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(Re)Canonizing the Tool: Constructions and Insincerity in the Digital Age

Danielle Romagno

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

School of Art, Design, and Art History

May 2020

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

Committee chair: Robert Mertens

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Corinne Diop

Greg Stewart

Dymph de Wild

Dedications

To my cohort of fellow artists and friends; thank you for your support and feedback offered up to this project, you are truly some of the best and I hope to remain close for many years.

To my editors, thank you for guidance and support through this labor of love. Having your keen eyes and kind hearts see me through this work is so appreciated.

To my parents, I can only hope to be as amazing as you both someday. Thank you for instilling in me my work ethic, believing in me, and for everything you've done for me.

And lastly, to my husband who let me read this work to him "just one more time", countless times, thank you for your endless patience, standing by my side, and for helping me keep (most) of my marbles.

Acknowledgements

I give my most sincere gratitude to the faculty I've had the pleasure of working with these past years. What I have learned from you extends far beyond this project and I will be eternally grateful.

It is necessary I extend my thanks to the faculty of the School of Art, Design, and Art History with whom I've had the pleasure of working with during my studies. Thank you for all your support, feedback, and inspiration along the way.

To my advisor, Robert Mertens, thank you for your patience and understanding, and for allowing me to get done what needed done, especially when I was stressed about a deadline or demonstration I'd have to give later that day.

To Greg Stewart, thank you for so generously offering up materials, studio space, time, and advice to me whenever I was in need. I couldn't have pulled off many projects without your help.

To Corinne Diop, thank you for lending your time and resources and for helping me with anything regarding photography. Your kindness and patience have been so appreciated over the years.

To Dymph de Wild, thank you for advice and insight in and out of the studio. In times of panic and worry, I will always remember your advice to "keep it simple".

Table of Contents

Dedications.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
List of Figures.....	iv
Abstract.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Relationship Between Human and Tool.....	9
Problematizing Our World: Making Problems and Making Special.....	15
Craft and the Artists Hand.....	19
Absurdity.....	22
Reimagined Function.....	27
Adopting Language.....	28
Trustworthiness and Truthful Reviews.....	29
Code Switching.....	30
Conclusion.....	31
Works Cited.....	34
Bibliography.....	35

List of Figures

Figure 1. <i>DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool</i> , proposed exhibition installation.....	2
Figure 2. <i>Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool</i> YouTube tutorial.....	5
Figure 3. <i>Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool</i> gallery installation.....	5
Figure 4. <i>Depot X Colorpop Tool</i> vellum insert for eyeshadow palette.....	6
Figure 5. <i>DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool</i> infomercial still from filming location at Randy’s Do It Best Hardware Store, Bridgewater, VA.....	7
Figure 6. <i>DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool</i> detail of sloppy crafting and bucket foot anchor.....	7
Figure 7. <i>DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool</i> nail polish with patent pending faucet turn technology.....	7
Figure 8. <i>DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool</i> installation in the Duke Hall Gallery of Fine Art, Harrisonburg, VA.....	8
Figure 9. <i>BUUF Tool</i>	11
Figure 10. <i>Hand Clamp</i>	13
Figure 11. <i>Score Construction</i>	14
Figure 12. <i>Score Sitzprobe</i>	14
Figure 13. <i>Drop-Cloth Icon</i>	16
Figure 14. <i>Repurposed Iconography: Why Buy the Cow?</i>	17
Figure 15. <i>Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool</i> ” sloppy craft detail.....	21
Figure 16. <i>Score Construction</i>	24
Figure 17. <i>Score Sitzprobe</i>	24
Figure 18. “(Re)Canonizing the Tool: Constructions and Insincerity in the Digital Age”, digital exhibition, Duke Hall Gallery of Fine Art, Harrisonburg, VA.....	32
Figure 19. “Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool”, and “DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool”, digital exhibition, Duke Hall Gallery of Fine Art.....	33

Abstract

This thesis conceptually frames and accompanies the MFA body of work *(Re)Canonizing the Tool: Constructions and Insincerity in the Digital Age* done by Danielle Romagno. Using lenses of relationship between humans and tools, a desire to problematize our world, absurdity, and reimagined function, this document explores the work's connection to the contemporary superficiality of online media like infomercials and YouTube DIY tutorials.

Introduction

In an ideal world, this body of work exists in a hardware store, adjacent to a bathroom vanity, or in an unfinished basement. My pieces are not mere static figures, but are meant to be used, demonstrated, reimagined and transformed in the mind of the viewer. They are constructed like bath fitter sales kiosks or home improvement expos. Two plywood-framed walls with a digitally projected bathroom scene set the stage for abominations of hastily crafted, awkward, and spindly pine wood limbs with hardware store tools at their extremities. Coming through the speakers of a flat screen television, a YouTube beauty vlogger espouses the variety of uses in addition to the well-used paint roller at the one end of the limb, that is slopping makeup primer across her face. Around the corner, someone is climbing atop a ladder in a thicket of limbed tools, balancing on one leg. She stretches to grasp a faucet-nozzle capped nail polish bottle to paint the nails on their outstretched foot in hopes of prettier feet. In another beauty vlog, adjacent to the others, a makeup artist balances a two-person makeup tool. Humorously ping ponging back and forth to use a Home Depot inspired makeup palette and other makeup applicators at both ends, and in spite of its non-ergonomic ungainliness, she is the embodiment of transformation. All of these characters were played by me, so those are my face and my feet in each image. These unsightly tools become something other—something for beauty, something crude and reminiscent of early human life, and something that reimagines use.

