Paul's Turn: Re-imagining Art From the Entropic Remains of Visual Form

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Abstract

After exhibiting the work *Untitled (Rust)* at the Annex Gallery in Glasgow (part of the *Field Notes* exhibition, 2025) I was invited to contribute work to the publication *Do Rocks Remember Lava* by curator Leo Hajducki. Her interdisciplinary research draws on a background in philosophy and politics, exploring the intersections of materiality and ecological thought. My response to this invitation was an eight-page visual essay describing the research process around a current project *Paul's Turn* where rust material from Anthony Caro's sculpture *Paul's Turn* (1971) had been transformed into ink. The visual essay included photographs describing the research journey from harvesting rust in the Hunterian sculpture courtyard at Glasgow University where the work is displayed, to ink making, then printing. The final two printed images are displayed on the last pages of the essay – *Paul's Turn* (a photo etching) and *These Words* (a printed text). These images face each other in conversation, referencing the original sculpture from which they are printed, creating space between image and text. Using an ecological perspective I will discuss this practice-led research to address questions of agency, authorship and conservation.

Keywords: sculpture, rust, conservation, ecology, entropy

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Introduction

Figure 1
The Sculpture Courtyard at the Hunterian Gallery in Glasgow

"Objects have an ego, and this ego is fragile". (Morton, 2013, p. 209)

This paper describes a research journey intuited through creative practice. It is informed by Object-Oriented Ontology (Morton, Harman) but follows an ecological approach (DeSilvey, Bennett, Szendy, Rubio) foregrounding material processes in relation to their environment. Methods included harvesting rust, ink making, drawing, writing and printmaking with rust-based ink. Sir Anthony Caro's sculpture *Paul's Turn* (1971) was the focus of attention due to its heavily corroded steel body. This work had been located outdoors in the Hunterian sculpture courtyard at Glasgow University since 1982, when it was loaned by the artist (see Figure 1). Through close observation and repeated visits over many years, it was clear to see that the rusty brown outer layers were slowly bleeding[1] into the ground with small pieces falling away like scabs. The work was being undermined by its environment.[2] So began a careful process of harvesting the fallen rust (see Figure 2). This instinctive response came from a morbid fascination for the state of the work, mixed with a sense of disbelief for what was present. This feeling developed into a growing sense of responsibility to answer the following research questions:

- Why didn't Caro protect *Paul's Turn* and how did he anticipate the future of this work beyond his own lifetime?
- When fragments start falling off a sculpture, at what point does the art object lose its material integrity and identity?
- What can we learn from the process of entropy in terms of agency, authorship and conservation?

[1] In his book *Rust*, Jean-Michel Rabaté states that "There is oxidation of iron in the blood stream, even if the specific chemical bonds at work between iron and oxygen in blood are not identical with the bonds generating common rust". p.63. Bloomsbury (2018).
[2] For ecocritical art history perspectives see Smith O. & Patrizio A. (Eds.), *Methods For Ecocritical Art History* (2026) Manchester University Press.

- As an art practitioner, what opportunities are there to work *with* the process of entropy to question conventional art history methods which neglect environmental factors such as weather and weathering?

These questions were given fresh impetus following an invitation by curator Leo Hajducki to contribute work to her upcoming publication *Do Rocks Remember Lava.*[3] Hajducki's interdisciplinary research explores the intersections of materiality and ecological thought. These themes resonated with my work *Untitled (Rust),* a photoetching depicting part of a steel fence, so heavily corroded, that it had nearly disappeared in places. Using rust collected from the same fence, oil-based ink was produced to print the fence image. Through this circular or reflective process, the print becomes a ghost image, representing the gap between object and thing. According to Fernando Dominguez Rubio "Things should be understood as material processes that unfold over time, while objects are the positions to which those things are subsumed in order to participate in different regimes of value and meaning" (Rubio, 2019, p. 166). Hajducki had seen this work at the Annex Gallery in Glasgow, during the *Field Notes* exhibition.[4] She encouraged me to share my current fascination with *Paul's Turn* in the form of a visual essay describing the practice-led research process which used material from Caro's sculpture as a starting point.

