

Adaptation

Hannah Fox

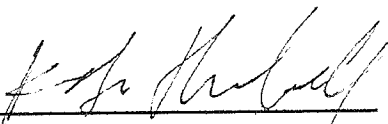
Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of fine Arts in Visual Art and Public Life
in the Herron School of Art and Design
Indiana University

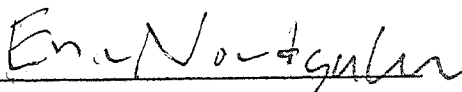
May 2018


Adaptation

By
Hannah Fox
Master of Fine Arts


Herron School of Art and Design
IUPUI
Indiana University


Assistant Professor Katie Hudnall
Advisor


Professor Eric Nordgulen
Committee Member


Professor Jean Robertson
Committee Member

Accepted:


Professor Valerie Eickmeier
Dean of Herron School of Art and Design

5-17-18
Date

Introduction

At the core of humanity is a driving force to create and change our environments to better suit our liking. In this century, the need for hand-making in the developed world is becoming obsolete. As privileged Americans we no longer need to make utilitarian objects using these processes to stay warm or even to survive. Everything we “need” is mass produced in factories we will never visit, by machines most of us could not even begin to operate or comprehend. The most abundant of these commodities are made from plastic. An entirely unnatural and man-made material, plastic is used and discarded at a rate unmatched by almost any other substance.¹ My thesis work utilizes recycled material, specifically polypropylene biohazard bags, to identify the destructive realities of human waste and consumption in contemporary society. By confronting viewers with grotesque overwhelming forms of melted plastic the work is a rumination on human adaptation to technologically-driven wasteful consumerist life in the 21st century.

On a personal level the work provides a coping mechanism for these realities through a mindful and meditative process of making. Working in repetitious processes rooted in the ancient feminine techniques of crochet and weaving, a state of meditation can be achieved to calm the overactive, anxious mind. In a sense, the culminating work is the use of process and material as a means to adapt to the reality of life in the Anthropocene.

¹ Heather Davis, “Life & Death in the Anthropocene: A Short History of Plastic,” in *Art in the Anthropocene*, ed. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 348-9.

Crocheting in the Anthropocene

Humans are the most wasteful beings on planet Earth. Any commodity, object, or otherwise an American could need or want is mass produced and sold at a profit. Meanwhile the objects no longer in use are cast off into landfills with no regard for the impact on wildlife or the environment. The human species currently consumes the planet's resources at one and half times that which can be produced at a sustainable rate.² Wasteful human consumption has led to the current geological age known as the Anthropocene, in which human beings have had more of an impact than any other force acting on the planet. This has resulted in irreversible damage to the environment and caused the sixth mass extinction.³ As Heather Davis eloquently summarizes, in essence we are living in an "era in which the extractivist logic and capitalist economics have drastically reshaped the chemical, geological, and biospheric conditions of the Earth."⁴ The reality that humans have been destroying the natural resources and ecosystems that miraculously and randomly occurred on this planet to create and sustain life is one of the many issues that relentlessly plague my anxious mind.⁵ The true wasteful nature of humanity became increasingly omnipresent last

² Christophe Bonneuil, and Jean-Baptiste Fresoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2017, 6.

³ Joseph Stromberg, "What Is the Anthropocene and Are We in It?" Smithsonian.com. January 2013. Accessed October 2016. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-is-the-anthropocene-and-are-we-in-it-164801414/>.

⁴ Heather Davis, "Life & Death in the Anthropocene: A Short History of Plastic," in *Art in the Anthropocene*, ed. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 348.

⁵ Specifically, my diagnosis of mental illness; a combination of depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder, of which I take medication for daily.

year when I began working with recycled ethernet cable. An item of technology that came into wide ranging use only around twenty years ago, but due to the quick progression of technology, the cable is becoming obsolete, and most often thrown into a landfill.

