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ABSTRACT

Title of Document: WORK AROUND UTOPIA

Mitchell Noah, Master of Fine Arts, 2018

Directed By: Lynn Cazabon, Professor
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WORK AROUND UTOPIA is an alternative vision of service within public space that reimagines participants, practices, and tools using humor, craft, and design. Through playful reconfiguration, otherwise mundane maintenance activities become touchstones for serious issues: utopia, justice, social cohesion, mobility, infrastructure, and labor. At a city-block scale, the sculpture, video, and photomontages in the exhibition reclaim public space through critical making techniques. The exhibition includes four sculptural and performative works: *Deflators*, a wall installation of metal debris meticulously gathered from Baltimore streets. *Magneto*, a device made for picking up such debris. *BW3H*, a broom that explores cohesive labor by requiring three bodies to operate it. And *Chariot*, an *ad hoc* motorized street sweeper. The video *uuutopia* shows close-quarter perspectives of a car wheel in continuous motion. And finally, *Models for Greener Policing* is a series of photomontages speculating fantasies of public service.

WORK AROUND UTOPIA.

By

Mitchell Noah.

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, Baltimore County in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2018.

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Preface

"I've got a bone to pick with capitalism, and a few to break."

Refused
"Worms of the Senses/Faculties of the Skull"
from the album *The Shape of Punk to Come*
Burning Heart Records, 1998

Dedication

To Baltimore,
The Greatest City in America.

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I would like to thank the following peers, professors, colleagues, cohorts, comrades, and friends:

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Chapter 1: Unfixing utopia

One of the common terms used in theoretical discussions of public space is "utopia." Sir Thomas More introduced the word "Utopia" in 1516 in his text *Utopia*, defining it (satirically) as "no place."[1] My work reinterprets this term as an action instead of a place. Circumventing the many variations of the concept of Utopia that followed More's, I offer a fresh understanding of the word. While there are crossovers and connections between the discourse More's book fostered and what I aim to define, my etymological explorations have led me to formulate a new utility of his word as a verb: to *utopianize*.

More's vision of "no place" is in fact a fixed place: a city-state occupied by Utopians (Figure 1). But this fixed state generates cycles of oppression. There are still slaves in More's *Utopia*, because there is upkeep: basic things (like infrastructure) need to be maintained. His Utopians weren't very upkeep-oriented: they were, after all, the economic upper class. In More's Utopia, maintenance was carried out by convicted criminals, prisoners of war, and foreign laborers. By this measure, a Utopia creates its own dystopia for the people who do not fit into its idealized image.[2] This is the covert logic that drives any Utopia but often goes undiscussed. Through control over others, More's Utopians never looked beyond their own fixed image, and therefore abandoned the rest of the world, as if it didn't exist. This is why I am not interested in reaching any fixed place,

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[1] There is argument over the level of satire at work in More's story, because it is believed that "utopia" is a pun on the term "eutopia," which means "good place." I read his work as both a critique of the state as well as an attempt to map out what a good place might begin to look like, at least in the 16th century. While More's mission was to imagine a utopian society, in doing so, he codified the discussion such that his definition gained monolithic power and the designation of the term Utopia as a proper noun to suggest that power. Sir Thomas More, *Utopia* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005), xxviii.

[2] Said colloquially: One person's Utopia is another person's dystopia. Rami K. Isaac, "Every utopia turns into dystopia," *Tourism Management* 51 (2015): 330.

or state. It is the reaching itself that I seek. To be a capitalized *Utopian* in Utopia is to stop reaching, and to settle for the status quo.

Figure 1. Map of More's Utopia by Ortelius, c. 1595

Keeping the idea of "no place" in mind, a solution to the status quo problem may be to reconsider the term not as an obtainable location, but as the sustained action of change. De-capitalizing the term signifies a key aspect of my vision of utopia—that it is non-hierarchical and in flux. I delineate the term further in the sense that to *utopianize* is to function with the intention of working toward the wellbeing of others, through cohesion with others. The lowercase "u" allows utopian acts to be considered horizontal, outward,

and without bounds or hierarchy.[3] A citizen engages in utopian efforts when they provide an essential service to society; think of garbage collectors or street sweepers, but imagine them all making the effort to be worker of the month. Through utopianization, we will be working cooperatively toward being in a better place collectively, while understanding that this type of place is never static, but always in transit.

[3] This is a very loose definition of how anarchy works.

Chapter 2: Promoting cohesion

So, once everyone is utopianizing, everything will be OK, right? Not that easy. It can be exhausting (but fun) to be a lone utopian, like Harry Tuttle, the vigilante heating-and-cooling repairman played by Robert De Niro in the 1985 dystopian tour de force *Brazil* (Figure 2).[4] "Listen kid, we're all in it together," he says before zip-lining away from undocumented maintenance work.[5] But in looking beyond what one person can do to make the world a better place, the next and more difficult step is cohesion—that is, harmonizing an individual's utopian efforts within a collective body. This step always seems to be a tripwire, impeding progress. Cohesion is about a culture of generosity, play, and humor; it is cyclical and forward-moving. It is not fixed, but constantly in motion.[6] I think the methods, aims, and forms of promoting cohesion have to be colorful and, for me, this all starts in the theater of the street. The tensions and civic exchanges embedded in public space provide a vibrant place to work.

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[4] *Brazil*, dir. by Terry Gilliam (Universal Pictures, 1985), film.

[5] As a stealth electrician working on the down-low, Harry intercepts a call to fix the air conditioning of a sweating apartment dweller who otherwise would have waited indefinitely for the hopelessly bureaucracy-bound "Central Services" to do the job.

