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# on Remaining

Lauren Michelle Peterson

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# ON REMAINING

by

LAUREN PETERSON

Under the Direction of Anthony Craig Drennen MFA

## ABSTRACT

*on Remaining* demonstrates how rational systems of value disrupt pursuit of intrinsic value, and how my work may provide a different way of seeing everyday objects within these systems. The accompanying installation of discrete structures accumulated from used disposables, trash, and residuals (all of which have no discernable worth) function as components of an aesthetic system. Removing the residual object from its depreciated state as garbage into an alternative ontology generates potential value, new relationships, and purposes. In *on Remaining*, residuals resolve into artifacts of my intuitive processes, revealing play between my own subjectivity and the value of physical materiality obscured by consumerist signifiers.

INDEX WORDS: Trash, Disposable, Residual, Process, Materials, Sculpture

ON REMAINING

by

LAUREN PETERSON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Art

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2015

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2015

ON REMAINING

by

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**DEDICATION**

To my Nana, Lillian Anne Garner.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Human beings and objects are indeed bound together in a collusion in which the objects take on a certain density, an emotional value – what might be called a ‘presence’.<sup>1</sup>

-Jean Baudrillard, *System of Objects*

Objects with which we surround ourselves generate meaning and memory at a subconscious level, serving as extensions and containers for the body. Consider when you first moved into the space of your living room. Perhaps you furnished the space with a hand-me-down sofa, a thrift store coffee table, some knick-knacks on a bookshelf, and a flowerpot in the corner. As you filled the room with your personal belongings, your own physical presence expanded, the familiarity of these objects operating as extensions of self.

The physical relationship between body and objects is intrinsic, grounding us within the sensual and tactile world; this is what contemporary philosopher Jean Baudrillard names presence in the epigraph above.<sup>2</sup> This presence molds personal rituals and routine, determines existing modes of value, develops reason, and constructs beliefs. For *on Remaining*, I consider the residual object and its unique virtue of disposability as components of the complex system of use, exchange, and materiality in which we inhabit.

In search of how such objects potentially alter fundamental aspects of our own ontology, my studio practice prioritizes my own bodily relationship to residual and single-use objects. I collect used disposables, neutralizing the object’s representational authority and original function through intuitive abstraction. The end result is a recontextualization of such consumerist artifacts into an accumulative installation of discrete sculptural forms, prints, and performative elements that generate new, intrinsic value.

## 2 BUILDING SYSTEMS

Put in the simplest of terms, a system has an input, output, and a series of exchanges, events and/or processes. I approach my thesis work systematically, as an ongoing experiment establishing a

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London, Brooklyn: Verso, 2005), 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 14.

collection of pre-existing constants and variables. Intuition enters into the system, confined by my own imposed preliminary constraints and/or physical parameters as they relate to my materials or the space of the room. This methodology initially emerged during the construction of *Meta Structure* (Fig. 1), an installation of string, cut paper, and cast shadow. *Meta Structure* consists of four iterations of a single idea, each of which follows a subset of parameters. The initial string grid structure was constructed from ceiling to floor. Shadow was then cast to create paper cutouts of both the positive and negative spaces of the string's shadow. The paper and the string were then combined, casting a second shadow, the fourth iteration. As the work evolved, I was presented with series of problems related to the physical properties of light, gravity, and weight. It was in these acts of troubleshooting that I began to recognize my interactions with the materials as generating a new and inherent value. I found meaning intrinsic to my actions of pulling, stretching, cutting, twisting, etc. Working on one specific area meant distorting another and effecting the position of the whole structure. The tolerance of my own body's abilities in collaboration with how the materials could be manipulated determined how *Meta Structure* could occupy and alter perception of space within the room.

From *Meta Structure* I began to view my practice as a way to create a personal system of processes and materials that would generate the content and cultural context of my work. I moved away from using new materials and became fascinated with the nature of the residual object, focusing on separating inherent material properties from their metaphorical connections. I started to work with residual objects as a way to intervene upon assumed associations and create alternative narratives. As I developed my process of how to collect and make work from waste materials, I found how my behaviors, routines, and procedures in the studio were referencing the ways human and natural systems function. This enabled a new kind of logic to emerge within the studio.

I build this logic by regularly assessing the terms by which I make my decisions. The subjective and impulsive nature of my practice is to categorize, referencing human-based systems of hierarchical value. In contrast to human systems, natural systems account for the waste or byproduct as an essential component for the continuation and function of the system. In my personal system, I look at objects

according to their energy and being-in-the-world, considering the first law of thermodynamics, which states that energy can never be created or destroyed, or in other words, matter and material only change in form. For the purposes of my system, the existence of all objects—whether new or discarded—creates an overall totality of objects in which nothing is excluded. This means it is the objects within the system that have the power to describe the overall state of the system. William Rees discusses the functionality of natural systems in relation to man-made systems in his article, “Thinking ‘Resilience’.”

Natural ecosystems do not operate continuously in some optimal state; nature does not set out to maximize specific variables or particular species. Ecosystems are constantly in flux and are normally able to function over a wide range of natural variability...attempting to force the system down some narrow productivity channel in the service of human needs affects how that system functions and behaves.<sup>3</sup>

My current studio practice more closely relates to a flexible system, but is at constant odds with my own need to rationalize. I scavenge and collect single-use objects from my immediate surroundings, building an inventory of disposable materials from my daily life over a sixth month period. My system within the studio is flexible wherein leftovers reintegrate into other works, so that each work is not mathematically rigid or overly data specific in how it describes accumulation. This new system begins where the lifespan of my materials would typically end. Removing the materials from the category of “trash,” I integrate waste material into a new ontology as art.

