

Happy Objects Beget Happy Objects

Ideas on how time, care and closeness ensure a 'happy' future.

Happy Objects beget Happy Objects.

by Jill Price

“We are moved by things. In being moved, we make things.” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 25)

During my first year of an Interdisciplinary MFA program at OCADU, I was horrified at being able to see myself within a reading of Tiqqun’s *Theory of a Young Girl*, that is, “the model citizen as redefined by consumer society” (Tiqqun, 2012, p. 15). Overnight, I became very uncomfortable with the idea that I had been naively answering ‘hails’¹ from capitalist titans to re-enact social practices that reproduce messaging of ‘feminization,’ ‘youthification,’ and consumptionism. Determined to become more aware of what I was consuming, I became overly “intimate with what is not happy,” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 31) about ‘fast fashion’s’ chains of production. Also, discovering the ‘vitality’ or ‘liveliness’ of textiles upon their discard (Bennett, 2010, p. 5), all data pointed to how my guilty pleasure of shopping meant I was purchasing environmental and psychological trauma.

Not interested in owning such materials, I performed what Karen Barad might refer to as an ‘agential cut,’² by shifting to second-hand shopping as a way of distancing myself from the astronomical waste, human suffering, and ecological destruction stitched into every seam of store-bought clothing. From this new place of consumer consciousness, manufactured ‘things,’ whether fabric or steel, were not safe from the scrutiny of the eco-feminist lens through which I viewed the world. Upon sight, I would often reduce all encountered things, whether animal, plant, plastic or human, to the Land of the future. As the matter of the world became flatter and flatter, I could not help but point out the excessive amount of toxic and undervalued materials in the world.

With more research, I began to view global trade as an iteration of colonialism where the consumption of affordable, imported goods meant I had been complicit in resource extraction, environmental devastation

¹ Within *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* Louis Althusser, introduces the concept of interpellation, suggesting that Ideologies, upheld by the dominant class, “call out” or “hail” people to identify and perform in particular ways so as to uphold the ruling ideologies and repressive state apparatuses that be. (Althusser, 1994)

² Karen Barad, is an American feminist theorist and physicist working within the field of New Materialism who recognizes that all matter has agency within larger assemblages of human and non-human material that are performative and in relation to all other things. Combining the theory of knowing with the theory of being and ethics, Barad presents “agential cuts” as “material-discursive boundary-making practices that produce “objects” and “subjects”, and other differences out of, and in terms of, a changing relationality.” (Barad, 2007, pp. 92, 93)

and human exploitation around the world. This speculation was clarified by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's definition of 'external colonialism' in their essay *Decolonization is not a Metaphor*. As such, it was rare for a 'good' to come forward and defend itself as a 'happy object.'

Initially wanting to use my PhD research to expose textiles as woven technologies that continue to colonize and stigmatize bodies, another essay by Eve Tuck entitled *Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities*, made me consider "the long-term impact of damage-centred research, which "operates with a flawed theory of change" and "simultaneously reinforces and reinscribes a one-dimensional notion of people as depleted, ruined, and hopeless." (Tuck, 2009, p. 409) Tuck's text revealed that despite acknowledging my privilege as a researcher, I had failed to recognize that my privileged perceptions of 'objects' manufactured in developing economies are attached to humans who may not have the luxury of seeing their situation similarly. This led to the realization that by researching and sharing stories other than my own, I may be contributing to the traumatizing of people I was intending to assist.

From this past assemblage of happenings, I am now drawn to imagining, manifesting, and encountering "happy objects," as discussed by Sarah Ahmed in her book *The Promise of Happiness*. At the risk of encouraging the creation and consumption of more 'stuff,' this paper will revisit Sara Ahmed's multiple theories on what constitutes a "happy object" from an ecological, social, and personal perspective while examining the cultural text of a hand-knit afghan. Hoping to put into practice the accumulation of positive affect (Ahmed, 2010, p. 28), as this essay also has the potential to serve as a "happy object," I will examine how objects might become, stay, and inspire future "happy objects" through material webs of knowledge, skill, time, care, proximity, and personal 'decoding'³ or storytelling.

