You Are What You Wear: A Vital Materialism of Textiles

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YOU ARE WHAT YOU WEAR: A VITAL MATERIALISM OF TEXTILES

By

Walter Greenleaf

B.A. Hampshire College, 2016

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

(in Intermedia)

The Graduate School
The University of Maine
August 2023

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YOU ARE WHAT YOU WEAR: A VITAL MATERIALISM OF TEXTILES

By Walter Greenleaf

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An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
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Intermedial artworks are deemed effective when they draw from the roots of the most
basic, universal elements of materiality, concept, sensation, and/or experience, melding disparate
elements into an inextricable novelty. As hybrid artifacts, they take up an unusual degree of
substance\(^1\) in one dimension or another, and can at times be difficult to categorize, describe, or
document. Nonetheless, the potential for intermedial expressions to resonate with their
viewership is strengthened by the depths to which the artist ventures, and through such a process
the most far-reaching and complexly interconnected issues of our time can be made approachable
on the personal level.

The work documented and realized herein developed from the idea of addressing the
issue of global textile waste on a personal level. Inspired by the need to perform basic clothing
repair, I began exploring textile-based art practices during the 2020 pandemic lockdown, studied

\(^1\) For instance, Dick Higgins arranged the extraordinarily brief composition of *The Thousand Symphonies*
(1968) by means of “machine-gunning music paper with the standard ensemble indicated on it.” —
https://dickhiggins.org/thousand-symphonies
them formally at the University of Maine from Fall ’20 to the time of publication, and greatly benefitted from the culture of ecological ethics, forest management, and community-engaged art flourishing at and around the University. My path of research-oriented artistic production has led me to participate directly in many facets of the reuse economy of central Maine and beyond; at times I have operated as a volunteer in a Catholic mission’s thrift store, and as an employee of a donation-based shop. I have both attended and hosted workshops, “skill-shares”, and other events in a variety of settings, from guest presenter at a public high school to spontaneous runway model at a fashion show for upcycled streetwear. Focusing primarily on ubiquitous textile artifacts, such as the graphic t-shirt, in conjunction with universally attainable and applicable projects such as tote bags, pockets, written messages, and drawstring pouches, I have developed an artistic practice geared towards inspiring in the viewer/wearer a newfound appreciation for textile materiality as a function of their embodied experience—ideally empowering them to begin independently addressing their textile footprint. The body of artwork associated with my studies culminated in a gallery-centered event, named You Are What You Wear, where participants were encouraged to wear, and offered from a shared selection, garments with visible repair work and customization—thus allowing an imaginative glimpse at the potential for healing and self-expression through textile work.

With the abundance of textile material available for those of us on this side of the manufacturing cycle, the means by which we address the inefficiencies and injustices of global textile production cannot be solely derived from a sustainability mindset; there must also be celebration of abundance: freedom to make mistakes, generosity, gratitude, and discovery. Through analysis of my work and the concepts which support it, I intend to show that worn textiles and the associated actions of repair are inherent parts of the human experience, and how
creative work can encourage a more mindful and harmonious relationship with textile materiality. Aided by a series of informal interviews conducted over the last two years, I will also present analysis derived from a variety of perspectives that I hope will show that the reuse economy as found across donation centers, second hand retail, volunteer labor, sewing workshops, and other social structures, is a viable and important lens through which one can perceive a community.
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CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

Methodology

The consequential magnitude of global textile production, though continually subjected to scientific study, ideological scrutiny, economic cultivation, and if we may be optimistic, the largely unconnected reformation of its various facets, remains uncertain. The system and its variables are complex, and whether we understand it or not, we are all contributors. There is simply no way to opt out of participating in the textile industry, which is fine, because that wouldn’t really help anyway. Instead, why not find ways to participate more?

As clothing and textiles are part of effectively all instances of human life, the cultural, material, and conceptual forces at play within the horizon of clothing and textiles are world-wide. It is daunting to picture oneself and one’s individual attempt at reducing waste in a global system, where billions of individuals, astronomical volumes of material, and unending market fluctuations shape the course of events. Nonetheless, choices and behaviors enacted on the scale of individual lives and bodies have an influence on the system—often a much greater influence than the individual can realize. For instance, a 2006 study of textile consumption in the UK² charted the energy required for various phases of textile production and use, with the cotton t-shirt as one of their three test cases, finding that much more energy was required by the end-user to maintain the t-shirt than went into any stage of the manufacturing process—even accounting for the energy expended in shipping the material across oceans. This suggests that when the end-user wears their garment for longer, washes it with cold water, and air-dries it

²https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282249347_Well_Dressed_The_Present_and_Future_Sustainability_of_Clothing_and_Textiles_in_the_United_Kingdom
instead of using a machine, the overall environmental impact of the t-shirt can be effectively cut in half.

We consume garments and other textile wares just like any biological nutrient, and at an ever-increasing rate—in terms of how much and how often we buy new clothes. Economist Juliet Schor\(^3\) calculated the per-capita volume of America's textile discards in 2007 as 78 lbs. Those of us in the West are more than likely contributing to a secondary global industry: the *reuse economy*. But beyond the roles we all play as consumers, millions of us depend on and celebrate textile work for our livelihoods, as well as we should. Irrespective of one’s origins, scope, or motivation, to begin considering textiles and textile waste is to invoke forces as broad and multilayered as agriculture, animal husbandry, environmental pollution, human rights, labor rights, cultural evolution, technological progress, trade politics, international conflict, and the historical analysis supporting such topics—all ongoing issues represented in virtually every corner of the world.

However, as a major industry, textiles have over the last few hundred years become dominated by globalized market practices, which has led to the overproduction of cheap commodities\(^4\), consumption of ever greater resources, rampant, irreversible\(^5\) pollution\(^6\), and some of the most dangerous and disreputable working conditions\(^7\) in modern history as the race to the bottom drives farming, manufacturing, shipping, and waste disposal concerns worldwide (Rivoli, 2009). Fast-Fashion designers maintain a 52-season model for releasing new clothing lines every


\(^4\) https://www.greenpeace.org/international/story/53333/how-fast-fashion-is-using-global-south-as-dumping-ground-for-textile-waste/


\(^6\) https://www.wri.org/insights/apparel-industrys-environmental-impact-6-graphics

week (Schor, 2010). The suicide rate for Indian cotton farmers trends ever higher. Poorly maintained buildings in the world’s sixth most populous city, Dhaka, Bangladesh, collapse and cause the death of hundreds. International markets are flooded with cheap, used garments. Landfills in Kenya by the millions, some perfectly intact, others completely ruined even before being sent overseas. As a species, we are producing more textile material than we need, moving it more than it needs to be moved, and attempting to destroy or otherwise banish it long before its usefulness has run out. Cheap goods have cheapened the western perception of textiles, while the side effects of production, which must be reconciled in terms of pollution and human suffering, have been veiled from our consideration. Some countries and individuals are bearing more of the burdens than others, but these are issues with which everyone must reckon.

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Graphs such as the one above depict clearly some of the issues associated with textile production, use, and waste in the United States in recent decades. It should be noted that the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), from which the graph originates, does not track the number of uses any given textile item has experienced before entering the municipal solid waste (MSW) stream. For the EPA, "recycled" means that a textile has moved through a municipal or industry-run recycling program at a large scale. Recycling here does not

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encompass all of the everyday, unseen and uncounted work that people do in their homes, sewing shops, cafes, and even street corners to repair, upcycle, and mend their clothing. This is why I have centered my creative enquiries on the scale of textiles functioning in the lives and within the care of individuals: Part of the work ahead of us is to envision how and why the practice of home repair can be encouraged, and it is worth remembering that there will always be more of it going on than any individual or institution can account for.

There are efforts underway to make visible the social problems associated with textile production. A contemporary and compassionate documentary film such as *The True Cost* (2015)\(^{11}\) can induct even the most disconnected viewer into some appreciation of textile waste and the suffering associated with working conditions in certain parts of the world, as well as the connections they (the viewer) establish and indulge, knowingly or not, between themselves and unseen garment workers. Authors such as Maxine Bédat\(^{12}\), Clare Hunter\(^{13}\), and Pietra Rivoli\(^{14}\) have undertaken studies of textile issues which allow great strides towards an integrated and compassionate understanding of the metaphorical big picture, without neglecting to mention the points where their research has fallen short of a desired outcome or claiming to have resolved the concerns in totality. However, textile consumption is a universal constant in the experience of human life. Everyone has a textile footprint, regardless of whether or not they possess the knowledge or inclination to think of it as such, let alone act upon it with intention. How, then, to frame the importance of basic repair and textile waste reduction in such a way that it takes on a

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\(^{11}\) [https://truecostmovie.com/](https://truecostmovie.com/)

\(^{12}\) *Unraveled: The Life and Death of a Garment*, a 2021 epic which focuses on denim, written by the founder of the New Standard Institute.


sufficiently universal appeal? Books and films are vital and effective means for unveiling the complexities of globalization, and at promulgating knowledge and strategies for empowering individuals to reduce their impact on the big picture, without sacrificing quality of life, but they simply aren’t everybody’s cup of tea. Advanced, specialized, or scholarly work can pose an insurmountable barrier of entry for many textile users—which, of course, is a group that includes virtually all human beings. We are faced with an issue that exists on an almost unimaginably large scale. By definition, a true solution must be as ubiquitous as the problem, and as it unfolds in the life experience of any participant in the solution, deliver unmistakable and inherent benefits that outweigh the benefit of making the problem worse—i.e., discarding old textiles for new. A true solution will also require unveiling and the promulgation of knowledge, to which ends I dedicate the goals of my creative practice. Whether with artworks in a gallery, clothing on human bodies, technical skill workshops and other community-building events, I am working towards a social movement that pushes back against the unimaginable.

The goal of the upcycle is a delightfully diverse, safe, healthy, and just world with clean air, water, soil, and power—economically, equitably, ecologically, and elegantly enjoyed.

— epigraph of The Upcycle

William McDonough and Michael Braungart, authors of the 2002 environmentalist design classic Cradle to Cradle and its 2013 follow-up The Upcycle, are in a large part responsible for creating and promulgating the mindset of sustainable design, but, with relentless optimism, are already working to upcycle sustainability itself. Why, they ask, should we settle
for a merely *sustainable* state of earthly existence? Why see only a problem, and not an opportunity? Once we had the phrase “respect diversity;” now, “*celebrate* diversity.” We used to “design for sustainability;” now we “design for *abundance*.”

Nature operates according to a system of nutrients and metabolisms in which there is no such thing as waste. [...] Then came industry, which altered the natural equilibrium of materials on the planet. Humans took substances from the Earth’s crust and concentrated, altered, and synthesized them into vast quantities of material that cannot be safely returned to soil.

—*Cradle to Cradle*

The surplus of textiles surrounding us, at least in the West, isn’t all *already* in landfills; in fact, there exists an entire market for secondhand, damaged, unfashionable, and otherwise unwanted textiles. An extension of this market exists in the back of our very own closets. Through Intermedial practices and artistic research, I have worked towards projects and ideas that make textile repair and customization more accessible, more within the reach of the average wearer. The abundance is present, here and now, so maybe it’s time to think about what could happen if we tap into it for all it’s worth. I believe, and aim to demonstrate through my creative endeavors, that positive inputs to the system of global textile production and disposal can be magnified through mindful participation in the *reuse economy* of any given cultural domain. For example, pictorial and typographical images, not to mention pounds of quality cotton fabric, can be harvested from the endless flow of t-shirts through the reuse economy, and made available for
study and experimentation in classrooms, where children and other beginners could learn the fundamentals of textile maintenance and customization.

Where individuals perform operations of material reuse, the depersonalization effects of globalization, commodity consumption, and internalization of cultural artifacts, is put on hold. It would follow, therefore, that establishing practices of reuse within a community and cultivating those which have maintained continuity within it, can be said to work towards healing the community through affording its members greater control of their consumption, interpersonal dynamics, and their very sense of identity.

Anthropologists characterize gift economies as systems of exchange in which goods and services circulate without explicit expectations of direct compensation. Those who have give to those who don’t so that everyone in the system has what they need. It is not regulated from above but derives from a collective sense of equity and accountability in response to the gifts of the Earth. (Kimmerer, 2022)

**Practice-Based Research**

This is going to take us all, and it is going to take forever. But then, that’s the point.

— McDonough & Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle*
Somewhere in the rainy depths of 2020, a time of great trepidation and uncertainty, about a dozen students of Intermedia swore a solemn oath—or were at least encouraged to consider it. Just another day on the frontiers of the avant-garde: coffee, last-minute reading, try not to think too hard about the Death Toll, log into class, solemn oath. Most of us had had plenty of opportunities to experience and reevaluate our personal relationship with solemnity at that point, and while I may never know how seriously any of my classmates really felt about it, I can at least say the oath marked a crucial step in my academic path. In a word, I abide by it to this day, and knew from my first read-through that I always would.

A fellow student and I led the group in swearing the Faux Frau Oath of Solidarity. We all set one hand on our sewing machines, an affect not in the least diminished by holding the ceremony over Zoom, and recited the following:

“On my Sewing Machine, I swear this oath to the Sewing Rebellion and garment workers around the world. I shall render textile and sewing knowledge to all who will listen and as a brave Faux Frau I shall at all times be prepared with advice, instructions and tools to serve my fellow humans to Stop Shopping and Start Sewing. If I turn traitor to this cause I now pledge, I will spend the rest of my days, in garments with un-repaired holes.15”

Carole Frances Lung, a.k.a. Frau Fiber, would be from that day forward one of the guiding stars in my creative and academic pursuits. She deployed the oath, and the title Faux Frau, with all the timeless weight of a secret society. By calling such attention to the power the

15 https://fauxfrautraining.wordpress.com/oath-of-solidarity/
operator of a sewing machine has *as a teacher*, a possibility easily overlooked by beginners but ultimately unavoidable, the oath as a work of performance, inspired a sense of this power in its participants and granted them permission to wield it. This was for me a great breakthrough in understanding how to view and influence the wellbeing of a community through care-oriented engagement. When I learned, some indefinable time later that my unexpected new siblings the Faux Fraus had been released from their obligations\textsuperscript{16}, (in fact, almost a year *before* my classmate and I led the swearing-in) it made no difference to me whatsoever. Pandemic or not, I was and am prepared at all times to render textile and sewing knowledge.

Susan Smith’s textile arts class met in person only twice, and then only with extraordinary caution, limiting us in proximity and numbers; once for a crash-course in use of the sewing machine for basic patterns (a face covering, of course,) and once for a workshop in indigo dye techniques. Other than those two days, our community was one of remote connections over the internet. We did our best to sustain our community through the remoteness, and our shared promise to commit to supporting others through our knowledge and experience brought us closer than ever before. In fact, both the themes and products of my creative work are as much of *community* as they are textile, all thanks to the Oath. It may even be accurate to say that, for both cases, *upcycling* is what occurs.

In any case, my pursuit of repair, generosity, and material abundance by way of community would ultimately require, though perhaps we can more optimistically say it *allowed*, personal involvement in a variety of nodes of my local reuse economy. For a deeper understanding of second hand retail, I became a part-time employee at an independent thrift

\textsuperscript{16} https://fauxfraustraining.wordpress.com/2019/12/05/faux-fraus-are-being-given-honorable-discharges-from-all-sewing-rebellion-duties/
shop. To better appreciate volunteer labor, I volunteered. I also conducted seven informal interviews with knowledgeable individuals in order to begin gathering perspectives and anecdotes on the social applications of reuse, repair, volunteering, abundance, and other forces across and within the horizons of art and life.

I do not want to give the impression that I believe the textile industry is some sort of evil force, fit only to be vanquished by grassroots uprising. Far from it. The production of textiles is in and of itself a wonderful thing, necessary and rich with tradition, and the more of us who choose to take an active role in these traditions, the better. It is the systems of global mass production and fast-fashion, as well as the less clearly defined cultural forces of disposability, that have become environmentally and socially problematic.

Consider the presence of textile use in human history: every culture, nation, and community on earth has some tradition of repair, thrift, repurposing, or upcycling. In many cases, it persists and can be reignited in favorable conditions. As powerless as one may feel in the face of a global issue, there are still innumerable ways for the inhabitants of a materialist, capitalist system to adjust their consumption of a particular resource, to attune their needs not in terms of “What’s cheap and easy?” but “What’s truly best for me / my family / community now? What will help me / us become who I’m / we’re meant to be? What version of this process will allow me to involve the work of my own hands? What will last the longest, make the world more beautiful, and inspire others?” Look back a few generations and you’ll find a prevalence of repair and mending unheard of today. (Strasser, 1999). Somewhere along the way, we lost our zeal for repair; or worse, we allowed consumer culture, fashion, and the dangerously normative influences of overconsumption to determine what constitutes an acceptable garment, and to supply excuses for the wanton, destructive rejection of perfectly good textile materials from the
places they’re most needed: our bodies and homes.

