IMAGINING AND MATERIAL IMMEDIACY

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A THESIS ESSAY SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF APPLIED ARTS in Visual Arts

EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY OF ART + DESIGN 2014

ABSTRACT

Through sculptural explorations using everyday objects and materials, my work investigates the potential for social transformation through material explorations in art. Drawing on strategies found in both art and design, I explore connections between material culture and the social ideals of a larger collective. Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch refers to the goal of utopia as "being-here". I aim to address being-here through a sculptural exploration of the objects and things that are ready-at-hand in my immediate surroundings. Using combinations of handmade and readymade objects, I'm interested in relationships between the individual hand and larger industrial systems. By exploring relationships between individuals and collectives through sculptural objects and installation, my work aims to reframe utopianism in a contemporary context, acknowledging a world in which materials might also act as agents. Through this work I intend to make a critical intervention using a material practice to address issues of sustainability, and a broader range of problems including social and economic alienation.

Materials are full of quiet, unknown potential, both hopeful and unsettling. Political theorist Jane Bennett describes the material stuff of life as "vibrant matter". I'm interested in this notion of the vitality of materials, and through my art practice I explore the possibility that matter may have unseen agencies and a greater impact than we readily acknowledge. How might objects be considered as subjects, and what larger ramifications might this shift in perspective have? By participating in material enquiries, I examine the relationship between utopian imagining and the immediacy of materials, aiming to question late capitalist models of consumption and excess. Drawing on various strategies including idea-led, material-led, and use-what-you've-got approaches to making, my work poses questions about the possibility of creating "embodied utopias", in which idealism merges with the lived experience of the body. My thesis research explores being-here with materials, by which I mean: exploring my desire for an ideal state of being, in dialogue with a shifting, continually transforming relationship with materials.

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(All photographs by Leah Weinstein unless otherwise noted.)

INTRODUCTION

What is the function of art? In *The Reenchantment of Art*, art critic Suzi Gablik argues that art should respond to the needs of the world, not be isolated from them, as Modernism tried to do by depoliticizing and insulating aesthetic concerns (Gablik 100). What, then, are the needs of the world, and how can art help us to understand this? Perhaps one of the greatest needs of our time is addressing the alienation of the individual—alienation from the larger collective and the context of the planetary whole. Judith Brown states that according to Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, "the only problem of how we are to know ourselves is the same as the world problem"; the "only problem" is the relationship between (and reconciliation of) the self and the greater "we" (Brown). My work attempts to address relationships between the individual and the collective, and between bodies and materials. Through sculpture (including relational garments, collective shelters, and hyper-functional objects), I'm interested in exploring agency in a complex world, one that is troubled by questions of late capitalism and consumer-culture, issues of environmental sustainability, globalization, and individual and communal experience.

As a mixed media sculptor, I use conceptual and material strategies to respond to contemporary issues such as late capitalism, utopian communities (and their dystopian underbellies), environmental sustainability and the body. My methods of making include: idea-led, material-led, and use-what-you've-got ways of working. These approaches overlap, drawing on different modes of thinking and making that I bridge within my practice. The idea-led method involves starting with sketches, working through ideas to imagine how form meets function, with the intention of designing and constructing prototypes for imagined uses. The material-led method is a more recent way of working for me, in which I start with the materials themselves, often including readymade objects and everyday, ready-at-hand things from my immediate environment. This method involves allowing form to unfold in an intuitive process rather than from a predetermined concept. The use-what-you've-got method involves using materials that are immediately available in my everyday surroundings. I'm calling these

three overlapping modes "imagining" (a preconceived concept/ideal), "material immediacy" (an exploration of materials and "being-here", a term that I will define later), and "the everyday". In this thesis paper I will explore these interrelated modes of making and thinking within my practice, while connecting to a larger context and influence of historical and contemporary artists and theorists.

Familiar, everyday objects and materials, gathered from hardware stores, alleyways, cupboard shelves, thrift stores and fabric stores are an integral part of my work. Some of the objects I use are branded and recognizable, reflecting a globalized world of commerce, while others are more generic or nondescript. Some use electricity, some are tools meant for another purpose. All are repurposed as art (in a Duchampian gesture), while still hovering in the realm of potential utility. These materials and readymade objects are common and familiar—things we might have experience with in our daily lives already, but here we see them in a change of context. Their sense of familiarity is important, serving to blur the lines between art and life, highlighting the uncertain relationship that contemporary art has set up between "art" and "not art". From wearables (the closest you can get to a body without entering the body) to architecture, I'm interested in locating the viewer's body in relation to familiar objects and materials, while evoking a sense of imagined possibility with these things in order to suggest potential (unknown) outcomes. Exploring spaces where design and art overlap, I am interested in what lies between utopian solutionism and the problematic underbellies of materials in the present moment (the here and now in all of its beauty and horror). Through my work I consider the pressing issues we face today, not to solve them necessarily, but to reframe them as a way to examine their complexity.

The artists and historical art movements that I'm influenced by approach their work from one or all of these perspectives (utopian imagining, material immediacy, and the everyday). Utopian imagining can be seen in historical movements such as the Russian Constructivists, who attempted to bridge art with design using utopian strategies to provide material, solution-oriented frameworks around the problems of their time (industrialization and capitalism). I will also look at specific projects that explore utopian imagining, including

Situationist International member Constant Nieuwenhuys' *New Babylon Project,* which includes architectural models that don't consider real bodies in real space, and contemporary artist Andrea Zittels' functional *Living Units* that are made for actual use. Material immediacy and the everyday are evident in the works of contemporary artists Sarah Sze and Thomas Hirschhorn, whose sculptural installations evoke an embodied immediacy and sense of "being-here," as well as, in the case of Hirschhorn, a disregard for solution-oriented thinking in art. My approach to making is influenced by all of these: visionary utopian proposals attempting to merge art with design, micro-utopian ideals that take a more embodied approach, and more formal, sculptural work that takes a direct and immediate approach to materials, creating form without attempting to solve problems. Engaged with the edges between dichotomies (design and art; utopia and embodiment; total and fragment; imagining and material immediacy) my practice ultimately explores the everyday. In this thesis paper I will examine my work through these various lenses, discussing how these ideas converge in my graduate work.

Chapter one: CONCEPT

Problems and solutions: Relationships between art and design

In this section I will discuss the overlap between art and design. These disciplines generally approach problems and solutions in different ways, but there are disciplines where they meet, such as the field of Critical Design. I will discuss what I refer to as an idea-led approach, elaborating on how it can be seen within my own practice. I will then go on to discuss problems and solution-oriented approaches in relation to imagining/utopia, and dystopia/embodied utopia, before moving on to materials in chapter two.

The primary function of design is to provide solutions to problems (Rand 34). However, in addition to countless solutions, designed objects and industrial systems also provide countless new problems, many of which are only visible in the aftermath of their use. While the function of design is generally agreed upon (as providing solutions to problems), the function of art, on the other hand, is less clear, and is constantly being redefined by individual artists in response to the times and circumstances in which they live. According to Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn, art should not offer solutions, but rather, give form to problems. While Hirschhorns' view of the role of art differs from Gabliks' (who believes that art should respond to the needs of the world, rather than reflect problems), both Hirschhorn and Gablik point to art's role in addressing or highlighting problems.

While designers generally approach problems with a sense of expected improvement, artists often take a critical stance. Whether through optimism or criticality, there is a similar aim of effecting or instigating some kind of transformative change through these practices, although the methods can differ. While designers usually work from final drawings, which designer Norman Potter calls "the point of no return" (Potter 30), artists often work through a process of development with materials or media. That said, there are countless exceptions to this generalization, and many artists and designers work in ways that blur boundaries between

the disciplines. My art practice rejects a separation of these disciplines, rather, combining methods from both fields in order to address contemporary issues of material consumption and excess. Drawing on both art and design methods, I approach creative practice with a diverse and adaptable toolkit, challenging the hierarchies we establish and assumptions we make about disciplinary divisions in order to respond to my immediate environment in innovative ways. I believe that the larger social and environmental problems we are faced with today require such a multi-disciplinary approach.

An example of this multi-disciplinary approach can be seen in *Lampvest* (fig. 1 and fig. 2), which was part of a series of wearable works (which I also called "furniture clothing") that I created in 2012-2013. Blurring the lines between art and design, this hybrid object is made from a combination of materials and readymade objects designed to increase its functionality, creating a kind of hyper-functionality. Through this work I explore the way in which attempted solutions (like adding the additional function of a lamp to a vest) can in turn provide new sets of problems (such as awkward mobility).

I had a specific idea in mind when I set out to make this *Lampvest*: it would have a pull-switch, be powered by a small, inconspicuous battery pack, and the lamp would sit in a certain position above the shoulder, which required a structural armature. I created it as I'd originally planned it; all of the weight was in the vision rather than the material exploration. This is important to note because it highlights its starting point as an idea-led approach, as opposed to a material-led approach, which I see as relating to materials differently. In an idea-led approach, the planned drawings are "the point of no return" (Potter 30). In this approach, the materials have little agency, rather, the concept is what drives the form. I relate this "preconceived form" way of working to a design approach because it envisions an imagined ideal and then draws that ideal into the present. Through this way of working I'm attempting to offer semi-practical solutions to unexpected or unlikely problems, such as the need to have a reading lamp on one's shoulder, or a pillow incorporated into a jacket. I consider this approach to be "solution-oriented" because there is an ideal outcome planned from the outset, and the design

serves to solve a problem. While striving toward this ideal outcome, the work also ends up problematizing or questioning a solution-oriented mindset through its hyper-functionality that instead ends up hampering its proposed solution. In this way it demonstrates the absurdity of the broader problems I address.