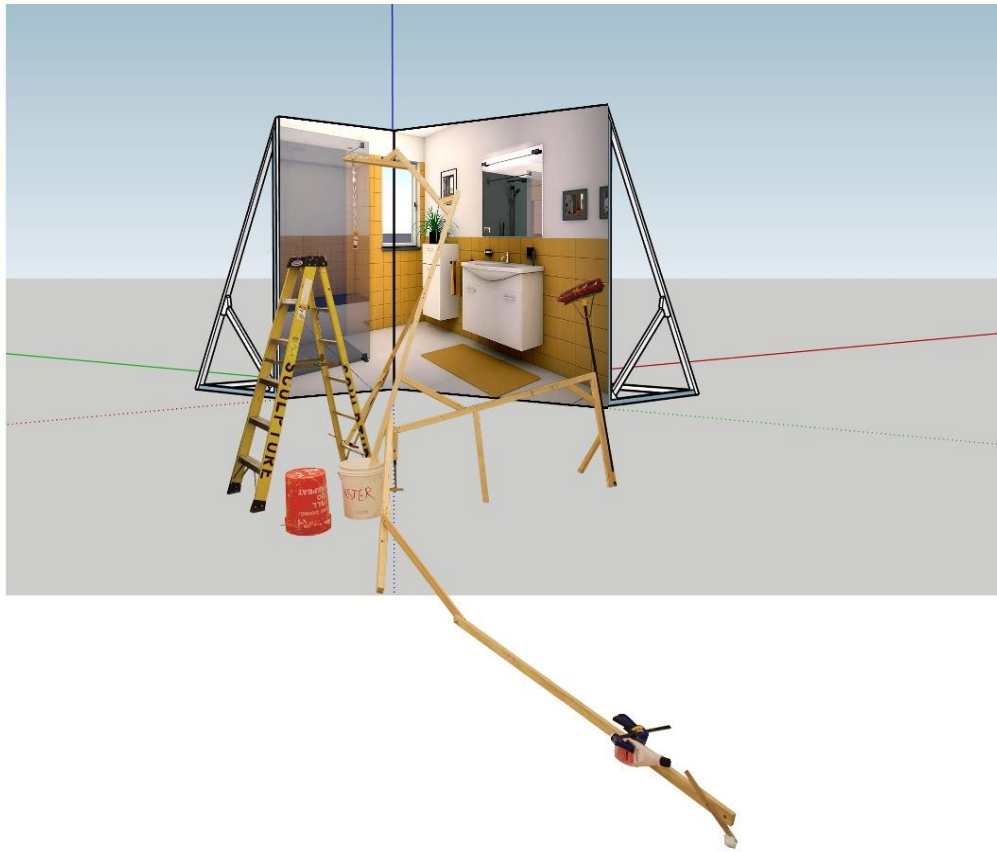


Fig. 1, “*DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool*”, proposed exhibition installation

Growing up, my connection to tools was one of seeking, assisting; it was an incomplete relationship, peripheral, at best, for a great deal of my life. I helped my dad with work in the garage fixing cars and holding the light for him to see. In our unfinished basement we would fix broken household appliances and I was the “go get me this or go get me that” person and needed to know the purpose and appearance of each tool to carry out my half of this relay. The time I got to spend with my dad was invaluable, and I do not resent being the runner, but my relationship to fixing and repairing things was lived on the fringes of using the tools I was sent to find. I was only ever of the realm of tools, but was never part of it, fully. I found my niche, however, in beauty. I have many memories with my mom of painting my nails or doing my makeup and it was in this space of remaking and reconstructing where I flourished. I commandeered any Barbie in sight for my DIY hair salon and used to give them makeovers. No matter how choppy their hair and how disheveled the makeup, my parents always gave me encouraging words about the Barbie’s new makeovers. This body of work arose out of my desire to restore balance to the unstable thresholds of beauty and construction which I have wobbled between for so long. My work smashes together these past times whose edges have rarely touched and is a reclamation of tools I never got to use. Ultimately, these pieces rebuild and rewrite a future in which humans and tools coalesce in absurd and humorously reimagined ways.

Within my work, a playful visual vocabulary of hardware store materials is transformed into absurd beauty tools in an effort to destabilize and reinterpret their functionality. Paint rollers become implements of beautification and are used, reviewed, and produced with elements of truth and trickery, not unlike the tactics used by salespeople of infomercials and YouTube beauty tutorials. These new beauty implements flip the script on gendered tools once used for building

houses, and now reclaim and carve out a space in which people might come to rely on them in the ways that early humans needed stone and wood. These pieces are interconnected and share similar themes and objectives and will be thoroughly discussed within the contexts of human and tool relationship, a desire to problematize our world, absurdity, and reimagined function. Earlier projects that influenced this more recent body of work will also be introduced along with references to their connections and significance in this new body of work “*(Re)Canonizing the Tool: Constructions and Insincerity in the Digital Age*. Within this series are three activated sculptures, “*Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool*”, “*Depot X Colorpop Tool*”, and “*DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool*”.

The “*Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool*”, is accompanied by a YouTube makeup tutorial in which I demonstrate a “get ready with me look”, a subgenre within the larger makeup community online. The sculpture itself is gangly and crooked — a ten-foot pine wood appendage with a Tonka truck crane arm with a makeup crusted paint roller as its lift bucket at one end, and at the other — a caster wheel that adds an unstable wobbliness to its already crude construction. Screws poke out, much too long for the wood they’re meant to hold together, and retractable makeup implements resemble tiny human arms ready to strike forward in the way they are hinged.



