Humans Are Dust

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*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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Humans Are Dust

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

By
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Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2024
Bachelor of Fine Arts, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2018

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To my late Aunts, Kay and Mimi, this is for you.
Abstract

I probe how objects act as intermediaries between people. These explorations reflect on the delicate navigation that happens when we intertwine our lives with others. My curiosities lie in the fuzzy aura of human life that encircles materials. Do our materials possess life or do we imbue and inject the materials in our world with personalities reflective of ourselves? My motivation for this project is to highlight the stories infused in and witnessed by things we surround ourselves with and use daily.
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“It isn’t a terrible life to be surrounded with dust bunnies, 
but they are made with people dust, which means they hold people secrets…”
- Cory Borkowski, letter correspondence, November 2023
Introduction, plus a little background

I probe how objects act as intermediaries between people. These explorations reflect on the delicate navigation that happens when we intertwine our lives with others. My curiosities lie in the fuzzy aura of human life that encircles materials. Do our materials possess life or do we imbue and inject the materials in our world with personalities reflective of ourselves? The motivation for my work is to highlight the stories infused in and witnessed by things we surround ourselves with and use.

Chelsea Nanfelt Rowe
Still
Grandma’s hair curler, “East Coast Bumble” honey, cork, glass, 7 x 3”, 2022
Photo by Madeleine Morris

Chelsea Nanfelt Rowe
Hold
Grandma’s hair curler, copper, sterling silver, 7 x 4 x 3 cm, 2022
Photo by Madeleine Morris
My work engages human nature’s desire to be known. After four years of making production-style jewelry, I had the itch to use non-traditional materials to communicate my ideas. I began to contextualize mundane objects, imagining new lives for them. While looking through my studio bins, I opened a bag of hair curlers, once belonging to my grandmother. It smelled just like her. There even were pieces of her delicate, dark gray hair embedded in the curler foam. I altered the materials using metalsmithing techniques with the hydraulic press, jeweler’s saw, and rolling mill. I gave life to the materials by reimagining their existence. Manipulating the hair curlers, I clung to the fading scent I missed. When I squeezed the last remaining turquoise curler through steel rollers, I could not bear losing the connection I still feel with my grandmother. Making these pieces allowed me to distill a yearning for and relationship with a person into objects—A box containing a hair curler still filled with the scent of my grandmother, another preserved in honey, and another embedded in beeswax. Hair rollers, honey, and honey bees became steeped with memory, turning forgotten objects into new entities. By mining the peripheral information I learned through bee byproducts, I learned that my work was not about the honey bees, the sticky liquid gold they produce, or hair curlers. My work was the physical and material manifestation of my social and emotional experiences and connecting them to materials.

While working on the Connecting Series, I considered the bonds between people, objects, and surroundings. I translated these observations and curiosities into 60 watercolor paintings. Painting allowed me to sketch an image quickly without hesitation. The painted shapes appeared functional yet flowed instead
of connecting mechanically. I transformed these paintings into jewelry using metal, wood, and color in combination with analog and digital fabrication. The shift between materials and techniques was important. The blur between two and three-dimensionality, analog and digital making, and meandering within functional and seemingly functionless objects and shapes supported the interconnectivity I explored and continue investigating.

Chelsse Nan'felt Rowe
Connecting Series: Brooch #1
Reclaimed wood, recycled sterling silver, steel, 6 x 4 x .25"
Photo by Manavi Sirgh
A meditation in my artistic practice has been to notice what I notice. As someone with a transient life, I spent hours on the highway. Time on the road informed my understanding of design thinking because of what I observed. I obsessed over amazingly different semi-truck designs while driving from state to state. Each had uniquely designed frames, ratchet straps, colors, netting, and securing to carry their large loads. These custom truck forms fueled my thinking as I painted and constructed jewelry. Designer Daniel Basso’s Pink Brooch On A Truck¹ adorned semi-trucks with

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a larger-than-life brooch. During this art project, industrial trucker life in Argentina was presented with such contradiction to the hot pink lacquered brooch attached to the front of the truck. Basso used scale to highlight the contrast between the truck body and the brooch.