Sarah DeFusco, half of the art team WallaSauce, (a zero-waste production company based in North Adams, MA, and currently expanding and reorganizing itself as Wait A Minute Manufacturing\textsuperscript{17}) asks “When are people going to take the initiative in their own hands?”

We’re literally taught to throw things away. [...] The fashion industry has seasons within the actual seasons of, like, weather. You need winter clothes, you need warm clothes. But why are there 12 seasons in a year where new lines of clothing are being produced by the thousands? New styles to make people think that they need something new all the time, when the things that they have are completely sufficient. They're just taught that they're not of the time anymore, or whatever it is, that it's just like that. And then your clothing doesn't last because they're made in Bangladesh by people who get paid pennies and material that's completely synthetic and unsustainably produced and not a strong suitable material… (Interview, 2022).\textsuperscript{18}

After decades of fast fashion, it’s harder than ever for most westerners to imagine owning an article of clothing for the duration of its existence - or that of their own. T-shirts, the profligate descendants of the ancient tunic, have somehow become disposable items, something worth keeping around only until it demands repair, or as long as any printed graphics hold significance to its owner. I’ve taken a particular interest in the t-shirt as the material cornerstone of an exploration of artistic research, and aim to demonstrate how the inspired reader may begin taking advantage of its ubiquity. Some of my projects focus on the graphical material of t-shirts and

\textsuperscript{17} \url{https://www.instagram.com/p/CuXDKELLwJg/}
\textsuperscript{18} See Appendix E1 for a more complete transcription of the interview.
other garments (pictures, words and letters, etc.), such as All Things To All People, an outfit covered in patches from hundreds of repurposed shirts, each of which constitutes a title or declaration of authority. Others take advantage of the seams, hemlines, and other structural features of the t-shirt as the raw materials for upcycled items such as bags, pouches, skirts, and pillows, all guaranteed to survive as functional redirections of textile surplus and alleviate pressure on the cycle of production and nutrient management\textsuperscript{19}, if only to an infinitesimal degree.

I also focused on participatory artworks, such as the opening night of the 2023 MFA thesis exhibition, where the attendees were encouraged ahead of time to wear clothing which had been visibly repaired or customized, so that the evidence of this work could approach becoming the norm for the crowd and not the exception.

The textile works I create are intended not just to serve as functional garments or accessories, or to merely hit a certain number of stylistic markers and qualify as sufficiently odd-looking to invoke artistic potential, but to encourage within the viewer or owner a renewed appreciation for textiles as a function of their own embodied experience. I aim to create clothes that are more than just clothes, garments that facilitate unexpected or unconventional variations on the cultural functions already at play in the use of garments: communication, expression of identity and authority, pride and heritage, and purpose-specific functionality. What all forms of my work have in common is an attempt to meet the viewer halfway in the development of their own expression. To reach, as works of art, beyond the white box of the gallery and approach the

\textsuperscript{19} “Next time you want to use the word “waste,” bite your tongue. Worms consume food and, through the system of their bodies, produce richer nutrients. You, through the system of your intelligence, can create richer nutrients too.”

–McDonough & Braungart, The Upcycle p212
very spirit of the viewer, helping them to realize how fulfilling, beneficial, and ultimately how possible and easy it is to work, mindfully, with textiles.
CHAPTER 1

Making Connections

I began sewing at home because I recognized the joy that someone else had experienced doing so. My coworker at a small Massachusetts bakery loved flannel shirts, and would appliqué the graphics from t-shirts and other textiles onto the reverse sides.20 When the conditions are favorable, that’s all it takes: one glimpse, one idea. “She did that, and I could too.” After a few months of experimentation, I had something I felt worthy of bringing in: a stylized eye to peek back at the customers who watched us while in line for the restroom.21

fig 2. A social media post from Walter Greenleaf which depicts the eyeball shirt

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20 Hindsight suggests that she may have done this, specifically, because kitchen work requires an apron.
21 https://www.instagram.com/self_in_walterity/
Starting Out in Solitude

Not long after that photo was taken, my bakery shut down, temporarily, in anticipation of COVID-19. Some of my coworkers would return after a few months, but I would not.

Spring-summer of 2020 was, I need hardly reiterate, a time of great uncertainty, but two points were clear to me: #1, the more time I could spend at home and away from crowds, the better; and #2, if everything turned out okay, I’d be relocating to Maine and starting an art program in September. With that in mind, most of my days were spent sewing. I made as few trips outside as I could, but even before the lockdown I had developed a fascination with using t-shirt graphics in an appliqué patch technique, and most of my excursions were to thrift shops in search of new t-shirts.

During those crucial early months, I processed many years’ accumulation of novelty t-shirts—repairing some, but mostly focusing on downsizing the overall volume of my wardrobe by transferring t-shirt graphics onto larger garments. In a word, or two, my practice became contemplative and healing. I taught myself to slow down and focus on details. I started to think seriously about the way graphics on clothing functions as communication: what had I been saying, and what had I been saying without realizing it? What were the people around me saying through their clothing, and how could I become more adept at interpreting it?

The sense, or rather the phenomenon, of material abundance in the t-shirt also became apparent to me at this time, but as I did not have a sewing machine of my own, I am sorry to say that the majority of the fabric from the t-shirts I consumed went straight into the trash. I made some small pillows and patchworks from the cuttings, but ultimately did not yet know how to handle this accumulation of material. My roommate and I would have all the cleaning rags we

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22 Some stayed open, odd as it may seem. Goodwill and the Salvation Army operated in Western MA around this time, though with enhanced safety restrictions such as face coverings and social distancing.
could ask for, but that was clearly still a waste of the fabric’s potential. With access to my network of friends and fellow artists cut off by the lockdown, my relationship to materiality had shifted dramatically. I suspect that just about anyone who experienced a lockdown or quarantine scenario could recall a similar story of their own.

During August of 2020, I relocated to the area of Bangor, Maine, to attend the University of Maine’s Intermedia program. Only when I had access to the machines kept by the IMRC Center did I find it realistic to work with textile materials in bulk, and began adjusting my practice towards a zero waste ideal. I became a regular visitor to the local thrift shops. No meaningful understanding of the material abundance in a reuse economy can be had without experience in thrifting—the art of studying and shopping for goods which have been previously owned and potentially degraded by others. To be sure, there are many other important nodes to the reuse economy, such as garage sales, antique outlets, transfer stations, community events, and charity organizations—but it was the reliability, convenience, and high inventory turnover rate of the retail system of second hand material that best allowed me to pursue these studies even amid the uncertainty of the ongoing pandemic.

Though I began my sewing practice in a state of isolation, I always held onto the sense of connection and camaraderie that had started it off. Many of my earliest projects were inspired by someone I knew, and eventually sent to them via mail, as a surprise gift. Where personal connection was restricted or impossible, I sought instead to reach out to my loved ones with the power of generosity, and what better to be generous with, than the newly unveiled abundance of textile material?
For most of art history, the tangible, physical object has been the locus of the work of art. It still forms an ineluctable association in the minds of viewers. However, in exchange-based art, the object holds a special paradoxical power—the artwork is activated only by giving the art object away; and this dissipation of that fetishized object scrutinizes the bond between giver and receiver (which the very act of giving and receiving creates): a complex of moral and legal obligations to reciprocate, to further develop the social bond formed, as well as to respect the power relationship implied in the exchange.

—Francis McIlveen, What We Want is Free p33

Thinking of a former bakery coworker who played in not one but two hardcore bands, I decked out a red flannel with t-shirt graphics of skulls, creepy-but-innocuous runes and sigils from a video game-inspired graphic, and other related and appropriate images. For Sarah K., whose homemade work inspired me to begin sewing in the first place, I put together a yellow flannel with a somewhat more wholesome theme. The direction of a third flannel, blue, began to suggest the character of one of my online friends, so I sent it to her, and the striped shirt with the eyeball went to an aunt in Pennsylvania, where I imagined it might help her keep three stepsons from engaging in undue mischief. I sent something to my dad. I sent something to my ex. At the time, mailing out all these gifts just seemed like the right thing to do. Through studies in Intermedia of the principles of exchange art, mail art, and the gift economy (Purves & Selzer, 2014), not to mention having lived through lockdown and quarantine, I came to realize that there was much more to it. This work was my way of maintaining a connection with those closest to me in a time of adversity, and it would form the basis of my later work, as discussed herein,
where the ultimate goal is to foster and enable a sense of engagement through art with the adverse issues of our time.

Joining the Reuse Economy of Central Maine

Over time, the lockdown restrictions melted away from our schools, businesses, and minds, though I must admit, rarely with a display of any genuine sense of accomplishment. Meeting and collaborating in person became a possibility once again, and, slowly but surely, there seemed to be less of a need for strategic planning or limitations of exposure to public spaces. I recognized that the time was right to become more than just a student and patron of thrift stores, and sought out new connections.

In the summer of 2021, I was fortunate enough to discover the Clothes Encounter Thrift Shop of Ellsworth, an independent donation-based storefront which celebrated its 10th anniversary in June of 2023, and to make the acquaintance of its co-founder and proprietor, Suzanne Wood. She had just recently reopened for the season, after months of reorganization and a period of online-only sales. I continued to visit Clothes Encounter regularly, developed a rapport with Suzanne and her employees, and began working there myself, part time, from September of 2022 until July 2023. I knew I’d found something special in Clothes Encounter right away, as they proudly featured a line of garments and accessories made by upcycling damaged or otherwise unsellable materials: exactly what I had been hoping to find.

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23 See appendix E2 for the transcription of my interview with Suzanne, featuring a history of Clothes Encounter.
fig 3. An image from Clothes Encounter’s social media which depicts one of their iconic upcycled “I Am Enough” handbags. Buttons and seams celebrate its rebirth from the pool of surplus garments.

The downtime required by the COVID-19 lockdown allowed Suzanne and her collaborators to implement this long-desired feature (Interview, 2022). It makes perfect sense for the staff of a thrift shop to practice textile upcycling; the supply of free material is uninterrupted,

24 Image courtesy of https://www.instagram.com/clothesencounterthriftmaine/
health crisis or not, and many shoppers are not only already resource-conscious, but visiting specifically in search of unconventional wares. Since upcycling is only a sideline of Clothes Encounter’s day-to-day operations, the abundance of free material is really more of a mixed blessing—only some time and space can be dedicated to textile craft, and for an independent retailer, both are in constant demand. New donations arrive every day and constant tidying is required to keep the storefront habitable.

I continued to return to Clothes Encounter every month or so and speak with Suzanne and her employees, and my studies of upcycling and the abundance perspective on t-shirt material became well known to them. Up until the point where I joined the team, Clothes Encounter was saving certain materials for me in a dedicated “Walter pile,” based on my specifications: Cotton t-shirts with graphics and large letters; all subjects and themes acceptable; damaged items A-OK.

By this point, as I’m sure the reader will be relieved to hear, I had begun working with sewing machines in earnest, with an ongoing series of projects specifically designed to use t-shirt materials, other than the graphics. In particular, my signature creation: the lined drawstring pouch.25 Over the last two years, I’ve processed dozens, perhaps hundreds of t-shirts from the Walter pile alone: embellishing garments with their graphics when an immediate use-case presents itself and archiving them in my collection if not, converting material from waist and sleeve hemlines into drawstring pouches, and even converting t-shirt fabric into yarn, with a technique that requires only a few minutes of scissor work.

I readily passed on to Clothes Encounter a technique I’d originally learned in 2017, from the Experienced Goods Thrift Shop of Brattleboro, VT, whereby a single t-shirt is converted into a shopping tote bag. Our social media post about the introduction of these bags, in conjunction

25 You’ll hear more about them in Chapter 3, and in the appendix.
with the shop’s 10-year anniversary, caught the attention of local news:

Clothes Encounter Thrift Shop segment on WABI-5 (May 2023)

As an employee of Clothes Encounter, I found great joy in speaking with customers and hearing, reliably often, that many people visited in search of materials for upcycling and other creative endeavors. The old cliche holds true: I wasn’t the first, and I won’t be the last. From behind the register, I gathered information from customers and got in touch with them when I come across their material of choice. For instance, one local artist remakes clothing from old fur coats, and is just as interested in the somewhat more common faux fur garments. By developing the new requests file, I expressed gratitude for the Walter Pile arrangement. Clothes Encounter is itself neither the first nor last to save things for their regular customers; this expression of solidarity is as intrinsic, as natural to a second hand retail operation as the upcycling of surplus material. (Berry, 2021)

Between discovering Clothes Encounter as a patron and joining it as an employee, I spent about a year volunteering once a week at the Holy Family Catholic Church in Old Town—just a few minutes drive from the University of Maine’s campus. In the course of my studies, I would conduct an interview\textsuperscript{26} with its principal coordinator.

“We're a ministry\textsuperscript{27},” coordinator Barbara Falls explained to me,

and our ministry here is to take care of the charitable needs of the people in the community. Most of our money goes back into the community. We have a free community supper. Well, now it's a community luncheon. We've changed it to a luncheon.

\textsuperscript{26} Appendix E2

\textsuperscript{27} Operating as an extension of the church means that not only does she receive saleable goods for free, she can also afford to sell them at rock-bottom prices. Clothing at the mission’s shop is typically priced by weight.
At the beginning of the school year, I will contact all the area schools to make sure that they have a supply of personal care items for the kids that may need them. Those items will be brand new. The area schools always know to call me. If I don't have what they need, I can go out and buy it. There should be no child in this area going to bed hungry or walking around naked. (Interview, 2022)

The mission shop is run from the bottom two stories of an aging townhouse: sales floors on the ground level, and storage above. Use of this space, with its drawbacks and advantages, is contingent on the staircases; thus, a great deal of manual labor is required. Ideally, their donation intake is modulated and refreshed through the process of rotating between warm and cold weather clothing, seasonal and holiday items, and other essentials such as space heaters and summertime fans.

It was difficult to come to terms with having to discontinue my volunteering, and I hope to return in due course. There is often palpable desperation in encounters with donors of used goods, but that is true even more so with the volunteers who work to provide them with that recourse in the first place.

Starting Something New

Once word gets around that you’ve begun working with second hand materials, you can expect your friends and neighbors to seek you out with used goods, instead of their typical
donation center. This goes double if you start working to build social structures: community begets community.

As my studies progressed, I was approached by my advisor, Susan Smith, on behalf of Joey LeBlanc, then a newcomer to Intermedia, whose community-engaged work with UMaine-affiliated Wilson Center28 led him to seek out exactly the product I had been developing over the last two years: cloth bags, suitably durable for storing plastic food service containers. I started visiting the Wilson Center once every week or two, getting to know the team and developing a workflow we could fit into our respective schedules. We collected textile materials and worked together to refashion them into functional bags; see Chapter 3 and Appendix D for a more detailed description of this project.

On November 20th, 202229, the Wilson Center hosted a bean supper fundraiser, and attendees who took their food to go were given one of our upcycled t-shirt bags. They were a hit, and I would meet with Wilson Center staff shortly thereafter to establish the Wilson Center Sewing Circle. We agreed to meet every other week with the dual goals of fostering a shared space for textile work where participants would be free to learn, teach, and collaborate with each other, and, when the circumstance seemed favorable, resuming and expanding production of upcycled to-go bags.

28 https://umaine.edu/wilsoncenter/
29 https://www.instagram.com/p/CkgIH9ducjJ/
fig 4. Ten t-shirt drawstring pouches are displayed on a worktable in the Wilson Center’s main hall, along with the container they were designed to protect.

Thanks to the WCSC, I have had at least a dozen opportunities to fulfill my sworn oath of rendering sewing knowledge, specifically with regards to the use of the sewing machine. Though attendance fluctuates based on conditions of the academic year, a community is beginning to emerge. As word got around, inevitably, friends of the Wilson Center began donating t-shirts,
tablecloths, and other mainstays of textile surplus. Soon, we had our own sewing machine: the classic “stone soup” experience.

![Wilson Center Sewing Circle poster](image)

30 **fig 5. A screenshot of the Wilson Center’s announcement for the first meeting of the Sewing Circle.**

Our shared project continues, and in the Autumn renewed student body presence in Orono will make it feasible once again to pursue the sewing circle / community supper model of textile upcycling. It is easy to feel optimistic about projects conducted in partnership with the Wilson Center; as a multifaith organization, inclusivity and community solidarity are their bread and butter.

