

AGENTE COSTURA
(we are a sewing agent)
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Abstract

Agente Costura is a Portuguese term loosely translated into *We are a sewing Agent*. It stands for my experiments with the sewing machine as a compositional percussion instrument, making music out of making clothes, challenging myself in collaborative performances with new ways of transformation. The interdisciplinary quality of the work means that it can be adapted and presented in different settings, from art galleries, to fashion weeks, to music festivals, aiming to engage with various audiences. The work investigates participatory currents in art history, paying special attention to two distinct moments in performance history. Researching my own cultural background, I make reference to Brazilian artists of the 20th century working with participatory performances such as Hélio Oiticica, and Ricardo Basbaum. These artists have created a specific aesthetic that draw on cultural issues in Brazil, which are mirrored in my own work. The work of New York based artists influenced by the teachings of John Cage, such as Fluxus and Allan Kaprow, interest me due to improvisational aspects, as well as the creation of *happenings*, and the interdisciplinary quality of these works, as I explore music, dance and performance art. Furthermore, my work discusses the contemporary term *upcycling*, as defined by Michael Braumgart and William McDonough, relating back to historical texts on the Dress Reform of the late 19th/early 20th century, both questioning the fashion industry as perpetrator of unnecessary consumption. These themes are stitched together in a rhizomatic structure, through the theory of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, feeding into the fabric of contemporary art, and creating a patchwork of experiences and ideas.

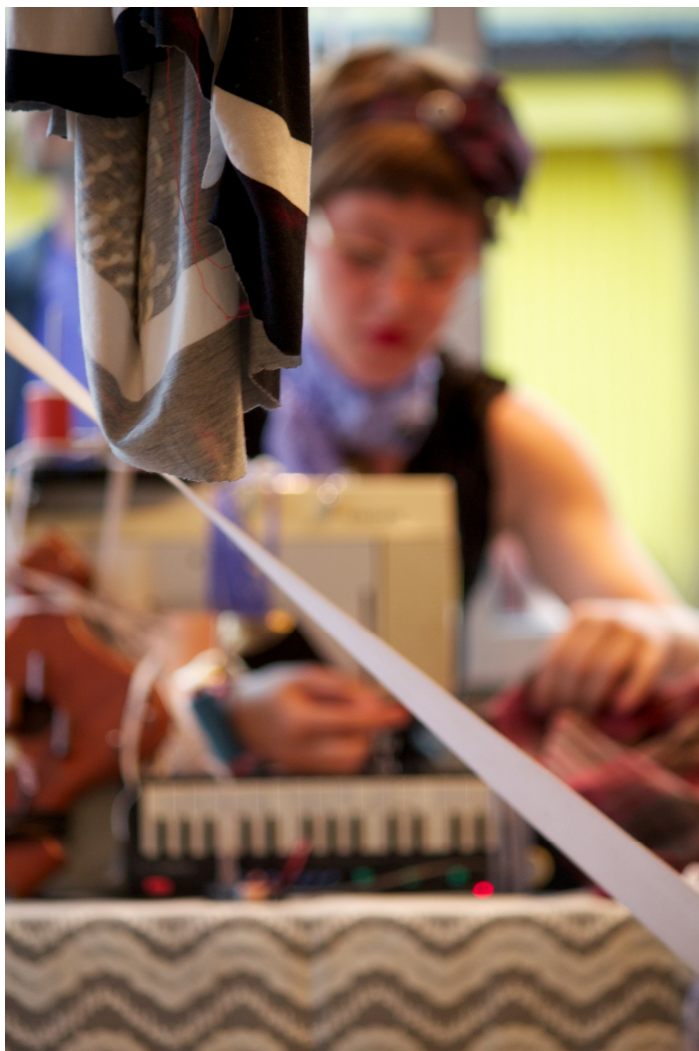
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Introduction: Threading the sewing machine



1. we are a sewing agent. Charles H. Scott Gallery. 2014
Photo: Ravi Gill

In the following essay I present my current research based on my artistic production since enrolling in the Low Residency Master of Applied Arts program at Emily Carr University of Art and Design. Through an exploration of collaborative performances and active sewing spaces, I am merging music and sewing composition, making music out of making clothes. *Agente Costura*, a Portuguese double entendre, is the term I have been using to define my practice as a composer of music and sculptural garments. *Costura* means sewing. *A gente* translates into *the people*, indicating the intent of bringing people together to experience an action. *Agente* translates into *Agent*, “a force or substance that causes a change”. Another translation for *Agente* is the colloquial term for *We*, so that *Agente Costura* is loosely translated into *we are a sewing agent*.

In the present research, *Agente Costura* explores connections between textiles and sound within a participatory framework, in collaboration with musicians, performers, dancers and interested audience members,

in action. *Agente Costura* stands for myself as conductor of these performances, the orchestrating agent of sewing events. *Agente* is singular but collaborative, each performance is shaped by the input of different audiences and participants. It is *We*, in a specific moment in time. *Agente Costura* stands for my practice as a whole, encompassing the *sewing station* as an active, transformative, site specific installation; and *musical sewing* as the accompanying performances. I choose to write as *Agente Costura* as all explorations have come as a collection of experiences, and this stands for the I that stands for the We that stands for the action.

Since 2003, when I moved from Vancouver to Curitiba, I have created environments for repurposing clothes - exploring the social conditions of textiles - in different spaces, ranging from music shows to fashion shows, and from art galleries to coffee shops. *Sewing station* is a term I will use throughout this text to describe the various iterations of my exhibition practice as an ongoing performative installation, inhabiting

gallery spaces as well as being the stage for a series of *musical sewing* performances. *Sewing station* is also the name of the installation I exhibited at the Charles H. Scott Gallery in July 2014. This particular *sewing station* installation encompasses different elements that I have come to consider sculptural, such as the elastic web, upcycled garments, a pile of clothes (figure 2), and several assembled musical sewing machines.

I have been the conductor of *musical sewing* performances since 2010, playing a prepared sewing machine in a range of different musical ensembles. These experimentations have changed in magnitude over the years, especially since the enrollment in the Master of Applied Arts program. This program has helped fine-tune the present research, broadening the scope of *Agente Costura* into many new directions, enabling me to further develop every aspect that is described in this document.

This text creates a stitch between the method and the methodology of *Agente Costura*, and because the sewing machine has been my instrument all along, I choose to use it as a metaphor in which to explain my practice. In this analogy, I place *Agente Costura* as the bobbin: the theoretical bottom thread winds around the bobbin, which is then encased within performance art research. The top spool of thread stands for the audience guided down the sewing machine in order to reach the needle, a *musical sewing* path of experience: through the space, around the actions, and down to sound. These two threads are then pulled together into a stitch, piercing the social fabric. This metaphor has shifted after my last summer intensive at Emily Carr due to the final graduation exhibition, where I was able to reflect upon my writing. This edited document illustrates my process during the course of the program.

Though the threading of a sewing machine follows a linear/temporal structure, each theme discussed here is an intersection of a rhizome and follows no specific order - the themes weave into each

other - they are stitched into a patchwork of ideas, and can be read from many directions. Each performance is like a different sewing machine: the thread guides shift for each specific performance, just as sewing machines have the guides in different locations but follow a similar threading progression.