Fig. 2 (left) *Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool* YouTube tutorial and Fig. 3 (right) gallery installation

Under the branding, “ColorPop” cleverly named eyeshadow colors in a self-made palette are reviewed via a YouTube tutorial in “*Depot X Colorpop Tool*”. With this palette, I demonstrate how to create an eye look inspired by the humorous names made for each eyeshadow. The sculpture itself is crafted out of pine wood and intended for two simultaneous users, complete with two workshop sponge neck pads and makeup implements poking out of either end. The arms are retractable and move about, but the user must bounce back and forth, end to end, in order to apply their makeup. A car inspection mirror serves as a compact mirror, and a corner painting brush helps apply cheek contour with extreme precision to get a chiseled

look. This tool is unable to stand on its own but comes with a stand just as spindly and hastily constructed as its tool. For installation purposes, this tool is also furnished with metal eye hooks so that the viewers and users can walk up to and underneath the work.



Fig. 4 “*Depot X Colorpop Tool*” vellum insert for eyeshadow palette used in tandem with the “*Depot X Colorpop Tool*”

The “*DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool*”, is accompanied by an infomercial video, in which I use this tool to give myself a pedicure. This sculpture is a pile of leggy apparatuses with all the beauty supplies necessary for a pampering pedicure. From cotton balls to acetone, this beauty tool features six “must have’s” for an at-home-spa-worthy pedi. Outstretched in a hardware store and ready for its infomercial debut, the tool is poised and ready to give its user a pedicure. This

piece was chosen for its exemplary evidence of my hand's involvement in the work and balances the influences of mechanization and handwork.

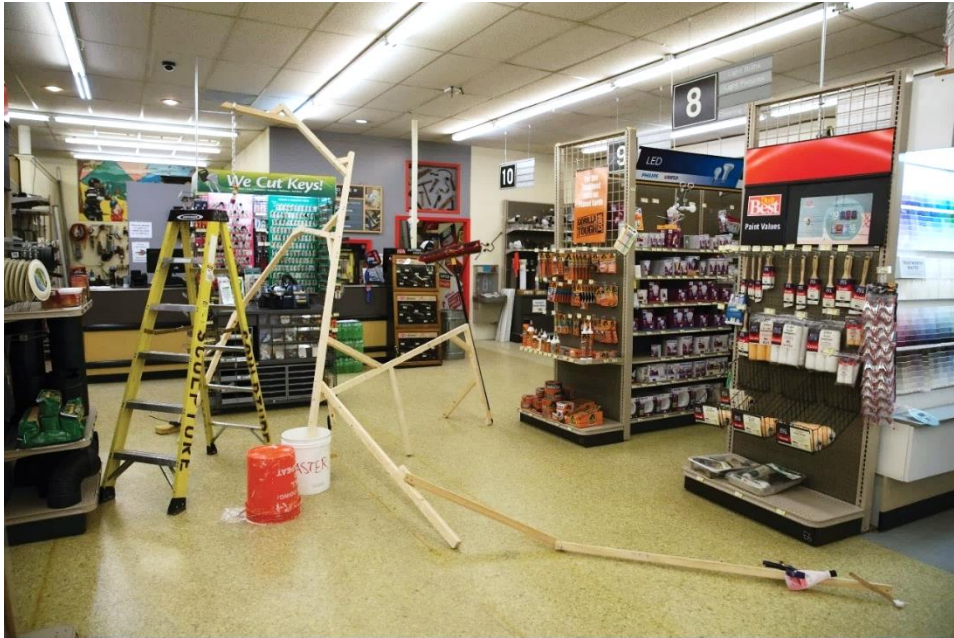


Fig. 5 “*DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool*” (top) infomercial still from filming location at Randy’s Do It Best Hardware Store, Bridgewater, VA

Fig. 6 “*DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool*” (bottom left), detail of sloppy crafting and bucket foot anchor

Fig. 7 “*DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool*” (bottom right) nail polish with patent pending faucet turn technology



Fig. 8, “DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool”, installation in the Duke Hall Gallery of Fine Art, Harrisonburg, VA

Relationship Between Human and Tool

For millions of years, human-kind's evolution was a result of an unmatched ability to use and create tools, a skill not possessed by any species besides our own. If we are to be considered “revolutionary”, why has our reliance on tools not waivered through the years? My interest in our dependence on tools lies in the pseudo-adaptability of the tools themselves. Are we that far from our ancestors if we still rely on the same tools? In an era of expedited obsolescence, we are in a constant negotiation of which tools we discard and which we transform. While humankind may never escape the need for tools, my work playfully critiques a culture that tells us that we need more; the extra, the unnecessary, and even the superfluous products endorsed in infomercials, advertisements, and that are featured in YouTube DIY beauty tutorials. Instead of eliminating tools from our lives completely, I ask the viewer to consider a “transformative” relationship with the things we use, allowing our tools to be multifaceted, to be used, reused, and again transformed in the face of an era that would have us do the opposite.

My work acknowledges the relationship between humankind and tools that started with the evolution of the opposable thumb. Whether or not contemporary humanity would like to admit it, the evolution of thumbs in early hominids led to arguably one of the most longstanding and complicated relationships between people and their need for tools. Their tools evolved simply and organically, making use of what was at hand to fulfill needs like fire making, animal harvesting, and shelter to survive. At the same time, tools also set a precedent for a certain quality of life made better by the ability and pleasure in crafting these assistive technologies.