Figure 2

Fragments of Rust Collected From the Hunterian Sculpture Courtyard 14/8/24

[3] Further information can be found here: https://radar.gsa.ac.uk/10382/

[4] This work formed part of the *Practicing Landscape: Field Notes* exhibition (22nd April – 16th May, 2025) in the Annex Gallery, Stow Building (GSA). It was initiated by curator James N. Hutchinson who invited the *Reading Landscape* research group to respond to the site both inside and gallery and beyond it. For more details visit https://radar.gsa.ac.uk/10315/

Art *Not* Environment

In 1972 Anthony Caro, a key figure in twentieth century art, was asked by Phyllis Tuchman[5] to consider his sculpture indoors and outdoors. He responded by saying:

> Of course there are some wrong settings for sculpture. Just as it would be meaningless to play a quartet in a marketplace so there are some quite unsuitable sites for certain sculptures. I prefer my sculpture to be seen in a tranquil and enclosed space. Almost all sculpture, I guess, needs to be indoors – or enclosed in some way; it mostly blows away if it's in the open air, or else it becomes environment.

Caro was no doubt, referring to the way work could become lost aesthetically in open spaces, rather than suggesting the work completely breaking down through corrosion.

He would often paint his work in vivid colours to stand out from its environment, like *Month of May* (1963) which is bright pink, orange and green. Although these industrial finishes would protect the steel, this wasn't his primary motivation. He might be credited for helping sculpture come off the plinth, but he still valued sculptures sense of separation, as Dave Hickey intimates in his essay *The economies of surprise:*

> When sited out of doors, these unpainted works blur into their settings. They lose their lightness and abstract potential and take on an un-Caroesque aura of naturalised, Greenbergian modernism. Or so it has always seemed to me, who never comes upon an early unpainted Caro out of doors without being overcome by a desire to take it inside or, even worse, to paint it monochrome. (Hickey, 2005, p. 134)

Caro was interested in rust more as a colour and less as an active agent within his work. He wanted visual separation between his work and their environment and colour helped achieve this. Some sculptures like *Bailey* (1971) made in the same year as *Paul's Turn*, were even painted a rust brown colour. Caro explored a full colour palette in his work of this period and although the painted surface inhibited actual rust taking hold, it wasn't painted for this reason. Although there are some examples of Caro allowing the steel surface to rust more fully, he usually attempted to control the level of rust with oil or varnish. Seldom were these types of work left outdoors intentionally for long periods of time.

Heavy Metal and Rust

When Herbert Read spoke of a "New Iron Age" (Read, 1964, p. 237) in sculpture in 1964, he did so because of its prevalence and durability over emerging synthetic materials like plastic:

> It is true that latterly industry's dependence on natural metals has been challenged by the invention of various synthetic materials, a development which artists have also noticed and exploited; but metals such as bronze, steel, iron and aluminium remain the characteristic materials of our civilization and have decisive virtues for sculpture – they can be cut, welded, moulded, cast, polished or patinated, and the final result has a durability that exceeds all but the hardest stones. (Read, 1964, p. 240)

[5] Tuchman P. p. 116-117, An *Interview with Anthony Caro Anthony Caro*, Penguin books (1974) Richard Whelan. (ed.)