Fig. 1 Leah Weinstein. *LampVest*, 2012

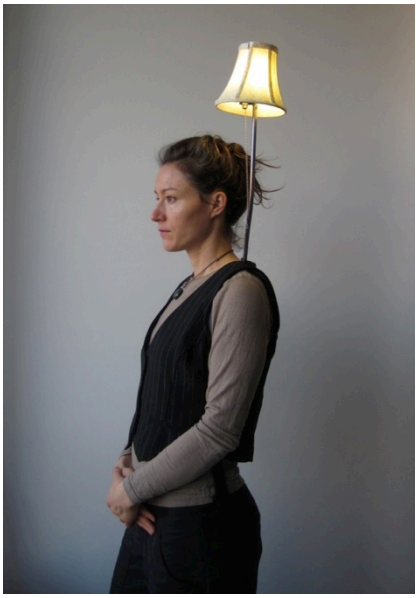

Fig. 2 Leah Weinstein. *LampVest*, 2012

Drawing on design methods, I adapt materials to concept—selecting things to match the vision. This way of working starts with an idea (usually for an imagined utility or perceived problem) that I work out through drawings. From the refined drawing I build a prototype, then create a pattern from the prototype, and finally, create a finished work from the pattern. This method explores materials through a preconceived image or ideal. Usually the object is designed for an imagined utility (such as shelter, garment, or light source), and as an object through which to discover new utilities.

An example of a fusion between art and design methods can be seen in the field of Critical Design. This approach uses designed objects through which to critique contemporary consumer culture and to provoke new ways of thinking about objects and their uses. London-based design studio Dunne & Raby have based their practice around this methodology (in fact they coined the term Critical Design), asking such questions as:

"What happens when you decouple design from the marketplace, when rather than making technology sexy, easy to use and more consumable, designers use the language of design to pose questions, entertain, and provoke—to transport our imaginations into parallel but possible worlds?" (Dunne & Raby). As seen in fig. 3 and fig. 4, this approach to design can look more like art, as it produces objects that function *beyond* function. Rather than solving problems, these objects bring awareness to our relationships with them, their use, and the larger context or environment they function within. Although rooted in design, this approach is unlike design in the sense that its function is more conceptual than practical, contemplating existing cultural values rather than producing objects to satisfy those values. I consider my own methodology in similar terms: drawing on design means, but not for design ends, allowing the methods and methodologies of both art and design to influence and inspire the other, so as to think outside of disciplinary boxes in order to address the complexity of problems today.

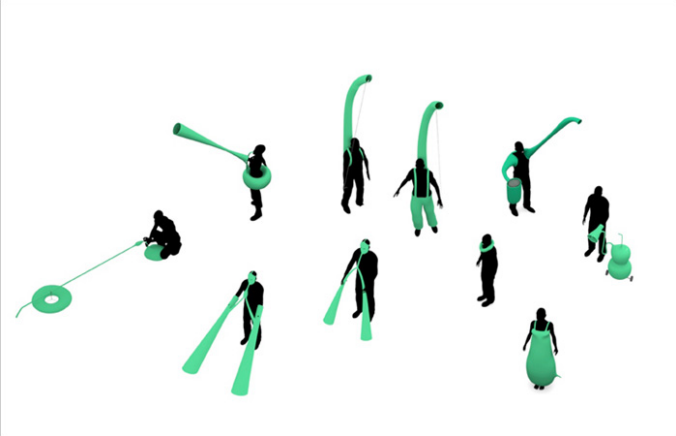

Fig.3 Dunne & Raby. *Designs for an Overpopulated Planet: Foragers,* 2009

Fig.4 Dunne & Raby. *Between Reality and the Impossible*: *Foragers 6*, 2010 (Photo: Jason Evans)

Another work I made using a solution-oriented, design-influenced process is *Pillowjacket* (see fig. 5 and fig. 6). Here I've altered a readymade jacket by modifying its hood into a pillow, adding a hyper-functional feature to an already functional garment. Yet, with the addition of the pillow, the jacket becomes awkward and cumbersome, less functional. How might these solution-oriented works relate to the solution-oriented thinking

of utopia? As historical utopian projects have demonstrated, within attempts to provide solutions also lies the potential to create new problems. I'm interested in exploring the new problems created, such as the impractical bulk of the pillow in *Pillowjacket*, or the awkward placement of the lamp in *Lampvest*.

Fig. 5 Leah Weinstein. *Pillowjacket*, 2012

Fig. 6 Leah Weinstein. *Pillowjacket*, (in use) 2012

After exploring this solution-oriented, idea-led approach to making throughout the early development of my thesis project, I discovered that this way of working left little room for the influence of the materials themselves to emerge. Once I realized that this idea-led approach was limiting the possibilities inherent in materials, I decided to take a different approach: a material-led approach. I will discuss this way of working further in Chapter two. However, I continue to use aspects of design-influenced, idea-led approaches to making in my practice, as ways to explore relationships between art and design, problems and solutions. My research into the relationship between art and design also furthered my interest in utopianism as an attempt to provide ultimate solutions, often through design methods. I see utopianism as requiring both art and design methods, both the solution-oriented approach of design, and the critical, problem-oriented approach of art. In the next section I will explore utopian imagining as it relates to my practice.

Imagining/ utopia

Within utopian movements and frameworks there exists the possibility for the solutions they present to in turn cause new problems and oppressions. By first discussing the historical use of utopia as a framework in art making, I will highlight the use of utopianism as a solution-oriented process that can sometimes create new problems. I will use this framework of an ideal that creates conflict and oppression despite its overwhelming positive goals to help me discuss pieces I've created which explore this notion of solutions that cause new problems.

What role does utopia have in art? First coined by Sir Thomas More, who published *Utopia* in 1516, utopia means both "good place" and "no place" at the same time, revealing the inherent paradox in this concept. More's book depicts a fictional, ideal communist society based on humanist principles of rationalism rather than established doctrines or faith. However, perhaps ironically, More's *Utopia* includes enforced regulations and restrictions (and the consequences for breaking those regulations are severe). While More's *Utopia* is generally regarded as a political critique of contemporary England (which was ruled by the Church and Monarch rather than rationalism), the term has come to mean an ideal yet nonexistent place, a fantasy. The term has since been linked to many socialist propositions, including several political art movements throughout recent history (including contemporary examples which I will discuss later), often as a criticism of their idealism. Utopian imagining represents the belief that change can happen, and art can offer a space for envisioning change through creative thought and idealistic visions. *Lampvest* and *Pillowjacket* are examples of works that offer this kind of idealism, while at the same time presenting new restrictions (such as awkward mobility), like More's *Utopia* offers idealism with restrictions.

What interests me about art that uses utopian strategies is the underlying sense of possibility or potential that such works evoke. By possibility I mean: the desire to alter (or completely revolutionize) existing systems—

imagining and creating new ways of producing art, architecture, and everyday objects. Yet within the new possibilities also exist new restrictions. I will now look at some examples of historical art movements with utopian underpinnings as a way to further contextualize my thinking about utopia in relation to my own practice.

Art movements with utopian underpinnings include: the Arts and Crafts Movement, Russian Constructivism, and the Bauhaus. These movements attempted to create ideal systems through art, architecture, and design that were rooted in social and political equality and a desire to flatten social hierarchies. All of these movements sought to blur disciplinary boundaries between art and design, drawing on strategies from both fields in order to address complex problems. From William Morris's blend of socialism and handcrafted textiles (the Arts and Crafts Movement), to the Bauhaus' merging of art and industry, these projects intended to enhance everyday life for the masses through designed or handcrafted objects, and were rooted in responses to modernization and the Industrial Revolution (which some utopian movements rejected while others embraced). From handcrafted textiles (Art and Crafts) to industrially produced furniture and modernist architecture (Bauhaus) these movements intended to bust out of historical molds, problematizing Capitalism's grip on art as a commodity (Constructivism), while attempting to draw art back into everyday life through craft, utility, and design.

However, inherent in utopianism (especially of a revolutionary scale) also exists the possibility of new, unimaginable problems being created. An example of this can be seen in modernist architecture, which sought to produce "pure" spaces that seemed to disregard the actual human bodies that occupied those spaces. However, despite these kinds of problems, many of these movements also offered new ways to look at relationships between materials and culture. Russian Constructivism for example, sought to shape society through material practices, seeing form not as an end in itself, but as a means through which to explore creativity through materials, and to support a socialist vision (Strigalev 34).

