

Alexa Can't Let
Anything Go

Alexa Gordon
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Introduction

I have a very good memory for certain tactile details in my life. When I was a kid, I memorized the drive home. I knew exactly the way the roads twisted, how the hills would raise us up, only to plummet a second later, causing the kind of slight drop in our stomachs normally reserved for fair rides. I remember how the rhythm of sunlight trickled through the forest canopy, reaching down through the backseat windows of the car to shed warmth on my cheeks. I remember tracing the sunlit silhouettes on the backseats with my fingertips. Seats, which were made up of grey upholstery fabric that featured the kind of contemporary patterns comprised of tiny shapes and lines (teal and red, in our case) that only existed in cars from the 1990's.

I remember these details, maybe, because they changed. My parents moved up from Houston in the late 1980's to our small rural town, just a little over an hour outside of Philadelphia. They bought a plot of land and built a log cabin, imagining it to become the perfect family home. Within a few years of their home ownership, the Conestoga landfill became an unwanted neighbor, less than two miles from our cabin. Its mountainous unnatural form grew up with me, slowly accumulating, and later, upon an expansion that began in 2003, plowing down forests and paving its way over the tree-lined road that once led to my childhood home. As one of Pennsylvania's largest landfills, Conestoga destroyed property values, polluted ground water, and tainted the fresh wooded air. This proximity to trash and the direct consequences of waste culture shaped my concern for the environment, and slowly solidified my aversion towards creating garbage. However, my own patterns of consumption and attachments to material goods— particularly clothing— has often contradicted these concerns, not always proving waste-conscious.

Alexa Can't Let Anything Go is a repentance for my own implicit participation in overconsumption, explored through cataloguing my own textile waste in a tediously quilted wall hanging. Individual quilt squares were excavated from personal items that lost their practical value over time, each beyond the point of resale or donation, and often made of fiber blends nearly impossible to recycle. Quilting the small, viable scraps establishes new value for these otherwise landfill-bound items. Details about the 2,100 quilted squares are meticulously logged in the adjacent Rolodex. Written notations for each swatch card range from informational to sentimental and haunting, cumulatively outlining the complex value systems and attachment patterns that define what we abandon or throw away.

Contextual Discussion

Trash Culture

Over the course of this project, many people told me that they had never actually seen a landfill before. Landfills are not a visible fixture in the daily life of most people, as the Conestoga Landfill was for me (Fig. 1). Regardless, waste systems exist to meet the needs of everyone, as we all contribute in some way to our collectively wasteful culture. Robin Nagle, author of *Picking up: On the Streets and Behind the Trucks with the Sanitation Workers of New York City*, attributes the world of sanitation work as a sort of necessary and yet disrespected dam, protecting modern society from bearing witness to the “sea of refuse that would otherwise overwhelm us”.¹ In the book’s final chapter, Nagle references an episode of *The Simpsons*, titled *Trash of the Titans*, where Homer comically runs his own campaign to be Springfield’s Sanitation Commissioner. His laziness in developing a campaign strategy (“Can’t someone else do it?”) later inspires his campaign slogan: Someone Else.² This may be the most universal opinion about trash that exists, the notion that no one really wants to deal with it.

Stigmas around waste and the seeming unwillingness in our society to take responsibility for the waste we produce, are routine. Single-use throw away items are commonplace, so much so, that it’s nearly impossible to get through a day without coming in contact with them. As easy as it seems however,



Above: Fig. 1, Trash Mountain: Views of the Conestoga landfill as seen from Shiloh Road, northbound, in November of 2018.

disposability as standard practice has consequences. Annie Leonard first posted the short film titled, *The Story of Stuff* online in December of 2007, the same month that the National Bureau of Economic Research declared the official state of economic downturn in the US, which we now call “The Great Recession”.³ The film is a strong critique of the types of consumerism that surged in the early aughts. Annie takes on explaining “The Materials Economy”, a linear system of extraction, production, distribution, consumption, and disposal. Leonard states, “You cannot run a linear system on a finite planet indefinitely” and instead proposes a more circular and

¹ Nagle, Robin. *Picking Up: On the Streets and behind the Trucks with the Sanitation Workers of New York City*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.

² Maxtone-Graham, Ian, writer. “Trash of the Titans.” In *The Simpsons*. Fox. April 26, 1998.