By understanding that happiness can be achieved through being affected by an encounter, setting intentions, and or evaluating an object (Ahmed, 2010, p. 21), it becomes essential to clarify that objects are not only physical, consumable goods. An idea, a desire, a refusal, a song, or, if one is willing to consider humans as animate or inanimate assemblages of material, both the individual or, in Sara Ahmed's example, 'the family,' can be viewed as an object. As such, one must not assume that 'objects' make us happy but recognize that their effect on us potentially stems from us making them happy.

³ An extension of semiotics, Stuart Hall, within his 1973 Encoding / Decoding essay, outlines how a subject or audience member, despite how an image, symbol or text is "encoded," may, in the process of "decoding" a text, brings their meaning to the reading or interpretation of that which has been coded.

To illustrate how three handmade afghans gifted to me by my grandmother gradually became ‘happy objects,’ I will first share three ‘happenings’⁴ that occurred over the last two years.

Happening #1: Nearing completion of an interdisciplinary MFA, my grandmother, at the age of eighty-seven, passed away. Leaving me a small box of memorabilia, including a large cream afghan, I solemnly returned to researching the ‘agency’ of things by carefully pinning the hand-knit blanket to my studio wall and tracing each knit stitch to arrive at a drawing informed by the size and elasticity of each loop.

Happening #2: In the fall of 2017, I attended a Woven Technologies workshop hosted by the *University of Toronto’s Media and Communications PhD Program* and the *Contemporary Toronto Textile Co-op*. This full-day, hands-on workshop explored how early forms of textile production, such as hand spinning and indigo dying, used spindles, vats, hands, resists, time and air technologies. Shocked at the idea that each of these things was once considered technology, I had many aha moments while communications and textile scholars pointed out how even the tiniest units of materials must have the right conditions to come into relation with one another so they can communicate in a way that is desirable or ‘happy.’ Although a far cry from the encoding that Stuart Hall’s “distinct moments” in the “production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction” of messaging within television (Hall, 2009, p. 163), I was reminded how textiles, once laboriously and carefully handmade, were one of the first substrates used to record, share, and transport messages.

Happening #3: In late fall of 2018, I was invited to exhibit my drawings created from my grandmother’s afghans in a two-person exhibition entitled *Two Legacies*.⁵

The point of sharing these three “happenings” is to draw attention to encounters and knowledge that began to help unflatten things, experiences, and humans that deserved ‘mattering,’ or as Ahmed would say, point “towards happiness” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 27). Although not willing to completely relinquish the empirical ‘what’s what’ attached to material things (Ahmed, 2010, p. 22), I began thinking about “how objects become happy,” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 21) and how this line of thought may offer insight into how the creation, or in my

⁴ Sara Ahmed introduces the reader to the etymology of happiness “from the Middle English word hap suggesting chance”, which draws our attention to the question of happiness being a result of good fortune and coming to us through a series of events or happenings. (Ahmed, 2010, p. 22)

⁵ Two Legacies curatorial essay – Appendix A

case, the reclaiming, recrafting, and presenting of objects can accumulate “positive affective value as social goods,” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 38) while also considering the ‘happiness’ of the more-than-human.

Starting with Sara Ahmed’s statements, “We turn toward objects at the very point of “making,” and “to be “made happy” is to recognize that happiness starts from somewhere other than the subject who may use the word to describe a situation” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 21). I took these words to mean that the creation of happiness can begin at the moment of ideation, continue at the point in which materials are grown and extracted, and hopefully embody lessons of cradle-to-cradle design as written about by William McDonough and Michael Braungart⁶ when returning to the earth. These statements and the remainder of Ahmed’s essay also suggest that there are three distinct ways an object could be made or considered ‘happy,’ the first way being that objects are culturally ‘encoded’⁷ as happy or unhappy before one’s encounter with them.

To address the concept that ‘happiness’ is predetermined by the social construct of the ‘object’ itself, I will first clarify what an afghan is for those who are not crafters or have not heard this word used in this context. As a white settler of various European descents, an afghan is a knitted or crocheted blanket often found draped over the foot of a bed or chair. Beyond its decorative potential, an afghan is typically pulled over its user to contend with a breezy draft, cut a chill, or get cozy with a loved one while reading or watching television. ‘Encoded’ by many as an artifact you would find in a home where the traditions of family, matrilineal traditions, and craft are respected, afghans are often gifted to younger generations from great aunts or grandmothers at times of importance. Within more sentimental familial networks, afghans are frequently referred to as keepsakes or heirlooms and are passed down from generation to generation. As such, afghans are often made with extreme care, requiring the maker to pay careful attention to the number, order, and type of stitches to arrive at a repetitive pattern and desired size. Often taken up as one of the first large projects by emerging crafters, the finished outcomes serve as physical documents for the new knowledge, skills, care and time invested.

