

Pretty in Plastic:
Drawing Sustenance from the Capitalist Wasteland in Portia Munson's Pink Projects

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the thirty-year installation and sculpture practice of New York-based artist Portia Munson (b. 1961, Beverly, MA) involving the collection and assemblage of discarded plastic objects of the same colour, specifically the *Pink Project* series. While her assemblage works of blue and green plastic trash present more obvious ties to plastic consumption and its detrimental impact on the environment, the *Pink Projects* series reveals the scale of the pink palette of products that become consumer waste, and enables an understanding of both the work's subject and materiality as the abject product of gendered capitalist ideology. I consider four of Munson's works that assemble pink plastic waste. This thesis argues that Munson's work critically visualizes the paralyzing, overwhelming, and terrifying nature of our planetary predicament, while also enacting a feminist reparative ritual — drawing from the history of women's altar-making, a feminist history of capitalism, eco-criticism, anti-capitalist philosophies, and depression studies. The transformative quality of Munson's works hinge on their expression of the degraded and abject status—produced in the transition to and maintenance of capitalism—of waste and female body as productive spaces through which the unknown may be encountered and therefore from which the critical vernacular to address planetary chaos is produced.

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INTRODUCTION

Pink, a harmless color made to be consumed is the color of perfected female sexual parts, sweet, candy, love, sticky, pretty, innocent, fun, dainty, clean, soft, youthful, flower-like. Useless little pink things permeate a girl's world in harmless subtle ways.

Pink imposed girliness is part of what makes up the perverted meanings of femininity in our culture.

A pink comb by itself seems harmless, but when seen in mass accumulation one may discover that this wide range of innocent pink objects take on an insidious character.¹

—Portia Munson, “How Pink is Made”

In Portia Munson's 2023 installation *Pink Project: Bedroom* (fig. 1) what appear to be hundreds of pink baby onesies make up the canopy or ceiling.² Their arms dangle corpse-like, haunting the space below. Below are thousands of pink things. They are the discards of capitalist consumerism: fake nails, combs, dildos, cleaning products, toys, and tampon applicators.³ These pink things are unique and identifiable yet a homogenous mass. The space they make-up presents a likewise dialectical conundrum, oscillating between uniqueness and sameness. It is a personal bedroom unlike any other, each object painstakingly arranged and carefully placed, and it is simultaneously impersonal: one hundred bedrooms overlapping, pervading, and saturating each other. It is initially difficult to orient the self in this overwhelmingly occupied and unreasonably pink space. Only after thorough observation does the shape of a bed, desk, and windows become discernible. What then becomes clear is the space's inhabitability—this is the domain of objects not of people. Every pink surface is already occupied, often by multiple pink things. Every inch of the space is filled with pink objects. It is total pink chaos, yet the space is also defined by its orderliness—everything sits in its proper place, nothing is dumped or absent-mindedly strewn. Extraordinary care has been taken in the construction of the bedroom. In this pink arrangement, a

¹ Portia Munson, “How Pink Is Made,” (dissertation, Rutgers University NJ, 1990).

² Displayed in the Museum of Sex, New York City, New York, as part of the *Portia Munson: The Pink Bedroom* exhibition, January 27 to July 26, 2023.

³ “Installations,” Portia Munson, accessed July 30, 2024, <https://www.portiamunson.com/work/installations>.

multitude of conceptual, contextual, and practical truths about garbage and the systems that produce it become legible: *Pink Project: Bedroom* situates its viewer in a rare context – one where not only is the viewer forced into a surprising new relation with this discarded material but also one in which contemplating both the scale of waste and the forces that produce it becomes possible.

Pink Project: Bedroom is just the latest iteration of Munson's *Pink Projects*. This thesis examines the thirty-year installation and sculpture practice of New York-based artist Portia Munson (b. 1961, Beverly, MA) which involves the collection and assemblage of discarded plastic objects of the same colour, specifically the *Pink Project* series. While her assemblage works of blue and green plastic trash present more obvious ties to plastic consumption and its detrimental impact on the environment, the *Pink Projects* reveal the scale of the pink palette of products that become consumer waste and enable an understanding of both the work's subject and materiality as the abject product of gendered capitalist ideology. I consider four of Munson's works that assemble pink plastic waste. While only two of them are titularly designated as belonging to the *Pink Project* series, I discuss all four as *Pink Projects* because all four address the same themes and are composed of the same material (pink garbage, mostly plastic). This thesis argues that Munson's work critically visualizes the paralyzing, overwhelming and terrifying nature of our planetary predicament, while also enacting a feminist reparative ritual involving the collection, organisation and sacralization of gendered pink consumer detritus, providing a framework with which the perception of ideological and ecological planetary chaos can be effectively encountered and transformed into a recovered sense of agency. The transformative quality of Munson's works hinge on their expression of the degraded, abject conditions of waste and the female body as productive spaces from which the unknown may be

encountered and therefore from which the critical vernacular to address planetary chaos can be produced.

The objectives of this research are as follows: 1) to provide an urgent and novel analysis of the work—despite her long career and extensive exhibition resume, Munson is largely unstudied in art history, and there is little scholarly work that combines the emerging discourses of climate crisis, feminist, anticapitalist, and ecocritical ideas prevalent in contemporary discussions of garbage; 2) to examine Munson’s approach to plastic as one of obsessive contemplation, assuming the role of “speculative archaeologist”⁴ who undertakes a politicized archaeology of the present which enables a renewed perception of the planetary condition; 3) to undertake a feminist theorization of Mikkel Krause Frantzen and Jens Bjerrng’s notion of the Hyperabject through an illustrative comparison to Munson’s sculpture *Her Coffin* (fig. 6) and using the figure of the Witch, the arbiter of transgressive abject power, to formulate the critical position from which the perception of the planetary crisis can be shifted; 4) to apply Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s conceptual framework of reparative reading to Munson’s *Pink Projects* to examine how the work draws sustenance from the discards of this troubled cultural present and reconfigures waste material into an aesthetic of relationality wherein the individual subject can effectively connect the universal to the personal regarding the planetary state of waste and the actuality of their entanglement in its production. This objective also considers the relevance of rituals and altar making in the framing of Munson’s practice as reparative.⁵

⁴Shannon Mattern, “Speculative Archaeology,” *Places Journal*, December 1, 2014, <https://placesjournal.org/article/speculative-archaeology/>.

⁵ The focus of this argument is situated in a North American context, for this is where the art of its study materialized and the garbage it consists of was collected. However, the systems that produced the conditions from which Munson’s artwork emerges are entangled in the process of capitalist globalization.

Methodology

The methodological approach of my thesis proceeds in the vein of the scholars that most inform it—Amanda Boetzkes, Heather Davis, and Gay Hawkins—all of whom are thinking through the overproduction of waste, ecology, and relationality. These three scholars frame discourses of sustainable waste management as masks that disguise the grave reality of irreparable ecological destruction and all three suggest and call for practices that necessarily shift human relationships to waste and waste management.⁶ Boetzkes advocates for an approach to waste art (and the study of art in general) that moves necessarily beyond interpretation, which she describes as a passive act, and the idea that art reveals hidden truths.⁷ She states instead that “our lens” in studying this intersection of waste, ecology, and relationality, is already muddy and the impetus to study art is that artworks reveal the depth of our enmeshment with these realities—allowing thinkers to go “deeper into the mud.”⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s notion of the reparative position is a mode of study that then enables such further enmeshment with cultural reality.

The reparative position is especially appropriate in the study of waste art and waste management practices because it is a method for the interpretation of cultural phenomena wherein the individual can “extract sustenance” from the objects of a “culture whose avowed desire has not been to sustain them.”⁹ Sedgwick’s extraction of sustenance, in this context, occurs both in Munson’s creative process where she recovers and assembles waste, and in her viewers’

⁶ Although it is outside the scope of this research I am also thinking through the particular situatedness of waste relations on Turtle Island (the site where I am conducting this research), the disproportionate negative effects of waste and petroculture on Indigenous populations, and Indigenous ontologies for imagining shifts in relations with waste. Métis theorist and ecologist Zoë Todd is a critical scholar on the subject of shifting relations to waste from an Indigenous perspective and through Indigenous ontologies. In the article “Fish, Kin and Hope: Tending to Water Violations in *Amiskwaciwâskahikan* and Treaty Six Territory,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 43 (March 2017): 102–7, <https://doi.org/10.1086/692559>, Todd interprets contemporary relations with plastic and oil waste through Indigenous frameworks of reciprocal relations with “fossil fuel progeny” (104). Todd seeks methods to re-imagine oil from contaminants and pollutants toward something else, questioning how to de-weaponize these materials and shift these logics (107).

⁷ Scott Stoneman and Amanda Boetzkes, “Amanda Boetzkes contemplates what it means for waste to be charged with meaning,” podcast, *Pretty Heady Stuff*, September 22, 2023.

⁸ Stoneman and Boetzkes, *Pretty Heady Stuff*, September 22, 2023.

⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid and Reparative Reading or You’re So Vain You Probably Think This Essay Is About You” essay, in *Touching Feeling* (Duke University Press, 2003), 150.

experience of these works. In both cases sustenance is drawn from abject, rejected objects produced by a culture of unsustainability. The reparative position or reparative reading was coined by Sedgwick in *Touching Feeling*: it is a method of approach to engage and interpret signs and systems. Munson enacts Sedgwick's reparative reading in her recovery of discarded objects. The language of extraction, however, is problematic. In a discussion of the overconsumption of plastic waste in particular, extraction signifies the violence of petroculture. To clarify my position in such a loaded discussion, I avoid using this word and develop Sedgwick's reparative reading wherein reciprocal relation is key to the reparative encounter. This elaboration, I believe, is in line with Sedgwick's thinking. In her essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You" Sedgwick develops the reparative reading position by elucidating its opposite, that of paranoid reading. Paranoid reading, she argues, is the position from which the majority of theory originates and operates. In further accord with Boetzkes call for the necessary move beyond interpretation, paranoid reading, according to Sedgwick, blocks the potential of seeking positive affect in its absolute objective to expose hidden violence.¹⁰ The reparative impulse on the other hand is "additive and accretive."¹¹ The accretion of pink objects is a principal component of Munson's immense *Pink Projects* and central to my discussion of them. Accretion in some ways is diametrically opposed to extraction. Considering accretion as a critical element of reparative reading alongside the fact that Sedgwick cites queer communities as the basis for her understanding of the reparative position, it is reasonable to conclude that queer abject relations of additive reciprocity enrich the reparative position.

In addition to her reparative approach, Boetzkes' work, like mine, looks to waste art for an archaeological perspective of the present state of cultural and ecological degradation. Her

¹⁰ Sedgwick, "Paranoid and Reparative Reading," 136.