[6] A good analogy here is how the Earth moves through space: "As the planets orbit in the plane of the solar system, they change their direction-of-motion continuously, with Earth returning to its starting point after 365 days. Well, almost to its same exact starting point. Because even the Sun itself isn't stationary. Our Milky Way galaxy is huge, massive, and most importantly, is in motion." Ethan Siegel, "How Does Earth Move Through Space? Now We Know, On Every Scale," *Forbes*, June 16, 2017, https://www.forbes.com/sites/startswithabang/2017/06/16/how-does-earth-move-through-space-now-we-know-on-every-scale/#23667225861f.

Figure 2. Robert De Niro as Harry Tuttle in Brazil *(1985)*

In 1995, Antanas Mockus was elected mayor of Bogotá, Colombia.[7] At the time, the city was known globally for rampant crime, corruption, and "lawless" traffic.[8] Tourists were barred from traveling to the city in an effort to protect their safety. It was precisely this fear for safety that Mockus sought to eliminate. In order to uplift his city, and to enact a change in the people's public passivity—their quiet aversion toward each other—he implemented an exercise in cohesion. His method of unfixing the hostility of public space

[7] Mockus, a mathematician and philosopher, ran as an independent.

[8] "The UN Office of Drugs and Crime placed it [Bogotá] among the top five most dangerous urban areas in the world, the U.S. State Department advised against any civilian travel and international airports singled out Bogotá (and Lagos) as the two highest risk no-go areas for tourists." Elliot Goat, "The 'Cop in Your Head' or the Clown in the Street: Antanas Mockus and the Theater of Civic Culture," *International State Crime Initiative*, September 29, 2014, http://statecrime.org/state-crime-research/the-cop-in-your-head-or-the-clown-in-the-street-antanas-mockus-and-the-theatre-of-civic-culture/.

was to replace some 1,800 of the city's corrupt traffic police with hundreds of mime artists.[9] Their tactic was to be in public space, and either shame or celebrate a citizen's performance (Figure 3). If there was a driver who was breaking traffic laws, they would be mocked. If a citizen was doing a good deed, for example by picking up trash, the street mimes would silently cheer.[10]

Figure 3. Traffic miming in Bogotá, Colombia

Mockus utilized the "collective leadership" of his position to reverse the negative power Bogotá's public space had previously held over citizens, by creating a community

[9] Antanas Mockus, "The Art of a Changing City," *The New York Times*, July 16, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/17/opinion/the-art-of-changing-a-city.html.

[10] "This philosophical approach to leadership helped Mockus transform the city in his first term, cutting the homicide rate by an impressive 70% and traffic fatalities by more than 50%." Sarah Marsh, "Antanas Mockus: Colombians Fear Ridicule More than Being Fined," The Guardian, October 28, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/public-leaders-network/2013/oct/28/antanas-mockus-bogota-mayor.

connection through humor and play.[11] This cohesive effort negates a widespread, patriarchal belief: in order to fight violence, crime, or passivity, superior force must be used. Instead, Mockus attempted to reverse the process of civic upkeep: these problems had to be unfixed. This was possible with a paradigm shift, or a philosophical work-around, in the public's gaze upon the city. And although clowns are not for everyone, neither are police. Using humor worked, in part because it affected citizens on the core level of personal responsibility, as opposed to the penalizing methods practiced by the police.[12] Cohesion requires a further shift in method, aim, and form if it is going to reach beyond the upkeep of a few city blocks. But I am in no way discrediting the effort at the scale of the Bogotá project. It is, in fact, the same scale at which my work operates (a few city blocks). I am instead arguing for a sense of urgency in utopianization.

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[11] Mockus has used the phrase "collective leadership" to describe his method of governing: "Mockus doesn't like to be called a leader. 'There is a tendency to be dependent on individual leaders,' he said. 'To me, it is important to develop collective leadership. I don't like to get credit for all that we achieved. Millions of people contributed to the results that we achieved … I like more egalitarian relationships. I especially like to orient people to learn.'" Mara Cristina Caballero, "Academic Turns City into a Social Experiment," *Harvard Gazette*, March 11, 2004, https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2004/03/academic-turns-city-into-a-social-experiment/.

[12] Mockus: "The spectacle created a public from discrete and defensive residents who, during years of lawlessness, had been avoiding eye contact with one another. A public is formed in response to a spectacle, as performance theory makes clear; it is not a pre-constituted body with a general will to see a show." Goat, "The 'Cop in Your Head' or the Clown in the Street."

Chapter 3: Urgent adhocism

The ideal of adhocism, defined by architectural theorists Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, is a purpose immediately fulfilled, as "it cuts through the usual delays caused by specialization, bureaucracy, and hierarchical organization."[13] In a broad sense, everything is or started out as *ad hoc*, in "the style of eureka," because there was an urgent need for something new, for something that didn't already exist.[14] In my practice, I have sought to apply these ideals toward circumventing failing systems and infrastructures, which I will refer to jointly as the "state." More explicitly, I intend the generalized "state" to also be a blanket term referring to capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy (structures of systematic coercion). Anthropologist David Graeber recalls from a 2014 trip to Rojava (or, the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, a non-statist territory of municipalities based around principles of women's liberation, social ecology, and consensus politics), that the lesson of history is "you can't get rid of capitalism without getting rid of the state. And you can't get rid of the state without getting rid of patriarchy." [15] Like More's *Utopia*, the American "state" apparatus gives utopianism a violent and predatory name.