2. *The Pile* (2014).

A sculptural component of the *sewing station* at the Charles H. Scott Gallery.

Photo: Ravi Gill

Chapter 1: Winding the Bobbin



3. *Agente Costura @ ECUAD (2013)*
elastic rhizome, detail of installation.
Photo: Minttu Maari Mäntynen

All sewing machines have a top thread and a bottom thread, which loop in a precisely timed movement to create a stitch. In this analogy, the lower thread represents the theoretical references that inform my work, which in combination with the practical aspects will create the stitch. The bottom thread as a theoretical framework is wound around the bobbin, which is then encased within the artistic references that influence my practice. In the proposed structure I place *Agente Costura* as the bobbin, as the agitator agent: bringing people together, organizing events, inviting performers, creating the set, collecting clothing, playing music, cutting up skirts. As Miwon Kwon argues, contemporary art has a new *aesthetics of administration*, where “the situation now demands a different set of verbs: to negotiate, to coordinate, to compromise, to research, to promote, to organize”(Kwon 51). All of these tasks that Kwon describes are intricate to the creation of a *sewing station* installation and the *musical sewing* performances, so that connecting and interacting become a large part of the work. Kwon goes on to argue that “it is now the performative aspect of an artist’s characteristic mode of operation (even

when working in collaboration) that is repeated and circulated as a new art commodity, with the artist him/herself functioning as the primary vehicle for its verification, repetition, and circulation”(Kwon 47). The characteristic mode of operation of *Agente Costura* as a musical sewing station is circulated as the art commodity. I put myself in the position of a cultural agent interacting with various communities, enquiring about our relationship with clothing, questioning the banal and repetitive contemporary garment industry.

I have been thinking of my practice as a rhizomatic elastic weave of connections and ideas tied together in a seemingly random way, stretching between art, fashion and music. The philosophical concept of the rhizome as described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari is adapted from the botanical term attributed to a subterranean plant stem capable of producing new nodes in any direction. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari use felt as an example of a rhizome, an ‘entanglement of fibers’, a *smooth* space created by the

agitation and pressing of fibers that can grow in infinite directions. On the other hand, fabric construction is confined to the warp and the woof, a striated space, limited in its expansion because it is delimited, closed on one side, since it can be infinite in length but not in width (Deleuze and Guattari 475). I situate my practice within this concept of a *smooth* space, without any limitations as to where it might expand. Following a definition of the rhizome which “has no beginning or end: it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb ‘to be’, but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction ‘and... and... and...’” (Deleuze and Guattari 25), *Agente Costura* has no beginning and no end, it is not one project, not an object, not a subject, it is a multiplicity of clothing and a multiplicity of sound. I am concerned with being ‘in the middle’ and having many lines of flight that intersect, represented by the themes explored – music, textiles, performativity, participation – these lines weave as the framework.

Though I place myself as the initiator agent of the *musical sewing* performances, the input of other artists creates the work: dancers improvise movements instead of following specific choreography, musicians improvise the score. Each action is up to each participant, how these actions interact and interchange is unique to each performance, which allows for indeterminate results. In this sense, I am providing a structure as the initiator of the performance, but allowing for unforeseen results through improvisation.

The sculptural garments I create in *musical sewing* do not follow traditional sewing conventions – the sewing begins from the middle, from a garment that already has a form to create a new form. In this sense, the possibilities of transformation of a garment by adding other materials or cutting away, allow for a multiplicity of dimensions. Instead of following traditional conventions, the root of sewing, I am applying a multiplicity of measurements as a rule for garment alteration.

I am interested in exploring the rhizomatic potential

of music, through the amplification of a prepared sewing machine. According to Deleuze and Guattari, “music has always sent out lines of flight, like so many ‘transformational multiplicities’, even overturning the very codes that structure or arborify it; that is why musical form, right down to its ruptures and proliferations, is comparable to a weed, a rhizome” (Deleuze and Guattari 12). Along with a musical ensemble, this notion of the rhizome is emphasized as the sewing sounds are meshed with live music, without a subjective compositional structure. John Cage uses the term multiplicity to describe the heterogeneous and unlimited space of all sound. According to Brendan W. Joseph’s article *Chance, Indeterminacy, Multiplicity*,

Cage’s total sound-space is what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would call a ‘smooth space’; all points are reachable, but none are identical. ‘I believe, of course, that what we’re doing is exploring a field,’ Cage would proclaim in 1961, ‘that the field is limitless and without qualitative differentiation but with multiplicity of differences’. (Joseph 220)

Joseph notes that both Deleuze's writing on the smooth space, and John Cage's research on indeterminacy draw from Henri Bergson's multiplicity theory. In understanding this theory, Deleuze proposes two terms: possibilities and virtualities. According to Joseph, "possibilities relate to static, preformed, closed systems (being, in fact, backward projections from an existent reality), virtualities are part of ongoing systems, "vital" and "creative" systems that are infinitely evolving and temporally accumulating. The virtual, therefore, cannot be fully conceived until it is created." (Joseph 223) He goes on to explain that possibilities are *realized* in a process of limitation, and virtualities are *actualized*, differentiated, or as Cage would define, become "the unforeseen nature of an experimental action" (Joseph 224). In this sense, continuous multiplicities are *actualized*, created, and limitless. I am interested in furthering my research into multiplicities, both on a theoretical and a practical level, which is explored in many layers of my performances.

The concepts of multiplicity and indeterminacy will

be revisited throughout this text, where all of the proposed lines of flight weave into my *musical sewing* performances. The audience is drawn to a multiplicity of actions, led through a rhizomatic structure of experience.



4. **Agente Costura @ ECUAD (2013)** elastic web component of the sewing station.
Photo: Minttu Maari Mäntynen

Encasing the theoretical framework of *Agente Costura* is a historical inquiry about performance art and theory. According to art historian RoseLee Goldberg in *Performance Art – From Futurism to Present*,

The history of performance art in the twentieth century is the history of a permissive, open ended medium with endless variables, executed by artists impatient with the limitations of more established forms, and determined to take their art directly to the public. For this reason its base has always been anarchic. By its very nature, performance defies precise or easy definition beyond the simple declaration that it is live art by artists. (Goldberg 9)

The determination to bring art directly to the public is quite central to my practice, in order to engage with an audience. In discussing *Agente Costura* within the artistic context of performance art, I'm interested in finding relations between performance art in the southern hemisphere, where I was born, and in the northern hemisphere where I grew up. In relation to the issues raised by *Agente Costura*, I examine the

production of Brazilian artists [Hélio Oiticica](#)¹ and Ricardo Basbaum, whose participatory works have shaped Brazilian contemporary art. Within a North American context, Allan Kaprow also created his own vocabulary of participatory events. It is interesting to note the similar development from spatial installations into participatory practices in the works of Oiticica and Kaprow, both working in the 1960s but separated geographically. Both of these artists set precedents that have influenced the development of contemporary performance art. I believe that the issues raised by Oiticica and Kaprow are both historical and influential to the development of my own performance practice.