Read's enthusiasm for metal and his optimism for its durability seem overstated when considering *Paul's Turn*. But he goes even further when describing the submissive and obedient qualities of metal which jar with current theories around art and New Materialism: Read states that "metal is so docile that it will submit to any formal conception the sculptor may have, and it is this adaptability that explains its present general use" (Read, 1964, p. 247). These comments suggest a fallacy of permanence and a false confidence regarding the artists omnipotent control over materials. The idea that the work remains static is implicit within these remarks. The folly of this outlook is clear in the sculpture courtyard at the Hunterian Gallery where rust forms a common thread running through many of the other works, including *Grave Gate* (1981) by Fred Bushe, *Aje* (1982) by Jeff Lowe and *Noon* (1978) by Gavin Scobie. All three sculptures are heavily corroded, but whereas Scobie's work is made of Cor-ten steel, engineered to develop a protective layer of rust, the works of Lowe and Bushe are made of mild steel which can be weakened to breaking point over time. Lowe's work is heavily corroded despite being zinc plated for protection. In Peterborough in 2025, *Lagoon* (1976/7) another Caro sculpture of similar scale to *Paul's Turn,* was eventually returned to the Key Theatre following conservation work due to weathering[6] and graffiti. This sculpture is not even as old as *Paul's Turn* and according to the title label was even oiled for protection.[7]

In *The Language of Sculpture,* William Tucker[8] suggests that one word captured the aspirations of modernism and that word was "object" (Tucker, 1974, p. 107). According to critic Michael Fried, Caro's work transcended mere "objecthood",[9] but as an object in the world, *Paul's Turn* still needed protection, especially given its outdoor location. Paul Moorhouse describes how Caro's work in the early 1970's "renews and intensifies its interrogation of the boundary with the world of real objects: simultaneously testing and maintaining the line of separation" (Moorhouse, 2005, p. 59). Caro might allow rust to form on the surface of some sculptures, attempting to fix this point of transition with oil or varnish. But with *Paul's Turn* this balance collapsed and Fried's conception of "presentness" – work that "compels us to believe what we see rather than what we know" (Fried, 1974, p. 100) is gone. Instead, the accumulation of rust from more than forty years outdoors in the Glaswegian weather reminds us of the works temporal and spatial history. As Timothy Morton says: "this is what happens when you die – you become your environment" (Morton, 2013, p. 220).

Playing With Shadows

Iron-brown stains marking the white pebbles beneath *Paul's Turn* (1971) revealed the slow but steady process of solid steel becoming liquid. This observation by the author suggested the potential for the collected rusty fragments to become ink. A suitable water-based ink was created[10] from which drawings were made of the sculpture in situ. Special attention was given to the shadows cast by the sculpture. These initial drawings manifested further ideas in language. Text including "THESE WORDS USED TO BE SCULPTURE" was painted on paper. These early sketches and scrawls were a prelude to further developments in print.

[6] See online report https://nenepark.org.uk/news/lagoon-sculpture-restored-thank-to-funding/ "*Lagoon*, the artwork by sculptor Anthony Caro, is located outside The Key Theatre in the City Centre and is part of the city-wide Peterborough Sculpture Collection. The funding has allowed conservation specialists Hall Conservation Ltd. to carry out essential repairs caused by graffiti and weathering". (29/9/25)

[7] On a visit to the Caro Centre (10/7/26) Ben Caro confirmed that the artist had gained a better understanding of how to use oil to preserve the rust on his work by the late 1970's and was using Owatrol, an industrial grade oil.

[8] Tucker was a student of Anthony Caro at Central Saint Martins.

[9] See Michael Fried's critique of minimalist sculpture in various essays including *Art and Objecthood*.

[10] Iron gall ink was made with rust and crushed oak galls boiled together in water. Oak galls are found on oak trees and are a reaction to the invasion of parasitic wasp eggs.

Crushing rust fragments into fine powder using a glass muller an oil-based ink was produced. The same text was then composed in the case room at Glasgow School of Art (see Figure 3). Whilst making these prints an important observation was made. The "print furniture," small metal structures used to space the individual lines of text, resembled miniature steel "I" or "H" beams used by Caro in his sculpture. An impromptu model of *Paul's Turn* was quickly assembled using these pieces. A photograph was taken which was later turned into a photoetching printed with the same ink (see Figure 4). The visual essay featured in *Do Rocks Remember Lava* included documentation of all these works, as well as the process of making the prints, producing ink and gathering rust. The final two images displayed on the last pages of the essay face each other in conversation: *Paul's Turn*, the photo etching and *These Words*, the printed text. Caro's original sculpture is clearly referenced but notable in its absence. All that remains are visual reminders and material traces of its past; ghosts or shadows of the original.