From Recycle Force over sixty pounds of ethernet cable was procured for less than five dollars.⁶ The organization charged the going rate for copper, which at the time was seven cents a pound. Most of the cable was completely undamaged, some was brand new and still in the original plastic packaging.⁷ Working with the cable in slow meditative crochet, the true wasteful nature of humanity became prevalent. The desire to reuse the material, but also to understand how easily humans discard “obsolete” technologies, was the driving force behind the slow-moving crochet process of my ethernet cable piece.

Continuing to use the process of crochet, the large-scale installation *Permanence//Impermanence* was composed of fifteen crocheted copper wire cocoon-like hollow forms suspended from the ceiling. Inside each “cocoon” was encased a specific object of personal and global significance. A few of these included: vintage sutures which represented the human right to medical care, a clump of my own hair representing my own anxieties surrounding beauty and appearance, an old tintype photo of a boy representing the human desire to learn of one’s heritage and home, and twelve more explicit objects. Each crocheted “cocoon” represents the process as a meditation enveloping the object, its

⁶ Recycle Force is an organization in Indianapolis that employs former convicts and the otherwise “unemployable” to recycle broken and obsolete technology ranging from old televisions to last year’s model of smart phone. However, to recycle much of the metal within the objects they must first melt away the plastic, which then usually gets thrown in to a landfill. Recycleforce.org.

⁷ The cost of buying this amount of ethernet cable brand new would be over \$200 from Amazon.

personal and universal significance. As Betsey Greer explains so elegantly in her essay *Craftivist History*, “The combination of getting benefit from both process and product allowed me to further my thoughts on craft, making the eventual connection from gentle craft to activist craft inevitable, seeing that as my hands were busy stitching, my mind was free to wander.”⁸

The *Permanence//Impermanence* installation became a starting point for meditating on the traditionally “feminine” and “craft” based processes to encapsulate found and/or recycled objects, recall memory, create objects, and clear the mind. As most of the stressors that weigh heavily on my mind are related to global concerns specifically surrounding the Anthropocene,⁹ it is only evident that I, as one person with an over-active mind, can quiet these fears and anxieties by engaging in wholly personal acts of repetitive textile processes. Even though the pieces may not be utilitarian objects for safety and survival purposes, the work engages in the same processes used globally by the first human ancestors who began knotting as a means to survive. As Rozsika Parker suggests, although a position that appears submissive, the bowed head and shoulders of the needle worker is a posture that, “contains within it a hint of autonomy and self-containment at odds with any complete

⁸ Betsey Greer, “Craftivist History,” in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 176.

⁹ Including but not limited to, the disappearance of the Andean ice cover in Peru in the last twenty-five years, acidification of the oceans by twenty-six per cent, the rate of extinction of species being increased to 1,000 times the geological norm, humans and their livestock taking up ninety-seven per cent of the biomass inhabited by vertebrates, and twenty per cent of Earth’s species to disappear by 2030. Christophe Bonneuil, and Jean-Baptiste Fresoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2017, 6-7.

subjugation.”¹⁰ In view of this there is a connection from my work to generations of makers in my own familial history, as well as the abundant history of women and humans as creators.¹¹



Hannah Fox, *Permanence//Impermanence* (installation view), mixed media, dimensions variable, 2017

¹⁰ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (New York: Routledge 1989), 10.

¹¹ My family heritage consists of Irish immigrants and Native American on both sides. My great-grandmother on my mother's side made all their family's clothing by hand-sewing and crocheting. I inherited all her sewing and crocheting supplies.

Gentle Interaction Encouraged

As well as referencing the connection to humanity's past as makers, the work connects to the present-day audience through interaction, touch, and smell. For the *Permanence//Impermanence* installation the crocheted forms were suspended at

approximately eye level, and viewers were invited to gently interact, touch, investigate, and move between the objects. As such the entire atmosphere around the suspended pieces changed as people begin to interact with them, study them, blow on them, and fully engage. The installation



Hannah Fox, *Permanence//Impermanence* (tintype detail), mixed media, dimensions variable, 2017

became more of an *environment* than a purely sterile work that is essentially fully removed from the viewer. Even more powerful than being afforded the opportunity to interact through touch, is the element of scent. A strong smell can transport a person through memory and time in an instant.