³ Business Cycle Dating Committee, National Bureau of Economic Research. Accessed December 4, 2018. <https://www.nber.org/cycles/dec2008.html>.

sustainable economy in the video's final segment.⁴

One of the less obvious occurrences of throw-away goods implicated in Leonard's "Materials Economy", is the textile industry. In Maxine Bedat's Ted Talk, *The High Cost of Cheap Fashion*, she describes many facets of how the textile industry has changed in the last 50-60 years.⁵ In that time, the exponential rise of fast fashion has created a wealth of cheap clothes poorly made out of composite synthetic fibers that are difficult to recycle, and wear too poorly to resell. This creates a lot of textile waste, adding up to roughly 70 pounds per person annually in the United States. Furthermore, recycling all of this waste has become its own nuanced issue. In a series of CBC News broadcasts, titled *Clothes recycling: Investigating where clothing ends up*,⁶ and *How fast fashion adds to the world's clothing waste problem*,⁷ I learned that there's an excess of recycled textiles that aren't being bought by companies producing recycled content (insulation, etc.). Additionally, fast fashion has created a surplus in community donations, often causing unsold items at donation franchises to be sold in bulk overseas to remain profitable, where they typically become littered waste in developing communities.

Donation franchises aren't the only ones prioritizing revenue and subsequently burdening other less privileged places with waste. *The Pottstown Mercury*, a local publication to my hometown, came out with a scathing article in 2003 right after the Conestoga landfill's 134 acre expansion (Fig. 2-3) had been announced (adding to the 454 acres of landfill that already existed at the time).⁸ The article reports a staggering amount of statistics positioning Pennsylvania's revenue system as fully reliant on importing trash from its neighboring states, despite continued pushback from communities. Groups like the "TriCounty Concerned", of which my father was a member, organized in opposition to the landfill's expansion. Residents had ample reasoning—the Landfill had been failing at least 20% of its violation inspections, and had yet to rectify the noxious odor emitting from its grounds and surrounding areas. This failure was despite excessive use of "odor concealers" which only added a sickly perfumed note to the unmistakable smell of trash. These inspection failures and odor problems were not seen at other nearby landfills, pointing to poor operational practices at Conestoga. More concerning still, was the Landfill's precarious geological location.

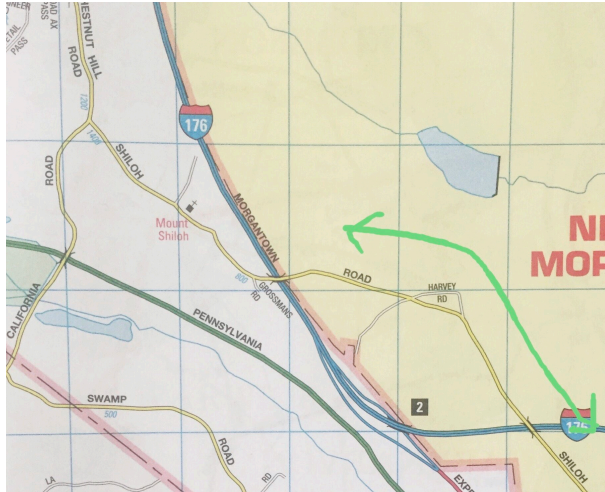
⁴ The Story of Stuff. "The Story of Stuff." YouTube. April 22, 2009. Accessed November 01, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GorqroigqM&vI=en>.

⁵ Talks, TEDx. "The High Cost of Our Cheap Fashion | Maxine Bedat | TEDxPiscataquaRiver." YouTube. May 21, 2016. Accessed January 14, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5r8V4QWwx0>.

⁶ News, CBC. "Clothes Recycling: Investigating Where Clothing Ends up (The Investigators with Diana Swain)." YouTube. January 20, 2018. Accessed January 14, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHhD3zb-uQY>.

⁷ News, CBC. "How Fast Fashion Adds to the World's Clothing Waste Problem (Marketplace)." YouTube. January 19, 2018. Accessed January 14, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eIU32XNj8PM>.

⁸ "The Nation's Dumping Ground- 6 Area Landfills Take in the Most Trash in a State That Is the Largest Waste Importer." *The Pottstown Mercury*. November 12, 2018. Accessed December 08, 2018. https://www.pottsmmerc.com/news/the-nation-s-dumping-ground--area-landfills-take-in/article_9989f645-8bfe-5442-b13b-ebcd4e3ca289.html.



Above Left: Fig. 2, map of Shiloh Road overlapping Interstate 176 before the landfill expansion was complete. *Source: photocopied from a Berks County, PA street map book published in 2006 by ADC The Map People.*



Above Right: Fig. 3, map of Shiloh Road overlapping Interstate 176 in the same places, but now with the road between those fixed points curving around the landfill expansion. *Source: Satellite image from Google Maps, accessed in 2018.*

Built on a fractured limestone bedrock leading to underground mine shafts, any possible ruptures of the landfill liner put nearby water supplies at great risk of becoming irreparably tainted.