This work began after returning home one winter to visit my parents. I discovered my childhood neighbors' house had been condemned, and as a result, their objects were laid bare in

their front yard. I was heartbroken to see their things thrown about, having grown up fixing and repairing whatever my family could salvage. Seeing the disregard for these objects and tools unlocked within me the fond memories I had with my father changing breaks on our cars and building a shooting range bench from our run-down swing set. After what felt like a lifetime of fetching tools, I was ready to take the lead. I set to work clearing their yard, wondering about the homeowner's connection to these things and began making work inspired by the makers and users of objects and tools. Looking back on that winter, I realize I became a catalyst of change in this newly formed relationship between human and tool.

Since then, making the bonds between maker and tools evident has been an important part of my practice. In earlier works I acknowledged this million-year-old relationship in plaster-cast sound reconstructions accompanied by slap-happily-made percussive implements. The reconstructions from the piece "*BUUF Tool*" relied on each other — one was not itself without the balance of its counterpart. The tensions therein, between tool and object and human and tool, were a fascinating see-saw of negotiations that emerged in my work.



Fig. 9 “BUUF Tool”

Sherwood L. Washburn’s explanation of this complicated relationship in “Tools and Human Evolution” undoubtedly influenced the visual language of my work.

It was the success of the simplest tools that started the whole trend of human evolution and led to the civilizations of today. From the short-term point of view, human structure [was] possible. From the evolutionary point of view, behavior and structure form an interacting complex, with each change in one affecting the other. Man began when populations of apes, about a million years ago, started the bipedal, tool using way of life that gave rise to the man-apes of the genus Australopithecus. Most of the obvious differences that distinguish man from ape came after the use of tools. (Washburn 63)

Instability abounds in the haphazard construction of the “*Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool*” limb which is relegated to being clamped to a wall, for its wheel foot has created a conundrum of usefulness and reliance. The wheel needs the wall to balance, the limb relies on the screws that barely hold it together, and humans depend on the tool itself. In the work “*Depot X Colorpop Tool*” the balance between human and tool is felt most prominently as the user wears the tool like a yoke and bears the weight of centuries of progress on their back. The multitude of beauty applicators attached to the “*DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool*” required the innovation of stickiness, hence the putty binding agent that holds them together. The notion of reliance and progress are essential elements in these works. In an era of constant evolution, the line between human and tool becomes blurred.

In addition to the relationship between humans and tools, and reliance and progress, my work examines the physicality of tool use. As a result of my research, I started to see many connections between the necessity of tools the evolution of civilization, thus my work began to reconnect the makers body to their tools. Hands extend, limbs stretch, and achy joints creak as this work forces its user to engage physically in order to use the implements properly. Parallel to the construction and further investigation of bodily involvement with tool, I had been digging into philosopher Marshall McLuhan’s book “*Understanding Media: The Extension of Man*”, in which he considers technology to be an outward growth of intellectual tasks and consciousness. He describes media and, technology as “extensions of ourselves” and notes examples like the wheel acting as an extension of the foot, television enhancing our eyes and ears, and homes as “an effort to extend the body’s heat-controlled mechanism”. (McLuhan 141) Building upon his theories, I took the tool formerly known as “*BUUF Tool*” and evolved it into photographic works called “*BUUF Extensions*”, in which I used the tool as an appendage of my body. I performed

with it, contorting and bending as I demonstrated its use fishing in a local state park, painting an apartment building, and rolling makeup onto my face. Tool becomes body, and body becomes tool as I squish and extend myself to use this implement as its awkward construction creates awkward use.



Fig. 10 “BUUF Extension 1”

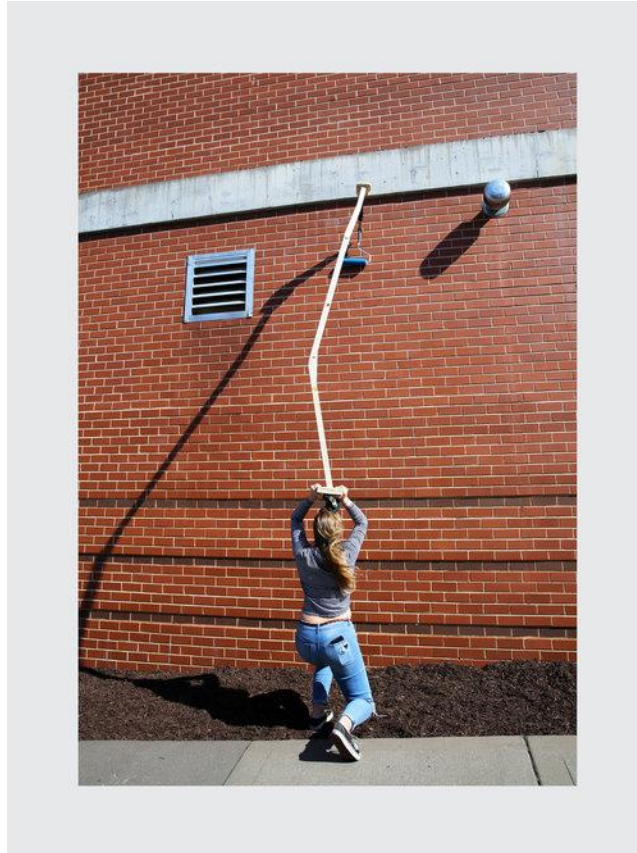


Fig. 11 “*BUUF Extension 2*”