With that in mind, I encased an apple that was slowly decaying as well as a piece of *palo santo*, a sacred Brazilian wood used like a sage smudge to purify the energy of a space. These combined smells, the woody incense-like smell of the *palo santo*, and the sweet sickly decaying smell of the apple, gave the sense of an *environment* rather than an *installation*.

Each time the pieces were on display viewers commented on the power of the scent, how it transported them and reminded them of specific memories.

The vaguely human figure of *Untitled: Tangle Series I* was formed by utilizing over twenty pounds of tangled parachute chord, *Untitled: Tangle Series II* was made using



Hannah Fox, *Untitled: Tangle Series I*, parachute cord, dimensions variable, 2017

second-hand musty polypropylene macramé cord, and *Insecurity Blanket* was constructed using the exterior and interior of a tattered vintage quilt, as well as rusty scrap expanded steel. These materials were procured at little to no cost and were likely headed to a landfill. As with the *Permanence//Impermanence* installation, all three of these pieces emitted their own specific scents. Both *Untitled: Tangle Series* pieces had the smell of musty textiles, and *Insecurity Blanket* had a combined aroma of coffee, musty blanket, and burnt wool. One

viewer described the smell as transporting and reminding him of fond times in his friend's basement while growing up.

As well as scent and material, another cohesive element is the capability of all three pieces to be installed and displayed in a variety of configurations. Since the pieces are not so tightly bound by the conventions of crochet, weaving, or knotting, the work can be manipulated in an abundance of ways to fit into different spaces. Each time the *Untitled:*

Tangle Series has been shown the incarnations appeared different from their original display. From these pieces, it became evident that the work is best displayed intuitively in a space to create increasingly more immersive installations. As such, these works are site-responsive.



Hannah Fox, *Insecurity Blanket V. I and V. II*, vintage quilt and batting, expanded steel, mixed media, dimensions variable, 2018

Creating an Immersive Recycled Plastic Environment

The idea of fully immersive installations, reuse of discarded materials, and working intuitively in a space to calm the anxious over-active mind has led to the culminating thesis

work. Although I suffered the great misfortune of breaking a bone in my right wrist,¹² this work combines the repetitive nature of textiles, with the more site-responsive and gestural qualities of the *Tangle Series* and *Insecurity Blanket* pieces.

During a trip to the IUPUI campus surplus three large boxes overflowing with plastic biohazard bags, such as one would see in a hospital or at a doctor's office were procured for this work. There was nothing apparently wrong with these bags but still they were available for an incredibly cheap price.¹³ When leaving the surplus building one of the employees said, "Biohazard bags are not technically allowed on IUPUI campus." This was confusing and astounding. When asked for an explanation, he could not give one. This sent my mind racing. Why were these bags being thrown away? Had they passed their "expiration" dates? Do plastic bags have an expiration date? Should they not be incinerated as medical waste? Why are specifically marked plastic bags not allowed on campus, even if they did not contain biohazardous waste and were not being used in their intended medical practice?

Plastics that humans have and continue to deposit into the Earth's ecosystems are compounding to form new types of rock. Millions of years from now if the rock deposits of the Anthropocene are examined, the millions of tons of plastics that humans have discarded will still be present.¹⁴ If all the art and beauty that has been created by humans is destroyed,

¹² The break required surgery involving placing a permanent flex-screw into my wrist to secure the bone properly. The total healing time will be over a year. As such, I was unable to crochet, weave, or sew for four months. During this time, I discovered the processes I would later use to produce the thesis work with melted plastic. These processes using a light weight heat gun are done easily with either hand and were less strenuous on my wrist during the long healing time.

