her husband at the service of France's monarchy during the early to mid-1600s, they prospected for various mineral ores across Europe, including coal. What struck Bartol was that de Bertereau employed dowsing as one of her prospecting methods. Though the cause of her death is not known, we do know that she was eventually accused of witchcraft, which may have been linked to her use of divination, and that she died in prison. Drawn to the contradictions in de Bertereau's story—that she was, on one hand, a pioneering woman, maybe a type of feminist, yet on the other hand, a mining pioneer—Bartol identified her as an "appropriate muse" given the artist's reflections on the contradictions of her own position as a settler woman of mixed European ancestry investigating extractive capitalism while also entangled with and benefiting from it.

Bartol saw it fitting to conjure de Bertereau's ghost through the contemporary figure of the witch, drawing on her implications in Western popular culture as both an empowering and a healing figure, yet also with monstrous or power-hungry propensities. The character is evoked through disembodied green hands with long red-lacquer nails—referencing the famed Wicked Witch of the

recent works. Bartol perceives the witch figure today "as a symbol that counters patriarchal power and maybe capitalism, but [...] gets co-opted by that in many ways." Interestingly, the story of the witch is implicit to capitalism. Regarding the formation of capitalism fuelled by colonization of the Americas and the transatlantic slave trade, Italian feminist Silvia Federici expounds how witch-hunts—which were at their peak during de Bertereau's era—were instrumental to severing the peasantry from the lands they worked in Europe and assailing women's social power. Resuscitating the ghost of de Bertereau through the witch, then, alludes to these complex histories and asks questions about the system that gave rise to coal mining in the context of a province where it remains not only active but proactive.

Throughout the exhibition, the witch mediates these coiled contradictions through the figure's archetypes: how we fall prey to systems of power (the "bad witch") yet how we also have the ability to heal by rebuilding our connection to the natural world (the "good witch"). For instance, in the sculptural installation *Coal Futures* (2021), a series of Bartol-as-the-witch's green-painted cast hands levitate over chunks of coal, petroleum coke, and a core sample—almost as if guarding them—while each hand balances a dowsing rod. In this, the witch nods to the paradox of our present, clutching to exploitative processes we know have killed and are contaminating us. Meanwhile, in the installation *Rotten Pot* (2021)—translated from the French *pot-pourri*—introduced plants harvested from the Pass hang to dry while others are gathered into a large copper cauldron, implying their use in medicinal remedies.

The witch's work with these contradictions extends through the 10-minute video *With a finger to her lips...* (2021), which includes footage from the abandoned Greenhill Mine Complex that closed in the late '50s. Green hands emerge from the ground to reckon with the remnants of coal mining. "There was a sense that I didn't need the dowsing tools when I embodied the hands [there]," describes Bartol. "It was very much an intuitive performance in the spaces I was in, and seeing what came out of my hand acting." The hands crawl through and sensuously caress the infrastructure and leftover materials, including discarded core samples from the nearby Grassy Mountain. In one scene, a stream flows past a heap of core samples, followed by a close-up of the witch's hand pointing toward mysterious white strands flowing in the water, which suggest the silent contamination of the Oldman Watershed (upon which the Pass sits) by an old underground mine.