30 [https://www.instagram.com/p/CrULbguOMJL/]
Any context where a large number of t-shirt pouches can be manufactured and distributed, not just for free, but with the expectation of generosity as the basis of the entire undertaking, is an occasion where the true value of the textile materials will become more apparent to the upcyclers as well as the recipients.

Sewing Demos with the Joy Truck

Over eight years in the making, the Joy Truck traveling community resource center now routinely visits small towns in Piscataquis County to offer free gifts and events, collect stories, and host workshops. Twice, I had the good fortune to join the truck, and its creator, Intermedia artist Merrilee Schoen. We set up tables and chairs, a portable generator, signage, and my sewing machine. I taught some children how the machine worked and demonstrated my technique for converting t-shirts into drawstring pouches. Part of the truck itself is, in fact, a chalkboard for children to draw on. Merrilee recognizes both the needs of rural communities and the privilege that comes with mobility, and centers her work in gratitude.

[I explore] what it means to be a useful guest and a compassionate guest, and the process of acquainting oneself and exploring ideas of humanity, whether it's passing through a town for a night and staying with somebody, or in the case of the Joy Truck, creating a structure that would allow for repeat visits to a specific neighborhood. Suddenly this idea of bringing resources to people wasn't just about the neighborhoods, it was also about the anchor institutions that were having difficulty reaching people in such a very rural area. Piscataquis County is considered a frontier county still because of the distance between
homes. There's an enormous amount of distance between homes and services, and if you have little to no transportation and you have to rely on neighbors, it becomes this whole significant process. So the idea of bringing resources to people and then connecting back to anchor institutions was affirmed in 2019, 2020. I just decided that that was what needed to happen (Interview, 2022).

Merrilee recognizes that, materially, her work with the Joy Truck can only go so far—“a drop in the bucket”—and that its real power is intangible.
fig 6. Walter Greenleaf with the Joy Truck in Derby, ME.
fig 7. Furniture and equipment arranged for a demonstration of the sewing machine, as hosted by Schoen and the Joy Truck.
In organizations and buildings, evolution is always and necessarily surprising. You cannot predict or control adaptivity. All you can do is make room for it—room at the bottom. Let the mistakes happen small and disposable. Adaptivity is a fine-grained process. If you let it flourish, you get a wild ride, but you also get sustainability for the long term. You’ll never be overspecified at the wrong scale.

—Stuart Brand, *How Buildings Learn* p174

Through these connections and others, I have guided my ideals and creative practice out of isolation and into the world; a journey which can be begun, but never finished. There are boundaries beyond quarantine, not the least of which being Academia itself, and for my work to have an impact on big-picture issues, the pursuit and renewal of connections must be continual.

Anthropologist Brieanne Berry, whose advice and guidance have been instrumental to the present work, concludes her 2021 study with a warning that “pursuing circularity without attention to sociality is likely to reproduce existing inequality and to foreclose opportunities for positive local impacts.” (Berry, 2021)
CHAPTER 2

Vital Materials

In tribal societies they prize the integral power of the corporate far above the variations of the individual costume. In fact, when all members of the tribe wear the same costumes, they find the same psychic security that we do in living in uniform, mechanized environments. Since our environments are so drastically uniform we feel we can afford a wide play of private expression in behavior and costume. However, when we seek to rally the corporate energies for sharply defined objectives, we do not hesitate to impose uniforms. Both the military costume of the citizen as robot and the ceremonial costume of the elite at dignified functions are exact parallels to the tribal use of costume. It is somewhere in between the military uniform and the rigid fixity of formal attire that there falls the world of fashion.

—McLuhan & Fiore, War and Peace in the Global Village

As I hope to show through my creative works, there is no better way of promoting mindful use of textiles (and by extension, any and all materials) than through personal use. This promotion can be mundane or extravagant; as simple and intuitively mundane as wearing a garment out completely before replacing it… or as complex and personal as the slow development of a fantastical, unique garment which captures a record of experiences. In my own endeavors of the latter variety, I've taken to calling this garment my *Wizard Sweater*. 
fig 8. The original “Wizard Sweater.” Photo courtesy of Jules Mogul.
Thinking back to the start of my work with textiles, it was the realization that somebody had dared to modify their garments, as an expression of joy and discovery, that led me to rethink my entire conception of textile materiality. Some of us will never feel inclined to or capable of sewing, repair, decoration, etc, but all of us deserve to know what is possible. Speaking from personal experience, once you start wearing clothes that demonstrate a personal touch, you can expect to hear “I wish I knew how to sew!” in at least 50% of the conversations you have about them.\(^{31}\) It is just as important to grant this wish as to invoke it, as Frau Fiber well understood.

Every project is an opportunity to promote at-home textile work. When stitching by hand, for appliqué, embroidery, or repair, I invariably tie my knots on the outer side of the garment so that it can be seen by viewers. When constructing patchwork, I eschew thread and scraps of like color to the garment, also for the advantages of visibility.

Somewhat paradoxically, facilitating longevity of an object is possible only by accepting its ephemerality. This requires embracing and making a creative use of the signs of ephemerality by incorporating allowance for the signs of change from the beginning.

—Yuriko Saito, *Aesthetics of Care* p150

**A Form of Magic**

Underlying much of my work in art and otherwise is the tradition of *Shambhala Warriorship*, as described by guru Chögyam Trungpa in the 1984 Buddhist classic *Shambhala*:

\(^{31}\) You’ll also hear “Oh yes, I’ve been sewing for years,” which can be even more exciting.
The Sacred Path of the Warrior. Among many useful precepts and perspectives, it has furnished me with a definition of magic easily acceptable and applicable to creative endeavors:

When we draw down the power and depth of vastness into a single perception, then we are discovering and invoking magic. By magic we do not mean unnatural power over the phenomenal world, but rather the discovery of an innate or primordial power in the world as it is. [...] It is wisdom beyond aggression. [...] We are not talking here about an intellectual revelation; we are speaking about actual experience.  

This is a secular tradition, not tied to a particular geography, political system, or culture. It asks that we think of ourselves as stewards of the planet, and discover what we have to offer the world in order to build an enlightened society. Notions of abundance, and a sense of optimism not dissimilar to the tone of McDonough & Braungart’s work, inform a practice of warriorship based on bravery and self-control.

For the warrior, clothing actually provides an armor of discipline, which wards off attacks from the setting-sun world. It is not that you hide behind your clothes because you are afraid to manifest yourself as a good warrior, but rather that, when you wear good, well-fit clothes, your clothing can both ward off casualness and invite tremendous dignity.

—Chögyam Trungpa, Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior p112

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32 Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior. p103
33 Essentially, pessimism and hopelessness.
Other instances of clothes as a conduit for magic are perhaps even more commonplace than Shambhala’s form of magic, (known as the Drala principle, “Drala” meaning “beyond the enemy”). For instance, the concept of the talisman: a tradition as old as human consciousness itself.

Rags have long been believed to hold special powers. The agents of mythical, magical and mysterious worlds – Harlequins, Mummers, the Lord and Lady of Tatters, shamans, dervishes – all wear costumes pieced from cloth patches. [...] Pilgrims to sacred wells and ancient trees often bring and leave pieces of cloth, some cut from the clothing of the sick, others from their own clothes. [...] Sewing pieces of fabric together was believed to endow the pieced cloth with spiritual power, the needle’s magical strength permeating every join, the more joins, the greater the potency.

–Clare Hunter, *Threads of Life* p90

**Extended Self**

There’s really nothing new to the idea of clothes as an extension of the body; it’s a concept as time-honored as clothing itself, a stage in human progress accepted eons ago and yet still unfolding.

Russell Belk (1988) draws from philosophical, sociological, and economic theory to demonstrate how “having possessions functions to create and to maintain a sense of self-definition and that having, doing, and being are integrally related,” and that “just as we seek
to extend our selves by incorporating or owning certain objects, we may still seek the sympathetic magic (contagion) of possessions that retain a part of the extended self of valued others.”

The presence of secondhand materials in our economies, whether circular, linear, reciprocal or transactional, therefore is partly an exchange of identities; a physical medium through which the externalization of human experiences passes from one participant in or across societies, to another. To approach secondhand materials with the restorative intentionality of care, and through the organizational principle of abundance, is to support a network of interdependence as defined within the material’s horizon—or economic footprint, if you prefer. Redirecting the materials through the action of gifting emparts further power to it, leading to a cascade of positivity, such as Kimmerer describes in terms of birds and berries: (2022)

Human-machine symbiosis, I believe, is simply what comes naturally. It lies on a direct continuum with clothes, cooking, (“external, artificial digestion”), bricklaying, and writing. The capacity to creatively distribute labor between biology and the designed environment is the very signature of our species, and it implies no real loss of control on our part. For who we are is in large part a function of the webs of surrounding structure in which the conscious mind exercises at best a kind of gentle, indirect control.

—Andy Clark, Natural-Born Cyborgs p174

Intermedial artist Alex Rose works with t-shirts and other garments as part of her inquiry into accessibility and sensory processing difficulties.

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34 https://emergencemagazine.org/essay/the-serviceberry/
Our bodies, as we wear t-shirts, we are technically feeling it all around us, but our brain tells us to ignore it. Some [...] people, their brain can't tell their body to stop feeling it, and it feels very uncomfortable and they're hyperaware. Sometimes a t-shirt is one of the easiest materials to put on. It's more universal in that capacity, the ability to do that, but also the memories that are attached to t-shirts as well. We go to amusement parks, we go to National Parks, we go to visit grandma, and we get a t-shirt along the way. And, then it's beautiful, it's fun to look at, but it's also a wearable scrapbook in some way. Which is why people make these quilts after they don't fit the t-shirts anymore. Because they don't want to let go of those memories. And sometimes the memory you have attached to this thing is far better than any image you took on the journey. (Interview, 2022)
CHAPTER 3

Where to Begin

If you take only one thing away from my work and writing, let it be this: the simplest and most effective way that you, or anyone else, can reduce textile waste, is to wear your clothing for longer. Customization is optional, but repairwork is not. Thrifting and DIY may “trend,” may fade in and out of style, but their benefits are beyond question, beyond context. Upcycling, repairwork, patches, and the cyclical reuse of textile materials are inherent features of their role in human life. It is the discontinuation of repair that we may call abnormal, if anything. Zero-waste textile practices are naturally grounded in basic survivalism, or what in Shambhala teachings is referred to as basic universal goodness. Sarah DeFusco of WallaSauce puts it quite plainly:

When people were making their own clothing, they were using literally every piece in a survivalist way. It wasn't like, “oh, I'm going to make a scrap quit because it looks cool.” It was “I have extra cutoff material and my fucking family needs a blanket. So I'm going to make a blanket with this and not have to buy anything or go out.” (Interview, 2022)

This survivalist approach to materiality can be employed with or without the actual desperation of survival. In this chapter, I will describe how my creative techniques in textile art achieve functions that support and, hopefully, at times venture beyond what is typically expected of garments and other textile artifacts. It is further hoped that where the reader finds inspiration
in these techniques they may equal it with ingenuity of their own, as in-depth technical instruction is beyond the scope of the present work.

Being undivided, nature cannot be used against itself. We do not therefore consume \textit{it}, or exhaust \textit{it}. We simply rearrange our societal patterns in a way that reduces our ability to respond creatively to the existing patterns of spontaneity. That is, to use the societal expression, we create \textit{waste}. Waste, of course, is by no means unnatural. The trash and garbage of a civilization do not befoul nature; they are nature–but in a form society no longer is able to exploit for its own ends. [...] As we find ourselves standing in garbage that we know is our own, we find also that it is garbage we have \textit{chosen} to make, and having chosen could choose not to make it. [...] If waste is the result of our indifference to nature, it is also the way we experience the indifference of nature. Waste is therefore a reminder that society is a species of culture. Looking about at the wasteland into which we have converted our habitation, we can plainly see that nature is not whatever we want it to be, but we can also plainly see that society is only what we want it to be.

— James P. Carse, \textit{Finite and Infinite Games} p131-2
My practice in textiles is based on these principles:

1. Use of materials available for free, from reuse / circular economics, or diverted from waste channels is preferred.

2. The promulgation of knowledge and inspiration is crucial.  

3. When possible, develop, refine, and document basic techniques which can easily be understood and adapted by the viewer or wearer.

4. Envision textiles in the long term: create and perpetuate only what is intended to last for a long time.

5. Wherever textiles are worn, in work, art, or life, celebrate repair work and maintenance without downplaying its visibility or the time it takes to perform.

6. Embody the artwork: Let there be meanings and double meanings in the color, in attributes of placement, wordplay to words and pictures, indicating the intentions of the work.  

7. Whenever possible, seek or allow collaboration to occur between individuals and their respective creative approaches.

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35 See the Fau Fraux Oath of Solidarity  
36 See the upcoming “Volunteer Patches” section
fig 9. The back of the Student’s Uniform, featuring a patch of the words “Infinite Player/Orono.” Photo courtesy of Jules Mogul.
Volunteer Patches

fig 10. A sleeve of the Wizard Sweater features a patch of the word “VOLUNTEER.” Photo courtesy of Jules Mogul.
T-shirts featuring the word “volunteer” are often printed and distributed en masse for events, marking them as objects invested with a certain power and authority. Yet this power resides in a garment whose primary feature is a graphic of such specificity, such fleeting relevance, that as a rule of thumb it can be assumed to reduce the garment’s overall lifetime.

Volunteer shirts predictably reappear in thrift shops and other extensions of the reuse economy, though certainly without any chance of regaining the power which they held in their original contexts. They may hold sentimental value for their first or even subsequent owners, but whatever actual authority was conferred on the shirt’s wearer as a volunteer and supporter of the event evaporates when the event ends. However, a derivative of this power can be recaptured, and showcased as a repeatable technique of textile work, by isolating the very word itself and reinstalling it elsewhere, as shown above.

One may self-select as a volunteer with a raised hand; I have anticipated doing so while wearing the Wizard Sweater, and planned accordingly. When the left hand is raised, the word *volunteer* becomes plainly visible at or above the wearer’s eye-level. During any other use of the garment, the patch and its promise of interpersonal support remain visible, perhaps as a reminder of the value of volunteer labor for the wearer and any viewers. Though remaking the shirt can result in losing track of the specific event from which it originated, the remaker maintains a continuity of gratitude with the original volunteer by treasuring the record of their work. One can easily envision a similarly placed graphic, a question mark, at the wrist of the opposite sleeve, to be deployed in another nigh-universal hand-raising gesture.
Dog Training Shirt

fig 11 & 12. The Dog Training Shirt in action.
The phrases “sit” and “stop it,” as one would speak to a dog in obedience training, have been reappropriated from graphic t-shirts and applied to this dog-themed garment. The wearer is
given the opportunity of incorporating body language into their training routine, with the patches as a potential starting point. Though, to be sure, the dog does not appreciate the printed words as words, and the wearer has no immediate need to read them either, a certain advantage of ceremony is nonetheless applied to the practice of hand and body gestures by way of their relation to the words—and perhaps the wearer’s body language is fine-tuned in a way appreciable to their animal companion?
T-Shirt Drawstring Pouches

As mentioned previously, I began using disassembled t-shirts as material for creative work without any clear idea of how to avoid having to discard much of it—a dilemma easily recognized as being inherent to the material, and likely as not to be an issue in anyone else’s creative practice. The more familiar I became with this material, the more ease I found in reworking it, and the more apparent it became that the ubiquity, the abundance of t-shirt material was its greatest feature; not a drawback whatsoever, at least until the theoretical point where I ran out of storage for scraps of cloth I felt loath to throw away.

To get the most out of t-shirts, not just as material, but a material which had been worked on with great care by many unknown hands, I redirected my attention from the printed graphics to the seams and hemlines, where, particularly in the latter feature, I found tremendous hidden potential. Although some hemlines are too wide, most can be threaded with a length of yarn or line and easily converted into drawstring closures. Once discovered, it seemed obvious; it was also quite simple to look up similar techniques online and see what others had developed.