“The things people know for sure will change. There is no knowing for a fact. The only dependable things are humility and looking.”
- Richard Powers,
The Overstory, minute 10:41

Chelsea Narfelt Rowe
On adorning
Wood scraps, sterling silver, steel, nylon, Richmond aluminum and plastic, 14 x 10 x 10 cm, 2023
Photo by Wesley Meyer
Like Daniel Basso, I often use scale as a tool in my jewelry making. My jewelry confuses traditional conventions of how large a piece *should* be when worn on the body (think diamond engagement rings, pearl necklaces, charm bracelets). I aim to broaden my audience’s understanding of what jewelry can be. Jewelry is a form of adornment meant to highlight the body or be a focal point. What happens when jewelry is impractical for daily wear because of its size? Perhaps the pendant in the necklace is the size of a shoebox. Using scale as a tool creates a more self-conscious experience of the work for viewers, testing familiar jewelry styles and sizes. I design my work for the body and understand traditional jewelry customs, but I challenge these assumptions through scale. I rely on the imagination and attention of my audience to consider a new kind of jewelry that is almost ridiculous. Through this experience, the viewer is more aware of their body in relation to the jewelry they see, as I am when designing the work.

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Material Use: Parts of Objects

Material exploration is significant in my work. In particular, the movement towards a more environmentally and socially responsible jewelry field drew me into a like-minded community and continues to sustain my attention. The article I wrote for Metalsmith Magazine follows. This project clarified my interests and what I aim to explore.
We cannot untether material use from social and environmental contexts. Metal mining, in particular, has a significant footprint. Before I unwrap a fresh sheet of sterling silver in my studio, it is laden with its own history. It was extracted from the ground, sent to a refiner, rolled into sheet, packaged, and shipped to me. This singular sheet of silver has affected human lives other than my own before landing on my bench. These implications are often damaging politically, socially, and environmentally. Artist Keith A. Lewis recognized the imperative to interrogate our cumulative material effect in his 1989 *Metalsmith* article *Ethics of Materials*. He discussed the burden of materials like ivory, diamonds, and exotic wood, even before using them, and how artists respond to these realities. However, in this article, I will address various uses of precious metals, as well as lower-value materials like trash and costume jewelry. Material choice must be determined by our values and the concepts we want to communicate. Setting up a framework of guiding principles is the first step toward a better future.

Every artist uses personal values and philosophies when selecting materials and making work. In my studio practice, I am interested in learning about how others channel these guidelines so that I can understand how to forge my own set of guidelines. I have been seeking responsible material practices since 2018 when I was an undergraduate student. At that time, I co-hosted

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Radical Jewelry Makeover* (RJM) in collaboration with RJM co-directors Susie Ganch and Kathleen Kennedy at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. We worked to collect old, unwanted jewelry from my local community. These donations were disassembled and given to jewelers to reimagine into new jewelry. Donors signed a contract, acknowledging that “their items will be melt[ed] down, hammer[ed], cut and chang[ed] beyond recognition”. These “madeover” pieces went out into the community through a fundraising sale and exhibition. Donors were invited to share stories and also given a coupon to use, encouraging them to purchase a new piece. With hands greyed from sorting through piles of charms, chains, and bangles, I read one donor’s story. He described the relief he felt when donating a small gold pendant and ring from his late spouse. He had no one else to inherit these memories. In that moment I was struck by the enormous emotional weight we feel for the things we surround ourselves with. Additionally through RJM, I learned about the environmental impact and influence that we carry when making objects. And so my journey began, exploring the burdens our materials possess.

Shortly after graduating, I joined Ethical Metalsmith’s (EM) Emerging Jeweler Program to learn more about responsible studio practices through mentorship from more experienced jewelers. This group pulled me further into a professional community that shared similar values. My sustainability goals were reinforced as I grew my jewelry business. A few years into building my practice, I realized that I wanted focused time enriching my work conceptually. I specifically sought out the Craft and Material Studies graduate program at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, VA to be mentored by RJM’s co-director Susie Ganch, a rockstar in the sustainable jewelry movement. Now in my second year of graduate school, I am becoming more aware of the spectrum of and intentions behind material uses in our field. Through my guided research, I am learning that material extraction, especially metal, and gemstones, immensely

3 “Radical Jewelry Makeover Donation Form,” 2022.
impacts mining communities. By following other artists’ work on Instagram, I am noticing more jewelers sourcing and incorporating “responsible,” “reclaimed,” “alternative,” or “discarded” materials into their practice to offset these effects. This article is not an exhaustive study of material ethics. I will share my observations of what a “new” ethics of materials can look like within the artist's studio through the use of precious metals and low-value materials. This article builds upon the goals proposed in Lewis’ Ethics of Materials that center on an awareness of the burden that material carries. Lewis implores readers to “understand not only what we intend our work to mean, but what baggage and burdens our work takes on because of the context of our world”.4