¹¹ Sedgwick, "Paranoid and Reparative Reading," 136.

book *Plastic Capitalism: Contemporary Art and the Drive to Waste* is motivated by two research questions highly relevant to my line of inquiry and argumentation: “Is it still possible to undertake a politicized archaeology of the present?” And “In what situation are we so embroiled that we have become blind to it?”¹² Shannon Mattern’s theory of speculative archaeology usefully informs a position from which to answer these questions. Mattern’s theory is based on a trend she notices in contemporary art and art exhibitions. Her notion of speculative archaeology is especially useful because it operates from both a paranoid and reparative position. It is paranoid in that it is premised on a Foucauldian notion of archaeology that decentres the subject in order to move beyond what is consciously perceived and expose the underlying rules and structures that delimit the realm of thought.¹³ It is reparative with regards to its material concerns. Mattern understands this trend as a response to the conditions of “financial collapse, climate change, and growing alarm about the increasingly unsustainable processes of manufacturing, construction and waste disposal” which have inspired “deeply historically approaches in art and design.”¹⁴ Mattern’s theorization stems from art practices that have excavated the historical conditions that create a materialist relationality, approaches that turn everyday detritus into “archaeological treasure.”¹⁵

Where Boetzkes’ work importantly informs my understanding of Munson as speculative archaeologist, and my intention to move beyond interpretation and determine a means of drawing sustenance from Munson’s work, Davis and Hawkins’ research illuminate methods for re-orienting understandings and relations to plastic and waste based on the ethical and ontological ideas from which waste and plastic emerge and continue to proliferate, fundamental to my methodological approach. For Davis, who argues in *Plastic Matter* that “thought manifests

¹²Amanda Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism: Contemporary Art and the Drive to Waste* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2019), 5.

¹³Shannon Mattern, “Speculative Archaeology,” *Places Journal*, December 1, 2014, <https://placesjournal.org/article/speculative-archaeology/>.

¹⁴ Mattern, “Speculative Archaeology.”

¹⁵ Mattern, “Speculative Archaeology.”

materially,” the recovery of sustenance involves the re-evaluation of the relationship of plastic and plasticity, and the relationship “between ideas and materiality to do the difficult task of thinking with, rather than passing over plastic.”¹⁶ Davis advocates for thinking through queer ecologies, networks, kin, and composition to open new ways of relating to and with plastic matter. While I do not specifically attend to the theme of queer ecologies in my analysis of Munson’s *Pink Projects*, Davis’ application of queer theory to plastic emboldens my linkage of Judith Butler’s reconfiguration of abjection through a queer lens to plastic and pink in Munson’s work. Hawkins argues “that a changing relation to waste is a changing relation to self.”¹⁷ This is relevant to the aspect of my argument that Munson’s work grants its visitors the opportunity to imagine and enact such changed relations in order to effectively shift their perception of the crisis of the overproduction of waste from that of paralyzing individual responsibility toward a sense of collective agency and reparative possibility.

Literature Review

This composite methodology informs my interdisciplinary research. The range of subjects I draw from includes political theory, art history, affect theory, eco-criticism, environmental responsibility and waste minimization studies, plastics, queer theory and feminism. The existing literature on these subjects is ever-increasing as systemic injustice and the climate situation grows increasingly dire. While this existing literature within art history and otherwise is importantly expanding understandings of waste relations, none that I have encountered explicitly addresses the critical link between the degraded state of waste to that of the female body upon which capitalism depends. The findings from this diverse range of literature are inextricably implicated in Munson’s *Pink Projects*. In the following brief review of the literature that informs

¹⁶ Heather Davis, *Plastic Matter* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 14.

¹⁷ Gay Hawkins, “Plastic Bags: Living with Rubbish,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 4, no. 1 (March 2001): 5–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779010040010>, .5.

my argument I assess the relevant theoretical and historical premises from which Munson's work is interpreted.

The primary source of my argumentation is Munson's own words. This portion of the literature consists of quotations pulled from interviews where Munson describes her process and the ideas that inform the *Pink Projects* and her broader practice. These interviews affirm my positioning of Munson as a speculative archaeologist, my discussion of her interest in the everyday, my understanding of her use of horror as an artistic strategy, and my comparison of the *Pink Projects* to altar-making.

The most critical source of Munson's utterances about pink is the written portion of her MFA thesis, "How Pink is Made." Alongside the very first iteration of the Pink Projects, *Pink Project: Table*, and a series of still life oil paintings, Munson submitted a 22-page narrative poem. "How Pink Is Made" reads like a lucid dream. It is a loosely structured series of images, vignettes, lists, and declarative statements that repeatedly depict or evoke the pink interconnections between women, babies, religion, innocence, shame, girlhood, human intervention in nature, pollution, the ocean, death, and decay. While some of the images Munson's poeticism evokes locate pink's relation to femaleness in reproductive organs, other poetic reverberations indicate that her understanding of pink's relation to femaleness and femininity is shifting. The pink feminine is a construct and not merely biological. Pink is "things to do in the privacy of our own homes," a long list that includes "put deodorant on," "powder puff our bodies," and "pluck our eyebrows and any other unwanted facial hair."¹⁸ Pink is made (and the idea of pink is perpetuated) through a series of bodily modifications of feminine becoming rooted in the amorphous impulse of shame and the imposed expectations of what constitutes girlhood or womanhood. This amorphous impulse, I have come to understand, is a

¹⁸ Munson, "How Pink Is Made," 9.

principal project of the historical and social degradation of women's bodies in the transition to capitalism. Pink, Munson poetically expresses, is culturally produced and is connected to capitalist tendencies of over consumption: pink is "made to be consumed"¹⁹ in a culture that is "desperately trying to feed a hunger that cannot be satisfied."²⁰ Throughout the work, Munson establishes a line of thinking that is revelatory to my understanding of what the *Pink Projects* enact, and I have, therefore, integrated the work's most relevant quotations as epigraphs that introduce the premise of each of my sections.

My understanding of the conditions of capitalism as a pervasive, paralyzing force comes from the work of political theorists Mark Fisher and Byung-Chul Han as well as more specifically art and ecology oriented discussions of capitalist violence, including the work of T.J. Demos, Jason W. Moore, Donna Haraway, Kirsty Robertson, Heather Davis, and Amanda Boetzkes. Fisher discusses the contemporary context as a condition of "capitalist realism" which entails "the widespread sense that not only is capital the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible to even imagine a coherent alternative to it," rendering the individual powerless and hopeless. Han similarly describes the devastating impact of capitalist individuality as it is related to the loss of rituals in his book *The Disappearance of Rituals*. The foundational premise of the work of Demos, Moore, and Haraway is the creation of alternate denominations describing the geological epoch other than the popular use of Anthropocene, including Capitalocene, Chthulucene, and Plantationocene. Their work on theorizing alternatives to the devastating planetary predicament importantly sets the stage for my participation in a contemporary tradition of academic work that operates to create better, more apt, and usable language to interpret the overwhelming planetary situation. These scholars argue for language and theoretical approaches that can adequately address a situation that is effectively

¹⁹ Munson, "How Pink Is Made," 15.

²⁰ Munson, "How Pink Is Made," 6.

obscured by a plethora of powerful forces whose desire is to uphold the present order for their benefit. Robertson describes the obscurity of these situations using the term “wicked problems.”²¹ Robertson elaborates that “depicting climate change is notoriously challenging.”²² Robertson names climate change and its associated waste a wicked problem, which are “issues that are challenging to articulate and difficult to solve in a straightforward manner.”²³

A significant aspect of this literature that informs my argument is the understanding that these problems are wicked because they are invisible. Another key concept related to the wicked problem is that of “slow violence.” Davis states that “slow violence” occurs gradually and out of sight and is enacted by the ontological forces that uphold late capitalism and Western economic growth. Davis names plastic as the arbiter of this hidden slow violence because plastic is such a ubiquitous and intimate material; it infiltrates our daily lives on such a scale that it becomes hard to fathom.²⁴ Boetzkes and Davis look to contemporary art as a site from which the hidden nature of plastic’s relationship to capitalism becomes clear, and both call for alternatives. Boetzkes calls for a shift in attention “from plastic object to the interlocking systems of ecology, the energy economy, and aesthetic interpretation” which, for her, “is precisely the move that is needed to think of waste as a systemic pattern of creating the world through the foreclosure of diversity.”²⁵ Davis calls for practices that teach us to enter the untenable world of plastic and of planetary devastation “instead of operating from the fantasy that it can be barricaded against.”²⁶

The visibility of plastic and the culturally constructed feminine, visible through *Pink Projects*, is hidden through their association with domesticity (mundane, everyday). The

²¹ Robertson is a member of the inspiring Synthetic Collective and co-curator of their exhibition *Plastic Heart* which brought together works that addressed the historical aesthetics of plastic and its degradation, but specifically functioned to visualize the collective’s research on plastic pollution in the Great Lakes.

²² Kirsty Robertson et al., “Plastic Heart: Surface All the Way Through,” *Open Library of Humanities* 9, no. 2 (October 13, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.9210>, 3.

²³ Robertson et al., “Plastic Heart: Surface All the Way Through,” 3.

²⁴ Davis, “Life & Death in the Anthropocene,” 349.

²⁵ Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism*, 199.

²⁶ Davis, “Life & Death in the Anthropocene,” 356.

historical reality that creates the ideological situation of plastic and capitalism is that of enslavement and colonization. Silvia Federici's Marxist, feminist book, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, outlines the hidden quality of domestic labour as an instrument of accumulation in the transition to capitalism. "Female domestic work" alongside "the integration of enslaved labour" hid "the labour of a multitude of workers."²⁷ She also describes the obliteration of "the commons" in the privatization of land, and the social degradation of women, enslaved, and colonized peoples as foundational in the transition to capitalism.²⁸ However, even in this degraded state and against all odds, these populations forged community and gained forms of autonomy. Federici's argument foregrounds the history of the Witch Hunt in Europe.²⁹ Through an extensive historical analysis of the transition from feudalism to capitalism she determines capitalism required "the subjugation of women to the reproduction of a work-force" and the "destruction of the power of women" achieved through the extermination of "witches."³⁰ Federici argues that "Primitive accumulation [...]"³¹ was not simply an accumulation and concentration of exploitable workers and capital. It was *also an accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class*, whereby hierarchies built

²⁷Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (London: Penguin Books, 2021), 103.

²⁸ While outside of the scope of this project, the work of Black studies scholars who develop the particular relationship between the transition to capitalism and the labour of colonized and enslaved peoples is a definitively relevant aspect of this conversation, especially as it relates to the hidden nature of capitalism I develop in Section One. Denise Ferreira da Silva's "Unpayable Debt: Reading Scenes of Value against the Arrow of Time," *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*: Issue 39 (2023) provides a crucial framework for interpreting this relationship and understanding how it manifests in the present. Ferreira da Silva disrupts accepted understandings of capital, its origin, and how it implicates historically enslaved and colonized peoples in accumulating "unpayable debts." She proposes a fractal figuring of the colonial, racial, and capital triad. It is an urgent revision of understanding of capital that "accounts for how the obscuration of how the colonial participates in the creation of capital." (94) She concludes by describing that the work of shedding this unpayable debt can only be accomplished through intuition and imagination. Such an imaginative approach to understanding capital is highly relevant in my formulation of Munson's work as an opening to interpret the impossible situation of capitalism.

²⁹ Linked to Constance Classen's formulation of the transgressive and abject "Witch's senses."