Individual works function within a sub-system of parameters, or set of rules, that dictate the final form of the art object. I approach my materials with the question of what can I do or make that will change their context and quality, requiring me to identify my own preconceived notions and push the limits of their physical attributes. I use my system as a way to break the linear time-line in which the

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<sup>3</sup> William E. Rees, “Thinking ‘Resilience’,” in *The Post Carbon Reader: Managing the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’s Sustainability Crisis*, ed. Richard Heinberg et al. (Healdsburg: Watershed Media, 2010), 28-29.

materials were collected by first organizing materials into categories according to their physical elemental properties, such as plastic, cardboard, paper, metal, glass, etc. I further divide objects in these categories into more specific subcategories or species, grouping materials with similar properties of density, weight, color, etc. From these subcategories I apply a single process that I repeat to form the resulting works in the exhibition.



Figure 1 *Meta Structure*  
cut paper, string, pastel, watercolor, t-pins, cast shadow, 2014, dimensions variable

### 3 ART AS PROCESS

When works of art, like words, are signs that convey ideas, they are not things in themselves but symbols or representatives of things. Such a work is a medium rather than an end in itself or “art- as-art.”<sup>4</sup>

-Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, *The Dematerialization of Art*

Works in *on Remaining* exist as artifacts of lived experience; they are the product of intervention upon everyday disposable material through reduction of that material, followed by repetitive actions of binding by sewing, knotting, twisting, weaving, etc. My practice emerges from the tradition of anti-illusion or process art and the post-modernist breakdown of disciplinary categorization. James Monte and Marcia Tucker quantify the process art movement in their catalogue essays for the Whitney’s 1969 group exhibition *Anti-Illusion*. Monte notes that artists in the exhibition were not only using new, non-art materials, but “that the acts of conceiving and placing the pieces take precedence over the object quality of the works.”<sup>5</sup> Later in the catalogue, Tucker delineates how process work strays further strays from the previous traditions of making.

They do not evolve from a preconception of order which the artist is trying to express, but from the activity of making a work and from the dictates of the materials used. A relational logic has been replaced by a functional one. By divorcing art from an established value system in which order is inherent, new concerns with time, gesture, materials and attitudes take precedence.<sup>6</sup>

What we call “content” cannot be separated from the “form.”<sup>7</sup> Meaning is intrinsic to material and process, and the attempted insertion of content in any other way obscures and randomizes interpretation

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<sup>4</sup> Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, *The Dematerialization of Art*, (1967-68), 2. Accessed February 19, 2015, [http://www.c-cyte.com/OccuLibrary/Texts-Online/Lippard-Chandler\\_The\\_Dematerialization\\_of\\_Art.pdf](http://www.c-cyte.com/OccuLibrary/Texts-Online/Lippard-Chandler_The_Dematerialization_of_Art.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> James Monte, “Anti-Illusion: procedures/materials,” in *Anti-Illusion: procedure/materials*, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1969), 4. Accessed on October 12, 2014, <https://archive.org/details/antiillusionproc61whit>. Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

<sup>6</sup> Marcia Tucker, “Anti-Illusion: procedures/materials,” in *Anti-Illusion: procedure/materials*, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1969), 27. Accessed on October 12, 2014, <https://archive.org/details/antiillusionproc61whit>. Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, (New York: Picador, 1961), 4.

due to the complexity of cultural signs. My work has no ideal state of exhibition, emphasizing the impermanence and tenuous nature of human rationality. The work negates institutionalized signs in favor of a search for authenticity and non-categorical truth that can be experienced as a “displayed act just as much as it is an exhibited sculpture.”<sup>8</sup> To reference the opening epigraph of this section, *on Remaining* is a thing of itself.

I use an accumulative approach to form *Low Density Radical* (Fig. 2). All plastic films and sheets that I collected over the six months prior to the exhibition are reduced to strips, then twisted and tied together. The resulting netting is tangled and chaotic, resolving into a large, dense mass that slumps over atop a found wooden palette. As I tied more material to the form the overall shape shifted in unpredictable ways as additional strands altered the distribution of weight. The form eventually became top heavy and would fall over on its own accord. After this point I needed to succumb to the will of the form. The materials quite literally had a movement and musculature of their own. This is an ideal state for me within the studio. The physicality of the materials became something of force, with which I had to battle and reconcile. It was at this point that I find the process a more authentic collaboration between my materials and myself.