Unfortunately, citizen efforts were unable to thwart the willingness of the state department to approve requests from dump operators, bringing more trash into Berks County. This unabashed willingness can be explained by the land's lucrative location. Southeastern Pennsylvania is accessible to New York and New Jersey and takes on much of their waste, as it is far cheaper for dumping garbage due to a lower cost of land and living. Morgantown, my hometown, proves even more accessible, as it is located right off of Interstate 176, a convenient rarity for such a small place (only 826 residents in the 2010 census⁹). This presents another unsettling consideration: if it was cheaper to transport waste and then dispose of it in my town, the implication serves that Conestoga was taking waste from primarily more affluent communities, and dumping it on us.

Looking to speak to someone directly about Conestoga's municipal waste imports, I conducted a phone interview with Bryan Clever, the current Division Manager at the Landfill. Bryan helped direct me to a series of PDFs detailing specific quarterly waste totals at the Conestoga landfill from the past 5 years, dating back to 2013 at the earliest.¹⁰ When I compared the quarterly municipal waste intakes, their waste had increased by 63.4% in only 5 years, growing from 96,871.2 tons of municipal waste in the second quarter 2013, to 158,325.2 tons of municipal waste in the same quarter of 2018.

⁹ US Census Bureau. "Census.gov." Census.gov. Accessed December 8, 2018. <https://www.census.gov/>.

¹⁰ "PA.Gov." What Is Hydropower. Accessed October 3, 2018. <https://www.dep.pa.gov/Business/Land/Waste/SolidWaste/MunicipalWaste/Pages/MW-Disposal-Info.aspx>.

While this surge in trash could suggest an influx of revenue gain for the state, its implications on the town's residents are bleak at best. The 2003 *Pottstown Mercury* article had declared that the landfill had decreased property values of nearby homes, seriously affecting those as far as 2 miles in proximity (mine included) by nearly 7% already, in a study conducted between 1998 and 2002, which was an unprecedented hit by pre-recession standards. The losses were expected then to spike further with the new expansion. Furthermore, this statistic was formed ten years before the 63.4% gain in municipal waste intake seen in the last five years alone, overall indicating a severe decline in property values today. Not only do landfills harm the health and atmosphere of communities, but by simultaneously targeting lower income level areas and continuously decreasing their home values, they are actively making those communities poorer.



Top: Fig. 4, "a wall of photographs expressing family identity and recording important moments". Source: *Life At Home in the Twenty-first Century...* (pg.12)

Bottom: Fig. 5, "a home office with high densities of possessions, including business and school documents, photo albums, media electronics, and sports memorabilia". Source: *Life At Home in the Twenty-first Century...* (pg. 11)

Psychology of Material Attachments

After learning more about trash and its accumulation in landfills, I became interested in unpacking what psychologically drives us to consume and inherently create waste.

Life At Home in the Twenty-first Century: 32 Families Open Their Doors, presented a study of American families and how they relate to their belongings.¹¹ The book gave attention to how residents chose to ascribe value to their possessions, based on the presentation of these items in their personal spaces (Fig. 4-5). Arnold cites "collection" as a refined and competitive form of consumerism in America, referencing Russell Belk's 1995 book, *Collecting in a Consumer Society*.¹² Arnold contrasts Belk's more holistic views of consumerism, presenting further evidence of American "Mania" to consume in pursuit of the American dream, while more commonly creating stress, debt and waste in spite of these efforts.

This critical picture of the human relationship to materiality and the objects human existence cultivates, led me to consider a more exaggerated pattern of material attachment: compulsive hoarding. Hoarding is

¹¹ Arnold, Jeanne E. *Life At Home in the Twenty-first Century: 32 Families Open Their Doors*. S.I.: Casemate Academic, 2017.

¹² Belk, Russell W. *Collecting in A Consumer Society*. Edited by Susan M. Pearce. Reprint ed. Vol. 1. Collecting Cultures Series. Psychology Press, 1995.

by definition, drastic overconsumption, paired with the inability to get rid of material goods, often leaving those affected by the disorder with a high density of items covering their living space, both challenging their mobility and causing distress. One of the most predominant examples of this attachment variation is A&E's television show, *Hoarders*.¹³ By capitalizing on sensationalizing extreme cases, *Hoarders* often presents a vexed single story narrative of a complex disorder. Most episodes conclude with full truckloads of trash being hauled away to the nearest landfill, tempting viewers with bright blue signage, *1-800-GOT-JUNK?* One family expelled over 32 tons of trash from their single family home over the three day span of the show's intervention. This sounds extreme and rare, but in reality is an accelerated look at the future for most items filling American homes today, confirming that what we consume does not only weigh on us, but it inevitably turns into actual tons of municipal waste.