Novelist and op-ed writer William C. Anderson argues that "at a time when environmental, social, and economic crises are running out of control amid authoritarian overreach, the state seems to be in a moment of purposeful neglect and disarray," a condition "leading people to take the response to the confluence of crises into their own

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[13] Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013), 15. Originally published in 1972 by Doubleday & Company, Inc.

[14] Ibid., xix. "The Style of Eureka" is the title of Charles Jencks's new foreword for the 2013 re-publication of Jencks' and Silver's original 1972 publication of *Adhocism*.

[15] David Graeber, "Syria and Anarchism," *The Real News Network* video, 18:38, May 30, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqfoJvD0Ifg.

hands, raising the question of the state's *raison d'etre* to begin with."[16] Today's "state" is one primarily focused on acquiring and exchanging economic capital, to the direct detriment of other, more valuable forms of capital: social and cultural. But those who share and build social and cultural capital are also sharing and building resilience. This "positions people to build movements that undo the violence that oppression inflicts. If we want that better world," Anderson argues, "we have to align our politics with a radical imagination, with sustainable everyday resistance and innovative strategy."[17] And it is the sharing of these forms of capital, demonstrated through the friendships, exchanges, and improvisations among everyday human beings, that are quintessential in working around the structural violence of the "state."

The question then becomes this: What are the conditions that would have to exist to enable us to wake up, as a society, and produce something other than capitalism?[18] The urge to bypass dependencies on hierarchy, bureaucracy, and infrastructures (to work *ad hoc*) is about recognizing the explicit failures of these top-down systems and attempting to reverse them, eventually making "currently existing forms of power seem stupid and beside the point."[19] Acknowledgment and effort, then, become key steps in building the momentum of bottom-up progress. "To pose revolution as the destruction of capitalism is to distance it from ourselves, to put it off into the future," sociologist-philosopher John Holloway asserts. "The question of revolution is not in the future. It is here and now: how

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[16] William C Anderson, "Climate Crisis and the State of Disarray," *Roar Magazine* Issue #7 (Autumn 2017), 51.
[17] Ibid., 57.
[18] For more on this question, see: David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules* (New York: Melville House, 2015), 89-90.
[19] David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004), 40.

do we stop producing the system by which we are destroying humanity?"[20] And further, as artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles inquires in her Maintenance Art Manifesto: "after the revolution, who is going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?"[21] To answer this question, as well as Holloway's, is to operate in the present as if one is already in a post-revolutionary future (more on this in Chapter 6). Practicing ways of outwitting these systems creates the conditions for continued social and cultural mobility. "More than simply reacting to capitalism in anarchistic ways, we should be proactively working to overcome it by making our very models of resistance anti-capitalist."[22] Working around the top-down, authoritarian "state," for the bottom-up: every single person. This is the very idea of utopianization that I am arguing for. And, indeed, the idea calls for the de-capitalizing – both geographically and economically – of "Utopia."

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[20] John Holloway, *Crack Capitalism* (London: Sage, 2012), 254.

[21] Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Maintenance Art Manifesto (1969)," in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, Second Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 733-737.

[22] Anderson, "Climate Crisis and the State of Disarray," 56.

Chapter 4: Past work: Vehicular cohesion in public space dystopias

As I have stated, creating a fixed public-space utopia is not the goal. Instead, what I am identifying as utopian are active, kind-hearted attempts at finding work-arounds (alternatives) – that is, to change spaces, objects, and processes by shifting their function. I started exploring this idea in past works. One example is *Trunk/truck* (2016), an *ad hoc* approach to changing the interior space of my vehicle in order to increase its utility – a work-around to having an actual truck. I retrofitted the rear space of my compact car into a flattened zone for hauling shit, cargo, and anything else. *Trunk/truck* (Figure 4) highlights the car's capacity to move within a public space (the street) equipped to facilitate active and cohesive engagement with the public.