³⁰ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 63.

³¹Primitive accumulation is the prior accumulation of capital and labour, without which capitalism could not exist.

upon gender, as well as “race” and age became constitutive of class rule and the formation of the modern proletariat” [italics in original].³²

Another thread which I draw on, through its relation to the realm of domesticity and its relation to capitalism, is that of depression. Ann Cvetkovich’s book *Depression: A Public Feeling* formulates depression in relation to the domestic, to the everyday, and to public space. Domesticity is a “keyword” in her chapter “The Utopia of Ordinary Habit: Crafting, Creativity, and Spiritual Practice” where “the home becomes the soft underbelly of capitalism, a place where the current state of things is experienced through a complex range of feelings.”³³ The chapter tracks “the intertwined histories of feminism and depression,” the “incommensurability of small-scale anxiety and global problems,” and the sensation that “any effort to transform the sense of feeling bad about oneself that is so endemic to capitalism is too insignificant to make a difference.”³⁴ Another concept in this chapter which links the paralyzing condition of capitalist realism and “slow violence” to an individual subject’s depressive reality is her understanding of the “slow death.” She describes “how capitalism affects people at the level of daily somatic practice by offering them forms of immediate gratification and comfort that are ultimately killing them.”³⁵ This line of argumentation is largely informed by Allyson Mitchell’s, *Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata of Late Capitalism* (fig.2). This work exists in an art historical tradition of the feminist installation of “womb rooms,” the earliest example of which is Faith Wilding’s contribution to the Los Angeles collective artist project Woman House in 1972 *Crocheted Environment (Womb Room)*, of which Munson’s *Pink Project: Bedroom* also belongs. Munson herself situates *Pink Project: Bedroom* in this context, that its creation “was like creating a girl

³² Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 64.

³³ Ann Cvetkovich, “The Utopia of Ordinary Habit: Crafting, Creativity, and Spiritual Practice,” in *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012), 156.

³⁴ Cvetkovich, “The Utopia of Ordinary Habit,” in *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 164-66.

³⁵ Cvetkovich, 167.

dream space or womb space.”³⁶ *Hungry Purse* is a room size installation modeled off the anatomy of the womb and created out of discarded materials Mitchell finds in thrift stores. Mitchell selects these culturally rejected objects based on the criteria that they either express sentimentality, are cute, garish, cheap, or excessive and which, for Cvetkovich, evoke a range of negative feelings “associated with both fat girls and feminisms, and this reservoir of shame, abjection, and mixed feelings is resource for queer reparative strategies.”³⁷

Munson’s work is also situated in a larger tradition of junk art history, especially that of the *Nouveaux Realistes*. While there are many exceptional works on the history of junk art and the aesthetics of trash,³⁸ my knowledge of the material, political, and ideological history of junk art is particularly indebted to Gillian Whiteley’s *Junk Art: Art and the Politics of Trash*. Whiteley establishes multiple theoretical and ideological frameworks that bolster my argument for Portia Munson’s *Pink Projects*. She affirms my positioning of Munson as a speculative archaeologist by repeatedly locating garbage art and artists alongside anthropology and archaeology. She links the sorting of trash to a process of uncovering truth.³⁹ She emphasizes that this problem must be addressed at a corporate industrial level and that eco-rhetoric “feeds on an existentialist discourse of individual fear, anxiety, and guilt;”⁴⁰ and, using the theories of Julia Kristeva and Georges Bataille, determines the history of garbage and its material qualities as disruptive to hegemonic social order.⁴¹ The fifth chapter of the book centres the art of the *Nouveaux Réalistes* in mid-century France and their connection to the philosophies of ‘le quotidien,’ the

³⁶ Lily Bradfield, “The Timeless Relevance of Portia Munson’s ‘Pink Project,’” *Cultured Mag*, April 17, 2019, <https://www.culturedmag.com/article/2019/04/27/portia-munson>.

³⁷ Cvetkovich, 185.

³⁸ See Lea Vergine and Museo d’arte moderna e contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto, *When Trash Becomes Art: Trash Rubbish Mongo* (Milan: Skira, 2007); and Deborah Cartmell, I.Q. Hunter, Heidi Kaye, and Imelda Whelan, *Trash Aesthetics: Popular Culture and its Audience* (London: Pluto Press, 1999).

³⁹ Whiteley, 19.

⁴⁰ Whiteley, 22.

⁴¹ Whiteley, 26.

“transformatory possibilities of the everyday,”⁴² and “the everyday as revolutionary praxis.”⁴³ These artists “directly employed detritus and found materials and their fascination with the stuff of daily existence.”⁴⁴ The artwork of *Nouveaux Realiste* Arman is particularly significant in the formation of the themes Munson’s work addresses. Whiteley describes that, informed by his concern in the dramatic proliferation of manufactured goods, their place in contemporary culture, and their impact of the environment, Arman— “artist, archaeologist, and anthropologist—collected and collated objects, sometimes dissecting them, sometimes destroying them, sorting and ordering manufactured products.”⁴⁵ The imperative aspect as well as his process of collecting manufactured goods resembles Munson’s. His work *Accumulation des Broses* (fig. 3) shares an oddly specific visual language with Munson’s *Pink Project: Table* (fig. 4).

My reparative reading of the aesthetic language Munson’s work produces, specifically *Pink Project: Table* and *today will be AWESOME* (fig. 5), will also draw on Kay Turner’s unique monograph *Beautiful Necessity: The Art and Meaning of Women’s Altars*. I assert the aesthetic of Munson’s work lies not only within the context of art history but also that of the visual aesthetic and historical tradition of women’s altar making as well as Turner’s positioning of the altar as “an interiorization of an exterior” and “a microcosmic strategy to gain macrocosmic results.”⁴⁶

Finally informing this thesis (also implicated and informed by my positionality) is Jayne Wark’s essay, “Queering Abjection: A Lesbian, Feminist, Canadian Perspective,” that importantly positions abjection’s redemptive potential which will set up my strategy of a feminist theorization of the hyperabject in Munson’s work. I follow Wark’s lead in her word choice of a queer abject’s *redemptive* potential. My use does not follow an exclusively Christian

⁴² Whiteley, 106.

⁴³ Whiteley, 108.

⁴⁴ Whiteley, 106.

⁴⁵ Whiteley, 112.

⁴⁶ Kay Turner, *Beautiful Necessity: The Art and Meaning of Women’s Altars* (London: Thames et Hudson, 1999), 95.

understanding, wherein redemption entails the deliverance from sin, but instead describes the condition of recovering sustenance from degraded materials. Abjection is Julia Kristeva's theorization of fear in the face of bodily waste that takes on a horrifying presence in the zone between what is me and no longer me (the figures of the cadaver and the newborn child exemplify abjection).⁴⁷ The presence of horror, terror, and fear are notions that are fundamental to my theorization of Munson, capitalism, and the pathway through which attention can and must be shifted. The use of a feminist theory of abjection in interpreting Munson's work places her in a tradition of feminist abject body art, works that deal with similar and relevant themes to Munson's, including the construction of women's cultural identity, and that female bodily functions in particular, are 'abjected' by a patriarchal social order. Women artists who fit within this tradition include Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith, and Carolee Schneeman. Wark also discusses the work of Alyson Mitchell and uses it to elaborate this queer abject line of theorization.

My analysis of Munson's work is informed by my positionality. Therefore, it is necessary I critically situate myself, and my implicit and explicit biases in relation to this work. I am a white settler, non-binary person (who sits at the edge of gender non-conformity and the presumptive appearance and condition of social and biological womanhood) from Winnipeg, Manitoba. My priorities are in disrupting the oppressive systems in which I am implicated and am product, namely the universally oppressive and ecologically destructive systems from which capitalism emerged and continues to thrive. I acknowledge that as a white person and apparent 'woman' I have both benefitted and suffered from these systems and am interested in researching actionable means to address their ongoing violence and imagine alternative ways of being now and in the future. My non-binary identity drives my particular interest in the presentation of consumerist femininity in Munson's *Pink Projects*.

⁴⁷ Mikkel Krause Frantzen and Jens Bjerring, "Ecology, Capitalism and Waste: From Hyperobject to Hyperabject," *Theory, Culture & Society* 37, no. 6 (2020): 87–109, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276420925541>, 88.

The argument of my thesis, that Munson's *Pink Projects* provide a framework with which the perception of the garbage crisis and the systems that produce it can be effectively encountered and transformed into a sense of agency, is developed in three distinct sections. The first section "Everyday Crisis: *Pink Project: Bedroom* and Depressing Capitalocene Devices of Normalization, Banalization, and Economization" both analyzes and uses *Pink Project: Bedroom* as an opening that aptly describes the contemporary context wherein states of crisis are so constant they have become mundane and therefore invisible. This section considers the foundational logic of garbage management practices as linked to the logics of colonialism and as deeply problematic in the formation of the relationship between the self and Other, and the devastating construction of individual responsibility in the face of crisis as a device of capitalism. Section Two, "Witching Transgression and Perceiving the Hyperabject: Seeing anew, the Witch's senses, and forming allegiance with the hyperabject as pink plastic waste," focuses on Munson's sculpture *Her Coffin* (fig. 6) and develops its aspects which illuminate and expand Frantzen and Bjering's Hyperabject as an accessible and redemptive visualization of the terrifying and abject conditions of plastic that does not go away. Section two also locates Munson's work and its redemptive potential in creating the conditions of a new and generative perception. The final section, "Rituals of Reparative Relation to Rubbish: Microcosmic Strategies to Gain Macrocosmic Results," discusses Munson's *Pink Project: Table* and *today will be AWESOME* as practices in altar making and the necessity of relating to the once invisible conditions of the everyday through ritual strategy to rescue the politics of the everyday and recover agency.

SECTION ONE: EVERYDAY CRISIS

Pink Project: Bedroom and Depressing Capitalocene Devices of Normalization, Banalization, and Economization.

What is most important is hidden because of its simplicity and familiarity. It is most difficult to see what is right in front of our eyes because it is always there. Ordinary events go unnoticed.

Everyday language disguises thought.⁴⁸

It is that petrified stone feeling again, completely numb, a numb trauma.⁴⁹

– Portia Munson, “How Pink is Made”

In “How Pink is Made” Munson expresses with succinct clarity the depressing obfuscation of agency as it infiltrates the everyday. It is the familiar proximity of systemic injustice that creates a condition of concealment. These systems are disguised within the material of day to day life. This section undertakes a paranoid reading position of *Pink Project: Bedroom* to unearth “what is most important” from its location of being hidden in plain sight. What is most important to visualize is capitalism and the overwhelming planetary chaos it so effectively conceals. The systems of capitalism have failed the planet. They are major, insidious arbiters of violence. These systems drive individuals to ignore, for the sake of narcissistic desire, and feed off an abstract fear of the Other—the fear of chaos. These systems become visible in the encounter with Munson’s work—through her chosen material and process—providing an entry into the chaos that must be encountered and related to if there is to be an imagined alternative.

Pink Project: Bedroom

There is no focal point in *Pink Project: Bedroom*. It is (importantly) impossible to orient the self in the visual world of this work. There is no place for attention to land, to rest.