Interested in a more clinical interpretation, I looked to a medical publication discussing hoarding and its complex range of causation.¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, hoarding is considered an OCD-associated disorder, presenting similar cognitive responses to other nervous compulsions falling under the term, like skin picking and hair pulling. Hoarding is linked in several ways to extreme cognitive difficulty in decision making. This difficulty can perpetuate a sense of fear of deciding incorrectly, and thus overconsumption becomes a coping mechanism. "They tend to believe a disproportionate number of their possessions are very important, and feel paralyzed by seemingly commonplace decisions about what items to discard and what items to keep, or which items are valuable, and how to organize the items". Fear can play other roles in compulsive consumption- the fear of scarcity is also noted as a contributor in the attachment styles of hoarders, suggesting that overconsumption is always necessary when possible, because the opportunity to have things may be fleeting.

The range of reasons behind excessive consumption are not reserved for hoarders alone. Traces of similar patterns can actually be seen in most people. Authors of *New Minimalism*,¹⁵ Cary Telander Fortin and Kyle Louise Quilici use their expertise (Fortin specializes in the psychology behind decision making and attachments, while Quilici has a degree in organizational behavior, and earned her certificate in sustainable design from UC Berkley Extension.) to outline four main attachment patterns related to material items: "Connected" meaning sentimental attachments, "Practical" meaning retaining items that could be useful in the future, "Energetic" meaning saving things one does not realistically have time to utilize, and "Frugal", signifying the fear of scarcity. *New Minimalism* suggests that accessing current relationships with material items provides the ability to alter attachment patterns, and move towards a sustainable lifestyle with less to throw away, because as the book suggests, "away doesn't really exist".

¹³ Severson, Dave, Andrew Berg, David McKillop, Elaine Frontain Bryant, George Butts, Jessica Morgan, Mike Kelly, and Matt Chan, prods. *Hoarders*. A&E. August 17, 2009.

¹⁴ Jessica R. Grisham, Melissa M. Norberg. 2010. "Compulsive Hoarding: Current Controversies And New Directions". Pubmed Central (PMC). Accessed October 6, 2018. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3181962/>.

¹⁵ Fortin, Cary Telander, Kyle Louise Quilici, Kelly Ishikawa, and Hannah Elan. *New Minimalism: Decluttering and Design for Sustainable, Intentional Living*. Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 2018.

Art Context

John Knechtel's book *Trash*, reconsiders personal ties to the things we discard through the lens of various artists, makers, and writers. The anthology has an entrancing ability to pull at your heartstrings all the while turning your stomach. Knechtel states, "With every action, people make trash. Casually as a matter of course, we throw things away". Creating waste is culturally akin to any other basic human function. Knechtel's book cites the disservice this ideology provides: "We are embedded in our trash—there is no easy way to leap beyond it and build a utopia without garbage, to dress the contradiction between the world's limited resources and our seemingly unlimited ability to manufacture trash". A particular work of interest in this book was a collection of photos, titled, *50 Sad Chairs* by Bill Keaggy. Found on the streets of St. Louis, all 50 chairs are seen displaced, run down, and alone— but when compiled and collectively seen together in this photo series, they resonate. A featured essay about Keaggy's work digs into the sentimentality of the objects we abandon and their life after we deem them useless. Keaggy's photographs of "Sad Chairs" radiate with ghosts of former ownership, while adamantly maintaining the "material recalcitrance of trash...it's refusal to go away". Keaggy's work stood out, bringing on a unique sorrow for the burden of trash, but more adequately for the trash itself.

In a talk at Google HQ, Bea Johnson, a prominent figure of the zero waste movement, reflected about her past as an artist before going zero waste. Dissatisfied with the accumulation of materials her art practice had created, she donated the bulk of them, and decided to instead source her compost and recycle bins going forward. She chose to collect compostable butter wrappers for four years, then folded those wrappers into origami lotus flowers, and applied them to a canvas. The piece caused her to take note of how much butter her family consumes: 575 butter wrappers over those 4 years alone. She was shocked: "The thing is when we throw things away, or even when we compost or recycle, we become really disconnected from how much we're truly consuming. Once you start collecting it for a while, then you're much more aware of your consumption".¹⁶

Works featuring forms of collection began to interest me. I found a book introducing El Anatsui's work, detailing his show, "New Worlds" as it was exhibited at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum.¹⁷ El Anatsui is a Ghanaian sculptural artist who works most notably with bottle caps and other reclaimed forms of aluminum. His sculptures drape heavily over walls (Fig. 6), made of tiny individual pieces of metal laced together with copper wire. El Anatsui's work concerns itself with the environment, but does so in a disguised way you can only notice up close, due to the collected tiny metal pieces he uses to tessellate.

¹⁶ Google, Talks At. "Bea Johnson: "Zero Waste Home" | Talks at Google." YouTube. September 28, 2015. Accessed November 11, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmfDTduRh4>.

¹⁷ Anatsui, El, Amanda Gilvin, and John R. Stomberg. *El Anatsui New Worlds*. South Headley, MA: Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, 2015.