As a member of the EM Students Committee**, whose headquarters are at VCU, I co-facilitate the annual international student exhibition and competition, So Fresh + So Clean (SF+SC). The exhibition highlights student artists working within and about sustainability. Rashele Alradaideh is a SF+SC 2023 participant and EM Student’s Choice Awardee. Alradaideh designed and fabricated a project entitled “What Remains of Alder Creek” in response to the recent call for entry. Their project magnifies “what the ecosystem in Alder Creek once was and what it has now become, [drawing] attention to harmful mining practices and their impacts on local ecosystems”.5 Before metal extraction operations, Alder Creek was “once abundant [with] populations of insects like caddisflies, beetles, [and] mayflies. Their habitat was soon overtaken by stoneflies, watermites, and blackflies, which were able to survive in such hostile conditions [due to metal deposits like zinc and copper in water sources]”.6 The artist created two sterling silver pieces. The first was to inform the audience about specific insects that inhabited Alder Creek before the landscape was damaged by mining. This piece was melted down to create the second iteration, resembling the insects that now exist in the harsher, post-metal extraction

4 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
environment. Alradaideh used this act of melting and remaking as a metaphor. They were motivated conceptually to point out the impact of metal mining and its overarching, long-term effect on the landscape.\(^7\)

I first encountered Sarah “SPEE” Parker’s work in 2022 at the RJM Artist Pop-Up in the North Carolina Museum of Art. Parker’s *Smoosh Collection* explores the ethos and perception of material value.\(^8\) Using traditional metal casting processes, the artist collages precious metals, costume jewelry findings, and gemstones reclaimed through RJM jewelry donations. In this series, cast elements hold aged, unwanted glass and plastic gems that I suspect would have ended up at the bottom of jewelry drawers or in the landfill. SPEE’s material usage diverts fast fashion waste and avoids new mining. Her work highlights the abundance of jewelry already a part of our society, pairing fast fashion items with durable jewelry-making tactics like cold connections. Faux and natural gemstones are prong set, so they may be disassembled in the future if needed. This collection is an example of designing for the future, placing value on making jewelry that can be taken apart and reused in the future. Over time, jewelry may break, styles change, and our emotional ties to an object may fade. Parker gives future jewelry designers the space to remake her jewelry. It also inspires fellow makers to rethink the sustainability of our material use and pursuits in the industry.

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\(^7\) Ibid.

“Process-driven cast aluminum and cast sterling silver jewelry with set components such as foil-backed antique plastic and glass gems. Reclaimed materials highlighted in this series celebrate aspirational environmental sustainability in the jewelry industry.”

- Sarah “SPEE” Parker
When considering the *ethics* of materials, it is essential to also consider waste. I worked for artist Yevgeniya Kaganovich as an undergraduate research assistant at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Kaganovich crochets and fuses disassembled used plastic grocery bags into 3-dimensional forms, stuffing them with the remnants from the making process. These plastic bags manifest as jewelry and sculpture, pointing out and upending our associations with material value. Abundant, used single-use plastics are reimagined in this work. The amount of synthetic material waste in our world is overwhelming. This work highlights slower craft processes while contrasting rapidly manufactured plastic bags populating the planet.

I want to acknowledge the numerous approaches and strategies already in motion, pushing toward a better industry before my journey begins. Keith Lewis is undoubtedly one of these guiding forces. Each artist carries a different lived experience and, with it, varying approaches - one artist might solely purchase gemstones from small-scale mines; another might eat completely vegan and bike to the studio; a third might seek zero-waste goals in their studio. These are differing outlooks, yet the collective sway of individual decisions has a critical effect that cannot be ignored. Keith Lewis rightly points out that “the responsibility to try to do right is still there, to hash out our differences of opinion and pool our experiences”. It is imperative to consider what our guiding forces are when selecting materials. They impact not only on the earth but also our fellow humans.

*RJM is an international traveling community jewelry-mining and recycling project that draws attention to the creativity and skills of local jewelry designers, reveals the stories behind our personal collections, and encourages reconsideration of our consumption habits. For more information, visit [www.radicaljewelrymakeover.org](http://www.radicaljewelrymakeover.org/).

**EM Students builds a community of students, engaging them in conversation about wise, sustainable studio practices. For more information, visit [www.ethicalmetalsmiths.org/em-programs](http://www.ethicalmetalsmiths.org/em-programs/).

