Resistance Against Futility in the Name of Convenience

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RESISTANCE AGAINST FUTILITY IN THE NAME OF CONVENIENCE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Art

by
Dalia Karina Delanuez
December 2017

Accepted by:
Professor David Detrich, Committee Chair
Assistant Professor Beth Lauritis
Associate Professor Valerie Zimany
ABSTRACT

While utilizing plastics, my primary motivation as an artist is to understand how this material can disassociate the body from its natural environment and its subsequent effects. In my work, I speak of three spaces that are not distinct but that overlap each other. I analyzed my interaction with plastics as an intermediate space. This space of transition and domestic use is explained through sculpture in several modalities. My first sculpture is a fragmented installation. My second is a video projection of my body within a sculptural surface and a filmed documentation. My third sculpture is participatory and includes a performance inside of one of my sculptures during my show presentation.

So, why knit plastic? I experienced the negative aspect of plastic which is a toxic material that has physiologic effects. I manipulated this material in a way that differs from everyday use. During this time, I began to analyze how my body interacted with this material in different ways and in different places. Working the plastic through the technique of knitting capitalizes on the idea that plastic is a futile material to use in weaving. Also, weaving, knitting, and stitching, tend to be traditionally associated with a domestic woman’s activity. Often what is produced is used as or as an extension of oneself.

The earth is currently covered with plastic which is affecting new generations that will not see the end of this material. Also, less developed nations like my birth country, Honduras, are incapable of carrying the burden of this
technology and its waste. With this context in place, I started knitting not as an act of recycling but as an act of resistance.

During the exhibition, the viewer expected to perceive the transformed plastic and the time invested in the labor of weaving it. I wanted the viewer to wonder why this plastic is knitted for something non-functional in a traditional sense. The soda bottles are evident in a careful observation and the gallons of milk are observed in the domesticity of the doily-like objects. The bubble is a metaphor of isolation: “we are each inside our own plastic bubble.” This is an indirect and subliminal way to attack plastic as a material without promoting it or exalting it. Instead, I resist it!
DEDICATION

To my Lord Jesus Christ, my husband Nelson, my three beautiful children, Alejandro, Sarah Elisa, Gabriela, and to the Earth.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis is a project built over two and a half years in collaboration with my sculpture professors, Greg Muller and David Detrich, who taught me all the techniques I know so far in sculpture and pushed me beyond the limits of my knowledge. I have immense gratitude for the experiences and many conversations with other graduate students, friends, and professors from Clemson University, Greenville Technical College and Converse College.

I would like to thank Assistant Professor Beth Lauritis and Associate Professor Valerie Zimany, and particularly Nelson Delanuez, Susan Vander Kooi, Andrea Garland, and Maria Pedro for their help, patience, and support at each stage of my creative process and the writing of this thesis manuscript.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTERMEDIATE SPACE

Since we know that plastic is having a negative effect on our planet and that it is toxic to our bodies, why do we still buy it? Insight into the psychology of the paradox can be found in the obedience studies of Stanley Milgram. He states: “the essence of obedience consists in the fact that a person comes to see himself as the instrument that fulfills the wishes of another person and, therefore, is no longer considered responsible for their actions.” (3). For example, when we buy our food in plastic containers, we only obey the convenience that is offered to us. When we see it that way, the plastic does not look so bad because the consumer was not the one who manufactured the container. We can still refuse to buy our food in plastic containers, but other cultural factors intervene. Courtesy, the discomfort of abstinence, and common practice, lead us to drink from plastic bottles. The result of this consumption a plastic fabric that covers much of the earth. We consume food and liquids packed in plastic, and we serve our food in more plastic every day. On a typical day, a person throws approximately four pounds of this material into the trash of each home (9). The viewer is made aware of this collective activity which is woven into each artifact in the 24 Pounds installation.

