

***NEW MATERIALISMS: Intersections of
Plastic, Consumption & Spectacle***

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by

Arianna Richardson

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Thesis Committee:

Sandra Alföldy, Associate Professor, Art History & Contemporary Studies (Program Advisor)
Anna Sprague, Regular Part-Time Faculty, Intermedia and Foundation
Sarah Maloney, Regular Part-Time Faculty, Sculpture and Foundation
Mathew Reichertz, Professor, Chair of Fine and Media Arts
Jan Peacock, Professor, Media Arts (Director, MFA Program)

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I. PLASTIC

I took a look around my studio. Everything pinned up on the walls and piled up in bins was plastic. Everything I had been working with was composed of polymers and plasticizers; toxic and yet, seductive. It was October 2016, I had been working in this way for seven years without realizing that the core of my practice was built on the use of this specific material. The obsession and focus had been named. Now I could begin to unpack this commonplace and decidedly modern material, assessing its role within my studio practice and MFA research.

Bakelite, the first fully synthetic material and what many consider the forebear of modern plastic, was invented in 1907. After the Second World War, American and German governments invested millions into the research and development of synthesized, petroleum-based materials which resulted in plastic becoming the ubiquitous presence that we see today.¹ While researching the historical origins of plastic, I realized its pervasiveness; everywhere I looked, there it was. No surface is truly free from plastic: it is on our bodies, on the ground, on our food, on every wall, it is in every public and private space, in our bodies, in the water, and in our food. If plastic is not contained within the object, it was most certainly used at some point during its production. How did this happen in a matter of decades? Roland Barthes describes our human predilection for this material, perhaps explaining how it was able to penetrate our personal space and material culture so deeply:

“So, more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation; as its everyday name indicates, it is ubiquity made visible. And it is this, in fact, which makes it a miraculous substance: a miracle is always a sudden transformation of nature. Plastic remains impregnated throughout with this wonder: it is less a thing than the trace of a movement.

[...]

At the sight of each terminal form (suitcase, brush, car-body, toy, fabric, tube, basin or paper), the mind does not cease from considering the original matter as an enigma. This is because the quick-change artistry of plastic is absolute: it can become buckets as well as jewels. Hence a perpetual amazement, the reverie of man [sic] at the sight of the proliferating forms of matter, and the connections he [sic] detects between the singular of the origin and the plural of the effects. And this amazement is a pleasurable one, since the scope of the transformations gives man

¹ Liboiron, Max, “Redefining Pollution and Action: The Matter of Plastics,” *Journal of Material Culture*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2016): p. 9.

[sic] the measure of his [sic] power, and since the very itinerary of plastic has given him [sic] the euphoria of a prestigious free-wheeling through Nature.”²

Despite being a fascinating material that has propelled the technological advancements of our society, plastic is an insidious, nebulous pollutant that evades our attempts to manage it both legislatively and physically. The specific chemical compositions of plastic, and the variety of sectors it permeates, makes it difficult for researchers, activists, and industry to agree on its classification as a toxic pollutant. Plastics are comprised of two main components: brittle and rigid polymer chains that are non-toxic and basically benign (other than their ability to break down into increasingly tiny fragments that choke animals, lacerate intestinal systems, and clog infrastructure) and monomer additives or, plasticizers, which are the chemicals that are nestled between polymer chains to give plastics their recognizably *plastic* qualities (varying degrees of transparency and flexibility).³ It is these monomer additives such as bis(2-ethylhexyl) phthalate (DEHP), bisphenol A (BPA), or polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) that are toxic and harmful for humans and the environment; 98 percent of plastics leach chemicals into our bodies or the environment that they are present in.⁴ Because every human and animal body that has been tested in the past decade has contained detectable levels of the chemicals that leach from plastics, it is impossible to conduct scientific studies that aim to determine if there are any deleterious effects from exposure to these chemicals.⁵

I am left to wonder how our relationship to this material can be so conflicted. While it represents the industriousness of modern life and human technological achievement, it also represents our demise. Plastic is contradictorily synonymous with both progress and destruction. My studio practice uses contradiction as a strategy. I co-opt the processes of consumption and mass-production in order to understand and critique them. I adopt the languages of consumerism and marketing and pervert them for my own intentions, pushing my own agenda that is counter to dominant ideological systems. I use plastic as my primary material to investigate our society’s dependence on it and I create objects that masquerade as commodities to challenge the way in which we are expected to produce and consume objects in

² Barthes, Roland, “Plastic,” *Perspecta*, Vol 24 (1988): p. 92.

³ Liboiron, “Redefining Pollution and Action,” p. 9.

⁴ Ibid, p. 10.

⁵ Ibid, p. 3.

our Western culture. This hypocritical approach is meant to frustrate and provoke the viewer, intended to illicit a conversation about our collective complicity in consumer culture. The contradictions of presenting celebration and critique alongside each other also displays my ambivalence about plastic as a material and plastic pollution as a ecological catastrophe that needs our attention: I am simultaneously attracted and repulsed by plastic, using my practice to call attention to the need for action in this crisis while also maintaining a certain hopelessness about the effectiveness of any action. I employ a glittering, superficially celebratory and playful aesthetic to distract me from the despair and frustration I feel when confronted by my own complicity in a destructive system that relies on cheap, invisible labour, compulsive purchasing, and monumental waste production.

I am investigating plastic to make sense of my own relationship to it as a material and as a symbol of consumption. Plastic has been instrumental in perpetuating rampant consumerism since its inception, Susan Strasser describes how deeply it has altered our relationship to the material world:

“New materials, especially plastics of all kinds, became the basis for a relationship to the material world that required consumers to buy things rather than make them and to throw things out rather than fix them. Nobody made plastic at home, hardly anybody understood how it was made, and it usually could not be repaired.”⁶

In particular, I am interested in determining new uses for discarded plastic through experimentation, exploring the possibility of subverting the powerful structures that keep it in circulation in our consumer society. Our current recycling infrastructure does little to benefit the environment as, “of the 15-30% of recyclables that are retrieved from the US waste stream, nearly half are buried or burned due to contamination or market fluctuations that devalue recyclables over virgin materials.”⁷ I have diverted my own plastic detritus from entering the recycling system, putting it to use instead, for example, as a speculative furniture material in the two *Hobbyist Brand Trash Chairs*: one filled with the packaging and waste plastic that has passed through my home and studio, the other filled with shiny, metallicized-plastic snack packaging that I have processed into a confetti material. These *Trash Chairs* hypothesize a scenario in which we are forced to live amongst our trash: an absurd but useful tool with which

⁶ Strasser, Susan, *Waste and Want: The Social History of Trash*, New York: Henry Holt (2000): p. 267.

⁷ Liboiron, Max, “Modern Waste as Strategy,” *Lo Squaderno: Explorations in Space and Society* No. 29, (2013): p. 10.

to visualize one's own accumulation of consumer-waste material; a proposition for upcycling⁸ that could alter how a person perceives and enacts consumption. Another example of how I have diverted plastic material is in the *Collect-o-Cube*: a large, clear PVC, handmade cube that contains approximately one year's worth of the plastic that has cycled through my household and studio. Every collected piece has been meticulously washed, dried, and individually crushed, amassing to become the embodiment of an absurd and futile practice that disrupts the normal flow of disposable materials, resisting the logic of capitalism.⁹ It is a compression of space and time, a monument to consumerism, a metric by which to measure my complicity in an economic system that makes waste inevitable, and a self-portrait created from the physical evidence of my consumption. This object is accompanied by an instruction manual, prompting the viewer to imagine the amount of cubes that they would need to contain the packaging they encounter in their own lives.

These objects, and the *Collect-o-Cube* especially, are similar to French-American artist Arman's *Poubelles* wherein the artist would seal various types of disorganized waste materials into polymer and plexiglass containers, "mak[ing] no effort to classify or distinguish between the objects accrued herein... draw[ing] attention to the impossibility — and absurdity — of classifying rubbish."¹⁰ While the *Poubelles* are certainly absurd, they are also abject, the waste contained within them unwashed and left to deteriorate in the sealed plastic. I would posit that my own iterations are operating with a heightened absurdity, the abject qualities largely absent as the waste material that is contained and displayed within them is sparklingly clean, highlighting the intended futility of my private performances of washing and sorting trash.

⁸ A term/concept described by William McDonough and Michael Braungart in *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*. They discuss the importance of recognizing that, in traditional recycling (or more accurately, downcycling) processes, materials are made into lesser versions than themselves, usually existing for only one more cycle through the consumer realm. Upcycling means to turn a waste material into a product that is more or equally as durable or useful than its former iteration, where no material integrity or usefulness is lost. In theory, this material could be cycled through the consumer system endlessly. Ultimately, this would rely heavily on future uses for a disposable product being considered in its design.

⁹ Dini, Rachele, *Consumerism, Waste, and Re-Use in Twentieth Century Fiction: Legacies of the Avant-Garde*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 76.

¹⁰ Dini, Rachele, *Consumerism, Waste, and Re-Use in Twentieth Century Fiction: Legacies of the Avant-Garde*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 77.