Teetering between intentionality/subjectivity and raw form, *Portable Fortification* (Fig. 3) is the artifact of the degradation and rebuilding of structure. Similar to *Low Density Radical*, the scale of the structure is set by the quantity of boxes I collected, however it is the tension of the boxes that proliferates the expanding structure. Each cardboard box was sewn to the next, twisting and folding. The entire structure was made in the studio, broken down into six parts with connection points indicating an alphanumeric labeling system. Similar to process artist Eva Hesse’s *Expanded Expansion* (Fig. 4), parts of my structure can be collapsed or extended, or exhibited on the wall or floor. Kinetic potential in Hesse’s is stabilized by the rigidity of the poles. For mine, it is the evident weight of the boxes that grounds the structure to the space. While *Expanded Expansion* is consistent in the internal structure of its parts, *Portable Fortification* must be dismantled, new connection points made, and re-constructed for

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<sup>8</sup> James Monte, “Anti-Illusion: procedures/materials,” 7.



each installation. This makes the work only partially site-specific, as the original sub-sections are maintained. Both works discussed above have a potential as objects and as environments as they confront the scale relationship to the body of the viewer.<sup>9</sup> I use the cardboard boxes for their materiality but also for their political and documentary significance, contributing in combination with process to the overall content of the work.

I further investigate the potential shape and spaces of cardboard boxes in a series of eight prints, *blue, red, yellow (series no. 2)* (Fig. 5). The series began with a single roll-up and ended when the ink from all components is used up, so that, as a whole, the set began with a single act that builds a multiplicity of subsequent residuals. Each of the three colors were printed individually, beginning with blue. I kept track of how each sheet was printed in order to match the applications of the red and yellow ink to the coordinating blue stage. For example, the first print or stage in the series was made by rolling a rectangle of ink onto a blank matrix, the cardboard was used to block out the ink from printing. The second stage was printed from the same plate. I removed the first cardboard block-out, placed a second cardboard that was slightly smaller than the first and printed the ink that remained on the plate. I repeated this process, replacing the previous cardboard with another slightly smaller piece until I could not pull any more ink from the plate. Then I printed one sheet each from the backs of each of the cardboard pieces that had been used as block-outs, producing a total of eight prints. Although the prints individually are aesthetically pleasing with their multiple layers creating new colors at the overlapping sections, it is the process of generating and capturing residual ink that is important to this piece. I display the work as an aesthetic system. Each print overlaps and cascades sheets down the wall, covering half the print with the next one in the series. The prints hang on the wall with pins directly through the paper, so that the integrity of the print will continue to break down at the corners for each installation.

I allow the works discussed here to be effected by their own physicality. The prints will degrade from the weight of the paper, slowly tearing from the stress of the pins. The cardboard structure will sink, pulled down by its own heft and gravity. The form of the plastic will shift, its internal parts reorganizing

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<sup>9</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, *Eva Hesse* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 151.

the shape's distribution of weight. As these forms evolve and change, so will our sensual experience. I define the innate or intrinsic value of an object by the ways in which object and body relate. This value relies on the qualities of that object to simply exist in the world as an object with weight, mass, and density, that experiences gravity, has physical limitations, etc. I find intrinsic value in the act of surrendering to physicality of the materials, allowing them to self-accumulate in order to locate a visceral bodily association.

In order to approach innate value I remove the object from its human purposes. Reactivating the materials as art materials does not solve the fundamental problems with our current consumer or waste management system. However, the work calls attention to waste as positive and generative form that does not disappear when we stop thinking about it or throw it away. Returning to Baudrillard, contemporary mass-produced objects "have no individual presence but merely, at best, an overall coherence attained by virtue of their simplification as components of a code and the way their relationships are calculated."<sup>10</sup> I use repetitive processes, allowing the materials to build upon themselves to create something that has its own presence with objects that otherwise lack presence.

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<sup>10</sup> Baudrillard, *System*, 23.



Figure 2 *Low Density Radical*  
found plastic, wooden palette, 2015, 35 inches x 30 inches x 18 inches



Figure 3 *Portable Fortification*  
cardboard, wire, tape, thread, 2015, dimensions variable



Figure 4 Eva Hesse, *Expanded Expansion*  
fiberglass, polyester resin, latex, cheesecloth, 1969, 10 feet 2 inches x 25 feet. Courtesy of The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation