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10 Ibid.
By writing the article above, I clarified that my curiosities lay heaviest within our social experiences of materials. Brooklyn, New York-based author Anita Bushell wrote *Object Essays* considering the emotional meaning of our objects in contemporary culture. The collection started with a prompt she created for a writing workshop: remember an object that made an emotional impression on you and write about it. At the beginning of the book, Bushell writes, “This collection is dedicated to my late mother, Alla Gutoff, who was the first person to make me think about the emotional attachment to objects.”¹¹ Bushell and I share similar sentiments. The *object* defines the spirit of the writing through descriptive language, narrative, and humor. Bushell writes, “I’ve always felt that material objects have less value for what they are, as opposed to what they represent. The white blouse with china blue flowers I once found at my grandmother’s house has absolutely no value as a clothing item, but I can’t begin to describe the feelings it elicits about time spent with a grandparent who left us long ago.”¹² She continues, “Materialism runs rampant in American culture; it’s showy, insubstantial… And yet the objects in our lives… however, give us pause to reflect on what *is* substantial about them: the emotions they elicit.”¹³ Aiming to highlight the personality of each object, Bushell uses storytelling to capture the humanity we surround our objects with. Growing up, I learned the emotional value of our things was grounded by those who owned and used them. Stories and wisdom surround our things. I value this perspective, which has led me to capture visual stories using sentimental materials in combination with found remnants from our urban and industrial environments.

¹² Ibid.
¹³ Ibid.
“‘Craftsmakers and artists,’” Slivka wrote, “[reach] inside and beyond the physical nature of the object.” While the physical is a point of departure, it is the intangible that gives meaning to the object. … “The object is a visual metaphor… The object provides a thereness, a physical place: it holds the space, marks the terrain, the geography of the metaphor.” I would add that craft objects do all of these things with a dynamic quality that begs for interaction, rather than passive “thereness” satisfied by mere visual perception alone.”

“Utility, lore, craft, dream converge within the prism of art and emerge self-insistent, abstract syntheses of the willful imagination. They collaborate with the material and dematerialize the material. They make no aesthetic conclusion. The objects are their own comment, their own drama. They accuse, they amuse, they challenge. Having shed their roles as functional or decorative intermediaries, they assume their own objective aspect, and we are brought face to face. While seeking the connection between object, person, and language, the makers create an absoluteness for each. The perspective is one of surreal space, of interacting isolation – of stillness, of object, of person, of space, of word.”

I use materials in my jewelry to locate myself in history. I source them from my daily experiences and social interactions. These are often from my studio, walks in the city, and the people in my life. Environmental concerns and hopeful perspectives challenge me to use discarded materials that will likely enter the landfill or settle into the ground over time. While taking daily walks, I source inspiration from materials I notice. If I have an immediate instinct and vision for a discarded material on the sidewalk, I will collect it and bring it to my studio to collage into future jewelry. If I see a material and do not have a gut reaction, I will leave it where I spotted it, sometimes returning to pick it up days (even weeks) later. I understand that I am one artist with

a vision—my actions to use materials over several months will not completely change the world’s abundant waste problem. But to me, it seems natural, even obvious, to be an artist in the 21st century utilizing materials already introduced to our consumer streams. By seeing trash and scrap material embedded in my work, I aim to inspire others to imagine outcomes for the remnants they encounter. Seeking connections between my daily experiences and studio work, I also gather and inherit materials from the people in my life. My friends and family support my work by gifting me old, unwanted jewelry, sentimental fabrics, and recently–broken plastic or steel found on the ground that made them think of me. It is a hopeful and often vulnerable thing to gift something to another person. Recognizing this, I bring the gifts to my studio, adding them to my material archive with gratitude, considering what the item meant to the giver before arriving to me. Gathering and receiving materials to collage into my work locates me in a time and place. It also motivates me to integrate non-traditional materials into my jewelry. The cultural meaning of my work will change over time and already does change based on who the viewer is. Yet, the viewer can glean much about my life from the materials I use. Patterned fabrics point to the domestic, something I think about often. Plastic remnants lead the viewers toward my urban environment concerns. Old, sentimental jewelry re-formatted into jewelry express my social curiosities. The details (always more details) and scale lead to a delightful newness within jewelry, communicating subtle mischief and humor. It is important to me to challenge cultural conventions by working with unconventional jewelry materials. The three artists described below are known for using non-traditional jewelry materials to create wearables. Each critiques and reimagines jewelry with a unique perspective.