In my studio, I interrupt the prescribed chain of consumption and upcycle the plastic materials that pass through my own sphere of influence. This DIY approach, while ineffectual, explores the possibility of exerting one's own agency in the vastness of the Anthropocene. Perhaps this is my own futile attempt at maintaining sanity in the face of massive environmental catastrophe, a facile effort to not feel entirely powerless. This sense of hopelessness is a feeling described by Bruno Latour in "Agency in the Anthropocene":

"I think that it is easy for us to agree that, in modernism, people are not equipped with the mental and emotional repertoire to deal with such a vast scale of events [of environmental disaster and geological time]; that they have difficulty submitting to such a rapid acceleration for which, in addition, they are supposed to feel responsible while, in the meantime, this call for action has none of the traits of their older revolutionary dreams. How can we simultaneously be part of such a long history, have such an important influence, and yet be so late in realizing what has happened and so utterly impotent in our attempts to fix it?"¹¹

II. CONSUMERISM

Much of what I am investigating centres around how cultural ideologies are spread covertly, through the consumer culture that we are immersed in everyday. Our embedded-ness in this system results in a feeling of inevitability, that the oppressive and violent structures of capitalism and the invisibility of the modes of production that it relies on are inescapable. This invisibility is key to maintaining the functioning of the machine: "the habit of buying things without knowing where, or how, or by whom they were made supports an infantile understanding of the significance [and impact] of products [people] use everyday. Similarly, when used products are routinely removed by garbage disposal services, consumers may just as easily shed their sense of responsibility for the consequences."¹² If we were made constantly aware of the real impact our consumption had on people and the environment in a way that we could comprehend, our consumer culture—and waste infrastructure system—would not exist as it does today. Contemporary readings of Thorstein Veblen identifies the maintenance of the

¹¹ Latour, Bruno, "Agency in the Anthropocene," *New Literary History* Vol. 45, No. 1 (Winter 2014): p. 1.

¹² Rathje, William, and Carl A. Zimring, editors. *Encyclopedia of Consumption and Waste: The Social Science of Garbage Vol. 1*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications Inc., 2012, p. 152.

capitalist machine as performed by the consumer in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) where he coined the term ‘conspicuous consumption’¹³:

“Veblen’s work remains a vital antidote to the Marxist theory of capitalism as a top-down system of exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. For Veblen, any adequate account of the driving motors of a capitalist economy has to pay special attention to the role of status-seeking, in particular to the various forms of conspicuous consumption designed to evoke what he calls an “invidious comparison” - a comparison that judges people according to their relative worth or merit and is designed to evoke envy or resentment.”¹⁴

This reading of Veblen exposes the covert, dispersed functioning of the ideologies of capitalism that drive up competition between people, solidifying the stratification of a class-based system, sending people into a tailspin of consumption in search of status, wealth, and validation by society. Advertising exploits this blatantly, marketing the common tropes of fantasy lifestyles: if you buy such-and-such product, you will be able to transcend your perceived position in society, making your dreams a reality. In *The Authenticity Hoax*, Andrew Potter has posited that our quest for status has become less linear—like a ladder on which you move up and down—since the mid-20th century and has shifted to a more covert exploitation of consumers by presenting the *authentic* as the ultimate pinnacle to be reached. Those people whose status we covet “does not manifest itself as mere privilege, but as a successful discovery of the rare fruit of authenticity. It is precisely because only a few people can partake of this sort of implicit, genuine authenticity that there is a market for the more explicit, fake kind.”¹⁵ As nobody wants to admit that they are inauthentically defining themselves through consumption, or that their consumptive habits are being used to exert their status within society, we are at a standstill: we cannot acknowledge the power that our consumerist ideology has over our society if we believe ourselves to be exempt from its sway over our individual decisions.¹⁶

¹³ Defined as “lavish or wasteful spending thought to enhance social prestige.” Taken from Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary.

¹⁴ Potter, Andrew, *The Authenticity Hoax: How We Get Lost Finding Ourselves*, New York: Harper Collins, 2010: p. 116.

¹⁵ Ibid, 135.

¹⁶ Ibid, 199.

Sociologist and trash historian, Susan Strasser intersects the emergence of consumer society with the proliferation of mass media in the 1920s. Before this time, common people's "vision [was] limited to people they knew, they had little opportunity to examine how others lived. By the late 1920s, thanks to movies, magazines, and all kinds of advertisements, everyone live[d] on a slope from any point of which desirable things belonging to people all the way to the top are in view".¹⁷ In the U.S. in the 1930s, exploitations of gender and class were integral in developing a throw-away culture: through the marketing of newly disposable convenience products, women in the home were both empowered and manipulated to buy into the promises of modern technology as a means to achieving more efficiency in the household tasks of sewing, cleaning, and cooking: "Beyond efficiency, then, convenience was a synonym and a metaphor for freedom, a form of well-being that products could provide, an amalgam of luxury, comfort, and emancipation from worries", allowing a women of meagre means to achieve the leisure time previously afforded only to aristocratic ladies with many servants.¹⁸ The gendered history of consumer culture was further solidified in the 1950s and 60s in America with the emergence of motivational research studies that assumed and propagated damaging stereotypes of women:

"Because studies on motivation research assumed that women purchased most goods or, at the very least, exerted determining influence on the decisions made by other family members, they focussed their attentions almost entirely on the secret desires of the female shopper. Of the numerous books and articles published during this period that promised to explain in objective terms the unconscious impulses causing women to buy, the most frequently quoted was Janet Wolff's *What Makes Women Buy* (1958). Wolff attributed the female consumer's irrationality, which she regarded as inherent, to her physical constitution: 'A woman's sex is a very deep part of her life, due to the constant reminders of her reproductive system and sexual characteristics. These factors make women more emotional, less predictable.' Other texts, stopping short of ascribing woman's consuming practices to her reproductive organs, adopted a pseudo-scientific language to describe the shopper's subterranean emotional fantasies, fears, anxieties, and desires."¹⁹

¹⁷ Strasser, Susan, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*, p. 171.

¹⁸ Strasser, Susan, "The alien past: Consumer culture in historical perspective" *Journal of Consumer Policy* Vol. 26, No. 4 (Dec 2003): p. 383

¹⁹ Whiting, Cécile, *A Taste for Pop: Pop Art, Gender, and Consumer Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 36.

The supermarket became an especially ripe area for mid-century critics of consumer culture and the ad-men that generated desire for manufactured goods. In Vance Packard's book, *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) he cites a study by motivational analyst James Vicary, claiming it to be a "particularly revealing example" of the susceptibility of women to be manipulated by consumer culture: "the rate at which a woman's eyes blinked dropped precipitously in the supermarket. Vicary concluded that women entered a hallucinatory trance when faced with shelves and shelves of product labels. Having lost her ability to appraise the true value of goods, the hypnotized shopper indulged in rampant impulse buying. Driving home the point even further, Packard cited other dramatic case studies 'proving' that the large number of package designs on display in the supermarket provoked hypnotic trances and impulse buying in the female consumer."²⁰ I find this to be interesting, while outdated, as it describes the framework upon which our current culture of consumption is built, a legacy that undoubtedly influences how and who advertisers target in their campaigns today.

I am interested in understanding my own relationship to consumption and, through my practice, I investigate it from within, parodying the rhetoric and aesthetic of consumerism in the way that I frame my creations as 'products' that are to be coveted and put to use. The promises that these products make to the audience are futile and often ridiculous in nature: that of liberation from the mundanity of everyday life as in the *Hobbyist Brand Garbage Can Cozy* or a *Hobbyist Brand Collect-o-Cube* that will make one's life instantly more efficient and exciting. I have created two signs, *Experience The Magic* and *Enter The Excitement*, that brazenly celebrate their own superficiality and the vacuousness of the promises they offer. They are pure surface, a suspended, tassled, and polished PVC tarp in the case of *ETM*, and the vacuum-formed, glittered shell of replicated food packaging in the case of *ETE*, employing the sort of seductive shininess that only plastic can produce. These signs are simultaneously handcrafted and mass-produced: the evidence of their crafting present only in slight imperfections and inconsistencies, giving an illusion of authenticity, while the aesthetic of tinsel, glitter, mylar, over-decoration, and polished plastic suggest pure superficiality. It is my hope that these signs parody consumer culture in a way that they become almost imperceptible as a critique, infiltrating the consciousness of consumer-culture covertly. Heather Davis speaks of the power of adopting imperceptibility as a strategy to work against the hegemonic powers of neo-liberal capitalism, and how this can be seen in the decay and dispersal of plastic:

²⁰ Ibid, p. 38.

“In an era in which surveillance and bio politics feel all-encompassing, in which every particular position seems to already have been captured, the lesson of imperceptibility is not a call for invisibility or an imperative to drop out. It is, rather, the lesson of shape-shifting, of assuming identities that defy coherent forms and change with and in response to particular contexts — to abandon ontology and its promises. Imperceptibility means appearing in unlocalizable formations, myriad forms, and identities... Imperceptibility is about creating structures and ways of being that are at once immediately apparent, at once immediately understood, but yet reveal nothing, containing no truth, no depth. Surface all the way through, hidden in plain sight... For example, whenever a single piece of synthetic clothing is washed, more than nineteen hundred microfilaments of plastic are shed. Since microfilaments are not filtered by water-processing plants, they eventually find their way to the ocean... The smaller and less obvious our political forms can become, the more they can travel, proliferate, and, in the end, exert a much larger influence on the system as a whole.”²¹

My work provokes a consideration of the construction and curation of identity that we all participate in, especially in the ways that we attempt to exert our individuality through the goods that we buy and the things that we make.²² By making some of my works in the form of a ‘craft kit’ available for purchase, or by providing instructions on how to replicate the work, as in the *Hobbyist Brand Garbage Can Cozy* or *Collect-o-Cube Instruction Manuals*, I am challenging the notion of the individual artist as sole creator of the work, democratizing and commodifying my artistic and intellectual property. By primarily using a material that we all encounter daily—plastic—and by assuming an everyday form—that of a commodity or a vernacular, useable object—I hope to interrupt the oppressive ideologies contained within these forms to call attention to our passive existence within class-based systems of domination and control. The Situationists International, led by Guy Debord and influenced heavily by Henri Lefebvre’s *Critique of Everyday Life*, spoke of the possibility for an effective, cultural revolution against the hegemonic power of the spectacle—driven by and for consumption—as being possible only in terms of “revolutions in individual everyday life.”²³ I disrupt everyday processes of consumption and our usual treatment of the resultant waste, calling attention to the ideologies of capitalism that have been fully naturalized in common society.