In November 2013, I visited a retrospective exhibition of Hélio Oiticica's work at the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt. There, I bought a catalogue of Oiticica's texts translated into English and German. I am drawn to Oiticica's *Theory of New Objectivity* (1967) where the principal characteristics are: a general constructive will; a move towards the

¹ All blue underlined texts are external links.

object; the participation of the spectator; an engagement and a position on political, social and ethical problems; tendency towards collective propositions; and a revival of, and new formulations of anti-art (Oiticica 167). In his *Position and Program of the New Objectivity*, Oiticica institutes the spectator as an active part of his work:

Anti-art, in which the artist understands his/her position not any longer as a creator for contemplation, but as an instigator of creation-creation as such: this process completes itself through the dynamic participation of the 'spectator,' now considered as 'participator'. Anti-art answers the collective need for creative activity that is latent and can be activated in a certain way by the artist. (Oiticica 169)

As instigator of creation, Oiticica built *Tropicália*, a *penetrable* installation reconstructing the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro. The title of this work was popularized through other cultural manifestations especially music, becoming a movement of artists characterized by a juxtaposition of references. According to Simone Osthoff,

Adopting an aesthetic of mixing and contamination, the Tropicalist movement of the late 1960s aggressively combined high and low and industrial and rural cultures, merging political nationalism with aesthetic internationalism and rock and roll with samba (Osthoff 289)

Brazil was under military dictatorship between 1964 and 1985. In 1968 the military government suspended all political and constitutional rights, which initiated a period of political oppression, persecution, youth revolt movements, and counterculture. The same year marks the release of the collaborative music album *Tropicália: ou Panis et Circencis* which included artists such as Mutantes, Caetano Veloso and Gal Costa, with subversive lyrics to question the system, filled with subtle metaphors in order to go uncensored.

Oiticica's *penetrables* can be compared to Allan Kaprow's *environments*, installations that invite the viewer into an immersive experience. As Kaprow began to incorporate actions to his environments, which led to the *happenings*, Oiticica evolved from the *penetrables*

into the *parangolés*, where the act of putting on the textile cape structures activated the work.

Influenced by Hélio Oiticica is Brazilian contemporary artist Ricardo Basbaum, another important reference for *Agente Costura*. For the past decade, Basbaum has created the [NBP \(New Basis for Personality\)](#) project, an ongoing inquiry and guideline for installations and performances. One particular work [Would you like to participate in an artistic experience?](#) invites artists to appropriate an object created by Basbaum as the starting point for an art work, to use or alter the object in any way the artist may want. This type of approach is a reflection of the Brazilian participatory inheritance instituted by artists such as Oiticica, turning the spectator into participator. The artist becomes mediator for experiences, facilitating a situation for creativity. I situate my production within this discourse, inviting the spectator to interact with the *sewing station* providing a platform where the transformation of clothing can take place. The ongoing aspect of *Agente Costura*, as well as the *sewing station*,

is similar to a project such as Ricardo Basbaum's NBP, for the sculptural garments created are not the main focus of the work, these objects stand as visual artifacts of the transformative experience.

Fluxus is of particular influence due to an interest in blurring distinctions between art forms, as well as the distinction between art and life, often creating happenings and performances that included music, dance, poetry, and audience participation. Many Fluxus artists, including Allan Kaprow, Alison Knowles and Yoko Ono, were influenced by a course in musical composition taught by John Cage at the New School for Social Research in New York City between 1956 and 1960. As Hannah Higgins explains in *The Fluxus Reader*,

the activities of various performers vary over time, the nature of the event varies as well – artists have sent letters, made salads, projected fantasies about climbing into the vaginas of live whales, and watched the sky – all this under the deceptively simple rubric of the Event. Clearly the event format is highly flexible. (Higgins, 32)

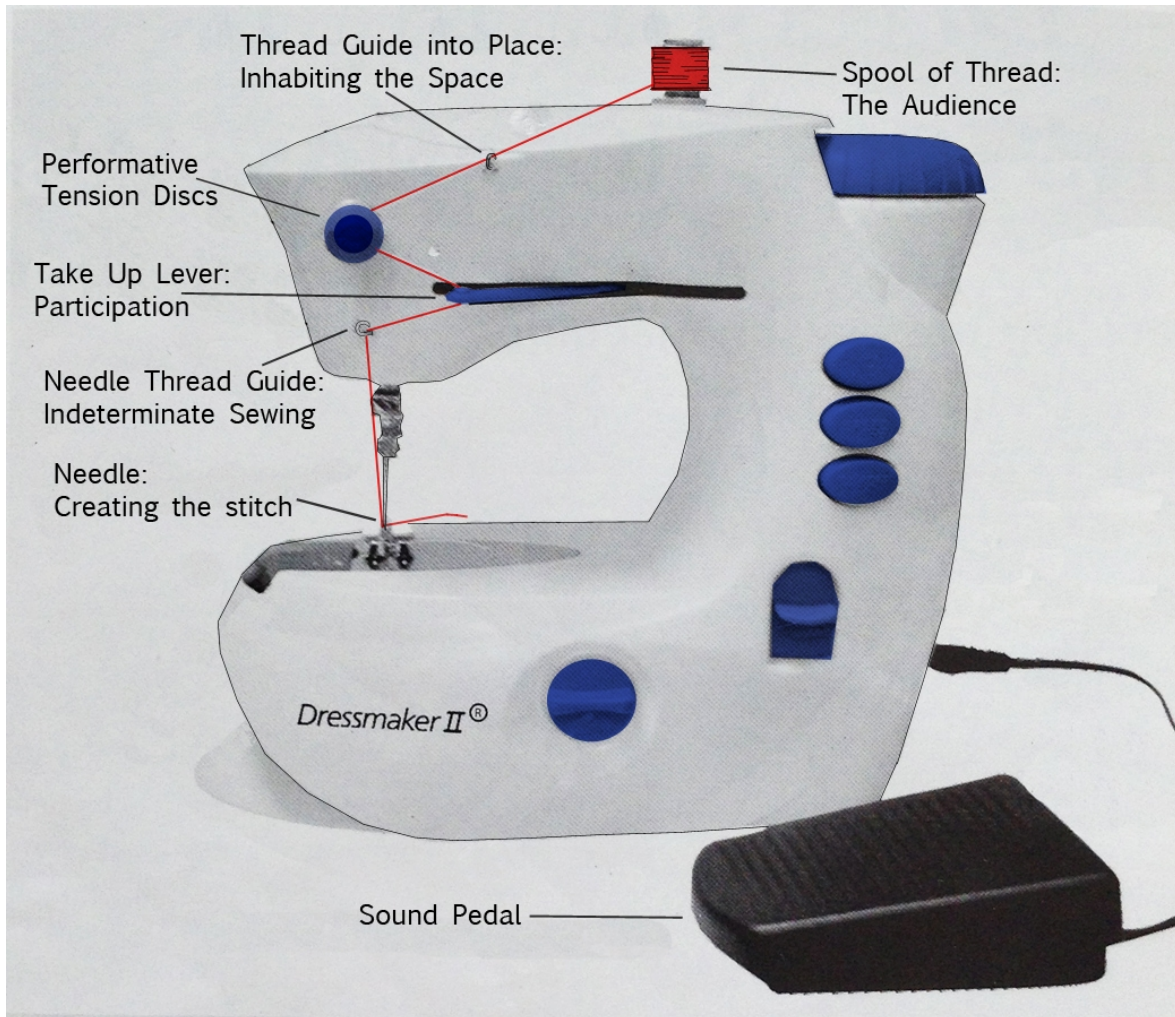
This shows the emphasis of Fluxus performances in everyday activities, translated into action music and event pieces. Yoko Ono's [Cut Piece](#) (1964) is one example of a Fluxus performance that can directly relate to some of the concepts and materials that I am exploring, with the tension of cutting a garment while wearing it, relying on active audience members who become participants. Knowles' event scores are another example of works that blur the distinctions of art and life, and have a close relationship with sound. In *Make a Salad* (1962), Knowles actually follows a musical score to make a salad, then serves it to the audience. In 2008 Knowles [reenacted the performance](#) at the Tate in London, taking it to enormous proportions.