After about two years of trial-and-error, I settled on a basic pattern for the lined drawstring pouch. These pouches have appeared at Clothes Encounter, the Wilson Center Sewing Circle, the Joy Truck, and, of course, Lord Gallery. I’ve also mailed dozens of them to members of my family over the holiday seasons of 2020-2022. As a series of objects made from the same basic materials and actions, repeated with only minor variations in technique if not appearance, they can in some contexts be defined as artist’s multiples; but above all I consider the t-shirt drawstring pouch to be my number one tool for demonstrating the advantages of

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37 In almost all cases, cotton or poly-cotton blends, dyed and knitted.
38 See T-Shirt Pouch Sewing Demo hosted by Joy Truck for a video demonstration.
textile upcycling. From the standpoint of materiality, they cover a lot of ground: starting with objects whose value had been exhausted, and reinvigorating it with new purpose and life. Restoring material from rejection, back into circulation through webs of community and generosity.

The t-shirt drawstring pouch does not require advanced knowledge of sewing machine or fabric management—once the hurdle of working with stretch-prone knitted fabrics on the machine has been surpassed, either through use of specialized needles and thread, or just a warning to sew with a zig-zag stitch and manipulate the materials as needed, the process is simple. T-shirts are available everywhere, and removing the front graphic from almost any t-shirt leaves enough material for at least one large pouch. T-shirt sleeves can also be converted into small pouches, with minimal measuring or cutting. The drawstrings can even be made from t-shirts strategically sliced and pulled into yarn.

Unless decorated in some elaborate manner (which I by no means aim to discourage!) t-shirt pouches are just as easy to clean and maintain as the shirts from which they are made: machine washable, and as strong if not stronger than a t-shirt when sewn in double thickness.

It remains to be seen if this project is cost-effective enough to survive as a commercial endeavor, however, its merits as a work of upcycling are easily recognized. As an artifact, t-shirt drawstring pouches are a viable, practical step for textile material between “garment” and “Rag.”

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39 For the full instructions of this project as distributed in Lord Gallery for my thesis work exhibition, see Appendix D.
fig 13. The Big Banner on display in Bangor, ME.
The impetus of this project arose from the ideal of celebrating textile abundance without requiring the framework of a garment. I designed the banner with a specific location in mind, and installed it temporarily around the beginning of Spring 2023.
No Wear Special, and You Are What You Wear

Earlier this year, the 2023 Intermedia graduation cohort put together an exhibition of our MFA artwork in the Lord Hall Gallery—works that supported and delineated our then-forthcoming theses. We contrived the title of the exhibition, No Wear Special, as a play on words which jointly referenced our individual projects and overlapping thematic elements in some way. My own project, which of course was called You Are What You Wear, brought together a variety of elements of my artistic practice and many of the ideas which have been discussed here thus far. In fact, by setting up my sewing machine with a table and chair and repeatedly visiting the space, my entire textile arts practice was temporarily relocated to Lord Gallery, though this was only part of the overall endeavor.

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40 Of the four of us, I was one of only two to have begun the three year Intermedia program during the COVID-19 lockdown. That is to say, all but two of the original 2020 cohort had to delay or discontinue their studies.
Through word of mouth, distribution of fliers (see appendix #) to local areas of interest, and personal invitation, the audience of No Wear Special’s evening reception on 5/19/23 was encouraged to wear clothing which had been visibly repaired or customized, in the hope that we might collectively become a crowd in which evidence of imperfect and personalized clothing was closer than usual to the norm, rather than the exception. In some cases I worked with individual members of the Intermedia community months in advance to design and produce something for them to wear, as a collaboration and/or gift, but there was a rack of clothing for anyone and everyone to try on as their whims dictated, positioned near an inviting banner and mirror. There was also a media display which offered viewers a looping presentation of the seven interviews previously discussed, free printed instructions for upcycling t-shirts into drawstring pouches, and smaller pouches also free for the taking. Taken together, the elements of You Are

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41 See Appendix D
What You Wear offered not just an introduction to the concepts of textile waste, upcycling, and the reuse economy, but an opportunity to envision and participate in it, no previous experience necessary.

I visited Lord Gallery many times over the duration of No Wear Special\(^{42}\), working on various projects, offering sewing and upcycling lessons to gallery attendees, and giving away sleeve-size t-shirt pouches. Some of the garments were beloved, long term projects, while others were spur of the moment “doodles.” There were experimental pieces from when I was first

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\(^{42}\) 5/19/23 - 6/30/23
considering the potential of appliqué, some garments which had been made for specific people but remained in my collection for one reason or another, and some which had come to embody very personal experiences, such as the Wizard Sweater.
fig 16. Play With Your Words.
*Play With Your Words* (collaboration with Adele Drake)

Photo series presented as collage

The culmination of a study in food-based artwork. An arrangement of real food items depicting words which represent some of the elements of life and the human experience that must be considered when the idea of *food* is considered. We also gave this piece a sense of humor and play, specifically wordplay—“conflict” is a pickle, “culture” is cheese—in order to achieve a suitably light but gentle touch.
fig 17. A Nicer Place (I'm Loving It).
A Nicer Place (I’m Loving It)

Upcycled clothing

Created as a gift for my former roommate, Wes Heinrichs, to commemorate the occasion of his career shift from McDonald’s staff member to hospital lab technician. This project incorporated elements of upcycled t-shirts and a Hawaiian-style shirt, as well as shibori fabric dyed using natural indigo pigments, transforming Wes’ corporate uniform into a unique and humorous work of art. If changing clothes is to change the self, this project may help inspire new levels of care and deliberateness in such work.
fig 18. Details of the pants from All Things To All People.

All Things To All People

Upcycled clothing

My most complex, time-intensive, and perhaps most crucial work of all began in my very first week of Intermedia, in fall 2020. ATTAP is ongoing to this day, and will likely not be completed at all. Once localized to a jacket, but now grown to encompass pants as well as an apron, this work is best displayed on a mannequin or live model. Hundreds of patches sourced from t-shirts have been painstakingly hand sewn onto the three garments; each patch features one or more words which constitute a title or declaration of authority.
The product of uncountable hours and painstaking stitches, ATTAP aims to show that when people work together, the impossible is within reach. It exemplifies some of my artistic principles, such as working slowly with care and contemplative thought, the celebration of second hand materials, and the idea that the greatest challenges facing the world today must be addressed by each and every member of the human race.
fig 19. Detail from the Tent Project.
**Tent Project (Invitation Project)**

Mixed media / installation

A series of small, two- and three-letter appliqué kits created for the members of Intermedia’s Spring 22 critique class. Each kit contained letters for initials of a member of the group, a needle and threader, pins, and thread. These “invitations” were presented to the group inside a fully furnished tent, which contained elements to play on all the human senses (a phonograph for sound, a bread machine for smell.) As with my work in developing the t-shirt drawstring pouch, I want any and all interested viewers to feel free to adopt my technique of repurposing individual letters from textile graphics as their own.

![fig 20. Looking into the Tent.](image)
fig 21 Drawstring pouches.

Upcycled Drawstring Pouch Project

Upcycled clothing

What began as a solution to reducing textile waste on a personal level has become my cherished point of focus in addressing the issue on its true scale. I have converted more than enough t-shirts into drawstring pouches to know that this process is suitable for adoption and adaptation by anyone with access to a sewing machine. Ubiquitous to the modern world as the t-shirt is, its end-of-life prospects in consumer culture are as dismal and nebulous as any other disposable and replaceable object. However, only a minimal investment of time and effort is
needed to convert its textile yield into a durable, functional cloth pouch. This is my method of turning trash into treasure, one that I feel driven to improve and popularize in the hopes that it might catch on.

*fig 22. Smaller drawstring pouches made from t-shirt sleeves. Photo courtesy of Adam Küykendall.*
fig 23. Details on the inside of Dream Robe 1: the words “DIVE,” “SLEEP,” and “RETURN.” Photo courtesy of Jules Mogul.

fig 24. A talismanic arrangement of fabric graphics, intended to be wrapped up inside a drawstring pouch and included with Dream Robe 2. The statement in the graphics expresses the warding-off of specific nightmares.
Dream Robe Project

Upcycled clothing

Two garments intended to be worn at night, onto which *talismanic* messages have been imparted. The first, which I created for an Intermedia course on rituals in art, is still in use, when not on display. I made it with myself in mind as its user, and with the creation of such a garment came my own personal issues regarding sleep and dreaming. Specifically, I have a difficult time remembering my dreams, but am hoping to change this through use of *Dream Robe 1* as a tool for cultivating and reinforcing healthier habits. *Dream Robe 2* was made for my cousin, and incorporates a much more complex and specific talisman designed to ward off recurring nightmares.
fig 25. A projection of the Kitchen Warlock at the IMRC Center’s kitchen.

*Kitchen Warlock*

Projection mapping
This projection-based installation emerged from long-abiding feelings of disconnection with the University community and IMRC Center itself, as a result of the remote learning we undertook to mitigate the effects of COVID-19. The otherworldly effect of superimposing a photograph back onto its location allowed this commentary on “lost time” or “missing time” to play humorously with the mundane kitchen setting.
fig 26. The sleeve of Walter Greenleaf’s Student’s Uniform, with in-progress upcycled fabric graphics stating the institution, degree, and years of study.

Student’s Uniform Project

Upcycled clothing

An extra-large shirt covered with scraps, slogans, and small treasures, transforming it into a wearable scrapbook, a chronicle of my time in Intermedia. This project will not be “complete” until I graduate. I also have a second uniform, intended as an example of a more generic academic experience. It bears the legend “YOUR NAME HERE” in place of a name tag.
fig 27. Dyed bread set out for free at the IMRC Center.

Bread Machine Project

Performance
Another project inspired by the disconnection of remote learning: creating a welcoming smell in the IMRC Center during our “return to campus” phase and distributing free food to members of the University community. Use of the bread machine during class hours started before my studies led me to the term *care ethics*. Even though the positive reception of the bread I distributed for this project inspired me to incorporate the automated bread-baking process into my Tent Project, only hindsight allowed me to recognize the connection of the sense of smell with COVID-19.
fig 28. A projection of Shark And Awe on one of the IMRC Center’s facades.

Shark and Awe (collaboration with Alex Rose)

Video / projection mapping

This 20 minute video clip was formatted for projection on two wall spaces at the front of the IMRC Center. It depicts a humorous shoreline scene in which its creators appear alongside puppets of sea creatures and a model ship, and was intended as a mood-lightening display during a bleak part of a particularly bleak year.
fig 29. The Unburden project, set up for UMaine students and visitors.

Unburden (collaboration with MK Jones, Jessy Brainerd, & Lia Davido)

Installation and ritual
An enclosed booth containing a light source, writing material, and a paper shredder, was left unattended for some time in the IMRC Center, and also made an appearance in one of the University’s dining commons. Viewers of the work were invited to enter the relative privacy of the booth and record anything they felt compelled to say, before shredding their writings. Our group later met at a predetermined time to completely destroy the remaining fragments in a ritualized fire. Did it work, as a service of *unburdening* to the community? I say, it can be considered successful to the degree of seriousness with which we handled the ritual—how respectful we were of the messages people left behind.
In 2020, you may remember, the use of face masks was still an unfolding, sometimes volatile, controversy unto itself. Cynical though it may seem, I often expected to, often *did* hear about some authority moving to make them illegal. I hope it goes without saying that I believe the right to cover one’s face is to be protected at all costs, not just for health concerns, but basic
privacy in the face of mass surveillance, and that it should be just as safe to wear a huge bandana with the word OUTLAW on it in threatening letters as anything else. This mask marks my first use of ransom note style typography in textile work.
fig 31. A close-up of a submerged model ship, with the video projection running on its sail.
fig 32. The aquarium and projector setup.

*Ghost Pirate Project*

Installation and video projection

This project challenged me greatly but developed well. I shot two video clips depicting myself wearing some of my modified garments, and edited them into an underwater scene with projection mapping software. The difficulties associated with assembling, documenting, and projecting into an aquarium environment ultimately discouraged me from following up on some of its successful elements, but its impact at the time was strongly felt by viewers.
Nanocellulose Elephants 1 and 2

Cellulose nanofiber, repurposed stuffed animal

Of my work to date with cellulose nanofiber (CNF), these two elephants best exemplify my research inquiry into the use of textile molds as the source of relatable and recognizable shapes. Both were cast inside the same repurposed stuffed elephant; the larger and thicker of the two with CNF pulp subjected to an additional phase of drip-drying to decrease its water content before the casting.
CONCLUSION

While the scope of my work has been necessarily limited to the cultural and geographic horizons in which it was conceived and enacted, I remain optimistic that the practice I have developed will remain valid and useful as I take it further afield. Wherever t-shirts are manufactured, sold, or worn, there is untapped potential in physical material and material knowledge, ready to be awakened in the lives of the wearers. Wherever and for whatever reason repair work has fallen out of fashion, it can be restored as part of basic universal goodness and the embodied human experience. As long as textile manufacturing conditions remain adverse in any part of the global economy, the celebration of customized and imperfect garments can contribute to the refutation of an exploitative societal standard, regardless of cultural particularities of dress.

These ideas will form the basis of an artistic practice with a broad range of materials and great longevity, but the creation of artworks is only part of the overall pursuit and implementation of my goals. Teaching is important as well— or rather, not merely teaching, but promulgating worthy ideas and techniques without necessarily attempting to become the center of attention; helping viewers and participants to realize how easy and wonderful it is to teach and learn from each other, whether inside the gallery, at home, on the factory floor, in the woods, or on the streets: anywhere and everywhere. Everybody needs textiles; therefore, to envision a world with better textiles is to invoke the betterment (enlightenment!) of humanity as a whole. One might balk at the enormous scope of such a mission… I say, it’s more like the point where a vision begins than its upper limit.
In addressing the viewer, my work is meant as a gentle reminder, never an admonishment. There are important concepts which I seek to communicate, and inherent to this ambition is the danger of *opining*. I’m not setting out to change anyone’s mind… just to help them realize what’s within their reach. When basic universal goodness is made the subject of art, the viewer/wearer/participant in/of the work is allowed to redefine their own horizon. Artistic contexts and undertakings, especially when empowered through Intermedial practices, can cultivate situations, environments, and lasting dynamics in which the fundamentals of life and the human experience may be safely, positively reevaluated. My collaborators and I can work towards the normalization of visible repair and customized clothing through art, through life, and through the unavoidable blending of the two. What we do can be transactional, or otherwise, but it will always be open-ended—something started, or rather *continued*, without a predetermined end. A meaningful care relationship with textile material and the garments I work to prolong as works of art will take a lifetime to truly cultivate, and mastery of the sewing machine is also not something I can expect overnight.

Moving forward, I believe I will find it crucial to expand the interview series, as there are many important nuances and perspectives represented in my studies only as speculation or received wisdom. Repair work, garment personalization, and trade in textiles as a gift or commodity belong to everybody, to every culture, and so it is *everywhere* that I must look for new conversations.

However, one does not need to visit Chinese yarn factories in person, finagle meetings with high-level corporate executives, or navigate the slums of Dhaka to understand how they can have a positive impact on global issues. Changes made on the scale of an individual life, when made mindfully and with the big picture in focus, are *always* worth the effort, always towards the
greater good. So, try washing with cold water. Pick out a coat you’d want to grow old with. Find out where the volunteers are, and support or join them. Learn to repair, and learn to love the look of repair for the goodness it represents… or at least try to compliment whoever’s wearing the next visible seam or structural patch you happen to see. The changes that matter most often cost the least, and when they require more time, that’s actually half of the benefit. We have more power than we realize, and the only difference between our world and our bodies is that it’s easier to work together to improve the world.
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Appendix A: Event Scores

Event Scores are texts that can be seen as proposal pieces or instructions for actions. The idea of the score suggests musicality. Like a musical score, Event Scores can be realized by artists other than the original creator and are open to variation and interpretation.

–Allison Knowles

Event Scores for Discarded Clothing

#1

Identify and retrieve an item of clothing which has been slated for disposal

Evaluate its condition

Deduce and imagine its history

Repair it if possible

Otherwise, incorporate its materiality into something wearable

Wear it with pride and continue its history

https://www.aknowles.com/eventscore.html
Event Scores for Thrift Shops

#1
Purchase a set of items suitable to wear
Change into them
Examine your former outfit and repair as needed
Donate it to the shop

#2
Purchase several graphic t-shirts and one larger item of clothing
Decommission the t-shirts and render them into tote bags or drawstring pouches
Apply t-shirt graphics to the larger item
Donate some or all of the remaining and reimagined items

#3
Purchase damaged or unadorned items from the shop
Repair, reimagine, and decorate them
Return them to the shop as a donation
Hi Walter! I am a UMaine employee and by chance went to the Lord Hall MFA exhibit yesterday. Just wanted to say that I really enjoyed your work! My coworker and I had lots of fun trying on your awesome textile collages. What a great idea!

thank you so much for reaching out - I am glad you enjoyed the work
Appendix C: YAWYW poster

Do you repair or customize your clothing?