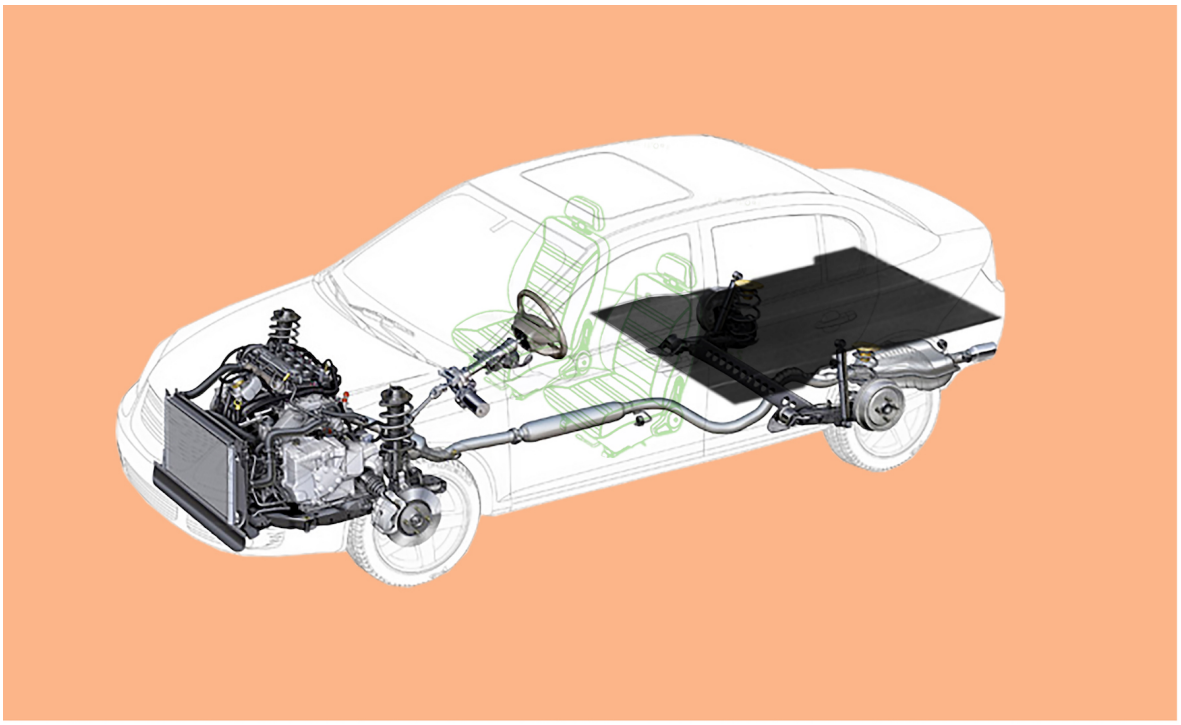

Figure 4. Trunk/truck (2016)*, study photomontage*

In *Fear and the Family Sedan*, cultural theorist Meaghan Morris writes that cars "offer a utopian space to escape," promising a kind of manic freedom. "They offer danger

and safety, violence and protection, sociability and privacy, liberation and confinement, power and imprisonment, mobility and stasis," she continues. "The way that any one of these oppositions can reverse and swing into new alignments with the others suggests that car's semantic potential for extreme volatility."[23] But Morris' idea of the enclosed interior space of a vehicle allowing for privacy, and therefore "freedom," is not necessarily a universal (or ideal) function. She was writing about mobility in the vast distances of Australia in dystopian narratives. In a city made up of compact roadways like Baltimore, more than individual spaces or rabid escape must be considered. Through a slight re-framing of Morris' theory, however, owning and operating a vehicle can just as well be a model for existing cohesively with others.

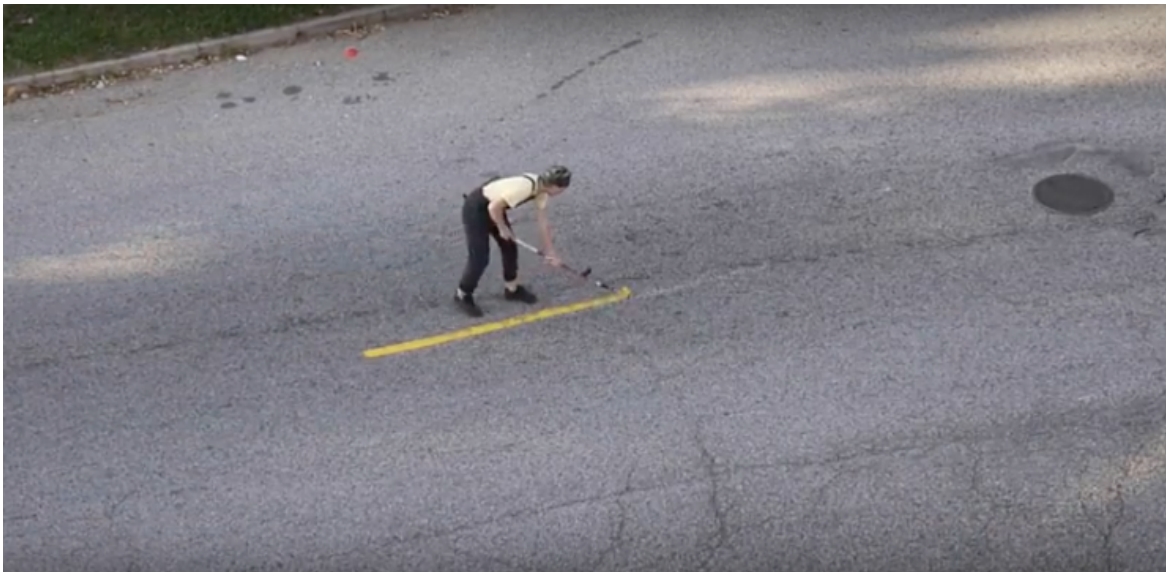

Figure 5. Video still from Touch-up (2016)*. Image courtesy of the artist.*

I attempted to contribute to such cohesion in *Touch-up* (2016), a civic intervention that has been documented in a video with the same title (Figure 5). After several weeks of observing the increasingly chaotic traffic patterns at the bustling intersection outside my

[23] Meaghan Morris, "Fear and the Family Sedan," in *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, edited by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 11.

corner apartment, I noticed that a stripe dividing two of the lanes was fading. This disappearing act was turning a section of what had been a well-functioning two-lane street into a wide, single, free-for-all lane. In witnessing the disorder that this practically invisible demarcation created and how it took away from traffic cohesion, I recalled a video work by the artist Francis Alÿs titled *Painting Retoque* (2008). In this work he meticulously, and patiently, repaints a stripe dividing two lanes on a quiet road in Panama.

I wanted to do two things here: cover Alÿs' work, and conduct a civic experiment attempting to change drivers' movements by repainting the stripe myself. Since the traffic flow in Baltimore did not allow me to take my time as Alÿs seemed to be able to, I had to make my action into a hasty gesture. I don't know how much or for how long my action changed the traffic flow, but for me, it was an action that practiced utopianization. A public space in decay can all too easily collapse into a dystopia (going along with the notion that every utopia creates a dystopia). It is through our actions and the change they can both create and sustain—the constancy of motion—that can begin to generate alternatives to the status quo.

