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Abstract: Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas’s recent art installations, which re-purpose car hoods, doors, fenders, sunroof deflectors, and gas cap lids, re-cast normative notions of value by transforming the remnants of automobile manufacturing into singular works of art. Blurring categories of animate and inanimate, natural and manufactured, traditional and post-industrial, Yahgulanaas’s automobile art is informed by a Haida-specific ecology in which elements like copper are seen as possessing a vital energy. His works further reference Haida economics in which copper shields accrued social, material, and metaphysical value through their circulation and destruction. More than an act of ecological remediation, Yahgulanaas’s salvage art unbinds his materials from capitalist determinations of value and utility. This essay traces the different cultural notions of value operating in Yahgulanaas’s installations and the broader ontological implications of his works.
Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas’s recent art installations, which re-purpose automobile parts, re-cast normative notions of value by transforming the remnants of consumer culture and one of the most consumption-driven industries in particular, automobile manufacturing, into singular works of art. Yahgulanaas’s use of car hoods, doors, fenders, sunroof deflectors, and gas cap lids in *Pedal to the Meddle, Coppers from the Hood, Flappes,* and *Take Off* diverts his materials from their paths of scrap and waste. Even while trading on the automobile’s aesthetic appeal and symbolic power, Yahgulanaas re-creates his materials into forms independent of their originary object. By re-circulating these materials as Indigenous art within museum and gallery spaces, Yahgulanaas tropes on the salvage ethnographic paradigm that once determined the category of Indigenous art. Yahgulanaas’s works do more, though, than respond to the spatial politics of the museum and the purchase that museological practices have had over Indigenous material cultures. Blurring categories of animate and inanimate, natural and manufactured, traditional and post-industrial, Yahgulanaas’s automobile art is informed by a Haida-specific ecology in which elements like copper are seen as possessing a vital energy. His works further reference Haida economics in which copper shields accrued social, material, and metaphysical value through their circulation and destruction. More than an act of ecological remediation, Yahgulanaas’s salvage art unbinds his materials from capitalist determinations of value and utility. In what follows, I trace the different cultural notions of value operating in Yahgulanaas’s installations and the broader ontological implications of his works.
I became interested in Yahgulanaas’s installations while writing a book on representations of mobility in Indigenous literature and visual art. The appearance of the disaggregated car parts in *Pedal to the Meddle*, *Coppers from the Hood*, *Flappes*, and *Take Off*, projects that Yaghulanaas created between 2007 and 2013, struck me for their clever choice of the automobile as a literal medium to explore value, waste, and ecological remediation. Even more compelling were the multiple cultural systems simultaneously invoked by each installation, a bundling that draws on a Haida cultural framework while referencing capitalist systems of circulation and (depleted) value. Yahgulanaas’s art radically challenges his audience’s perceptions of the non-human world as resource, object, or mere backdrop for human activity. By revealing a dynamic life of his materials, Yahgulanaas models a different way of seeing the other-than-human world. While Yahgulanaas has long been a voice for protecting ecological biodiversity in his artistic, activist, and political work, these installations surprise and disarm audiences with how far they take the idea of life in the vitality his materials acquire. In his use of automobile parts, Yahgulanaas further challenges his audiences to think about what this reconceptualization of the non-human has to do with automotive infrastructures and everyday habits. Yahgulanaas’s installations ultimately compel viewers to see the so-called material world through different eyes and to recognize an interconnectedness emblematized in the Haida expression, *Ginn ḵwaadluwaan gud7ahl Kwaagiidang*, “Everything depends on everything else.”

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1I define “ecology” as the field of interactions among species and the environment—acknowledging that the lines drawn around such categories are themselves contentious and culturally variable. I am hesitant to define “ecology” any more concretely than this because the terms that would ineluctably figure in such a definition—human, non-
Yahgulanaas’s *Pedal to the Meddle* consists of a Pontiac Firefly re-finished in onyx argillite dust and copper leaf with a Bill Reid cedar canoe suspended above its roof (image 1). The staging of its exhibition created the impression of the car speeding away with the valuable museum-owned canoe. In its ornate and traditional crafting, the human, life, nature, the environment—are, in my view, too porous to hold up under the weight of the structuralist logic behind such categories.

