2018

Of the Crickets

Kathryn Lien
Virginia Commonwealth University

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Of the Crickets

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by
Kathryn Lien
BFA University of Washington 2012

Directors Kendall Buster, Gregory Volk

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May 2018
Acknowledgments

My partner, inspiration, dedication, my love Jessica Lawrence
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Abstract

OF THE CRICKETS

Kathryn Lien, Master of Fine Arts

Partial Fulfillment Statement

Virginia Commonwealth University 2018

Matt King, Chair

Of the Crickets imagines the overlapping worlds of ethical ecological solutions to climate changed sustenance and the potential for collective excellence in female exclusive environments. Using garments, furniture, site-specific installation and directed performance, the project harnesses social and material sensitivity to mine solutions for idealized living.
Concrete is the most consumed material on earth, after water. An industrial product of cement, sand, gravel, and other raw materials, concrete use in development skins the ground with impervious rock. Cement paste binds the aggregate rocks together, activated with water to produce a chemical reaction called hydration. Hydration attaches a node to every cement particle, expanding, reaching out to grasp ahold of another particle’s node. When linked, the cement settles permanently, each particle held forever by those around it. Cement itself owes this holding power to the limestone in its makeup. Limestone, a sedimentary rock composed of the mineral calcite, forms in shallow marine waters. Shelled marine organisms and corals die, leaving behind their calcium carbonate skeletons en masse to lithify, providing a sedimentary layer to be mined, heated, and reintroduced to the water as concrete.

As the severity of storms increases in coastal areas, water winds through streets, entering and exiting buildings searching for the naked earth into which it can relax. In US cities, the amount of penetrable earth surfaced with hardscape is forty times that of rural areas. This clogs the pores of top-layer stratification, forcing incoming water to anxiously sit atop the built environment, its own concrete shoes essentially sinking it to the seabed’s floor. The National Flood Insurance program subsidizes the stilting of housing affected by this yearly
flooding, leaving the concrete strata beneath the water while giving homes legs that enter them in the losing race away from the water’s rise. Concrete walls, ceiling, and floor define the bounds of this last room.

*Of the Crickets* builds a world upon a bed of cork, the skin of trees buoyantly floating atop the tide. The floor meets its inhabitants with a gentle give, rising and falling between the stocking*ed* feet of the women and the water below. This project constructs a space that does not run away from the climate changed but instead rushes to meet it. An image of water flow cascades across the cork, breaking only at icons of fallen leaves and patterned lines permanently depicting filtered light from the room’s only window (Figure 1).

A single bench splits a Mann/McLoud/Von Derau pentagon between upholstered cushions and laterally joined wood blocks (Figure 2). The 15th (and thought to be final) pentagon that can tile the plane was discovered in 2015. Only 15 pentagons, three hexagons, and all quadrilaterals and triangles can tile the plane, stacking end to end horizontally with no gaps or overlaps into infinity. The bench is but one. The cushion’s textiles repeat a motif of found foliage, scaling up a peach pit that was collected in an infantile fruiting stage and dried, preserving its fuzz on the surface (Appendix B Image 1). Portals reach into the seats, creating spaces for hands to hold below the surface.
The lumber of the furniture’s structure comes from naturally felled domestic box elder, whose surface stains with red phenals, colorfully painting a surface that denotes the material’s lived history. Native to Pennsylvania and other parts of North America, box elder (Acer negundo) is also known as Manitoba maple, elf maple, ashleaf maple, and maple ash. Unlike its sister maple varieties, the box elder falls short of utility for most common maple production. Its sap is high in sugar and sometimes referred to as “mountain molasses.” It has a soft, straight grain, but is considered inconsistent and therefore useless for industrial lumber production. It is most often chipped and powdered for the construction of products such as fiberboard and MDF. This furniture piece returns
to the potential utility of box elder, with boards milled from naturally felled trees, split open, sanded, and waxed to reveal the complex aesthetics of their interiors. The wooden table of the bench traces deep black fungal lines and pink bleeding washes, the same faults that render this product useless in commercial production. This bench is both ergonomic and transformative, creating spaces for bodies to rest while moving them through its determined spatial and temporal logic.