Above: Fig. 6, El Anatsui, Avocado Coconut Egg (ACE), 2016. Source: October Gallery.

Matthew McLendon, author of *Re:Purposed*,¹⁸ quotes a survey of trash and its uses predominately in European art of the twentieth century: “attempts to define trash lead back to a fundamental link to systems of value which are time and place specific. There is no material which is intrinsically trash. Indeed, it is a social and culturally constructed concept—the word, like its physical manifestation, is in a continually shifting state of conceptual, symbolic, and material flux”. McLendon points out that old discarded chipped bowls, tools and other assorted items dating back to antiquity, now are pristinely revered in museums—items that were once trash in another time are now, as McLendon writes, “transformed and elevated by the patina of time”. Under this consideration, trash exists only fleetingly, caught in the rip tide of societal paradigm shifts. In environmental contexts, we often consider trash to be something permanent, ignoring the resilience items relegated as garbage can have when acknowledge them.

Methodology

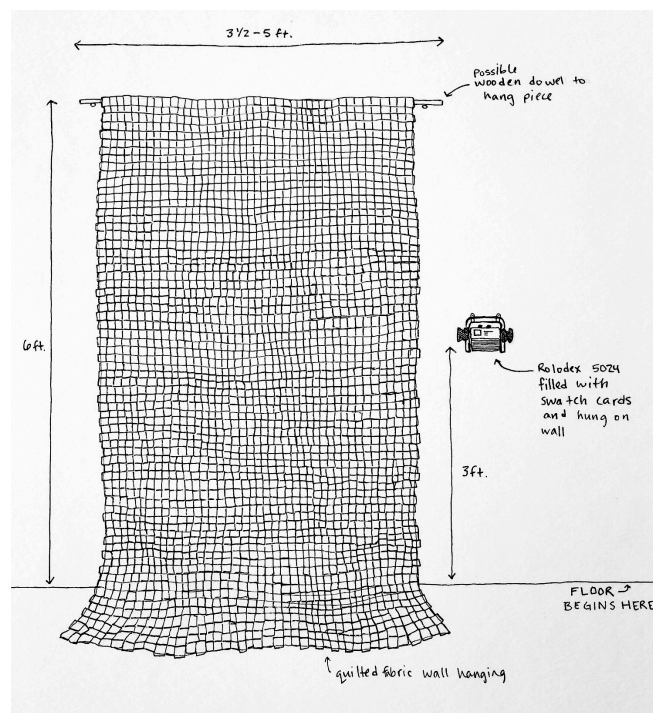
My methodology throughout this project experienced some significant shifts in focus as it evolved. I prioritized research first, aiming to better understand the points of interest that mattered most to me. My reaction to discovering more about environmental practices was to pivot my principals through my actions. What I learned through making these changes in my personal life supplemented my research in new ways, sparking the development and ideation of my project plan. I reframed my choices in materiality by turning to time consuming textile work, and planning for my project to use no new material. I still sought to tell my own personal story of overconsumption through the piece, and I found the right amount of space to share by indexing and writing about collected moments in the short informational cards of the Rolodex.

¹⁸ Keller, Mariah, and Matthew McLendon. *Re:Purposed*. New York, NY: Scala, 2015.

The Research

Researching for this project forged a space for me to consider my own impact beyond my studio practice. I was interested in augmenting my daily routines to align environmentally with some of the the low waste principles I was ascribing to my project. I became engrossed in the idea of minimizing my own waste, and additionally, my possessions. As I considered my own consumption and how I could change that impact, the obvious problem area for me was clothing. What we wear is part of the first impression we make on those around us, and often, clothes can subconsciously determine our value, status, and belonging to our peers, and even to ourselves. This had previously fueled my consumption of wearable goods, as much of my adolescence was spent trying to fit in at new school where upscale abundance was the baseline.

In recognizing this bloom of materialism, I aimed to stop needlessly buying and began to pair down my wardrobe, selling nearly 60% of my clothes. Discovering the complexities of clothing donation and recycling, pushed me to sell my clothes online through secondhand shopping sites. If at all possible, I wanted to ensure the items had a another lifecycle after me. As I purged, I became interested in better understanding the patterns of my own consumption. I went through all the items I planned to keep, recalling what year I had bought them, and if I had purchased them secondhand or new. I categorized and tallied each item, and then calculated overall statistics representing my wardrobe: how much was bought secondhand versus new, and how long have I owned and maintained what I now have? I wanted to



Above: Fig. 7, My final schematic diagram for my exhibition plan, showing proposed dimensions for the wall hanging, and wall mounted install for the Rolodex.

understand the personal value retention of my past consumer choices, and to detect any patterns or changes in this attachment and accumulation.