Textile historian Lynn Abrams also suggests that textiles, whether they be woven, knitted, crocheted, or stitched, reach beyond the stereotypical ‘encoding’ of women’s work or labour “that integrated women

⁶ William McDonough and Michael Braungart are architect and scientist work in collaboration to draw attention to how we can become better designs, makers and consumers by ensuring that we consider the end point of all objects on earth, that is the earth itself.

⁷ An extension of semiotics, Stuart Hall, within his *Encoding / Decoding* essay published in 1973 outlines how the production of a message or the creation of meaning through media is arrived at by using different words, signs, images, video, and other non-verbal symbols in order to communicate something to the audience. Within this paper I look at how even an object has multiple meanings depending on the context or perspective from which it is presented or read.

into the market and enabled women to construct an identity for themselves based on their relationship with production and the wider economy.”(Abrams, 2006, p. 149). Abram also argues that throughout history, “hand knitting and how it was produced and traded occupied a central place in the web of female relationships [...], helping to create a female culture characterized by an acknowledgement of women as producers with economic autonomy” (Abrams, 2006, p. 149).

If one examines an afghan’s knitted form, during times of war, knitting was an act of patriotism in which all sexes, young and old, and even the wounded, would passionately and devotedly produce wool socks, scarves, sweaters, and blankets to let soldiers know they were loved and to keep them warm and dry while out in the trenches. Carefully inspected for holes, unevenness, and seams that would cause sores or blisters, many charitable organizations, including the Red Cross, published posters, manuals and magazines to encourage and instruct people on what and how to knit for the troops. (Gosling, 2014) (Florence, 2014)

From these three Western European and North American settler perspectives one could consider the cultural text of an afghan as a material force “encoded” with the history of women, craft, family, patriotism and love. This would mean that for someone familiar with receiving an afghan or perhaps a quilt from a loved one, the social and cultural implications of this happening would be considered a happy event at which both the giver and the receiver would feel a warm joy and the object would serve as the perfect material vessel to carry that happiness forward.

Unfortunately, in acknowledging that language is a cultural text, by looking at the origins of the word afghan, I can demonstrate Ahmed’s point about how happy objects do not always remain happy or “stay in place.”(Ahmed, 2010, p. 23) Deemed as an expression of colonialism in which the British reduced the ‘other’ to material while expanding the English language, the etymology of afghan stems from the word Afghanistan and “first appeared in English in the late 1700s as a name for the Pashtuns of eastern and southern Afghanistan. (The name is not Pashtun in origin, however; “Afghan” is the Persian name for these people.)” As a noun, some people suggest that because Afghanistan was known for the production of exquisite textiles such as carpets, tapestries and shawls during early global trade, “it’s no wonder that “afghan” was used in English to refer to knitted or crocheted wool shawls or blankets. This use of “afghan” (always lower-case) arose in the early 1800s.” (Inok, 2005)

If staying with colonial discourse, one must also explore the arrival of the afghan into North America. Simulated through the Kairos Blanket Exercise⁸ and referenced through Leah Decter's and Jamie Isaac's 2010 - 2016 art project (*official denial*)⁹ In its simplest form, a blanket, regardless of its shape, size, colour, or material, now exists as a signifier of how diseases were introduced to Indigenous communities throughout Central and North America during first contact and through various other colonization and settlement projects on Turtle Island.

If one only considers the material content of blankets, which is usually an acrylic wool blend, the ecological and ethical issues of the textile industry would also "encode" the afghan as excess and harmful.¹⁰ So, how might an afghan, now known as a 'knitted throw,' become a "happy object" after I have learned all about its colonial and ecological histories, present, and future?

Over my lifetime, my grandmother on my father's side gifted me three 'knitted throws.' Executed in a dusty blue yarn, the first one was gifted to me while completing an undergraduate degree in fine arts at Western University in London, Ontario. Only "decoded" upon her passing, I recognized the hue of the throw as being one of her favourite colours. Long and lean, it has always been the perfect size to lie down with on a three-seater couch.