Between 1914 and 1932, the Russian Constructivists sought to involve artists in all stages of industrial production, seeking to bring art back into daily life, blurring the lines between art, design, and everyday life (Andrews and Kalinovska 10). The idealistic "socialist objects" of the Russian Constructivists were created to support the political ideology of the Communist Soviet Union, promoting the socialist cause and flattening of social hierarchies (Kiaer). The Constructivists attempted to create a total, all-encompassing system in a massive, revolutionary social utopia, seeking to fuse art with politics, and idealism with materialism. Intending to create an alternative to commodity fetishism, the Constructivists imagined a socialist culture that had not yet arrived (Kiaer). Focusing on designing products for industrial systems, the objects they created were envisioned as "comrades" for a socialist society, rather than as the "mournful slaves" of a capitalist society (Rodchenko). However, by 1932, Constructivism's utopian project was crushed by the very political system it supported, and with Stalin's rise to power, saw socialism develop into totalitarianism. While the Constructivists vision did not get a chance to fully blossom, their vision was a total one, with its own potentially oppressive limitations. Constructivism's premature demise demonstrates how utopian idealism can be subsumed or hijacked by a powerful few, creating dystopia for the disempowered majority.

Within every grand utopian project lies its potential failure. It is this relationship between solutions and problems—this essential paradox—that interests me about the concept of utopia. While utopia proposes ultimate solutions, dystopia reflects ultimate problems. Yet the distance between utopia and dystopia can be shorter than we think. The utopian vision can instead create dystopia if it does not consider the desires, empowerment, and changeability of the real people for whom these utopias are imagined.

An example of an imaginative architectural utopia that fails to consider real bodies in real space is Dutch artist (and former Situationist International member) Constant Nieuwenhuys' *New Babylon* project. This project consisted largely of drawings, paintings, and architectural model forms (see fig. 7) depicting imagined future

city landscapes, offering utopian models for the viewer's imagination. Constant called these models "hyper-architecture", designed for an imagined future human that he called "homo ludens", meaning "man at play". Designed as an all-encompassing utopia, Constant's fantastical models offer room for playful imagining, not rooted in (or limited by) issues of practicality or concern for the actual lived experience of bodies in space. Yet although this kind of utopia is wonderfully imaginative, it is not something that could be embodied by real people with individual desires and agencies. In this sense the *New Babylon* project maintains the concept of utopia as a distant, pie-in-the-sky ideal, rather than something that could be created in the everyday. I'm interested in challenging the notion of utopia as a distant, pie-in-the-sky ideal through finding ways of situating these ideals in the everyday. This attempt can be seen in *Lampvest*, as an object that aims to illuminate, yet its structural armature is slightly awkward and restrictive at the same time, as it negotiates the relationship between illuminating vision and the real space of the body.

(Image removed due to copyright issues—permission not granted to reproduce image.)

Fig. 7 Constant Nieuwenhuys. *New Babylon project*, *Mobile Ladder-Labyrinth,* 1959-1974 (Photo: Holland Pictoright)

In contrast to Constants' *New Babylon* project, an example of a contemporary artist whose work effectively explores the utopian in the everyday is American artist Andrea Zittel. Zittels' artworks address the needs and desires of real bodies in real space. Designed for living in, Zittels' sculptural objects blur the lines between art

and life, allowing their users to perform basic living functions in them such as cooking, eating, and sleeping. Created to free their users from excessive choice, Zittels' *Living Units* (see fig. 8) limit their users living space to include only the bare essentials. Here Zittel intends that they provide freedom through limitation. By eliminating choices (offering their user only one choice), the user is freed from the time consuming effects of too many choices (which is a byproduct of the free market and late capitalist society). However, their restrictions also suggest oppression. While Constants' utopian vision is wildly open, and therefore impossible, Zittels' utopia relies on limitation in order to exist in the reality of the everyday. Here we see how so-called "solutions" must also include new problems in order to exist in the realm of real time and space. Another example of this can be seen in Zittels' *Personal Uniforms* (see fig. 9), in which she has created one ideal garment for each 3 or 6 month period, instructing the wearer (usually herself) to wear only that garment, evoking both the liberating and restricting qualities of utopian systems. By eliminating choices, Zittels' work offers interesting solutions to problems of excess.

Fig. 8 Andrea Zittel. *A-Z Management and Maintenance Unit, Model 003*, 1992. (Photo: Andrea Zittel)

Fig. 9 Andrea Zittel. *A-Z Personal Uniforms 2004-2014* (Photo: Andrea Zittel)

While historical utopias such as Constructivism relate materialism with industry, Zittels' contemporary utopia relates materialism with excess. What I find particularly engaging about her work is the way she creates micro-utopian models for living, designed to create a sense of freedom (freedom from an excess of belongings) for

their users on an individual scale. French curator Nicolas Bourriaud uses the term "micro-utopias" to refer to tactics and gestures that create micro-communities for individuals or small groups rather than massive, totalizing systems like the social utopias of the past (Bourriaud 30). After the failure of modernism we want to be wary of any kind of totalizing or one-size-fits-all solution. Although the constraints of Zittels' art objects are ever-present, they are optional, self-chosen limitations rather than totalitarian ones. Offering both problems and solutions at the same time, these works point to the reality of idealisms' underbelly of potential oppression. It is this paradox that I find interesting, which I will explore further in my own work in the following section as a look at dystopia, "apocaloptimism", and the notion of embodied utopias.

Dystopia/ embodied utopia

Drawing on the theoretical ground that I have covered in the previous section, outlining various ways that utopias are imagined and explored through art, in this section I will discuss potential dystopias or emergencies as a theme in my work. I will discuss "apocaloptimism" (optimism despite the possibility of a dystopian future) as an idealism that acknowledges current realities. I will introduce the concept of embodied utopias as an approach to utopia that considers the body. I will explore how embodied utopias might avoid some of the pitfalls of the grand social utopias of the past through the intention of "being-here", which requires being with immediate circumstances. I will also discuss these concepts in relation to my graduate work.

Although utopia is a compelling ideal, it does not exist without its underbelly: dystopia (the least desirable outcome). The concept of dystopia grew out of utopian experiments, demonstrated most clearly in mid-20th century totalitarianism. French writer Frederic Rouvillois describes totalitarianism as "the tragic execution of the utopian dream."(316)

How might utopian solutions also give form to problems? An example of new problems created through attempted solutions can be seen in the waste generated through the designed obsolescence of products as a result of Capitalisms over-consumption. How might these problems, themselves the result of what were once thought of as solutions, be explored with some sense of hopefulness intact? I came across what San Francisco-based artist Ilyse Iris Magy refers to as a state of "apocaloptimism" as a term used to describe a sense of optimism and impending doom at the same time. Magy describes apocaloptimism as: "a composite of two future-facing words, and the future is by definition unknown. Apocaloptimism is embracing the unknown, is embracing transformation. It is being okay no matter what the outcome is, but fighting like hell to steer it in the direction that you want." Although we can make all sorts of educated guesses, we don't know if better or worse awaits. Aware that we might be living in the midst of economic, social, and environmental collapse, my approach to making includes an attempt to imagine some kind of future in a world that seems to be rapidly changing on all sorts of levels. Current environmental research suggests that emergency situations may be developing. A specific example is the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, in which plastics, carried by the oceans currents, can be found sparsely occupying vast expanses of ocean. Birds and sea creatures mistake the plastic for food, which they consume yet cannot digest, causing death. The problem is the result of the overconsumption of single-use plastics and poor waste management. This damage is quite possibly irreversible, yet, we must hold on to some sense of hopefulness in order to ignite desire for change. In other words, we must be "apocaloptimists" in order to effect change. Current environmental issues can be overwhelming, yet they are not something that we as individuals can face alone, but rather, something we must face as a collective. One of the issues I address through sculpture is material overconsumption.

I address excessive consumption in relation to materials and the body in *Spoondress* (see fig. 10 and fig. 11), by attaching 240 thrift store spoons to a dress (which was designed and constructed for this purpose). *Spoondress* calls to the hunger of the fashion industry as an insatiable system that endlessly churns out new designs, rendering last seasons collection useless. The spoons too are rendered useless in their new configuration as

decorative objects, yet a new unknown use is discovered: the spoons, as a collective, create a cacophony of sound. Perhaps the noise of the spoons is akin to the noise of the plastic gyres. One spoon is silent, but many create a cacophony; one plastic cup is silent, but many create a colossal impact in the ocean. In this way, the fashion industry provides a fitting example of solutions that in turn create new problems. Another example of a blurry line between solutions and problems can be seen in *Kitkat Dress*.