This particular moment in art history has helped shape much of contemporary discourse around performance art, and proves to be important for my current research of *musical sewing*. The experiments of the 1960s both of Allan Kaprow and Hélio Oiticica have been crucial in shaping contemporary event-based

practices such as *Agente Costura*, inviting the spectator into the experience of the work. I am also interested in how female artists have contributed to performance research during the same period, as exemplified by Yoko Ono, or by Hélio Oiticica's contemporary Lygia Clark, whose wearable series of works *Nostalgia of the Body* (1964-1968) consisted of sweaters, goggles, and masks that encouraged the activation of the object by audience participation, emphasizing the sensorial experience. (Osthoff, 281)

In *musical sewing* as a series of performances, and in the *sewing station* as a performative installation, the audience is invited to participate in creating meaning, encouraged to activate the space of the exhibition.

Chapter 2: Upper Threading



5.Upper threading structure adapted from sewing machine manual

The steps to thread a sewing machine are represented in the following adapted diagram, labeled according to *musical sewing*. Though the diagram shows the linear threading of a sewing machine, I am proposing a nonlinear reading of this thread progression, as if the thread could go through any of the different thread guides at any time. The thread guide sections of the following chapter can be read separately and in any order.

Spool of thread: The Audience



6. *Agente Costura with Mine and Mamm* (2014) Charles H. Scott Gallery

Photo: Ravi Gill

As the thread that is guided down the experience of *musical sewing*, the audience is an important component of my practice. I am interested in multiple kinds of audiences, placing the *sewing station* in various settings, to connect with a wide range of viewers and possible participators.

I will examine three geographical locations where I have exhibited as *Agente Costura*. The first location is the *Garage* in Curitiba, Brazil, my storefront studio and stage for cultural production and public interaction, where I was particularly involved in the independent art and music scene, collaborating with a number of musicians, dancers, circus performers, actors and artists. Sporadically on Sundays I would host in the sidewalk music shows, art shows, and fashion shows. The *Garage* was a place for the public to transform their wardrobes, as well as a hub for creative encounters.

The second location is Vancouver in the summer intensives at Emily Carr, creating performances in collaboration with local artists and interacting with a community in short periods of time. Since September

2013 I am establishing an identity as *Agente Costura* in Germany, the third location, within a new culture and new costumes. Each example will be discussed in length as we now follow the audience thread moving through our metaphoric sewing machine.



7. Garage (2013) Collaborators of Fashion Orchestra. Curitiba, Brazil
Photo: Alberto Krawczyk

The work developed at the *Garage* (figure 7) between 2009 and 2013 has shaped the early development of my practice. Some of the core issues of

my research were developed based on the exchanges in the *Garage*, as a place where many artists met and interacted. Most artists who collaborated in the *musical sewing* performances in Brazil participated in my *upcycling* practice. The *Garage* was a mix between conceptual and commercial studio, following in the same fashion as certain artists working across disciplines. I am influenced by projects such as Christine Hill's [*Volksboutique*](#) in 1990's Berlin, and Natalie Purschwitz's [*Hunt and Gather*](#) in 2000's Vancouver, as examples of a mix of artist studio, commercial store and cultural venue, hosting performances and other artistic collaborations. Instead of conforming to the gallery system, these women artists commercialize their products in personal exchanges with the public, as "a way of claiming autonomy" as Christine Hill states, "absolving me from having to rely on the art system to provide me with an audience". In the *Garage* I commercialized the sculptural garments as a commodity, as well as created a conceptual frame for the visitors. The apparent

commercial transactions were embroidered with social implications, where the audience became an active part of the practice. The interactions at the *Garage* are then translated into *musical sewing* performances, as exemplified by *Fashion Orchestra* (2013), performed in the Curitiba Theatre Festival. This was the last show I organized before moving to Germany, and involved all artists that have collaborated with *Agente Costura* in the ten years in Curitiba (figure 8).



8. Fashion Orchestra. (2013) Curitiba, Brazil.

In collaboration with: Alexandre Gonçalves, Ana Rocha, Irineu Almeida, Alexandre Gonçalves, André Cajarana, Vina Marçal, Jonathan Washington, O Lendário Chucrobilly Man, Cassiano Fagundes, Andreza Michel, Babi Age, Vilma Ribeiro, Amaranta, Loa Campos, Marina Prado, Matias Donoso, Jessica Petry, Pam Farias, Fabiane Meissner, Marcio Oliveira, Michelle Kelly e Jonathan Washington, Giba E. Lima, Alberto Krawczyk, Maria Mion, Cleverson Antunes de Oliveira and Marta Souza.

The examples in this text of my interim and graduation exhibitions show how a *sewing station* inhabits the gallery space during and after a *musical sewing* performance, as an itinerant studio that can be translated into various locations. In the past three summers in Vancouver I have created strong ties to the local artistic community, collaborating with a range of different artists, exhibiting and performing in several venues such as the former Instant Coffee Studio (2012), the Grunt Artist Run Centre (2013), Ayden Gallery (2014), the HopBopShop (2014), and the Vancouver Art Gallery (Fuse, 2014). Each *sewing station* is carefully tailored to inhabit each space.



9. Agente Costura @ ECUAD. (2013)

Interactions between Lisa Simpson, Alexandra Bischoff and Ruth Beer
Photo: Minttu Maari Mäntynen

During my internship in Berlin with sound artist Brandon LaBelle in the fall of 2013 at his project space Errant Bodies, my research in sound was greatly amplified. Germany marks the intensification of my research into DIY electronics, after collaborating with artists who build their own electronic instruments. Since January I have been attending the Experimental Music group (EMU) in the University of Ulm, taking part in workshops and connecting with the local music scene. I have also ventured into solo performances in the Lange Nacht der Musik in Munich (*Nähagent*, 2014) and the Month of Performance Art Berlin (figure 10), exploring my own agency as a performer. These solo performances have challenged my previous collaborative approach, nonetheless they are important for my own musical development.



10. *Agente Costura* (2014) Month of Performance Art – Berlin
Photo: Ilyia Noe

The work developed in Germany exemplifies my interest in environments that go through slow changes, concerned with a progression of alterations – every day the *sewing station* changes as the clothes are altered in the duration of each exhibition. Errant Bodies is a storefront, and I explore the window space as a place for display of these slow changes. This was also a theme in my graduation work. For the duration of the ten days, I was present in the Charles H. Scott gallery sewing and creating garments that would then be hung on the elastic web. For a viewer that encounters the installation for the first time these changes are not perceived, however they are important to the development of an active *sewing station*.