Chapter 5: THESIS WORKS

Expanding upon the idea of a civic service experiment as an artwork, the works in the thesis exhibition are a catalogue of public service interventions, designs, and processes. A photomontage series titled *Models for Greener Policing* (2017-2018) critically reimagines the identity of police service. A collection of potentially dangerous debris titled *Deflators* (2016-2018) attempts to give form to the disarray and passivity of public space in a sculptural wall installation. Three other sculptural works in the exhibition—*BW3H* (2018), *Magneto* (2018), and *Chariot* (2018)—are tools I have devised for cleaning and intervening in the street, and include video documentation of their use. And a video titled *uuutopia* (2018) (Figure 6) uses a close-quarter perspective of a car wheel in motion to provide a visual metaphor of the continuous motion necessary for working around failing systems. These thesis works create an alternative vision of public space, serving as entries into broader issues of utopia, cohesion, infrastructure, and labor.

Figure 6. Video still from uuutopia *(2018). Image courtesy of the artist.*

***Models for Greener Policing* and *Chariot*: Order, cleaning, and satirical speculation**

One part of my practice utilizes digital compositing techniques to take a satirical look at the increasing militarization of state policing power in America. Utilizing humor as a strategy, a series of photomontages titled *Models for Greener Policing* (Figure 7) conceptualizes what policing might look like if power and resources were distributed toward actual civic upkeep. The images illustrate *ad hoc* models aimed at utopianizing police power by re-presenting the use of their resources as maintenance-driven and community-oriented acts, in hopes of providing viewers with a critical fantasy of alternative civic services.

Figure 7. Crew, *from the series* Models for Greener Policing *(2017-2018). Image courtesy of the artist.*

Combining images *ad hoc*, I replace weapons with cleaning instruments—things like brooms, brushes, garbage bags, and vacuums.[24] These objects function as symbols of thoroughness, order, and labor, referencing custodial or maintenance work. I am using these replacements in particular to immediately reverse the authority of, or disempower, the military might of the police, by contrasting fastidious housekeeping with the warrior mission. This happens through associations the objects create with work commonly done by disenfranchised people: women, minorities, illegal immigrants. The use of bright colors is a satirical tool that adds vitality and humor to the images, while creating stark contrasts to the armor and equipment of these public servants. [25] By decontextualizing the police from the original images, the work offers a critical examination of the capacity for force displayed by the "state."[26]

In an attempt to directly physicalize one of these photomontages, I built *Chariot* (Figure 8), a sculpturally retrofitted mobility patroller with a striped broom head built into the front end.[27] In the exhibition, *Chariot* stands as a symbol for reclaiming an object using *ad hoc* methods in order to perform work in service to a community. It is the most impractical of three functioning sculptural works in the exhibition, but also, in my opinion, the most representative work of the types of urgent transformations in practice that must

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[24] Which idea is more asinine: giving brooms to police, or giving guns to teachers? The latter being something suggested after continuous mass shootings in America.

[25] As mentioned in Chapter 2, cohesion is about a culture of play and humor that, to my mind, needs to be colorful, both figuratively and literally.

[26] Martha Rosler's body of work *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* (1967-1972, 2004-2008) was a guiding influence in my photomontages. Her work is very much about witnessing and recognizing the militarization of the everyday, particularly within the home. Her collages became a method of protesting war by way of remixing media images. John Heartfield and Peter Kennard offered biting commentaries of power with their photomontage works which also directed me.

[27] I acquired this mobility patroller through a Craigslist ad for a "Segway knock-off."

occur to reverse the status quo. It is intended to be a philosophical model, or working prototype, that suggests a radical reconfiguration of a common police vehicle.

Figure 8 Chariot *(2018). Photo by Marlayna Demond.*

***BW3H*: intervention, sculpture, and raising questions**

As a sculptor, I have been interested in making devices that sustain the capacity for intervention with a heightened functionality, however impractical. This interest in functionality is something that has carried over from my previous training in craft

mediums.[28] The problem I have had with making sculpture in the past is that it tends to become large, bulky, and inert, occupying a lot of space. More recently, I have sought to make work that is adaptable and modifiable, capable of facilitating, or at least inspiring, social cohesion.

In studying the artist Joseph Beuys, I came across a description of his work titled *Spade with Two Handles* (1965). This shovel's exaggerated functionality requires two people to use it, signifying "a special kind of compound action for people working the earth together. Without the spirit of cooperation, harmony and even humor it would be impossible to work with the tool."[29] I sought to expand upon this idea of a cooperative and humorous tool by making a similar work titled *BW3H* (Figure 9). This device, like Beuys', requires the total cohesion of three individual bodies in order to operate it. The broom has three striped handles adorned with brass pointed endcaps, similar to those atop flagpoles, suggesting the ceremoniousness of utopian ideals. With the help of two allies and under the guise of blue and green jumpsuits, the operation of this sculptural object becomes a public intervention, an unannounced spectacle for pedestrians and drivers on the street.[30]

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[28] In craft mediums, such as glass, ceramics, or metals, objects are either functional, sculptural, or a mix of both. To make an object functional and simultaneously sculptural is to design something spectacular.

[29] Joseph Beuys, "Spade with Two Handles (1965)," in *Energy Plan for the Western Man: Joseph Beuys in America*, edited by Carin Kuoni (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990), 127-129.