In the only window is a shutter of vented wooden slats. The vent creates a barrier that is both physical and invisible – that allows its negative space to draw light into lines. It perforates the architecture. Laminated hardwood creates each slat: box elder, beech, locust, and walnut harvested from the same 50-acre plot in Pennsylvania. Laminated in order of lightness, the strips of walnut sit angled beneath the slats above them, depicting the place where a shadow may fall. The compositions of these slats use the material to draw imagined light as the vent itself draws its reality in the beams that it casts.

Figure 2
The room illustrates this world’s entirety, decorated as both an expansive landscape and an enclosed space. The ideal environment for experimental living overlaps the predicted world of climate changed materialism and the potential excellence of the female exclusive group.
The Performance

*Praise the carrying to/ & the carrying away,*

The women enter the room and leave the room. They wet the mud to sink in their fingertips, germinating their seeds, decomposing their fruit. When they meet one another, their garments come alive, connecting with one another and entangling the wearers’ bodies. To zip into one another, or to wear their partner’s sleeve as their own, the women explore the inherent possibilities for dress to encourage social connectivity. In the cycle of dressing and undressing, individual acts of care culminate in creative bursts of intelligence exclusive to their group. When the garments move amongst an audience, they offer the strange desire to zip into them and be carried into their surviving world. The women do not see the audience – these performers move atop reality without engaging in it, moving to and from the room while searching for one another.

The project considers materials for their ecological ethics and the possibility to point towards a new kind of sustainable solution in regard to a changed climate. By looking towards domestic craft, a historically female sphere, *this work* can empower the individual body by stretching the usual boundaries of function. Combined with a focus on the biodegradable object, these tender actions to care for the self and the community provide fruitful avenues toward an environmentally and socially productive lifestyle. The garments in *Of the Crickets* misbehave, inserting an act of subversion into the tight lineage of domestic
clothes-making. The maker’s role is to set up the framework for bodily investigation, expressions of touch, and experimentation in the spaces between female bodies.

The single unifying garment of the women is their pair of shorts (Figure 3). Fit to each woman’s body in white canvas, the shorts differ in the images depicted but unite in form. Designed to mimic the attire provided at Spa World, a Korean style spa, the shorts appear as a one-size fits all in order to support the particularities of individual bodies. These shorts temper the experience of emergence from the fully nude, female exclusive bath pool into mixed-gender, clothed areas. The shorts in Of the Crickets use this design to acknowledge this format’s ability to foster a supportive relationship between the body and the garment.

Recent research has found the makeup of the highest scoring collective intelligence in groups to be composed entirely of women. This is thought to result from increased levels of social sensitivity. Group intelligence is measured by providing a group of individuals with an IQ test taken together, with all members of a group coming to each answer through discussion, debate, inquiry, and trust.
Groups composed of experts and strong leaders, who may score higher as individuals, perform poorly as members of a group. Skills like listening, empathetic reasoning, and rational debate seem to harness to power of the aggregate intelligence of a collective. The only group demographic that consistently scores highest is the female-exclusive. This effect is mirrored at many ages and levels of industry. In mixed gendered (majority male) corporate environments, individual women adopt the traits and behaviors of their male coworkers. This mirroring instinct dissolves as more women are represented in a group. Though the Boy Scouts of America allowed girls to join previously male-exclusive troops in 2017, the Girl Scouts of America shows that girls perform better as leaders and supporters when involved in female-exclusive groups and show less confidence and leadership skills when among mixed gender groups. By harnessing this dynamic potential, the four female performers use their garments to enact gestures of tenderness, touch, care, and intimacy towards one another. In attempts to find forward-thinking solutions to social and environmental troubles, the female-exclusive group may provide a model for collective listening and reasoning that can drastically improve the outlook of a larger social group.