Objects within human culture define our daily experiences and are ingrained in our memories. Throughout history, certain people have seen this impact as an almost magical ability, almost like the material is what makes a person transcend. The French-born, Australian-based artist Pierre Cavalon is a self-proclaimed ‘gatherer of materials’. Shells, cork, watches, old jewelry,
bone, nuts, and more are some materials that make their way into Cavalon’s imaginative jewelry. He uses traditional jewelry fabrication skills to collage found objects into wearables and explores the idea of jewelry’s protective presence. As a tool used in military, religion, royalty adornment, and jewelry, power is also of great interest in Cavalon’s work. Badges and collar-like necklaces are common formats used in the artist’s work, tying back to the idea of power given to the wearer through jewelry. The artist uses the underlying tone of taking power back in the brooch “Gun Control.” This politically charged work integrates a bullet casing, flowers, and bone. It was created after the Port Arthur massacre in Tasmania in 1996. The piece was purchased the day after the judge closed the case. Cavalan quoted Picasso, ‘Where things are concerned, there is no class distinction.’ Characterizing Cavalan’s work is location, tragedy, politics, travels, environmental decisions, living in Australia, and his vocation as a jeweler. The artist is driven to highlight and lift his chosen materials to a glorified standard, encrusted in gems, metal, and craft. Pierre Cavalan engages directly with jewelry’s ability to transform the wearer using old faux jewelry, political pins, and gemstones. These imbue a backstory of a life lived – perhaps even a wisdom* – of the components within the object. Combining materials that seem nonsensical or low-valued, the artist upturns how value is used to communicate power and prestige, almost eliminating value. No longer are military badges made with gold and precious gemstones. Instead, they contain old, discarded materials curated by the artist.

Cavalan glamorizes each material, encased in a sterling silver stone setting in a format that matches the other pieces he makes (badges, collar-style necklaces, amulets, etc.). He maintains a consistent formula in his work. My work also falls within the jewelry category, yet each piece is treated differently depending on my conversation with the material. My process is just that: process. I cannot process one moment in the same way as the next. What personality does the material have? How do I feel in the moment as I am creating? Are the colors
stimulating my eyes? Is the texture singing? I tap into knowledge from my finished projects as I create and solve new problems. Each piece manifests uniquely while it also informs the next.

The late Ramona Solberg labeled herself a jewelry artist, not a “metalsmith,” because of her process. She was motivated by the small objects she found on her numerous global travels. Solberg became familiar with the small collected tchotchkes, coins, and beads by considering how they might live in a new context. These items she collected were plucked out of another life she was unfamiliar with. She recontextualized these things into a jewelry format using jewelry fabrication techniques. When describing her work, she talked about her interactions with herself, the person she purchased from, the object, and the location. Yet, she collected these items because of their formal representation, not necessarily because of their cultural meaning specific to the place she visited.

I resonate with Solberg’s methods of extracting materials from a location because of her motivations to create a new kind of jewelry. But what were these motivations other than creating visually stimulating jewelry? Curating materials that Solberg was unfamiliar with freed her to fabricate new forms of jewelry that surprised both herself and her audience. I work similarly to Solberg, wanting to be surprised by material, form, and color in my daily studio practice. I combine these materials with sentimental materials, seeking contrast between the two. My

*Wisdom. Yes, it is an odd word to use for a thing. But I believe that while things do not behold a soul necessarily, they do carry the ability to make us imagine an existence for it in its future (what it will become - artist’s vision) and what it was (where it came from, who owned it, who made it, how was it made, where was the material extracted, etc.). For example, when Cavalan purchases material from an auction or finds it on a walk, the materials have a history. These materials are a place, or “thereness,” for humans to attach themselves and their experiences. More on this later.