[30] Thank you, Chinen Aimi and Chris Kojzar, for your attempts at performing displays of cohesion with me in public, and to Parastoo Aslanbeik for documenting them. Hopefully our efforts created a new public for those who saw them.

Figure 9. BW3H *(Broom with 3 Handles) (2018). Photo by Parastoo Aslanbeik.*

As an artistic strategy, humor has proven to be both critical and comforting, and art historical models have been inspirational.[31] For example, during the Fluxus movement, the Japanese performance collective Hi Red Center conducted *Street Cleaning Event* (1964), a satirical critique of state infrastructure (Figure 10). The critique was especially biting given the context of their action—the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games, during which the Japanese government had been pushing their citizens to "present a clean image of the city."[32] For this action, the three artists (and their allies) sported white lab coats as they

[31] Mockus: "People respond to humor and playfulness...It's the most powerful tool for change we have." Mockus, "The Art of a Changing City."

[32] Jeff Michael Hammond, "Hi-Red Center's Quiet Actions Still Reverberate Today," *The Japan Times*, February 26, 2014, accessed March 7, 2018, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2014/02/26/arts/hi-red-centers-quiet-actions-still-reverberate-today/.

methodically cleaned a city sidewalk in the Ginza neighborhood.[33] Their performance was so convincing that their labor was perceived by the public to be sanctioned on behalf of the city. Hi Red Center's type of performative protest has been influential in the work of countless artists over the decades, especially the group's emphasis on seeking to "raise questions rather than simple objections."[34] The concepts behind *Street Cleaning Event* sparked my own investigation into the ways intervention can raise questions.

Figure 10. Hi Red Center, Street Cleaning Event *(1964), Japan*

BW3H is meant to inspire solidarity through the performance of three individuals operating the device in sync. It has taken several field tests to figure out the actual cohesive effort that goes into using it, as well as the structural integrities needed for such an impractical design. This absurd impracticality makes it at once critical while also

[33] Ginza is one of the most expensive and luxurious sections of Tokyo.
[34] Ibid.

humorous. Baltimore is a testament to unattended upkeep: urban environments populated by loose garbage and miscellaneous debris. While *BW3H* acts as a large broom for sweeping up branches, bottles, and other types of bulky trash, I needed something which could get the harder-to-see, harder-to-find, and potentially violent debris that plagues the roads: tire deflators.

***Magneto* and *Deflators*: Flat tires, formlessness, and tiny violence**

Figure 11 Magneto *(2018). Photo by Parastoo Aslanbeik.*

The three-person broom sculpture led me to making another civic service device. *Magneto* (Figure 11), a magnetic retrieval tool, picks up mangled pieces of ferrous metallic debris that lie in wait along the roads and curbs. The abundance of these small hazardous objects has led to a collection titled *Deflators* that is displayed sculpturally in the exhibition. This collection actually started long before I developed *Magneto*, and was

motivated by the unique frustration of dealing with potential flat tires on my own vehicle. After pulling two strangely sharp objects out of my car's tires—a mangled tent stake and a blunt lock pin—I began keeping an eye out in the streets for any possible tire deflators that could end up puncturing not only my own tires but the tires of my fellow citizens. This act of collection became a form of urban exploration for me, and a way to care for other drivers, as well as for the infrastructure of the city.

This collection has grown into a material resource mined from the ignored disorder of society. Anthropologist Mary Douglas writes that "disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realized in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite."[35] From this urban disorder—the formlessness of society's passivity, or inaction—an endless resource has emerged. This resource holds both a danger and a power; a "thing-power," which philosopher Jane Bennett defines as "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle."[36] Each of these objects has a potential for tiny violence: causing blowouts on roadways, creating numbing bureaucratic procedures, and instigating aggravation, need for repairs, expenditure of time and money, and possibly even injury.

The intent of the work is not solely about cleaning the streets; ultimately it is concerned with the work of maintaining a safe and healthy body (a city, a society). To phrase it in a more pedestrian sense: *someone* has to pick all this shit up. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Mierle Laderman Ukeles' Maintenance Art practice is a quintessential example of reclaiming menial everyday labor as performance art. My work, like hers, values the

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[35] "This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognize that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality." Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1966), 95.
[36] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 6.

processes of maintenance. For Ukeles, maintenance was as important as creation itself.[37] As anthropologist David Graeber says, "you make a cup once, you wash it like a thousand times."[38] Most work, in fact, isn't creation. Most work is actually maintaining things. My hope for this thesis work is that it lights a spark in the social consciousness, illuminating the fact that *action* has no fixed form. Everyone participates in the upkeep.[39] As I scour the gutters and corners of the streets, these "tire deflators" (Figure 12), with their potential to inhibit (utopian) mobility, symbolize an indefinite patterning, or: like maintenance, a form without an end.

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[37] Ben Davis, "What Mierle Laderman Ukeles's 'Maintenance Art' Can Still Teach Us Today," *artnet news*, September 20, 2016, https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/mierle-ukeles-laderman-manifesto-655478.
[38] David Graeber, "The 5 Types of BS Jobs," *The Real News Network* video, 6:37, May 9, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kehnIQ41y2o.
[39] Unlike potholes, which exist as things that must be spotted, filled, and rolled (traditionally) by municipal authorities, deflators may be removed by anyone paying attention and picking them up. Though in 2017, masked citizens in Portland, Oregon were reported to be circumventing municipal authorities by filling potholes themselves. John Metcalfe, "Portland Anarchists Want to Fix Your Street's Potholes," *City Lab*, March 15, 2017, https://www.citylab.com/equity/2017/03/portland-anarchists-want-to-fix-your-streets-potholes/519588/.