For a three month period, I also kept what I called a “Trash Journal”, where I logged everything I threw away over the course of each day. Over those three months I experimented with ways to minimize my trash. I began to equip myself when necessary with a tin for lunch or leftovers, my camping spork, cloth napkins, and a reusable coffee cup. I grew more comfortable asking, “Actually, do you mind putting that in this container instead?”, and I learned to collect compost in the freezer of my apartment to deposit weekly in the University’s compost bins. I stopped rebuying makeup and hygienic products in wasteful packaging when I could find waste-free alternatives, and if I forgot my reusable bags, it served as a reminder to

only buy what I could carry out of the store in hand.

Surprisingly, the most valuable aspect of keeping the trash journal for me was how it highlighted the startlingly personal nature of the waste we produce. By the end of each day, I found that the items I had tossed told a certain story. The wrapper of a since-eaten Luna bar, floss I had remembered to use, an unwanted parking ticket: it was a somewhat embarrassing list, now immortalized like a fossil record of a bad Monday. Regardless, I found listing to be fascinating in this context, and it gave me the idea to converge my interest in categorizing my consumption with logging my waste. I then planned to make a wall hanging with my wardrobe's refuse, providing an itemized index of its contents (Fig. 7).

The Sewing

Once I had a plan for the work in place, I was working on a consistent schedule to build the wall hanging. First, I would initially scrap the old clothes and textile goods, cutting them into smaller squares. As I did this for each item, I would create a stack of the squares to add to my working "palette" of color. I thought of these stacks like a painter's palette, but in place of paint various dollops, I had stacks of fabric swatches (Fig. 8). With each new swatch, I would make sure to set aside one scrap to use later for my swatch inventory. After enough swatches in a range of colors were cut, it was time to lay out rows of the intended quilt grid before beginning to trace, pin, and sew.

This part of the process changed over the course of my project, in part due to the quilt's growth, but it also adjusted as my skill level improved. In the early days of sewing, I was lucky if I could manage to sew over 20 squares in a six hour work period. However, after a month of near daily sewing and pinning, I had more than tripled that rate. This meant that I was often recalculating daily, trying to forecast how many squares I could then expect to complete by the deadline. The process was obsessive, but it had to be if I was going to reach my goal of at least 2,000 quilted squares, thus making the work large enough to create my intended impression of overflow and abundance.

Laying out rows of colorful swatches in the first couple weeks felt more hap-hazard, as I was still building out the wall hanging's overall width, while simultaneously finding a starting point for my gradient composition (Fig. 9). I use gradients commonly in my work to represent calm transitions and the passing of time. Here, that compositional choice felt relevant for those reasons in new ways- I was choosing a time-intensive method to organize and essentially calm the appearance of my textile waste. While the grid leaned into the categorical nature of the piece, the gradient was reminiscent of organizational methods I had learned while working in consignment shops. Arranging goods by color is a common tactic employed to make a room full of individually different items feel less chaotic for shoppers.

Once I reached 35 squares wide, I finally felt comfortable that I could just add to the wall hanging's length from that point on (Fig. 10). Working in 35 square-long rows was challenging, but for the final length of the piece I settled into a rhythm. For each row I began by tracing a 1.25 inch square on each swatch with a disappearing ink pen. This square would outline the swatch's seams in the quilt's grid.



Below: Fig. 8, Piles of clothes are color sorted, ready to be transformed into quilt-able stacks of squares (also shown here). A shirt sleeve opened at the seam lays in flux between lifecycles, ready for the rotary cutter.



Top Left: Fig. 9, Starting out: Building on all sides after quilting the initial 24 square grid, still small enough set up on and ironing board.

Bottom Left: Fig. 10, Compositional Choices: Laying out the final 17 rows, each 35 quilt squares across. Setting up this assembly line in the final stage (two months after the image in Fig. 10 was taken) took up the entirety of both large tables in the sewing studio.



Above: Fig. 11, each quilt square is measured and marked using disappearing ink pen. This allows pinning the corners of each quilt square to be very exact when constructing each row.

Right: Fig. 12, sewn rows of quilt squares lined up in order to be added to the wall hanging.

Below: Fig. 13, here I am shown pinning a sewn row onto the already quilted work.



Bottom Left: Fig. 14, detail of pinning a sewn row onto the already quilted work, paying careful attention to matching the alignment of each corner seam correctly.

Bottom Right: Fig. 15, machine sewing the pinned row in place on the wall hanging.



Once this was done, I would flip every other square over onto the square to its right in the line up, and then pin each of these pairs, traced corner to traced corner along the left seam lines (Fig. 11). As I pinned these pairs, I would stack them in order. This way, I began by sewing each pinned set first, then conjoining those pairs into one long strip of squares, finally making up another row of the quilt (Fig. 12). Next I would press out the strip so I could carefully pin it along the already quilted work, matching each seam line of the new row to the seam lines of the existing piece (Fig. 13-14). Once this was done for all 35 squares in the row, I would sew it in place (Fig. 15), press it out, and start the whole process again.