18 Ibid.
jewelry background combines with my search for new and unusual compositions. Energized by this lens, I gather materials from the people in my life, my studio, and daily walks in Richmond. Materials vary, including recycled precious metals, fabric from my grandmother sewn into a small pillow, and car parts from my walk that are perfect for holding the bird's nest serendipitously found on a walk. Singling out materials that would otherwise be considered trash allows me to define a new normal, or story, for more sentimental materials used in my work. I also believe that the more “industrial” materials that support our societal infrastructures, such as steel fences, contrast the “sentimental” materials, pushing my understanding of value. I classify a sentimental material by its ability to evoke an emotion or memory. If a material was thoughtfully gifted to me by another person, it holds even more sentimental value. Sentimental materials help create our human experience. Is it the most sentimental material that I care about most? These are the things that make human experiences.
My considerations focus on human-made matter integrated into our personal and social lives, similar to artist Bob Ebendorf. Bob Ebendorf is a non-traditional jewelry-making hero in my eyes. Ebendorf talks about how he “gleans” and constantly collects materials from his walks and frequented flea markets. Instead of using diamonds and gold in his work, he uses broken steel spoons, plastic sporks, driftwood, old earrings, typewriter buttons, and tape measures, just to name a few. Ebendorf believes the intrinsic value of his work is design skill and language. Value is placed on the time and experience of the artist instead of the material. For Ebendorf’s audience, his jewelry creates curiosity and confusion about worth and adornment. His perspective creates a unique dynamic between the artist and the material, giving gravity to materials that others would likely consider trash. Materials are democratized, so each is seen through equalizing lenses as the artist works. This is a throughline between Ebendorf’s work and mine. I use my practice to discover

20 ibid.
and reimagine, similar to Ebendorf. On the other hand, I aim to interrogate the idea of value by including sentimental materials in my work. A critical lens is not overt in my work but embodied in the process. Ebendorf and I reimagine and speculate a different value system through making jewelry.

In the book *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, author Edmund de Waal describes his perspective on objects. The author details a set of passed-down, sentimental wooden figurines with amber eyes. He expresses the life that this collection of small Japanese netsuke experienced. How has it experienced life, what has it seen, and who has owned it? The author, a celebrated ceramicist, then describes his clay pots. Each item is *handled* a certain way based on its fabrication process and the maker’s skill. By looking at a mug, he understands how it will feel, function, and react to the hand. “All this matters because my job is to make things. How objects get handled, used, and handed on is not just a mildly interesting question for me. It is *my* question. I have made many, many thousands of pots…”21 Some of de Waal’s clients talk about the life of the pot. De Waal reacts by saying, “And, as a potter, I find it a bit strange when people who have my pots talk of them as if they are alive: I am not sure if I can cope with the afterlife of what I have made. But some of the objects seem to retain the pulse of their making.”22 “*It was supposed to house life*…” is a necklace completed in 2023. Worn around the neck as a sash, beads, and boxes from my grandmother are secured to two steel frames I found on a walk. Through the fabrication process, I infused my attention, skill, and effort into materials. Visually reverberating, sewn beads and tacked down thread attempt to reach the boxes, yet failing. Old jewelry and knick-knack boxes with handwriting from my grandmother are pinned in motion to steel frames. I wanted to hold onto the touch (read: *life*) that surrounded the boxes at one point when my grandmother was living. The piece communicates futile attempts to hold onto life, contrasted by the vibrant new life of materials used to make jewelry.

22 Ibid.
meaning of objects

(objects and their meaning; meaning and its objects)

external meaning of objects to/in culture

as a child, my family often moved because of my dad's job as a pastor. relocating across the country and being a part of different church communities informed how i process my life experiences. craft practices inspire me as a mode of peace or healing. for reference, i initially set out to work as an art therapist in a socially engaged capacity. the spiritually grounded church and home i grew up in was filled with a hopeful outlook, gratitude through prayer, and a shared goal of generosity. these communities are where i learned not only to form new relationships but also how to draw others into the church's fabric. my family was the connective tissue between individuals seeking a home there. i learned how to be the intermediary between people. foundational memories from childhood fuel my desire to see the power of action—in my case, through creating art.

the artist's role as a “healer” is coined in the book “active sites: art as social interaction” by timothy van laar and leanoard diepeen. the duo defines various categories artists often fall into, offering a framework for understanding art. for me, they are a way to interpret my work and inspirations. on the term “healer,” the authors write, “some artists believe their work can

“you can't get lonely if you wear my jewelry” - ramona solberg
express transcendent truths that accomplish social healing. They try to operate as priests, mediating between people and the harshness of the physical, social, and spiritual environment. In this role, artists have an important function as leaders in social, political, and religious rituals.” The authors continue to write about how these artists are primarily “concerned with human relationships: to others, to nature, to God.” They continue, “it attempts to mediate these relationships and to create a healthy future.” I think that art is healing and transcendent on many levels. Some artists are conceptually motivated to work as a “healer.” Two artists who fall into this role are Tanya Aguiniga and Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Tanya Aguiñiga is a trained furniture designer working collaboratively with other artists using traditional craft methods like

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24 Ibid.
weaving. Aguiñiga “draws on her upbringing as a binational citizen, who daily crossed the border… for school. Her work speaks of the artist’s experience of her divided identity and aspires to tell the larger and often invisible stories of the transnational community.”