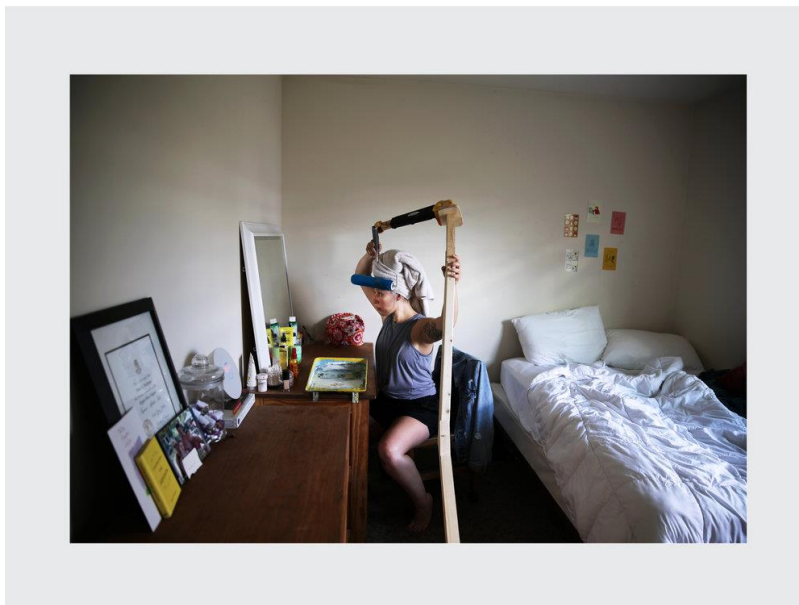


Fig. 12 “*BUUF Extension 3*”

As I was exerting myself to use these objects in physically demanding ways and thinking about McLuhan's theories, I grappled with questions of: "If tools are extensions of their makers, what would mine look like?", "In what context is this tool useful, and how can I make that visible?", "Can this thing be helpful and a burden simultaneously?" and "Where does the tool stop and my body begin? These questions guided this new series of work. These notions are reflected in the recent works "*Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool*", "*DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool*", and "*Depot X Colorpop Tool*" as construction store tools form makeup applicators. I hyper-extend to reach the paint roller foundation sponge, and force myself into cramped corners of sprawling tools, and balance the yoke like two-person beauty tool upon my back. Combining influences of human progress, reliance, and physical involvement, my role in this human tool relationship is that of transformative agent, thus (re)canonizing these implements contemporarily.

Problematizing Our World: Making Problems and Making Special

I am interested in the spaces or moments in which humans invent problems and solutions at the same time. Not only do tools help realize a life of leisure, they come from an evolutionary need to make, and fulfill the desire to flex our inventive muscles. If making and innovating were not enjoyable, why then do we live much more comfortably than ever before? In earlier works that I made while experiencing extreme feelings of homesickness, this notion of problematizing emerged in a series of icons and sewn pieces that complicated and made special the Pennsylvania Dutch hex sign. As a native of Pennsylvania, I grew up seeing these images as tools, known for their talismanic protection from crop blight and livestock famine. I designed iconography foregrounded onto a quilted piece that simultaneously amended the old phrase "Why buy the

cow when you can get the milk for free?” and subverted the transformative usefulness of the hex sign as an implement in “*Drop-Cloth Icon*” and “*Repurposed Iconography: Why Buy the Cow?*”.



Fig. 13, “*Drop-Cloth Icon*”



Fig. 14, “*Repurposed Iconography: Why Buy the Cow?*”

Making problems and making special has been a common theme throughout many of my works, however, it is most successfully realized in the works where hardware store tools and makeup application intersect. My work builds upon research done by art and culture scholar Ellen Dissanayake. Her writing about how art makes special the average and ordinary in transformative ways in “The Pleasure and Meaning of Making” has been an inspiration and point

of departure for my new body of work. Her extensive research about how infants grasp, handle, and drop objects proves that play is an intrinsically linked activity, which in turn makes object manipulation and tool making a pleasurable pastime when infants mature. As noted in her research, she describes that the skill of manipulation is crucial to the future of that infant's culture and society in which they participate:

Such specialized anatomical and cognitive abilities, and their emotional/social correlates, indicate that surely the use and making of things manually—that is, handwork--is something we were born to do. And indeed, one could say that nothing recognizably human is achieved without hand use--writing, painting, carving, sewing, building. If we haven't realized this before, it is only because in our lives machines do these things for us--but until very recently, human lives were made by human hands.

(Dissanayake 5)

I reflect on Dissanayake's theories and complicate them by focusing on the mundane hardware store tool. The tool's original functions fall away as these hardware store objects become tools for beautification instead in "*Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool*". As I stamp foundation onto my face with a well-used paint roller, I complicate the relationship between makeup and hardware store tool by forcing their interaction. In the work, "*Depot X Colorpop*" my tool revamps Dissanayake's notion of quality handwork with regards to tools by beautifying the user instead of the implement itself, thus problematizing their interplay. In "*DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool*", space is carved out for the ritual of doing one's own pedicure in the same way Dissanayake describes

how making something special “artifies” it, creating a rite of passage that transforms it from the banal, the everyday, and the ordinary to the extra-ordinary.