⁸ "Developed in response to the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1996* – the KAIROS Blanket Exercise (KBE) covers more than 500 years in a 90-minute experiential workshop that aims to foster understanding about our shared history as Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. During the KBE, participants walk on blankets representing the land and into the role of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples by reading scrolls and carrying cards which ultimately determine their outcome as they literally 'walk' through situations that include pre-contact, treaty-making, colonization and resistance." Early on in the simulation, one of the European Explorers gifts a blanket by wrapping it around the shoulders of one of the participants playing the role of an Indigenous person. Any Indigenous role player holding a yellow card at that time is asked to leave the simulation as the blanket has brought disease, sometimes leading up to 90% of the community dying. (Kairos Blanket Exercise, 2019)

⁹ (*official denial*) trade value in progress was a six-year participatory project initiated in 2010 and subsequently co-activated with Anishinabek / British curator / artist Jaimie Isaac from 2011-2016. Conceived in response to Prime Minister Harper's 2009 statement "we also have no history of colonialism," the project engaged participants across the country in responding to Harper's statement by writing their responses to Harper's statement in a project book. At subsequent Sewing Actions hosted in a variety of locations, each participant selected a response already written in the book and sewed it onto the blanket. They also left a written response in the book for future sewers choose from. When the project began, the blanket composite featured only the machine-stitched version of Harper's statement at its centre. Over time this was crowded out by several hundred hand-sewn responses that rendered a collaborative trace of participants' thoughts, labour, and affective engagement. (Decter, 2016)

¹⁰ Beyond the extensive use of water, arable soil, chemicals, dyes and energy required in the production and processing of wool, the wool industry also contributes to the production of methane gases quickly destroying our ozone layer. As much of our wool products are now acrylic or synthetic blends, the textile industry at large is the second biggest industrial user of petrochemicals other than the oil and gas industry itself. The production of synthetic fibres not only prevents textiles from breaking down on the earth or be burned safely, but have been proven to break down during washing and add to the ongoing rise of microbeads in our water systems. (Mcdonough & Braungart, 2002)

The second 'knitted throw' came to me as a newlywed after my husband and I had moved into a townhouse off-base in Petawawa, Ontario. Upon visiting us, my grandmother secretly noticed our colour scheme. The next holiday season, we received the traditional Christmas card stuffed with scratch-and-win tickets and a lovely hay-yellow 'knitted throw.' Almost perfectly square, its shape implied we were to remain sitting up on the couch despite our marital status.

The third 'knitted throw' came to me upon my grandmother's death. Carefully tucked away in a box with many of the things I had given her throughout her life, this cream throw comfortably covers the top of a double or queen-sized bed. I am unsure about its purpose or why she had waited to gift it to me, but part of me suspects it was meant to come to me upon the birth of my first child.

By sharing these three short stories, I arrive at my second impression of how an object may become happy and, in this case, stay or become 'happier' over time. Again, starting from Ahmed's idea that "to be made happy by this or that is to recognize that happiness starts from somewhere other than the subject," (Ahmed, 2010, p. 21) I am prepared to argue that the context in which 'this or that' is produced lends to an object being deemed happy or unhappy. To draw on this thread further, by investigating the context or process in which a thing is created, one can acknowledge the knowledge and skill of the maker, the work conditions of the maker, the 'why' or 'intentions' of the maker, the cultural climate or environmental conditions in which something is made, and the amount of time and care needed to arrive at something's creation to "evaluate" whether an object is happy or not.

As suggested by Ahmed, my grandmother's biography "is intimately bound up with" these 'knitted throws.' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 27) This reminded me of Pliny's myth of the origin of art, where Pliny the Elder tells the story of a potter's daughter who traced her lover's shadow before he left for war. From this traced shadow, her father drafted a clay form that incorporated relief elements to further the fantasy of his presence. (Pliny 1896) (Price, 2017) Although not a silhouetted bust, the form and function of the 'knitted throws' refer back to a human presence and the absence of the maker's hands, serving to fill a "certain gap" or offer "a prop that sustains the fantasy" of my grandmother's presence. (Ahmed, 2010, p. 32) Ahmed suggests that even in the "absence of happiness," their role as "gap fillers" denotes the throws as "happy objects."