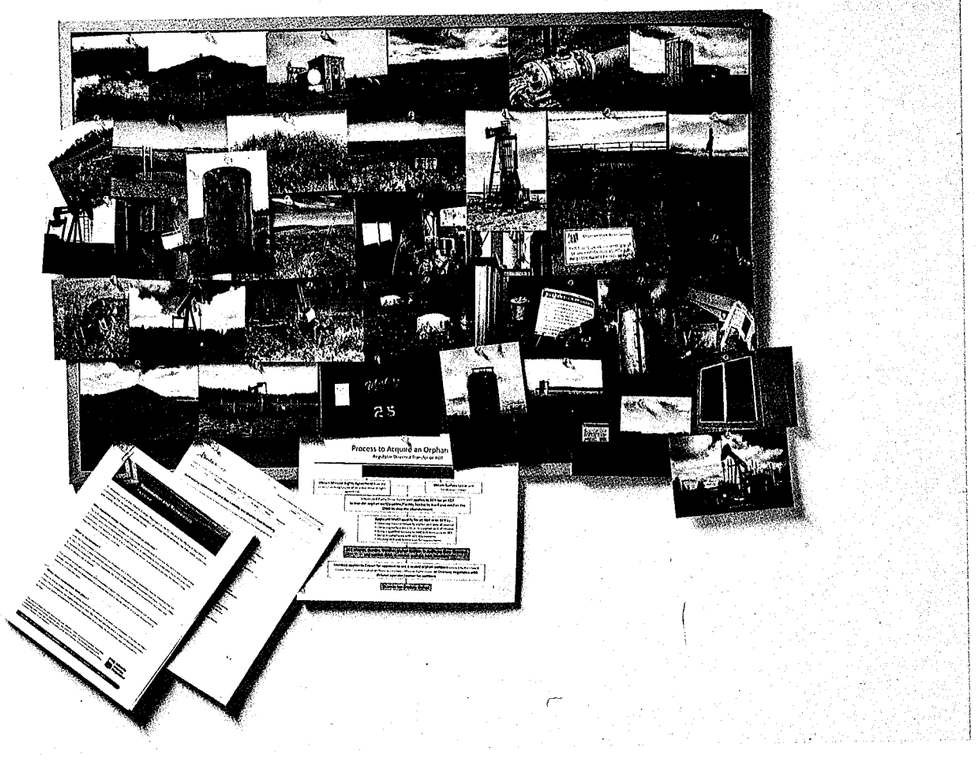
While investigating the impacts of about the present and futures of coal quickly turned relevant. On one of her visits to the Greenhill site that summer, Bartol stumbled upon the road leading to the proposed site of the Grassy Mountain Coal Project: an open-pit metallurgical coal mine backed by Australian-owned Benga Mining Limited, and which was under review by a joint panel formed between Canada's environment minister and the Alberta Energy Regulator at the time. If approved, the project promised to produce 4.5 million tonnes of coal annually over a period of 25 years. In the past, coal mining mostly took place underground, but in recent decades, invasive open-pit mines on top of mountains have become commonplace. With the failures to remediate past mining ever-present in the land and waters, Bartol thought about what such a project would mean for the Oldman Watershed. "You can't restore soil after you remove it. You can't restore a mountain after you literally take the top off it. And you're not going to restore the vegetation. You're not going to restore all the complexity of that landscape." What's more, just a few weeks prior that spring, the United Conservative Party of Alberta had revoked a 1976 Coal Policy that banned open-pit coal mining in parts of the Rockies region of the province.

Through her blog writing and in the exhibition at the University of Lethbridge, Bartol offered educational entry points to the proposed Grassy Mountain project, inviting visitors to consider the future of coal in the region. Within the installation were QR codes that linked to the websites of activist groups and reading material about the proposed open-pit mine, amplifying the fight. Thanks to the tireless activism and educational campaigns of many organizations and community members—including the significant leadership of the Niitsítapi Water Protectors, a grassroots collective from the Blackfoot Confederacy on whose traditional and treaty lands the project was being proposed, as well as Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society's Southern Alberta Chapter and the Livingstone Landowners Group—the proposal was successfully denied in June 2021. Cries for the urgent elimination of coal as a fossil fuel and in steel-making operations continue to be voiced. Although the 1976 Coal Policy was reinstated in February 2021 following mounting public disapproval, the relative ease with which it came down remains a concern for areas like Crowsnest Pass and the communities who live within their watersheds.

To further resist the symbols of death found throughout the Pass as well as the settler-colonial narrative that sacrifice zones are endemic for human econo-

region's ecosystem and its life forms. Plants teach us many things about countering extraction, perhaps most importantly how to be in relationship—the first step of remediation. In learning about how profoundly the grasslands ecology of the Pass has been disrupted, Bartol noted that native plants grew sparsely at the sites. She enlisted Latifa Pelletier-Ahmed—an artist, botanist, herbalist, and co-owner of ALCLA Native Plants in so-called Calgary with whom Bartol collaborates to create educational plant walks in the city—and the two created *Seeds for Grassy Mountain* (2020–ongoing) to encourage the restoration of these native species. The project assembled over 400 wild-collected seeds of plants native to the Grassy Mountain region, or historically known to grow there, into packets for the exhibition's visitors to take away and plant. Packets with different pairings of fireweed, fringed sage, meadowsweet, paintbrush, prickly wild rose, Rocky Mountain fescue, silky and silvery lupine, yarrow, and more were presented in a coal core storage box from the Greenhill Complex marked "GM" for Grassy Mountain, repurposed here as a vessel for renewal. The artists hoped the seeds would help exhibition visitors "to create a connection to Grassy Mountain and think about how we can connect with damaged landscapes."[6] The project also became a way for both collaborators to do so, building relationships with these native plants and learning from each other's knowledge of them.