Following the thread of this thought, I began to collect more than 300 bottles of soda and cut them into strips to weave them and build the sculpture, 24 Pounds, which is the byproduct of this convenience. The hollow tubular shapes of
the bottles, once functioned as intermediate conduits of comfort and daily consumption. The sum total of the bottles is equivalent to 16% of my total weight which equates to 24 Pounds of my skin. The emptiness of the skin of my sculpture reads like the absence of a body, like an ecdysis (the act of molting or shedding) of a porous skin of something that once was.

In this sculptural installation, I created anthropomorphic forms that highlight the weight of my skin as the equivalence of the burden on the earth of three hundred bottles of soda. These are part of the subversive chain of consumption of three hundred people. Viewed through this lens, we all become part of the skin that covers the earth. These artifacts function in space as an index of the body, a light armor suspended from hanging fine wires. The installation functions as a point of entry to direct the viewer to the other works in the exhibition that subliminally confront him or her with establishing the idea of irrational consumption in plastic containers. My artifacts allow the viewer to experience the work of art and rethink attitudes and values towards the plastic. “Installation is a form of conceptual art, a genre in which ideas and impact are regarded as being more important than the quality of a finished product or work of art” (10).

Contemporary artist Ann Hamilton, through her large-scale installation study, embodies the relationship between production and consumption. In her work, *Habitus*, she created a space where our individuality is collectively experienced. In my installation, *24 Pounds*, there is a collective experience where three hundred people, who drank from these bottles of soda, including myself,
became this plastic cylindrical tube that continues growing as an indirect indictment throughout the installation exhibition.

By constructing these gleaming artifacts that index the human body, I am transforming the mundane plastic bottle into intricate knots. Paradoxically, the same material that seduces us is hurting the earth and humanity, that humanity that we do not see, those who live in other countries. We do not know who they are, but all people, without exception, experience the evil of plastic. In his experiments, Stanley Milgram showed that phenomenon. Dissociations and distance make people more destructive. Under dissociated conditions, it’s more difficult for the subject to be aware of the connection between his actions and the consequences for the victim. The act and its repercussions are physically separated. (12) We cannot see the need to stop the way we live because we think we are not harming anybody, but the reality is the contrary. In Milgram’s experiment, the fourteen out of forty people who refused to hurt the learners scored higher in “social responsibility” on the MMPI (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory) personality test. (4) This social responsibility is driven by small associations in comparison with big capitalist industries, such as The Natural Resources Defense Council, Sierra Club, and World Wildlife Fund. The mission of the World Wildlife Fund is to “stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature” (13). They urge their supporters to consume less plastic bottled water. Anti-bottled-water-campaigns and organizations, such as Corporate Accountability
International, typically argue that bottled water is no better than tap water, and emphasize the detrimental environmental side-effects of disposable plastic bottles (6).

The skin is the largest organ of the human body. It is essentially the fabric that limits the internal body and the external environment. Analogous to this, plastic has become the fabric of the earth that obstructs the relationship between our bodies and the wild nature, as well as the rest of humanity. Weaving plastic in this context is paradoxically absurd and complex. It is like the contradiction that exists when we say "love your enemies". The power of love is a mystery, as when touching the thread of these plastic bottles, we touch our own wound. The same weapon that destroys us is what leads us to our satisfaction. My work as a whole is not an act of recycling, but of resistance. 24 Pounds is a repetitive act that will remind us of our responsibility towards our natural environment in order to strengthen the part of humanity that we cannot see.
CHAPTER TWO

THE DOMESTIC

Even jackals offer their breast; they nurse their young, but the daughter of my people has become cruel… (From the book of Lamentations 4:3 in the Bible, Anonymous author.)

My heart expands with joy at the memory of the birth of my first child. There are no words to describe the pleasure of his sweet scent. I’m describing a perfume of intimacy and bonding which we all need and seek at our first cry. Gracefully, a mother uncovers her breast to begin feeding, with tears of love in her eyes. People often leave the vicinity so as not to interrupt such a miracle. The magic keeps happening in this intimate relationship between two bodies, taking showers of oxytocin within a year of feeding at home. I remember the intoxicating smell of my milk and the little mouth of my child looking for it. I love to think about this experience. I feel grateful that I breathed it. I performed a labor of love by instinct, though I recognize this is not the same for every woman. Not every mother can experience what I did for an infinite number of reasons; however, considering the paradox of convenience and complicity, other options work to replace the mother with the latex and now silicone nipple, plastic bottle, artificial formulas and cow’s milk inside plastic containers.