Fig. 10 Leah Weinstein. *Spoondress,* 2012 (Photo: Elizabeth Weinstein)

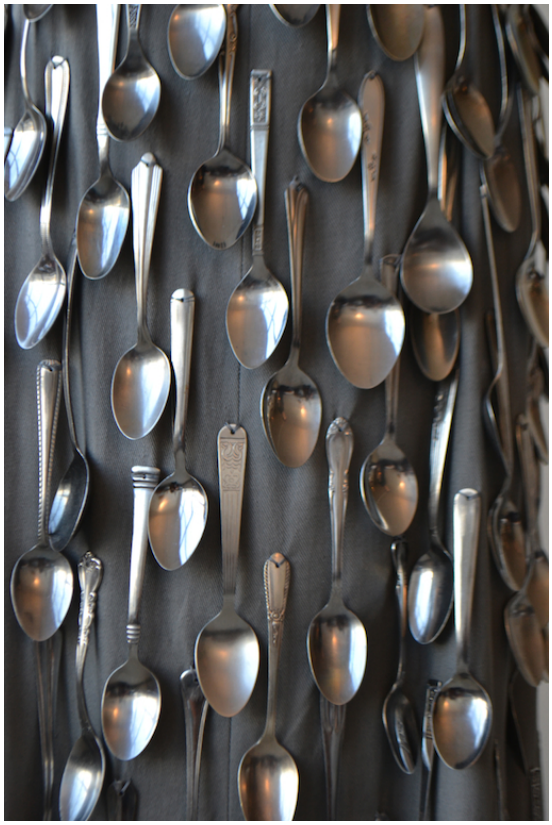

Fig. 11 Leah Weinstein. *Spoondress* (detail), 2012 (Photo: Elizabeth Weinstein)

Kitkat Dress is a wearable, reversible dress lined with pockets filled with objects of use suggesting survivalism (see fig. 12 and fig. 13). The objects include: a hatchet, saw, emergency blanket, waterproof matches, water purifier, and unexpected objects such as a small toy and Kitkat bar. Through this work I try to evoke a sense of potential: the potential use of the objects and the dress itself. What sorts of situations might call for this kind of garment? Is it for an imagined or real apocalypse? A light-hearted or serious adventure? I'm interested in

how the objects suggest use, but their use is unclear and must be imagined by the viewer, existing in the realm of potential. Are these objects part of a solution? Or are they instead, as mass produced objects of consumption, actually part of the problem?

Fig. 12 Leah Weinstein. *KitKat Dress*, 2013

Fig. 13 Leah Weinstein. *KitKat Dress* (reverse view), 2013

How can we consider utopianism in the context of the kinds of situations and potential emergencies that we face today? How might we consider a contemporary approach to utopia in the context of our actual lived experience, which takes place in the body? Returning to my actual experience, although I live on the lower end of the economic spectrum in Vancouver, I still have access to more abundance than the majority of the world. The materials and readymade objects I use in my practice relate to the way I live: on a shoestring budget in a city of affluence. Despite the knowledge of potential environmental disaster, my embodied experience reveals *now* as full, rich, and beautiful. In this way, I'm trying to balance the immediate and abundant *now* with the unknown (and potentially dystopian) future; trying to remain hopeful, I am operating from a sense of "apocaloptimism". Perhaps through apocaloptimism I can find a way to rest in the unknowability of the future,

and return to the lived experience. This return to the lived experience ties in with Marxist Philosopher Ernst Bloch's view on utopia.

Bloch identifies utopia as "the principle of hope", or "anticipatory consciousness" (Touraine 28). What is unique about Bloch's utopia, according to French sociologist Alain Touraine, is that, "it ends not with the hope for a better world…. [but with] …the lived experience" (Touraine 28). Bloch says:

> Utopian consciousness wants to look far into the distance, but ultimately only in order to penetrate the darkness so near it of the just lived moment […] In other words, we need […] polished utopian consciousness, in order to penetrate precisely the nearest nearness […] the most immediate immediacy, in which the core of self-location and being-here still lies. (43)

Here Bloch links utopia (a future-oriented ideal) back to being-here (being in the present moment). I think of being-here as relating to the immediacy of the body, yet this seems like a departure from the notion of utopia as a future ideal. Is Bloch suggesting, not a future ideal, but embodied presence in the immediate now? I'm interested in how being-here can be explored through materials. To me this means evoking relationships between materials and the body. Our bodies too are made of materials. These ideas are explored in the wearable works. Here, the body influences the sculpture (materials), but the sculpture also influences the body. Perhaps in this sense materials, like our bodies, are also agents. I will explore this idea further in chapter two, but for now, I will return to the notion of being-here.

I see Bloch's notion of being-here as a kind of "embodied utopia", one that attempts to merge idealism with the lived experience of the body. Bingaman et al describe embodied utopias as exploring "the relationship between the individual body and the body politic" (3). Said another way: exploring the relationship between the lived experiences of real people in real time and space, and the ideals of a larger collective. Bloch's utopia

might be considered a proposal for an embodied utopia in the way he suggests a merging of idealism with lived experience, focusing on hope, self-presence and "a coming-to-ourselves" (Brown).

Touraine asks of Bloch's utopia: "is it possible to combine a principle of hope and a focused attention on the present?" Through my work I pose a similar question: Can art be used as a tool to point us toward a more ideal state of being (one that includes freedom) and to highlight the aesthetic abundance and imperfections of the present moment at the same time? Can art offer a bridge between being-here and becoming?

Perhaps embodied utopias also include "being-with". Canadian educator Heesoon Bai talks about "being-with" in relation to Zen practice: being-with the discomfort of the present moment as a middle path between rigidity and chaos. I consider being-with to mean an active rather than passive presence. Being-with is vibrant, relational, participatory, and in-the-making, rather than detached or inert. Embodied utopias require this kind of active presence. Bingaman et al describe the concept of embodied utopias as offering: "not the tyranny of the totality but rather the radical possibility of the fragment, [suggesting] the importance of work left incomplete, unfinished—social transformation in the making." (12) The power of the fragment relies on individuals and small communities that can change and transform as needed, without the oppressive structure of a totalizing system that requires passive compliance. An embodied utopia seems to have the most room for individual freedom, active engagement, and possibility. By underlying the in-the-making aspect of embodied utopias and "the radical possibility of the fragment", perhaps we can escape the notion that things are ever finished or complete, but rather, always growing toward an ideal that also changes. This active being-with or participatory quality is something I explore in *Lampvest, Pillowjacket*, and *Kitkat Dress*. Through these works I explore being-with the problems of the everyday, including the restrictions inherent in materials, but also becoming, inviting new possibilities in the utility of those materials, such as a lamp, a pillow, or a survival tool. Being-with and becoming seek to bridge dystopian with utopian, through the embodied action of the wearable sculpture.

Kitkat Dress, for example, appears more dystopian than utopian, evoking a sense of taking matters into one's own hands, a fierce kind of individualism found in survivalist, pioneer, or "prepper" mindsets. I see this work in dialogue with the embodied-utopian aims of Zittel's *Living Units*. These works lie somewhere between being-with, and taking matters into one's own hands; not only accepting things as they are now, but also considering how to move towards a more ideal situation. Bloch describes moving toward the ideal as a process of daydreaming. He describes daydreaming as: "not in the sense of merely contemplative reason which takes things as they are and as they stand, but of participating reason which takes them as they go, and therefore also as they could go better." (42) This suggests an active, productive kind of daydreaming, one that draws the vision into the present. For individuals seeking embodied utopia, "participating reason" might include the use of artworks such as *Kitkat Dress,* or Zittel's *Living Units,* in order to enact gestures of individual empowerment in response to larger systems of power within which individuals must carve their own way.

While the works I have shown so far address the solution-oriented aspect of utopianism as it relates to mostly individual structures, a primary focus of utopia is of course social collectivity. I am interested in relationships between the individual and the collective, and through the following two works I will focus on the collective, relational aspects of utopia. This relates as well to what Bingaman et al refer to as embodied utopias, as "the relationship between the individual body and the body politic" (3).

Garment #1 explores relationships between individuals and the collective (see fig. 14 and fig. 15). Made for numerous people to wear simultaneously, this garment introduces both the idealism and the potential difficulty of its use. In order to achieve the sense of community it proposes, this relational garment puts its wearers into a position of negotiation. In order to "wear" this garment, the wearers must find a way to occupy this space together. Many sleeves are awkward, some too tight, some too long, and most are placed too close to one another for a comfortable fit, making it difficult to manoeuver within. Cumbersome and restrictive, it

does not function as a garment should. It both thwarts and furthers utopian aspirations at the same time—problematizing the one-size-fits-all solutionism of utopia. Yet, although potentially dystopian, a sense of hopefulness remains. Although this work suggests that collective action is a potentially awkward experience, perhaps it is a necessary one, we must face the larger problems together. This work aims to increase awareness around both the difficulty and the necessity of working together.

Fig. 14 Leah Weinstein. *Garment #1*, 2013

Fig. 15 Leah Weinstein. *Garment #1*, 2013 (Photo: Minttu Mantynen)

Another work that brushes up against problems created through utopian idealism is the *Welcome Project* (*Welcome: a mobile sculptural performance*), an artwork that I created for the City of Richmond's public art program, "Art in Unexpected Places", in 2013 (see fig. 16-19). For this project I focused on Richmond as a place of arrival, being situated between Vancouver and the US border, home to the Vancouver International Airport, and home to the largest percentage of immigrants (per capita) than any other Canadian municipality. I was interested in exploring the theme of welcome as it relates to arrival, and to the notion of the body as our first home. As a project commissioned by the City, I was aware of the importance of speaking directly to the historical and contemporary setting of Richmond. I did this through the selection of sites and participants, as well as through the sculpture itself—as an intimate shelter migrating through public places, welcoming the public to enter the temporary, alternative spaces created by the structural form of the sculpture, in order to create new spaces within already loaded sites.