Bartol's interactions with introduced plant species during her fieldwork—which (unlike native plants) thrived at the abandoned mines—also taught her about the work of remediation. She particularly noticed the presence of mullein in the Pass, their tall flowered rod at times literally growing from coal slag. As with de Bertereau and the witch, the story of mullein abounds in contradictions. Introduced to North America by way of European settlers, the plant has had many uses in recent centuries—including as a torch for miners underground, as a fish poison, and as a medicine for human ailments. What intrigued Bartol most by mullein's growth at the sites was their potential role as phytoremediators there—a theory supported by scientific studies about mullein's capacities to heal the soil as a hyperaccumulator of heavy metals.[7] Enthralled by the notion "that plants can extract contaminants from soil"—literally countering extraction—she wondered to what degree the plant was contributing to remediation. In the three-minute video titled after one of mullein's many names, *Hag's Taper* (2020), the witch's hand holds a dried torch burning



Alana Bartol, *Orphan Well Adoption Agency (office)*, 2018, bulletin board, 60.96 cm x 91.44 cm; installation view from "Orphan Well Adoption Agency," 2018–19, Latitude 53, Edmonton
PHOTO: ADAM WALDRON-BLAIN; © ALANA BARTOL; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND VIVIANEART, CALGARY

Alana Bartol, *Hags Taper*, 2020, video still, 3 min
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND THE CANADIAN FILMMAKERS DISTRIBUTION CENTRE, TORONTO

that threatens to disrupt an ecosystem, the witch may also be ritually honouring those who lost their lives in the Pass, or incanting a spell summoning the plant's power to help heal the land's extractive wounds.

When I ask Bartol what remediation means to her, she brings it back to relationship-building and an ethic of reciprocity. "In order to restore, remediate, it's all about understanding that we are in a biodiverse world [and that] we are all constantly in relation with everything around us." In more recent projects that broke ground during the pandemic, Bartol fortifies her collaborations to do this work. In *Remediation Room* (2021–2022), she took on a curatorial role to bring together the work of six artists[8] who proposed remediation strategies from within the province to jointly counter the Alberta government's Canadian Energy Centre campaign (referred to as the Energy War Room) that aggressively promotes rampant extraction. And, as a member of the Fathom Sounds collective,[9] Bartol contributes to the group's ongoing research about human relationships with endangered watersheds in so-called British Columbia and their shared reflections on the vitality of water. Overall, Bartol's understanding of collaboration is expansive, and it's not just humans that inform the work, but the plants, the sites, and also the dead. Practicing dowsing not as a search for the potential of extraction, Bartol uses it to ask questions with her collaborators in pursuit of agents of remediation. When you take heed, listening with your whole body, you start

Valérie Frappier is a white French-Canadian settler who grew up in so-called Ontario between Lake Simcoe and Lake Ontario. She is an independent writer and curator who is curious about how artists utilize embodied creative practice to engage with memory, historical narratives, and the more-than-human, and how these engagements create alternative entry points in understanding our relationships to place.

ENDNOTES

1 In the industry, a well becomes orphaned when the company who owns it goes bankrupt and cannot take care of its reclamation and remediation.

2 The starting point to discussing alternatives to extractivism in this exhibition was Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's definition of it being "deep reciprocity. It's respect, it's relationship, it's responsibility, and it's local," in Naomi Klein, "Dancing the World into Being: A Conversation with Idle No More's Leanne Simpson," *YES! Magazine*, March 6, 2013, www.yesmagazine.org/social-justice/2013/03/06/dancing-the-world-into-being-a-conversation-with-idle-no-more-leanne-simpson

3 "Groundworking: A conversation with Alana Bartol, Ileana Hernandez Camacho, and Tsēmā, moderated by Valérie Frappier," March 15, 2021, https://criticaldistance.ca/assets/2021/07/Groundwork_Conversation-with-Artists.pdf

4 Alana Bartol, video call with author, April 7, 2022. Unattributed insights that

5 These include the 1903 Frank Slide, where a landslide buried part of the Frank mining town, killing over 90 people, as well as the 1914 Hillcrest Mine Disaster, caused by an underground explosion which killed 189 of the workers in the mine.

6 Alana Bartol, "Seeds for Grassy Mountain," *Dowsing and Digging* (blog), www.dowsinganddigging.com/post/seeds-for-grassy-mountain

7 Alana Bartol, "Greenhill Mining Complex: 'It's Yours' | Part 2," www.dowsinganddigging.com/post/greenhill-mining-complex-it-s-yours-part-2

8 Christina Battle, Tamara Lee-Anne Cardinal, Rita McKeough, Nurgül Rodriguez, and Mia Rushton and Eric Moschopedis.

9 The collective is composed of artists Kat G Morris, Genevieve Robertson, Nancy Tam, and Jay White, along with Bartol.

Trickle Down