The Haida ecology to which I refer is also far too complex to describe in a footnote or to address comprehensively in an essay of this scope. I would point to Haida narratives for a deeper encounter with the full dimensions of Haida ecology and the cosmological vision behind it. As just one example, the epic transformer-trickster story, “Raven Travelling,” illustrates the formal play between colors, shapes, species, worlds, and environmental patterns that I foreground in my discussion of Yahgulanaas’s installations.


canoe represents the category of cultural objects most coveted by museums for emblematizing Northwest Coast Indigenous art. Next to the repurposed Pontiac Firefly whose mass production and kitsch modifications might render it less culturally authentic in the context of the museum, the iconic canoe stands in marked contrast. However, the cedar canoe is more than a museum-fetishized object: as a previous technology of automobility, the canoe tacitly questions the replacement of ecologically sustainable modes of transportation with destructive mobility industries. The graceful stealth of the canoe overshadows the diminutive (and fiercely overcompensating) Firefly that appears almost as an absurd foil.

Despite these obvious contrasts, this binary is too neat for describing Yahgulanaas’s oeuvre that has consistently challenged notions of “modern” and “tradition.” The ease of their pairing and their visual harmony suggest that these modes of mobility figure more as homologous relations to each other as opposed to foils—as two iterations of technological invention rather than two points on a linear axis of technological evolution. Pedal to the Meddle invites recognition that these two objects do not have to be bound by categories of pre-industrial and modern. In fact, the installation disrupts a diachronic notion of technological evolution. Firefly’s manufacturer, Pontiac, bears the namesake of the eighteenth-century Odawa political leader who led a sustained military revolt against the British.3 The car in Pedal to the Meddle is thus overlaid with various cultural signifiers, including argillite, copper, and Haida imagery that indigenize it. In Yahgulanaas’s
treatment, the car is as much a Haida object as a post-industrial one. Indeed, Yahgulanaas’s art makes it clear that such categories should not exist in opposition to each other.

Yahgulanaas’s challenge to notions of tradition and authenticity shouldn’t be surprising, given that Haida material practices, including those aesthetics and forms often regarded by museum-goers and collector-audiences as “traditional,” have never been static. Haida art forms, like Indigenous material cultures generally, transformed and changed in response to shifting economic and social contexts. Yahgulanaas’s great-grandfather, celebrated Northwest Coast artist Charles Edenshaw, was admired for his masterful incorporation of traditional Haida stories in his work, but Edenshaw also distinguished himself by interweaving and overlapping cultural influences in ways that revitalized his art. Over time, Edenshaw’s argillite platters, boxes, model poles, and bracelets expanded into new forms like canes, American emblems, and non-indigenous animals like elephants, lions, and snakes. This interfusing of older practices with emerging subject matter is a method that Yahgulanaas continues in his installations, many of which use the locally-sourced Haida-Gwaii argillite seen in Edenshaw’s works. Yahgulanaas incorporates familiar Haida narratives and imagery, but his visual work also expands into new territory with an artistic innovation that he dubs “Haida manga.” Haida manga, which Yahgulanaas describes in a YouTube video interview as “art

5 Ibid.
without borders,” is a transpacific aesthetic hybrid that borrows elements from Japanese manga (particularly its representation of human forms) while also using Haida formlines that push the narrative outside of a contained frame. Time and space are completely re-imagined in ways that leave the viewer with “no proper horizon,” as Yahgulanaas puts it, or without any discernable point of orientation. Haida manga decorates the surfaces of the automobile parts in Yahgulanaas’s installations, making the car a medium for Haida visual storytelling. Yahgulanaas describes the interpretive experience of “reading” his Haida manga as a different way of discovering the world—a fitting description for these larger installations that transform everyday, overdetermined materials from car parts into something alive and uncanny.


