

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the Graduate Project Exhibition or Film Project prepared

By: Sarah Usick

Entitled: Two Summer LAG Shows 2020

Held at: Loft Art Gallery (LAG) Manitoba

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts (Studio Arts – Painting & Drawing)

complies with the regulations of the University and meet the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Names of the final examining committee:

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Date and Year January 18th, 2021

Layers of Languages:
Stories in plastic and other forgotten materials

or,

Two LAG Summer Shows, 2020

MFA Thesis

Concordia University

January 12th, 2021

Sarah Usick

This summer, I completed a site-specific art project near Oak River, Manitoba, in the form of two exhibitions in a barn loft on my parent's acreage. These two shows, *Picture Plastic Perfect* and *I AM CONSUMER 2.0*, involved two subjects: children's art and post-consumer debris. As this project happened in part due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the aim was to create a positive experience during this difficult time for a community that has few opportunities to participate in contemporary art.

The Loft Art Gallery (LAG) began when my parents moved to a small acreage in 2011. Since 2014, the LAG has been hosting themed group and solo shows in the summers. This pandemic season, I used the cold months (March-April) to undertake a construction project in order to increase the LAG's ability to exhibit work. This included building a main exhibition wall on the east side of the space, which also created a storage room for artwork and installation tools. Two additional stationary walls were mounted on the north wall of the Loft, and finally, a movable two-sided wall was built to add exhibition space. Simon J Knell speaks of a shifting focus of 'living museums', where "in a Britain entering a post-industrial phase, mills and factories were converted into museums, manufacturing narratives which spoke of skill, dedication, community and hardship."¹ Transforming the barn retains the context of the pieces made in rural Manitoba. During the warm months (May-August), I continued the artwork I had begun previously at the Manitoba studio. The two shows at the LAG this summer combined new, continued, and past work.

Website

Continuing the 2018 LAG website experiment, each site-specific show will be exhibited online to broaden the range of people able to see the show. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic this year, travel and physical gatherings were increasingly limited, so the website will attempt to compensate for this. The vintage, blocky style of its design is reminiscent of a time in my recent memory when the Internet was seen with optimism, as revolutionary tool that could democratize and connect the world. The Internet, once seen as wholly new, is now a place containing antique aesthetics, lost URLs, and disappeared cultures. Everything is prone to obsolescence or re-imagination.

Working with Non-Human Collaborators

A human-centric model did not seem broad enough to examine post-consumer debris or the art action. On the farm, I had a couple of pet mice for company. They lived in my art studio on the outskirts of the acreage, far away from the barn's main level, where reside a community of skilled cats employed for the purpose of mouse hunting. Given their industrious, creative, and friendly attitudes, the works of the mice were included in the show.

¹ Simon J. Knell, "Museums, Reality and the Material World," in *Museums in the Material World*, Leicester Readers in Museum, ed. Simon J. Knell (New York: Routledge, 2007), 17.

Working with Post-Collaborations

In both shows, I used post-consumer waste as material, sourced either from the supplies accumulated and used in the process of learning art, or from the detritus created by my day-to-day consumption. In a sense, I was collaborating with individuals, albeit after-the-fact. In my personal art practice, I found it generative to harmonize with pre-existing streams of objects, those which contain their own context, history, style, and tone, rather than relying on the single voice of any new material. I specifically avoided using the supposedly "neutral" context of new material to tell another object's story.

Two Pandemic Shows

Picture, Plastic Perfect

August 2 - 10th, 2020

"To lose the ability to play is to lose the sense that worldly conditions are plastic." ²

- Richard Sennet, *The Fall of Public Man*

This show brought together a combination of semi-anonymous "post-collaborations," or, a work involving two artists from two different contexts, working consecutively on the same object. Leftover materials, discarded art, and teaching demonstrations left over from my time as an art educator working with students from preschool to post-secondary were used in these post-collaborations. Drawing on six years of observations as a daycare worker, summer art camp director/instructor, middle school and highschool art teacher, TA in undergrad studio courses, as well as my own experiences learning art, I created a few original works as well.

Rather than pursuing a Modernist fetish for "naive" art or any one "purity" or "truth" of aesthetic, I worked with the children's art as an opportunity to examine the process of learning, how boundaries and definitions are used to understand the world around oneself, and to point out that any part of this process is plastic, or flexible, and can be questioned and re-formed with endless potential. I refrain from using terms such as "unformed" or "naive" art when describing the early work of children and adults learning art techniques, because I do not really see it as unformed or naive. Rather, I have come to see all work in this

² Richard Sennet, *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 267.

show along a range of less or more aligned with Western art education and societal traditions. Each piece, like each student, brings a unique set of style and ideas.