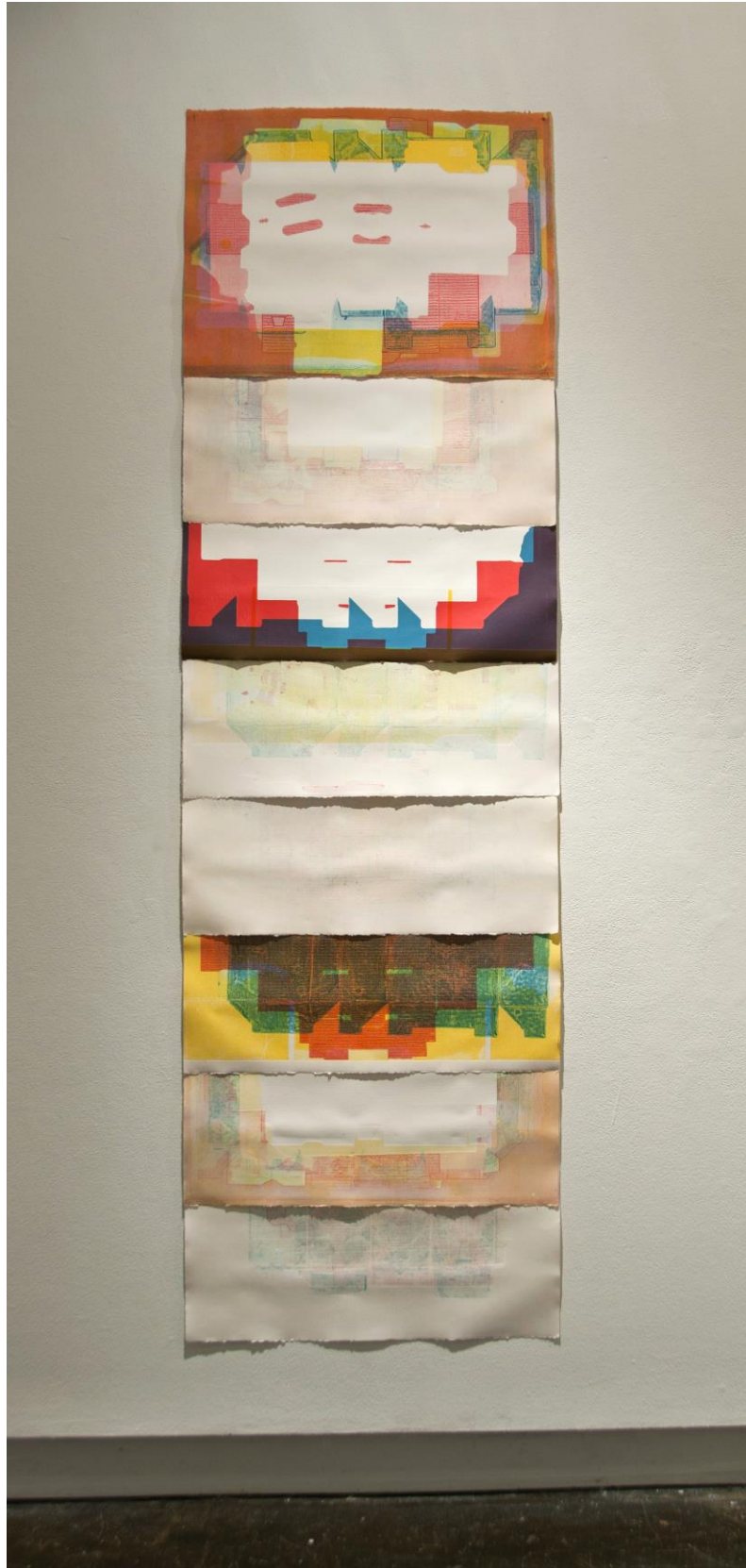


Figure 5 *blue, red, yellow (series no. 2)*  
stencil monotype on paper, t-pins, 2015, 99 inches x 30 inches

#### 4 BODY AND EVERYDAY PRACTICE

Through the works in *on Remaining*, I address the questions of how everyday objects affect my own memory of spaces, and the potential for objects to cultivate new forms based on their own materiality. I confront or intervene upon my materials, entrusting intuitive action as a way to form inherent connections between my body and my materials. The process of learning from and building upon this relationship creates opportunity for an authentic moment of creation, indulging my curiosity. I spontaneously and constantly develop my methodologies throughout my process. The experience in the studio is equally important to the finished work. This impulsive way of working places value in the act of making for the sole purpose of making instead of making to achieve a preconceived end goal. I conceptualize the work after it has been made, allowing space for my actions to resonate in isolation from outside concerns. I make the work to subvert the need for spectacle, replacing it with attentiveness to experimentation. Richard Flood describes how this sort of art functions in his curatorial essay for the 2007-2008 exhibition *Unmonumental* at The New Museum in New York:

There isn't time or distance enough to perpetuate monuments. We live in a world of half-gestures where there is not definitive stance and the sands shift incessantly over a desert of evidential truth. Sculpture is now that thing that jams its foot in a door and scurries around looking for a comfortable corner. No absolutes are reliable and no hierarchies are consistent."<sup>11</sup>

With the absence of hierarchical qualifications of materials and its implied truths, I look for what meaning comes about within the everyday and how I might interject upon normal routine to create new meaning. I remove my own political and social agenda, addressing these concerns instead on a more personal scale.

I use remnants of hair and my actual presence in the space to draw relationships between body, space, and object within the context of daily practice. *Self Portrait (2014)* (Fig. 6) is incidental material

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Flood, "Not about Mel Gibson," in *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century*, (New York: Phaidon, 2007), 4. Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, shown at the New Museum of Contemporary Art.

that marks a haircut several months before the exhibition, marking my own history present in the gallery. The dreadlocks themselves are a result of the process of continually braiding and knotting. Similar to the disposable materials used in the other works, the hair originates as a remnant and functions as a cultural symbol. By placing the hair within the gallery it can no longer be used as an attribute to describe myself, but is now an entity of its own. Whether the hair exists attached or detached from my body, it retains the tactile quality of hair. The disconnected bun has nostalgic value as a small and quiet marker not only of the moment of severance but more notably of everyday accumulation and maintenance over the past five years. Calling attention to process and the residual is a way for me to subvert the contemporary consumer culture of excess without needing to directly quantify.

In his essays around redefining how art should function within society, Allan Kaprow talks about play as the basis for experimentation, a way to pay “attention to what is conventionally hidden.”<sup>12</sup> Although the works in *on Remaining* can be intellectualized afterwards, they are all variations of my impulses. “Play” is the driving force of my practice. Humor and absurdity are mechanisms for seeing everyday life and objects in new ways, to identify residual objects as having a life of their own while we are not watching.