*Of the Crickets* relies on the garment to indulge in this possibility, looking at clothing as the site of activation that lies closest to the skin. The garments the Mud, the Water, the Seed, and the Fruit determine the movement of the women who wear them, including exponential possibilities for care and connectivity as
the garments encounter one another. Zippers, buttonholes, sleeves, cords, and buckles entangle the garments, and the women wearing them, with one another. The touches of the women attach them into chains of connected bodies, intimately creating new potentials for wear, movement, function, and touch. These connections and disconnections erase the notion of the hem as the end of an item and situate it as the place from which the garment extends toward other bodies.

The actions of the performers flutter between the improvisational, the responsive, and the familiar. Comprised of two dancers and two performance artists, the group of women exhibited distinct sensibilities in relationship to their own bodies, others’ bodies, and the possibilities of movement within a space. They performed within the larger gallery containing other works, where the audience and the other artworks became the backdrop for their movement as misbehaving sculptures. Each performer took their movement cues from one another, waiting in a given room until one of their partners arrived. Upon seeing one another, the women came together with magnetic force and engaged in a spontaneous process of interacting with their garments together. An interaction could be as gentle as buttoning another’s button or as involved as the penetration of an arm through another’s sleeve while buckled into a third’s unzipped bodice. The course of the performance begins with the Mud, followed by the Water, followed by the Seed, followed by the Fruit. Over time, they exit in
the same order, engaging their place in the cycle. By performing for four hours, the women engaged in a true process of acquaintanceship with their own garment, those of the other performers, the room, and the gallery itself. To witness the performance was to see exploration and agency realized, supported by the framework of the garments.
The Mud

*Its salt stitch & always going on/ With its back to dominion, & country,*

The Mud reaches inside of herself, through her belly button and out of her shoulder. The yokes on her shoulders enter *otoshiana*, the garment’s interior passageways, providing external sleeves for her partner’s arms and the trace of that touch when left empty. *Otoshiana* is the Japanese term for pit, or pitfall, or trap, denoting the precipice where the body may succumb to another’s touch.

The cotton textile depicts enlarged images of ceramic squares (Appendix B Image 2), each indented with a single fingerprint. Individual squares do not repeat across the bodice, each item a unique icon of touch torn at its tattered edges where it was cut from a larger slab of clay. The stoneware, fired to 2000 degrees F, is unglazed but unvitrified, unchanging in form but able to suck water in and out of its pores. This fired stoneware anchors the garment at the mineral level, clothed in the presumed permanence of heated clay, feldspar, and silicia.

This mud is the only material that can maintain the record of the touch. When conformed to the body, this ceramic touch extends through the otoshiana, its exoskeleton provides a stable platform concealing its vacuous interior labyrinth. Each otoshiana enters at the center of a ceramic fingerprint, allowing the outstretched index finger to depress through the body by puncturing the
garment at the belly and exiting through the shoulder. The Mud can penetrate herself, inserting her own arm through an otoshiana at her bellybutton.

The Mud begins the performance. She waits in the last room, pacing the floor and punctuating the quiet with the snapping of a buckle at the end of her right sleeve, clipping into and out of itself. Sitting on the bench, she explores the pathways through the cushion and out the other side, the labyrinth of her own garment mirrored by the furniture. Lacing up the right sleeve cinches the material around her arm. The Water rushes into the room and they attach. Her front panel ends in a zipper, latching onto the back of the Water. The Mud is the stable earth made slick by the Water, coating the spaces between toes and catching the landscape of the skin.
The Water

Praise the water who helps us to see/ Our smallness by/ Not seeing us,

The Water guides the others in and out of the room, both sustaining and destructive. This garment is one piece, the top connected to the shorts at the elastic waistband. Its right sleeve (Figure 4) is a weatherproof gray and the left is tanned Icelandic catfish leather. The leather, gifted from a friend’s Icelandic mentor, speckles the sleeve with the spots of scaleless, smooth, puckered fish skin. Icelandic fish tanneries produce these goods as byproducts of the fishing industry, running their facilities in isolated towns with geothermal energy. The Atlantic wolffish, or Atlantic catfish, is caught for food in the deep sea waters surrounding Iceland. Wolffish skin has been used as footwear in Iceland for hundreds of years. The animal dines exclusively on mollusks, swallowing the calcium carbonate shells of its prey. This wolf, or cat, decorates the arm of the Water, cementing a relationship with the waves and she moves around the other performers.