Working with the leftover materials from lessons and camps, these often synthetic and non-toxic materials are excluded from "serious" art, designated in the department store as belonging in the "kids" section and kept very separate from "fine art" supplies. This is a metaphor for many of the historical and current exclusions from contemporary art and the unspoken, but ever present, expectations of what is "allowed" to be art. These assumptions are held by the viewing public as well as by private institutions, and when crystallized, limit the generative potential and experience of art.

Art as a "benign" activity, carried out in day care centres and elementary schools, is a space where children are learning what is art, what isn't, what is a person, what isn't, what is possible, what isn't possible. Within the art of young or early artists, I see the formation of cultural distinctions and prejudices, symbols, and conventions. Their output is perceived as a stage to advance through, a snapshot of process, rather than the most desirable destination: the "mature" stage of an artist. This art showcases how seemingly ubiquitous visual standards, things we may take as universal, must be taught, absorbed, and practised. When did you learn to name the colours? To hold a crayon? That suns have rays (lines) and houses have triangular roofs and the peach crayon is named "flesh tint"? The differences among people lie in how this canon could be reconciled with their identity or not, what sort of struggle it was to absorb it, or face the consequences of erasure and exclusion. The fact that historically these definitions and categories have had devastating consequences on societies is critical to examine at this cultural moment.

I AM CONSUMER 2.0

August 10 – 14th, 2020

Post-consumer debris, or materials generated by persons living in an environment, has potential as a type of self-portrait. One that reveals something about an individual, a community and its environment, and that can also offer a sensory experience. Here, the post-consumer debris is cut up and rearranged into collages, creating new abstract aesthetic experiences or narratives.

This show imagined a future where the present cultural symbols and narratives had vanished, and what remained was the heterogeneous mixture of natural and synthetic remnants of human and animal consumption. It explored how this portrait of an extinct human race could be revered, examined, consumed, or simply exist in the sediment.

In a pseudo-anthropological manner, I looked for opportunities to collect samples of the sediment that occurred from different human activities around the farm. These activities were primarily of my own art-making, and that of my pet mice. These inventive mammals have no prejudice against mass-produced,

inorganic, or synthesized materials. In fact, they often preferred them. The mice have a standard way of finding articles in their environment and putting them to use, bending, shredding, perforating them with holes, etc. Over the course of a couple weeks, I introduced different types of materials into their habitat for them to work with. After spending some time establishing a comfortable home, the result was a mixture of materials. I tried different combinations of natural and synthetic materials.

This show envisioned a future archaeology engaged in the study of combinations of broken-down plastics, glass, metals, and very fine detritus, as well as how these mixtures differ from place to place. Finding similar patented materials, copyrighted colours, and traces of design, either in printed form or in the physical aspects of the piece, could give these future scientists clues about global trade. If our explanations of our cultural systems and hierarchies end up illegible or lost, how would the physical remains of our culture be perceived? How would these traces aid the creation of new myths and theories about the past?

This show sought to recycle a perceived distinction between academic art and functional, industrially designed objects. In the future, these distinctions could be mistranslated or completely lost, and while some remnants of text or thoughts may remain, passed down orally or through writing, it is interesting to consider how the whole output of human-made objects would be perceived by a future community, one with little or no knowledge of our current ideas about things we make. Our preference for the artistically made over the mass produced could be completely reversed, for example. The smooth, subtle curves and grooves of a plastic water bottle could be admired or even worshipped, over the irregular marks and handmade forms of an exquisite pottery set or a charcoal drawing.

These questions inspire me to look at post-consumer debris with a fresh perspective, seeing the bright hyper-designed world of simulation as unavoidable and necessary to incorporate into any portrait if it is to be an honest expression of my existence. George Carlin famously opined: "The earth doesn't share our prejudice towards plastic. Plastic came out of the earth. The earth probably sees plastic as just another one of its children."³

Considering the physical remnants left behind by human culture and activity does prompt me to reduce my traces by replacing new materials with upcycled ones. This practice has led me to be mindful of the entire life cycle of art pieces. In 2017-2019, I was working on found thrift store paintings or rejected pieces donated generously by my colleagues in the MFA program. This changed how I had been thinking of the art making process, causing me to move away from my previous perception of it as a

³ George Carlin, *Jammin' in New York*, performed by George Carlin, recorded at the Paramount Theater, Madison Square Garden April 24-25, 1992, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x49ueyc> .