Unable to fill in for or communicate the maker's situation, stories, however partial, help to inform how 'happy' these objects might be. My Dad's mom, Phyllis, grew up on a small farm in rural Eastern Ontario. An extremely private woman, my grandmother was a keeper and consumer of few things. Within her minimal

means, Phyllis managed to survive having three children, an alcoholic husband, my grandfather's early death, being a grandmother at the age of 39, working as a waitress at my mom's parents' restaurant to make ends meet, philandering boyfriends, late night shifts at the local Becker's, losing her middle son to a tragic car accident, owning and losing the local arcade to arson, worrying about the divorces of her two remaining children, working part-time in a twelve by fifteen foot sorry excuse for a library, breast cancer and of course, the endless gossip of a small town.

As told through the eyes of her eldest granddaughter, Phyllis's story doesn't align with the original meaning of happy, "to be lucky or fortunate." (Ahmed, 2010, p. 22) If anything, one might argue that my grandmother's crafting may have been an activity that offered her a way to escape or manage depression, as discussed in Ann Cvetkovich's final chapter of *Depression: A Public Feeling*. In Cvetkovich's last chapter, Crafting, Creativity, and Spiritual Practice, the author "explores crafting as a model for creative ways of living in a depressive culture and as an ordinary form of spiritual practice" that she calls "the utopia of everyday." (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 159) Cvetkovich also points out how "depression is tied to the domestic because it is ordinary." (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 157) Perhaps as ordinary as happiness, but not as quickly flipped on the dime I suspect they share.

Despite the grim framing of my grandmother's life above, it was also one of modesty, generosity, dedication and survival, which falls more in line with the argument that Ahmed draws in through John Locke's¹¹ discussion on the benefits of uneasiness and Mihály Csikszentmihalyi¹² convictions that happiness "is not something that money can buy or power command" and "does not depend on outside events, but rather on how we interpret them," and "must be prepared for, cultivated and defended privately by each person." (Locke, [1690] 1997) (Csikszentmihályi, 1992) (Ahmed, 2010, p. 22)

¹¹ John Locke 1632—1704, known as the founder of British Empiricism wrote his most important work, the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* "to offer an analysis of the human mind and its acquisition of knowledge. He offered an empiricist theory according to which we acquire ideas through our experience of the world" arguing that knowledge is the constant assembling and reorganizing of ideas that allows our mind "to examine, compare, and combine these ideas in numerous different ways" to arrive at understandings or evaluations of what is good or constitutes happiness. (Connolly, n.d.)

¹² Mihály Csikszentmihályi is Professor of Psychology and founder/co-director of the Quality of Life Research Center (QLRC) that studies "positive psychology, the study of human strengths such as optimism, creativity, intrinsic motivation, and responsibility." Mihály Csikszentmihályi discovered people find genuine satisfaction during a state of consciousness called Flow. In this state they are completely absorbed in an activity, especially an activity which involves creative abilities. During this "optimal experience" they feel "strong, alert, in effortless control, unselfconscious, and at the peak of their abilities." In the footsteps of Maslow, Csikszentmihályi, Mihály insists happiness does not simply happen. It must be prepared for and cultivated by each person, by setting challenges that are neither too demanding nor too simple for one's abilities."

Looking more closely at Csikszentmihalyi's idea that challenges lead to happiness as they allow us an opportunity to overcome them and achieve a sense of pride or accomplishment upon realizing one's resiliency to what I believe Ahmed refers to as the "drama of contingency," (Ahmed, 2010, p. 21) each challenge my grandmother faced may have required her to enter a state of absorption or a state of "flow" that helped her to cope. (Csikszentmihályi, 1992) Perhaps knitting a new pattern would have offered Phyllis just enough of a challenge, as it required a positive attitude, determination and discipline, which would have resulted in a sense of accomplishment or 'happiness.'