In his book *Towards an Ecology of Images,* Peter Szendy traces the history of the shadow, exploring the concept of "iconomy" to describe the invisible economy supporting the digital image industry (Szendy, 2025). In the context of *Paul's Turn* shadow works might be understood as analogue images composed of the very material which devours the object referred to in the image. Speaking directly and simultaneously of absence *and* presence, shadow works make a physical link between matter and subject. Subject/matter in this instance speak *not* of a hidden economy, but allude instead to those neglected environmental forces producing the rust the image is dependent on. If the photoetching *Untitled (Rust)* simply depicts a heavily corroded fence outside the Annex Galley, then *Paul's Turn* (2025) quietly probes the modernist fantasy of art separate from its environment. Rust is irrefutable evidence of material agency operating in this this overlapping realm (Bennett, 2010).

Figure 3
Printed Text Made Using Oil-Based Ink With Rust From "Paul's Turn" (1971)

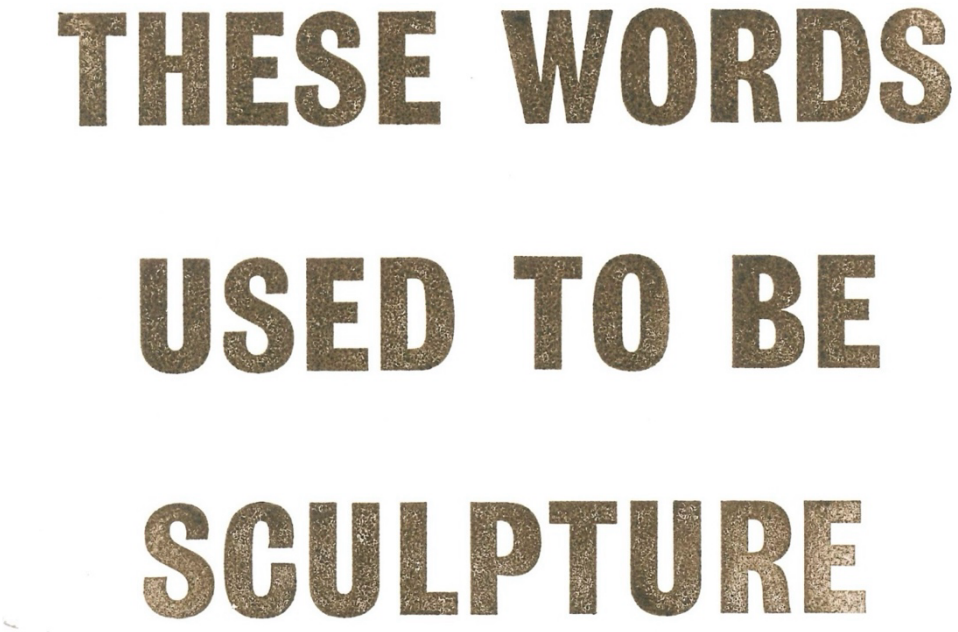

Figure 4
Photoetching of Sculptural Model Assembled in the Case Room Workshop Printed With Ink Made From Rust Harvested From "Paul's Turn" (1971)

Alongside these primary, practice-based activities in ink making and printing, a letter was written to the Anthony Caro Centre using ink from the work, alerting Paul Caro[11] (director) to

[11] Paul Caro is Anthony Caros youngest son and probably the referent to the title 'Paul's Turn' (1971).

the poor condition of the sculpture, "slowly returning to the earth".[12] There was no response.[13] Emails were also sent to staff at the Hunterian to share my practice-based research. Responses acknowledged the conservation issues with *Paul's Turn* and commented favourably on the printed works. Then, several months later the sculpture was suddenly removed following a visit by the Anthony Caro Centre.[14] This decisive action suggested a point had been reached where the integrity of the art object was considered compromised. Slippage from object to thing was underway and the work suddenly disappeared with no explanation to visitors. All that remained of the physical object were the familiar brown stains on the ground, more rusty fragments, three large rusty bolts and a matching nut.[15] The removal of *Paul's Turn* helps us imagine the work through the lens of anticipatory history (DeSilvey, 2011) a work distinct in its absence. All that remains in the distant future would be brown shadowy stains on the ground. Eventually these too would be gone, the work returned to the earth. If *rocks remember lava*, as Leo Hajducki would have it, then perhaps iron stone recalls ore too?