²¹ Davis, Heather, “Imperceptibility and Accumulation: Political Strategies of Plastic” in *Camera Obscura* Vol. 31, No. 2 2016, p. 190.

²² Chase, John, “The Role of Consumerism in American Architecture” *Journal of Architectural Education* 44, No. 4 (August 1991): p. 212.

²³ Trebitsch, Michael, “Preface” in *Critique of Everyday Life Vol. II: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday* by Henri Lefebvre, trans. John Moore, London, New York: Verso, 2002, p. xxii.

From Claes Oldenburg opening *The Store* for two months in 1961 in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, to *The American Supermarket* exhibition at the Biancini Gallery (NYC) in 1964, to Lorri Millan and Shawna Dempsey's *Grocery Store* installation in Winnipeg in 2002, artist interpretations of and interventions in consumer culture—especially as it relates to the purchasing and consumption of food products—are a line of inquiry that I see my project as a continuation of.²⁴

III. PACKAGING

During the 1920s and 30s the amount of packaging on goods increased significantly, resulting in the development of a whole new category of waste that was created solely to be thrown away, training consumers in a new culture of disposability that equated re-use to poverty and backwardness and waste to abundance and wealth.²⁵ The disposability of packaging was a phenomenon that was manufactured by advertisers and corporations, introduced to a society that was steeped in thriftiness and restraint—they had to create an attitude that the packaging material was valueless. The practice of disposability was quite easily adopted in North American society because of the prevalent discourses of hygiene and efficiency that emerged in the early 20th century:

“These new packages offered consumers cleanliness *because* of their disposability—the fact that they were made to be thrown away meant that every newly purchased item was newly made and therefore clean. Disposability guarantees cleanliness. Lucas also notes an economic dimension to disposability, whereby the risk that early commentators saw of the cost of disposable packaging being a disincentive to consumption is neutralized by the expectation that it will be thrown away, classed as valueless even at the point of purchase.”²⁶

²⁴ For a great discussion of the intersections of consumer culture, class, and mid-century America as it is presented in *The Store* and *The American Supermarket*, see Ch. 1 of *A Taste for Pop: Pop Art, Gender, and Consumer Culture* by Cécile Whiting, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 200, 269.

²⁶ Fisher & Shipton, *Designing for Re-use* p. 78.

I am interested in packaging because I believe it to be the most fundamental intersection between consumerism and material culture. Labelled packaging first emerged in the mid 16th century in response to the increased consumption and trade that resulted from the expansion of colonial empires, making it easier to transport goods across political boundaries²⁷. Packaging was mostly handmade and remained expensive until the late 1800s when paperboard and cardboard became more commonly used.²⁸ By the end of the 19th century, urban populations were expanding and more people were working within the capitalist system, selling their time and labour for money, creating a market for more goods. In 1884, the term “marketing” was coined, signalling a shift in the relationships between corporations and individual members of society.²⁹ With factories becoming increasingly mechanized and efficient they were able to produce goods at a faster pace than ever before; corporations recognized that they had to stimulate the market to create a desire for the excess of products that they were creating, employing advertisers who recognized that their job was not only to introduce new products to the people, but to actually convince them that they needed them. In addition to traditional advertising methods, product packaging itself became one of the main ways in which advertisers could influence—and increase—public demand for products. Wharton School advertising professor, Herbert Hess wrote in 1915 that “the manufacturer was to use imagery in advertising (and on packaging) to awaken ‘desire where people’s senses have not yet been aroused to appreciate this particular article.’... Visual attraction was especially important: ‘Each advertisement should consist of an intensity strong enough to force itself into the consciousness: by its bold type, seductive illustration, or striking colours.’”³⁰

With the invention and perfection of plastic in the 1920s and 30s, it became increasingly entrenched in the consumer experience, this particular material being very adept at producing seductive, shiny surfaces and vibrant, never-before-seen colours. Now, plastic packaging is completely ubiquitous in our environment, seemingly inseparable from consumption of almost all goods and impossible to avoid. In 2010, in the United States alone, there were 14 million tons of plastic packaging and containers generated by consumption and, of that total, only 8 percent

²⁷ Fisher, Tom, and Janet Shipton, *Designing for Re-use: The Life of Consumer Packaging*, London: Earthscan, 2010. p. 15

²⁸ Cross & Proctor, *Packaged Pleasures*, p. 45.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 12.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 47.

was recovered for recycling.³¹ It is estimated that in the past decade in the U.K., packaging has made up 50 percent of the volume of the municipal solid waste stream³² and that the average household in the U.K. purchases and throws away an average of 200 kg of packaging per year³³. In my mind, this makes packaging—and disposable packaging in particular—one of the most significant areas to explore if one is to determine how to stimulate a shift in attitudes about and practices of consumption in the Western world.

Since the fall of 2017, I have been saving all of my shiny metallicized-plastic packages and have been convincing family, friends, and colleagues to save theirs and give them to me. In addition to reaching out to my local community directly, I have also been regularly collecting empty, discarded snack packaging from the garbage cans at the NSCAD Port and Fountain campuses, as well as other public places around the HRM. I started to notice that certain days were more bountiful than others, sometimes there would be a plethora of snacking evidence concentrated in one location, and that there were certain brands and flavours that I was finding very frequently. The intention behind this practice is twofold: to keep these seductive materials out of the landfill and to put them to use in my studio work as a substitute for tinsel. I assembled and self-published a checklist booklet (edition of 20) based on all of the various snacks that I had encountered up until this point and all of the additional brands and flavours that I could think of in order to keep track of when, where, and what I was collecting. I have created pie charts that break this collected data down into a few different visualizations: by snack type, chip flavour preference, general flavour profile (salty/sweet), and by frequency according to days of the week for some of the locations that I have collected material from (See Appendix A). All of my findings are completely anecdotal and not calculated with any sort of statistical accuracy. It has been, instead, a way for me to experiment with visualizing information that might be transmittable to other people. It has also been useful for me in tracking the amounts and types of material that I will be using for my PVC, confetti-filled *Hobbyist Brand Trash Chair*.

Individually-wrapped snacks represent many facets of the patriarchal, capitalist, colonial, and neoliberal structure of North American consumerist hegemony: the destruction

³¹ Becker, Craig, et al, “Initiating Sustainable Behaviour: Feel Good for Doing Good” in *Electronic Green Journal* Vol. 1, No. 37 (2014), p. 2.

³² McDonough, William, and Michael Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle*, New York: North Point Press, 2002, p. 102.

³³ Fisher & Shipton, *Designing for Re-use*, p. xiv.

perpetrated by pesticide-laden, corporatized, mono-culture farming practices that produce this type of food; petrochemical extractivism and the technology and infrastructure necessary to manufacture these products and the plastic wrappers that caress them; the networks of shipping and storage involved in moving the product from crop to factory to warehouse to shelf to house to garbage can to landfill; the marketing and promotion involved in creating the seductively shiny and colourful packaging, advertising campaigns, and brand loyalty that these products strive for; the capitalist system that monitors the ebb and flow of money exchanged between producers, manufacturers and consumers; the social attitudes that we have regarding waste, dirt, and disposability; and the class system embedded in packaged goods—premium and discount brands identified by the materiality and aesthetic of the package, the endorsements they are able to pay for, and the literal placement on the shelf in the grocery store. Neoliberalism is perhaps most clearly and simply operating in the pleasure and sense of independence that one feels when exercising one's *right* to choose, enjoying a *treat*, emancipated³⁴ from the mundanity of everyday life; a seductive illusion of agency, affluence, and reward.³⁵ Google ngrams tell us that “snacking” was not a term in common usage, as we would define it today, until the 1950s, emerging officially in relation to the vending machine trade that began in 1942.³⁶

IV. TINSEL

Much of the plastic that I use in my work comes in the form of metallicized plastic fringe or strands: tinsel. This material has been a near constant in my work since 2009. I have been buying out entire stocks from stores, excitedly collecting vintage examples from thrift stores and garage sales, and have amassed a huge collection of various iterations of the stuff.

³⁴ For an interesting synopsis of the emergence of neoliberalism and how it “redefined emancipation in market terms,” see “Contradictions of Capitalism and Care” by Nancy Fraser, p. 113-114.

³⁵ For a great discussion on the conflation of human rights and consumption see “In Goods We Trust” by Jane Pavitt in *Brand New*, London: V&A Publications, 2000. p. 20-69. From p. 32: “In the post-war West, against the backdrop of the Cold War, to be an active participant in a consumer society became increasingly regarded as a basic human right. The idea of citizenship becomes framed around the idea of consumership and this ‘redefinition of rights and obligations articulated itself in the seemingly innocuous language of soft drinks, cars, and household appliances.’”

³⁶ Cross, Gary S., and Robert N. Proctor, *Packaged Pleasures: How Technology & Marketing Revolutionized Desire*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014, p. 57.

The word tinsel originates in the mid-15th century and comes from the French word *estincelle* — meaning spark, or spangle— and describes a “kind of cloth made with interwoven gold or silver thread.” In the 1650s, the meaning shifted to denote anything “showy with little real worth.”³⁷ Tinsel icicles and their association with Christmas came in the 1840s when a German silversmith hammered silver into a thin sheet and shredded it for placement on fir tree branches.³⁸ In 1904, the German company Stanniolfabrik Eppstein patented tinsel made of lead foil with shiny tin bonded on top.³⁹ This practice continued until the 1960s when it was discovered that lead was poisonous, resulting in the end of import and production of lead alloy tinsel strands. Since 1969, tinsel has been made from polyvinyl chloride (PVC) that has been metallicized in a process of “heating and evaporating a metal such as aluminum under a vacuum and condensing it onto the plastic to leave a thin coating.”⁴⁰ The proliferation of tinsel is intrinsically linked to a very Western set of consumption values: the South Philadelphia company, Brite Star Manufacturing, has been producing 80 percent of the world’s tinsel since 1950, 95 percent of which is sold in the United States.⁴¹ This American factory produces 158 million feet of tinsel from February to October each year — enough to stretch around the full circumference of the Earth “with 5,000 miles to spare.”⁴²

As a material, tinsel interests me because of its hyper-frivolity; tinsel is ornament for the sake of ornament, dazzling us into consumption. I am fascinated by its exciting and seductive scintillations, its mimicry of opulence and celebration of falseness and superficiality, and its ties with consumption and waste (ie- the craziness of the multi-billion dollar Christmas industry). This material is commonly associated with cheapness and kitschy bad-taste, linked socio-

³⁷ “Tinsel (noun),” Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed March 30, 2017, http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=tinsel.