⁴⁸ Munson, “How Pink Is Made, 1-2.

⁴⁹ Munson, “How Pink Is Made, 6.

Encountering it is simultaneously repulsive and attractive—this lack of direction makes the work impenetrable as it draws its viewer further into its field—the restless eye noticing more and more and more niches of assembled pink objects. Its most evident themes are girlhood, sex, and reproduction. The objects are juxtaposed in perverse contradiction—the bed is piled high with a collection of plush pink stuffed animals as well as two enormous dildos. The work’s obviously legible themes are represented by the colour pink and these perverse juxtapositions—these are the objects that constitute the female experience and identity. This work is about girlhood and womanhood and provides astute evidence on the material reality of how these ideas are culturally perpetuated through consumer products. This aspect of the work is affecting and effective and critically informs the work of my thesis; but what the work most compellingly represents is the unrepresentable: the pervasive and relentless condition of capitalism.

The lack of a focal point in a sea of pink-coloured consumerist discards exactly articulates Fisher’s description that “the centrelessness of global capitalism is radically unthinkable.”⁵⁰ Munson’s installation, in some ways, is inconceivable in its excessiveness. In its restless chaotic composition, the work engages its viewer in the manner that Fisher demands: “the centre is missing, but we cannot stop searching for it or positing it.”⁵¹ The relentless nature of capitalism, for Fisher, is plastic. It “entails subordinating oneself to a reality that is infinitely plastic, capable of reconfiguring itself at any moment.”⁵² He elaborates capitalism’s plastic nature through a useful comparison of capitalism to the creature from John Carpenter’s horror classic *The Thing*: “a monstrous, infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolizing and absorbing anything with which it comes into contact.”⁵³ I posit that what is readable in *Pink Project: Bedroom* is the impossible reality of this capitalist condition. Through its use of plastic material,

⁵⁰ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zer0 Books, 2022), 63.

⁵¹ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 65.

⁵² Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 54.

⁵³ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 6.

its overwhelming visual assertion, and its abject state that oscillates between repulsion and desire, every element of *Pink Project: Bedroom* makes visible the concealed structures that perpetuate a reality of unthinkable violence, crisis, and chaos. The condition of everyday crisis is a problem of visibility. It is also a problem of language.

Capitalist Boundaries between Self and Other

Overconsumption, capitalism, and the plastic garbage they produce are concealed through the quality of their everydayness and unaddressable because of the impossibility of their unimaginable solution. They are invisible because we are conditioned not to see them. Fisher explains that “the normalization of crisis produces a situation in which the repealing of measures brought in to deal with an emergency becomes unimaginable.”⁵⁴ Capitalism, like garbage, infiltrates life at an atmospheric level. Indeed we live in the age of waste. An age, where the geologic conditions of the Earth have been permanently shaped by human by-product, the Anthropocene, the age in which nowhere on Earth can be considered free of plastic waste. Plastic is dispersed across every surface of the planet: its particulate matter occupies the interior of human bodies while it re-configures the atmosphere, biosphere, and hydrosphere.⁵⁵ Alongside their statuses as highly “normal,” the ontological origins of plastic and practices of waste management provide a key opening to understand this impossible situation.

Plastic and practices of waste management that enable the invisible nature of capitalism and produce the crisis of waste hinge on the logics of colonization and Western post-enlightenment ideology that position waste as the Other. Whiteley explains, in her brief overview of the historical and social roots of junk, that trash is created through sorting, that this reordering of the environment has psychoanalytical implications but also more complex

⁵⁴ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 1.

⁵⁵ Davis, *Plastic Matter*, 9.

connections to civilisation, modernity and empire.⁵⁶ Whiteley traces visual and material histories wherein clean is equated “not only with order but with the ‘civilisation’ of colonialism and empire.”⁵⁷ Boetzkes concurs that “pollution can be understood as a way to appropriate the planet.”⁵⁸ She positions the rise in popularity of SUVs—unreasonably large vehicles that massively expend energy—in the last decade as an example of a “drive to waste.” The cultural desire to own an SUV explains part of the psychoanalytic, colonizing impulse that originates in Western notions of mastery. The marketing of SUVs appeals “precisely to fantasies of transgression involving the mastery or destruction of the natural environment” and to an impulse to resist the environmental movement in order to “preserve one’s individuality and liberty.”⁵⁹

The psychoanalytic aspect of waste management pertains to the formation of subjectivity, and is also dependent on the ontological position of mastery and the drive to waste. Hawkins’ describes that practices of waste management constitute the “ordering of the self, in the interest of maintaining a boundary between what is connected to the self and what isn’t.”⁶⁰ Federici explains that the success of primitive accumulation hinged on a sustained campaign of terror, that “terror creates boundaries.”⁶¹ At the base of this desire for order and the establishment of boundaries between the self and Other lies a fear of chaos, which is the imperative of Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection. The fear of abjection drives the desire for order, for waste organization that occurs out of sight. Waste management “has always been one of the ways we keep chaos at bay, order the self, rehearse death.”⁶² Cvetkovich discusses the domestic nature of depression in these same terms, that the *home* serves as an ideological barrier between the self and the depressing forces of capitalism, but that depression persistently disrupts this order.

⁵⁶ Gillian Whiteley, *Junk Art and the Politics of Trash* (London : I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2011), 25.

⁵⁷ Whiteley, *Junk Art and the Politics of Trash*, 25.

⁵⁸ Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism*, 26.

⁵⁹ Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism*, 16.

⁶⁰ Hawkins, “Plastic Bags: Living with Rubbish,” 8.

⁶¹ Federici, 106.

⁶² Hawkins, “Plastic Bags: Living with Rubbish,” 12.

These performances of waste management are traps. From this fear develops a desire for a relation of mastery between the self and abject material which orders and maintains these dreadful planetary conditions. Abject chaos is therefore fertile ground for the disruption of social order. Plastic shares these ideological underpinnings. The terms of plastic's materiality originate from post-Enlightenment beliefs "where matter is subservient and dichotomous to the whims and wills of the human mind."⁶³

Plastic preserves the barrier between self and the Other, self and abject material, self and waste. Plastic in the form of garbage bags, for example, materializes this desire for impenetrability. For Davis, plastic "represents the promises of modernity: sealed, perfected, clean abundance" and rids the subject of "the dirt of the world, of decay, of malfeasance."⁶⁴ Plastic matter and techniques of waste management ideologically assuage our fear of the contaminated, the abject and formless chaos, meanwhile promoting the same capitalist systems that produced this degree of contamination and chaos, placing economic acquisition above all other life. However, these unruly materials overwhelm the conditions of the everyday. Their abject reality is far beyond the promises of sealed, clean, abundance that modernity and capitalism failed to keep. Depression, like plastic, is a proliferating uncontrollable condition, such that "the pervasiveness of depression suggests an atmosphere that is also haunted by bad feelings, by the awareness that something is wrong either inside or outside."⁶⁵

Obscuration and Inaction

We must encounter a terrifying chaos that we have been conditioned not to see and address it using language that refuses to name it to ensure it stays concealed. We are conditioned

⁶³Davis, *Plastic Matter*, 9.

⁶⁴ Heather Davis, "Life & Death in the Anthropocene: A Short History of Plastic," essay, in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 347–58., 349.

⁶⁵ Cvetkovich, 156.

into non-action through the normalization of crisis and narcissistic cultural capitalist paradigms that encourage distraction and separation. Staring into the eye of this impossibly large problem is daunting to the point of meaninglessness. These conditions were designed to create a situation where the only available response is what Munson describes in “How Pink is Made,” “that petrified stone feeling again, completely numb, a numb trauma.”⁶⁶ This numbness is upheld by the rhetorical understanding that the individual bears the impossible responsibility of so-called sustainable practice to change the course of planetary degradation, because the real entities responsible thrive under the conditions of the present order. This rhetoric, that places impossible responsibility upon the individual to keep them numb to real drive to action, includes the banalization of the environmental movement and the tendency to language that obscures instead of addressing the entities responsible.

The confusing eco-rhetoric of corporate-capitalism obscures the perception of responsibility in confrontations with the climate crisis. Whiteley states that “as 21st century global citizens, we are encouraged to take an ethical audit of our everyday activities and habits” and that this audit, emboldened through a quasi-religious tone, “feeds on an existentialist discourse of individual fear, anxiety, and guilt.”⁶⁷ These problems, however, are unsolvable at an individual level. They must be addressed at a corporate industrial level on a transnational, global scale.⁶⁸ Whiteley and Boetzkes both assert that the environmental movement has been hijacked by corporate capitalism. What was once an effective political movement that addressed a multitude of environmental crises has been reduced to an exclusive focus on the vague and foreboding problem of global warming.⁶⁹ Boetzkes elaborates that the solution to this abstract and singular problem has become an appropriately vacuous notion of sustainable lifestyle

⁶⁶ Munson, “How Pink Is Made,” 8.

⁶⁷ Whiteley, *Junk Art and the Politics of Trash*, 22.

⁶⁸ Whiteley, *Junk Art and the Politics of Trash*, 22.

⁶⁹ Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism*, 7.

management. Sustainability, touted as an ecological panacea and appropriated by tactics of eco-branding and greenwashing, is the banalization of ecology and its aims.⁷⁰ These tactics include the false premise of the ‘conscious consumer’ who buys more because it is disguised as buying less.⁷¹ Sustainability, as an obfuscating and ineffectual rhetoric “pervades every possible domain of culture, from government parties to scientific research, the humanities, architecture and design” and insidiously forecloses “thinking about the relationship between ecological being and economy.”⁷² This rhetoric suppresses considerations of the detrimental excesses of capitalist culture and extreme resource extraction while maintaining economic growth.

The discussion of obfuscation and of who bears responsibility in confusing and anxiety-inducing eco-rhetoric is clarified in Demos’ discussion of necessary distinction at the level of language. In his discussion of terms that define the present epoch, he emphasizes the importance of names. Demos prefers the term Capitalocene over Anthropocene. The Anthropocene obfuscates corporate industrial responsibility by placing the onus of the state of the planet upon the narrow and abstract notion of *anthropos*, Greek for human. Capitalocene specifically names capitalism as the ideological force that shapes the planetary condition.

Demos argues that the unequal distribution of climate impacts “is the result of a series of policy decisions the governments of wealthy countries have made” and that “those decisions, informed by a language that hides things, place lives at risk, and not just any lives, but particularly the lives of the impoverished, women, Indigenous people, migrants and people of colour” and that naming can call crucial attention to these invisibilities. Munson sees this as part of her practice also: “I see a lack of respect for the environment, the very place we live, as parallel to our civic discord and disregard for women and other undervalued groups.”⁷³ These are

⁷⁰ Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism*, 7.

⁷¹ Whiteley, *Junk Art and the Politics of Trash*, 21.

⁷² Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism*, 7.

⁷³ Bhullar, “For Portia Munson Consumerism Is a Site to Decipher Violence on Ecology and Feminism.”

the same groups that Federici's historical account determines as necessarily degraded in the transition to capitalism. The imposition of plastic and its legacies are placed onto communities from which they never emerged, communities othered through the racist and sexist logics of petro-capitalism. Plastic goes elsewhere contaminating the lives of others to unlivable conditions of toxicity. A perfect example of the way in which these systems operate is the reality of recycling.

