PLYMOUTH COLLEGE of ART

making FUTURES

Agente costura: a brigada das mascaras

Lisa Simpson

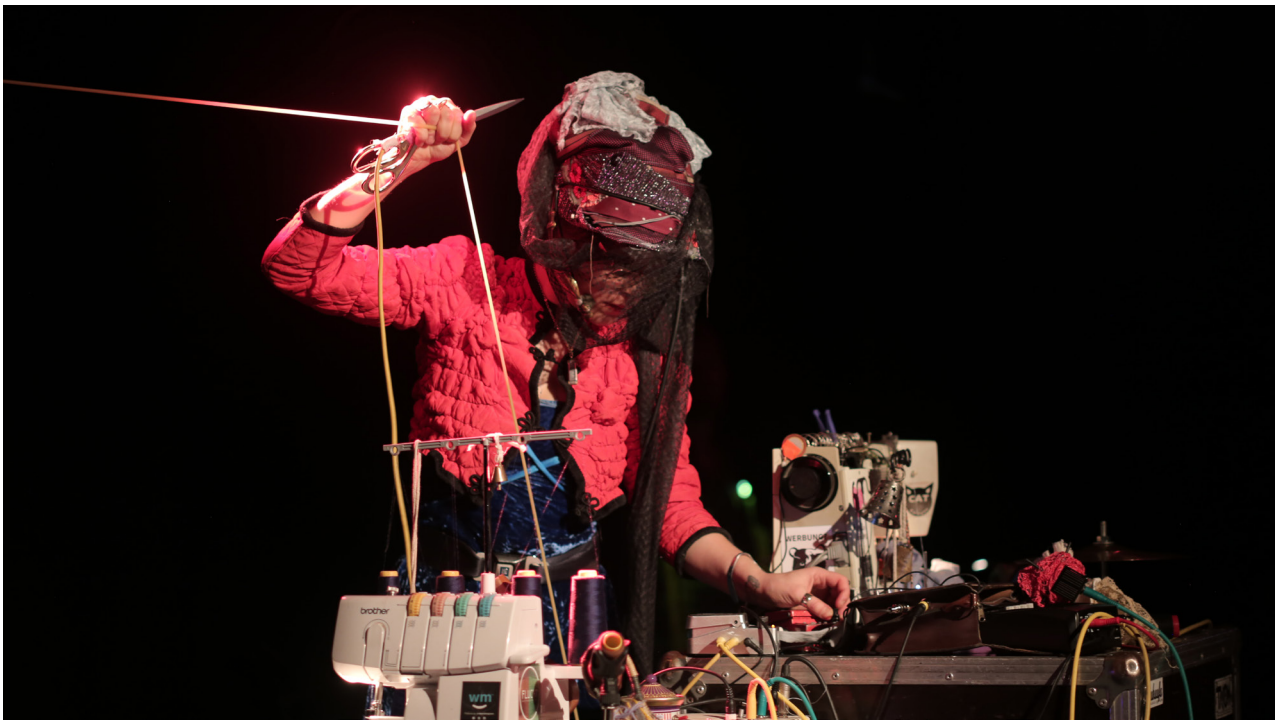

Foto: Klaus Erika Dietl

"The creation of things by hand leads to a better understanding of democracy, because it reminds us that we have power"
Betsy Greer

Pockets

This was supposed to be a story about pockets. It was supposed to be a story about a musical sewing machine, wearable instruments, talking hats and musical handbags, and an invitation to collectively sew pockets into clothes. A story about a performance

practice that stitches musical memories into the clothes we wear around our bodies, cutting up and rearranging textiles, in participatory scenarios where audience members are invited on stage to be part of a musical sewing world. But in spring 2020 everything changed. And as spring turned into summer and quickly into autumn, it still seems very remote that I will be able to conduct a performance where the audience and myself are entwined in cables and musical hats, multiple people are touching my instruments, I am touching their clothes, and we are touching each other. So, this has become a story about a different type of pocket, one that you can insert a filter into and wear over your mouth and nose, to protect communities from this new virus we are learning to live with.