In the process of constructing my sculptural installation *Sustento* (meaning Nourishment in Spanish), I experienced through video performance how difficult it
is for natural components to break a plastic structure on the ground. The incorporation of my body with this woven material was a personal experience because it related to the pain of birth. My hands hurt and my fingers were damaged after sewing this organic form made of commercial milk containers for 30 days. Sustenance is a metaphor related to the penance and pain that the earth is carrying in its uterus because of our careless action of discarding plastic. Because of the smell of dairy residue in the plastic milk container related directly to breastfeeding, I found distinct similarities in researching work by the artist Janine Antoni, particularly her performance entitled 2038, in which she was prepare to breastfeed a cow. I especially connected to a quote about the work that explained that “we were separated from the breast of our mothers and weaned into the culture” (1). This weaning into the culture, suggests how children are thought to conform to the perception that teaches them what to consume from an early age.

Replacement of natural methods at home is an old chant in developed nations and among the ones who choose to ignore them. The impoverished women in Jerusalem, dispersed and lost, ceased nursing their babies in the more developed country of Babylon. Feeding vessels dating from about 2000 BC have been found in Egypt. A mother holding a very modern-looking nursing bottle in one hand and a stick, in the other, is depicted in a relief found in the ruins of the palace of King Sardanapalus of Nineveh. Clay feeding vessels were found in graves with infants from the first to fifth centuries AD in Rome (11). Researcher Ian G. Wickes speculates that ancient pediatric writers never mention artificial feeding because
there was no advice to be given as to mixing it (11). By the early 1970s, over 75% of American babies were fed on formulas, almost entirely commercially produced (2).

The book of Lamentations that I previously quoted is a poetic reflection of one of the horrendous diaspora this small country of Israel went through during Babylonian captivity in 587 BC. In the new millennia, this type of confinement exists more subliminally, from developed countries to underdeveloped countries without a significant displacement. The dependency from developed countries of the many layers of corporations and government organizations that produce and supply our basic needs like food, water, clothing, shelter, and energy, are also implemented within small nations such my own birth country of Honduras and even refracted into our tiny domestic spaces here in the United States. All these layers rapidly separated us from natural resources and natural environments very quickly during the last hundred years (12).

An additional element of the work *Sustento* includes a video where I filmed my body using ultrasound effects to resemble a baby inside the womb. The work was partially influenced by the work of feminist artist Faith Wilding entitled *Womb Room*, but conversely, my work contrasts with the tenderness of the image it reflects. In my work, the fetus is replaced by an adult, and the uterine sac is surrounded by a more rigid pelvic-like structure. This form creates a tension for the viewer who observes the constant movement of an overgrown being resisting a confining space.
Video differs from the film (including avant-garde cinema) in its disregard for the conventions of traditional movie-making. While film producers juggle with storyline, screenplay, actors, and dialogue - the basic elements of entertainment movies - the video artist is concerned with exploring the medium itself, or to use it to challenge the viewer's ideas of space, time and form (10).

The video projection onto the woven milk carton material in the foreground creates a reflection on the wall behind the installation. The result is very much reminiscent of a crocheted doily that is usually used in domestic environments as a decorative element. This decoration is a signifier of conventional femininity that encapsulates other signifiers such as delicate and docile. The shadow on the wall and the physical form interacted with each other in a conversation between domesticity and femininity, both contained and interlaced by plastic. Because it was a daily painful process, I felt like a mother in the last month of gestation watching this form grow until it looked like a cervix. Here we can see a relationship between the female gender and the earth that sustains us; that's why we call it mother earth. Embroidery and female gender are related in history in the way weaving activity conventionally indicates submission and containment (7). The plastic knitting suggests the way in which the mother earth is being contained and subject to this plastic material in a subversive manner. By performing conventions of femininity in the domestic space, I subvert convention.
CHAPTER THREE