¹³ As with the ethernet cord used in previous work, some of the bags were still sealed in unopened plastic casing.

it is almost certain that our waste will survive instead. This reality is, of course, very troubling. Plastic is a wholly synthetic human creation, intrinsically “the invention and proliferation of plastics was driven less by a need to develop new technologies... than to simply replace the objects we already had – but at a price and in a quantity that helped to instantiate a middle class defined by consumption.”¹⁵ In the year 2012 two-hundred and eighty million tons of plastic were produced worldwide, and by the year 2050, the number is expected to increase to thirty-three billion tons annually.¹⁶

By melting the bags with the heat gun on low and high heat settings, while wearing leather gloves, a respirator, and safety goggles in a well-ventilated space, I can freely manipulate the plastic into organic melted shapes.¹⁷ The plastics easily melt together and hold stiffly, so the use of an armature is not necessary. Because of my familiarity with working in fabric I am able to make the pieces



Hannah Fox, *Autoclaved Environment (detail)*, reclaimed polypropylene biohazard bags, dimensions variable, 2018

¹⁴ Christophe Bonneuil, and Jean-Baptiste Fresoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2017, 13.

¹⁵ Heather Davis, “Life & Death in the Anthropocene: A Short History of Plastic,” in *Art in the Anthropocene*, ed. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 349.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 349.

¹⁷ The fumes that exude from the melting plastic are extremely toxic for a short period of time. Anyone working near me I also encouraged to wear respiratory protection.

flow together almost seamlessly. The result is a mass of bright orange and red plastics, with biohazard icons appearing and disappearing within the folds, creating almost tumor-like forms. Since the heat gun is small in size and produces concentrated heat, certain parts can be melted while leaving others untouched. This gives full control over the appearance, except what the plastic does spontaneously when melted. The mixture of full control and spontaneous plastic melting is at once challenging and calming.



Hannah Fox, *Autoclaved Environment (detail)*, reclaimed polypropylene biohazard bags, dimensions variable, 2018

Once inside the gallery I was able to work with and combine various smaller pre-made pieces, as well as create new forms, and the work began to grow and intuitively encapsulate the area. Like the previous work, *Autoclaved Environment* is a site-responsive installation. Vast forms overwhelm and hang from the ceiling, extend to the walls, and fall to the floor. The lighting is purposefully harsh, and from directly above the intricately interconnected plastic forms. The viewer is thus cast in red and orange light that appears to

emanate from the forms themselves, and vast shadows play upon the walls and floor. The scent of totally artificial plastic is heavy in the space as well. The result is a totally immersive experience.



Hannah Fox, *Potentially Hazardous Material (installation view of print series and Autoclaved Environment)*, reclaimed polypropylene biohazard bags, letterpress prints, dimensions variable, 2018.

The contradiction of organic form and artificial material in the culminating thesis installation confronts the viewer with the destructive realities of human waste and consumption in contemporary society and their effects on the planet. On a personal level, this work provided an outlet rooted in traditional craft processes to ruminate on the realities of life in the Anthropocene. The product is an immersive site-responsive installation utilizing my practice which is founded in repurposing and reusing that which is easily discarded by humans. The ultimate effect is a strident commentary on life in a technologically-driven wasteful consumerist age.



Hannah Fox, *Potentially Hazardous Material* (installation view of print series and *Autoclaved Environment*), reclaimed polypropylene biohazard bags, letterpress prints, dimensions variable, 2018.

Works Cited

- Bonneuil, Christophe, and Jean-Baptiste Fresoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*. (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2017).
- Davis, Heather, "Life & Death in the Anthropocene: A Short History of Plastic," in *Art in the Anthropocene*, ed. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015).
- Greer, Betsey, "Craftivist History," in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
- Parker, Rozsika, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (New York: Routledge 1989).
- Stromberg, Joseph, "What Is the Anthropocene and Are We in It?" Smithsonian.com. January 2013. Accessed October 2016. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-is-the-anthropocene-and-are-we-in-it-164801414/>.