Are you interested in learning how?

Do you wonder how things would look if everyone took on the task of textile maintenance?

Please visit You Are What You Wear, (YAWYW) on May 19th, 2023!

YAWYW is a participatory art project, and you can join just by showing up. The general idea is to attract a crowd of people where visibly repaired or customized clothing is the norm, not the exception.

The purpose of the crowd is predetermined; your role in it is up to you: YAWYW is part of an MFA thesis exhibition, one of four that will be shown on the 19th. So, yes, you are invited to an art show and an art project. If you can't make the opening, the thesis works will be on display through June.

**Lord Hall Gallery, University of Maine, Orono - 5/19/23, 5-7 PM**

For more info about YAWYW, email walter.greenleaf@maine.edu
For more info about Lord Hall Gallery, email um.art@maine.edu

Bring your own customized/repaired clothes, or try on some made by the artist. There will be instructions for DIY projects, info about local sewing groups, etc.
Appendix D: T-shirt pouch instruction document (as it appeared in YAWYW)

instructions for upcycling t-shirts into drawstring pouches using a sewing machine - by Walter Greenleaf IV

1 - materials
- Fabric
- Thread
- Pins (optional)
- Sewing machine
- Scissors
- Nylon mason line
- Thick plastic needle
- Fabric chalk (optional)
- Patches, fabric graphics, appliqué décorations (optional)

2 - picking something to upcycle

Our goal is to transform an existing item, a t-shirt, into something else: a cloth pouch with a drawstring. Think about what you’ve got in your wardrobe—do you have any shirts that have become too worn-out to wear, or too sentimental to discard? Perhaps there are so many that some of them hardly ever get used or even looked at. Why not turn them into something different, practical, unique, and lasting?

You’ll use the hemlines of the t-shirt as a channel for threading the drawstrings; not only will this save time and effort, it serves to highlight the origins of the fabric and mark the occasion of its transformation. The waist hemline of most shirts can be used for pouches in a wide variety of sizes, and the sleeves can be fashioned into smaller ones. If a hemline has been damaged, you may have to repair it, or sew a new one yourself, but even a severely damaged t-shirt has enough usable material for a pouch of decent size, if the hemline and surrounding fabric is intact.

Think carefully about your machine and skill level. These instructions will provide a general outline, suitable for beginner to intermediate sewing machine users, but cannot cover all material conditions. The most important thing to keep in mind is that t-shirts are made of knitted fabric, which isn’t what usually ends up under the machine’s needle—it’s going stretch a lot, so run your machine slowly!

3 - making the pouch

Set the machine up with threads that either blend in or contrast with the color(s) of your t-shirt(s), according to your preference. Remember, sewing with knit fabric means fudging it around a lot as it stretches. Avoid straight stitches—use a zig-zag instead.

Start with a rectangular piece of fabric, hemline at the top, with its right side facing out. Decide what shape you’d like the base of your pouch to have, and trace some.

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guidelines onto it with chalk if desired. This will be the exterior of the pouch, so now is
the time to pin and sew any decorations you have in mind.

For single-thickness pouches, you're ready to fold it in half, right sides inward, and sew
up the sides. Start where the opposite folded edges meet, right on top of the shirt's
original hemline, sew down to what will be the base of the pouch, and either curve up
into the folded half of the fabric, for a pouch with seams on the bottom and only one
side, or sew all the way back up to the hemline on the opposite side.

For double-thickness pouches, set your exterior layer right side down and find a suitable
piece of material for the lining. It will need to be an inch or two longer than the outside
so its hemline can poke out from the inside and receive the drawstring threads instead
of the outside layer, for a nice color contrast.

Lay the pieces on top of each other, wrong sides together, and sew across the tops of
both layers, so that the stitches of the lower hemline are just covered by the top of the
other. Then fold the whole thing in half, as with a single-thickness pouch, lining on the
outside, trace or otherwise determine the pouch's outline, and sew down from the
opposite corners of the hemlines until the pouch is whole. Trim around the new seam.

Now turn the pouch right-side out. Make a small incision in the side of the hemline
opposite from where the main seam starts, for threading the drawstrings. Measure the
width of the opening of the pouch, multiply it by two, and add 5-7 extra inches for the
knots. Cut two strands of mason line. Thread one of them all the way around the
hemline, tie its ends together, thread the second one from the opposite side, tie it, and
you're done!

4 - how to care for a pouch and what you can do with it

Before chopping up your shirt and discarding unwanted scraps, it is worth making a
note of the type(s) of fiber(s) making up your fabric, and any care instructions included
on the tag. Since t-shirts are generally low-maintenance items, drawstring pouches
made in this style are almost always safe to machine wash.

Suggested uses:
- Coins
- Guitar picks
- Rocks
- Jewelry
- Candy
- Makeup
- Gift bag

Walter Greenleaf, 2022-2023 - University of Maine, Intermedia MFA

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Appendix E: Transcriptions of field study interviews

E1 - Interview with Sarah and Kirby (WallaSauce)

Kirby: My uncle showed me a barbecue recipe and I tweaked it a little bit. I made it my own and I just started selling it. I just wanted to be like an entrepreneur personally. Like I just didn't want to like work for anybody else and stuff. So two years later, I met Sarah at MCLA in 2016 and we just hit it off. At the time we were selling pins and patches, we were getting pins and patches made, you know, overseas, we had to get 100 at a time, which was like, probably $250 for 100. The pin market at that time was pretty big. We were selling pins for like 7, 10 bucks a piece. It's like a five buck mark up, something like that. Not including shipping. So it was really interesting to see like how it jumped, because Sarah was helping with the business aspect but she was also–

Sarah: Not much.

K: Yeah, it was mostly like the designs and stuff she was really like helping out with because I didn't draw much. So then for my birthday the next year she made me like two pocket tees that she sewed herself, like she just grabbed a blank T shirt and then fabric and made a pocket stencil out of it and sewed it on. And I just remember, because we were in P-Town at the time, I remember just opening them up and I was like, holy shit, I was like, these are fire. Nobody is making these right now. Like we should definitely like, hop on this opportunity. That's where we started as far as the sewing aspect of it. She taught me how to sew. I don't know if you want to talk about where you learned how to sew.

S: We're pretty relatively just self taught. Took like one class, like sixth grade, made a dolphin and a stuffed guitar, and then I didn't touch a sewing machine again until college.

Walter: Love that. I’ve thought a lot, uh, I wouldn't say I've “thought a lot about” It's more like I've seen the name WallaSauce so many times that it is just not something I wonder about anymore. But I just take it for granted. I never would've imagined that it actually had to do with a literal sauce. What's the best way to refer to your operation? Is it best to say that you are an art collective, or a company? Or is it best to say, I don't know, movement? What's the thing that you
think applies most accurately? Not just for like a business context, but just for the reality of it, what would you say?

S: Well, we're an LLC. A majority of it is business, but I guess more of like just lifestyle initiatives, trying to get people to think about where their stuff comes from and what their responsibility is when they buy something and the lifetime of that product and what happens to it when they're done with it.

K: It seems like there's just people that almost want to use us like a goodwill and just like forget about their shit.

S: We live in a disposable society. It's easy for people to relinquish responsibility of the things that they buy when they're out of sight, out of mind. Having us be the creative outlet, they feel like they're doing something really good. But in the end, back to the educational thing, my goal is to help people understand that. Like you can do this yourself. You can take your T-shirts and turn them into yarn and crochet or knit with them like you can take your trash, your soil bags and turn them into like a reusable bag.

W: “It doesn't have to be us,” is what you're trying to say to them.

S: Kind of. Like we appreciate obviously, donations and people's ideas. But at the end of the day, like when you consider how much waste exists, if everybody gave their clothes to somebody else to deal with them, there's no solving the issue there. You're just passing along responsibility.

Whereas if you learn the skills to be sustainable and self-reliant enough to know how to sew with what you have, like everybody's creativity comes from a different place. So you can make things yourself that like, I could have the same materials as somebody else and come up with two wildly completely different projects. But if nobody's going to think about taking that initiative for the sustainability aspect, like it's becoming a situation where we know that the mass production in this country is going to ruin this country.

K: Already has.

S: Like yes it has, but in the sense of like when are people going to take that initiative into their own hands? It's kind of tough when people like, want to unload their things, but then go continue to consume new product instead of thinking like, okay, I already have this. What do I do with it
once it's served its purpose for me. We’re literally taught to throw things away, like the fashion industry has seasons. Why? The fashion industry has seasons within the actual seasons of like weather. That's one thing. You need winter clothes, you need warm clothes. But why are there 12 seasons in a year where new lines of clothing are being produced by the thousands? New styles to make people think that they need something new all the time, when the things that they have are completely sufficient. They're just taught that they're not of the time anymore or whatever it is, that it's just like that. And then your clothing doesn't last because they're made in Bangladesh by people who get paid pennies and material that's completely synthetic and unsustainably produced and not a strong suitable material…

W: In a sense, your house style of getting all the many, many different scraps in one place, or at least one or two things that are recognizably recycled, that's educational, in and of itself. It's a visual example. It will get people thinking about it, not just thinking about it because it's colorful and weird. If you look at it just for a little while, you'll recognize what it was made out of, and why.

S: My goal for those soil bag things was to make people look at them and say, why the fuck are we buying dirt in plastic bags? Like it's a joke. But it turns into, that's the thing with streetwear now, too, it's a little unnerving because it's all about aesthetic. And it becomes less about process and reason of process, to the point where it's strictly about the price tag and the product.

K: Where like on the other hand too, like when you look at high fashion, it's the complete opposite. People pay the money because they…

S: Want the name brand.

K: But it's not even that, like they see the vision that that designer wanted to have for that collection and they resonate with it. And it could be the stupidest shit, bro. And if someone resonates with it so fucking deeply they're going to buy that thing. It’s crazy to see like how the two different, like, streetwear and haute couture is marketed because it really is so different, especially with like the Instagram market now because people don't care, bro, if there's like a fucking Pokémon on it, they're going to buy it. It's like, that's fine, it's cool. But like you get to a point where as a consumer, like yourself, when you start to realize like, okay, I'm going to start to make my own shit and like put my own work into it. You're like, damn my bobbin’s fucking up,
my machine’s doing this. It's like there's so many more hours that go into the actual product that you're buying that like it's just not known. But also how do you get that across to your consumer without becoming preachy from like a streetwear point of view? You know what I'm saying? It's like you can't have the same values as like a high-end brand on a streetwear, because it almost like–

S: You can, you just have to do it differently.

K: That's… right.

S: If you don't do it on a mass scale of crystal new material basically starting there like… if we were going to do couture fashion I would still use trash, you know what I mean? Like, I think it's just creative interpretation. But at the end of the day, people still come into our store and complain about the prices. They're like, oh, this was a stuffed animal and now it's a backpack and it's $70? And it's like, well, yeah, you do the thing yourself and understand the process or you're just, you're already spending your money on things that you could do yourself. This weird mix of like providing a service and trying to… like, I don't think brands really think about teaching people how to do what they're doing all the time. And it's not a matter of like, we want people to like rip our style off. That's literally not it, but it's like we want people to understand that they can do what we're doing on their own, in their own way, that makes their life more enriching and sustainable and less wasteful just through thinking about things differently. There's a lot of stigma around sustainability. Not only the whitewashing aspect of it, but the fact that people think that sustainability and perfection like go hand in hand, when sustainability requires you to make mistakes, and requires you to be innovative in ways that are not going to result in something that looks like it was produced in a fashion house. I think that's really important for people to understand, to step forward, moving into like doing things themselves, is alleviating that pressure of like “this needs to be done perfectly”. Or like “I can't just put a patch over this that's not going to look good or that's not going to work.” It's like allowing people to think creatively about like repairing your clothing is so incredibly important and it can literally make your clothing last years beyond what it was produced to last for. Like that shit doesn't have to be perfect. If it works and it's functional, then it's fine. There's just this weird idea that like… my sewing is so sloppy sometimes and imperfect and I like that, like you tying your knots on the outside. I think that's important for people to understand. Like this wasn't made by people who
are trained, people who are *forced* to make things perfect and still get paid nothing to do so. He [Kirby] gets so mad, I just rip my ends of my threads off instead of cutting them. Having scraps of material that like we just cannot get rid of because it's part of our mission, to use what we have became the implementation of replicating the Coogi pattern with the scrap material and making like abstract scrap sweaters that don't really resemble Coogis but texturally can imitate design tendencies of Coogi sweaters as they were.

K: Yeah, like some of the things like we improvise like the frills from like the tapestry blankets, like they don't really have anything that's like 3-D, kind of like frilly things, but I don't know…

S: They liked our shit enough to repost it on their Instagram.

K: That was cool. We'll quilt it onto a big sheet or like if we start with like a crew neck–

S: Technically appliqué.

K: Okay, yeah, appliqué, Yeah, it creates like a quilt of appliqué, I guess.

S: Scrapappliqué.

K: Wow.

S: Either way.


W: That's pretty good! Have you not been using that this whole time?

K: No, she just made that up on the fly.

S: Quick thought. It's cool that sustainable aspects of doing things like, bring you closer to the things that you own, like telling somebody you need to handwash and hang dry this piece means that they literally need to be involved in the care and upkeep of that product to ensure the longevity. And that's like, so combative of what we're taught in an efficiency based, convenience based, disposable culture of just like throw your shit all together in the wash and don't really think about what's going to happen to it, six washes from now or whatever, which with a lot of like fast fashion clothing, causes them to not be as good quality, just based on the materials used.
It's just interesting, like I imagine people like washing their clothing in like the river. Like getting to think about sustainability in a way that's really raw. But just through little things like that, making them connect with things.

W: That's actually pretty good. If somebody says like, “how the heck do I wash this?” you just say, “wash it by hand, take it to the river.”

S: “You don’t have a washboard!?"

W: If they say “the river is too gross,” then you'd say, “oh isn't that a shame? Maybe you should do something about it.”

K: Then we just say you can cold wash it, but we recommend air drying.

S: When people were making their own clothing, they were using literally every piece in a survivalist way. It wasn't like, “oh, I'm going to make a scrap quit because it looks cool.” It was “I have extra cutoff material and my fucking family needs a blanket. So I'm going to make a blanket with this and not have to buy anything or go out.” And people are making their own material, like weaving materials. The labor that went into that is so lost, like we're working in our studio space with a weaver, she uses like no electricity in her process. I helped her thread her loom, the warp on her loom, and that's just to get the loom to be able to be woven on. It took us 8 hours to put the threads through the heddles on the loom. To think about somebody not utilizing the material that they made in a way that's like efficient and actually useful in their life is something that we're so distant from now because we don't know who makes our clothes, we don't know where our material comes from. Usually cotton is slave labor created. There's like this huge disconnect with responsibility when you think about it like that. Yeah, there's a lot that goes into making clothes because it's the disposable mindset of the culture that we live in.

W: Just because you're using the survivalist mentality, doesn't mean you're in mortal danger or anything. It just means that you're taking it seriously.

S: Exactly, right. And you're thinking through the product's life cycle.
E2 - Interview with Suzanne Wood (Clothes Encounter Thrift Shop)

Suzanne: This space that we are sitting in now used to be a thrift store, but they had closed down, and so the store was empty. We inquired about it and got the space and started trucking in our boatloads of stuff that we had just collected ourselves, and friends or family…

Walter: In anticipation or just through life?

S: Both, I guess. Yeah. Because as the time got closer, more real, like this is actually happening, we started to go and seek out things, talk amongst our close family and friends. We hadn't announced it officially yet.

W: You immediately found somebody who had the exact same goal as you and everything happened 12 times faster than you thought it would.

S: Yes!

W: It was opened on June 1 and it was the same place that we are now?

S: Yeah. To make it to year one is a big deal. To make it to year five is a super big deal. So, to be able to say that we're about to embark upon our tenth year? That's a really, really big deal. There's a lot of learning involved to doing this whole thing. We learned what worked for us as far as operations go. What do we want to provide for people in the store? How can we provide it for them? Basically, the goal is to be able to just let it run. I always want to evolve, but I want it to be a store that everybody knows they can come home to.

W: You want to fit the need of the community.

S: Yeah.

W: Not try to grow continually.

S: Yes, yes. I don't want to sound insensitive because that's not my intention in my statement, but the pandemic was honestly the best thing that ever happened to Clothes Encounter.