Fig. 16 Leah Weinstein. *Welcome Project*. Aberdeen Mall performance, September 28th, 2013. (Photo: Tim Matheson)

Fig. 17 Leah Weinstein. *Welcome Project*. Aberdeen Mall performance, September 28th, 2013. (Photo: Tim Matheson)

Using sculpture as an interface between the body and the landscape, we attempted to create a micro-utopian bubble as we traveled through three specific public places and natural settings (relating to historical and ecological areas of significance in Richmond) carrying or wearing large sculptural forms constructed of steel and tarp, LED lanterns, and pieces of welcome mats as interactive props. It was a nomadic utopia, seeking to explore the ground between individual freedom and collective structures. Through the coming together of the collective form made of ten individual parts, a kind of idealistic space of welcome was created. Attempting to flatten social hierarchies by making each individual performer (wearing their sculptural form) an equal part of a larger collective, the sculpture implied that the greater whole (the larger structure) was reliant on the participation of each of its members in order to function with structural integrity as a shelter. This highlighted the interdependence between individuals and the collective. Yet for me it raised questions about the difficulty around creating a form that attempted to flatten social hierarchies in a place where hierarchies still exist.

Fig. 18 Leah Weinstein. *Welcome Project*. Garry Point performance, September 27th, 2013.

Fig. 19 Leah Weinstein. *Welcome Project*. Aberdeen Mall performance, September 28th, 2013. (Photo: Tim Matheson)

Rather than give form to problems, this project proposed solutions. But I found that I wasn't quite able to address some of the problems around the theme of welcome, which, for Richmond, being situated on Musqueam land, and with a history of racial divide, is more complicated than I was able to address through this project. So for me this project revealed that the theme of welcome is more complex than a solution-oriented approach can address. As historical utopias have demonstrated, within each solution lies potential new problems, and the *Welcome Project* was too brief (only 4.5 hours of performance in total) to effectively reveal the extent of the new problems created through its utopian solutionism. While I hope to restage this sculptural performance at a later date in order to investigate its impact more fully, one of the discoveries for me was that I wanted to rethink my solution-oriented approach. I began to mull over what "giving form to problems" might look like.

To summarize this chapter, I have discussed the conceptual framework around relationships between utopianism and art making in relation to both a larger context and my own practice. Through notions of emergency, individualism, and embodied utopias, I outlined a solution-oriented approach to making, and the ways in which these so-called solutions can in turn created new problems. After completing the series of wearable works, including *Lampvest, Pillowjacket, Spoondress, Kitkat Dress, Garment #1*, and the *Welcome*

Project, I decided to take a break from the wearable series in order to explore materials in a different way. I wanted to start again from the materials themselves as a way to expand my understanding of everyday materials, the stuff of everyday life, and the notions of being-here and being-with. The concept of utopia seems much too fraught to take an idea-led or solution-oriented approach alone. As my research deepened, I began to examine the underbelly of materials as a way to explore the problematic side of material culture, while at the same time considering what an embodied utopia might mean to me. Investigating the problematic underbelly of materials through engaging with materials that were readily available in my immediate surroundings I continued exploring relationships between embodied utopias and the everyday.

Chapter two: MATERIALS

Between materials and the body

I've just outlined what I see as the larger context of utopian, dystopian, and embodied utopian approaches to making in relation to my work. In this chapter I will explore an embodied approach to working with materials. I will discuss "situated knowledges" as an embodied view, and the immediacy of sculpture as a medium that relates to the body. I will then discuss the use of handmade and readymade materials in my work, as well as the notion of objects as subjects, before moving on to the agency of materials. Then I will touch on Thomas Hirschhorns' work as an example of "vibrant matter", before going on to discuss Sarah Sze's work as an example of "letting materials lead". I will further discuss my own practice in relation to all of these ideas, before moving on to the final chapter, the everyday.

As an extension of the theoretical ground of utopia that I explore in Chapter One, I also use a material-led approach to making in my work. I decided to experiment with this approach after completing the *Welcome Project*, through which I began to notice the importance of giving form to problems, considering the material-led approach a way to more directly address problems through form. When I returned home from my internship as a studio assistant for Andrea Zittel in Joshua Tree California in December 2013, I decided to focus on letting materials lead as a new starting point in my practice, while still drawing on the conceptual framework of utopia that I'd been exploring in my earlier works.

In order to explore new ways of working while still remaining grounded in my previous research, I'm interested in how material immediacy might also relate to utopia, in particular, to Bloch's notion of the "most immediate immediacy, in which the core of self-location and being-here still lies", of which he describes as utopias aim. Although Bloch doesn't make explicit reference to the body, my understanding of "the core of self-location and

being-here" necessarily includes the body's perspective: the view from a body. Whether wearable (designed to be viewed from within the work), or as installation (designed to be viewed around and through the work), the embodied perspective is something I'm always considering as it relates to the viewers' presence within the artwork. How might an embodied utopia be in conversation with materials and the body?

In relation to the notion of the body as the location of embodied knowledge, feminist theorist Donna Haraway defines "situated knowledges" as: "the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere" (Haraway 589). Haraway argues that only partial perspectives can provide objective vision: "Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object" (Haraway 583). According to Haraway, only the situated, embodied perspective offers objectivity; the universal or transcendent perspective, on the other hand, is an imaginary one. The subject and the object cannot be separated, rather, they are connected. Through my work I am trying to evoke a sense of the embodied view (the view from a body) as an empowered view—the view from the body as a place of situated knowledge. The situated aspect is important, because it relates the body to place. Rather than the "no-place" of utopia, bodies exist in real places; only real bodies in real places are empowered. The transcendent view, on the other hand, is not rooted in a body or a place. It is utopian perhaps, but not embodied, and therefore not empowered.

The embodied perspective is further reflected in the way scholar and curator Claire Bishop describes installation art. In her book, *Installation Art*, Bishop discusses how installation work cannot be viewed from a singular stationary perspective, but rather, needs to be walked around. Only through the embodied experience of physically navigating the work (moving around and through it) can the viewer come to understand the work. In this sense, installation art (and sculpture as well) can acknowledge the embodied view—the somatic and phenomenological experience of viewing work from the perspective of a body. Installation art, Bishop states, is: "a medium that insists on immediacy" (77). The immediacy or immersive quality of installation and

sculptural work call to the necessity of the embodied presence of the viewer. This necessary presence of the body, or *being-here*, is what connects imagination with materials. The immediacy of materials (which exist in real time and space) serves to anchor the work in relation to the body.

Materials, like bodies, are in a process of constant change. I'm interested in the relationship between materials and the body, and I explore this by taking materials through a process of ongoing change and transformation. This process can be seen in my more recent working experiments, which I will explore later in this chapter in the section called "Letting materials lead". Here I just want to introduce the concept as a way to relate materials with bodies. Next I will discuss the handmade and the readymade as a lens through which to look at materials as reflections of individual and collective production processes.

Handmade/ readymade

A material depiction of the relationship between individuals and collectives can be seen in my work through the relationship between industrially produced readymade objects, and handmade elements or components that evidence the artists hand. I see the handmade/ readymade aspect as a link between materials and larger social relationships. While readymade objects are generally produced by collective systems or structures, handmade objects are produced by individuals. By combining readymade objects within handmade or hand-altered forms, I seek to draw attention to the relationship between the larger industrial system and the DIY fragment.

Through the alteration and repurposing of readymade objects, I aim to appropriate objects made through complex globalized webs of industry as a way to take ownership of their use, and use them on my own terms. A culture of commercial materialism and excess relies on the ongoing purchase, use, and discard of its

products in order to exist. Such objects, produced through industrial systems, are often designed for short-term purposes. Our relationships with such objects are primarily those of consumption. In this scenario it is the commercial system that dictates the use of these objects and their likely lifespan (through their design), therefore it is this system that assumes or exercises the most agency. What happens when I alter their use, highlighting other possible outcomes than the ones for which they were prescribed? How can I subvert their uses in ways that interrupt their intended functions? Here I want to give the viewer an opportunity to consider how they relate with the material things of utility in their own environments.

The readymade has a prolific presence in art history from Duchamp forward. Duchamp's use of the readymade effectively divorced the artist's hand from the art object, setting the stage for conceptual art and the dematerialization of art practice. What role does the readymade have today, in a culture of excessive consumption and throw-away materialism? While still an alienated relic from industrial systems, the readymade now signifies our disconnected relationship with materials. Consumer objects require no intimacy with materials or material processes in order to consume them. A disconnect from material processes is a disconnect from the world of vibrant matter.

Handmade alterations suggest individual agencies, those that do not require complex industrial systems in order to create, but rather, require only a set of hands and some simple tools. They are relationships that rely on conversations between hands and materials, between the artist's agency and the material's agency. The handmade, do-it-yourself fragment is a kind of embodied-utopia, using ready-at-hand means through which to enact changes in immediate environments. A sense of personal empowerment is experienced through this kind of object creation/ relationship. Handmade DIY is an anti-commercial gesture because it operates outside of conventional systems of design, production, and sale. Rather than produced by massive, totalizing systems that can reproduce a seemingly endless supply of objects, DIY versions need only be produced as one or a few. Variation and surprise exist in handmade, low-tech versions, in which materials can be more highly valued.