³⁸ Ansberry, Clare, “Tinsel: Can’t Live With It, Can’t Get Past Christmas Without It,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 23, 2009, accessed October 12, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB126152379099102083>.

³⁹ Drahl, Carmen, “What Is Tinsel Made Of, and How Has it Changed Over the Years?” *Chemical and Engineering News* Vol. 92, Iss. 50 (December 2014) p. 33.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 34-35.

⁴¹ Ansberry, “Can’t Live With It...”

⁴² Kinney, Monica Yant, “You Want Tinsel?” *Philly*, December 3, 2000, accessed October 12, 2016, http://www.articles.philly.com/2000-12-03/news/25578643_1_tinsel-christmas-tree-trimmers.

economically to the decorating practices of *uncultivated* people.⁴³ For those who desire the shine and sparkle of precious metals and gemstones but who cannot afford such materials, tinsel provides the same surface qualities in an immediate and accessible way. For me, tinsel is a reminder of my poor, working class background; I use it as a beacon to display my perceived position in the class hierarchy. I come from a lineage of self-described ‘magpies’—women who are attracted to and collect frivolously cheap and shiny objects impulsively and constantly—and I was raised to follow the same path. Interestingly, a study in 2015 revealed that there is no empirical evidence for magpies being particularly attracted to shiny objects at all, the widespread belief for this ‘truth’ being instead a result of “cultural generalization of anecdotal evidence, demonstrating how biases in observations of animals may determine the broad public perception of species and their impact on the environment.”⁴⁴

The conflation of femininity and a propensity for glittery objects is a social construct meant to diminish the desires of women, portraying them as distracted, frivolous and superficial. I have been angry with my female role models for thoughtlessly engaging in this stereotype and frustrated with my own complicity in perpetuating a frivolous attraction to this material. Instead of abandoning and dismissing this material entirely, I decided that I would rather work within its framework to liberate myself and everything sparkly from the strict and demeaning confines of patriarchy that limit this material to the realm of the unserious. After researching the psychological effects of shiny and glittering surfaces on human attention, I found that an attraction to this sort of material was not determined by gender. In fact, many researchers have come to the conclusion that it is a trend among humans of all ages, ethnicities, and genders that has a basis in our evolutionary programming, which enabled us to survive by developing skills for seeking out and recognizing sources of fresh water.⁴⁵ Pools of still water act as a mirror while moving streams, rippling waves, and melting ice exhibit the scintillating effect reproduced by tinsel.

⁴³ For a discussion of the cultivated people vs. the lower classes, please see Clement Greenberg “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” and Adolf Loos “Ornament and Crime”.

⁴⁴ Shepard, T.V., S.E.G. Lea, & N. Hempel de Ibarra, “‘The Thieving Magpie’? No evidence for Attraction to Shiny Objects,” *Animal Cognition* No. 18 (2015) p. 397.

⁴⁵ Goss, Richard C., Saralynn Ruff & Tara Simms, “All That Glistens: II. The Effects of Reflective Surface Finishes on the Mouthing Activity of Infants and Toddlers,” *Ecological Psychology* Vol. 15, No. 3 (2003): p. 198.

Meert, Katrien, Mario Pandelaere, and Vanessa M. Patrick, “Taking a Shine to it: How the Preference for Glossy Stems from an Innate Need for Water,” *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 24, No. 2 (2014): p. 197.

As a purely ornamental substance, it is no wonder that tinsel has been relegated to the periphery of serious thought. As Adolf Loos so adamantly proclaimed in his 1908 treatise, “Ornament and Crime”: “[o]rnam[en]t does not heighten my joy in life or the joy in life of any cultivated person... it is a crime against the national economy that it should result in a waste of human labour, money, and material. Time cannot make good this damage.”⁴⁶ Loos scathingly presents ornamentation in opposition to the progress of industrial modernity, intrinsically linked to the “uncultivated” classes and the frivolous pursuits of women’s fashion. Describing ornament as intrinsically feminine and based in the aesthetic preferences of the lower classes means that “the devaluation of ornament meant at the same time, a dismissal of the feminine [and “uncultivated” people⁴⁷] as inferior.”⁴⁸ The sustained influence of this kind of thought can be seen today in the clean aesthetic of restraint and good taste in art institutions, home decor catalogues, and contemporary architecture, as well as in the constant murmurings of “less is more” in art institutions. My use of such an excessively frivolous, purely decorative substance asks the viewer to address the many naturalized assumptions that dictate *good* and *bad* taste today.

V. SECONDHAND KITSCH

When I am not recycling materials that result from my own habits of consumption, I am most often collecting them from a thrift store. I am fascinated by the cheap, mass-produced objects that somehow have managed to escape their almost certain fate of disposal, ending up instead recirculating in the cycle of consumption. Glimmers of the ideologies and societies that produced them and the desires of the people who coveted them can be found writhing beneath their—usually plastic—facade of playfulness and decoration. These objects most often represent consumption for consumption’s sake: instrumentalized as a means to constructing individual identity and discarded at the suggestion of the newest fashion. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu discusses how we exhibit our position within the class hierarchy through the aesthetic

⁴⁶ Loos, Adolf, “Ornament and Crime,” in *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*. Riverside, Calif.: Ariadne, 1998: p. 21.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 21.

⁴⁸ Negrin, Llewellyn, “Ornament and the Feminine,” *Feminist Theory* Vol. 7, No. 2 (August 2006): p. 219

objects that we surround ourselves with, whether intentionally or subconsciously: “Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed.”⁴⁹

The Salvation Army was the first model of our modern-day thrift stores. Founded in 1865 by a “renegade Methodist revival minister,”⁵⁰ William Booth, The Salvation Army was a charitable organization founded to employ “human wastage” and the “deadbeats of society” to collect, sort through, repair, and sell donated and discarded objects to people who could otherwise not afford to purchase goods from a regular store.⁵¹ While this model did help many to lift themselves from poverty and provided an alternative path for goods that would otherwise be destined for the landfill, it also helped to expand the system of capitalism, reaffirming the class hierarchies of consumption. By including people heretofore excluded from participating in consumer culture—the poor and working classes—The Salvation Army extended associations of re-use and recycling with the stigma of poverty.⁵² Since the 1960s, the thrift store has been more widely accepted as a fashionable and less stigmatized place to shop: people of all socio-economic backgrounds concerned about consuming with a ‘clean conscience’ can be observed proudly searching for their next treasure at secondhand stores across North America. While, on the surface, this may have a positive effect on shifting attitudes about people who shop secondhand out of necessity, it actually drives up prices and re-marginalizes these groups in search of a larger share of the market.⁵³

While shopping secondhand is linked to ideas of social class, so too, is that of kitsch. Clement Greenberg’s famously cited essay, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*—which has set the dominant tone to the present day of our understanding of kitsch—reveals the high modernist,

⁴⁹ Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984: p. 6.

⁵⁰ Strasser, Susan, *Waste and Want*, p. 142

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 144.

⁵² Ibid, p. 145.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 285.

avant-garde aesthetic as the antithesis of kitsch. He describes the former as a pursuit of “a superior consciousness of history” aiming to “keep culture *moving*,”⁵⁴ and, the latter as a new cultural phenomenon, a product of the industrial revolution, demanded by “the new urban masses [with a “new capacity for boredom”]... a culture fit for their own consumption.”⁵⁵ In Greenberg’s view, there is absolutely no place for kitsch among the realms of high art because it is fundamentally inferior:

“Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time⁵⁶.

[...]

There has always been on one side the minority of the powerful—and therefore the cultivated—and on the other the great mass of the exploited and poor—and therefore the ignorant. Formal culture has always belonged to the first, while the last have had to content themselves with folk or rudimentary culture, or kitsch.”⁵⁷

The influence of Greenberg’s privileged aesthetic is apparent today in the way that there is still an embedded gender and class elitism found within institutions of art and a continued pursuit of *art-for-art’s-sake*. Pierre Bourdieu argues that “viewers who experience a work of art from an art-for-art’s-sake perspective can do so because they have the privilege and capacity to distance themselves from worldly concerns as they stand before it. According to Bourdieu, this capacity creates a distinction between elite and popular classes because elites have the upbringing and economic ability to enjoy works ‘from afar.’”⁵⁸ Choosing to work with an aesthetic and materials that are placed entirely in the realm of kitsch, I want to antagonize the continued adherence to Greenbergian aesthetics in the majority of art institutions. I use the aesthetic of mass-produced commodities to appeal to a broader audience, attempting to bridge the divide between *high art* and *the masses*. An investigation of mass-culture is crucial if I am to

⁵⁴ Greenberg, Clement, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* by Clement Greenberg. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989: p. 4-5.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 10.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 10.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 16.