11. *Agente Costura @ Errant Bodies* (2013)

Detail of *sewing station*

Photo: Lisa Simpson

Music: Guido Henneboehl, Taiko Saito, Tobias Schirmer, Lisa Simpson, Jeremy Woodruff. Performers: Nastasia Hase,

Thread Guide Into Place: Inhabiting The Space



12. sewing station (2014) Charles H. Scott Gallery.
Photo: Ravi Gill

This thread guide secures the audience in place on its way to the tension discs, guided through the space of a *sewing station*.

The *sewing station*, in its many iterations, is a sensorial environment for social interaction, through a textile installation: an elastic web that carries repurposed garments created in *musical sewing* performances, inviting the viewer into the creative process of stitching together collected materials, second hand clothing, lace, curtains, anything soft – searching for rhythm and melody in the actions of a seamstress. The elasticity allows viewers to activate the work by trying on the garments, experiencing the exhibition from within.

In each place that I exhibit, I consider the specificities of each site to install the elastic web: the wooden beams of the Concourse and Charles H. Scott gallery (figure 12), curtain rods and existing holes of Errant Bodies project space, the stairs of the rotunda at the Vancouver Art Gallery. The malleable elastic bands expand and bend to each venue, and there are no

traces left after deinstalling. Once the web comes down, I use the elastics on the garments to provide the necessary elasticity so that they also expand and contract, molding to accommodate bodies of different sizes, inhabiting the space of the body.

I consider each *sewing station* to be *site specific* because every installation tapers to fit each room as the garments do to each body. As Miwon Kwon argues in *One Place After Another*, “the term site-specific has come to mean ‘movable under the right circumstances’ shattering the dictum that ‘to remove the work is to destroy the work’” (Kwon 38). In the book, Kwon argues that contemporary site specificity takes into consideration the site as a social place. In this sense, the elastic web is a social construction, activated by the dressing of participants.

Agente Costura is performative in its nature, exploring the spontaneous creation of sculptural garments. Each iteration of a *sewing station*, from the beginning of this program to the installation presented in the graduation exhibition, has been designed for



13. *Agente Costura* @ ECUAD (2013) sewing station under the stairs.
Photo: Minttu Maari Mäntynen

each place, transforming a gallery into studio space, and encouraging participation in reconstructing garments. After I have upcycled the participants clothing, all that is left is a Polaroid documentation of the before and after the transformation. I collect and exhibit these photos as part of the installation, telling the story of each exhibition (figure 14).



14. *Agente Costura @ ECUAD (2013)* before and after
Photo: Minttu Maari Mäntvnen

Both installations at Emily Carr considered architectural specificities. In the Concourse Gallery, I installed a *sewing station* underneath the stairs (figure 13). In the Charles H. Scott gallery the *sewing station* is placed by the sliding window that opens to the street, so people can look inside and I can look outside. For the opening night performance, *Agente Costura with Mine and Mamm*, the window is open and the performance spills out onto the street, not only responding to the architectural specificities of the gallery, but also

permeating public space. The *sewing station* displays something that has either just happened, or is about to happen. Walk by it everyday you will notice subtle differences, as an active space that is in constant movement and agitation.

In the *musical sewing* performances, I play a prepared sewing machine as a musical instrument while remaking clothes. The performance can be presented on opening night of an exhibition, or as a singular event. It is an improvised composition emphasizing the sound of making clothes, in collaboration with musicians and performers. Garments are altered instantly, in spontaneous actions, influenced by the music. Everything happens in real time, and each performance is unique based on its participants. The performance is a rhizomatic, sensorial event that aims to engage the viewer in experiencing a visual, sound, tactile experience. By remaking garments in musical compositions, I am proposing a kind of spontaneity and playfulness that is usually not associated with the labor of the garment industry.

Performative Tension Discs



15. *Agente Costura with Mine and Mamm* (2014). Charles H. Scott Gallery
Photo: Ravi Gill

Performativity creates the tension of *musical sewing* through indeterminacy. Each performance has a different tension depending on the participants. Allan Kaprow's 3rd rule for making a happening emphasizes that "the situations for a happening should come from what you see in the real world, from real places and people rather than from the head"(1). *Agente Costura*

performs actions that take place in a sewing studio, based on experiences I've shared with people through *upcycling*. These experiences are amplified by music and dance, emphasizing the actions of sewing, cutting and mending. There is a tension and a risk in spontaneously cutting into a garment, especially when someone is wearing it. There is a tension between the staged and the spontaneous, and this tension is validated because there is an audience, there is a spectator watching the performative tension of indeterminate sewing.

The methodological implications of indeterminacy in my practice come from a research into the lectures of John Cage, advocating indeterminacy in music composition, using chance procedures to create experimental works:

What is the nature of an experimental action? It is simply an action the outcome of which is not foreseen. It is therefore very useful if one has decided that sounds are to come into their own, rather than being exploited to express sentiments or ideas of order. Among those actions the outcomes of which are not foreseen, actions

resulting from chance operations are useful.
(Cage 69)

I am interested in the possibilities that arise from these experimental actions, so that the outcome of each performance is not foreseen. Altering garments is the structure for *musical sewing* and how this is executed is up to the participants, the performative actions are indeterminate based on collaborative ideas. Each step of the process has levels of chance, from the participants, to the clothing to the music.

In improvised music there are a set of notes, scales and rhythms to choose from, without a score for the composition. In his essay *Composition versus Improvisation?* Steve Larson explains how

improvisation is traditionally regarded as a process in which performers, with their voices or instruments, in 'real time', use luck or skill to respond to or incorporate mistakes; the improvisation grows out of innovation, exploits freedom, and relies on talent in an instantaneous process that involves emotional invention and intuitive impulse to create simple, direct expressions. (Larson 241)



16. *Agente Costura with Mine and Mamm* (2014)

Charles H Scott Gallery

In collaboration with: Ben Brown, Kelly McInnes, Rianne Svelnus, Sophia Wolfe, Jessica Wilkie and Kaitey Desante

Photo: Ravi Gill

Though Larson is writing from a musical perspective, the same can be said about improvised sewing: there is a set of actions to choose from – sewing, cutting, pinning – which cannot be rehearsed without actually cutting or sewing the garment, there is an inherent real time aspect, in that these actions can only be performed live (figure 15, 16). This improvisational and indeterminate sewing action is the basis for the performativity of the practice, where the process is emphasized. There is a tension in having no score.

When a performer or an audience member chooses the garment to be altered during a *musical sewing* performance it enables me to work upon a garment not previously chosen, allowing for a spontaneous result instead of a staged or foreseen outcome. This is also left to chance in the *sewing station*, as the participants bring their clothes and I respond with quick decisions to resignify each garment. The results are always uncertain. Once a participant brings a garment, there is a conversation about what

needs to be altered. This is the starting point for *upcycling*, as each garment brings with it an idea. From that idea, there are many lines of flight that we can take to alter, to change, to transform. In instigating this participation, the work is intrinsically performative. The *sewing station* again emphasizes the act of sewing, where the tensions of hacking and mending garments are literally amplified.