For the performance *Exercise in Isolated Cushioning* (Fig. 7) I constructed a bubble wrap structure around myself, leaving an opening to enter and exit. In its resting state in the gallery, the cocoon-like form sat on the floor, bound by a square delineated by white tape. During the active state (Fig. 8), I entered the taped out square and pulled the form over my body. I sat down with my knees to my head and enclosed myself, knotting the attached ties. For a fifteen-minute duration, I rocked back and forth, side-to-side for a number of rotations with periodical resting times, during which the audience could see the form “breathe.” The act began as comical as the bubble wrap popped as I rolled about the floor. Over the course of the performance, the bubble wrap transformed from a familiar packing supply to protective and comforting enclosure for me as the artist. However, as soon as my movement stopped, the

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<sup>12</sup> Allan Kaprow, “Just Doing,” in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, Expanded, ed. Jeff Kelley, (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2003), 250.



audience became anticipatory, due to the perceived danger of suffocation. I closed the performance when I perceived the room to be quiet and empty, attempting to position myself within the taped square. My sense of location was confused, and I ended up exiting the square. I removed the bubble wrap to find the audience still present. I performed this act without strict guidelines of duration or number of movements, which heightened the experimental element for both the audience and myself.

The seemingly mundane, absurd, or even childish act of encasing myself in bubble wrap exists as an experiment in the search for meaning. The audience takes part in the initial test run of the full performance, activating the process in real time and space, but also revealing otherwise hidden aspects of process in the other works in the exhibition. Other works in the exhibition use the body as a means of interaction and exploration, but on a more personal and private scale as investigations within the studio. The hair and the performance more literally insert the body into the work for the viewer. This act works to concretize the exhibition as a whole, solidifying my main concerns of body, set of rules, and residual object.



Figure 6 *Self Portrait* (2014)  
hair, wire, 2014, 10 inches x 10 inches x 4 inches



Figure 7 *Exercise in Isolated Cushioning* (resting state)  
bubble wrap, staples, thread, taped rectangle measuring 5 feet by 5 feet, 2015, dimensions variable