“blank” slate, something to be made using new, industrially-made materials, produced in order to be transported, packaged, displayed on a wall, consumed by viewers, documented, consumed as knowledge, purchased, then finally stored in a room, with an arbitrarily defined beginning and end. In this revised view, creating art objects is more a temporary formation of stuff in my immediate environment, part of a larger cycle of culture and living, one where with the distinction between cultural objects and objects used in daily living becomes less significant. Decay and decomposition of knowledge, when it is translated through technology, mediums, and languages over many years, is what the pieces illustrate. Breaking down along the way and reconstituted into something else.

Ephemeral Art

An intelligent member of the mouse artists, known as PPE, is featured in the *Morris revisited* video performance. This work was inspired by a revisit of Robert Morris' columns by curator David Weber-Krebs at the de Brakke Grond theatre in Amsterdam.⁴ In the spirit of Morris' work, PPE's stage and object are built with waste and industrial materials. In contrast to Weber-Krebs take on the minimalist theatrical performance, the pristine nature of the theatre's environment is replaced by an imperfect and dusty barn loft. Agency and unpredictability is reintroduced in the form of PPE's curiosity. In her own timing, she causes the column's fall with artistic gravity. This speaks to the process an artwork can be reiterated, as it degrades and transforms in its new context. Some information is lost and some is gained, picking up new grains of dust and knowledge along the way. In this sense, ephemeral art is not art that disappears, but artmakers that disappear, taking their ideas with them. The bones, wrappers, and shells of our cultural traces are left behind to be reiterated by a new life form or circumstance.

In a post-pandemic landscape, the LAG could become an annual exhibition space for local artists, hosting two to four shows in the warm months. Through *Picture Perfect Plastic* and *I AM CONSUMER 2.0*, I have explored how ideas are translated as the individual, or society grows, develops, and sheds old ideas, but how traces remain and keep continuing in new iterations. Converting a barn from a place of food production to a place to share art, conversation, and ideas is another iteration of this structure. It is my hope that the LAG will serve its community in the years to come.

⁴ David Weber-Krebs, “Performance (Robert Morris Revisited),” Gerrit Rietveld Academie, March 7, 2016.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAyeMIRpdvg> .

Carlin, George. *Jammin' in New York*, performed by George Carlin, recorded at the Paramount Theater, Madison Square Garden April 24-25, 1992. <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x49ueyc>

Knell, Simon J. "Museums, Reality and the Material World," in *Museums in the Material World*, Leicester Readers in Museum, edited by Simon J. Knell, 1-28. New York: Routledge, 2007.

Sennet, Richard. *The Fall of Public Man*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

Weber-Krebs, David. Performance (Robert Morris Revisited). Recorded at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie. YouTube, March 7, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAyeMIRpdvg>

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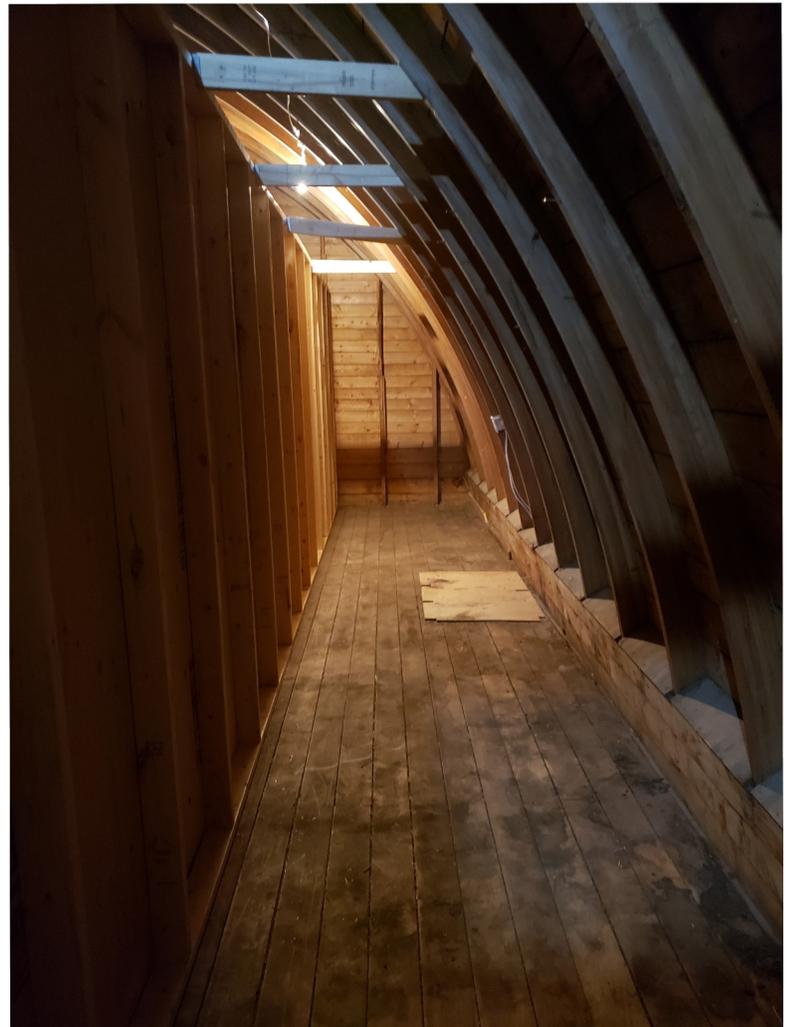
Storage/Exhibition wall construction