Here, a relationship with materials, perhaps even a participation with materials is developed, inviting the possibility of perceiving objects as comrades, rather than the slaves of commodity fetishism (Rodchenko). Handmade alterations of readymade materials thus impose the agency of individuals (the artist/ creator) onto the products of larger industrial systems of production. Highlighting individual agency within the context of larger systems for the purposes of individual empowerment is one of the aims of my art practice. I intend to propose embodied utopias by addressing problems and solutions of the everyday through accessible, readymade and handmade applications, in order to increase criticality and mindfulness in our relationships with materials.

Examples of handmade alterations made to readymade objects can be seen in all of my wearable works, including *Pillowjacket*, in which I have taken a commercially produced, readymade jacket and altered it using handmade applications, thereby creating a new object that questions the use of both pillow and jacket. Another example can be seen in *Spoondress*, for which I have designed and constructed the dress, and added the readymade spoons as adornments onto the created garment in order to create a third thing that is beyond spoons and dress, but instead questions both spoons and dress and the hyper-consumption they imply. Hovering between handmade and readymade, these created objects intervene with expected functions of existing items or products. These hybrid objects generally use readily available materials, which I'm interested in as a means through which to highlight the possibilities inherent in everyday materials. Before I go on to discuss the possibility of the everyday, I will first discuss the notion of objects as subjects.

Objects as Subjects

Russian Constructivist Aleksandr Rodchenko called for the "things in our hands" to be "comrades". I think of comrades as things to be regarded with respect, things with potentially active agency, things that have an impact, or as tools used for empowerment. What would it look like for the things in my hands, the objects that I interact with on a daily basis, to be comrades, and how can I approach making this way? Perhaps "comrades" can have a say in things, rather than being the "slaves" of our utility. Although I am not sure that this is what Rodchenko meant by "comrades", I am interested in this connotation— suggesting that things (everyday objects or materials) can influence the way we use them. As an artist this supports my notion of letting materials lead, which I see as a process-based approach to making that considers the larger impact of materials. While process-based implies a series of intuitive, improvised decisions, perhaps materials themselves also influence this creative unfolding. While human beings are radically active, it seems almost unfathomable that non-living matter might, in the most passive way possible, have unseen agencies. Yet, while we shape materials, materials also shape us. For example, the food we eat, the clothing we wear, and our surrounding shelter affects and shapes us, altering our very bodies and bodily experiences. How might materials be "comrades" in the making of art, rather than the "slaves" of our preconceived notions? Where do our agencies meet? Are objects also subjects, with their own potential agendas, albeit of imperceptible slowness? How might materials speak to us, or through us?

The agency of materials

Another way to look at material immediacy is through an exploration of the agency of materials, which political theorist and philosopher Jane Bennett explores in her book "Vibrant Matter". Here Bennett examines the

"vitality of matter", and the power of things as actants[1]. By vitality Bennett means: "the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi-agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own"(Bennett, vii). I find this notion of things as quasi-agents an interesting way to look at the larger impact of material use. Things, although inert, operate as actants, transforming into other things in an ongoing process of material transformation.

Bennett links the vitality of matter to the vital materialism of bodies, which are made of the same stuff: vegetable, mineral, water. This literal link between bodies and matter is also what underscores my interest in the relationship between sculpture and bodies, objects and subjects. In a lecture titled "Powers of the Hoard: Artistry and Agency in a World of Vibrant Matter", Bennett proposes that people who hoard things are particularly sensitive to the vitality of matter. She identifies hoarding as "a symptom of a hyper-consumptive body politic", describing it as "the mental illness of our time"—an appropriately insane response to a culture of over-consumption and excess [2]. This notion of a sensitivity to the vitality of matter is something I'm curious about exploring through my work with materials.

"Thing-power" is another term Bennett uses to describe the hidden powers of matter, one of which is the power of slowness. Materials move much slower than we do, providing the illusion of solidity and endurance. Things don't appear to do much on their own accord, their power lies instead in their slowness, which can only be seen over extensive periods of time. For example, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch appears to have its own agency as it grows larger and accumulates greater mass over time.

[1] Referring to Bruno Latours' term "actant", and actor-network theory.
[2] Bennett describes a book by Ian Hacking called *Mad Travellers: Reflections on the Reality of Transient Mental Illness*, in which Hacking argues that some mental illnesses arise only in specific historical circumstances. For example, compulsive walking broke out in France in 1887, apparently in response to the popularization of travel abroad and simultaneous pathologization of vagrancy. Bennett argues that, like compulsive walking, hoarding may be the madness of our time, as a response to our hyper-consumptive society, planned obsolescence, and relentless abstraction of natural resources.

An example of a contemporary artist whose work addresses materials as an unwieldy accumulated mass is Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn. Hirschhorn creates whole environments that the viewer is immersed in, often an overwhelming mass of stuff that seems to implicate the viewer through their direct contact with the work. In his 2010 installation titled *TOO TOO-MUCH MUCH* Hirschhorn has filled the gallery to overflowing with empty cans (see fig. 20 and fig. 21), offering a critique of material culture through an excess of materials. In an interview with Walker Art Center curator Peter Eleey, Hirschhorn discusses the way he's implicated the viewer as a participant by including the floor upon which the viewer stands. Through their direct bodily contact with the work (via the floor), the viewer's presence becomes part of the installation, suggesting that they might be involved or implicated somehow in this scenario (Hirschhorn 82). Yet the things themselves also have an undeniable presence. This gives rise to several questions: what role do the objects play in the work (do they have any agency?), what role does the viewer play in the work (are they implicated somehow?), and how might both objects and viewers be a part of the "problem" to which Hirschhorn gives form?

Fig. 20 Thomas Hirschhorn. *TOO TOO – MUCH MUCH*. 2010

(Photo: Thomas Hirschhorn)

Fig. 21 Thomas Hirschhorn. *TOO TOO – MUCH MUCH*. 2010

(Photo: Thomas Hirschhorn)

What I take from both Bennett's theory and Hirschhorns' art is that our relationship with materials is worth reassessing. By this I mean: we treat materials as if their use has no impact. But everything we use has a longer

lifespan than we acknowledge. Things/materials go on to transform in the environment even when they are no longer in sight. Materials should therefore be further considered in all ways they are used. Rather than seeing materials solely as objects, perhaps we can also view them as subjects. As both objects and subjects, they are connected. Perhaps materials can be viewed as an extension of our own bodies, not separate from, but part of and connected to.

While I find material agency a compelling enquiry within my work, I am aware that this agency is not readily discernible. My influence as an artist is much more apparent in the work than that of the objects themselves. For example, in *Projects for Micro-Utopia, Project #1* (see fig. 22), while I intended that the materials lead in some sense, influencing their arrangement on the floor, evidence of my influence is much more visible. Rather than tossing these collected objects (which include: found wood, bamboo skewers and matchsticks) into a pile to let them arrange themselves, I've arranged them carefully in an intuitive way. Here I attempt to be in dialogue with the materials, allowing their form to influence their placement, by placing each individual piece in relation to other similar pieces (similar in size and type), as a way to consider how they influence one another (as individual objects that are also part of a larger system). So, while I am interested in their agency, I am also interested in my agency as an artist, and the way the things and I might be "comrades", rather than slaves to one another. Developing a language of materials that speaks to, with, and through matter, I am interested in the notion of being in dialogue with materials, which I think of as attempting to listen to materials, trying to find a way, even if only imagined, to let them lead the conversation.

Fig. 22 Leah Weinstein, *Projects for Micro-Utopia, Project #1*, 2014 (Photo: Scott Massey)

Letting materials lead

By "letting materials lead" (if such a thing is possible) I mean: attempting to allow the objects themselves to inform their placement or participation within a work. Perhaps some aspects of the materials might not be revealed until they are arranged, incorporated, or altered in some way, demonstrating a process of discovery through an engagement with materials. In this sense, the materials lend their unique qualities to the work, possibly beyond my expectations or preconceived notions. Through an exploration of material immediacy I'm speaking through materials, but perhaps materials are also speaking through me. How can we tell which is which? How can I invite a language of materials to emerge? Through a dialogue with "vibrant matter" I am seeking an embodied utopia—being-here with the world as it exists now in its everyday material form.

An example of a contemporary artist whose work suggests the notion of letting materials lead is American artist Sarah Sze, whose practice includes amassing objects in intuitive, improvised arrangements, assembling object-relationships in space. In *The Uncountables (Encyclopedia)* (see fig. 23 and fig. 24), Sze uses familiar

objects (such as plastic bottles, milk cartons, and office supplies) in unfamiliar ways, flattening aesthetic hierarchies between new materials and refuse. These fractal-like, miniature architectural landscapes call to the viewers' aesthetic and embodied experience rather than offering conceptual solutions to problems. Mirroring the improvisational quality of urban architectural landscapes, I'm interested in the way Szes' works evoke a sense of being "in the making", suggesting the process of tinkering and discovery involved in its creation. It is this improvisational quality that interests me, as an example of letting materials lead, an approach that I explore in my own work.