The Rolodex

Determining the best way to archive information about the fabric used in my wall hanging was challenging. After considering charts, maps, and even inventory spreadsheets, I felt ambivalent to them. Their structure would undoubtedly bog down the viewer with too much information at one time, more likely dissuading them from engaging, rather than enticing their curiosity. I needed a way to organize information that invited people to interact. I considered making a book for people to flip through, where I could include physical scraps of fabric with my index, similar to swatch books I had made for textile design classes. Still, the finite aspect of something bound with a set amount of pages in a decided order felt confining and therefore inadequate.

Thankfully, another organizational device came to mind: the Rolodex. I began to research the Rolodex's history, finding it had been revered for its simplistic yet iconic functional design. Its primary use was to simplify and categorize one's connections. A single Rolodex could easily hold hundreds of cards, and they were easy to add, remove, and rearrange.¹⁹ The Rolodex's analog structure and inherent flexibility appealed to me. It seemed that a system originally meant to organize connections to people, could surely do the same for my connections to the fabrics of my former belongings.

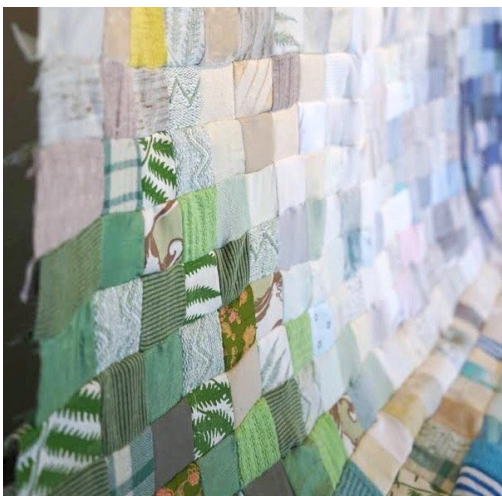
The writing on the cards was also a pivotal part of my project. Every so often, I would take a break from sewing to write down ideas that struck me about a particular swatch I was working on, slowly drafting and finalizing the Rolodex card sentiments.

¹⁹ Grossman, Anna Jane, and Anna Jane Grossman. "The Life and Death of the Rolodex." Gizmodo. June 18, 2013. Accessed February 12, 2019. <https://gizmodo.com/the-life-and-death-of-the-rolodex-5497511>.

Creative Work

Alexa Can't Let Anything Go is a cascading wall hanging of minutely quilted fabric squares, appearing from afar as a pixelated gradient of color (Fig. 18). Hung in tandem with the wall hanging, is a vintage rolo-dex, model 5024X. The wall hanging reaches 45 inches wide, and is hung approximately 6.5 feet high on the gallery wall, from there falling downward, spilling onto the floor (Fig. 20). Each quilted square within the piece, precisely 1.25 inches in side length, appears initially as a small fragment making up the gridded flow of color. Upon closer inspection, each square reveals its own textures, patterns, and slight warp from the weight of the textiles sewn adjacent to it (Fig. 16). Individual swatches transform in color as they are nestled between opposing and similar hues throughout the work. Occasional hints of garments-past are subtly embedded in the quilt: a Nike symbol from an old sock, a Ralph Lauren Polo logo embroidery, hidden examples of an exposed seam, a spliced T-shirt slogan or a familiarly soft texture. These details peek out of the grid, declaring ghost-like recollection of the reused textiles and garments that were sourced for the wall hanging's composition.