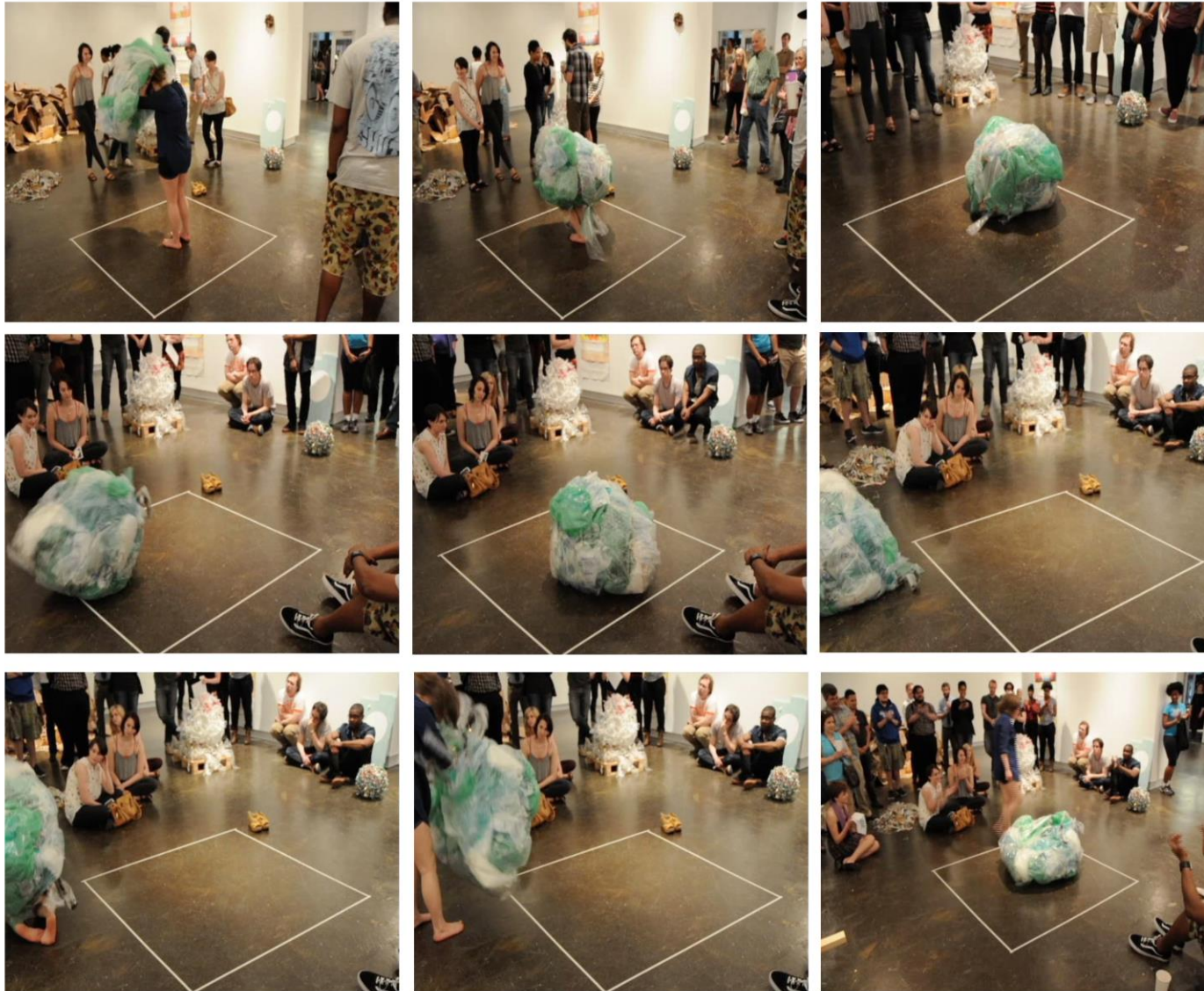


Figure 8 *Exercise in Isolated Cushioning* (active state)  
 duration variable (16 minutes as shown), *on Remaining*, Ernest G. Welch Gallery, 2015

## 5 TRASH AS AMBIGUOUS MATERIAL

Residue, like refuse, is what remains on the fringes, waiting to be seen. Implicit in it, therefore, is a double anachronism: its own deviation (its placement at the margins) and its subsequent reaffirmation as a decisive form of meaning.<sup>13</sup>

-Gego, *Residual Reticuláreas and Involuntary Modernism*

Multiple terms might be used to describe a leftover; trash, waste, residual, remnant, detritus etc. At the same time these words quantify a vast array of objects in a vast variety of sizes, colors, textures, functions, and values as commodities. In *An Ontology of Trash*, philosopher Greg Kennedy outlines that “Reason cannot help categorizing things, and so it employs ‘dirt’ as the default category that appears in the absence of rational comprehension. Thus, the concept of dirt and waste is where...reason loses its grip and where this definitively human faculty malfunctions.”<sup>14</sup> This process of homogenous devaluation strips the object of any sort of autonomy or consumer value and enters the object into the ambiguous category of trash. Locating where exactly the transition point is between object and trash becomes equally ambiguous.

Over the past six months I have allowed what I could not rationalize into other works to accumulate on the floor of my studio. These remnants are the materials for two works in the exhibition that question the definition of trash. I point to the subjectivity of the term along with how I determine a full trashcan, dirty floor, useful material, or organized space. In *Preservation of a Somewhat Recent Present* (Fig. 9), I enter groups of selected trash objects into an aesthetic organizational system, archiving everyday remnants as objects that are embedded with meaning and unique histories. The first grouping consists of the contents of a “full” trash bin; the second is the contents of a dustpan after sweeping a “dirty” floor. Pulled from my home, the contents are autobiographical, documenting aspects of my personal daily life. Contents are then cast in plaster. Some of the casts are fully encapsulated, at times

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<sup>13</sup> Oramas, Luis Pérez. “Gego, Residual Reticuláreas, and Involuntary Modernism: Shadow, Traces, and Site.” In *Questioning the Line: Gego in Context*, ed. Mari Carmen Ramírez et. al, 97. (Houston, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003). Published in conjunction with the exhibition and symposium *Questioning the Line: Gego, A Selection, 1955-90*, shown at Museum of Fine Arts Houston with the International Center for the Arts of the Americas.

<sup>14</sup> Greg Kennedy, *An Ontology of Trash: The Disposable and its Problematic Nature* (New York: State University of New York Press 2008), 6.

leaving very little of the trash contents evident. At other times, the casts are fragile, spilling random trash and dirt out of the molded form. Each encapsulation represents an unrecorded amount of time, is labeled with the date of collection, and then placed on shelves, loosely marking their lifespan in relation to my own. For the third grouping I scavenge small incidental compositions from detritus left on my studio floor made of paper, cardboard, fuzz, string, dirt, staples, etc. I treat these tumbleweed-like forms as pinned specimens, arranging them across the gallery wall, drawing comparisons between similar forms and materials. The material contained within either the plaster or pinned form may leave or enter into the isolated system of the work. *Preservation* uses the familiar actions of cleaning a space, taking out the trash, or sweeping to return waste objects to a level of rational comprehension and order. The groupings sprawl across the gallery wall, aesthetically placing the preserved remnants like how one would arrange keepsakes and decoration in their home. Each individual preservation indicates an action or series of actions and the time at which the action occurred. The collection as a whole gathers these locators into an overall autobiographical narrative.

Upon the day of installation for the exhibition, the remaining studio waste comprises the materials for *Potentially Useful* (Fig. 10), a maintenance piece that happens twice daily over the course of the exhibition. On the first day the exhibition is open, I swept the heap of waste down the stairwells and into the gallery, collecting and losing bits as I moved from the sixth to the first floor. For each subsequent day, I performed two actions. In the evening, I scavenged through the heap and arranged the material for one hour into a loose grid on the floor. The constraints for the grid changed each day. I organized the material by color on day two, scale on day three, and material on day four, placing a subjective, but logical system upon the nondescript accumulation. At the end of the hour, I left the unorganized material where it laid, drawing a comparison between trash as chaotic heap and trash as formal system. The following morning I would sweep the entire gallery space back into a single pile in order to exercise the continual displacement of matter within a hierarchical system. At the close of the exhibition, I swept the entire space, bagged and labeled the refuse with the exhibition title and date. Materials will eventually be cast in plaster and be entered into *Preservation of a Somewhat Recent Present* as a new component. It was

not necessarily important to me for anyone to view the actions taken during my organization or sweeping. The space was activated through the task of continually moving the material about, causing slight shifts in the positive and negative shapes of the room.