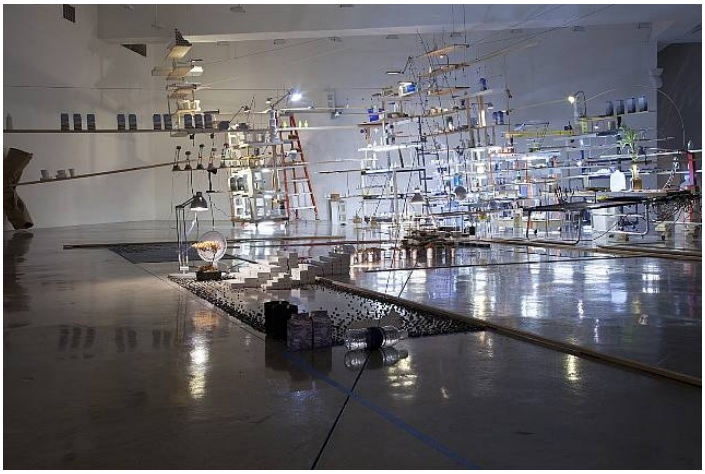

Fig. 23 Sarah Sze. *The Uncountables (Encyclopedia),* 2010 (Photo: Sarah Sze)

Fig. 24 Sarah Sze. *The Uncountables (Encyclopedia),* detail, 2010 (Photo: Sarah Sze)

I explore the notion of letting materials lead through a process of working experiments in which I start with the materials themselves to see what unfolds through the process of making. This is an attempt to develop a language of materials, in which a basic vocabulary of form begins to take shape. An example of this can be seen in fig. 25, which is a working experiment I made using toothpicks and bamboo skewers on Styrofoam. Here the outcome is unknown, but the possibilities inherent in these materials are what guides their formal arrangement. The outcome of these experiments can be seen in later works, specifically, *Projects for Micro-Utopia*.

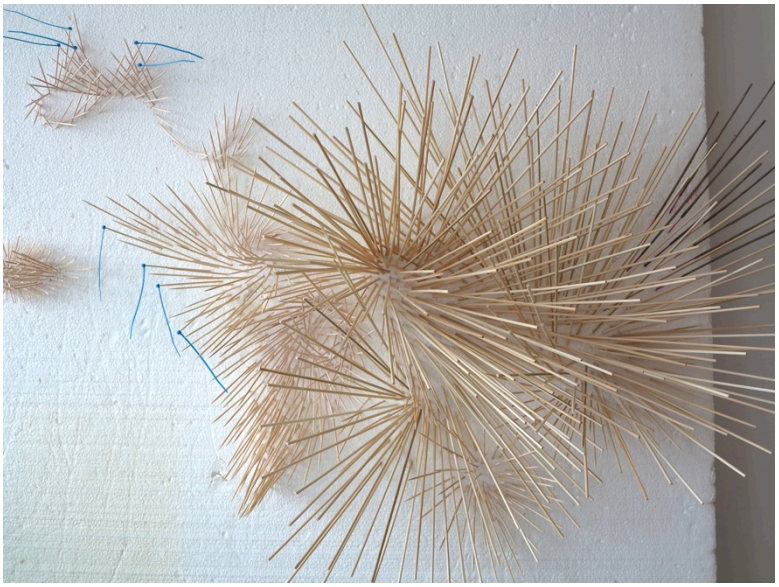

Fig. 25 Leah Weinstein, (working experiments), 2014

Fig. 26 Leah Weinstein, (working experiments), 2014

Another example of letting materials lead can be seen in "working experiments" (fig. 26) in which I take a variety of objects from my immediate surroundings and arrange them in improvised groupings through a process of "drawing with things", creating odd landscapes with ordinary objects. Through these groupings of accumulated things, the ordinary becomes strange.

I'm interested in looking at objects as being embedded in a process of creative unfolding rather than as isolated products. American philosopher John Dewey (who wrote "Art as Experience" in 1934) believed that objects should not be seen as being detached from the processes that produced them. Here John E. Smith discusses Dewey's notion of change and process: "Closely connected with the primacy of change is the idea that everything must be understood as *in the making* and not as once for all *finished* or *made*. If things are in the making, Dewey reasoned, perhaps we ourselves can have a hand in the process." (Smith, 62) This quote neatly encapsulates some of my thinking behind the objects and installations that I create. Things "in the making" have a sense of chance, improvisation and potential. I think of potential as being political because it suggests that new possibilities other than prescribed ones might be available: in potential lies the possibility that we can have a hand in the outcome of things. The wearables, designed to evoke an imagined use, and the installations, designed to evoke a precarious, in-process immediacy, suggest that the viewer might be involved somehow, although their role is unclear, unwritten, perhaps unknowable. The outcome of their use, although anticipated, is left primarily to the imagination.

I will go on to discuss how this material-led approach to making developed in subsequent works in the following chapter. I will also discuss the everyday as it relates to my practice, including a "use-what-you've-got" approach to making.

Chapter three: THE EVERYDAY

The everyday

In this final chapter I will discuss the importance of the everyday as it relates to my practice, drawing on French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvres' notion of the everyday as a site for critical action. I will discuss the everyday as it relates to the materials I use, which include everyday materials and readymade objects, as well as to the notion of everyday accessibility—that which is readily available in my immediate surroundings. I think of this as a "use-what-you've-got" approach to making, which is related to "being-here" and embodied utopias. I will discuss these ideas in relation to some working experiments, and finally, I will bring these ideas together to discuss the work I exhibited in the Charles H. Scott show this summer, *Projects for Micro-Utopia*.

The everyday is a primary concern within my work, located at the intersection between concept and materials. Relating to Bloch's notion of the ultimate goal of utopia as being-here, the everyday is the place where being-here happens. The everyday offers countless materials that can be used, reused, and altered in endless combinations towards creative exploration and critical reflection. Through an examination of the stuff of everyday life, my art practice aims to address being-here in the real space of the everyday.

According to Lefebvre (who wrote "Critique of Everyday Life" in 1947), everyday life has been hijacked by capitalism and turned into a space of consumption. Lefebvre proposed that the quotidian should not be overlooked, but rather, only through everyday life can people revolutionize their lives; the everyday is the *only* space through which we can develop a political consciousness and effect change. The everyday is both the space through which we are alienated and the means through which we can change our experience. According to Lefebvre (drawing from Marxism), products represent complex social relationships and social labour, but they hide their social meanings behind the utilities we desire of them; objects do not reveal the process of

social alienation embedded in their production (Lefebvre Production 81). Through objects, whether thing, being, or social reality, we enter into complex networks of human relations (Lefebvre Critique 156). Through my art practice, I aim to explore relationships between individuals, objects and the larger collective, in order to propose the everyday as a space of embodied connection, rather than a space of consumption alone. The everyday is the place where individual and collective action can happen, where we can reassess our relationship with objects and materials as potential "comrades". I will explore these ideas further in the next section through a use-what-you've-got approach to making, as a critical reflection of the everyday.

A "use-what-you've-got" approach to making

I've recently started working with a use-what-you've-got approach to making as a way to address being-here (Bloch), and being-with (Bai). This relates to the utopian strategy of limitation (Zittel) and the material immediacy of what exists here-now, which sometimes reveals excess. Through this approach I aim to highlight the material and aesthetic abundance of the present moment, while also leaning into imagined, non-prescribed, or unknown potentials. This approach entails using ready-at-hand, everyday objects from my immediate surroundings and arranging them in temporary aesthetic ensembles as a way to look at them anew. An example of this approach can be seen in *Table of Contents* (see fig. 27). With this piece I've taken the utensils from two kitchen drawers, arranged them in a diagonal pattern on my dining room table and photo-documented their aesthetic arrangement. Once documented, the objects go back into their drawers, existing only as a temporary ensemble exploring the material make-up of my immediate environment (although the photo-documentation lives on). This use-what-you've-got approach is intended to evoke a sense of possibility with these mundane and ordinary materials, as well as to provide a snapshot of contemporary life from the perspective of generally overlooked everyday objects, made visible through their aesthetic arrangement. They also serve as a sort of self-portrait, depicting personal preference, material affinity, lifestyle, perceived excess

or perceived lack, and/or circumstance. Their arrangement provides space through which to contemplate relationships between objects, viewer, and artist. Are these things commodities, or participants? Are they slaves, or comrades? Are they utilitarian or aesthetic? These are some of the questions I ask the viewer to consider through this work.

Fig. 27 Leah Weinstein. *Table of Contents,* 2014

Table of Contents shows the objects plainly, although their diagonal placement adds a layer of aesthetic intention. Their particular arrangement reveals the relationship between my aesthetic preferences and the objects themselves, between my agency and their agency. Although the tools are ultimately neutral, some of them, such as the knives, offer a sense of potential danger. The viewer can imagine their use, whatever that use might be: hopeful, dangerous, or neutral. We bring our own thoughts and interpretations to the objects. Here I want to highlight the viewer's imagination of their potential use as a way to suggest freedom and choice. The choice of how to perceive them is related to the choice of how to use them. "Use-what-you've-got" implies a sense of possibility through limitation. As Zittels' objects offer only one choice, I'm interested in the freedom this limitation provides. How can a use-what-you've-got approach provide an opportunity for unexpected possibilities to emerge?