Craft and the Artists Hand

My work is in response to contemporary progress and mechanization which have created a society of people who no longer make the tools they use. The involvement of my hand is at the conceptual and visual root of my practice. Using my personal sense of humor in this work has been of equal importance when making functional yet sloppy looking tools that go against craft hierarchies maintained by the status quo of the artistic community. I revel in the irony of sinking hours into a functional object just to display it carelessly on a wall with nails and screws in response to the humor I see in delineations made between art and craft. Inspired by essays from “Sloppy Craft: Postdisciplinarity and the Crafts” the physical part of this series is so sloppily built that it is difficult to reproduce with any hand beside my own. My work has been influenced by the notion of “sloppy craft”, a term coined in 2007 by educator and artist Ann Wilson as a “response to the purposeful, rather messy technique used by her student, Josh Fraught” (Wilson 4). Similarly, the essay “An Impression of Déjà Vu”, by Denis Longchamps, located within “Sloppy Craft: Postdisciplinarity and the Crafts” has influenced my motivation to use sloppy craft techniques within this body of work:

Craft artists, however, are not sloppy. Their pieces may present an aesthetic that looks messy at first but which, upon closer inspection, in fact highlights technical knowledge and mastery as well as an understanding of the material necessary to deconstruct it. The

results are carefully planned, with just the right dose of randomness. Skills are highly important, even when getting “sloppy”. In this exciting postdisciplinary environment, these artists are expanding the discourse of craft by embracing sloppiness and imperfection and creating a craft aesthetic richly layered with conceptual meaning (Longchamps 71).

Rough and rugged construction meet in a hasty assembly of poor-quality wood, protruding screws, and gloopy putty. The “*DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool*” is barely able to stand except for the bucket anchoring the piece in place. Additionally, the “*Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool*” looks haphazard in its construction but the angled corners that hold it together offset its hurried making in a way that acknowledges both sloppy craft and valued skills seen in craft hierarchies. Typically used because of their impermanence, the clamps in my work flip the expectation of the artists hand and makes them permanent fixtures by gluing and screwing them into the supports of the “*Depot X Colorpop Tool*” upending the notion that sculptures be perfect and permanent.



Fig. 15 “Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool” sloppy craft detail

The ideas of philosopher, cultural critic, and author of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Walter Benjamin’s essay has definitively provoked my work to oscillate between hand crafting and mechanized sales pitches. His essay suggests that if our lives were moving toward machines and mechanization, art would soon follow, and we would need a new way to perceive it. Benjamin describes the fragmented images made by a cameraman as the new precedence over that of a traditional painter:

Magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web.

There is a tremendous difference between the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled

under a new law. Thus, for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment. And that is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art. (Benjamin 13-14)

The “*DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool*” lives in a tenuous balance between the presence of artist’s hand and the influence of mechanization, as suggested in Benjamin’s essay. The hand crafting throughout the sloppily assembled tools is evident but the mechanization in the infomercial accompanying it is more nuanced. Acting as both the performer and cameraperson in this piece, my role in the work dictates how the message is delivered, and to whom it is delivered in a convincing manner like that of the infomercial salesperson or YouTube vlogger. The ways in which these tools are demonstrated become as much a part of the message as what I say as the character in the video. Similarly, the “*Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool*” is visually replicated and can live an infinitely looping lifetime because of the YouTube makeup tutorial that accompanies the piece. Within the “*Depot X Colopop Tool*” video makeup tutorial, reality as it is seen by the viewer is mediated by my hand and my role in the work. While mechanization is a necessity for humankind to prosper, my infomercials and YouTube tutorials arbitrate what and how much is seen by the viewer in a way that balances the artists hand and mechanization.

Absurdity

Central to this body of work is a type of absurdity defined by rule breaking and reconstructing, the role or roles of the artist, and ideas of truth or trickery that blends notions of

reality. Absurdity has been a continuous theme through many pieces including my earlier work, “*Score Construction*” in which I began working generatively, inspired by artists like Allan Kaprow and George Brecht. I designed rules that would be broken and amended and rebuilt the negative spaces formed by the intersection of musical passages and time stamps from the culturally and personally significant American sitcom, *The Office*. Inspired by the physicality present in John Baldessari and Yoko Ono’s poetry, I portrayed this convergence of music and time with a physically impeding plaster cast sculpture that would coerce the viewer to interact with it. Visually akin to a map, an artifact, or a manual for something long gone, this reconstruction of the intangible allows one to feel that which cannot normally be touched. Within “*Score Sitzprobe*” I take on the role of music director and artist simultaneously, as I silently conduct my way through a Broadway musical score while the viewer waits for music that will never play. This work mimics my generations version of the fictional narrative inherent in *The Office*, a mockumentary series that follows a filming crew making a documentary of blue-collar office workers. Having watched the series in its entirety many times, the construction and collapse of these notions of reality has never been lost on me and not has strayed far from my work. The rules I break and rebuild have been integral to this work as I continue to take on multiple roles simultaneously, and blend reality with simulation in my current work.