Figure 9 *Preservation of a Somewhat Recent Present*,  
found material, plaster, mixed media, 2015, dimensions variable





Figure 10 *Potentially Useful*  
 trash, broom, twice daily interactions, 5 day duration, *on Remaining*, Ernest G Welch Gallery, 2015, dimensions variable

## 6 DISPOSABILITY: TRASH AS SIGN

It is not only difficult to adequately quantify the materiality of trash because of its vague qualifications for categorization, but also because of the introduction of the disposable object into contemporary consumer culture. Objects that package our food and household products are produced to be the byproduct or waste. They are conveyers of messages or placeholders for what they contain. The application of labels, brands, and design on these objects separates us as the consumer from the origins and contents through the use of language and symbols. The packaging becomes inseparable from its contents at its height of utility as a container. Once its contents are all used up, the object is only then identified as trash. The power of these objects as signs masks and obscures our sensual experience of the actual packaging object, making our physical relationships with much of what we encounter on a daily basis shallow. Michel Serres defines this effect as “soft” pollution:

Our senses give meaning to the world; our products already have a meaning, which is flat. They are the easier to perceive because they are less elaborate, similar to waste. Images are the waste of paintings; logos, the waste of writing; ads, the waste of vision; announcements, the residues of music. Forcing themselves on our perception, those low and facile signs clog up the landscape, which itself is more difficult, discreet, silent, and often dying because unseen by any saving perception.<sup>15</sup>

In order to understand the potential of disposable objects for their materiality instead of for their purpose, I reduce them to formal components, subverting their previous function as a sign. I use labor-intensive processes, forming mechanically produced objects into materials of a handmade object.

I wove strips of colorfully printed, lightweight cardboard boxes for the construction of *Ready Made Grid* (Fig. 11). I worked in sections, choosing a single box to weave from. The shape of the initial

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<sup>15</sup> Michel Serres, *Malfeasance*, trans. Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibon. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 51.

box dictated the form of that particular woven piece. The pieces were then connected to form a larger covering or tapestry-like whole that is held together only by the weaving process. Sections buckle and bend from the tension of where the pieces were initially joined. The form has no function of its own and can be exhibited on the floor, wall, or hang from the ceiling. The boxes no longer serve purposes of advertising or the providing of information. Instead the purpose of each strip is to hold together surrounding strips, so that the entire structure is supported only by way of its components. This woven piece adheres to a traditional textile form. When viewed from far away the material cannot necessarily be identified, however once approached the boxes reveal themselves. The ordering of colors is chaotic, but the institution of the grid allows us familiar association and comprehension, giving the work a kind of value from its beauty and intricacies.

In *Best if Used By* (Fig. 12) I cut food wrappers, tobacco pouches, and pet food bags down to a single strip and spun the material similar to how one spins wool into yarn. The spun material accumulates through wrapping the resulting string around itself over and over again, making a material from material. The value of this work is its potential energy and future use. It is the embodiment of the time, effort, materials, and process used to create the form. Instead of containers or envelopes, the materials are contained within the construction of the overall form, occupying space and having a density of their own instead of the weight of what they contain. I see this piece working similarly to how Jackie Winsor describes her work as having “a quietness to them, they have their own energy. You relate to them the way you might relate to a sleeping person-to the potential energy that is manifested in a dormant state.”<sup>16</sup> The ball of wrappers is exhibited with a white dot painted on a shaped piece of green foam board, referencing the displacement of material from two into three-dimensions.

The shift in the ontology of the material comes about through my bodily interaction with the materials. The box or wrapper is no longer referred to by the product it contains, the product's

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<sup>16</sup> Jackie Winsor, *Jackie Winsor*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1979), 9. Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, shown at The Museum of Modern Art, 9.

manufacturer, or the printed labels but for its presence as box or wrapper. The identity of the box or wrapper, instead, becomes synonymous with line and color. One is then forced to describe the work through its materiality, methods, position in the gallery, and to generate new associations or narrative that is removed from the materials' mechanically produced and consumer based origins and history.





Figure 11 *Ready Made Grid*  
woven cardboard, 2015, 9 feet x 12 feet 5 inches x 18 inches



Figure 12 *Best if Used By*  
spun wrappers, white dot, 2015, dimensions variable



## 7 “on Remaining,” EXHIBITION AS SYSTEM

True to the exhibition title, the display of the work is executed to create the sense that something has happened and at the same time something could happen. I wanted the gallery and the works in it to feel as though they are not necessarily permanent, but in a constant state of change. With a general notion of the arrangement in mind beforehand, I ultimately placed the works intuitively within the gallery. This allowed me to directly relate my being in the space with the navigation that would be created within the space. The varying scale of sculpture and installation establishes a formal rhythm, activating wall, ceiling, and floor through the alternation of discrete form and remnant of form.