W: Ah-hah!?
S: It really was because it forced us for a while to have to be closed and have to reevaluate everything. You stop and decide, okay, what do I do? Am I shutting down forever? Obviously, I had to shut down physically, but what are my options? And I feel like I'm a pretty resourceful and resilient person and I was certainly not liking the idea of just laying down and letting it be. I started to do the online sales, I did the Facebook Live’s, and that I continued to do for a year and a half, pretty much weekly. And that created a whole new community of people that I didn't really have before. I had a whole new platform where people could come shopping virtually. We just put ourselves on the map. We were already on the map, but we put ourselves on a new map with that. I was able to reevaluate everything that I've done, reevaluate how the store is set up, reevaluate the items that we take. And I was finally able to realize that I could and was going to do the upcycle line with our excess. And all of that was possible because I had that year and a half to be closed. I could rearrange, and I did, I say 500 times, but I honestly, we rearranged at least ten times between the day we had to close and the day we opened up again. And I was able to set up my studio finally, that I had always needed and wanted.

W: Can you give us like a definition of upcycling and the examples that you and Hillary have producing. Tell us about the earrings, and I've seen aprons and cloth bags and semi-quilted tote.

S: Yeah. We do a little bit of everything as far as the fabric goes. Sometimes we'll actually make new pieces of fabric with pieces of clothes. The aprons, some of those are made with salvage fabric. Meaning fabric that we've gotten in excess donation that we just couldn't put on the sales floor. And then also some of them are made out of men's dress shirts. She actually just keeps the construction of the shirt, the bottom tailoring and everything, and then just takes the sleeves off, constructs new straps, and makes the aprons like that. Upcycling for us is just taking something that was once, whatever its purpose was, and either finding new purpose for it or at least taking pieces of that and integrating it into a new piece and just giving it new life.

W: You get clothing and tablecloths and you take the fabric and you are determining whether or not it can be sold as is or cut up, because of it, are unusable and turning into something else which may or may not be a more complicated or more finished or like nicer item.

S: Right. Yeah. Like the toy earrings, little plastic dinosaurs. The pirate. Yeah, I like to get wild.

W: Not even a small pirate, it’s like 4 inches tall, it is pretty wild.
S: I save those ones for me because I am pretty eccentric when it comes to my earrings. The general public, I don't know if they would like a pirate earring. You never know.

W: I think a pirate would like a pirate earring. I think so.

S: I have a cupcake, that's really quite wild. It's a little heavy. I think I'm going to have to branch out and do some necklaces because that's a little bit more versatile in the heavi ness of the toys. I like to say that I save them. I get them from free piles or yard sales, they’re at the bottom of a box and you know that those guys are going to end up either in the landfill or they're just going to become lost.

W: This is plastic and I'm pretty sure the invention of the word recycling came about as a result of the invention of plastic. I may be wrong about that… By the way, for the sake of the listener, when I say a pirate earring, I don't mean like a gold hoop or something. This is a tiny action figure.

S: He’s got a peg leg! Rubber action figure, plastic action figure. The other thing with upcycling is that you never, ever view the world the same again, a blessing and a curse. Because everything that I see, I instantly think if it's not intended for that purpose, what else am I going to do with it? We need minds to be thinking like that, because if they're no, then the alternative is ultra consuming. In the moments that I'm not perfect, I feel like I can make up at least a little bit in my work, in my art, making things out of other things.

Adele Drake: Do you ever feel overwhelmed by the glut of donations you receive?

S: Part of that restructuring that we did for the pandemic included speaking out and allowing myself to say no when I needed to. And allowing myself to say no to the certain things that I knew weren't going to work. And that's something I did not have the courage to do before. And I realized because of the pandemic, everybody's vision of life had completely shifted. Everybody was going to be understanding of me because, how could they not? Because everybody had to reroute their lives. Why would they say, “can you believe she's not taking kids clothes anymore?” They would say “I can totally understand why she's not taking kid's clothes anymore because it's too overwhelming.”

W: You had a get out of jail free card.
S: I did, for the first time, and all of a sudden it was like, geez, what can I do now? What else?

W: “Sorry, it’s the pandemic!”

S: And I wasn't using it as an excuse, but I was just using it as a “no, life as we know it has shifted, our perspective of life has shifted.” I share 2nd to None’s posts. They're a thrift store that operates very similar to me. They're a smaller operation, they’re donation based. They don't take a ton of stuff. I believe she doesn't do kids stuff either.

W: You don't have to like get together with the owner every day and plan.

S: No, no, but to have a relationship in that we're all in this together, we all have the same understanding of this industry, pretty much, we all support each other. I donate my excess to the Community Closet. I donate to the Goodwill, sometimes. They're corporate, that's different than us, we’re a small operation, we're a two woman show and they're just a different level. I would welcome a thrift store to open across the street. I would bring them flowers. I would be so thankful for them because it's an industry, if you go to thrift stores, you pretty much go to them all.

W: Yeah.

S: I love the idea of several thrift stores in one town. I want us to all band together. I want us to all support each other.
Merrilee: The Joy Truck has been an idea that I've had for eight years, though it's only been in official operation for two. I have always enjoyed the idea of mobile and traveling, and the lifestyle that comes along with that and what it means to be a guest in a community, however long that stay might be. What it means to be a useful guest and a compassionate guest, and the process of acquainting oneself and exploring ideas of humanity, whether it's passing through a town for a night and staying with somebody, or in the case of the Joy Truck, creating a structure that would allow for repeat visits to a specific neighborhood. Suddenly this idea of bringing resources to people wasn't just about the neighborhoods, it was also about the anchor institutions that were having difficulty reaching people in such a very rural area. Piscataquis County is considered a frontier county still because of the distance between homes. There's an enormous amount of distance between homes and services, and if you have little to no transportation and you have to rely on neighbors, it becomes this whole significant process. So the idea of bringing resources to people and then connecting back to anchor institutions was affirmed in 2019, 2020. I just decided that that was what needed to happen.

Walter: People were in danger, potentially, everybody was in danger at the time.

M: And still is.

W: Right.

M: The Joy Truck doesn't solve any of this. It provides a casual model, and a concept of a solution in some ways, right? But it's a drop in the bucket.

W: I feel the same way about the work I do. But I've come to realize that the most important thing you can do is get more people to think about what they can do.

M: Right. Right.

W: And to enable them, when you can.

M: Or empower them.
W: That's a better word. Yeah.

M: The primary goal with it was to understand what would be the basic structure of the interior. What were the things that people were asking for most. I connected with the local library in Dover-Foxcroft, the Thompson Free Library, Michelle had been talking about having a bookmobile. I already had been bringing books with vegetables to homebound seniors in a previous job, so I knew that there was a need for books, so I wanted to have those on board. I knew that clothing would be important, especially for little kids, so that was implemented, and I knew that tools and making supplies would be important. The library donated to a library catalog for me that I use as storage and it also has personal hygiene items. I knew that Piscataquis County in calculations is considered the poorest county, and next step is Washington County.

W: Learning as you go.

M: Learning as I go and learning how to incorporate what people need or what they would like to offer and how to best distribute that. A good example of how that happens, a really recent one, I go to a neighborhood called Derby, which is in Milo. And, not to highlight the problem that's being addressed, but to highlight the strength within community connecting, and that is the emphasis here, I think we could find problems all day long that need addressing. But the way that this problem was addressed, it was really important, and actually you were part of it.

W: Was that the day that I visited Milo?

M: No, it was the day that we set up shop with a sewing machine. That woman came by with all of those books. There's a little boy that lives in Derby, he's seven and he doesn't know how to read. I think the weekend previous, I had been trying to do something, an activity, with these kids because there's a bunch of kids and they were high energy. And I said, we'll pick out a book and we'll hide a book and we’ll do a scavenger hunt. He was like, “but I still don't know how to read, Merrilee!” I was like, oh, God. Okay. Okay. All right. And I knew that I was low on books and I haven't yet introduced the social media infrastructure to have asks, just haven't gotten there yet. So I sat on it and then went to an event in Guilford the following weekend, which was a very different event. It was a fundraiser for the Guilford Community Fitness Center. Every time you ran or biked a lap, you were donating $30 to the gym. A different strata of people on the economic ladder. A woman came by and she said, well, what do you need? And it was just a
random encounter. And I said, Children's books would be awesome. And she said, well, I'm a homeschool parent, I've got lots of books on how kids can learn how to read. And I said I need that exactly. Then I was able to go directly to Derby and see that little boy and say, hey, there's going to be some books coming your way, and the turnaround was same day. I hope to never be a part of what's considered charity work though because it's really important that like I might be making decisions. So there is a hierarchy, but there's reciprocity in this project that I think is important to note, that puts it outside of what is considered a charity. But in terms of it being an art project, there's a design element to the space itself. There’s a very basic understanding of the visual idea of an installation, right? On some level it's a mobile installation.

W: The nature museum too?

M: Yes!

W: Is that what it was called? The nature library.

M: There's the nature library which consists of the jars of oddities and there's also the oral history component which is coming back probably this coming season which is a space that people can tell their life narrative or shorter interviews. Yeah. Then when people bring in decorations or odd things and those are incorporated, on another level besides it being, I guess the mobile installation is really important because the creative process is active in every step of the way. When we think about the creative processes, artists and artistic research, right? We're continually like testing ideas, gathering data, asking questions, gathering those things up, and presenting them in some artwork. Final piece. Something that is…

W: Event or Happening.

M: Event or Happening, right. Gathering, something that's publicly visible.

W: Part of the Truck has chalkboard on the outside for kids to draw on, and most of the time that's what people latch onto. And they seem to understand what it's all about, When I point that out and I say it's all about, it's geared towards kids.

M: Yeah. It is geared towards kids more often than it is to adults, which has been an interesting process that I didn't expect. I kind of said that I wanted it to be for kids a few years ago, or four
years ago, I think. I was like “this can be for the kids.” But I didn't expect it to show up, to be like this. I had no idea, but, right. The chalkboard on the side and then the roving exhibit of people's work. Whenever I go from place to place. There's also this whole weird social experiment on a creative curriculum and self directed play. I like to show up and let the kids pick things out and decide what they want to do. And sometimes that’s spray painting rocks, so much that it's like just like drenched in spray paint. Right. It's like, well, sure, why not? Why say no? Sometimes letting kids pull out all, they really like to help, and so they'll pull out all the chairs and tables and set them up however they want to set up the space, that is an artwork in itself, designing space. And letting them do that, I think is super important because, in what ways do we as a society make space for that? The person that I met through the food cupboard in Milo, whose wife died just a year and a, almost two years ago. He came in through the line, he's going through the line, stopped in, super tall guy with a beautiful little black and white pug, we got to talking and he said, “wow, this is really great.” And I think he picked out a few books and said as he was on his way out, “do you take donations?” And I said, absolutely. And we had connected on grief already, and he said, “I think I'm in a place to, I'm going to be moving and I need to do something with my wife's clothes.” Little bit by little bit, he brought the majority of her clothes to me. And… so many jeans, many black pairs of jeans, so many blouses, it wasn't Chicos. I forget the brand, but like just I was learning about this woman through these clothing items and knowing that this was part of a healing process for him. And then knowing that the life of this person continues through that materiality, through other people getting excited about, this one woman, getting excited about the pattern and taking that home, and watching, not having to say anything at all. I don't need to say that that came from a dead woman.

W: Probably best not to, in most cases.

M: Right, but moving through objects, through materiality.

W: In this case, the system that you were creating and curating ended up providing a healing experience for somebody.

M: Right. And I didn't set out to do it. You know, and I think that's important too, letting go of control in some very specific ways allows this kind of stuff to happen.
E4 - Interview with Barbara Falls (Holy Family thrift shop)

Barbara: I was overwhelmed by the amount of clothing I saw there, and how much they had to save, and how much they had to throw away. So, I did start volunteering at the thrift shop.

Walter: What are some of the advantages that you derive from having the absence of a profit motive? Because it's not, it's not a *business*. You are making money,

B: Right. Right.

W: But you don't have a bottom line.

B: No, no, no. We're a ministry, and our ministry here is to take care of the charitable needs of the people in the community. Most of our money goes back into the community. We have a free community supper. Well, now it's a community luncheon. We've changed it to a luncheon. At the beginning of the school year, I will contact all the area schools to make sure that they have a supply of personal care items for the kids that may need them. Those items will be brand new. The area schools always know to call me. If I don't have what they need, I can go out and buy it. There should be no child in this area going to bed hungry or walking around naked.

W: And if you had to maintain competitive prices, if you had to have, you know, a roster of employees and coordinated connection, you wouldn’t be able to do that?

B: No. No, no.

W: Are there drawbacks to being connected to or overseen by a church? Like, does it prohibit you from interacting or coordinating with similar outfits that happen to be connected to different churches?

B: No. No, it doesn't. To be a volunteer, you do not have to be a member of the church. We don't really care. We do have, I don't remember, was it a statement of faith or anything that you had to look at?

W: I believe I had to sign a code of ethics [when I volunteered].
B: Code of ethics, Right.

W: I don't think I had to sign a statement of faith.

B: I don't think we have anything like that, no. I've worked for different organizations. We just want you to abide by this code of ethics. For most of us and myself included, our primary incentive is our community. We care about our community and people. I know the people in this community. I feel like I know the needs of the people in this community.

W: Do you view your operation as having a primary function? Like is it the primary function to accept the goods, or to make the goods available, or to aggregate and store them for when the time is right for the season, or do you seek to respond to the ongoing and changing conditions, however is best or most necessary?

B: I think all those are important. I think of the immediate needs of the people, yes. Thinking of the future. That's why when we get winter clothes in the summer, we don't say, oh, “throw those out. It's not wintertime.” No, we'll put those away for the upcoming winter. I mean, like I was even thinking this morning of all the summer clothes we still have upstairs going, oh my word. We still have so many summer clothes, we've got to get them out. So I'm doing a sale this week. It's going to be a half price sale. $0.50 a pound. Just to get stuff moving.

W: Right.

B: When the stuff comes in the shed, don't be putting it in the storage room and blocking the stuff that's been in there a while, because I don't know if that stuff has gotten wet, if it's been damp, and if it's like, Sandy last week had to throw out several bags because it was all moldy.

W: The same principle as a fridge, the first in the first out.

B: Right, right.

W: Well, not as urgent as a fridge, but at the very least you have to, you have to churn it up to maintain the pool of resources.
B: Right. We have a tendency, and I think this might, people are excited when we get new bags and they want to go through them right away. But it's like, no, we’ve got to through the old bags first.

W: Yeah. Has your time as a volunteer and coordinator of volunteers informed or changed your view of the community in which you operate?

B: Yes. I think I realized how much poverty there is in this community. I didn't realize.

W: It’s the kind of thing that is easy to overlook. Once you dig into a particular, I use the term operation in my notes and in my questions, and I hope it makes sense. When I say operation, I'm referring to the entire shop and the function that it has in the community. But it's only when you're able to really sit with that kind of operation and see it. Use it as a lens to see the community, that you can start to see the things that are beneath the surface.

B: If I wasn't bringing in the money I was bringing in, we could not run the food pantry that we have.

W: Has volunteering changed your habits and attitudes regarding use, reuse, and waste?

B: Yes, but at the same time… If you were to come by my house right now, you'd see plastic bags hanging on the clothes line.

W: Oh, because you rinse them out?

B: I rinse them out!

W: Okay. That's fine!

B: Alright, but the thrift shop, sometimes I feel guilty about how much stuff I have to throw out.

W: Oh, yeah.

B: I just don't know what to do! I don't think people realize how much stuff we all have.

W: It's a little surprising that it is always coming in so consistently, isn't it? You think it would be, you know, maybe there would be some high points of the year, but it's pretty much constant, isn't it?
B: Yeah. And I don't want to wear my poor volunteers out, it can be very overwhelming in there. I think about my mother who told me when she went out to work, she needed a suit. And the suit, it was a wool suit, it cost her $15 and she made $12 a week. And she said that every week, she would bring the woman some money towards her suit. And she wore that suit for the next five years, every single day to work. The only thing different was that she had different color blouses.

W: She was probably, you know, maintaining it assiduously.

B: Right, right.

W: Fixing it up.

B: Right. Could you imagine women doing that today?

W: Well, it might be heartening for you to hear that, at least through some of my studies, I've found there are plenty of movements and individuals who are dedicated to not letting go of that kind of traditional, and, easy to describe it as such, *useful* and sensible method, approach to possessions and materials. But it is nowhere near as much as I would like to see.

B: No, and if you look more into this, you'll see what happened in our fashion industry, something called Fast Fashion.

W: Oh, yeah.

B: If you go to H&M and you go to Forever 21… Have you ever been to those stores?