Ghost From the Archive

On 10th June 2026 the author had a meeting with Hunterian curator Dr. Lola Sánchez-Jáuregui Alpanes following a string of emails enquiring as to the whereabouts of *Paul's Turn.* Alpanes explained that a conservation plan had been decided with the Caro Centre. She also provided access to a folder containing historic documentation relating to *Paul's Turn*, mainly original correspondence between the artist and former Museum Deputy Director, Christopher J Allan. These letters, photographs and notes revealed answers to some of the research questions laid out at the beginning of this paper, particularly those relating to the works condition. But there were notable absences too, such as any formal contract between artist and institution or condition reports for the sculpture. What follows is a summary of the findings from these documents:

In a letter to Anthony Caro dated 23rd April 1982, Christopher Allan states: "We should be delighted if you were able to lend something to the University, perhaps for a year from this September". This somewhat casual arrangement, that the work might be on loan for just a year, goes some way to explain how badly the work corroded after more than forty years at the mercy of Glasgow's formidable weather. According to another letter to Caro dated 8th October 1982, Christopher Allan explains how the weather had been a factor even during the installation process:

[12] Taken from letter sent to Paul Caro 1/10/24. It is worth noting that The Joseph Black building at Glasgow University, which is located just 150m from the Hunterian, sits on top of old mine works. In 1948 a newly built wall collapsed to reveal the entrance to disused coal mines. The entrance is still accessible via the building's sub-basement and was used until recently for Geology field trips.

[13] However on 3/10/25 the author did receive a personal invitation from the Anthony Caro Centre to the exhibition *That Feeling of being alive, of jumping, dancing almost*.

[14] In a later email dated 8/7/26 Dr. Lola Sánchez-Jáuregui Alpanes explained the exact sequence of events from her perspective: "Ben Caro came over and met with me in November 2023 to see the sculpture. We then discussed the situation and agreed on a plan to remove and conserve the sculpture. Following that Anthony Caro Foundation Studio Manager's visited the Hunterian in December 2023 to check the conservation conditions of Paul's Turn and make an assessment. The sculpture was finally removed in May 2025".

[15] These were probably used to connect the sculpture together as letters describe how it came apart to be transported and moved into the sculpture courtyard. These remnants were treated as waste by the Hunterian and the Anthony Caro Centre, material without value and viewed as distinct from Caro's work. This underlies the absence of any ethical transgression on the behalf of the author who harvested rust only when it was separated from the sculpture.

> *Paul's Turn* arrived safely and was erected last Tuesday. I am sorry for the last minute rush in finalising a collection date which am sure prevented Pat Cunningham from making the preparation he would have wished. Because the weather has been so bad we were forced to erect the sculpture rather quickly and there is still work to be done on descaling the rust and varnishing.

This suggestion that the work was already rusting and might be varnished raises more questions about intended finishes and future maintenance and upkeep of the steel and further questions still about whether these intentions were shared more widely with gallery staff. This question is underlined by the fact that the title plate displayed by the Hunterian Gallery simply had the word "steel" listed under materials, not "rusted steel" or "steel, varnished" or "steel, oiled".

In another letter written on 8th May 1982, Caro explains to Allan why *Paul's Turn* would be a suitable choice for the courtyard:

> Paul's Turn has the bulk, strength and openness to stand up to the sturdy architecture around it, and if well placed, refurbished and oiled, I think it will look good in your courtyard. It can also be broken down into pieces and dismantled.