I had been thinking about pockets for a while. They intrigue me as an historic example of the difference in masculine and feminine attire in relation to gender inequality: limited to the private sphere, women did not have right to ownership until the nineteenth century, and thus meant that they didn't own anything to put inside pockets, pockets that they didn't even own. What did women have in the pockets that they sewed by hand and wore under a skirt and another skirt and a corsage? What did a man have, and hide, in his suit filled with pockets? Eventually women started to carry handbags, since pockets were unflattering to the female figure, and men still just walked around with their pockets. So, I began offering pockets during the musical sewing performances, and noticed how people jumped at the opportunity to make their garments a little more utilitarian, to have more space to either keep belongings or keep their hands warm.

The pocket show, performed in various locations in 2019, such as the festival Klang der Dinge in Berlin, as well as at the last Making Futures conference at Plymouth College of Art, stems from my ongoing musical sewing performance research of the last ten years, that has spanned three countries of residence in three corners of the globe: Curitiba, Brazil; Vancouver, Canada; and my current home Berlin. The pocket show weaves together my work as a maker, upcycler of secondhand garments, performance artist, sewing teacher, textiles researcher and craftivist. It illustrates my belief that knowing how to mend and remake clothes can empower individuals to think critically about the garment industry. On stage the pocket show says: if we don't have pockets and we want them, we should sew them ourselves. I see my artistic practice as a coat with many pockets. There are pockets of interests and tools, pockets of music, tailoring, teaching, craft, and activism, which sometimes mix into different pockets. The term craftivism, coined in 2003 by author and maker Betsy Greer, describes craft as a tool for political and social action. Sarah Corbett, founding member of the Craftivist Collective, talks about the power of gentle protesting and graceful activism as being "genuine and sincere. We are practicing what we want our world to be like: a place where we all care for each other and support each other to fulfill our potential and the potential of others", in small acts these can affect a community in a personal, systematic, but gentle approach. She writes in her book How to be a Craftivist about the anger associated with activism, and proposes a different approach where actions associated with craft such as precision, patience, and perseverance, can be applied to activist strategies that focus on how we communicate and deal with injustices on a micro level, which can collect strategies and communities into pockets of change.

With the musical sewing machine, I aim to create pockets of change in local communities, small actions that every citizen can do for themselves and for each other, learning how to

mend instead of buying new, having agency in what we consume. If I can affect the direct community in which I live and work and they in turn reach out to their network, with the power of multiplicity and quantity a greater change can occur. My gentle protest is to bring issues around gender and social inequalities onto a musical stage, to discuss these themes in a place usually kept for entertainment. None of this is however in fact discussed blatantly or overtly; it is stitched deep within a colorful visual practice. The performances, garments, and workshops I teach are lighthearted, sometimes humorous, sometimes punk, very visual and artistic gestures. Bringing a sewing machine to a music stage and amplifying the act of sewing, with an underlying critical message questioning contemporary consumption habits. Performing the role of women workers in the garment industry, entwined with the memory of the domestic sphere - the seamstress at home making clothes - the act of sewing is subverted and the performance aims to empower, to take matters into our own hands when it comes to the things we wear around our bodies, to cut up fashion trends, beauty standards, mass consumption. By adding pockets onto people's clothes, I want to give them more places to keep their belongings, to own their actions.

Lockdown

"We can make, thread and weave our values through all that we do. Stitch by stitch we can make a difference. Sometimes we need to unravel an unjust system before we can sew it back together and sometimes we simply need to make do and mend a situation rather than create a revolution"
Sarah Corbett

On March 11, 2020, my singer sewing machine sang for the last time. It was an eerie evening, as the coronavirus threat in Berlin approached us, though it was still an abstract thought that it could put our musical practice, and the existence of artist run spaces, on hold for an indeterminate period. That all changed very quickly. On March 13, the German government announced lockdown measures to shut down non-essential businesses, event venues, schools, universities and nurseries. That first weekend it was impossible to know how things would progress. As news of Italy and Spain showed people were only allowed to leave the house for essential purposes, I packed my instruments and my sewing machine from my studio and brought everything home. I prepared myself for isolation thinking I could spend my time making music and building instruments, but I couldn't concentrate on music as an overwhelming feeling of uncertainty and helplessness came over me. As a full time freelance artist, I was concerned for the implications this would have in the arts and cultural industry. As a non-European Migrant living in Germany, I also worried about people in vulnerable situations, such as refugees. I complied with social distancing measures very seriously, but also saw #stayathome as a luxury that I could afford to do in my twenty-five square meter bedroom. This was not a choice for many, social distancing is just about impossible when you live in some of the refugee facilities in Berlin.