Take Up Lever: Participation



17. *Agente Costura @ ECUAD(2013)*. Activating the elastic web.

Maiko Yamamoto, Jay White, Leigh Gillam, Leah Weinstein, Sarah Nordean, Lisa Simpson.

Photo: Minttu Maari Mäntynen

I am interested in the nuances between participation and collaboration. The *sewing station* is a constructed sewing space open for participation with the public, inviting audience to bring clothes for *upcycling*. In the *musical sewing* performances, I am interested in collaborating with other artists and musicians to orchestrate a collective performance.

In the introductory chapter for the book *Participation* the curator and art historian Claire Bishop makes a distinction between the *social dimension of participation* as participatory art with social and political implications, to that of the *activation of the individual viewer in so-called interactive art and installation*, which simply involve the viewer for aesthetic purposes (Bishop 10). She argues towards artistic practices that bring art closer to issues of contemporary living, in a social and political discourse. In *The Social Turn* Bishop writes, “the creative energy of participatory practices rehumanizes – or at least de-alienates – a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalism”(Bishop 3). This social

dimension of participation is amplified in the *sewing station* through a research and discussion of contemporary consumption habits.

Participating in the *sewing station* brings a new use for discarded clothing, an alternative for consumption of new products. In questioning contemporary habits, the participant is empowered to become a conscious consumer. Bishop outlines an *aesthetic of participation* as

the desire to create an active subject, one who will be empowered by the experience of physical or symbolic participation. The hope is that the newly-emancipated subjects of participation will find themselves able to determine their own social and political reality. (Bishop 12)

Participation in the *sewing station* is also encouraged by inviting the viewer to wear garments hung on the elastic web, aiming to activate the space of the exhibition, emphasizing a tactile experience. In this way, viewer becomes participant and there is a personal link created between the work and its audience (figure 17).

The collaborative *musical sewing* performances are lined with the participatory nature of making music. Music is usually produced as an ensemble, requiring several instruments and involving a collective. Each *musical sewing* performance is created in collaboration with invited musicians, who play an important role in the performance. The musicians set the tone for each piece, and they influence my sewing during each performance. This brings up questions around the difference between participation and collaboration. When does one begin and the other one end? If viewers are participating in *upcycling*, are they also collaborating in creating the work? When I invite musicians to participate, when do they become collaborators?

Bishop writes, “one of the main impetuses behind participatory art has therefore been a restoration of the social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning.” (Bishop 12) This collective elaboration of meaning is explored in the collaborative approach to *musical sewing*, where the participants have a valued

input in shaping the performances. The creative input of other artists in the different iterations of *musical sewing* depend on a network established where the performance takes place. *Agente Costura with Mine and Mamm*, presented at the Charles H. Scott Gallery, was developed in collaboration with musician Ben Brown and choreographer Kelly McInnes. Ben is initiator of a project called Music and Movement Mondays (Mamm), bringing together musicians and dancers for improv sessions. Kelly was working on a dance called Mine, investigating identity and personal relationships with clothing. The performance is an example of artists who share ideas, in this case improvisation and clothing, shaping a work together. This is a shift in my practice from being the orchestrating agent, a part that I played in *Fashion Orchestra* and *Agente Costura @ Errant Bodies*, and becoming also a collaborator in my own performances. The titling in this case also reflects the nature of the collaborative approach, acknowledging the three projects involved in creating the piece.

Needle Thread Guide: Indeterminate Sewing

Fashioning a new pattern of behaviour, based on resignification and repurposing of materials. Looking at an object and seeing it differently, finding new meaning for it, considering its limitations and its potential for transformation.

Pinning down certain aspects of contemporary consumption habits... The long lost seamstress replaced by the assembly line... Backstitch; reverse, to a time where clothing was made to each body's measurements... By using clothing, something that we can all relate to, discussing the importance of the individual in contemporary society, and the importance of our ability to improvise as a tool for change. Cutting on the bias, against the grain.

Wearing a statement against the massification of the garment industry. A statement against disposable, dispensable fashion. Against consumer trends that force us to accumulate. Against the production line that enslaves the seamstress to sew endlessly the same seams, never getting to see the finished product.

Indeterminate sewing is the term I use to describe the improvisational sewing technique I use to create sculptural garments. I call them sculptural

because when they are hung in the installation, they take on three dimensional shapes that are not necessarily associated with a wearable garment. The garments are sculpted around a body as a collage of textiles, adding sometimes two shirts to make a dress, rearranging pattern pieces, and playing with the details of each article of clothing that is altered. The sewing is *indeterminate* because I do not calculate measurements nor do I create patterns before constructing a garment, nor do I trace with chalk before cutting, or pin the material down, which are the traditional steps in garment construction. Using the original shapes of second hand clothing as the starting point of the alteration, I work on reshaping and repurposing, amplifying certain aspects of a garment. I do this live, and to the beat of music, creating rhythmic patterns from these alterations. In this sense, the music created is also indeterminate, as it is not based on a musical score, but on the sewing actions. This practice is performative in its spontaneity, there is a certain freedom in cutting into a garment without any previous

measurements, without the fear of making mistakes, because mistakes can always be mended. Working with discarded clothing also allows this freedom, as the garments apparently no longer have any use as they are.

The practice of repurposing waste material has recently been called *upcycling*, a term coined by chemist Michael Braumgart and architect Bill McDonough in the book *Cradle to Cradle – Remaking the way we make things*. Based on design principles, they explain that most products manufactured today have a *cradle to grave* cycle: products are made, used and then disposed of, creating a cycle of trash, of products that cannot be reused. Even if the product can be recycled, which they refer to as a down cycle, often it is done so at a high cost for a product of lesser quality. *Upcycling* means that a product can have a *cradle to cradle* cycle by being easily disassembled and all of its parts reused, thus being of higher quality even once it is no longer of use in its original state (Braumgart and McDonough 62). In my practice, *upcycling* means

reshaping a garment to fit the needs of the person who will wear it. In this way, a garment that was not being used can have greater value once altered. The experience of repurposing this garment is also an added value, seeing the instant transformation of a skirt into a dress, in just a few minutes.

Though Braumgart and McDonough do not specifically speak to the fashion industry in their book, the concept has spread throughout the fashion community and *upcycling* has become a very specific term within discussion of sustainability in fashion. In Berlin there is a growing *upcycling* community of designers, largely promoted by the [Upcycling Fashion Store](#), which commercializes brands working with fair trade, organic materials, repurposing of second hand clothing, and scrap materials from industry. There is plenty of debate on *cradle to cradle* theory. While the book is concerned in the design of better products, it does not advocate that people should perhaps consume less in order to create less waste. This discussion is important in the development of *Agente*

Costura. By using second hand clothing as the material I am using existing objects to recreate and repurpose, contributing to the discussion around sustainability. I am encouraging the participator to consume less by transforming the garments they already own.