Before (above)

After (right)

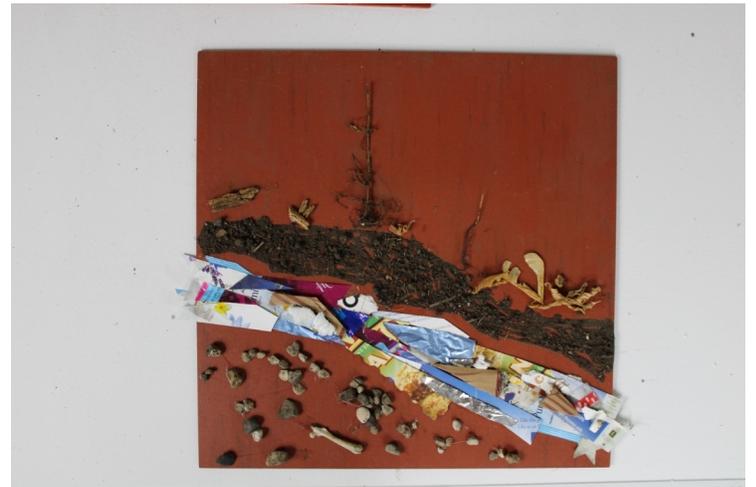
Loft Art Gallery

March 2020





Mouse Performance (Robert Morris revisited), Still from video, 2020

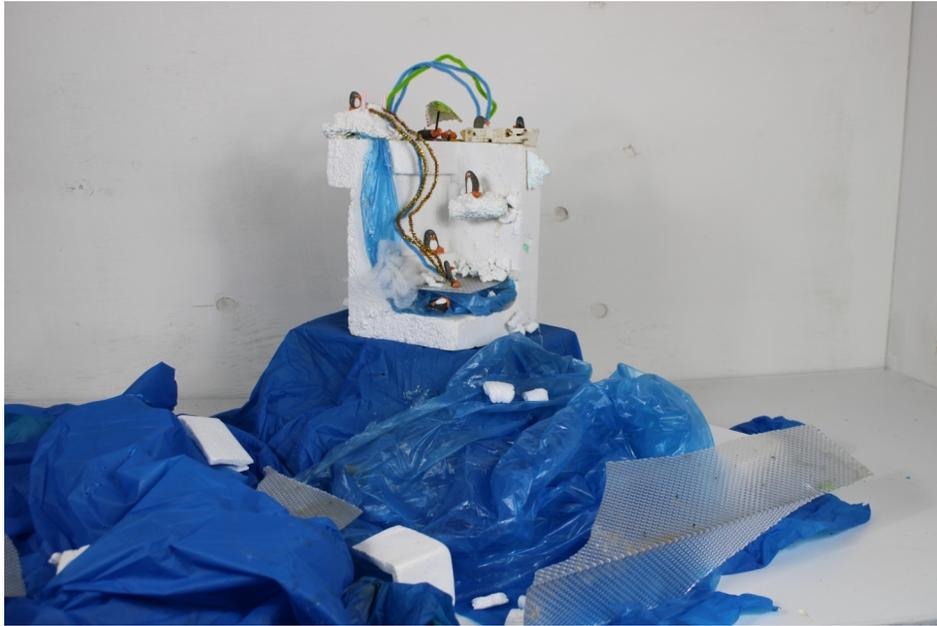


Geological Cross-section I
Post-consumer debris, cardboard, Stryfoam,
cardboard, tin foil, dirt, plants, rocks on tile
12 x 12"
2019
(left: detail)



Picture, Plastic, Perfect
Installation views
2020





Penguin Paradise

Recycled Styrofoam, recycling bags, plastic tablecloth, recycled florescent light cover, stones, homemade play dough, acrylic paint, craft materials

36 x 24 x 24 " (installation)

2020

Bottom images: details