Between the sleeves, slats of fabric lay across one another, vertically pleating a bodice. The front of each slat is a weatherproof gray, attached at a seam to a weatherproof black at the place where the slats overlap. The construction mirrors that of the vent and the radiator, the material describing a place where the shadow would fall. These pieces

Figure 4
draw darkness where shadows are presumed, diagraming themselves prior to activation. As the Water moves throughout the building, she unzips a sleeve and the slats fall away, the form of the bodice changing with its layered, not sewn, construction. As the slats fall the garment’s interior is revealed as pastel and gold, cracked open like mother of pearl lining an oyster shell.

The room’s radiator echoes this top. Vertical strips of fabric demark the pipes of the radiator, hugging its form as a pleated dressing. As the pleats move toward the center, the fabric becomes darker in color. Black fabric strips sewn between the vertical pieces describe the space receding between each pipe (Figure 5). This radiator’s garment reflects the logic of this performer, whose top reflects the logic of the vented window. These mirrors realize the body of the radiator and window, architectural actors that depict the shape of heat and light.

Seated on the room’s bench in the midmorning, the sun comes through the vented window and casts the drawing of its negative space across the Water’s leg. These repeated strokes of light distort as they trace her thigh and fall onto the floor, undulating with the waves carved into the cork. Decorating the shorts of the garment is the image of the shape of this light. Repeating lines drape across her right leg, in the same
formation as those engraved in the cork floor and drawn by the light coming through the vented window. As she walks through the space she carries this time from the room on her body, bringing it to every encounter with the other performers.

The Water acts as the tide from the room, carrying the performance into the gallery before washing it back onto the cork floor. Vertical, interchangeable zippers lie amongst the slatted bodice, zipping into the hem of the Mud, the zipper of the Seed, and the hood of the Fruit. This garment can perform the apex of the project, the elemental actor of both the essential and the changing. The Water is the woman on whom the rest quietly rely.
The Seed

who/ Helps us face oblivion, oblivion

The Seed bursts through the gaps between zipper pulls. Cut like a tailored blouse with darts, pleats, and yokes (Figure 6), this garment is then cleaved into disparate panels absent sleeve and neck holes. Two zippers, each three yards long containing 12 zipper pull tabs act as fluid seams. They run across the edges, around the bodice, leaping beyond the hem. The garment only opens where an opening is created, closing an entry just as easily with the soft grinding of the pull tab clenching the teeth back together. The Seed unzips to create the spaces where she can reach out with an arm or a head, tugging another zipper tab toward her body to close off the excess space. A zipper runs from her collarbone off the front edge of her top, touching the floor as it loops back up and into her side. A zipper runs over her
right shoulder and becomes the closed seam of a seven-foot long sleeve, opened and entered at any given point.

The Seed wears satin fabrics **printed with** popcorn piles (Appendix B Images 3 and 4) and cotton fabrics **printed with** oversized cracked peanut shells (Appendix B Image 5). Her popcorn bodice turns from a buttery yellow to the metallic gray of a graphite mark. The Seed remembers the extinction of these staple crops that embody simultaneity. The corn kernel and the peanut are both the seed and the product of the seed. Increasing global temperatures and drought may extinguish the climate that these crops desire - taking with it the industrial byproducts of these seeds. Corn oil, peanut oil, corn syrup, peanut butter, dextrose, glucose, dextrin, maltodextrin, lecithin, fructose, high fructose, vegetable starch, corn starch, baby corn, popcorn, corn nuts, corn flakes, sorbitol, imitation saffron, and Cracker Jack would either vanish or be supplanted by other sources. Proposed replacement grains for corn are sorghum and buckwheat, which both contain a drop of water inside of their hull that, when heated, turns into steam and creates enough pressure to burst through the hull identical to popped corn, but 1/8 of the size. The body of the garment, sewn in taut satin, acts as the body’s stiff hull, able to burst under the correct conditions.