⁵⁸ Peterson, Karin E., “How the Ordinary Becomes Extraordinary: The Modern Eye and the Quilt as Art Form” in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art* ed. by Maria Elena Buszek. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011, p. 100.

understand the ideologies found within it: “to the extent that mass culture has a homogenizing effect on the character of our taste, to that extent does it provide a more promising field in which to isolate the forces that shape our aesthetic judgments.”⁵⁹ I make objects that are to be used in the manner suggested by their vernacular form to subvert our continued privileging of static *art-for-art’s-sake*. Using theories from Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, Sianne Ngai suggests artworks that adopt a diminutive form—by way of a cute or kitsch aesthetic—can send a powerful message, describing “art’s ineffectuality, inconsequentiality, or powerlessness in a society of instrumental rationality as precisely the source of its distinctive capacity to draw critical attention to powerlessness (including the politically significant question of what it might mean to lack or refuse the kind of power most privileged by an ends-means society).”⁶⁰

Andy Warhol is the first artist whose work I felt a deep connection with; the legacy of “The Factory” and the strangely ambiguous performance of his public persona have remained important to my practice. His particular use of kitsch to both expose and perpetuate commodity fetishism is similar to the way that I employ it in my practice. Kelly M. Cresap describes the monumental effects of his performance as a “naif-trickster” on Greenberg’s elitist, intellectual modernism:

“In the face of anxiety over the status of aura in an age of mechanical reproduction, Warhol produces readily duplicated images and says with an alarming blitheness, “I want to be a machine.” After Clement Greenberg establishes his dichotomy between avant-garde and kitsch, Warhol makes kitsch avant-garde—or more precisely, he brings to an avant-garde milieu images that lack even the modicum of artistic ambition required for them to qualify as kitsch.”⁶¹

His use of commodity signifiers in a work such as *Brillo Boxes* is a complex critique of consumer society even though it can also appear facile and one-dimensional: while he borrowed from “normative culture, he utilized his imagery as a form of resistance, making slight

⁵⁹ Albert, Ruesga G., “Singing and Dancing in the Baser Manner: A Plea for the Democratization of Taste,” *Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. 29, No. 4 (Spring 1996): p. 127.

⁶⁰ Ngai, Sianne, “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde,” p. 846.

⁶¹ Cresap, Kelly M., *Pop Trickster Fool: Warhol Performs Naivete*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004: p. 16.

but significant alterations.”⁶² The reception of this particular work is just as much part of its legacy as, in 1965, boxes from the Stable Gallery show were travelling to be exhibited at a major gallery in Toronto when they were subjected to an import duty tax at the Canadian Border because they were not considered *art*, masquerading too convincingly as the *real thing*.⁶³ Warhol’s work has also been described as Camp which is classified by Susan Sontag in her 1964 essay “Notes on Camp” as a sensibility distinguished by “its love of the unnatural: artifice and exaggeration”⁶⁴ In an article in the New York Times from 1965, Thomas Meehan describes Camp as a “third stream of taste, entirely apart from good taste or bad taste, that encompasses the curious attraction that everyone—to some degree at least—has for the bizarre, the unnatural, the artificial and the blatantly outrageous.”⁶⁵

VI. HOBBY CRAFT

An extension of my interest in mid-century kitsch, and as a result of the heavily gendered upbringing that I had, I have a wide skill set in a variety of hobby craft techniques. After adopting the pseudonym *The Hobbyist* in 2010, I began to incorporate hobby craft directly into my work: sewing, intarsia knitting, embroidery, cake-making, crochet and cross-stitch became part of my regular practice. Instead of rebelling completely and abandoning this type of activity —after years of conditioning, I do enjoy it after all—I decided to consciously exploit these practices to better understand how I had absorbed certain ideologies through material culture and to see if I could overturn the expected passivity and obedience implied by feminine hobby crafting. I am not alone in this endeavour as countless women and femmes have been working within a craft framework to liberate themselves and others from the domination of patriarchal, capitalist society.

As I assert a political message or social commentary in my work, my use of hobby craft has become increasingly important as a way to engage with my audience. In a hand-crafted

⁶² Steinberger, Staci, “Reviewed Works: *The Brillo Box Archive: Aesthetics, Design, and Art* by Michael J. Golec,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (December 2010): p. 398.

⁶³ Cresap, Kelly M., *Pop Trickster Fool*, p. 14.

⁶⁴ Sontag, Susan, “Notes on Camp (1964)” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* ed. Fabio Cleto, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999. p. 54.

⁶⁵ Whiting, Cécile, *A Taste For Pop*, p. 178.

object, the time spent and skill required can be more apparent to the viewer and, because most of us have memories of a friend or family member who has engaged in craft practices, or have engaged in certain crafts ourselves, we have an appreciation for and understanding of this type of labour. Craft is generally understood to be non-threatening and can “seduce its audience,” creating a space for dialogue about more difficult subject matter.⁶⁶ Craft is a “vehicle to think about self-sufficiency, self-empowerment, communal experience and happiness in work, as well as a tool for fighting poverty and oppression”⁶⁷. With the large-scale, cross-stitched *Hobbyist Brand Garbage Can Cozies*, *Hobbyist Brand Plastic Party Receptacles*, and the *Hobbyist Brand Trash Chairs* in particular, I am working within a framework of craftivism, using crafted objects to talk about social and ecological issues while also encouraging people to craft their own versions and engage in the action alongside me. Craftivism is a term coined by Betsy Greer in 2003, linked to Third Wave Feminism, it is a combination of the words ‘craft’ and ‘activism’ and can be loosely defined as any type of craft practice that is “inspired by politics or is made in the effort to influence social change.”⁶⁸ She goes further to describe the impetus for using craft in an activist manner: “It was about using what you can to express your feelings outward in a visual manner without yelling or placard waving. It was about paying attention and not letting your anger consume you, it was about channeling that anger in a productive and even loving way.”⁶⁹

By working within the framework of hobby craft I link my pursuit to the particularly Western brand of consumerism that encourages disposability and rampant material waste, calling attention to the historic and cultural shift from hand-making and re-using things out of necessity to purchasing them out of convenience. Susan Strasser links the emergence of the popular pursuit of hobbies to middle-class, American men and women in the 1930s, at the same time that mass-consumerism was cementing itself in our cultural fabric:

“Among middle-class women, quilts and other handcrafts had become a hobby, a category of activity that became publicly acceptable for the first time during the Depression. Historian Steven Gelber has suggested that hobbies ‘served to expand

⁶⁶ Harrod, Tanya, “The Making of Protest,” *Crafts Magazine* No. 249 (July/August 2014) p. 46.

⁶⁷ Robertson, Kirsty and Vinebaum, Lisa. “Crafting Community” *Textile* vol. 14, no. 1 (2016): p. 7.

⁶⁸ Fry, Rachel, “Craftivism: The Role of Feminism in Craft Activism” (MFA Thesis, Mount Saint Vincent University, 2014).

⁶⁹ Greer, Betsey, “Craftivist History” in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. by Maria Elena Buszek, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011, p.183.

the work ethic in a period when work itself was at risk.’ Although they paid nothing, they looked very much like work and reinforced the value of work. From another point of view, hobbies structured leisure time into consumer activities. Most hobbies required purchasing materials and equipment, and the market for these things expanded as the Depression went on: sales of power tools increased, as did sales of books and equipment for bridge, Ping-Pong, and backgammon. Gardening grew, and more people kept pets. Expenses for hobbies like carpentry and quilting, which created tangible products, could even be justified as ways to save money.”⁷⁰

At a time when labour is precarious—especially for young people and arts labourers—conversations about the lineage of hobby craft and its relationship to paid labour can be especially potent.

I place myself within the discourse of everydayness and amateurism, among practitioners of mass-culture and kitsch. Because hobby craft is implicated in the functioning of capitalism and its socio-economic hierarchy, it is an appropriate means to implement in my critical investigation of the systems of domination and control that underpin our consumer culture:

“Indeed, in its modern form, amateurism should be seen first and foremost as a result of the surplus economy. Sewing in the living room or woodworking in the garage are activities that reflect a culture of prosperous excess. In a sense, the hobbyist is the positive mirror image of the worker who has been made redundant at the factory... The successful management of such purposeless populations has been key to modern politics; idle hands make for potentially revolutionary work. Similarly, the successful displacement of unused time into harmless leisure activities has been vital to the project of capitalist expansion. Furthermore, insofar as there are huge profits to be gained by selling commodities (in the form of materials and tools) to aspiring craftspeople, amateurs perform a valuable, if largely unconscious, service to the economy.”⁷¹

VII. THE HOBBYIST: AMATEURISM AND PERFORMING CARE

I create under a persona, *The Hobbyist*, and prepend most of my artistic creations with *Hobbyist Brand*. *The Hobbyist* is also the identity that I assume when engaging with the public and performing public acts of care (ie-picking up and sorting through other people’s trash, or

⁷⁰ Strasser, Susan, *Waste and Want*, p. 219.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 140.

decorating waste management infrastructure). I want to obscure my identity to reject the notion of the individual artist as genius, renouncing, also, my authenticity. Andrew Potter describes a Benjaminian origin for our obsession with the artist's perceived authenticity: "By opening the door to art as a mass commodity, the age of mechanical reproduction created a crisis of authenticity in art. In the age of secularized, commercialized, mass-marketed entertainment, what plays the role of preserving the aura of the work is the artist's life. Their past, their history, their lifestyle or persona is what provides the ballast that anchors the work in some sort of tradition or narrative, saving it from the frothy superficiality of mere commerce."⁷² This myth of the artist and artist's creations as somehow superior to "mere commerce" is a concept that I reject entirely as it reinforces the cultural hierarchy that restricts access to information and ideas: "The artist's pseudonym has served as a political tool challenging traditionally inherent concepts pertaining to authorship—gendered notions of genius, singular attribution, the scarcity model and notions of intellectual property—of which all are perpetuated by the art market."⁷³ As my work often masquerades as or incorporates mass production techniques and materials, I want to place my practice intentionally within the realm of the commodity to engage with conversations about the possible alternatives to our current capitalist system where we exchange our labour for money and purchase anonymously produced, mass-marketed products rather than engaging in and understanding the production processes ourselves. By adopting a pseudonym to work under I want to reject the title of artist and the cultural and social superiority associated with it. I believe that hobbies are more relatable to the general public than art practices and this is the audience that I wish to engage with.