W: I'm happy to say that that was never really my jam.

B: I remember going to H&M and just being horrified by the amount of clothing, how cheap it was, cheaply made. It was just like, it looked like a girl's bedroom. It was just thrown all, because they had, it looked like some girl's room. And then you find out later that the clothing only has a wear of seven times.

W: And it just falls apart.

B: Right. What I've read is about how the biggest, most items in landfills is clothing.

W: I believe that unfortunately, yeah, that sounds about right to me.
B: And I’m contributing to it, because like right now, I'm going through upstairs. I said, to them, “we've got to get the rest of the shorts and capris out.” And I'm going through them and a lot I’m throwing out because they’re faded. Okay. And I'm thinking this is ridiculous. All this, having to throw out. I also notice there's an attitude towards people that donate.

W: Is that so?

B: Yeah, people think, oh, you hear some people, they'll come in and say, oh, they'll have everything folded in the bag and say, oh, “everything's washed and folded.” Okay. Thank you. Okay. Other people are like, “here's donations.” And I'll look at them and go, “wow, it would have been nice if you had washed some of those” and they're like, “well, people should be grateful for getting donations.” It's like “I'm doing my part.” There's a very dismissive attitude, I think, towards people that need things, that bothers me.

W: Absolutely.

B: “You should be glad I'm donating.” I don't want your crappy, you know.

W: Yeah. Well, I think that, if through the work that we do, we can get people to re-examine their attitudes towards consumption and repair—

B: I think with the price going up, I think people might have to, well, okay, my daughter was home this weekend and she had this silk dress that she had gotten at a thrift store. And she said, “oh, mom, the sides have to be sewn.” And I'm going now, “don't you wish you learned how to sew from your mother?”

W: Yeah!

B: See, the younger generation didn't want to learn how to do those things. They thought “I'm not doing that.”

W: It's cheap. It's cheaper to buy a new one.

B: Yeah, exactly.

W: But the long term costs are what's being hidden. The value, the dollar value that you see at H&M is, it's just money. It doesn't represent the actual cost. The cost is being paid by people in
other countries. It's being paid by the environment and whatnot. I guess that's a bit of a
generalization, but you know what I mean.

B: Right. Well, I think, this affected me years ago about, okay, my daughter wanted a prom dress,
and I had gone down to a local prom shop and I was like, “oh my gosh, that's ridiculous, I'm not
paying $400 for something you're going to wear one night.” Okay. So she got online and she
ordered the dress online and it was maybe $100. Okay. And the place contacted me and said,
“could you do your daughter's specific measurements?” Okay. “We're going to custom make this
dress,” I was like, oh my gosh. And they said it would take six to eight weeks. Okay. Plenty of
time. The prom wasn't until May. A truck one day pulls up to my house, and there was her prom
dress. It was delivered by a private carrier. And this was so horrible, horrifying to me. It came
from Beijing, China. The dress had the room number, and my daughter's, like, “Oh my gosh.
Some girl was probably sitting there doing the beads.” The dress fit my daughter absolutely like
a glove. They made it, custom made for her, and they even put in extra beading in case any
beading fell off of it. But we just all went… “Some girl was sitting in a chair in room 302
making this dress.” It didn't have a tag on it. Okay. I'm sure if a tag was put on it, it would have
been that $400 dress at the, at the prom shop that we went to.

W: Sure.

B: My gosh, we are the biggest exploiters of people out there.

W: I'm sure she appreciated the dress and wore it.

B: She did. And, matter of fact, that dress, I don't know how many girls, it was a beautifully
made dress, we passed that down to many girls.

W: Good!

B: Yeah. Matter of fact, I remember cutting it to fit one girl because it was too long for her. And
we just kept passing it down to, I think, four of my girls wore that dress.
E5 - Interview with James F. (repair technician)

James: We do need more people like us in the world to encourage people to repair, create, make art, repurpose, fix whatever you can. Those things always spoke to me, like, ever since I was a small child, I was always taking things and putting it back together and seeing how things were made. And I don't like wasting stuff, from clothing to food. I try not to waste anything. Honestly, it's hard and I'm not perfect, and I still need a lot of work.

Walter: One thing I like to say when I'm talking to people about what I do, is that a lot of the impulses behind it are things that most people feel anyway. And it's just about reframing. Because, even somebody who is, for one reason or another, completely ignorant of food waste or whatever, it's just inherent, a least I would like to be optimistic and say most of the time it's inherent to want to reduce the waste as much as you possibly can, or, at least once you've cooked for a while it is.

J: I thought about this, I was thinking like we were brainstorming and thinking about everything. I just got to the root of like, who am I, like, what can I bring that I know very well. It literally came to me of just being sewing. Like I do repairs, and everyone can do basic hand sewing repairs. Like anyone, it doesn't matter. They don't need to look good. They can be sloppy as all get out, I don't care. But can it get you something fixed so your ass isn't hanging out of a pair of pants you just split like, walking down the street? With needle and thread, you can fix that, and you'd be okay for the rest of the day instead of going to buy a new pair of pants like that.

W: I never thought about it that way, but clothing repair is not just a long term thing, it's also a short term issue, isn't it? Sometimes an hour is all you need to worry about. You mentioned prototyping?

J: Yeah, I do a lot of my own. Yeah, that's on my side. So I do a lot of my own side bags. And I've been working on a pair of gloves for winter, for like, skinning stuff. I go out, yeah, I do a trigger finger glove for really light, for skinning. A lot of stuff where I go and find like, I'm missing the thing I need.

W: “Time to make the thing.”
J: Yeah, right, right, right, right.

W: Well, that's cool. Anything to do with fishing at all? One of my cousins is very into fishing. Do you make fishing gear?

J: I haven't, that I haven't gotten into it. I don't do a lot of fishing.

W: The next time I talk to her, I'll ask if there's like, some crucial thing that she wished existed.

J: Yeah! Yeah, I showed you that, like, stuff sack, pillow, neck, travel pillow thing like jacket. I think you were there for that.

W: I definitely saw a jacket that you or somebody else had repaired and you said that you have to do it up a little bit and give it a design, you used a different color, and then added other elements to it so it wasn't just a patch, it became a cool, distinctive, and unique pattern.

J: Exactly. Yeah. I've done a lot of that too. I've had either a lot of customers or myself, because I'm, like, I like unique stuff. I've always been like, “oh, if it's broken I want it to look repaired.” I don't want it to look brand new. A lot of my repairs are always funky or weird. Yeah. Like lots of different patches on it that are multiple colors or something, or a lot of weird reclaimed reuse stuff, like I'll reuse anything I can get my hands on and make it new. Yeah. Multiple experiences of people being like, “well, is it going to look repaired?” and you're like, “yeah, it's not going to look brand new.” “Well, I don't want that.” They're like, “I want a new one,” you're like, “yeah, but you broke your jacket, wearing it.” Like sometimes it baffles my mind how people think, like, “But it's going to look repaired!”

W: You must have heard some interesting things. Most of the time, I have to just imagine what an uncomprehending viewer would think. You probably have to put up with them all the time.

J: Had to in the past. And I'm not going to lie. I do get frustrated and be like, “well, I'm here to repair your stuff. If you want a new one, don't waste my time. I'm not here to like, I'm busy. I've got so much to do. Go talk to somebody else, like, that will get you a new one. I'm going to repair it.” I have an industrial straight stitch machine and a high post, an older high post machine to do some bag work on. It's a little rough, I wouldn't say it's the best thing to do. I have repaired some harder zipper bags, zipper replacements. It's not cost effective for me to replace
somebody's backpack zipper, on my own end or for them, if I was charging like, how much of my time to actually do it, it wouldn't be worth it, like both our time.

W: So, you can total a backpack like totaling a car, basically, is what you're saying.

J: Yeah. If you rip the zipper out. The other issue, I'd say, some anecdotes for repair stuff is, other companies don’t think about longevity, of repairing your gear. You get a company or a brand that has nothing to do with, I'm going to use H&M as probably a basic known example to a lot of people of like, a fast fashion brand that makes fast fashion. What's in season right now, like what's this week? What are these high end designers using? Their stuff blows out really quick. Or their zipper breaks or something, and they're not designed to like, have their zipper replaced in a jacket, effectively. They're not thinking long term, they're thinking what's the most inexpensive way we can mass produce these jackets to get made.

W: And you get like a little doll house zipper, a little fake zipper to look cute on your jacket that you wear for one weekend or whatever, yeah.

J: Exactly. If you step back and work a little bit slower to make it right, in my opinion, it cuts out hours of mistakes. I'm frustrated, I need to think like a repairer. Like instead of forcing myself to go faster, I need a break. Like I'm going to walk away. I'm going to think about it. A lot of times, way easier then, even if I took an hour long break or I waited the next day. It gets done better. Like, it got done better because I took that time to like reflect on what is the right way for this thing. The interesting thing with clothes is there's no right way to do something. And especially with repair.

W: Because everybody's different. Everybody's needs are different. Everybody's body is a little bit different. That's why tailoring is a framework, a profession dating back thousands of years. It's because there's no right way to do a particular piece of clothing.

J: No, exactly. And repair, people wear their things differently. Like, oh, that might be a zipper replacement. But they blew it out, they scuffed something, the way they walk like thinned out one area and it stretched this area out, there's a lot to go into sometimes.
Alex: Specifically, I was looking at all these sneakers that I currently own. I love sneakers. I think they're a great expression of myself as an individual and for other people. And as much as I love them, I also recognize how many pairs I own, and by making a statement about who I am, I'm also creating an impact in the environment. Carbon emissions from the sneaker industry are massive. I was creating these pieces where I only used about two pairs of sneakers, and was able to create these mini stones where the bottom half was sneaker cut ups, then coated with resin so you could still see the sneaker pieces, and the top was cement, where I then created a stamp of sorts of my own that said “CO₂nsider” and stamp that into the cement while it dried. And then I had a hole that ran through the whole stone that I created that I then attached a statistic about the sneaker industry, and I did so using a shoe lace of course.

Walter: Righ, right. And it was written on cardboard, right?

A: Yes.

W: I like the look of that, it was just one more of the many materials that come into play when you try to do things sustainably. Paper products and pulp products.

A: If you look at the t-shirts everybody wears, there's so many different colors, materials.

W: I feel like people probably by and large, maybe this is generalization or wishful thinking or whatever, but I think the ubiquity of the t-shirt gives a lot of people more leeway to use colors in their outfit than they might otherwise. Usually, it's like, kids wearing the brightest colors. But the t-shirt is so ubiquitous, all ages, everybody can wear it. It's like part of humanity now, really, because it's such a global thing. And it tends to be more colorful on the whole than, like, coats and sweaters.

A: And it's a very comfortable material. A work I created last spring is, if you hold a t-shirt in the traditional orientation and then you cut horizontally across the bottom, you get these loops. Basically, you can then connect together and create almost like your own yarn, which I then used to crochet a larger piece, which then referred back to the qualities of a weighted blanket. Looking
at accessibility. Thinking back to children with special needs and sensory integration disorders. One of the big reasons I use t-shirts is because people who have these disabilities in their life, textures that are rough are very uncomfortable. Anything that is scratchy can be a battle to put on because their nervous system is basically so acutely aware of the material.

W: It's like a sensory overload.

A: Yep. Our bodies, as we wear t-shirts, we are technically feeling it all around us, but our brain tells us to ignore it. Some of those people, their brain can't tell their body to stop feeling it, and it feels very uncomfortable and they're hyperaware. Sometimes a t-shirt is one of the easiest materials to put on. It's more universal in that capacity, the ability to do that, but also the memories that are attached to t-shirts as well. We go to amusement parks, we go to National Parks, we go to visit grandma, and we get a t-shirt along the way. And, then it's beautiful, it's fun to look at, but it's also a wearable scrapbook in some way. Which is why people make these quilts after they don't fit the t-shirts anymore. Because they don't want to let go of those memories. And sometimes the memory you have attached to this thing is far better than any image you took on the journey.

W: You wear something long enough and get used to it enough, it basically becomes part of your body. And there are like, not just philosophical but scientific lines of inquiry that would back that up. That would say anything you use regularly or intensely, a day book or your favorite set of clothes, like you might as well consider that as part of your mind or part of your body. Because it helps you express not just your feelings and emotions, but it helps you perform actions. The functionality of your life can be often dependent on an external object.

A: I think with t-shirts, yes, but almost all wearable textiles, there's the ability to create a timeline that exists past the moment you buy it. You're continuing to develop these memories of not just where you were when you got it, but what you were doing while wearing it. And it's funny, you think about people who never let go of their grandfather's sweatshirt. I have a stack of t-shirts in my studio right now that are all of my grandfather's. And it's interesting because I also liked working with a textile as it's something that's durable, and can be played with. And it's not so overly precious that it can't be worked with. But I'm still personally struggling to start a project with those t-shirts because of the sentimental value in some capacity, even though they're his
t-shirts that he no longer wants or needs, which is really interesting. So the relationship among that being more personal.

W: I always like to try to figure out what might have happened, if I get a shirt from Goodwill or whatever, and there's a stain on it. Often that's like, why it was there in the first place. You have to wonder like, was this the point where the owner said, I can't wear this anymore? Or was it something that they had lived with? Would they look at and be like, “oh yeah. That day at the beach when I touched the starfish,” that wouldn't really stain your shirt, but if it was something that they didn't have a negative association with... The t-shirt as an art medium has so many different angles that you have to consider, and it's so easy to flip the switch and stop thinking of it as a disposable thing. Some of the shirts that are being out there, you could get from just attending an event like a marathon, and you might wear that a little bit, but if you go to any thrift store, you'll see that it's full of things like that. Marathon shirts. I don't want to be judgmental or anything, but a lot of people clearly don't recognize just how valuable all that material is. And they view the shirt as a disposable item.

A: And at what cost that material was created. Also, you talk about thrifting a t-shirt and I think it's so interesting how there are so many t-shirts when you go into these places.

W: Yeah.

A: There's fewer sweatshirts, so what does that say? Why do people connect so much to sweatshirts? I know I love them. I live in them. I think there's a warmth, there's a comfort to them. But I know, it's like, I'm quicker to get rid of a t-shirt than a sweatshirt.

W: Yeah. It's only a few folds and a few snips before you have a ball of yarn.

A: Yeah. Then in crocheting, I was taught by an artist who was crocheting in her work. Recycled plastics.

W: Oh, nice.

A: And her thing that she described to me was, it's emotional. You drop and you add stitches where it feels right, when you need more to work with, when you need less to work with. For me, that was so hard to grasp coming from not only knitting–
W: I've never heard it described that way!

A: –but the structure that comes in my life too. It was weird to fight that at first, but then when you realize specifically…

W: It can let you get wherever you want to go.

A: Implementing craft in art is something, is a whole other beast in and of itself. But I also enjoy it because I think, interestingly enough, when you're crafting, your hands are doing something while your mouth is doing another, typically. You think of those crocheting circles. Those knitting circles, you have people actively working with their hands and then talking about something different. I think about the voices, the memories attached to these t-shirts coming together in a similar circular conversational mode. But yeah, the artist I worked with, she took single use plastic bags that she then cut loops of plastic into and then crocheted those to make large sculptural forms that she then, she used chicken wire as the structure and then she coated them with a resin. She actually installed them along the Minuteman Bike Way in Arlington, Massachusetts. It's fascinating to just look at the array of colors that come from plastic bags.

W: Oh yeah.

A: Which, it's very similar to t-shirts. You look and you're like, how did I not know the color palette I was afforded in this material? I think of product design and product placement, higher shelves, lower shelves.

W: Brand recognition.

A: Yeah. That's what our clothing is doing when we walk out in public.

W: Absolutely.

A: It's like, who can scream the loudest in the crowd of people to get somebody's attention. It doesn't feel that way when we're wearing them, but I think when you start working with the material on a more personal level and you see the stains, the wears, the rips, it's almost like it's been through a little bit of a fight to get to where it is.
W: I wear all these weird clothing items that I make in my work, but that's not the kind of person that I am. I'm not trying to get people's attention, but I end up anyway without wanting to, because I have all this crazy stuff on.

A: But think of it not as fighting for attention in that capacity, you’re allowing voices to continue. Exposing memories.

W: That's exactly right. I want to be bringing bits and pieces from other things into the foreground. That's why I'm using the thrifted items, because they have all these histories behind them, and people put love and thought and care into some things. And more than anything else, my goal is to raise the visibility and the popularity. Provide examples of visible repair. Like here on this backpack right here, I make some very blatant, very sloppy stitches.