I installed the works from largest to smallest, allowing *Portable Fortification* (Fig. 13) to evolve and grow on the right side of the gallery into its exhibited shape throughout the day of installation. Reconstruction began in the center of the gallery and as the structural integrity faltered I began attaching parts to the adjacent wall. I returned to my methodologies for the initial construction in the studio, expanding the structure by creating new connection points to the sewn sections. On the opposite wall, (Fig. 14) loose cardboard strips fell to the ground while *Ready Made Grid* was pinned from bottom to top. I left these strips on the floor (Fig. 15) as evidence of the installation process, but also to reinforce the fragility of the piece. The form retains the buckling from its construction in my studio, but is also shaped by where it attaches to the wall versus where it is pulled outward and down by gravity. The entire form might fall or alternatively, gain a sense of energy that might propel it to crawl up onto the ceiling if given the opportunity.

I could then place the other works and begin to draw connections from one piece to the next. Installation of *Preservation of a Somewhat Recent Present* began by placing a single shelf on the wall at my eye level. The other shelves were mounted one by one across the back wall, leaving two of the plaster encasements on the floor. The last and smallest shelf hangs in the right corner (Fig. 16) above *Portable Fortification* to emphasize the shifts in scale of the various accumulations throughout the gallery. I then applied the t-pin grouping throughout the shelves (Fig 17), randomly allowing some to clump and

disperse. I based my decisions for placing larger pinned forms on contrasting differing materials but similar shape. This creates visual repetition and cohesion throughout the installation. Each component is tenuously linked by shadows that are cast from one shelf or pin to the next.

Smaller works occupy the middle wall. *blue, red yellow (series no. 2)* neighbors *Portable Fortification* to draw associations between same material, and different process. The stack of prints functions as a remnant or ghost of the cardboard. *Low Density Radical* sits several feet out from the wall, allowing visitors to walk around the slumped form. I place *Self Portrait (2014)* on the wall behind to show the tying and knotting process mimicked in both pieces. Immediately below, *Best if Used By* takes up the lower corner of the partition wall, completing a small-scale system of formal relationships between the densely twisted plastic and hair to the form of hair and round sphere to flattened circle. (Fig. 18) *Exercise in Isolated Cushioning* and *Potentially Useful* (Fig. 19) engage the center of the gallery, acting as a connecting point of continual and potential change for the entirety of the space.

The varying degrees of unfinished or degrading qualities of the works are anticipatory and invite the question of whether the remnants are a leftover or if they are the missing parts yet to be applied to the work. The broom in the corner (Fig. 20) indicates the intentionality of the heap of rubbish left in the center of the gallery floor, while the contents of the pile reference the materials presented elsewhere in the room. The viewer is invited to experience *on Remaining* as a temporary bodily element of my larger system, causing the gallery to constantly shift as it collects a subtle time-line of remnant memories. This series of relationships between labor-intensive forms and the presentation of the residual as found begin to create an overall system in the gallery wherein what is labored over can easily become waste and vice versa.





Figure 13 Installation view (right)  
*on Remaining*, Ernest G. Welch Gallery, 2015



Figure 14 Installation view (left)  
*on Remaining*, Ernest G. Welch Gallery, 2015





Figure 15 Installation view (*Ready Made Grid*)  
*on Remaining*, Ernest G. Welch Gallery, 2015



Figure 16 Installation view (far right upper corner)  
*on Remaining*, Ernest G. Welch Gallery, 2015





Figure 17 Installation view (*Preservation of a Somewhat Recent Present*)  
on *Remaining*, Ernest G. Welch Gallery, 2015



Figure 18 Installation view (partition, left side)  
*on Remaining*, Ernest G. Welch Gallery, 2015





Figure 19 Installation view (overhead center)  
*on Remaining*, Ernest G. Welch Gallery, 2015



Figure 20 Installation view (far left lower corner)  
*on Remaining*, Ernest G. Welch Gallery, 2015

## 8 CONCLUSIONS

Our responsibility for the phenomenal existence of waste must be stressed because it sometimes vanishes in the surrounding fog of ambiguity. If we take nature as a domain indifferent to value, one on which values can only supervene, waste will appear utterly foreign to it. Ecology teaches that on the macro level nature wastes nothing. There death gets absorbed into life through an incessant, all-encompassing cycle impenetrable to the micro level judgments of positive and negative.<sup>17</sup>

-Greg Kennedy, *An Ontology of Trash*

In response to the proliferation of planned obsolescence and the incessant growth of man-made and disposable material *on Remaining* locates methods of recontextualization in the service of breathing life into otherwise devalued objects. Recognizing the potential use and value embedded within all materials, the ever-present residual, remnant, or leftover does not necessarily equate to what we call waste or trash. These terms are subject to the value systems and prescribed hierarchy in which they are placed. The terms “waste” or “trash” cannot actually quantify the complex processes through which materials and objects function on a human level. Instead these terms homogenize the tactile materials that create meaning and memory in the practice of everyday by way of our sensual perception.

By living, organizing, experimenting, and playing with the materials themselves I am forced to deal with the obscurity presented to me by cultural constraints of value. I instead create new ways to find meaning for myself by establishing systems and boundaries through intuition. This text and accompanying exhibition attempts to embody material presence and absence, reconciling disparities between human and natural systems. I study the dispersion of materials into disorder and ambiguity and the ways in which devalued objects can return to rational comprehension. *on Remaining* manifests in the fluctuation and the continuous flow of materials as markers of time and their memory. The artifacts of accumulation it presents point to the faltering of reason and the potential in the instinctual.

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<sup>17</sup> Kennedy, *Ontology of Trash*, 2.

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