The Hobbyist is an amateur. It is my modus operandi to try my hand at new skills, inserting my understanding of the world into specialized fields that I am not too familiar with; it is my goal to engage with and present ideas across a wide spectrum of understanding and practice. I have adopted this method of working across my practice over the past 8 years as a way to gain new skills and explore different ways of thinking/working. Recently, I have been particularly focussed on the potential for *The Hobbyist* project to talk about the exclusionary barriers that occur in conceptions of the professional/expert versus the amateur. In "Professionals and Amateurs", Edward Said writes of the potential of an intentionally amateur

⁷² Potter, Andrew, *The Authenticity Hoax*, p. 98.

⁷³ McCartney, Nicola, "Complicating Authorship: Contemporary artists' names" in *Performance Research* Vol. 22, No. 5 (Dec 2017), p. 62.

approach to counter the rigid confines of professionalism: the amateur operates with "the desire to be moved not by profit or reward but by love for an unquenchable interest in the larger picture, in making connections across lines and barriers, in refusing to be tied down to a specialty, in caring for ideas and values despite the restrictions of a profession."⁷⁴ He focuses the importance of the amateur approach as counter specifically to conformist ideologies of institutionalized capitalism (ie- corporate funding for research and universities, etc.), proposing that, "instead of doing what one is supposed to do one can ask why one does it, who benefits from it, how can it reconnect with a personal project and original thoughts."⁷⁵

I think it is important to conduct amateur research. I also value rigorous scientific research conducted by professionals. I do not see these two practices as being mutually exclusive, rather that they can work in tandem to spread information and ideas to an wider variety of people, affecting wider social change. I would like to posit that, if more people conducted small scale research in their communities and made their results visible in some way to other people in the community, we would be more effectively spurred to collective action, as it is easier to engage with and conceptualize an issue or idea if it is in reference to one's lived experience, local environment, and within one's realm of understanding (ie- not in super scientific, highly academic language, or from a distant professional). When I create pie charts detailing my findings in regards to snack packaging, I am not parodying real data collection and visualization practices in hopes of devaluing it, but instead, am attempting to translate information into another form, experimenting with a way of dispersing it more widely in my community.

The history of garbage and waste collection/sorting practices as it relates to gendered labour exists ambiguously between upper class women who took it upon themselves to "clean the world"⁷⁶, and lower class women—and children—who picked through and sorted the refuse of society in search of usable and profitable materials.⁷⁷ As *The Hobbyist*, I simultaneously adopt the identity of both and neither, performing unpaid maintenance labour and public acts of

⁷⁴ Said, Edward, "Professionals and Amateurs" in *Representations of the Intellectual*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994, p. 76.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 82-3.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 122.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 116.

environmental care as a way to reach out to people about plastic pollution and demonstrate an avenue of action that can have an impact in one's local environment.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles is an American performance and installation artist working with ideas of domestic labour and public maintenance and has been the official artist-in-residence for New York's Department of Sanitation since 1977.⁷⁸ Over the wide span of her career, Ukeles has done many large scale, collaborative works involving waste management infrastructure/ workers, using the entire city as her site, as well as many performative acts of maintenance— both public and private: “her interweaving of the domestic acts of maintenance that are mostly carried out by women and the public acts of sanitation that are almost exclusively executed by men, and her interweaving of the art world genre of performance with the world of urban systems, constituted an unconventional leap across the borders of gender and class.”⁷⁹ In 1969 she wrote the “Maintenance Art Manifesto!” after she had her first child, feeling angry and disenfranchised within the mostly male art scene of the period:

“I was doing work that's so common; yet there was no cultural language for this work. People would ask: ‘Do you do anything?’ I had never worked so hard in my whole life as when I had a little baby. Ever. Trying to be a decent parent, trying to keep myself alive as an artist, trying to make some money. I was working like a maniac. But there were no words in the culture that gave value for the work I was doing.”⁸⁰ [...]

“Women were never invited to become a maintenance class, we were just told: ‘You are like this. We know what you think. We know what you are. You take care of us.’ Women have been defined like that within the domestic sphere, while service workers, of either gender, do this stuff outside, to make a living. That's most of the people in the country, and most of the people in the world. If women could get together with service workers, as a political coalition, they could become a majority with great potential power. Society would get reorganized.”⁸¹

As a parent myself, struggling to achieve a balance between my own innate drive to create and be independent, and the desire to spend every moment of my time with my sweet

⁷⁸ Finklepearl, Tom, “Interview: Mierle Laderman Ukeles on Maintenance and Sanitation Art,” in *Dialogues in Public Art*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001: p. 295.

⁷⁹ Finklepearl, Tom, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2013: p. 26

⁸⁰ Finklepearl, Tom, “Interview,” p. 303.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p. 310.

little boy, her words were relatable and inspiring to me. This passage also succinctly describes the strange position I am existing in wherein the value of my labour and time seems to be applicable only within certain realms, even if performing the same tasks—not to mention also wildly variable, inconsistent, and precarious: “The extent to which social reproduction, the burden of care and myriad other unpaid tasks continue to profoundly shape women’s integration into the paid labour force has been documented in empirical studies which show that the marital status of women and motherhood correlate with (relatively) low paid, flexible forms of employment.”⁸² Ukeles’ work inspires me in the way she adapted the role of domestic maintenance worker to assume a critical, feminist stance on the complex labour systems that drive society. The participatory aspects of her work with NYC sanitation workers provide a good framework to extrapolate from when working in the public realm as she made sure to form connections directly with her collaborators, giving them agency in the creation of the work.

In September of 2017 I performed public maintenance at the Lumière Art-at-Night festival in Sydney, NS. During the event I performed as *The Hobbyist* in a custom-made, blue sparkle jumpsuit alongside five individually handcrafted plastic collection receptacles (*Hobbyist Brand Plastic Party Receptacles*) that were placed along the entire festival route. Much of my night was spent sorting and picking up trash from the street and engaging with passersby about plastic pollution and possibility of individual action in such an enormous catastrophe. This was my first attempt at performing public maintenance as art and is something that I see myself continuing as I move forward into my practice.

Upon reflecting on my experience at Lumière, I started to question my intentions and the implications of adopting the role of volunteer street cleaner. I have concluded that—much like my use of tinsel and over-decoration to understand the ways in which my aesthetic has been shaped by societal conventions of feminized frivolity—it is a strategy that I use to make sense of the valuation of my time and labour while also making it highly visible and unignorable by those who benefit from it. In this way I think that I am trying to confront the systems of capitalism that work to make my labour (non-art, domestic, regular labour) invisible. Nancy Fraser explains how the subordination of women’s care labour originates within the framework of a capitalist system:

⁸² Tepe-Belfrage, D. and Steans, J., “*The New Materialism: Re-claiming a Debate from a Feminist Perspective*” in *Capital and Class*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (2016), p. 28.

“From at least the industrial era, however, capitalist societies have separated the work of social reproduction from that of economic production. Associating the first with women and the second with men, they have remunerated ‘reproductive’ activities in the coin of ‘love’ and ‘virtue’, while compensating ‘productive work’ in that of money. In this way, capitalist societies created an institutional basis for new, modern forms of women’s subordination. Splitting off reproductive labour from the larger universe of human activities, in which women’s work previously held a recognized place, they relegated it to a newly institutionalized ‘domestic sphere’ where its social importance was obscured. And in this new world, where money became a primary medium of power, its being unpaid sealed the matter: those who do this work are structurally subordinate to those who earn cash wages, even as their work supplies a necessary precondition for wage labour...”⁸³

The way that I see the concept of care operating in my practice is not only in the publicly performed acts of gathering, sorting, and washing trash but also in the creation of the objects themselves: I employ labour-intensive, traditionally feminized, techniques of domestic handcraft—sewing, quilting, knitting, beading, etc.—to construct the objects that I use in my performances: the plastic collection receptacles; the jumpsuit that I wear while performing; the tool belt that contains the items I need to perform my labour. It is my hope that the hyper-visibility of my aesthetic and the use of handcrafted-ness prompts the viewer to consider the inherent, under appreciated care that goes into this type of labour, whether it is being performing by me or any other person. I think that the superficiality of my aesthetic may also cause the generosity and sincerity of my actions to be questioned, provoking the viewer to feel uncomfortable about their own contribution to the problem. I have felt a lot of frustration over the invisibility of the labour-care that I perform both in raising my child and in spending time picking up the litter that others carelessly let scatter around outdoors—not to mention the emotional and intellectual labour spent absorbing and carrying knowledge about the current environmental crisis we are existing in. A way that I have tried to mitigate my frustration and despair has been to operate under a sparkly, seemingly celebratory, superficial aesthetic, dazzling my own negative feelings away in an attempt to make my message more approachable and less doom-and-gloom—even though that may be the reality.

⁸³ Fraser, Nancy, “Contradiction of Capital and Care” in *New Left Review*, Vol. 100 (July/August 2016), p. 102.

VIII. SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Over my time at NSCAD I have been experimenting with different ways of reaching out into the public with my work. From anonymously decorating public garbage cans (*Hobbyist Brand Garbage Can Cozies*) to collaborating with students in the Learning Centre at J.L. Ilseley High School in Spryfield, I have achieved various levels of connection with people and varied levels of success inciting positive social impacts. Social engagement occurs in most of my work on the most basic level, as use-able objects that require physical activation by a human in order to operate fully. I want to implicate the viewer in the activation of my work to jolt them out of passivity. I draw inspiration from Debord's theory of "Situations": the pursuit of liberating the alienated victim of the Spectacle by encouraging their active engagement with everyday life, locally and personally.⁸⁴ I want viewers who engage with my work to be facilitated and encouraged to exert their agency in affecting positive changes in our society, especially in the domains of consumption and the waste that results from it, even if only superficially.