7 The formlines of Yahgulanaas’s Haida manga offer a different narrative ordering than Euro-American comic-book traditions. The “frames,” which often separate each moment of sequential action in a linear way, are in Yahgulanaas’s adaptation the “gutters,” which conventionally are the spaces between frames. This observation could also be reversed: the gutters could be considered the frames of Yaghulanaas’s narratives. Yahgulanaas’s formlines transform frames and gutters into coeval and intercalated sequential phenomena. His narratives are also organized by spatial rather than temporal contours in a way that departs from the heavy serialized format of Japanese manga.

8 Ibid.
Image 2. Stolen But Recovered. Photograph by Alex Waterhouse-Hayward. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

Continuing this challenge to notions of authenticity and tradition, Coppers from the Hood is a series of Toyota Tercel car hoods burnished with copper leaf and painted with Manga-inspired Haida images similar to those seen in Pedal to the Medal (image 2). The hood forms resemble the torso-shaped copper shields that once circulated among Northwest Coast Indigenous nations in potlatch ceremonies. Yahgulanaas’s use of copper is a nod to copper’s traditional significance as a marker of wealth among the Haida and other Northwest Coast Indigenous people. The re-cast hoods in this installation thus reference multiple economies at once: the heirloom copper shields, once a form of wealth, have now taken the form of a car in a substitution of one form of “bling” with another.9 While Coppers from the Hood may be read as a commentary on how previous objects of wealth have now been replaced with the allure of flashy new cars and trucks, Yahgulanaas’s strategic use of scrap automobile parts—the depreciated hoods of Toyota Tercel cars—complicates this reading. A car or truck may symbolize social and economic status, but a hood from an old model of Tercel conjures a different value. That is to say, while the hoods might nod to the car as status symbol, the car materials used by Yahgulanaas exist in fragmented and salvage form. In a potlatch

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economy, the coppers became more valuable in their destruction\textsuperscript{10} and accrued worth as they aged. In sharp contrast to this cultural framework, the scrap parts that Yahgulanaas sourced for his installations were regarded as automotive cast-offs, severed from their peak-value in the original assemblage of the car. Yet, in recontextualizing these scrap parts within his installation art, Yahgulanaas takes these materials out of their circulation in a capitalist economy. He encodes them with a value that is not just aesthetic but continuous with a Haida economy. This Haida economy, and the attendant ontology that informs it, is fundamental to understanding Yaghulanaas’s use of copper in many of his installations.

In a Haida ecological and economic framework (the two should not be seen as separable), copper is seen as a form of life. When I say that the ecological and economic are co-constitutive, I mean that the ecological and economic are fields of perception that mutually shape each other. In capitalist society, for instance, determinations of value structure human perceptions of the environment, particularly in relation to the non-human (animals, “resources,” natural habitats). Anthropologist David Graeber observes in his discussion of Northwest Coast Indigenous societies: “Coppers were the ultimate repository of value and, of all forms of forms of wealth, the one that came nearest to representing life in the raw.”\textsuperscript{11} Copper’s perceived animacy might account for the torso-

\textsuperscript{10} Georges Bataille, \textit{The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy; Volume I: Consumption} (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 68. This destruction—either by fire, breaking, or being tossed in the ocean—was a performance of sacrifice.

\textsuperscript{11} David Graeber, \textit{Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams} (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 206,
like shapes of the copper shields. Yahgulanaas pushes this likeness between copper and human forms further in his later series, *Under the Hood*, a display of copper hoods that resemble female genitalia. Among many Northwest Coast First Nations, copper possessed a vital energy. A deceased Tsimshian chief would be honoured by breaking a copper shield; the pieces represented “as the metaphoric *bones* [italics in the original] of the deceased.” In its colour, copper was also closely associated with salmon, blood (the Kwakwaka’wakw name for copper, *tlaq*, also meant “blood”), and cedar. Cedar was similarly seen as an animate force. This ecological imaginary informs Yahgulanaas installations, which similarly expand our notions of life and re-frame our relationships the non-human world.