Recycling, a "first-world atonement for single-use plastics and unfettered consumption is—for the most part, a highly costly and dangerous process."⁷⁴ Davis consolidates this point with reference to the dead zone in Wen'an, China where no plant life can exist and human life suffers from the extreme levels of toxic air pollution resulting from the recycling that occurs there. Recycling, from an ideological standpoint, serves as a scape-goat that atones for ethical responsibility and once again obscures the reality of who to hold responsible in making it the responsibility of 'everyone.' Managing it assuages guilt about planetary collapse and even grants the perception of being virtuous neighbours while "engaging in a form of disciplinary individualism that is both coercive and voluntary at the same time."⁷⁵ Fisher elaborates that through the ideological process of recycling, capitalist "structure contracts out its responsibility to consumers, by itself receding into invisibility."⁷⁶ Agency in this context appears as an impossible attribute.

Polluted Figures as Agents of Change

What is required to reclaim any form of political agency is to enter into chaos, "accepting our insertion at the level of desire in the remorseless meat-grinder of Capital."⁷⁷ For while

⁷⁴Davis, "Life & Death in the Anthropocene: A Short History of Plastic," 351.

⁷⁵ Hawkins, "Plastic Bags: Living with Rubbish," 12.

⁷⁶ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 66.

⁷⁷ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 15.

individuals are not responsible for the state of the planetary crisis, “what is being disavowed in the abjection of evil and fantasmatic Others is our own complicity in planetary networks of oppression.”⁷⁸ Fisher suggests this Marxian stance that “what needs to be kept in mind is *both* that capitalism is a hyper-abstract impersonal structure *and* it would be nothing without our cooperation.”⁷⁹ In order to accept insertion, to acknowledge chaos, allow ourselves to relate to and with it—we need icons. Boetzkes suggests one such icon in her formulation of the gleaner, a figure who is “polluted,” relegated to the margins of society, existing as “a hinge between the human world and what lies beyond its end.” This discussion of gleaning is implicated in an art historical movement from the 19th century, Realism, the French painting movement which preceded Impressionism. Realism was radical because it politically depicted ‘everyday’ people and labourers.⁸⁰ The gleaner’s selection and recovery of waste material reconfigures the meaning of that material and removes it from the schematic cycle of the “restrictive economy of profit acquisition” and the “continued colonization of the ecosystem in search of further profits.”⁸¹ She understands gleaning, and the reappropriation of waste as “both a survivalist behavior that demonstrates an alternative sensorial orientation, and a form of acquisition that is a practice of living generously” which, in turn, “makes waste visible and sensible anew, and refuses the restrictive aesthetic regime by which waste is commonly framed.”⁸² Munson is a kind of gleaner. She states that she has “always been a gatherer.”⁸³ While the word gatherer does not explicitly situate Munson in the tradition of gleaning, the material that she gathers, trash, certainly does. Outside of her rural home studio “several shipping containers store thousands of miscellaneous

⁷⁸ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 15.

⁷⁹ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 15.

⁸⁰ Nigel Blake and Francis Frascina, “Modern Practices of Art and Modernity,” in *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993), 78.

⁸¹ Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism*, 55.

⁸² Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism*, 56.

⁸³ Taliesin Thomas, “Pink Paradise: Portia Munson’s Ecofeminism,” *Chronogram Magazine*, December 21, 2023, <https://www.chronogram.com/arts/pink-paradise-portia-munsons-eco-feminism-19486363>.

objects—intercepted right before they go to landfills.”⁸⁴ The manner in which “capitalism subsumes and consumes all previous history” is part of the widespread understanding of the landfill as a site devoid of meaning.⁸⁵ Munson’s practice in gleaning recovers critical meaning at the site where trash “functions as part of a continuous, unconscious, permanent act of criticism of the culture” which produced it.⁸⁶ Here Munson performs the role that Whiteley develops of the “hygienist as hero” who “faces the foul unnameable and speaks of that thing which no one else will speak.”⁸⁷

Since plastic pollutes every aspect of the atmosphere and plasticisers integrate themselves into human and animal bodies, there remain no unpolluted figures. Yet we are ideologically terrified of such bodily pollution—it annihilates the foundation of our understanding of subjectivity. The gleaner serves as a positive icon by which to interpret and make use of our condition of bodily pollution that cannot be undone. Recovery entails accepting the status of pollution—gleaners, including Munson, exemplify positive practices in the recovery of agency as already polluted individuals.

Pink Project: Bedroom emphasizes this call to enter chaos—it reflects this overwhelming condition, making visible structures previously concealed through their materialization in the realm of the everyday. The unnameable, slow violence, that occurred out of sight, sorted through a mode of categorization based on logics of mastery and the othering of separation, comes to the fore in Munson’s work. Her work visualizes the unthinkable problem of capitalism and overconsumption, apparently impossible to address save one alternative method of approach. Munson’s work opens an alternative ethic of being in the abject nature of her work’s material and content. Her garbage assemblages open a specific framework wherein imagining a feminist

⁸⁴ Thomas, “Pink Paradise: Portia Munson’s Eco Feminism.”

⁸⁵ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 4.

⁸⁶ Whiteley, *Junk Art and the Politics of Trash*, 28.

⁸⁷ Whiteley, *Junk Art and the Politics of Trash*, 29.

alternative becomes possible through the disruption of order, and the individual's ability for recognition within the material and ideological chaos of capitalist overconsumption. The only alternative is to disrupt systemic order through relating to chaos: to break down these imaginary, categorical, capitalist boundaries. Boundaries that Boetzkes, Davis, and Cvetkovich concur are already porous, literally and psychoanalytically eroded by plastic's materiality.

Munson's polluted plastic work produces an activated opening of the politics of Frantzen and Bjering's hyperobject—a politics that “transcend any form of purity” and responds to their call for allegiance to be made with the hyperobject.⁸⁸ In the next section I will unpack the qualities of the hyperobject and its capacity to better articulate the planetary condition which is clarified when considered in combination with Munson's sculpture *Her Coffin*.

⁸⁸ Frantzen and Bjering, “Ecology, Capitalism and Waste: From Hyperobject to Hyperobject,” 105.

SECTION 2: WITCHING TRANSGRESSION AND PERCEIVING THE HYPERABJECT

Seeing anew, the Witch's senses, and forming allegiance with the hyperobject as pink plastic waste.

Blood and Milk that is how pink is made. Pink a female colour? Women at the peak of their femaleness produce and flow blood and milk.⁸⁹

The world is a graveyard.⁹⁰

– Portia Munson, “How Pink is Made”

Strategies for encountering and relating with chaos require language. This section outlines the concept of the hyperobject, which is exemplified by plastic, as it appears in Munson's work, specifically *Her Coffin*. My application of the hyperobject is elaborated through the feminine and abject qualities of Munson's sculpture. A queer and feminist anti-capitalist reading of pink plastic and the work as hyperobject demonstrates the work's capacity for producing the necessary language to perceive and encounter the chaos of capitalist waste and therefore capitalism.

Capitalocene, as a revision of the generally accepted description of the current geological epoch, is a good language that enables deep thought. Frantzen and Bjering rely on the Capitalocene to describe the context that necessitates their theorization of the hyperobject. They lack appropriate language to use in thinking through the reality of the age of the Capitalocene, or the age of waste. In thinking through waste, which sits at the intersection of ecology and capitalism, they ask “how do we think about agency, subjectivity, and history without reinforcing or reintroducing old, problematic concepts of an anthropocentric nature?”⁹¹ Also pertinent to their line of questioning is the assurance that responsibility can be placed in order for action to take place. To attend to these questions, and evade repeating the patterns of a social order that

⁸⁹ Munson, “How Pink Is Made,” 1.

⁹⁰ Munson, “How Pink Is Made,” 3.

⁹¹ Frantzen and Bjering, “Ecology, Capitalism and Waste: From Hyperobject to Hyperobject,” 88.

created the age of waste, they develop a novel theoretical concept—an aesthetic and a politics—the *hyperabject*—a concept which “above all” traces the trajectory of the “un-seen, hidden, and ultra-slow violence” of capitalism.⁹²

The Hyperabject

The hyperabject is a composite synthesis of Timothy Morton’s concept of hyperobjects and Kristeva’s theory of abjection. Abjection, as has already been established, is forms of bodily waste that represent the unsettling transgression between what is inside versus what is outside the body or the transgression between the self and Other. Morton’s conception of hyperobjects, explicitly linked to the climate crisis, describes “objects that are so massively distributed in time and space relative to humans, and thus very hard if not impossible to grasp, cognitively as well as affectively.”⁹³ Morton says that hyperobjects have “already had a significant impact on human social and psychic space” and that “they are directly responsible for what [he calls] the end of the world.”⁹⁴ For Frantzen and Bjering Morton’s notion is useful language to begin imagining the situation in which we are embroiled, but it nevertheless maintains an obfuscation that delimits responsibility and agency in discussions of the enormous impact of these hyperobjects. In an effort to reconfigure agency while using the useful language of the *hyperobject*, the scholars tentatively define their term, *hyperabject*, “as a planetary infrastructure of waste,” one produced by the “global infrastructure of capitalist production and circulation.”⁹⁵ The hyperabject is defined by its qualities of extension, inertness and the “clogging of economic and ecological circulation produced by this inertness.”⁹⁶ The hyperabject has a looping temporality wherein the

⁹² Frantzen and Bjering, “Ecology, Capitalism and Waste: From Hyperobject to Hyperabject,” 101.

⁹³ Frantzen and Bjering, “Ecology, Capitalism and Waste: From Hyperobject to Hyperabject,” ?

⁹⁴ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1-2.

⁹⁵ Frantzen and Bjering, “Ecology, Capitalism and Waste: From Hyperobject to Hyperabject,” 89.

⁹⁶ Frantzen and Bjering, “Ecology, Capitalism and Waste: From Hyperobject to Hyperabject,” 89.

excreted discards of capitalism at some point “return with a vengeance.” In other words, “we emit stuff and stuff comes back to us,” like in the case of humans ingesting microplastics by eating fish that have ingested plastic that was discarded by humans.⁹⁷ Frantzen and Bjering perceive the hyperabject as having no agency, indeed it is nothing but a lack of agency. It is unlike abject material in that it cannot be recycled and “has no features other than its own stubborn inertness.”⁹⁸ Frantzen and Bjering, in naming the hyperabject, strive to reinsert it into history and the realm of politics and allow it to speak in a manner that the hyperobject cannot. In combination with Kristeva’s abjection, the hyperabject “bears on a material, affective, and embodied reality in a way the hyperobject cannot.”⁹⁹ The hyperabject recovers what the hyperobject lacks in explanatory power and potential political practice: it makes the hyperobject graspable and provides a means through which to think about the material reality of the phenomena of the hyperabject—including oil and plastic. The abject state of these phenomena pertains to their inability to be integrated into anything else, which Frantzen and Bjering link to “an abjected subject’s violent return to the self, even, or especially when the same subject’s self is on the brink of destruction.”¹⁰⁰

They define plastic as the most concrete example of the hyperabject, foregrounding the fact that plastic cannot be re-integrated into anything else and the abject state plastic takes on in the form of plasticizers that occupy the body as a kind of “living dead.”¹⁰¹ They explain that some human bodies in Greenland are so full of plastic that they are classified as toxic waste when they die.¹⁰² For Frantzen and Bjering, the history of plastic is also the history of the hyperabject. Munson’s *Her Coffin* clarifies plastic as hyperabject through its state of abjection—it

⁹⁷ Frantzen and Bjering, “Ecology, Capitalism and Waste: From Hyperobject to Hyperabject,” 90.