The problem of excessive consumption surrounding the fashion industry is by no means a new discussion. Texts from the early 20th century bring up this debate, for example during The Dress Reform in Germany. The book *Against Fashion*, by Radu Stern brings together a collection of historical texts, including *A New Art Principle in Modern Women's Clothing* (1902), where artist Henry Van De Velde expresses his concern on the domination of the fashion industry:

All of us who have been involved in creating garments with the sole purpose of dressing women as well as possible have experienced a feeling of revolt against fashion and its representatives, who have turned their backs on this simple, natural aim in pursuit of another- namely, the development of a new style for each season, so different from the previous one that the slaves of fashion feel obliged to replace their wardrobes every six months. (138)

Though Van De Velde is writing about Haute Couture in the early 1900s, his concerns are extremely contemporary and the situation has sped up exponentially. In the recent book *Overdressed – The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Dress*, journalist Elizabeth L. Cline examines the fast fashion industry, “a radical method of retailing that has broken away from seasonal selling and puts out new inventory throughout the year”(Cline 96), which encourages more consumption. Often, the products of fast fashion are made with materials of poor quality and under poor working conditions, which is why they can sell at such a low prices. (Cline 115) This makes for an unethical and unsustainable industry, because garments are made to be disposable. According to Cline, “every year, Americans throw away 12.7 million tons, or 68 pounds of textiles per person, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, which also estimates that 1.6 million tons of this waste could be recycled or reused.” (Cline 122) That alone is a reason to work with second hand

garments, repurposing materials that would normally end up as waste.

Though this text does not aim to answer questions regarding sustainability in the fashion industry, I have incorporated the term *upcycling* to mean this transformation that a garment undergoes. The purpose of 'dressing women as well as possible' is one of my aims as an artist, as well as making clothing that will last for more than the passing trends. *Agente Costura* aims to create sculptural collages around the body, based on each participant's needs, and their particular history with each garment. A few examples of the before and after will help illustrate the transformation a garment can undergo, again emphasizing the importance of participation for this change to occur. Each example occurred as the participant brought their own clothes. A conversation is held as to why the garment is not being worn, and then I come up with a way to alter that garment in order for it to be wearable again. The importance placed on changing, rearranging, repurposing is a direct reflection

on our consumer waste society, as an intervention on these patterns. Again, I emphasize these garments as sculptural due to my creative process in making them: as if carving on wood, or chipping away a stone, I am looking for a new form in a raw material, in my case a second hand garment.



18. Debora before

There is a specific hierarchical structure in learning how to sew: take measurements, create a pattern, cut the fabric from the pattern, and sew the fabric pieces together in a specific order. What if these directions were followed in a rhizomatic fashion?



19. Debora after Garage, 2013.

Photo: Lisa Simpson



20. Nicola before.

If the measurements were not of the waist, bust and hips, but they were of sleeves, cuffs and collars? If instead of putting the sleeve in the armhole it is used as part of a skirt? If a pair of pants is turned upside down to make a dress?



21. Nicola after. London, 2012.

Photo: Lisa Simpson



22. Isabelle before.

If the measurements were not of the waist, bust and hips, but they were of sleeves, cuffs and collars? If instead of putting the sleeve in the armhole it is used as part of a skirt? If a pair of pants is turned upside down to make a dress?



23. Isabelle after. rosalux, berlin, 2014

Photo: Lisa Simpson

Needle: creating a stitch

The needle pierces the social fabric and creates the stitch between the theoretical and the practical aspects of *Agente Costura*, a weave between the research of participatory performance art, and the stitching of textiles and music. The open-endedness of this project allows for unlimited explorations, and every collaboration, each city, each situation is another stitch, another patch in the patchwork of experience. I have described a framework for the practice, but the elastics bend and expand depending on each exhibition. Some *musical sewing* performances have focused more on music, others have had more participation, some have been staged and others more spontaneous. There is no specific pattern to follow, allowing for the experience to be in the forefront.

Agente Costura is not only about my own practice as an artist, but it celebrates the creativity of others, by providing a platform of participation. I am grateful to have had so many talented artists collaborating in *musical sewing* performances. After ten years of

working in Curitiba, the masters program at Emily Carr University has helped me widen my audience and my network, facing the challenge of creating participatory performances. *Agente Costura* is now picking up speed to encompass more participation, in different spaces and with different artists. *Fashion Orchestra* (2013) was the biggest performance in scale of participation, over 30 people on stage including musicians, circus performers, dancers and audience participants. Performances such as *Agente Costura @ ECUAD* (2013), *Agente Costura @ Errant Bodies* (2013), and *Agente Costura with Mine and Mamm* (2014) have gained in details- the sewing machine has developed as an instrument, as I further my research in amplification, added sounds, and rhythmic patterns. With an indeterminate musical score the performance gains more freedom. The needle represents the performance practice as a moment in time, the stitching together of artists and community in a transformative experience. It represents each performance as a singular stitch, and the whole practice as a continuous seam.

Sound Pedal



24 Prepared sewing machine. Charles H. Scott Gallery, July 2014
Photo: Ravi Gill

The pressure I apply to the foot pedal controls the speed, and each speed has a different tone. When I press the pedal full force, the whole machine vibrates. At these points of vibrations, bells and strings are tied and activated, like a prepared piano by Cage. As I move the fabric while sewing, my hand hits the keys on the keyboard, creating a melody. By transforming a

sewing machine into a musical instrument I am

resignifying the function of the object, exploring not only its original function - the stitching of fabric - but also the potential for the creation and manipulation of sound, turning my sewing machine into an assemblage of bells and strings and keys and needle and thread (figure 24). This attempt is in tune with the teachings of John Cage and his research on experimental music, aiming to break away from musical conventions. In his seminal book *Silence*, Cage writes:

percussion music is revolution. Sound and rhythm have too long been submissive to the restrictions of nineteenth-century music. Today we are fighting for their emancipation. (...) experiment must necessarily be carried on by hitting anything – tin pans, rice bowls, iron pipes – anything we can lay our hands on. Not only hitting, but rubbing, smashing, making sound in every possible way. In short, we must explore the materials of music. (Cage 87)

I am exploring the materials of music with an amplified sewing machine, asking what is the sound of transforming a garment? I am aware of the rhythm of the sewing machine, and I am breaking away from the conventions of sewing by using this rhythm to compose music. My actions of where to cut - where to sew and when - are actions that make sound. In this sense, the music I produce while sewing is a result of altering a garment, but at the same time it is the primary influence.

In amplifying the sound of sewing, I am allowing for spontaneous improvised rhythmic structures. When sewing two pieces of fabric together with the finished garment in mind- purposefully altering that garment- I am producing indeterminate music, at once because the drone sound of the sewing machine is constantly producing rhythm, but also as I find musical patterns in the actions of a seamstress. In the search for rhythm, the stitching on the garments come as a visual score, creating a specific texture on the fabric (Figure 25). This stitching takes on a special form as it is guided by live

music, when I am not only creating rhythms but I am following them in live improvisation with other musicians. As Cage defines in conversation with Steve Sweeney Turner in *The Musical Times*, “the indeterminist position is all connected with seeing how things are at the moment when you’re experiencing them”(Cage 469). This indeterminacy is what guides both my sewing and the sounds I make.