She has also been considered a “craft activist” or an artist working within “a range of feminist, communal activities that involve the appropriation of spaces and provide an opportunity for activism.”

Mierle Laderman Ukeles is a Colorado-born sculptor and performance artist who has held an unpaid artist-in-residence at the NYC Sanitation Department since 1977. Ukuleles uses her role as an artist to merge into the lives of individuals working on the fringe. One of her well-known projects called “Touch Sanitation” included greeting all 8,500 sanitation workers for 11 months. The artist chooses to engage with the sanitation worker population rather than disengage - which I expect most of us to do. The idea of touch is important in “Touch Sanitation.”

Inspired by artists like Laderman Ukeles and Aguiñiga, I created Necklace for 13 People. This project followed my learned instinct to create work for others. My quest was to understand how an object like a necklace can act as an intermediary in social settings. What if a group of people wear one necklace? How will this object connect them? A 25’ strong, electric blue bungee cord is stitched together in a circle. 13 plush, ripstop, and neoprene pillows are strung onto the cord, one for each individual. Learning from several iterations of this work led me to offer participants simple instructions: “Step inside of the bungee cord. Place the pillow behind your body. Stretch and pull as a group.” Participants had unique experiences each time it was performed or interacted with. Some fully embraced the bungee cord and trusted its integrity, while others held onto it the whole time, grounding themselves in the knowledge that they were secure against the cord. The work is both harmonious and manipulative. It was a shared experience through active teamwork. I began asking if it was important to make work that bonded people together.

26 ibid.
through its use. This question sits in the back of my mind as I create. We use each other, and I rely on people for my research. I gained satisfaction from the harmony between my artwork and the participants but questioned my role as an artist in social settings. Following this project, I embarked on a 4x4’ huggable, leanable wall called *Exaggerated Self-Portrait*. I intended to hold a space for people to take a moment to rest. Using the scale of furniture, the body is enveloped in the bosom of the quilted piece. I lean into the foam and am reminded of the support from my family when I rest into it. I feel the soft textures and smell the fading residues of my family. My family and identity are embodied in this work, inviting the audience to rest for a moment. It started as a piece to comfort others; it became a comfort to me, embodying my support system. This piece taught me the value of making work for myself. And yet, social art practices are key foundations in my work. They reflect the ways that community plays a role in my work. I receive materials from people in my life–family, friends, Radical Jewelry Makeover–and my urban...
environment. My work is not possible without other people. I rely on my social curiosities, which inspire material choices. The common denominator of these materials? People.

The Role of Sentiment

The recognition that I really care about the feelings surrounding an object (maybe a little too much?) was sparked in my undergraduate studies. I am curious about the ambiguous, meandering aura of human life that I imagine surrounding materials. This is sentiment and memory. The artists and organizations discussed below seek sentimental, old, and worn items, often from past eras.

There are many ways to consider nostalgia and sentiment. Artist Coulter Fussell is a Mississippi-based artist making quilts with materials donated by her community. The artist’s studio is a storefront space, welcoming donations anytime. She receives materials ranging from an old yellowed quilt, a torn and worn flannel, or a single roll of 3” velvet ribbon. Fussell says, “It turns out, we live in a material world, and people have a lot to give.”28 The artist is motivated to find and tell the stories. Fussell reads about human histories to decipher

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what is happening in her studio, naming her series more general names like *River Quilts, War Quilts, Flora Quilts, and Home Quilts*. Like Fussell collaborating with the element of chance, I search for human stories within my materials, making connections with other people.

Venetia Dale is a Boston-based artist known for her cast pewter work. Dale recently finished a body of work for the 2023 James and Audrey Foster Prize, presented at the ICA Boston.29 Sourcing unfinished latchhooked projects, embroideries, and cross-stitches, the artist collaborates her fabrication efforts with the previous crafters. The elements chosen within her fiber work are evidence of moments in time, inspiration, and the roles that women have held domestically. The materials are already charged with history when they arrive in Venetia’s studio. She specifically chooses *not* to seek out specific stories of the materials collected. Instead, she absorbs objects into her studio through nameless e-commerce sources like eBay. The work still holds sentimental value and projects nostalgia, even without potent stories tied to the craft remnants.