⁹⁸ Frantzen and Bjering, “Ecology, Capitalism and Waste: From Hyperobject to Hyperabject,” 90.

⁹⁹ Frantzen and Bjering, “Ecology, Capitalism and Waste: From Hyperobject to Hyperabject,” 90.

¹⁰⁰ Frantzen and Bjering, “Ecology, Capitalism and Waste: From Hyperobject to Hyperabject,” 98.

¹⁰¹ Frantzen and Bjering, “Ecology, Capitalism and Waste: From Hyperobject to Hyperabject,” ?

¹⁰² Frantzen and Bjering, “Ecology, Capitalism and Waste: From Hyperobject to Hyperabject,” 101.

depicts the abject cadaver, the abject female body, both of which are made up of discarded, abject plastic.

Her Coffin

The major themes of *Her Coffin* are the abject corpse, the plastic body, and femininity as a culturally constructed identity. *Her Coffin* grants visitors the conceptual opportunity to think through plastic in its formation as hyperabject, a perceptive opening for political knowledge that is strengthened by its feminist perspective. Unlike the sprawling, openness of *Pink Project: Bedroom*, *Her Coffin* confines plastic. In a return to the established spatial relationship between art object and spectator, *Her Coffin* is displayed on a plinth in the coldness of the white-cube gallery space. The coffin/sarcophagus/tomb rests on the plinth that is obviously tailor made to its proportions, at the height the corpse might rest at an open-casket funeral or the height of a tomb in a mausoleum. The coffin is transparent, its plexiglass walls enclose thousands of small pink plastic objects. Munson asserts that it “is a sealed time capsule.”¹⁰³ The shades of pink are arranged in a graduated colourfield where the objects at the base are deep, bright magenta and those near the surface of the coffin—the objects that are most visible—have a yellow-pink hue, faded white from sun exposure. The gradient pinks, arranged in layers, read like a stratigraphic map—like a slice of sedimentary rock.

The objects at rest in the coffin constitute a kind of fragmented body. Most of the objects are various pink toys. The objects that are not toys are clothes pins, combs, and bag clips. The objects are at once a singular entity and distinct forms—forms both loaded with meaning and resolutely meaningless. Objects that once occupied an intimate role, handled by their original owners, have since been discarded and recuperated—forced into new conditions of meaning. The

¹⁰³ “Sculpture,” Portia Munson, accessed January 30, 2025, <https://www.portiamunson.com/work/sculpture>.

care, selection, and devotion present in the arrangement of these objects and their framing as a mourned but unnamed corpse in a funerary context gives the objects sacred meaning. *Her Coffin* unwittingly (or perhaps with great intention) uncovers two myths about plastic—its capacity to seal and the perception of its absolute persistence (or the belief in its inability to change independent of human intervention).

Her Coffin opens a tangible vision of the hyperobject as plastic waste, a means for thinking with plastic so desperately called for by theorists. Boetzkes discusses Munson's earlier work, *Sarcophagus*, which is a green variation of the form that became *Her Coffin*, and its dichotomy of decay. She explains that where sarcophagi are normally "used to encourage decomposition," this "plastic flesh does not decay," it persists indefinitely.¹⁰⁴ However, Boetzkes' evaluation of *Sarcophagus* does not consider an element that is definitively present in *Her Coffin*. In a video interview that takes place inside her home studio, Munson unsheathes *Her Coffin* from its shrouded seclusion under a heavy cloth. She explains that this covering protects the work, for, the "fugitive quality of pink in plastic," is light sensitive and will turn white if exposed to sunlight.¹⁰⁵ Plastic that does not behave according to the expectations of its inertness, plastic whose material quality of fugitivity lies in its pinkness is an especially rich site to think about transgression and the unruliness of plastic as having redemptive potential.

If, as Frantzen and Bjering suggest, we live in the age of waste which is the age of the hyperobject—whose condition is exemplified by plastic—we live in the age of plastic. Plastic's materiality, its plasticity, informs and has informed systemic world order and therefore is *the* site to think through the possibility of an alternative. Boetzkes agrees that "plastic is the avenue into rethinking our aesthetic and political strategies from within the suffocating confines of the

¹⁰⁴ Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism*, 205?

¹⁰⁵ Zachary Keeting and Christopher Joy, Portia Munson, July 2016, August 18, 2016, <http://www.gorkysgranddaughter.com/2016/08/portia-munson-july-2016.html>.

economy.”¹⁰⁶ Davis too ushers in a committed curiosity about plastic as a means to become more accountable and more enmeshed with the political and ecological reality of the Earth’s state. Davis presumes plastic to have queer agency even as it is embedded in all forms of capitalist logic.¹⁰⁷ She suggests that since plastic has already permeated all aspects of life on Earth, theorizing plastic’s queer agency challenges purity narratives, the principles that condition plastic and other forms of abject material as necessarily separate, and opens up “eroticism, kinship and care to more-than-human relations.”¹⁰⁸

Witchcraft, Transgression, and Queer Alliances with the Hyperobject

Here I consider pink plastic’s queer and feminist agency. The condition of abjection from Frantzen and Bjering’s explicative terminology of hyperobject is emphasized by Munson’s *Her Coffin*. The implications and potential transgressive power of abjection that lie within pink discarded plastic are deepened through their relationship to the leaky (abject) female body and Federici’s feminist history of capitalism that centres the figure of the Witch. Federici, in *Caliban and the Witch*, traces capitalism from a feminist viewpoint while at the same time avoiding the limits of a women’s history separated from that male part of the working class. In her feminist history of capitalism, ‘Women’ “signifies not just a hidden history that needs to be made visible; but a particular form of exploitation and, therefore, a unique perspective from which to reconsider the history of capitalist relations.”¹⁰⁹ In foregrounding the figure of the Witch, “the embodiment of a world of female subjects that capitalism had to destroy,” she makes visible the dependence of capitalism on the degradation of the female body.¹¹⁰ She states that her history of

¹⁰⁶ Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism*, 205.

¹⁰⁷ Davis, *Plastic Matter*, 7.

¹⁰⁸ Davis, *Plastic Matter*, 6.

¹⁰⁹ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (London: Penguin Books, 2021), 13.

¹¹⁰ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 11.

capital differs from Marx who was “deeply mistaken” in his assumption that the violence of the early stages of capitalist expansion would recede with the maturing of capitalist relations.¹¹¹ Instead Federici delineates the reality of contemporary capitalism where “a return to the most violent aspects of primitive accumulation has accompanied every phase of capitalist globalization, including the present one, demonstrating that the contiguous expulsion of farmers from the land, war and plunder on a world scale, and the degradation of women are necessary conditions for the existence of capitalism at all times.”¹¹²

Federici’s assertion that capitalism depends on the degradation of women, links Constance Classen’s lineage of the Witch’s senses as a feminist threat to capitalism in its state of transgressive abjection. The Witch’s senses are relegated to those ‘low senses’—touch, taste, smell—which are the sensory bases of both domesticity and witchcraft.¹¹³ Touch, taste, and smell—all of which are activated in encounters with garbage—are duplicitous as they are reparative, “imagined to be essentially feminine in nature: nurturing, seductive, dissolute in its merging of the self and Other.”¹¹⁴ The “suspect female sensorium” is the basis of the Witch’s powers.¹¹⁵ Touch is the most dangerous, for women who give life through the transgressive process of birth were also imagined to give death. The horrors of witchcraft come from the Witch’s capacity to transgress the realm of domesticity: “the tactile, gustatory and olfactory practices which were expected to keep women confined to closed quarters, were transformed by witchcraft into media for mastering the world.”¹¹⁶ The process of domestic transgression consequently implicates the logic and reality of the pink plastic garbage of Munson’s sculpture and installation—domestic material that has shaped not only identity but the condition of the

¹¹¹ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 12.

¹¹² Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 13.

¹¹³ Constance Classen, “The Witch’s Senses: Sensory Ideologies and Transgressive Femininities from the Renaissance to Modernity,” essay, in *Empire of the Senses* (Routledge, 2004), 73.

¹¹⁴ Classen, “The Witch’s Senses,” 70.

¹¹⁵ Classen, “The Witch’s Senses,” 71.

¹¹⁶ Classen, “The Witch’s Senses,” 73.

planet. Munson's *Pink Projects* depict the "uncontrolled feminine fluidity transgressing the boundaries between self and Other."¹¹⁷

Pink Plastic Thinking/Becoming

The presentation of pink plastic discards in *Her Coffin*, depicts the construction of femininity through plastic objects that binds feminine identity to the domestic (clothespins, combs, cleaning apparatuses) and the infantile (toys). Their reconfiguration as a corpse creates grounds for the interpretation of pink plastic as a feminist, abject device, harnessing the transgressive horror of the Witch's diabolical sensorium. Thinking within the space of the abject witch's senses encourages a productive means of thinking with plastic. In Davis' orientation for thinking with plastic, she argues that "we become with the world through our objects."¹¹⁸ Constituting identity through the collection of objects is also an imperative of girlhood studies as laid out by Emma Maguire who theorizes fangirling as feminist auto-assemblage. She argues that fangirling (like altar-making) is a significant life narrative practice that prompts us to re-examine the way cultural production and consumption are tied to (gendered) identity in representations of girlhood.¹¹⁹ Maguire draws from the body of Girlhood Studies work "that valorises girls as cultural producers rather than passive consumers" who participate in a form of auto-assemblage through the accumulation and organization of their girly cultural objects.¹²⁰ Fangirling is largely characterised as a form of consumption, but Maguire examines it as the cultural production of selfhood.¹²¹

¹¹⁷Classen, "The Witch's Senses," 73.

¹¹⁸ Davis, *Plastic Matter*, 15.

¹¹⁹ Emma Maguire, "Fangirling as Feminist Auto Assemblage: Tavi Gevinson and Participatory Audienceship," *Palgrave Studies in Life Writing*, 2018, 107–37, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74237-3_5, 108.

¹²⁰Emma Maguire, "Fangirling as Feminist Auto Assemblage," 108.

¹²¹ Maguire, 107.