The sleeves of the garment depict broken peanut shells. The peanut, the colloquial nut and technical legume, grows by reaching up toward the sun to fruit and then racing back into the soil to **develop** fully. The hulls of this bean scatter
across the seven foot sleeve of the Seed’s garment, its single zipper seam connecting it to the bodice, but closing it off as a separate husk, left to drag on the floor when not in use (Figure 7). The sleeve opens and closes as a sleeve for any arm, wearable for any body that the Seed interacts with. Ending in a black, weatherproof cuff, this sleeve contains the most direct piece of a garment: the cuffed sleeve to be opened and closed, as inherently flexible as the three-yard zipper.

Figure 7

Attached to the side of a zipper is an external pocket, unzipped to reveal its second zipper, unzipped to hold a parcel of peach pits. Like those pits dangling at the end of the room’s light pull, these exist in the project as the truest stasis of the cycle. They move throughout the performance, buried in the otoshiana of the bench and the hands of the performers.
The Fruit
& live, & know that we’ll choose/ Flowers still

The Fruit is the center of attention. The Fruit ends and begins the sustained life cycle, her growth relying entirely on her predecessors and her decomposition supplying vitality to the soft earth to grow anew. The simple top creates a t-shirt patterned after Y-3, a collaboration between Yohji Yamamoto and Adidas. In apparel cotton, this top repeats a damask pattern of leaves and fruit (Appendix B Image 6). These repeating images are built from an assortment of fruits collected with their leaves at a very young stage, hung to dry, then scanned and arranged. This drying process caused the young fruits to shrivel and harden, not to rot, preserving them in the state between the initial spurt of growth and the full maturity of being edible. The peaches, collected at the size of a ping pong ball, shriveled to the size of their pits, their young fuzz adhering to the pit’s nooks and crannies. It is these fuzzy pits that appear in faux suede on the bench in the last room, that repeat in denim on the cushion which exits the otoshiana, and in satin on the chest of the Fruit.

The damask, here using the flattened printed pattern and not the woven construction, appears on both the Fruit’s bodice and the bench’s largest cushion. At the neck of the garment attaches a 10-foot long hood (Figure 8), extending on to the floor like the train of a gown. This hood is lined with a satin pattern repeating the same foliage included in the damask print, arranged with the
branches and leaves overlapping one another (Appendix B Image 7), cascading the brush down the back of the garment and out onto the floor. The back of the hood begins as a peach pastel at the neck, becoming weatherproof black fabric at the place where the hood meets the floor.

The Fruit wears the hood atop her head, laid out behind her, atop the other’s heads, dangling over a balcony, and zipped into another’s garment. Two otoshiana begin shoulder width apart on the hood’s interior and exit on the backside, acting as sleeves for another body to wear. The hood is dropped inch by inch over a railing, becoming a curtain, part of the spatial layout. The Fruit and the Seed entangle one another, their garments dragging behind them and tying them together.

Inside the room, the Fruit motif is repeated across the textiles of the bench. The cushions display the damask in durable canvas, the peach pit in suede and denim. The hood rests on a beam of birch jutting from the bench’s top, wearing the clothes of the performers just as they wear one another’s.
& the pure, black trying/ Of the crickets.

Exiting the room, the shorts are folded atop the bench, and the Water, the Mud, the Seed, and the Fruit hang entwined, zipped and hooked into the concrete hallway.
Bibliography


Appendix A

Praise the water, now,
Praise the last room,
Praise the carrying to
& the carrying away,
Its salt stitch & always going on
With its back to dominion, & country,
Praise the water who helps us to see
Our smallness by
Not seeing us, who
Helps us face oblivion, oblivion
& live, & know that we’ll choose
Flowers still
& the pure, black trying
Of the crickets.