Figure 12. Deflators *(2016-2018). Photo courtesy of the artist.*

Using philosopher Georges Bataille's idea of the *l'informe* (formlessness) to formally and conceptually radicalize this practice, I continue it even though I know that I won't be able to recover every last tire deflator. The act of giving sculptural form to disorder reveals the things that go systematically overlooked: the potentially endless supply of abject objects embedded within the urban landscape. For Bataille, the formless celebrated the reduction of value in art, bringing it down to the level of those who were socially excluded, the impoverished class considered the scum of the earth. The abject here comprises a virtually invisible group of human beings. In her text *Informe without Conclusion*, art historian Rosalind Krauss doesn't discredit Bataille's use of the term, but dives further into how artists have made tangible his notion of the formless through their use of the abject, a material quality "composed of the infinite unspeakableness of bodily

disgust."[40] Abjection is physicalized in an even deeper and material sense of the human body. In my work, I seek to take this notion a step further by considering the city as a body, with an infrastructure that generates a violent detritus.

Figure 13. Sailors participate in a foreign object damage (FOD) walk-down aboard Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman, 2007. Photo by Seaman Kevin T. Murray.

There is a practice of collective walking on airfields, federal airport runways, and military aircraft carriers (Figure 13) to find what is known as FOD (foreign object debris) in order to prevent FOD (foreign object damage).[41] What is interesting to me here are the following: the practice of collecting FOD being exclusive to military and federal property; the necessity of a cohesive and direct-action effort in collecting them; and the power that

[40] Rosalind Krauss, "Informe without Conclusion," *October* 78 (1996), 92, http://www.jstor.org/stable/778907.

[41] "Foreign Object Debris (FOD) has been defined by National Aerospace FOD Prevention, Inc. (NAFPI) as 'a substance, debris, or article alien to a vehicle or system which would potentially cause damage.' By defining FOD so broadly, any material that could possibly be found on the air operations area (AOA) could be defined as FOD." Daniel Prather, *Current Airport Inspection Practices Regarding FOD: A Synthesis of Airport Practice* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences, 2011), 3.

these small objects hold in their potential for violence. Outside of private, guarded (federal) sites, FOD upkeep is not practiced in the civic state. Civilians are on their own when it comes to the mercy of these objects.[42] Although there are garbage collectors and street sweepers, they are not working with the same communal efficiency as an FOD walk (nor, of course, do these small state agencies work with the same budget as the military).[43] The military and the Federal Aviation Administration have statistics on the damages that FODs cause; they've cost billions of dollars per year.[44] That said, the chances of these objects inserting their way into any airport or military vehicle is a beyond a million-to-one.[45] A workplace poster (Figure 14) highlighting the importance of FOD safety measures states: "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Also featured are caricatures of things that FOD collectors should look for and remove, including aliens from outer space, deer, raccoons, and a question mark, which I am assuming symbolizes that there are objects out there that could cause damage that have yet to strike.

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[42] "Outside the airport environment, small items such as nails, screws, and aluminum cans would only be considered a minor nuisance." Ibid.

[43] "The trade-offs from shifting federal spending priorities with U.S. tax dollars away from the military toward other programs are tremendous." "Realign Military Spending, Covert Infrastructure to Produce Funding For Civilian Needs (Economic Conversion)," Section 29 of the World Beyond War white paper *A Global Security System: An Alternative to War*, accessed March 7, 2018, http://worldbeyondwar.org/realign-military-spending-convert-infrastructure-produce-funding-civilian-needs-economic-conversion/.

[44] In the U.S., direct and indirect costs of FOD strikes total $5.2 billion. "Goodyear data suggest the cost of tire embedded FOD comes to $7,350 per aircraft per year for a wide body jet." Iain McCreary, *Runway Safety: FOD, Birds, and the Case for Automated Scanning* (Washington, DC: Insight SRI, 2010), 21.

[45] "All aviation accidents are rarer than 'million-to-one' events. Looking at aircraft of a size used to carry passengers and cargo commercially, the UN's International Civil Aviation Organization predicts no more than 4-5 fatal accidents per ten million departures for 2010. Even if the stats are broadened from straight fatalities to non-fatal 'hull loss' events the numbers will be only slightly higher." Ibid., 23.