Fig. 3. Take Off. Photography by Gunter Marx.


Yahgulanaas’s work places his viewer in a radically different ecological, economic, and ontological worldview that not only challenges Western normative constructions of animate and inanimate but also mystifies categories of organic and inorganic, natural and manufactured. This interest in the vitality of matter is evident in *Take Off*, a large outdoor sculptural work commissioned for the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics (image 3). Replicating a bird taking flight from water, *Take Off* features Volvo fenders and a Volvo door in its construction. One of the most striking features about the installation is its sense of movement. The car parts inflect the sculpture with their aerodynamic form and their former function as instruments of mobility, while the installation, in turn, re-mobilizes the Volvo door and fenders that morph into an organic form of a mallard duck.\(^\text{14}\) Within the installation, the car parts do not entirely lose their referential connection to automotive manufacturing and consumer fetishism, but they acquire a life beyond this capitalist determination. As Arjun Appadurai observes in *The Social Life of Things*, the commodity phase of an object is just one stage in its life; this phase does not exhaust an object’s whole biography.\(^\text{15}\) In decommoditizing these automobile parts, Yahgulanaas reveals an object’s social and ontological possibilities beyond its capitalist trajectory. Materialism, in the context of late capitalism, often equates to a form of anti-materialism. That is, in a capitalist economy, the thing is never just the thing itself: its

\(^{14}\) Ibid.

value is accumulated through processes of labour and exchange; its significance derives in its fungibility with other desires and affects.

As Jane Bennett argues in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, an object’s autonomy—its agentive capacities and its material persistence that outlives humans—is never fully recognized within a consumption-driven economy. “The sheer volume of commodities,” she points out, “and the hyperconsumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, conceals the vitality of matter.” Bennett’s contribution to new materialism, which obviates neat divisions between life and matter, shines a theoretical light on the reappraisals offered in Yaghulanaas’s work. Her project seeks to overcome capitalist habits of consumption and schemes of perception that reduce the material world to its instrumental use by humans. In *Take Off*, the Volvo fenders and door archive a capitalist economic system, but that economic structure exists as only one of the various cultural economies of value in the work.

A variation on similar theme as *Take Off* and *Coppers from the Hood*, *Flappes* is a series of gas cap lids and sunroof deflectors gilded in copper leaf and painted with abstract images. *Flappes*’s use of automobile parts, whose links to fossil fuel dependencies, extractive industries, and toxic ecologies introduce an obvious ecological

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register to these art pieces, is a powerful act of salvage that models a different affective relationship to materials around us, including the by-products of the automotive industry that exit our field of social vision upon their disuse. Yahgulanaas’s process of recovering these relinquished car parts is an ecological and ethical gesture that, like Steven J. Jackson’s theorization of repair, takes as its starting point “erosion, breakdown, and decay, rather than novelty, growth, and progress.” An information and technology scholar, Jackson approaches repair not just as an everyday practice, but as a “standpoint epistemology” that offers “a different response to the longstanding problem of commodity fetishism.” His reflections on a repair-centred ethics mark an important intervention in the reluctance of consumer-driven societies—and the theoretical and intellectual work that happens in them—to fully engage the afterlife of the commodity. While car parts may not be considered “garbage” in the same sense as the stuff of landfills and dumpsters (given the existence of ancillary markets for automobile parts and scrap metal), automotive materials constitute an especially pernicious category of waste; indeed, their accumulation and environmental


19 Ibid., 230
contamination present a host of profoundly troubling ecological challenges.\textsuperscript{20} With this ecological awareness in mind, one might read \textit{Flappes}—which began by using gas cap doors as its primary medium before proceeding to sunroof deflectors—as enacting a movement from fossil fuels to solar energy. Lending further evidence to this reading, Yahghulanaas notes in his website description of “Flappe 2013-06-10”: “As of June, 2013, I understand that all the unused gas cap lid doors available from Nissan in North America and Japan are exhausted.”\textsuperscript{21} Emphasizing the non-renewable supply of one of his materials, this statement obliquely points to another non-renewable resource closely associated with the gas flaps, fossil fuels. Yahgulanaas’s decades-long involvement with the Haida Gwaii’s protests against oil tanker traffic, logging, and cedar deforestation informs his artistic work and the sustainable ecologies explored within it. In taking automobile parts as its focal medium, \textit{Flappes} contemplates sustainable energy sources in an extension of Yahgulanaas’s political work and activism.