In most of my works the ways in which the public is invited to engage remains prescribed by me: a practice of "Directed Participation" that "employ[s] a process of complicit engagement... clearly initiated and ultimately directed by the artist."⁸⁵ The first project that I did at NSCAD was to create large-scale, cross-stitched garbage can cozies for public waste infrastructure: one bin on the second floor of the Port campus, another at the end of a tunnel at the far south end of Barrington Street. These cozies were meant to create a more exciting and enjoyable experience for people as they disposed of their waste, while also perhaps increasing the likelihood that litter would end up in the bin and not on the ground as the garbage bin became more visible. As there is no feedback system for these works, I am unsure of their efficacy or impact; they were a failed experiment in public engagement in this way. Also in this vein, and as an extension of my practice of collecting snack packaging, I have most recently created special *Upcycle It!* bins in which people are directed—via accompanying signage—to anonymously dispose of their shiny snack packaging materials for me to put to use in creating future works. One of these bins was installed at the NSCAD Port campus for a duration of three weeks, with a very low number of packages being collected in it. The incentive for people to

⁸⁴ Finklepearl, *What We Made*, p. 27.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 4.

participate in this project was unclear as they had no input or knowledge as to how their donated materials were put to use and were left with only a general sense that they had kept this packaging out of the landfill. The ambiguity of these aforementioned interactions with the public, and their lack of success (in my opinion), I attribute to these objects being left out on their own without the interpretative presence of *The Hobbyist*.

In the spring of 2017 I worked with a group of students in the Learning Centre at J.L. Ilsley High School to create a large mural from plastic bottle caps that they had been collecting, washing, and sorting over the school year. The result of our collaboration was a large diamond-shaped plywood object with a flower/mandala design that we created by fastening hundreds of bottle caps with screws. This project lasted for about 6 weeks and I visited once or twice a week. This was my first direct collaboration with a group and was a bit tricky to navigate all of the personalities and ideas circulating during our work periods. In the end, the piece we created was decided on partially through my direction but mostly through negotiation and compromise among all participants: a version of socially engaged art that Pablo Helguera describes as “creative participation” wherein the “visitor provides content for a component of the work within a structure established by the artist.”⁸⁶ I found this project to be very successful because of the many conversations that we had during our workshops about recycling, waste, and consumption. It was also the first time that some of the students had used a power drill and the excitement and empowerment that they expressed made me feel that the benefits of the project were not only hypothetical but tangible and useful.

Pablo Helguera discusses the writing of Jürgen Habermas in relation to the potential of direct interaction between individuals in socially engaged art to affect social change: “In [*The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981)] Habermas argues that social action (an act constructed by the relations between individuals) is more than a mere manipulation of circumstances by an individual to obtain a desired goal (that is, more than just the use of strategic and instrumental reason). He instead favours what he describes as communicative action, a type of social action geared to communication and understanding between individuals that can have a lasting effect on the spheres of politics and culture as a true emancipatory

⁸⁶ Helguera, Pablo, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*. New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011, p. 14-15.

force.”⁸⁷ In determining the main factors that created the disparity of success that I felt I had achieved between my projects both at Lumière and J.L. Ilsley and my experiments in changing the disposal patterns of people via anonymous, decorative garbage cans and cozies, I think that the key to inciting social change through an art practice lies in the human element that performance and workshoping can provide.

IX. NEW MATERIALISM

New Materialism is a recent area of thought that “originated in the field of Gender Studies where Rosi Braidotti coined the term in the early 1990s.... [when] Braidotti and other feminist scholars like Donna Haraway, Karen Barad and Vicki Kirby started to critically question the cultural turn’s one-sided focus on culture,” shifting their inquiries instead to examine matter itself and the materiality of our lived experience.⁸⁸ New Materialism has been largely informed by feminist, post-colonial, post-structuralist, and queer theory, its many strands of thought including actor-network theory, artificial intelligence, bio-philosophy, evolutionary theory, neuroscience, philosophical post humanism, and quantum physics.⁸⁹ Although my understanding of much of New Materialist thought is superficial, I am attracted to it because it aims to “traverse the dualisms of (post)modern thought, creat[ing] diffractive cartographies by reading different disciplines and paradigms through one another.”⁹⁰ I adopt this approach in my own practice by reaching out into many areas to conduct my research: history, sociology, art theory, psychological studies, material culture studies, data visualization, craft manuals, and the creation of physical and performative art. New Materialist thought, and my practice as well, exists across many realms and, as a result, allows for the possibility of communicating to a greater number of people.

Although defined differently among New Materialist thinkers, the conception of agency as an affective quality that exists in both the human and non-human world is of particular

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 7.

⁸⁸ Schouwenburg, Hans, “Back To The Future? History, Material Culture, and New Materialism” In *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* Vol. 3, No. 1 2015, p. 63.

⁸⁹ Fox, Nick J. and Pall Allred, “Inside the Research-Assemblage: New Materialism and the Micropolitics of Social Inquiry” in *Sociological Research Online* Vol. 20, No. 6 (Sept 2014) p. 3.

⁹⁰ Schouwenburg, “Back To The Future?” p. 66.

interest to me and my project, especially in Karen Barad's writing on intra-action: "importantly, intra-action is not *interaction*, which we might understand as a meeting between distinct entities. 'Intra-action' posits fundamental entanglement, whereby individual entities do not exist as *a priori* things-in-themselves."⁹¹ "New materials scholars point to the fact that nature does not exist before socioculture, and socioculture does not exist before nature. Rather nature and socioculture constitute each other in agential practices in which several materialities are coproduced; since both sociocultural and material factors influence social development, they stress the inseparability of nature and culture."⁹² We are shaped by the non-human actors in our world whether it is the 'natural' environment itself or the human-made objects found within it.

My practice asks us to consider the ways in which plastic, in its myriad forms, has shaped our world: our perception of it and our actions/reactions to it. The title of my thesis exhibition, *New Materialisms* references this rich area of thought as well as the discovery of the many potentialities for disposable, worthless, and non-art/craft materials that I have arrived at through experimentation in my studio practice. In asking the viewer to re-examine their relationship to these materials and to question the origins and consequences of the associations we have with waste, consumption, and value. While we are all complicit in this system of environmental and social destruction, we are not without agency to affect change, however small and insignificant it may seem, in our local community: "Affects produce further affective capacities within assemblages, and because one affect can produce more than one capacity, social production is 'rhizomic' rather than linear: a branching, reversing, coalescing and rupturing."⁹³ Rebecca Solnit succinctly reminds us that we should move forward in our activism even though we may doubt the effect of our action:

"A lot of activists seem to have a mechanistic view of change, or perhaps they expect what quack diet pills offer, 'quick and easy results guaranteed.' They expect finality, definitiveness, straight-forward cause-and-effect relationships, instant returns, and as a result, they specialize in disappointment, which sinks in as bitterness, cynicism, defeatism, knowingness. They operate on the premise

⁹¹ Neimanis, Astrida, "Alongside the Right to Water, a Posthumanist Feminist Imaginary" *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment*, Vol. 5, No. 1, March 2014, p. 16.

⁹² Höppner, Grit, "Rethinking Socialization Research through the Lens of New Materialism" in *Frontiers in Sociology* Vol. 2, Article 13 September 2017 p. 4.

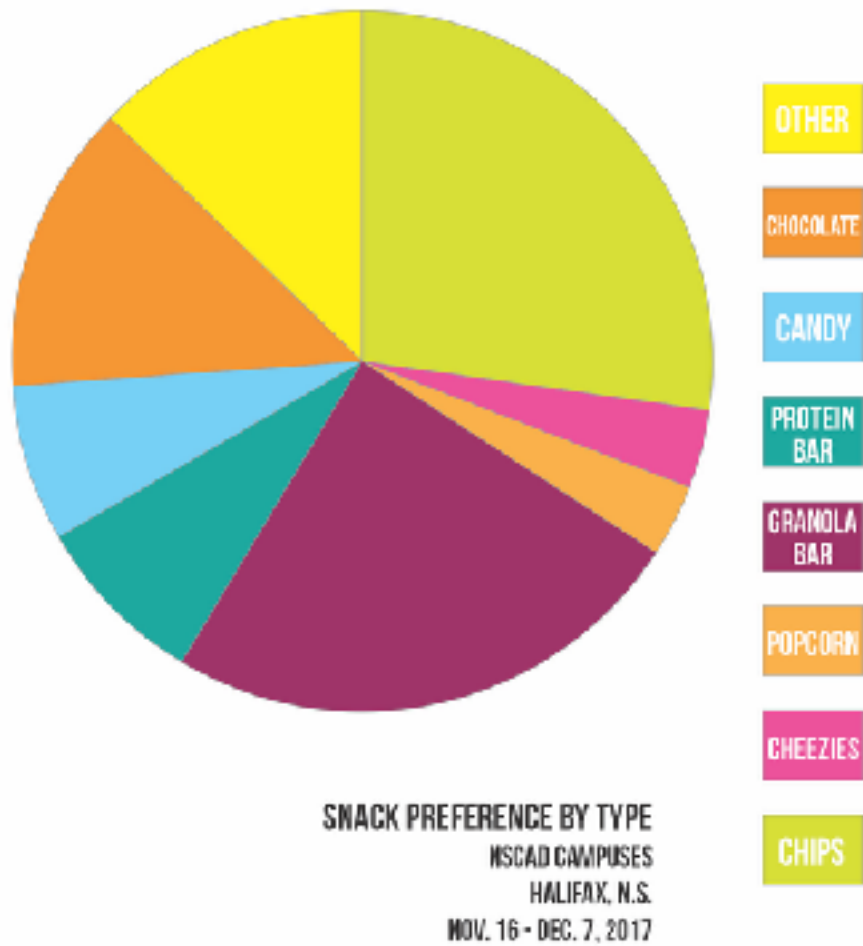
⁹³ Fox and Allred, "Inside the Research-Assemblage," p. 4.