TRANSITIONAL SPACE

In my work *Sequences of Transition*, I decided to use a video documentation format that unifies the rest of the body of work. Nothing was scripted but just as a pure manifestation of my daily life including the job of producing knitted plastic. This form communicates the lapse of time that I was working with this material not as a movie, but as a documentation of the places chosen for my daily trips to different areas. For example, I went to school, to home, visited friends, in my neighborhood, at work, even in the graveyard. When I was exposed in a public place, it was different from a private area because sitting with my eyes covered for an hour or two attracted a lot of attention to what I was doing. It was fascinating to put myself in a vulnerable situation when I filmed in public; it was like a peaceful demonstration of resistance. In private places, it was the time of work in my studio and the time invested in the process. I decided to cover my eyes in areas where I wanted to perceive myself as more vulnerable but left my eyes uncovered at the overwhelming sight of natural landscapes.

I put myself in a vulnerable position many times when I sat down and wove plastic alone on the street and among people in public spaces. I performed this labor in my house and my studio most of the time and sometimes I performed it in neighborhoods. I stress time and labor in *Sequence of Transitions* which represents the movement of the body in space and the futile labor of knitting.
plastic. Once again this action serves as a metaphor of our repetitive consumerism and usage of plastic in our daily lives. My performance lives within the social networks forever as plastic exists in landfills for more than 400 years.

Sight does not require physical proximity in the way our other senses do. My performance art is disseminated through social media over a period of thirty days at different locations and familiar spaces. From October first to November first of this year 2017, I videoed myself knitting every day in thirty different places and posted the videos on social networks. I took my work everywhere my body usually travels. On Day 19, for example, I put myself inside a transparent bubble blindfolded and surrounded by a beautiful bamboo forest knitting and paying attention to this material more than my surroundings. This same experience was performed in the gallery space, a reciprocal experience in a transitional space with another participant together inside our own bubble. The performance inside the bubble created a subtext with Pop art which was the art movement that reflected like a mirror the 60's and subsequent decades’ society in England and North America. It also echoes Pop in that it uses low profile such as materials from everyday life. This giant ball for the viewer it is an extreme and fascinating view that causes a type of satisfaction by indirectly addressing the issue of consumerism. *Three Spaces* is a transparent ball of six feet where the three spaces of interaction with the plastic are visible as is the space of transition and mediation within the domestic space, in which two people, one person at a time, will share space with the artist inside the transparent ball.
Philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) who thought deeply about how spatial practices both express and shape culture, “made me deduce that our spaces mirror our political and philosophical beliefs, and mirror how we engage with the landscape and with each other. We transform our spaces we transit based on our ideas without thinking in collaboration with wild nature and community with the whole humanity (12). I have witnessed and participated in this phenomenon of packaging and disposing products and then dispersing them all over different places. I believe I’m not alone in this experience. I know we are all involved in it, but sometimes I feel that we express our contentment with it in conformity. If we mirror ourselves through this work, we might have a glimpse of a more complex problem.
CONCLUSION

My work has a social agency that reflects a poetic lament expressed through futile activity. It is a manifestation of sequential performances in different places, using different media. My work serves as a form of protest and a way of processing conflicting emotions in the face of the impotence of mass-production and the profound over-use of plastic. “A study published in May 2017 in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences posited that a “biological annihilation” akin to a sixth mass extinction event is underway because of anthropogenic causes, such as human overpopulation, continued population growth and overconsumption, particularly by the wealthy. The study suggested that as much as 50% of the number of animal individuals that once lived on Earth were already extinct, threatening the basis for human existence too.” (8)

In my work, I have found a place to express my confusion, complicity, and dissatisfaction about the impact of plastic on our planet using repetitive knitting in public and in private. I am creating resistance against plastic utilizing the voice of sculptural materials and spatial contexts in different modalities to attract my audience indirectly, and ultimately proactively motivate community efforts towards a goal of loving of one another and respecting the place we call home.
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