While the car parts in Yahgulanaas’s installations function as an embedded critique of the ecological price of automotive culture, Yahgulanaas also admits his


attraction to these materials for their form and beauty. He notes “the elegant little sweep” of the Volvo front fender that he used in his public sculpture, *Take Off*. Similarly, he describes his “fascination with the undulating line” of the Toyota Tercel hoods selected for his *Coppers from the Hood* series. From the Latin *tarsus*, “Tercel” translates as “smoothly elegant” and “polished,” a meaning that seems fitting for the understated elegance of the hoods that is enhanced by their display as individual art pieces. The car’s complex symbolism—its aesthetic and affective power—partly inspire Yahgulanaas’s use of automobile materials in his installations. At the same time, his art signifies more than an act of making something beautiful out of something discarded and environmentally harmful. In Yahgulanaas’ work, salvaging objects is about

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discovering or restoring their vibrancy, a vitality suggested in the title of one his copper hoods, “Terse Cell.”

Yahgulanaas’s automobile art ushers his viewers into a different ontological field where one begins see his materials apart from their signification within a capitalist economy. Disassembling the car physically and symbolically, Yahgulanaas breaks down structural boundaries between life and matter and re-frames his materials in ways that illuminate a more ethical relationship to the material world. His installations reference multiple systems of valuation, often simultaneously. The Bill Reid canoe suspended above the Pontiac Firefly in Pedal to the Meddle is an example of these multiply operating economies. Reid’s canoe appears on the Canadian twenty-dollar bill, making it literal currency in addition to cultural currency. By cultural currency, I mean the canoe’s appropriation by nationalist imagery (its appearance on a Canadian banknote) as well as its iconic status as Haida art. Yahgulanaas’s works leverage different cultural economies of value often through visual and verbal punning. “Stolen But Recovered,” one of Yahgulanaas’s copper hoods, gets its name from a police note found on the hood that read, “stolen but recovered.”

Although this inscription references the theft of a car, this title also obliquely refers to another type of theft—the plundering of Northwest Coast cultural artifacts for museum trafficking. Referring to multiple economies at once—rapacious consumerism, museum fetishism, hot cars, settler-colonial theft, copper heirloom crests—works like “Stolen But Recovered” also leave the viewer to think about

the life of the metal hood that will survive all these cultural structures, along with the carbon and pollutant deposits that will live on with it.

   Automobile parts thus emerge as a fitting medium for Yahgulanaas’s installations, which transport their audiences through different frames of value and culturally-informed ecologies. As metonyms of the car’s passage over the often-arbitrary threshold from use to disuse, from desirability to abject waste, the parts bear the traces of a capitalist cultural economy in which value is determined and relinquished. Creating his own economy out of creative acts of salvage, Yahgulanass remobilizes materials destined for a landfill. As I think about how much mobility emerges as a central focus of these installations and my treatment of them—the audience’s conveyance through different frames of value, the motion of materials through different cultural systems of signification, and the sense of movement that Yahgulanaas’s installations evoke even in their fixed place—my thoughts turn here in the final sentences of this analysis to the immobilities created by automotive culture. I mean not only the social and economic inequalities that discussions of mobility justice have taken up, but also the immobility of trash. Our affective, imaginative, creative, and ethical energies are rarely directed to cars no longer on the road, largely because the materiality of our waste is removed from our field of social vision. Referring to the ontological and ecological imaginary that drives his work, Yahgulanaas remarked, “We need to be honest about who we are in terms of relationship to that which is around us.”26 I would agree, adding that we need to be

honest about our relationship to that which *isn’t* around us, or that which is pushed from our sight so that it cannot move us.

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