Fig. 16 “Score Construction”



Fig. 17 “Score Sitzprobe”

My work erodes delineations of gendered tools and spaces, overturning and reconstructing systems of power. Inspired by writer and critic, Lucy Lippard, my practice rebuilds notions of masculine and feminine. In her article, “Making Something From Nothing”, Lippard discusses women’s history with making and their adaptations therein:

Most modern women lack the skills, the motive, and the discipline to do the kind of handwork their foremothers did by necessity, but the stitch-like “mark” Harmony Hammond has noted in so much recent abstract art by women often emerges from a feminist adoption of the positive aspects of women’s history”. It relates to the ancient,

sensuously repetitive, Penelopean rhythms of seeding, hoeing, gathering, weaving, spinning, as well as to modern domestic routines. (Lippard 487)

The application of one's makeup, of beautifying oneself, is a performance so enmeshed with gender that its connotations are hardly ever escapable. However, in this piece I take a cue from Lippard and modernize the ritual. The "*DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool*" smashes together notions of masculinity and femininity when making hardware store tools that now apply makeup. My "*Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool*" makes over the weekend retreat to the hardware store with my father and is a feminine take on the space in which I would often get called "little lady" when it was assumed I was shopping for my dad or husband. No longer must the tools in the store just be something I was sent to pick up for someone, but have instead been carefully selected for how similarly they will accomplish the task of applying makeup. A corner paintbrush applies blush, calipers become eyebrow rulers, and blue painters' tape creates perfectly angled eyeshadow, making these tools drugstore beauty duplicates in their own right. Reclaiming and reconstructing notions of beauty, femininity, and masculinity, my "*Depot X Colorpop*" tool starts to unravel the complicated strings that hold together gendered spaces and objects as it is performed in tandem with a self-made makeup palette inspired by the ridiculously gendered products of Lowe's and Home Depot. When paired with the hyper-masculine tools from hardware stores, these beauty applicator tools reconstruct a future in which beautification implements are something akin to the serious and valued work done by construction workers, foremen, and architects.

One of the most influential artists for this body of work has been Fluxus artist Joseph Beuys because of his ability to juggle roles of instructor, artist, activist, and shaman. In previous

works I take on similar roles, and in many ways this new work is a contemporary continuation of Beuys's legacy, as artist as shaman. In the "*Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool*", I appear to be a YouTube beauty vlogger, but behind the scenes, I am negotiating multiple roles of artist, inventor, and salesperson. Victoria Walters, author of "*The Artist As Shaman: The Work of Joseph Beuys and Marcus Coates*", describes how similar roles were essential to Beuys:

The shaman's role appears, then, to have been seen by Beuys as a means of emphasizing particular ideas around the historical evolution of the human being over time, the development of a new way of thinking about material as substance and a future notion of how the human being could work with this. (Walters 42)

Joseph Beuys' roles of educator, artist, and activist, within his chalkboard work, "*Directional Forces (Richtkrafte)*", 1980, have been influential to my practice. In the piece, Beuys performed all of these roles simultaneously, and as artifacts, the written-on chalkboards were wiped clean to live on as once activated, now stagnated sculptures. I find myself working very similarly to modernize the chalkboard through my infomercial and YouTube tutorials. The pieces "*Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool*", "*DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool*", and "*Depot X Colorpop Tool*" exemplify the variety of roles I play throughout my work, as artist, consumer, inventor, and infomercial demonstrator in a complicated balance of professions.

The absurdity in my work destabilizes what the viewer knows about reality by playing into notions of fakeness and sincerity. Coined by Alan Kirby, cultural critic and author of "*The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond*", an integral part of post postmodern theory I have adopted

in this work is the term “pseudo postmodernism”. He describes engagement with new media like television and internet as more invested than analog media users, and yet their time spent there is superficial. “A world of internet clicks produces queries never made before and “gives the undeniable sense (or illusion) of the individual controlling, managing, running, making up his/her involvement with the cultural product” (Kirby 35). My infomercials and YouTube tutorials of my beauty tools demonstrate their multiplicity of uses as I take on the “fake sincere” persona emulated by so many YouTube and infomercial salespeople. YouTube makeup artist Nikkie de Jager known for her “NikkiTutorials” vlogs are complete with green screen backdrops and coordinated outfits and drip with the same sticky sweetness and put togetherness that I emulate in my video demonstrations of this work. I create a false sense of belonging for the viewer in the “*Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool*” YouTube tutorial as I smear makeup down my face with a paint roller with the relatable phrase “look how easily this foundation goes on!” The fakeness I must pull off in these demonstrations of the “*Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool*”, “*Depot X Colorpop Tool*”, and “*DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool*” is only amplified by the tools’ awkward construction and crude assembly that show that the makeup application is a difficult, albeit, doable task. With fakeness and sincerity, I illustrate to the viewer a façade of ease and confidence in these poorly built tool’s abilities to perform in this series of absurd videos.

Reimagined Function

A through line of past works has been this notion of remaking, reauthoring and rebuilding the past function of tools into something new. After continued work with the “*BUUF Extension*” photographic series I had the great privilege of working with contemporary media specialist and

artist Rebecca Forstater whose support indefinitely changed the trajectory of my new works “*Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool*”, “*DeWalt Pedi Plus*” and “*Depot X Colorpop Tool*”. We discussed what this tool had done previously and what it could be used for, and while unearthing the bedroom photo in the “*BUUF Extension*” series in which I am painting my makeup foundation with a paint roller, it dawned on me the other half of my time not spent helping my dad in the garage or shed was spent with my mother performing rituals of beauty like curling our hair and painting our toenails. It was at this point I knew these hardware store tools needed a kiss of beauty, thus the reimagination of these previously rugged implements.