This mention of the work being oiled is crucial in understanding the heavy corrosion of the work. Oiling the work would have helped protect the metal from rust and the absence of oil on the material list for the work is puzzling. Even if the work had been oiled, the challenging Glaswegian weather, known for its high levels of rain and humidity, would have created too much rust for oil to be a viable, long-term option.

On 23rd April 1982 Christopher Allan even warns Caro:

> One further point should be borne in mind – the courtyard is during the winter subjected to quite high winds, on occasion 50–70 miles an hour, and these can come in quick succession from several different directions because of the figuration of the University Library.

The architecture might have created the illusion of an enclosed, protective space, but it was probably more of a contributing factor in the works decline. Given the short duration of the loan proposed by Allan, Caro seemed to have given more consideration to the aesthetic qualities of the brutalist architecture[16] when suggesting a suitable work, rather than foregrounding the detrimental impacts of environment and weathering.

Architects and designers use the term "shadow gap" to describe a small intentional space left between wall and floor, disguising any discrepancies between these two surfaces. Shadow gaps hide inconsistencies to create the illusion of perfection, promoting confidence and authority. However, "the interstitial space between things is not a blank void. In fact, it's charged with meaning, even causality" (Morton, 2013, p. 209). New Materialist practices which view the world through an ecological lens, linger in these shadow spaces to reveal different narratives not exposed on the gallery wall. *Shadow works* whisper stories original objects have no memory of – they *become* that memory.

[16] Sir William Whitfield (1920-2019) was the architect of both the Hunterian Art Gallery and the University Library.

Conclusion

This paper relates to the ontology of objects, exploring object identity, value, and fragility. These areas are brought into sharp focus within the gallery context where material is carefully arranged in order that "Objects tell stories".[17] The gallery environment impacts our appreciation and understanding of art objects by confirming status and constructing meaning. In the case of *Paul's Turn* the specific gallery environment negatively impacted the stability of that object. As Fernando Dominguez Rubio states in his essay *On the discrepancy between objects and things*, it takes a huge effort, often by teams of invisible workers; conservators, technicians, art handlers, curators and others, to preserve and stabilise things as objects. When an object does break down, a gap opens-up between object and thing. As a work loaned from an artist who died in 2013, the sculpture "in limbo" brought with it additional layers of complexity.

Since its installation at the Hunterian sculpture courtyard in 1982, the untold story of *Paul's Turn* (1971) is one of rust. The combined forces of weather and material agency usurped any clearly documented conservation plan intended for the work. In some ways *Paul's Turn* (1971) was probably a victim of the artists own success. Anthony Caros meteoric rise in Britain, Europe and America in the early 1970's increased the challenge of recording and managing his exceptional output which was being produced and exhibited in multiple locations. What we know with some certainty is that the specific gallery environment of the Hunterian sculpture courtyard had a fundamental impact on the stability and integrity of the sculptural object. In this instance Caro appeared to have seen the sculpture courtyard more as an architectural backdrop, less as an *environment* with agentive powers. As a short-term loan stretching beyond a casually agreed time frame, the process of entropy was so gradual that changes were either unnoticed, unquestioned, or slowly accepted. The absence of any formal contract or condition reports helped to undermine the work further until its removal in May 2025 became necessary for significant conservation work to be undertaken.

In her book *Curated Decay*, Caitlin DeSilvey suggests:

> It is perhaps unlikely that a shift towards curated decay will displace the preservation paradigm anytime soon, but there may be opportunities to use the ideas in this book to frame experiments that work with abandonment and to stage ephemeral interventions that respond to moments of flux or change. (DeSilvey, 2017, p. 187)

These Words (2025) and *Pauls Turn* (2025) are practical responses to this suggestion. These new works on paper capture the imperceptible movement of material away from the sculptural object over time, marking its changing identity. *Shadow works* draw attention back to the original sculpture offering new critical insights.

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[17] *Objects Tell Stories* is also the name given to a current funding information leaflet produced and circulated by the Hunterian, encouraging visitors to donate money.

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