Full text of praise the water, now from Aracelis Girmay’s The Black Maria
Appendix C

Performance documentation
April 6, 2018
5-9 PM
Photos by Kathryn Lien and Patrick Harkin
Performers Michelle Koppl, Joy McMillian, Kari Schackmann, Natasha Kovacs
Vitae

Education
2012  Bachelor of Fine Arts, 3D4M/Three-Dimensional Forum, University of Washington, Seattle
2011  UW Studio Art Program in Rome, Rome, Italy
2010  UW Comparative History of Ideas Program in Prague, Prague, Czech Republic

One and Two Person Exhibitions
2018  By Toast I Mean Sugar, Southern Exposure Project Space, St. Augustine, FL
2018  Always Already, The Anderson, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
2015  This is Where We Live Now, Gallery II, The Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, VT
2014  White Girls, Blindfold Gallery, Seattle, WA
2014  Longing, Gray Galery, Philadelphia, PA
2012  Of Place and Time, UW 3D4M Gallery, Seattle, WA

Group Exhibitions
2018  MFA Thesis Exhibitions, The Anderson, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
2017  In Consequence of Everything, Also, Random Access Space, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
2017  Room Before, Visual Arts Center, University of Texas Austin, Austin, TX
2017  Snakes & Ladders, The Anderson, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
2017  misc., 1515 W Broad, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
2017  the past is calling the present is fleeting the future is calling, The Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
2016  How's My Driving?, FAB Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
2016  Current Elements, HackRVA, Richmond, VA
2016  Granfalloon, FAB Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
2016  Eight Hour Projects, The Galleries at Allegheny College, Meadville, PA
2015  Vermont Studio Center Showcase, Studio Place Arts, Barre, VT
2015  Staff Showcase, Gallery II, The Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, VT
2013  Locale, The Painted Bride Art Center, Philadelphia, PA
2013  Vigil: Inspired by Memory, lovecitylove Gallery, Seattle, WA
2013  3D4M Senior Exhibition, Jacob Lawrence Gallery, Seattle, WA
2012  Strange Coupling, Object, Seattle, WA
2012  DUPED!, The Piranha Shop, Seattle, WA
2012  Weather-or-Not, Pier 22/23, Seattle, WA
2012  SoA Winter Juried Show, Juried by Greg Bell, Jacob Lawrence Gallery, Seattle, WA
2011  SoA Summer Juried Show, Juried by Allison Milliman, Jacob Lawrence Gallery, Seattle, WA
Honors & Awards
2018  Dean’s Graduate Travel Grant to St. Augustine, FL, Virginia Commonwealth University
2017  Graduate Teaching Assistant Scholarship & Full Tuition Reimbursement, Virginia Commonwealth University
2017  Dean's Graduate Travel Grant to Austin, TX, Virginia Commonwealth University
2017  Dean's Graduate Travel Grant to Syracuse, NY, Virginia Commonwealth University
2017  Pollock/Krasner and VSC Joint Fellowship, The Vermont Studio Center
2016  Graduate Teaching Assistant Scholarship & Full Tuition Reimbursement, Virginia Commonwealth University
2014  Visual Artist Grant, The Vermont Studio Center
2014  Artist Scholarship, Pilchuck Glass School
2013  Grace C. and Bernard de Cillia Endowed Scholarship Graduating with Excellence Award, Undergraduate, Art Department, University of Washington

Publications

Residencies & Workshops
2017  Visual Artist Fellow, Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, VT
2016  The Make Your Own Loneliness Project, Murrell's Inlet, SC
2014  Visual Artist in Residence, Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, VT
2014  "Molds and Mayhem" Workshop with Amie McNeel and John Chapman, Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, WA

Professional Experience
2017  Instructor, PROJECT in Sculpture + Extended Media, Art Foundations, Virginia Commonwealth University
2017  Shop Monitor, AFO Wood Shop, Virginia Commonwealth University
2016  Teacher's Assistant, Basic Sculpture, Sculpture + Extended Media, Virginia Commonwealth University
2015  Visual Arts Coordinator, The Vermont Studio Center
2013-14  Lead Assistant, Work's Wood Studio
2013-14  Gallery Assistant, Taylor Backes Glass Studio
2013  Co-Curator Director, Strange Coupling 2013
2013  Artistic Assistant, Mad Dog Productions
2012  Teaching Intern, Art 373 Intermediate Sculpture, University of Washington
2012  Teaching Intern, Art 273 Beginning Sculpture Winter, University of Washington
2011-12  Artist’s Assistant, Allan Packer
2011  Student Researcher, UW 3D Printing Solheim Lab, University of Washington

Bibliography