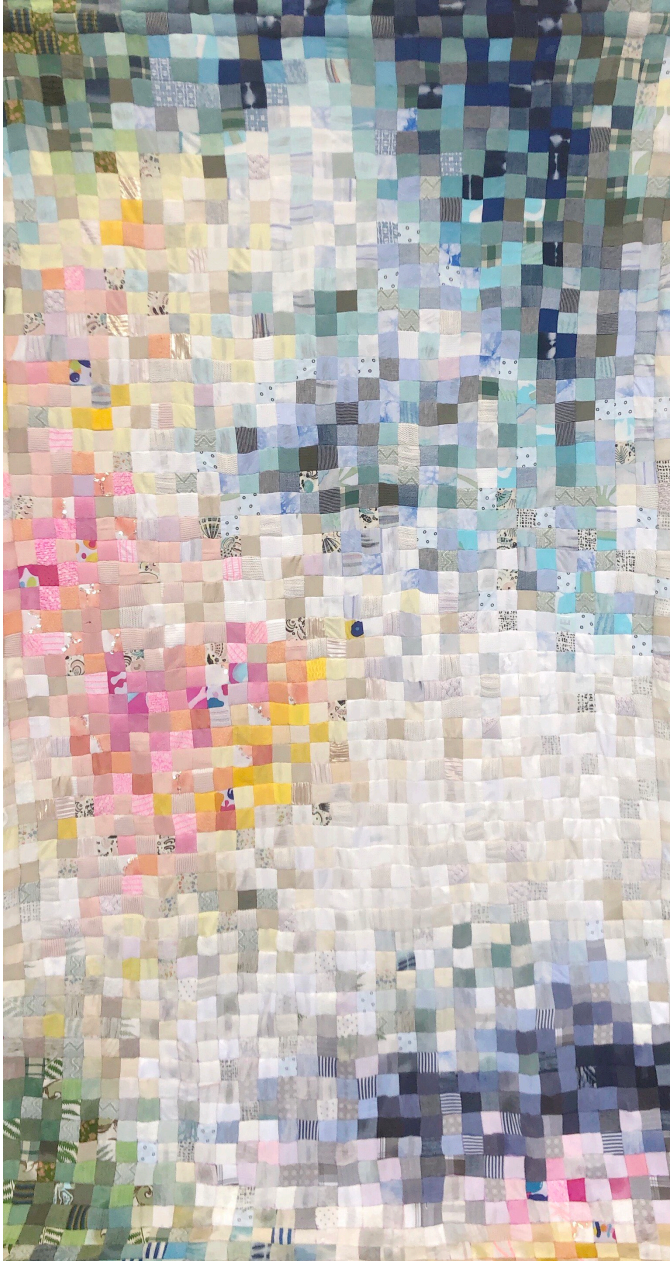
The Rolodex (Fig. 17, 19) is fixed to the wall just below eye-level to the right of the quilted work. It is filled with a plethora of cards ready to be flipped through by gallery goers. Each card provides a storied snapshot of the personal histories of individual fabrics making up the wall hanging's thousands of quilted squares. The notations detailed in the Rolodex's 126 cards are personal to the artist, but also reflect the ways people interact and experience material items in daily life. The recollections serve to equally showcase a diverse range of associations: Sentimental moments of joy, triggers of pain, justifications of consumption (laced with regret), and the monotony of accumulation, all shine through the cards' brief writings. This work aims to pay attention to the personal nature of discarded goods, while also highlighting the vast amount waste we often unknowingly produce, further exemplified in the volume of rolo-dex cards and overflow of quilted fabric on the gallery floor.



Above: Fig. 16, side detail of the wall hanging's edge.



Above: Fig. 17, Detail of a Rolodex card from a favorite bag.



Top Left: Fig. 18, Frontal close up view of the wall hanging's center composition

Bottom Left: Fig. 19, Close up side views of the Rolodex and its 126 swatch cards hung in the gallery.

Below: Fig. 20, Angled Gallery view.



Conclusion

The implication of titling your work “Alexa Can't Let Anything Go” doesn't fully appear until you are left the final working day of gallery install, unwilling to turn it over to the staff until the last 12 minutes before the deadline. I can confidently say that I have never spent so much time on one project or work of art. And like the 126 textile items that I catalogued in this piece's Rolodex, the time I've spent on this work, along with the milestone it now represents, paved a newfound attachment that is hard for me to let go of. Although I had always planned to keep working on this after the thesis show was over- the quilt's raw edges and Rolodex's remaining unused cards can attest- I realize now, how fitting that is. A professor told me at the end of the opening that the vulnerability of my memories logged in the Rolodex is what held her attention the most, because it allowed her to relate to the quilt beyond it's aesthetic quality. Reading traces of my memories, both the pivotal and the monotonous, had enabled her to consider what this kind of archive would look like if applied to her own life, her own possessions, memories, and inevitably, her own textile trash. While I believe that in scale, composition, and story telling, this work communicates my intentions well, I also know that I have more used textiles to quilt, and Rolodex cards to write.

Early in the ideation of the wall hanging, I had a meeting with a visiting artist, who asked me, “With tedious work like this, I always wonder, how do you decide when you're done? When do you think you'll feel satisfied that you've sewn the final square?” and as soon as the words left her lips, the clear answer for me was, “It is only really done when there is no more trash, when the piles of clothes are gone, and when I've tamed all of the chaos”. Taming the chaos of my own waste, I realize now (2,100 quilt squares later), is something that will be an ongoing part of my life. Sustainable practice takes awareness first, but then commitment, time, and care. Despite my best efforts, I still produce small amounts of trash most days. This project allowed me to hold on to my detail-oriented perfectionism in it's construction, but it also showed me how ease up some, and find value in other parts of my process. I wrestled with how to be vulnerable and honest about the wasteful and messy moments of my life, and I believe I found a way to do so, while still speaking to my audience in the careful way I always assumed only perfect craftsmanship could.

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