The Artist duo, Loose Ends Project, works collaboratively with the community, collecting unfinished craft projects from loved ones who have passed.30 Volunteer fiber artists complete the unfinished work donated to the project, which is returned to the individual who sent it. Loose

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Ends Project aims to ease grief, create community, and inspire generosity. The unfinished projects that the Loose Ends Project collects are already laden with a story - the crafting process of completing the piece layers, another element of human touch, time, and care.

Each example above engages in sentimental materials using skilled hands. These craft processes ground emotions imbued in the materials. It is important for my work also to do this. I listen to my gut, emotionally responding to a material’s colors, textures, and forms. I want to highlight the sentimental moments in my work, so I include their opposite, the industrial. Floral fabrics belonging to my late Grandma and industrial materials from my walks push my concepts forward. A shard of yellow rumble strip my husband picked up for me is paired with amethyst, which was gifted to me by my Grandmom. The purple amethyst also reminds me of my late Aunt Mimi. Another touch is the color blue, in particular, the blueberries. These are homage to my Mom and childhood in Maine. These are, of course, quite personal reasons for selecting certain materials. Choosing a material must be thoughtful because I process life through my work. I combine touch and energy into my jewelry through thoughtful craft processes.
Chelsea Nanfelt Rowe
Thereness (brooch)
Recycled sterling silver, Jackson Ward steel and plastic, amethyst, blueberries from Maine, 8 x 4 x 14 cm, 2024
Photo by Artist
Craft and Empathy, and then a Conclusion

Chelsea Nanfelt Rowe
Hello, is this your house?
Walnut wood burl, glass seeds, steel 4.5 x 2 x 3”. 2023
Photo by Wesley Meyer
I believe that there is wisdom in materials. Especially those that have been used, loved, and cared for. I often incorporate wood into my work and think about the wisdom humans experience around trees. Trees provide a place to rest, commune, warmth, and protection. Some of the first uses of wood in human history were documented in Zambia as two interlocking pieces of wood with a notch cut out. The use of the hand to alter material reveals human motivations. A wise hand will also consider the life of the material in front of them. This guides the artist or craftsperson to determine the story the material wants to tell. I tell stories through my work, not necessarily to direct but to engage the imagination. I rely on my imagination and experience when creating the pieces, but each viewer will bring their unique lens to view my jewelry.

Chelsea Nanfelt Rowe
Mrs. Personality (brooch)
Recycled sterling silver, RJM beads, natural stones, Jackson Ward wood, cotton, 26 x 10 x 2 cm; 2024
Photo by artist

Perhaps wisdom is not the right word. What about empathy? Empathy functions culturally, socially, inwardly, and in the artist’s studio. Lately, I have noticed the word empathy surrounding the things in our lives, not just people. Within the lives of our things, empathy is a deep communication or consideration of a thing. I have been questioning if the materials I use are already infused with empathy or if I am extending my empathy toward the material. I believe artists search for themselves in their materials. At the same time, materials have a personality, and my narrative speaks through the material, urging the viewer to see me. And so, do our materials possess life, or do we imbue and inject the materials into our world with personalities that reflect ourselves? Materials are communicating through their reflection of us.

Vita

Chelsea Nanfelt Rowe (b.1993, Bridgton, Maine) is an artist and jeweler in the United States. She earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts with a concentration in Jewelry and Metalsmithing from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 2018. She makes work that is deeply curious about the people and things that ground her identity. Chelsea is an active member of the non-profit organization Ethical Metalsmiths. Involvement includes the Radical Jewelry Makeover (RJM): Artist Project, EM Education Committee, and Ethical Metalsmiths Students. Recent exhibitions include the RJM: Artist Project Exhibition at the Metal Museum in Memphis, Tennessee, Refined Competition and Exhibition 2023 in Nacogdoches, Texas, and the RJM: Artist Project Pop-Up Exhibition at the North Carolina Museum of Modern Art in Raleigh, NC. She was also an invited speaker for the Chicago Responsible Jewelry Conference, representing the international annual juried exhibition and competition, So Fresh + So Clean 2023. Chelsea
received several awards, including the SNAG Educational Endowment Scholarship and Arts Council of the Valley’s Arts for Education Grant, and was a VCU Research Fund recipient. Her article, *A New Ethics of Materials: Collective Material Impact*, was published in Metalsmith Magazine. She has an upcoming residency at the Baltimore Jewelry Center in 2025.