Performances and constructions of gender identity serve as an opportunity to further clarify means to think with plastic. This is a literal aspect of Munson's work and it is a condition of Wark's redemptive reading of abjection. Wark uses Butler's understanding of abjection as it relates to the theory of gender performativity, and employs Kristeva's definition of abjection as a social position or state of degradation that disturbs identity, systems, and order in its refusal to respect borders, positions, and rules, to consider how abjection could open up redemptive potential through a queer framing.¹²² Wark's queer configuration of abjection relies on the overlap between Kristeva's theory of abjection and Butler's theory of gender performativity, which concurs on three important levels: firstly, "culture is ruled by the paternal laws of the symbolic and is predicated on the repudiation of women's bodies;" secondly, the "subversion of these paternal laws is possible and necessary in order to attain "an open future of cultural possibilities;" and thirdly, since "abjection is eminently productive of culture," it can be reworked into "political agency."¹²³ Thinking through *Her Coffin*, its visualization of plastic's embeddedness in the performance of female gender identity and its relation to the powerfully transgressive abject Witch's senses, enables a critical linkage of the plastic hyperobject as "eminently productive of language."

If we are to become with our objects, and think with plastic, we must be able to see them. As I have outlined in Section One and Davis affirms—this is no easy task—for plastic is "so present, so ubiquitous, that it risks becoming invisible."¹²⁴ Munson's work creates a lens for the clear vision of the objects of culture—removing them from the obscurity of the landfill and creating a condition for their profound consideration. It is the powers of horror prevalent in this work that make the obscured and ignored material of the everyday inescapably visible—through

¹²² Jayne Wark, "Queering Abjection: A Lesbian, Feminist, and Canadian Perspective," essay, in *Desiring Change: Contemporary Feminist Art in Canada*, ed. Heather Davis (Montreal : McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 97.

¹²³ Wark, "Queering Abjection: A Lesbian, Feminist, and Canadian Perspective," 102.

¹²⁴ Davis, *Plastic Matter*, 13.

the terrifying element of abjection pertinent to discarded material but also through the work's uncanny quality, recalling Freud's theory of the uncanny, based on the German word *unheimlich*, which is the horrifying experience of the familiar made strange. Munson makes everyday material exceptionally strange in her plastic re-configurations. She has stated on multiple occasions that she is invested in depicting the "beauty and the horror" for her viewers in order to grant them an opportunity to "question and not be passive."¹²⁵

Munson's work allows viewers to engage in the queer abject situation wherein language is eminently produced— "Our modern cultures produce so much stuff , we define ourselves and express our values through the commodities that we surround ourselves with. I hope my work helps people recognize that there are embedded meaning(s) in this stuff and it helps us tune into a deeper way of seeing."¹²⁶ The feminine aspects of Munson's work opens up a critically feminist reading of capitalism and the hyperabject. Her work creates new vernacular to describe and consider the everyday, enabling an important shift in perception and therefore approach to planetary chaos.

¹²⁵Bradfield, "The Timeless Relevance of Portia Munson's 'Pink Project.'"

¹²⁶ Dilpreet Bhullar, "For Portia Munson Consumerism Is a Site to Decipher Violence on Ecology and Feminism," STIRworld, October 2, 2022, <https://www.stirworld.com/see-features-for-portia-munson-consumerism-is-a-site-to-decipher-violence-on-ecology-and-feminism>.

SECTION 3: RITUALS OF REPARATIVE RELATION TO RUBBISH

Microcosmic strategies to gain macrocosmic results

We are taught what and how to think inside ourselves.
And it grows on us like mold.¹²⁷

– Portia Munson, “How Pink is Made”

Munson’s work with discarded objects enact a reciprocal relation to the hyperobject, making visible the invisible and insidious capacities of capitalism. Her work through the embodied relation to the plastic hyperobject creates a condition of wholeness that capitalism seeks to destroy. Where the foundation of the present social order encourages a fear of the object chaos that is garbage, Munson’s works opens a vision for this material through which wholeness can and must be repaired and recovered. This section conceives of Munson’s sculpture *today will be AWESOME* as well as her very first Pink Project, *Pink Project: Table* as altars and agents in the recovery of symbols, the recollection of rituals, and the means for imagining a collective alternative to capitalism.

Munson’s “How Pink is Made” expresses the isolation of individualist capitalism and compares its formation to that of mold. I understand her use of mold’s image as representing abjection, as a substance associated with death, but also as an apt metaphor for the invisible permeation of the disguised systemic violence of capitalism. The history of the degradation of women’s social position and the appropriation of women’s womb’s by patriarchal capitalism is part of the nature of pink trash and is also implicated in capitalist individualism because it created “women’s alienation from their bodies, labour, children.”¹²⁸ The conclusion of Federici’s chapter on the social degradation of women essential to the process of primitive accumulation looks at “the production of racial and sexual hierarchies in the colonies; asking to what extent

¹²⁷ Munson, “How Pink Is Made,” 18.

¹²⁸ Federici, 91.

they could form a terrain of confrontation or solidarity between [I]ndigenous, African, and European women.”¹²⁹ The chapter addresses the destruction of witches and forms of collectives destroyed because of their potency to disrupt the desires of the beneficiaries of capitalism but tracks that, while the violence of this destruction was extreme, these traditions persisted through the communion of European, African, and Indigenous women in the New World.¹³⁰ Federici uncovers testimonies from archives that “reveal the existence of multiple exchanges among women in matters relating to cures and long remedies, creating in time a new cultural reality drawn from the encounter between the African, European, and [I]ndigenous magical traditions.”¹³¹ Federici asserts that these exchanges constituted a “popular system of belief” which ran parallel to the church. However, Federici’s conclusive argument is that “primitive accumulation has been above all an accumulation of differences, inequalities, hierarchies, divisions which have alienated workers from each other and even themselves.”¹³²

Rituals for Relation

The recovery of agency is a recovery of wholeness. Han describes rituals as symbolic acts which “represent, and pass on, the values and orders on which a community is based.”¹³³ He describes the contemporary condition as a society of narcissism caused by the increasing loss of symbols. To define the meaning of the symbolic, he hearkens to the word’s Greek definition which is situated in “the semantic horizon of relation, wholeness and salvation” based on the myth of humans originally having four arms and legs, and two faces. Humans were divided in

¹²⁹ Federici, 68.

¹³⁰ This took place primarily in the destruction of the commons which were the site where festivals, games, and gatherings took place, a space where peasants could form solidarity and sociality, which encouraged collective decision making. The commons were especially important to medieval women.

¹³¹ Federici, 109.

¹³² Federici, 115.

¹³³ Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2020), 1.

two by Zeus because they were *two* unruly in this form but “ever since their division humans have become *symbola*, longing for their other half, longing for a wholeness.”¹³⁴ Rituals, then, are a form of symbolic practice that creates alliance, that creates wholeness. He describes capitalism as often being misinterpreted as a religion, when really, if religion is understood as something which binds, it is anything but, “it lacks force to assemble” in its dependence on individualization and isolation.¹³⁵ He discusses capitalist globalization as the production of a “hell of the same” that only permits variations of the same and annihilates otherness because the foreign inhibits production.¹³⁶ Otherness, however, as has been established, is part of the constitution of the invisible everyday in the form of garbage.

Sacred Trash

In her call for a changing relation to waste and therefore a changing relation to self, Hawkins describes the sorting of waste as ritual: “waste involves ritual performance of an assemblage of actions and beliefs fundamental to the constitution of habitus.”¹³⁷ Waste rituals involve forming a relationship to garbage, one that in the present order is not reciprocal. Hawkins calls for new waste management practices that foreground relationality over separation or mastery.¹³⁸ Munson’s practice with discarded objects responds to such a call. *today will be AWESOME* and *Pink Project: Table* both resemble the home altar and are therefore linked to the tradition of women’s altar-making in their decidedly feminine subject materials. The home altar depicts an aesthetic of relationality, the aesthetic of which is a point of contact between the universal and the personal.¹³⁹ The elements that constitute an altar include a central divine image,

¹³⁴Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals*, 6.

¹³⁵Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals*, 43.

¹³⁶Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals*, 32.

¹³⁷Hawkins, “Plastic Bags: Living with Rubbish,” 12.

¹³⁸Hawkins, “Plastic Bags: Living with Rubbish,” 6.

¹³⁹Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*, 95.

images or statues of secondary religious figures, candles, mementos, knick-knacks, gifts, or offerings, layering, embellishment, excess, miniaturization, fragmentation, and accretion.¹⁴⁰ With the exception of an obviously central divine image (unless that image can be interpreted as plastic waste, discarded material, or the construction of feminine identity under capitalism) all aspects are present in these two works.

The home altar, as described by Turner, “consecrates and serves women’s understanding of the power of relationship to overcome separation with an emphasis on the values of inclusion and exchange.”¹⁴¹ It is a process of setting up a miniature or archetype of the Earth that serves a reminder that all Earth is sacred.¹⁴² Turner asserts that the processes of accumulation central to the creation of an altar promotes “a kind of benevolent exchange” wherein “the significance of one thing is lent to another.” This benevolent exchange is a core aspect of how Munson’s work creates meaning. Highly relevant to my understanding of Munson’s works as not just paranoid representations of the hidden structures of capitalism but reparative emblems for imagining and even acting towards an alternative is Turner’s positioning of the altar as “an interiorization of an exterior” and “a microcosmic strategy to gain macrocosmic results.”¹⁴³ It is a mini-universe that enables learning and dealing with the conditions of daily life.¹⁴⁴ The altar embeds a woman’s understanding of potency and beauty and the “impulse toward wholeness.”¹⁴⁵ Turner calls for art that contains this feminine value of relatedness. She declares that “freedom might lie less in the solipsistic ideal of doing whatever one wants, and more in the accomplishment of ‘bringing’ into relationship.”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁰ Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*, 95,101.

¹⁴¹ Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*, 23-24.

¹⁴² Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*, 33.

¹⁴³ Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*, 100.

¹⁴⁴ Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*, 100.

¹⁴⁵ Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*, 111.

¹⁴⁶ Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*, 111.

In *today will be AWESOME*, while not one of Munson's works that centres specifically plastic waste, it is her assemblage of pink discarded material that most obviously employs the vernacular of altar-making since there are two conceivable central figures, both female figures. Both are demarcated by the only text in the piece—one sits at the base of the altar and the other at its head (ironically, headless). The figure at the base of the altar, on the floor, lays on top of a baby pink saddle purse that perfectly accommodates her shape and size, in a fetal position, clutching her pelvis. Miniscule hot pink pilates weights sit on either side of her beside vases of fake flowers, another purse and a gallery of doll-spectators. Directly behind the agonized figure is a toy couch displaying a plaque that reads “today will be AWESOME.” Above all of this is an open pink cabinet which makes up the lower half of the other central figure—the torso of a pink headless mannequin sporting hot pink elbow pads, pink pearls, a pink backpack, and hot pink sash that declares she is “FEMINIST.” The headless figure has her hands on her hips in a power position. Inside the open cabinet there are pink figurines on each shelf—pink pigs and ponies, and dolls that ride them, sit on the shelves that are like the floors of a dollhouse, alongside an excess of other toys and pink figurines arranged with care. The image description of this sculpture on Munson's website explains that “while the individual objects in *today will be AWESOME* were manufactured to sell confidence, positivity and success to young women, Munson's accumulation of them exposes their suffocation, violence, and victimization.”¹⁴⁷

Munson as a speculative archaeologist sorts through discarded pink material, accumulates and arranges them, both relating to them and putting these objects into relation. She explains that she “started working with the colour pink to understand my relationship to it” and to understand why it was connected to gender identity.¹⁴⁸ Munson asserts that “there is something to be learned through the mass collection of objects.”¹⁴⁹ Through this process, Munson uncovers meanings

¹⁴⁷ “Sculpture,” Portia Munson, accessed January 30, 2025, <https://www.portiamunson.com/work/sculpture>.