To deal with my isolation, I began receiving DIY fabric masks online tutorials, mostly from China and the US, which prompted my initial research about the effectiveness of these small pockets of protection. What could cloth masks protect, what didn't they protect, how was the best way to make them, which were the best fabrics?

The early surgical masks used in medical procedures were made of two layers of cotton-gauze, which were sterilized and reused. Studies show that the use of fabric masks by

health care professionals were popular by the 1920's and the Influenza pandemic of 1918-1919 saw a rise of fabric masks worn by the general public as a preventive measure. However, by the 1960's, disposable surgical masks were widely available in Western countries, so the use of cloth masks fell into disuse. Several studies from the early 2000s focused on a potential Influenza Pandemic researched whether the use of surgical or homemade masks could be a possible tool to contain the spread of respiratory diseases. The studies pointed to varying degrees of protection depending on the material and the fit of the masks, but the overall conclusion is that any mask is better than no mask in containing droplets from an infected wearer and lowering aerosol transmission of viral diseases. A characteristic of SARS-Cov-2 is that infected people can be asymptomatic, thus a preventive use of facial coverings could be beneficial in containing the spread of this disease. As documented shortages of surgical equipment swept the globe, official recommendations were very divided, as obviously surgical materials should be kept for Health Care professionals, so the DIY alternative of a fabric mask seemed an immediate solution, perhaps not 100% effective, but a way to help in prevention. Several projects around the globe began advocating fabric masks as an alternative for surgical masks. In the US scientific researcher Jeremy Howard from the University of San Francisco compiled scientific research under the hashtag #masks4all and urged the community to make and donate masks. In the Czech Republic, "Mask Trees" began appearing throughout the country, where handmade fabric masks were hung on trees and made available for communities free of charge, and this soon caught on in other parts of Europe.

What struck me most in my research about these crafted fabric masks was their strong message of solidarity and social responsibility: masks are not worn to protect yourself, but in fact to protect others. As my participatory performance practice was put on indefinite hold, this became my artistic response towards an interactive artistic project. It was an immediate way to connect my sewing skills to my activism, and I spent my lockdown time divided between sewing masks, campaigning on social media do destigmatize their use, and engaging more community members in making them.

Foto: Lisa Simpson

On the evening of March 22, as official lockdown measures in Berlin were announced advising us to only leave the house for essential purposes and not gathering in more than two people of the same household, I uploaded this photo on social media wearing a mask and offering donations to both private people and organizations, as well as offering my research to anyone interested in making their own. Immediately messages began pouring in, either wanting masks or wanting to know more about them. I was careful in explaining my research that the masks would not prevent the wearer from becoming infected with COVID-19. This was a major concern that people would suddenly slap on a mask and think they were invincible. The second biggest concern was that they would wear the mask wrong, or not wash it correctly, and it could potentially turn into its own infection source. Back in March, which seems so long ago now, the discourse was still so divided and unclear whether these small pieces of cotton fabric could in fact help at all.

So, I saw myself busy with another type of pocket, which I never thought I would sew. I sew my masks as a pocket, so you can put a filter layer between two cotton layers. I carefully studied the HK Mask website, invented by Dr. K. Kwong during the outbreak of COVID-19 in Hong Kong, with its extensive informative research on filters for fabric masks. His research indicates that two layers of Kitchen paper and one layer of tissue paper between two cotton layers proves as an efficient filtering system, due to the layering of woven and non-woven materials. Because within days I had a long list of organizations asking me for large sums of masks, I realized I needed to make a pattern that was quick to sew but as effective as possible. I combined and simplified the different patterns I had tested, to make a square pocket with tunnels on the side to thread a jersey band that goes around the head. The mask has only four seams. With this pattern, I made up to 150 masks per day and donated more than 3000 masks in Berlin. What began as a sole venture quickly gained momentum and soon there were people, both friends and strangers, getting involved and giving rise to the Maskerade Brigade.