that for every action there is an equal and opposite and punctual reaction and regard the lack of one as failure...
Activism is not a journey to the corner store, it is a plunge into the unknown.
The future is always dark.”⁹⁴

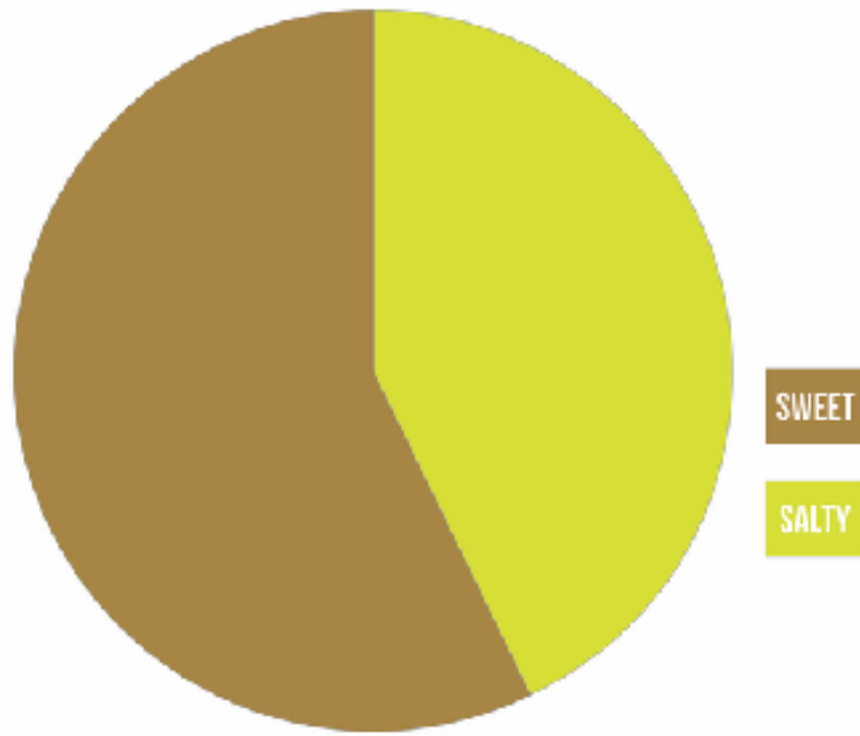
⁹⁴ Solnit, Rebecca. *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016, p. 60-61.

APPENDIX A: NSCAD SNACK DATA

GRAPH NO. 1



GRAPH NO. 2



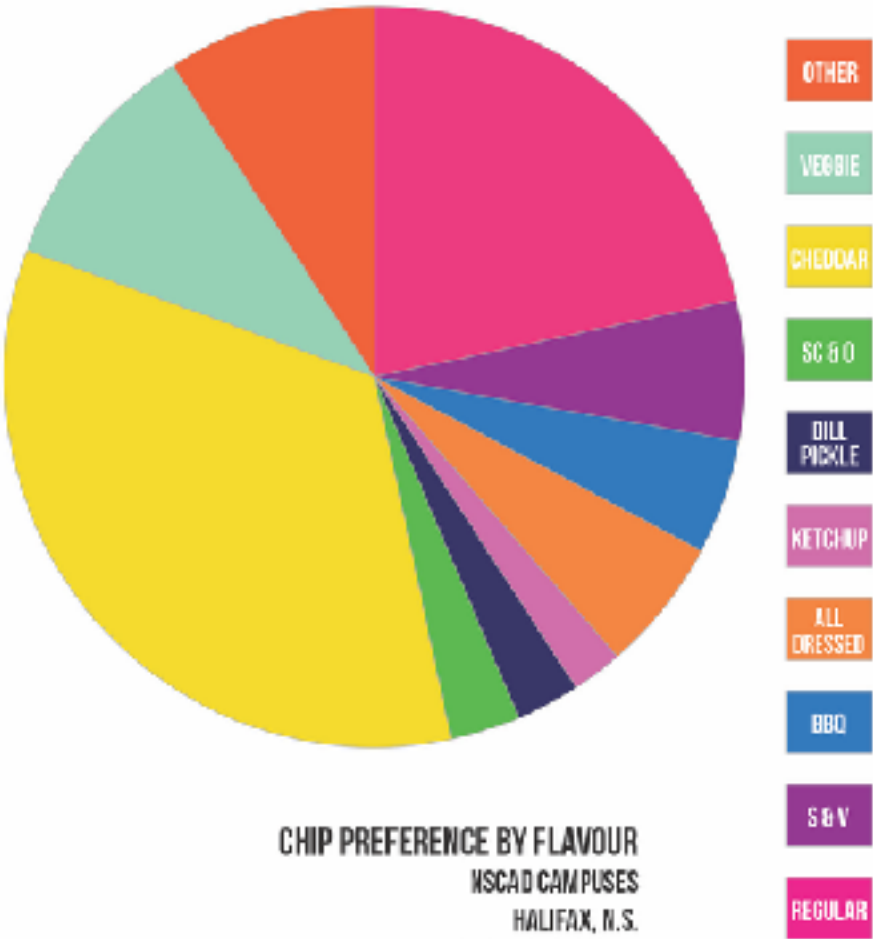
SNACK PREFERENCE BY GENERAL FLAVOUR PROFILE

NSCAD CAMPUSES

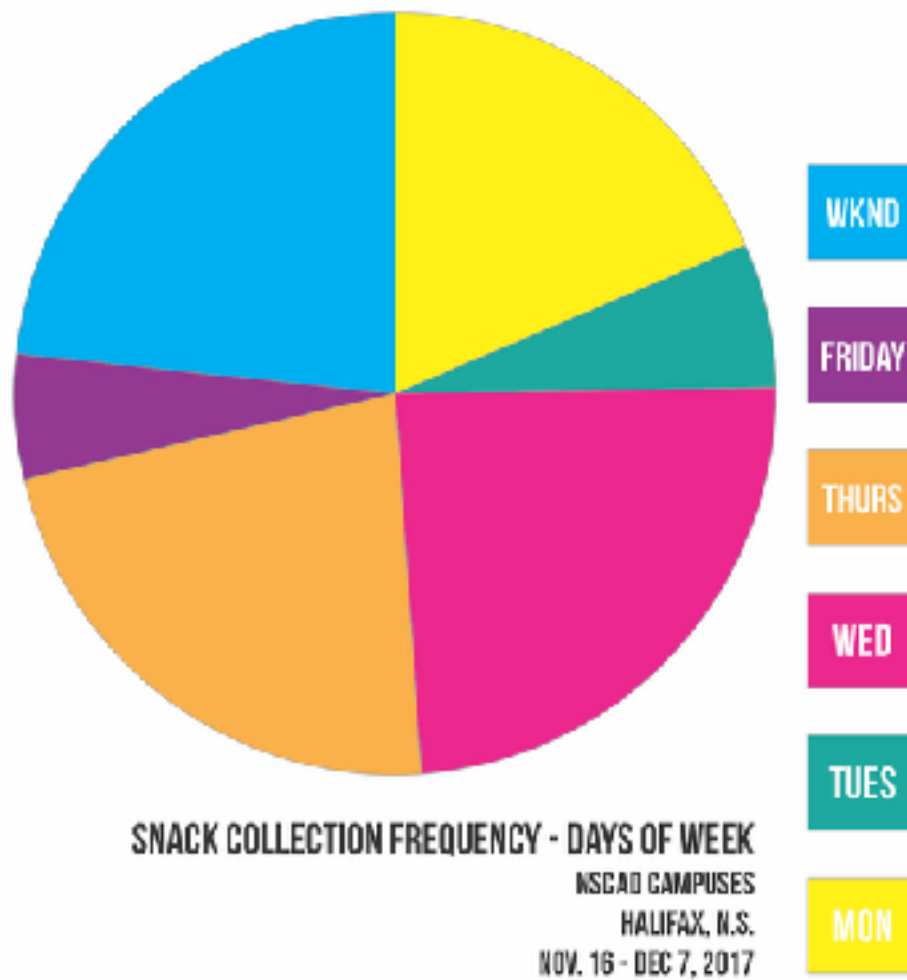
HALIFAX, N.S.

NOV. 16 - DEC. 7, 2017

GRAPH NO. 3



GRAPH NO. 4



APPENDIX B: PLASTIC MANIFESTO

Plastic is life.
Plastic enhances life.
Plastic impedes life.
Plastic destroys life.
Plastic facilitates life.
Plastic facilitates innovation.
Plastic inhibits innovation.
Plastic inhibits growth.
Plastic expands our understanding of humanity.
Plastic narrows our experience of humanity.
Plastic alters life.
Plastic extends human capabilities.
Plastic removes the human element from the world. Plastic is democratic.
Plastic is the work of a corporate elite.
Plastic creates jobs for humans.
Plastic creates jobs for machines.
Plastic is instantaneous.
Plastic will exist for eternity.
Plastic photodegrades.
Plastic shatters.
Plastic does not disappear.
Plastic represents the destruction of life on Earth.
Plastic is the future
Plastic will help us get to another planet.
Plastic will necessitate a move to another planet.
Plastic can be reused.
Plastic is disposable.
Plastic for the everyday.
Plastic occasions.
Plastic entertainment.
We consume plastic.
We avoid plastic.
We accept plastic.
We reject plastic.
Plastic makes life easier, more bearable.
Plastic makes life unbearable.
Plastic for babies, children, adolescents, adults, the elderly. Plastic is capital.
Plastic is life; Plastic destroys life.

A. Richardson 2016 - K'ijipuktuk // Halifax, N.S.

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