¹⁴⁸ Bradfield, “The Timeless Relevance of Portia Munson's ‘Pink Project.’”

¹⁴⁹ Bradfield, “The Timeless Relevance of Portia Munson's ‘Pink Project.’”

associated with the objects that constitute the formation of gender identity but also depicts the relationship between women and capitalism—translating this relationship into a reparative opening.

Pink Project: Table is the very first Pink Project. Although it lacks a central figure, it shares other critical aspects of altar-making including layering and embellishment. It is “organized by function.”¹⁵⁰ It appears like an archaeologist's table display of specimens—thousands of pink plastic objects are arranged by shape and length in addition to function. The table is skirted with pink fabric recalling the altar's element of sacralization through embellishment as well as the prettiness and orderliness of the figure of “woman.” The major discernible categories of objects include the following: combs, brushes, cleaning products, beauty products, toys, and phallic plastic (in the form of literal phalluses as dildos but this section also includes a flute, a gun, a bike seat, and a sword). The aesthetics of relation produced in this very first public altar to pink plastic puts the objects into “a benevolent relation of exchange” in Turner's words, or, as Boetzkes describes, “Munson's reassembly of the objects shows the way plastics continually relate in new ways.”¹⁵¹

Cvetkovich highlights the importance of everyday ritual (like altars created from everyday garbage) in the context of depression in the formation of utopian habits. For her, ordinary habit “can be a basis for the utopian project of building new worlds in response to both spiritual and political depression.”¹⁵² She develops this notion from Foucault's “practices of self” that “provide a model for new ways of inhabiting disciplinary regimes that constitute the modern self.”¹⁵³ Cvetkovich understands that a practice of spiritual habits premised upon utopian ideals has the potential to reconceive “the rational sovereign subject as a sensory being who crafts the

¹⁵⁰ Bradfield, “The Timeless Relevance of Portia Munson's ‘Pink Project.’”

¹⁵¹ Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism*, 205.

¹⁵² Cvetkovich, 191.

¹⁵³ Cvetkovich, 191.

self though process and through porous boundaries between the self and other between the human and the non human (including animals and things).”¹⁵⁴

Munson’s work with pink plastic enables such a re-imagining of reciprocal relations to plastic through strategies from the tradition of women’s altar-making. Munson herself describes similar imperatives in her work to that of altar-making as they relate to transgressive microcosmic examples of the formation of macrocosmic relations to waste: “each piece [of discarded plastic] represents the millions of other pieces of plastic out there.”¹⁵⁵ Munson states that “these works are made up of hundreds of ephemeral found objects from the culture;” therefore, she believes “everyone is going to identify with some of the objects, so the piece becomes personal.”¹⁵⁶ As a speculative archaeologist from the future, Munson engages in a reparative practice of touching, sorting and accumulating the abject discards of consumer waste, configuring them into a symbolic ritual through the vernacular of altar-making. Her hope is that “100 years ago plastic did not exist, and I like to imagine that 100 years from now plastic will not exist.” In the symbolic ritual that constitutes her reparative altars, viewers can answer her call to “acknowledge the impact of plastic” and “make it personal!”¹⁵⁷ This opportunity to engage in a personal aesthetic of relationality through Munson’s altar-like works entails a reparative process of recovering and communing with the once abject Other and forming the condition for collectivity through a practice of spiritual (witchy) ritual that emphasizes aesthetics of relationships.

¹⁵⁴ Cvetkovich, 191.

¹⁵⁵ Keeting and Joy, Portia Munson, July 2016, August 18, 2016, <http://www.gorkysgranddaughter.com/2016/08/portia-munson-july-2016.html>.

¹⁵⁶ Bradfield, “The Timeless Relevance of Portia Munson’s ‘Pink Project.’”

¹⁵⁷ Bradfield, “The Timeless Relevance of Portia Munson’s ‘Pink Project.’”

CONCLUSION

Munson's sculptures and installations, which draw from the material of pink plastic garbage, create a conceptual opening where agency may be recovered in the face of overwhelming, devastating planetary chaos. Munson's works examined in this thesis excavate meaning through an iterative politicized archaeology of the present: *Pink Project: Table*, the very first of Munson's archaeological undertakings into pink plastic garbage, represents the artifacts of the doomed culture that produced them; *Her Coffin* functions as a study into the burial rites of such a culture; *today will be AWESOME* signifies the possible religious tradition that could be built from that culture (an image which both reveals the shallowness of that culture and represents the hopeful possibility of sacralizing wasted materials); and finally *Pink Project: Bedroom* recreates the conditions of dwelling for the subjects of this culture. What isolates these works as speculative and political, not merely archaeological, is their capacity to identify the systems that produced them, and that they exemplify strategies for transgressive reparation between self and Other, self and abject, and self and chaos.

Munson's *Pink Project's* make the insidious capitalist situation visible through the everydayness of their material and the personal and universal scale these collections of garbage represent. They draw their viewer into the realm of the domestic everyday, and into the practices of waste management and the ideologies that uphold them. The most significant aspect of these practices of waste management is that of their production and reproduction of the barrier between self and Other. These barriers and boundaries have been shown to be fundamental to the production and reproduction of global capitalism. The presence of plastic waste in daily domestic reality lends to its obscurity, as do the highly intentional eco-rhetorics and capitalist projects that obscure capitalism's actual responsibility by placing impossible responsibility upon the individual that leads to inaction and the felt sense of depressed uselessness. The pervasive

material reality of plastic and global waste, however, produces the necessary recognition of the corrosion of these boundaries, which are further illuminated by the study of polluted figures like the gleaner who recovers abject waste. Munson has proved to be such a polluted figure. Through Munson's uncanny presentation of familiar materials made strange, the overwhelming aspect of her works and their expression of the everyday abject materials of capitalist realism is made visible, and compels viewers to consider and identify the systems that created the conditions for such assemblages of pink trash.

Munson's works serve as a framework for visualizing the capitalist hyperobject while also enacting a reparative strategy for imagining an alternative set of ideological conditions between the self and the Other wherein a reciprocal relation may be formed. Because Munson's works are made up of pink plastic objects, their entanglement with feminism reveals the gendered aspects of the formation of capitalism while simultaneously opening new portals for perception including that of abjection, domesticity, witchcraft, and the history of women's altar making. This is the most crucial aspect of this thesis—a feminist consideration of waste materials through the abject Witch's senses that enable a reparative transgression between the self and Other in relating to pink garbage and therefore the invisible systems that produce it. The work of this thesis proves that from abject, degraded conditions there is material to reconstitute identity and practices for becoming in a world worth living in on a simultaneously microcosmic and macrocosmic scale. In sacralizing practices of waste management through the combined historical forces of women's altar making and witchcraft there is a true sense of sustenance and sustainability that can and will be recovered.

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Illustrations

Figure 01:
Pink Project: Bedroom



Portia Munson. *Pink Project: Bedroom*, 2011-ongoing. Found pink plastic and synthetic objects along with salvaged pink bedroom furnishings. 243.8 x 548.6 x 304.8 centimetres. Museum of Sex, New York City, 2023, Photo by Daniel Salemi.

Figure 02:
Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism



Allyson Mitchell. *Hungry Purse the Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism*, 2004-ongoing. Mixed media installation. Dimensions variable. David Nolan Gallery, New York City, 2006.

Figure 03:
Accumulation des Brosses



Arman. *Accumulation des Brosses*. Manufactured hair brushes, 44.96 x 64 x 11.43 centimetres, 1962, Photo by Marc Moreau, 2008.

Figure 04:
Pink Project: Table



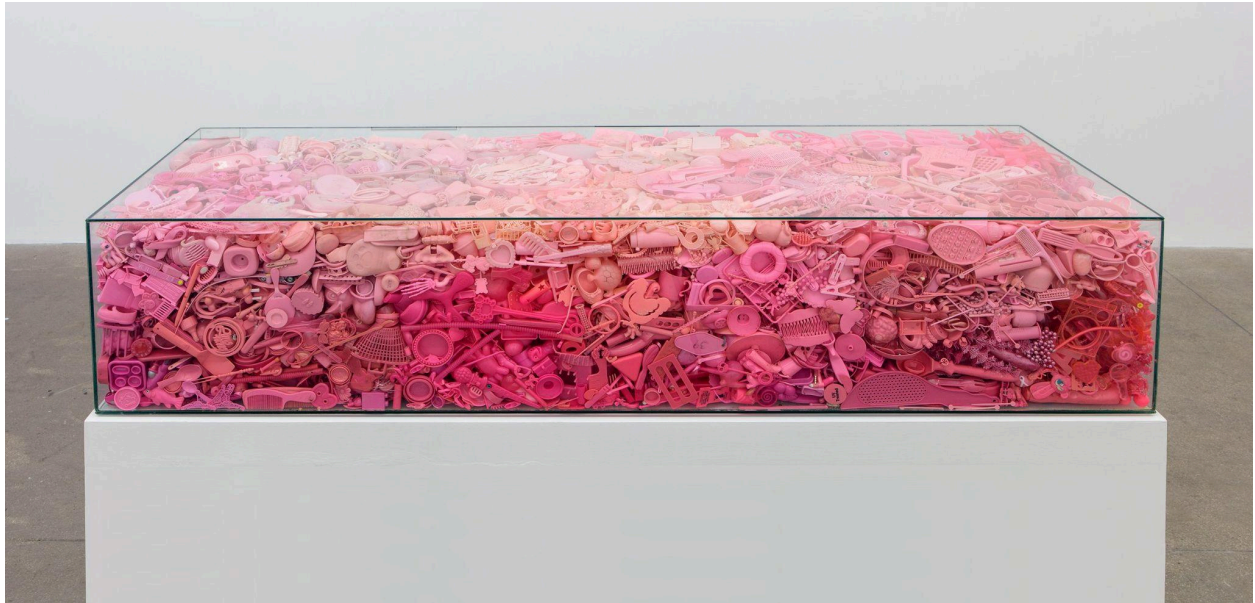
Portia Munson. *Pink Project: Table*, 1994-2016. Found pink plastic objects and table, 30 in high x 8ft wide x 14 ft long.

Figure 05:
today will be AWESOME



Portia Munson. *today will be AWESOME*, 2022. Found pink objects, pink synthetic fabric & cloths, mannequin, salvaged round bar table and a deconstructed secretary desk/cabinet, 70 inches high, 64 inches wide x 88 inches deep. PPOW gallery, New York City, 2022.

Figure 06:
Her Coffin



Portia Munson. *Her Coffin*, 2016. Found pink plastic objects, tempered glass and pedestal, 14.5in high x 70in wide x 22.5in deep. PPOW Gallery, New York City, 2016.