From this use-what-you've-got approach to making I then expanded the circle of available materials to include what was available in the larger local environment, including alleyways and hardware stores. The materials I chose reflected a sense of emergency and shelter, as I was focusing on the relationship between the body, materials, and the everyday (which includes current realities of the environmental impact of a culture of overconsumption), with emergency shelter as an intersection between these three things. This led to the development of the work I created for the Charles H. Scott gallery this summer, *Projects for Micro-Utopia.*

Projects for Micro-Utopia

What is a micro-utopia? As I mentioned in chapter one, Bourriaud defines micro-utopias as communities with social aims that are created by individuals or small groups, rather than the massive, totalizing social utopias of the past. As part of this micro-utopia (as a small community with social aims), I wanted to include problematic materials such as styrofoam. Styrofoam (polystyrene) is nasty because it takes hundreds of years to decompose (being resistant to light), and can be mistaken for food in marine environments, which can be lethal to birds and sea creatures when consumed. It is also recognized as a possible human carcinogen. What is the relationship between styrofoam and my own body? Drawing on the utopian framework I have outlined in relation to my work, including Blochs' notion of being-here as the ultimate aim of utopia, I want to draw a correlation between utopia and a sense of immediacy or urgency. This is due in part to the urgency I see in addressing our relationship with materials on a planet that is showing the effects of excessive material consumption and waste.

Micro-utopias are related to what Bingaman et al define as embodied utopias—utopian projects that take real bodies, real people into account. Through this notion of micro-utopias I want to focus specifically on the

present moment, however flawed we may perceive it to be. Perhaps this might be considered an "immediate utopia". I explore these ideas in *Projects for Micro-Utopia* through five sculptures that together create a larger body of work (and may later include more works). These works attempt to draw the utopian into reality through a combination of designed objects and material arrangements, yet at the same time, also revealing the flaws inherent in this concept through the precariousness of the forms themselves.

Project #1 (which I discussed earlier in relation to letting materials lead—see fig. 22) is an assortment of found wood and kindling, bamboo skewers and matchsticks arranged on the floor. This piece uses readily available materials, in which I attempt to create some order through its careful placement on the floor, while at the same time this arrangement reminds the viewer of its ephemerality. *Project #2* is a seven-sided shelter form made from reflective styrofoam, suggesting an emergency shelter form (see fig. 28). Its outside surface is punctured with thousands of toothpicks, evoking quills or fur, protecting or repelling. Propped open precariously, its shiny reflective interior might beckon the viewer inside. Is it a safe place, or is it a trap? Clearly fragile, its use is left to the imagination, while still hovering in the realm of potential utility.

Fig. 28 Leah Weinstein. *Projects for Micro-Utopia, Project #2,* 2014 (Photo: Scott Massey)

Fig. 29 Leah Weinstein. *Projects for Micro-Utopia, Project #3,* 2014 (Photo: Scott Massey)

Project #3 is a styrofoam, bamboo skewer and matchstick construction suggesting urban planning and architectural modeling (see fig. 29). Through a combination of building materials (styrofoam) and everyday objects (matchsticks and skewers) this work aims to evoke a sense of the fragility of imagined and experimental utopias, negotiating relationships between idealism and materialism by drawing the imaginary into sculptural form. Reflecting my view of Vancouver as a city with utopian aspirations, this work hovers between Vancouver's shiny upscale affluence, and the reality of living here with limited means. The reflective surfaces of the styrofoam reflect the green underbellies of the styrofoam forms, casting cheery green reflections onto its silver surfaces. This reflective trick speaks both to the (hopeful) dream and (dangerous) illusion of utopianism.

Fig. 30 Leah Weinstein. *Projects for Micro-Utopia, Project #4,* 2014

Fig. 31 Leah Weinstein. *Projects for Micro-Utopia, Project #4*, 2014

Project #4 is a helium balloon tied to a long piece of twine that is pierced by hundreds of toothpicks, creating a sea urchin-like "tail" form (see fig. 30 and fig. 31). The balloon floats, anchored by the weight of the toothpick conglomerate, which also poses a potential threat to the balloon as it moves imperceptibly slowly toward the toothpick form as the helium dissipates. As a metaphor for the utopian desires of lightness and liberation, the balloon is at the same time fragile and ephemeral. Here the dream and the reality exist in a precarious balance.

Project #5 (which was not shown in the exhibition due to limited floor space), is an irregularly shaped, seven-sided cushion-form made from fabricated emergency blanket material that reflects the other works and surrounding environment on its mirror-like surface. It suggests a seat because it appears stuffed, and might call the viewer to consider sitting on it. This work more clearly draws a connection between art and design, circling

back to early concerns relating utopianism with design and the notion of emergency (as evidenced by the fabricated emergency blanket material it is constructed with).

Fig. 32 Leah Weinstein. *Projects for Micro-Utopia, Project #5,* 2014

In different ways, each of these five works relate utopian imagining with material immediacy in the way fragile materials are used to create a strange landscape of objects, suggesting both a hopefulness and a potential emergency at the same time. Both hope and a sense of emergency are needed in order to inhabit a utopic space in a contemporary context. This landscape is a kind of DIY experimental micro-utopia, which brings to mind Bloch's notion of utopia as a "hope-landscape" (Bloch 45). Though, unlike my earlier works, these objects are for the most part impractical. However, they still suggest a potential use, for example, the wood and matches might be used to make a fire, the shelter form might be a refuge, and the silver cushion might offer a seat. In this way, these works relate art with design, by giving form to problems while at the same time hinting at solutions. The solutions aren't clear, however, as new problems emerge simultaneously, interfering with the solutions suggested.

Do these forms offer an embodied utopia? Rather than directly referencing the body, *Projects for Micro-Utopia* suggests a relationship between the body and the materials, offering not utility, but a precarious, uneasy situation, where matches might alight styrofoam, toothpicks might puncture balloons, and fragile forms might collapse or get crushed by absent-minded viewers (which actually happened to *Project #1* during the opening—not crushed but stepped on, a few pieces of wood disturbed). Here creation and destruction, like utopia and dystopia, are closely intertwined.

Through this display of arranged objects my intention is to invite the viewer to draw connections between material forms, imagination, and the physical body in relation to the larger installation as a kind of micro-utopian model/experiment, in order to find utopic inspiration and critical reflection in the everyday. The grand utopic promises of the past have all collapsed. We are left with only the everyday. With imagined and therefore unknown outcomes exist potential agency and freedom for individuals, collectives, and possibly objects.

Conclusion

What should art do? What is arts function? Throughout the development of my thesis project I have come to conclude that art should address relationships between the individual and the collective. These relationships are what the social utopias of the past and the immediate utopias of the present aim to address. Perhaps included in the larger collective is "vibrant matter" (Bennett)—things as actants with unseen agencies. By giving form to problems as well as proposing solutions (which often in turn create new problems), my practice uses material explorations through art to critique late capitalist models of consumption and excess.

While the social utopias of the past (such as Russian Constructivism), aimed to create a "Material Culture"[3], immediate utopias of the present (such as Zittel's work), aim to create material responses to a culture of excess. In response to historical and contemporary utopian enquiries, I explore material responses to material excesses through the sculptural work of my master thesis project, attempting to look beyond what is visible in things in order to expand the notion of the larger collective to include materials. Through this research I intend to make critical interventions using material practices in order to address issues of sustainability, and a broader range of problems including social and economic alienation. By way of creative explorations with materials, I seek to challenge current models of consumerism, approaching the possibility of intervention through the very means that are also the problem. This can be viewed as a homeopathic approach, which means: to treat an illness by introducing a micro-dose of the pathogen into the body in order to instigate the body's natural fighting response to the illness. By treating excessive materialism with mindful materialism, I aim to treat like with like, introducing problematic materials such as styrofoam into a material dialogue as a way to ignite awareness around some of the problematic underbellies of materials. This notion of a homeopathic approach calls back to the relationship between problems and solutions, where solutions in turn cause new problems, and problems might also provide solutions.

[3] Vladimir Tatlin proposed the name "Material Culture" for the Constructivist movement, a name that did not take. (Strigalev 15)

Examining relationships between materials and utopia calls us to consider these blurry relationships between problems and solutions. In an art context, material objects occupy spaces in between problems and solutions, inhabiting both simultaneously. A consideration of utopia also calls for an examination of the relationship between individuals and the larger collective, the fragment and the total. While the total suggests order and completion, the fragment suggests experiment, change, and uncertainty. Micro-utopian fragments offer opportunities through which to explore new ways of relating to the larger whole, including the world of vibrant matter.

By arranging, altering, and re-purposing everyday materials and objects, the works I create engage in dialogue with the world of matter while at the same time pointing to the "radical possibilities of the fragment" to which Bingaman et al refer (12). Radical possibilities require freedom—freedom to imagine, create, and recreate. Through playful creative explorations with materials, I invite open-ended, in-the-making qualities to emerge. By developing a language of materials (attempting to engage in dialogue with materials), I allow, if possible, the participation of materials into the creative process. I use a variety of approaches to explore relationships between my agency and material agency: creating preconceived ideals in form (using drawn plans, patterns, and prototypes); allowing an intuitive unfolding from the materials themselves (imagining that materials might influence form); and an everyday, use-what-you've-got approach to making. Through these processes I explore spaces between materials, the body, and conceptual (utopian) ideals—exploring spaces between being and becoming.

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