The Maskerade Brigade website has the motto: make to donate to your community and is completely open source. In her explaining of activism, Corbett points to three aspects of activism: emergency relief, advocacy, and development. Naturally, the donation of masks is an emergency relief, the first response in a crisis situation, where masks are donated to protect a population at risk. Creating the website is an example of advocacy, to encourage others to start groups in their communities, offering our research in the most effective way to make, wear, and care for the masks. This proved effective not only in my immediate community in Berlin, but inspired groups in Brazil and Portugal to follow my pattern and make masks for their communities. As the usage of masks enters our daily routine, the Maskerade Brigade continues advocating for the correct use of fabric masks, as well as presenting the fabric mask as a reusable and sustainable alternative to single use surgical masks, as there are now numerous studies about the negative ecological impact of single use surgical masks.

Furthermore, as the rise of right-wing populism marks the current state of global politics, face coverings have also become a symbol in politics. Conspiracy theorists and groups associated with right-wing extremism (such as Querdenker in Germany) are strongly opposed to wearing a face covering. Political leaders such as Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro have mocked and dismissed masks as irrelevant and unnecessary as a measure to contain the Pandemic. Therefore, the Maskerade Brigade advocates the wearing of facemasks not

only as an act of solidarity within communities, but as well as a political act in and of itself.

Personally, making masks proved to be a way for me to cope with the pandemic, and with the sudden halt in my participatory musical practice. At a moment where people felt isolated, I spent lockdown constantly in contact with strangers, coordinating a group of individuals who formed the Maskerade Brigade, organizing fabrics, and delivering masks from a self-made "elevator" from my first story balcony. Maybe I was slightly too obsessed in spending all of my awake time behind the sewing machine, making the same thing over and over again. This is definitely not the usual way that I work. Normally I am busy sewing individual and unique pieces, but the repetitiveness soothed me, a mechanical act that did not require a lot of thinking. I can measure my lockdown days in the amount of masks I made. Actively doing something to help, however small it might be, gave me a sense of purpose and handle on the situation, which calmed me down. It was my gentle protest. And I realized how the craft of operating a sewing machine, however devalued it has become, proved to be very useful.
The countless hours I spent in a production line of masks I often reflected about the conditions of garment workers in factories in the global south, the strenuous endless work of stitching fabrics together. I thought about the differences between labor and craft, and how privilege can be a defining factor. I was doing this as a choice, as I mentioned the therapeutic effect it had on me, but also because I found myself in a position where I could afford to do so. I thought of the women working in the garment industry as their only possible source of income, under precarious working conditions, paid less than living wage, often with no benefits or protection, due to a commodity system that undervalues the craft of garment making and turns it into cheap labor. Even worse, according to Fashion Revolution, due to the pandemic several major fashion brands took back orders from factories in the global south. Since these companies only sub-contract their production, they take no responsibility for ensuring benefits for the workers, often the most vulnerable link in the production chain. As Žižek notes, the current pandemic has only amplified conditions that already were poor to begin with.

How to Mask

Performance has been my channel to advocate for sustainability in the garment industry, worker's rights, and gender equality. When the stages had to turn off their lights, the Maskerade Brigade was born as a reaction and a content specific project. The mask donations supported numerous organizations in Berlin such as refugee and homeless shelters, organizations caring for the elderly and single mothers, and other support organizations for marginalized groups. If before this pandemic I wanted to sew utilitarian pockets onto all garments, masculine or feminine, to make them democratic, the face covering became a pocket of hope and solidarity.

It again intrigues me how these 40cm of fabric folded in half and wrapped around our face, as a pocket for a filter, can be so historically and socially charged. If in the history of attire pockets belonged to the masculine sphere, if it kept all of the secrets and made private the belongings only of men, the mask hides an even more private sphere, and is not gender specific. In a religious context, the face covering has been strictly a feminine phenomenon, and a major subject of debate concerning women's rights and freedoms. Face coverings are also associated with vandalism, in Germany a ban

to cover one's face during demonstrations and public events (vermummungsverbot) is in place since 1985, and since 2017 it is also illegal to cover your face while driving. I find it fascinating that now because of health concerns, these laws contradict themselves. As a scenario of surveillance and face recognition becomes prevalent in our society, it becomes official policy to be unrecognizable in public spaces.

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