With the guidance of Rebecca and her expertise in digital art, I began using virtual backgrounds and digital media to film and demonstrate these tools as a device to reimagine both the tool and the media with which it is filmed. Online venues like infomercials and YouTube makeup vlogs have become digital spaces in which products can be sold, marketed and reviewed, and their functions and usefulness can be reimaged all from the vlogger’s computer. This reconstruction of medium is fostered by the salesperson’s ability to adopt the language of their viewers, give trustworthy reviews that build a confident fanbase, and switch between amateur and professional makeup artist.

Adopting Language

The ways in which YouTube beauty vloggers create, use, and adhere to the codified language of their audience is key to their success online. “Chisel, swatch, and de-pot, might seem like casual construction slang thrown around the work site, however, these words are most prevalent in the vernacular of the YouTube makeup artists. Naming or identifying similarities through vocabulary is essential to success online and is demonstrated in the “*Depot X Colorpop*”

tool and accompanying vlog. This piece acknowledges YouTube naming culture, in both title and name, and its online influences with eyeshadow palette names such as “Clamped”, “She-Shed”, and “Stud”. It pokes fun at naming culture on YouTube, and the silliness of gendering and gendered products prevalent in hyper masculine hardware store tools. My “*DeWalt Pedi Plus*” also reimagines the naming conventions often seen online with beauty applicators named after hardware store tools like the “Irwin File and Buff Tool”, and “O’Malley’s Own Sponge On A Stick”.

Trustworthiness and Truthful Reviews

My research examines the YouTube makeup artists reception as a trustworthy source for the beauty needs of their fanbase and their ability to reimagine their message to meet the expectations of their viewers. Building trust between consumer and vlogger is instrumental in the YouTuber’s success, and whose voice is often heard even more loudly than the brand selling the products in the vlogs. Author of “Interdiscursive Performance in Digital Professions: The Case of YouTube Tutorials”, Aditi Bhatia uses tech journalist Chavie Lieber’s work to describe the sway of the influential beauty vlogger. As Lieber observes, beauty vloggers “have even more influence on customers than the makeup companies they use, causing a total shift in the beauty industry. Fans see beloved vloggers as their friends, or even sisters, while they don’t necessarily trust the content provided by their favourite makeup brands” (Bhatia 117). As necessary as trust is for the YouTube producers and consumers, so too is my ability to convince viewers of my makeup tool vlogs that my tools work and that they are an investment worthy of their time and money. Acting as a mediator between the two, the accompanying infomercial and tutorials of the “*Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool*”, “*DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool*”, and “*Depot X Colorpop Tool*”

emulate the friendliness, sass, and down to earth qualities seen so often in these media and act as a device that allows me to successfully reimagine myself as a trustworthy vlogger within these digital spaces.

Code Switching

Infomercial salespeople and YouTube beauty vloggers have an uncanny ability to mimic the humble amateur makeup artist as well as experienced veteran — highlighting here, contouring there, and eroding the delineations that shape online YouTube beauty culture. The ability to code switch between amateur and expert is another tactic I use in my work, as it is an important aspect of online YouTube culture, and perpetuated by vloggers who intentionally exploit the differences in each. Florence Garcia-Rapp, author of “The Digital Media Phenomenon of YouTube Beauty Gurus: The Case of Bubzbeauty” describes the fake intimacy that is part of these exploitations noting that “This is often achieved by displaying a reachable, ‘girl next door’ image, to foster empathy and identification”. (Garcia-Rapp 16) These manipulations of amateur and professional are part of the backdrops where my beauty tools are filmed. Differences between amateur and professional converge within “*Depot X Colorpop*”, a tool intended for two people that is filmed from my tiny apartment bedroom. Not a hair is out of place or sheet untucked in this hyper clean room that becomes a backdrop of superficiality for demonstrating this two-person device. The “*Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool*” is equally important and replete with artificiality with its Windows 98 screensaver attached to the back wall of the trailer in which I filmed the tutorial with the help of Rebecca Forstater. Having used the backdrop for filming inside the trailer at the onset of this first work, made me realize these tools were meant to be filmed and photographed in an equally considered and constructed space as the

implements. Lastly, “*DeWalt Pedi Plus*” is demonstrated and filmed in the style of an infomercial and has shaky camera work and minimal editing for a low budget filming style. Amateurism and professionalism are distorted in these works as I reimagine the function of hardware store tools now made for beauty.

Conclusion

Fakeness and insincerity abound in these tools that reimagine for what and for whom they are meant. Recalling the relationship between human and tool, these sloppily-crafted implements absurdly reconstruct notions of gender, the role of the artist, and truth and trickery that blend notions of reality throughout media like infomercials and YouTube. Through humorous atrocities of clamps, chalk, wood, and nails I rebuild spaces in which real objects and imagined use can exist, problematizing and making special their convergencies. Playfully critiquing the empty superficiality of online tutorials, I give meaning to and reimagine the tools of beauty and construction from my youth that have rarely met. These worlds coalesce into amalgamations of poorly made hardware store beauty implements, (re)canonizing and reconstructing the relationship between myself and tool.

I see this work living on in infinite digital applications. The potential of these tools to transform and metastasize with the aid of green screens or computerized autonomy ensures the success of these works, even with limited physical display, and lack of social interaction. This work could overcome the need for a physical audience, and the presence of physical work.



Fig. 18 “(Re)Canonizing the Tool: Constructions and Insincerity in the Digital Age”, digital exhibition, Duke Hall Gallery of Fine Art, Harrisonburg, VA



Fig. 19 “Anastasia Multi Makeup Tool”, and “DeWalt Pedi Plus Tool”, digital exhibition, Duke Hall Gallery of Fine Art

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