25.stitching the score. Detail of sculptural garment
Photo: Lisa Simpson

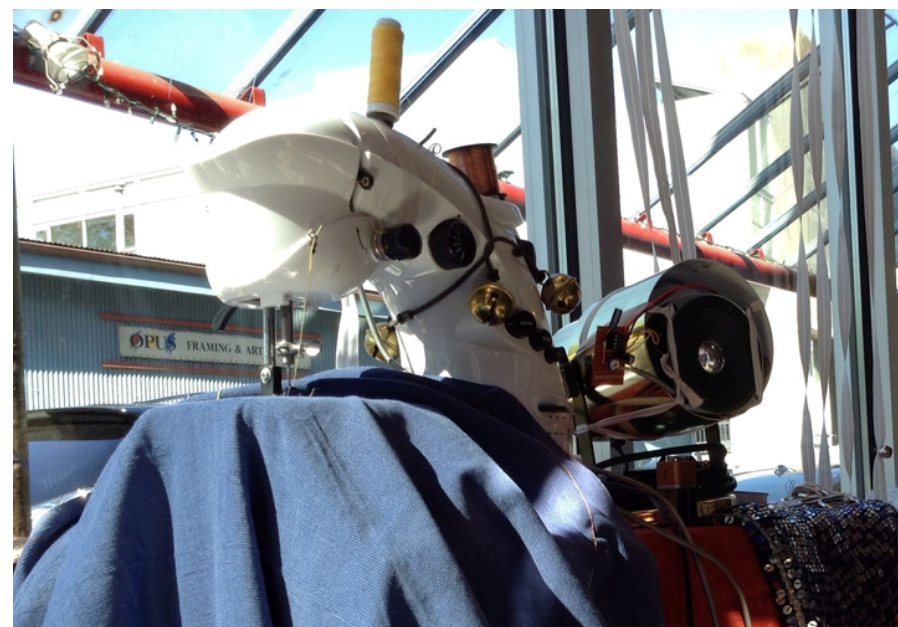
The amplification of the sewing machine is essential to the development of *musical sewing* performances, and a research into electronics is a recent addition to my practice. I am beginning to stitch together the handmade aspects of my sculptural garments, and the

research into handmade electronics, furthering a

discussion into DIY practices. I began building my own contact microphones based on lessons in the book *Handmade Electronic Music – The Art of Hardware Hacking* by Nicolas Collins. The contact microphone is made from a piezoelectric disc, which is a bond between a thin layer of crystal and a flexible sheet of brass (Collins 27). These piezoelectric discs are found inside mostly everything that beeps including microwaves, phones, and toys; therefore are easily purchased in electronics stores. Once connected by a mono cable into an amplifier the piezoelectric disc picks up vibration and translates it into sound waves. With a contact microphone the vibration of the sewing machine is directly amplified into sound. The contact microphone also picks up the cutting sound of the scissors, varying in sound depending on the fabric. Contact microphone music became a trend in experimental music groups during the 1960s and 70s when the piezoelectric disc became easily available, and was widely researched and advocated also by John Cage. (Collins 35)

Through building my own microphones, sound has literally amplified in my recent work. In the early *musical sewing* experimentations, where other artists invited me as a guest in their shows, the sound of sewing was secondary to my altering of garments live, and played a small role in the music. In the past year the sound has become improvised and experimental, as my own interest in amplifying the machine has become more technical. The following examples of *musical sewing* performances note this musical development: a progression from previously scored music where the sewing machine plays a secondary role, to it becoming intricate in the composition. The first two video links: [Fashion Orchestra](#) and [Agente Costura @ ECUAD](#) are previous to the research into contact microphones, the last two video links: [Agente Costura @ Errant Bodies](#) and [Agente Costura @ Rosalux](#) are examples of how the contact microphones capture the nuances of the sewing machine sounds, amplified scissors, and the sound of textiles.

This research was further developed for the exhibition at the Charles H. Scott gallery, as illustrated by the assembled *musical sewing unit* (figure 26). The unit is composed of a found sewing machine and a found lampshade assembled into speaker, connected by a piezoelectric microphone and amplifier circuit, built with the help of Wip Lab technician Bobbi Kozinuk at Emily Carr. I am interested in furthering my research into assembling my own sound equipment in creating these units of sound. This fall I have been selected for an artist residency in Hallein, Austria called [Schmiede](#), where I will be attending a Textiles Electronics lab furthering my research to incorporate sounds directly onto textiles.



26. *musical sewing unit* (2014) Charles H. Scott Gallery
Photo: Lisa Simpson

A reflection

Though this text has gone through the layers of *musical sewing* performances, as well as the conceptual framework for the *sewing station* as an ongoing installation, all of these thread guides are variables. These are guidelines of actions and themes that are adapted to each different situation, from the art gallery to the public space. There is no formula for a performance or installation to be repeated. Each chapter explored here must expand outwards into more research, more associations, a bigger rhizome. Writing about the practice has allowed me to explore and analyze the details, each theme in the performance, in order to create a strong stitch.

In reflecting back to the work developed along this program, culminating with the exhibition in the Charles H. Scott Gallery, I see my work as an agitation of contemporary consumption society, taking the usual assumptions about a sewing environment and breaking them into song: taking the repetitive sound of the sewing machine and changing it by amplifying and

synthesizing it, and through this rebellious irregular use of a sewing machine, challenging the repetition of contemporary living. My aim now is to be more performative, more musical, more collaborative, to create works that have a greater impact in questioning contemporary consumption habits. In creating sensorial, tactile experiences, I want to engage an audience, to thread them through an experience of transformation.

I am writing the last sentences of this thesis document at the Cabaret Voltaire almost a hundred years after Hugo Ball opened the door to a place that now hosts so much performance history, and I am thinking of the *Garage* as one of these spaces, inspired by Dada. I am reflecting on the experiments conducted at the *Garage*, and how much my performance work has evolved during the course of this program. I feel that I have strengthened and deepened my own understanding of my practice, realizing that indeterminacy, through the theory of John Cage, is what enables the rhizomatic nature of my participatory performance work.

Now living away from Brazil, I am even more aware of the particularities of Brazilian participatory art set out by artists such as Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, and how that continues to inform my practice. I am also encouraged and inspired by contemporary women artists working with similar themes and materials, such as Frau Fiber and her [Sewing Rebellion](#), and Liz Collins and her [Knitting Nation](#), as artists that explore issues around fashion, textiles, and the labor of sewing, bringing these issues into the contemporary art realm. Frau Fiber has an ongoing teaching lab in her studio, teaching the public to mend their clothes, empowering the participants with the necessary sewing skills to take matters into their own hands when it comes to clothing. Liz Collins creates collaborative knitting performances as a commentary on how humans interact with machines, global manufacturing, trade and labor, brand iconography, and fashion.

While considering these possibilities, I am encouraged to research a new term that has risen from the graduate exhibition, examining the *sewing station*

as an apparatus. The dictionary definition of an apparatus is “the way in which parts of a machine or of a mechanism and, by extension, the mechanism itself are arranged” (Agamben 7), and I see this in regard to the assembled musical sewing machines as units of sound. The way in which parts of a machine are arranged is also the metaphorical structure of this text, considering the threading progression of a sewing machine as a framework to my current research. Giorgio Agamben calls an apparatus “literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions or discourses of living beings” (Agamben 14). I am interested in developing the ongoing installations entitled *sewing station* as an apparatus within a larger context – a constructed sewing space that draws the viewer into questions of consumption and identity, through a transformative approach.

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