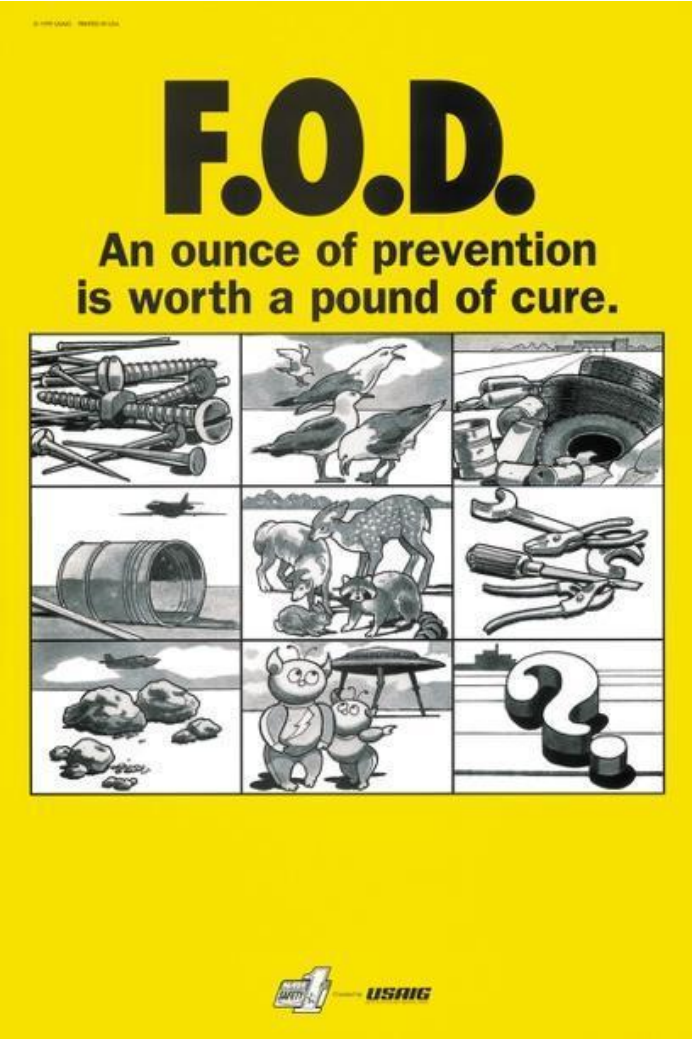

Figure 14. FOD workplace poster

As an artist who primarily works independently, I attempt to reverse the value of these potentially disruptive objects through a re-contextualization of this military-sanctioned retrieval practice, but in public civilian space. As a way of turning the personal into the political, I am curious how the meaning of this practice changes when performed in direct service to everyday transportation. The objects I am culling from the streets in *Deflators*, when accumulated, bring form to social passivity. Moving through an urban environment and distancing oneself from its conditions render invisible things like trash, shrapnel, and even bodies. These typically ignored transient objects, when attended to,

reveal patterns of disorder, a formlessness that cannot be fully harnessed yet holds a distinct power. But how can I give form to something which is so constantly shifting? What forms can an action take, especially one that exemplifies a utopian ideal? And conversely, in what ways does the passivity of society reveal itself?

Chapter 6: Issues in aestheticized action

I moved to Baltimore to be a graduate student, but my work has turned me into a citizen. Because of this, the intention of my work is not simply to make a spectacle out of action for a willing audience, like the one that would visit an art gallery. Since the requirements of this graduate degree allow me to showcase the work I have been doing, I hope that my artistic activism, aimed at the utopianization of public space, directs attention to topics that affect a broad number of people. To that willing gallery viewer, this thesis work will be recognized primarily as the work of a maker, or sculptor. But to the pedestrian on the street, how my efforts are recognized I may never know. And that is what excites me the most: how many ways a random flash of action, like three people using one broom to sweep a street, could be interpreted, outside the context of an art venue. I will always have an unwitting audience in the street, and if I don't, then my work has truly failed.

However, before failure, there are issues that arise when actions become aestheticized: like creating functional sculpture for cleaning the street with and turning their use into a spectacle. Parsing the term *aesthetics*, art critic Boris Groys finds a bi-functionality of the word within the fields of design and art. He says, "design wants to change reality, the status quo – it wants to improve reality, to make it more attractive, better to use. Art seems to accept reality as it is, to accept the status quo."[46] Furthermore, "art accepts the status quo as dysfunctional, as already failed – that is, from the revolutionary, or even post-revolutionary, perspective."[47] According to Groys' logic, then, contemporary art activism walks the line between art and design (via aestheticization). It politicizes art,

[46] Boris Groys, "On Art Activism," *e-flux journal* #56 (2014): 10.
[47] Ibid.

using it as a tool in the political struggles of today. By this measure, art activism must accept its own failure, like a foreshadowing of the looming failure of the entire status quo.

The self-defeating logic here offers awareness to the artist-activist-citizen. Accepting failure allows the work to expose issues and also to indicate possibilities for sustainable revolution. And something all revolutions need, of course, is resilience. Art activism is almost exclusively bound with resilience. And resilience happens from both collective effort, as well as from individual action. It is obviously stronger when an action is collective, communal, and cohesive. But the solidarity of resilience also depends on all the tiny actions. It is "not about a single ideological state, but an ever-changing system of disturbance and recovery."[48] Resilience, then, is about maintenance. And the thing about maintenance is that it cannot be exhibited, truthfully, without being performed.

The impracticality in my work helps to get my ideas across; it can depict hope, which, like maintenance and resilience, is also a cyclical event. Hope provides a platform for reaching the future. This is the reason why I do not qualify my work uniquely as social practice or community art. These labels are measured in terms of the success or the failure of a project (usually self-marketing), and to quantify something as either a failure or success is to understand it as complete, or terminated all together.[49] Art activism, on the other hand, allows the aim of the project to depict hope by already existing in the future. Hope recognizes failure, and attempts to by-passes it. When something is impractical, like a broom with three handles, it can also depict something truthful, in a deeper sense of the

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[48] This quote is from a rather unexpected source, but its discussion of resilience in the context of ecosystems links directly to the work I am doing in cleaning and maintaining public space. Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, *Great Barrier Reef Outlook Report* (Queensland: Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, 2009), 146.

[49] Boris Groys, "The Loneliness of the Project," in *Going* Public (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010).

word. A heightened impracticality suggests that the practice may be self-contradictory. Recognition of this possibility requires either a critical eye or a curious one, and in the moment of performing, or what I modestly like to call working, it is a matter of breaking through to those who hold neither type of vision. This is why, as an artist, an activist, and a citizen, the real artwork for this exhibition can only be viewed in the street if it is to have its greatest impact.

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