A: As society has progressed and there's more of a reliance on technology, I think there's a lack of trust in the human hands, now, ultimately, if you think about it, because I think about the work that I sell, knowing that I did it. I think about my own self doubts and other things that have somehow carried forward and now I wonder, is what I made going to hold even though I'm using this secure stitch? I think it might have something to do with technology, because I'll buy a shirt from the store and I'll be like, “oh, this is going to last me forever.” But if I were to stitch something on that shirt at home, I'd be like, oh, this could fall off, especially after, through the washing machine, or a couple of uses. Where does that leave us if we can't trust ourselves?

W: Yeah, there are so many veils that we’ve built up between product and consumer and manufacturing process. It is like triage for mankind just to even tell people about the conditions of garment workers. Even like–

A: Quick fashion, fast fashion.

W: The work that I'm trying to do, where that's like my whole thing, is trying to find ways to bring attention to textile waste. I still have to sit back and remind myself like, “oh yeah, don't forget about the freakin’ garment workers. Don't get too wrapped up in the stuff you're doing over here in America.” Because there's a reason, there's an entire side to this that you aren't seeing. Even if you try to remember it as often as you can, you are still abstracted from it. You
can barely even conceive of how far you've been abstracted from it because it's in so many people's interests to keep it from everybody's mind.

A: Exactly, it's the proximity. How closely are you within the circle of what's going on? We can distance ourselves from it because we are not in that factory. We don't see that on a daily basis. When we're done with our t-shirts, we don't always think about where they go to live, how they continue to live, specifically. They have a life after us. Which is confronting to think about, especially in the scope of these factories and you think about how it's created.

W: I want to try to help people think about textiles, and fiber, and textile products, and clothing, differently. At the end of the day, it really isn't something that you can just throw away. It's irresponsible. It should be something that we think about in the same way we think about disposing of batteries and e-waste. Which at this point I've heard that they say, if you have a cell phone there is nowhere good to drop it off where it could be recycled. The more effective thing to do in the big picture is to keep it in your home, travel with it, move with it, and use it as a paperweight. We've just allowed ourselves to think that if there's some piece of cloth that gets torn or whatever, it can be thrown away and it's okay. But it's just not. There's so many other options and there are so many good uses it can be put to, and practically nobody is doing it.

A: It's a conversation starter. Start the conversation, allow people to get the practice. I think that is the big thing, practicing with the material, reassuring people that it's okay to fail because that is a huge thing in society today. There's an immense amount of pressure on the younger group that's coming up, pressure to execute, that results in negative mindsets, anxiety. The statistics, I don't know them off the top of my head, but it's shocking the amount of more people who have anxiety and depression than they did years prior. And I think the pressure to execute at such a high level is reflecting in so many ways before that we didn't really think about. And so to implement craft as a relief from the daily pressure is kind of beautiful, because it's not just something that you do to escape. There's a journey in those stitches. There's a path, there's a communication.

W: And you're learning a skill.
A: It's a tangible thing afterwards. And I think in a material world, that's great. That's easily going to draw someone in. But, the evolution that you can see among those creations, I think being able to physically see them is great as well.

W: It's not bad to have perfect clothes, but ultimately, I think it should be because you made them. Because you keep them perfect, you either built them from scratch yourself or you maintain them at the level of perfection you want. Learning how to manipulate textiles is on many levels about as crucial as learning how to manipulate words, as in talking, as in writing and composition. It's not just a thing that is in the world around you. It's what you make your body out of, these clothing items that you wear.

A: Your wardrobe is your alphabet.

W: Yeah!

A: And however you compose it and arrange those pieces of clothing is the sentence you're saying that day. You're creating your own vocabulary, really.
E7 - Interview with Ivy Ruth Langley (Independent artist)

fig 34. A collage depicting one of Ivy’s custom jackets. Photo courtesy of the artist.
Walter: I love to see the DIY mentality embodied in the work that you do, and all the effort that seems to go into maintaining the website\textsuperscript{44} and everything like that.

Ivy: Yeah. Thank you.

W: Well, I'll shut up now so you can introduce yourself a bit, too.

I: Yeah, I'm Ivy Ruth Langley. I've only been sewing for, really, a year, but I've been screen printing for about four years, and I mainly make comics. I was mainly making comics. I spent the last year really learning how to sew because the thing about making comics is you don't make a lot of money, and I saw that I was making a lot of money making small print merch runs. One of my biggest concerns with making physical stuff is that I don't want, like, my footprint, I don't want my, like, artistic legacy to just be that I'm filling a landfill full with, like, plastic figures, like Matt Groening with the Simpsons. You know? Like, I love that stuff, but also, it's like, we don't need 900 people making entire merch lines of Simpsons figures. I feel like in the artistic community, especially Twitter, which is so geared towards, like, business and cartoon artists and stuff, who their end goal is, like, “I want to be Matt Groening,” or “I want to be Seth McFarlane,” or all of these other people who are making all this merch, that just never ends, like they want Cartman pajama pants of their own characters. Like, thinking about that long term, I just don't think that's sustainable for every single artist to be doing that. Anyway, I just started getting into the idea of, like, if I'm one person making stuff and I want to make my stuff as long lasting and retain value as long as possible, then learning how to sew and like learning how to really embellish my stuff in a way that is like, quality, and also affordable, retains value. Even if it's not affordable, people can resell it or whatever. And then also, I forgot the third thing. Oh, reduces waste by, like, reusing scraps and stuff. Then that's the best version and most conscious version, I guess, that I could think of doing merch long term. The real thing is, I was frustrated by how many artists that I'm seeing that are making merchandise but not fully expressing themselves in the merchandise that they make. It's more of an afterthought. I understand why, because not everybody has the time to do that. I'm not trying to throw shade at anybody in particular, but for myself, like, I do have enough time and I'm really passionate about the idea of like, if this is part of what I'm doing, then I want to go all the way, of myself, in it. Yeah.

\textsuperscript{44} http://bloodsad.com/
W: You were drawing these characters and populating the graphic novels and zines and whatnot with them, and that whole time you were developing a visual style, obviously you were drawing clothes in the work that you were doing, and whatnot. And it became a reality of something that you could create in actual physical form, of these same sensibilities.

I: Yeah, mm-hmm.

W: I've sort of come into the whole fashion thing sideways because I was making these things during the lockdown, because I lost my day job and then I ended up at grad school. I went through with it and I'm like, well, I need to have something new to work on, and I've been making these weird clothing items…

I: What looked like serial killer letters on clothes!

W: I've heard them described as ransom notes.

I: Yeah!

W: Ransom note words. But I think this is the first time that anybody has full on said serial killer.

I: I think what is cool about what you have been doing is, like, a lot of people who are upcycling, especially now, it's almost become like, a new buzzword on Instagram, because there's so many like, Instagram fashion designers. They will go to Goodwill and they'll find something that is already 80% of the way a sellable shirt, and then they'll just add a little bit onto it. But what I liked about the shirts that you started out with, it was almost like you were finding the ugliest souvenir, you know what I'm talking about. “I took a trip to the beach and I bought this shitty shirt and then I wore it one time and I gave it to Goodwill.” And you were like, finding those and cutting out the letters from those and it created a very gauche, modern Americana vibe to it. I think that's very interesting because so many people are only looking for, like, vintage stuff that already has really good design sensibility. But that's not the bulk of fashion waste. The bulk of fashion waste is like, you go to a boardwalk and there's 900 t-shirts, and they'll sell five of them in a year and then the other 800 just go to a landfill somewhere.

W: Yeah. Well, on one hand, I was starting out with using only my own shirts, so some of the ones that you are saying are tacky might have been beloved, treasured items.
I: [Laughing] I’m sorry!

W: It's okay. Now, I like to develop techniques and little projects that are easy for other people to pick up on, because I want to see more people just taking their own textile footprint in hand, and it is a lot easier than they think. It is something that, it's a very general thing to say, but like most households or family units, or tribes, or whatever you want to say in the past, they were responsible for their own day to day wares.

I: Yes.

W: There's a lot too that we have traded away for the sake of convenience that really doesn't need to be done that way, because it's often just as convenient to learn the skill and maintain things on your own.

I: Yeah. There was definitely, like I felt a very real demystification process in the past year while I was picking all this stuff up.

W: The post you made about that, it was inspiring. You talked about, like, “just grab the seam ripper” or something like that?

I: Yeah, yeah, exactly. Like, I didn't know what a seam ripper was a year ago. But now, I mean, if you grab your seam ripper and you just start ripping apart clothes, which is why I've bought tons of like, really random blanks from goodwill over the years that I'm like, okay, “I will print on this button-down shirt that I got,” and I just never got around to it. But suddenly that's like, a pattern that I can clone into a shirt or I can rip apart the fabric and make a quilt to put on something else, or just whatever. Literally, in a year, figuring out that a sewing machine is nothing but like, a tool to tape together fabric objects with thread, you know, like, and a seam ripper is basically the eraser for that. Figuring out those two things has made it so that I'd feel limitless in what I'm able to do with fabric, and when I think about, like, literally like 50 years ago, every house had at least one person that could probably sew in it. Now people just, are intimidated by the process or feel they have to produce some level of quality that's not even real. Because most of the clothes that we get that are mass manufactured aren't even more quality than what we could probably figure out how to do. I don't know, it's like a bummer to some extent, but it's also, like, refreshing knowing that the average person is not as far away from sewing as they, or being able to patch
their stuff up, at least, that type of textile handiwork. We're not as far from that as people think that they might be, but it's frustrating to know, at the same time as it is refreshing, if that makes sense.

W: Absolutely.

I: In the art sphere, people who do small business merch, I think something that's really taken for granted after Teespring and Redbubble is this idea of like, passive income through the manufacturing of merchandise. I think this is true of just like, the screen printed t-shirt, which at once I think is like, a beautiful artistic object, but also is responsible for so much of the Earth's waste at this point, the idea that you can put your shirt, or you can put your art on a shirt and somebody will do it for you and you make $2 on the side and suddenly that's passive income, is heavily taken for granted, but it obscures so much labor. It obscures how difficult it can be to screen print some people's designs. It obscures the amount of effort that is put into sewing a shirt. Because if you look at actual textile assembling places from like, how they're dying the fabric to how they're assembling the fabric with like, the looms. And then you see like, an eight person sewing table that's got like, eight grandmas in a Southeastern Asian country, like assembling hundreds of T-shirts every day. All of that’s obscured but on the side of things where I am on Twitter, you get $2 because you put your art on a shirt and it's like fan art for an anime that you like. It's just assumed that, “okay, but this is good for me” and a lot of people need that money on our side. Because a lot of people who are making money off of Teespring or Redbubble don't have very much money. They're just artists who happen to live in America on the other end of the supply chain. But it's also, I think, taken at face value, that once your art is on a shirt, then that shirt is worth the price that people are paying in all of these different parts of the assembly line to make that shirt, which I don't necessarily think is true. It's hard to evaluate something like that. But I feel like increasingly it is not sustainable for the level of people, because when you look at it on a case by case basis, it's very easy to be like, well, this person actually doesn't have as much money as the person who's screen printing this or yada, yada, yada. But when you look at all the thousands of people who have Teespring accounts, like everyone says that, like everybody is a small business owner in America at this point. Part of that is everybody feels the need to create merchandise for their small business, and [they feel that] there doesn't need to be any growth there, there doesn't need to be any look inward at how to increase the value of what
you're actually doing with that merchandise or anything. It's just like if I put my logo on a shirt, that's fine. I try to take as much of the process into my own hands [as possible]. Maybe I don’t make all my blanks, but I try to embellish them all myself. I try to do it as sustainably as possible with, like, as much reused fabric and reused materials as I can.

W: A lot of people when they see a website that makes it as easy as dragging the file in, and ordering it online, and everything, a lot of people—it's not a judgment to say this. I certainly don't mean it that way, but they won't think about it further than that because it has been set up so nicely and they will just be like, “oh, I'm sure lots of huge companies are doing this too.”

I: I don't think the average person even knows what screen printing is. It's really hard to tell, because for as many people as I talk to who immediately know what it is, and they're like, annoyed that I'm even trying to explain it to them, I get another person who has never even heard of the word screen printing. I don't know how much of that is because I'm in an art space, because at the same time there are screen printers all across the country, like, running mom and pop shops because, like, baseball teams need shirts. I don't know. My point is, I think that people really do not know the amount of labor at like, any part of the process. When they pick a shirt up off the rack, they just see a shirt, and it's part of our lives, at this point. I don't blame them. I think that if people understood the amount of labor, then it would probably be better for everybody. People might be a little more sustainably minded. I see this a lot with small Instagram brands. People are doing entirely DIY stuff, and because they have a small brand, if they charge more than like $20 for a shirt that took them like, 10 hours of work to assemble all the parts of, people will get very mad at them like, “well, you don't have the brand strength of Balenciaga, or whatever, with your $40 t-shirts, where do you get off?” the labor and cost, literally, just to put a design onto a t-shirt is a pretty good amount of work. It takes, like, setup cost. It takes walking around a lot, sourcing ink and all that stuff. I don't know.

W: You have to have already dedicated at least one room of your house.

I: Yeah, exactly.

W: Whatever operation you have, there's like, the space and the materials alone. A lot of people probably don't even think that far ahead at all. They just think that there's some faceless Wallace
& Gromit mechanical hands knitting all the shirts out in the factory somewhere, with no people in sight, and it’s doing the graphic and all.

I: Another part of the obfuscation, is like, this wishful thinking that if you put your clothes in a thrift store, then they are just immediately, not anybody's responsibility. They are like a net positive for the world, instead of just being thrown into the trash.

W: All you're doing is like, best case scenario, 50% of the time you're making a box heavier. You're making somebody have to hang up, like, one more piece of clothing. There's always going to be the sense of catching up and you're certainly never going to catch all the way up. That's why I like to try and make things that would inspire other people to dip their toe into that same equation themselves, and maybe start to tip the scales a little bit.

I: Yeah, that's what I really liked about the video of you doing the pouches, explaining like, “I don't even pin these a lot of the time, I'll just start sewing on them.” Like sewing machines are like, scary to people now, I think because they do seem like this very complicated–

W: They’re scary to me!

I: Yeah, exactly. Like, I don't know what half the functions on my sewing machine do, but at the same time I'm still able to repair clothes. And like, I can take a garment apart and put it back together just by being very careful and taking my time. And I think that that's the thing, that if more people understood, then ideally it would pay off in a good way for the planet. A lot of luxury fashion brands are moving into the space of, specifically, like, a lot of Japanese repair work with sashiko and boro stuff, which are like, traditional repair methods that were used not to make something beautiful but to make something functional, which now retroactively have been seen as beautiful. But there's all these brands, I think Undercover started doing it because, this is a Japanese brand that started doing crust pants essentially, which are like, pants that are made up of patches, et cetera, to the point where they're like Ship of Theseus pants just made up of other stuff. Undercover started riffing on that idea in like the ’80s. And just over time, more and more, like, small Japanese brands have started doing this. At once, obviously, it's like a part of Japanese history, and they are very good at making this stuff. But because of that, there are all of these Zoomers who are getting into fashion, making boro and sashiko stuff because they're inspired by these brands that they saw growing up. It is getting to a point where you see A$AP Rocky or
like, these other very rich influencers wearing all repair work clothes that cost them $6,000 when the whole point of repair work clothes was to save money for the person making them. I think that that's unfortunate to the extent that it's taking these beautiful garments out of the reach of the people who they essentially were made for, or who were making them. But at the same time, I do appreciate that it is aesthetically and socially making these objects beautiful, so that the average person, when they do put in the time to repair their clothes, they can feel like, “oh, well, this is just like what A$AP Rocky was wearing, except I made it myself.” It's an interesting dichotomy,

W: It's a complicated issue, because I would say that basically anybody who has passed a certain point of competency with sewing, if they make some nice piece of clothing that either has been repaired or has been made up to look like it's repaired and it's good and it's functional and it's hip, whoever they are, whatever country they're in or whatever materials they're using, if it takes them more than three days, a week or whatever, it should cost $6,000.

I: Yeah. Yeah.

W: It's tricky.

I: I absolutely agree with that.
BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

California transplant Walter Greenleaf draws on a lifetime fascination with ritual and mythology to create artwork that enables an experience of *innate or primordial wisdom in the world as it is* — a form of magic as defined by Shambhala Buddhism. His research into textile-based work, community engagement, and the principle of resource upcycling has led to an art practice which centers interpersonal outreach and the promulgation of textile repair and customization techniques, focusing on textile management as a function of community health and social well-being. Walter is a candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Intermedia from the University of Maine in August 2023.