Additionally, despite not being aware of Benedict de Spinoza¹³, my grandmother's life reflected his idea that "we call a thing good which contributes to the preservation of our being." (Spinoza, [1677] 2001) (Ahmed, Happy Object, 2010) These words offer us a glimpse of a mindset that does not find happiness in personal desires but instead puts others and potentially the earth before our wants, likes and pleasure. If one breaks the statement down, the word 'contributes' suggests that one arrives at happiness from cumulative actions. The use of 'we' and 'our' implies we must consider preserving many versus preserving just oneself. 'Preserve' could also be exchanged with the word 'sustain' or 'save,' moving us away from producing or consuming unnecessary, new 'things' and more towards acquiring what is needed, under-utilized and maintainable.

The three memories of how I received the 'knit throws' can help determine the "why" or the intent behind their creation and what Nietzsche claims is required to identify something's causality. (Nietzsche, [1901] 1968) (Ahmed, 2010, p. 27) Seemingly completely selfless and from no place of expressed promises or cultural expectations I was aware of, Phyllis created each of these 'knitted throws' to mark, celebrate and extend comfort during significant rites of passage for someone other than herself. In addition, Phyllis's generosity to others was often met with an unwillingness to receive gifts in return, as she found happiness in not having to worry about being wasteful or caring for things she did not need. Ahmed might suggest that the happiness my grandmother experienced was through "the gesture of deferral, [...] a deferral that is imagined simultaneously as a sacrifice and gift: for some, the happiness that is given up." (Ahmed, 2010, p. 33)

The size, number and variation of throws created over her lifetime also tell us that Phyllis enjoyed knitting as a pastime. This falls in line with Locke's idea that "the experience of pleasure is how some things

¹³ "Among philosophers, Spinoza is best known for his *Ethics*, a monumental work that presents an ethical vision unfolding out of a monistic metaphysics in which God and Nature are identified. God is no longer the transcendent creator of the universe who rules it via providence, but Nature itself, understood as an infinite, necessary, and fully deterministic system of which humans are a part. Humans find happiness only through a rational understanding of this system and their place within it." (Dutton, n.d.)

become good,” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 23) and so points to how ‘happiness’ can be found within the making process. This allows us to speculate on how feelings transfer or become interwoven into what is being created, resulting in their receivers being more affected by objects that offered their maker pleasure during their manifestation.

Understanding how and where the ‘knitted throws’ were made also provides us with hints as to whether an object is happy or not. Although not personally raising the sheep, carding the wool or spinning the yarn, by choosing to hand knit the throws herself, my grandmother chose to “give value” to the blankets by shaping them into objects through “practical actions” and care. (Ahmed, 2010, p. 24). Undoubtedly created while sitting in her only living room chair, the precise stitches exemplify the fine craftsmanship upheld by textile guilds today and pull from Nietzsche’s “basic formula of religion and morality” as well as Ahmed’s conceptualization that to take care of something, doing it well or doing it right “might be what promises us happiness.” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 29) (Nietzsche, [1901] 1968)

Ahmed also draws upon several philosophers to “theorize about the mind-body relationship with objects” and argue how “objects acquire value through contact with bodies” over time. (Ahmed, 2010, p. 23) Although Ahmed would suggest that it was actually ‘happiness’ that put my grandmother “into intimate contact” with the yarn in the first place. (Ahmed, 2010, p. 23) If one entertains new materialist thought, which acknowledges how objects affect and materials have agency, it becomes evident how the value of an object can begin to increase even at its conception. Knowing how particular my grandmother was, I would wager that it was from the moment she conceived of the idea to knit me a throw and began to imagine the pattern and yarn she would use that she began to imbue the materials of love and care into the finished blanket. This concept also suggests that machined objects are denied encounters that effectively turn them ‘happy.’

Continuing to examine proximity as a critical factor in creating “happy objects,” correspondence over the years tells me my grandmother may have accessed ‘how to knit’ books while working at the town library. Not of a generation that would ever order online nor ever be satisfied with orders from the Sears catalogue, Phyllis always worked within what Husserl would call her “near sphere” or “core sphere” so she could “experience in an optimal form through touching, seeing etc.” (Husserl, [1946] 2002) Able to walk for most of her needs, the yarn was likely acquired from the local craft store, which also doubled as the dry cleaners, seamstress and shoe repair shop. If not satisfied with their offerings, the wool may have been fetched during one of her carpool trips into Cornwall or Ottawa, more prominent cities that would have offered her a better selection of colours, textures, or material quality. Although Husserl nor Ahmed aims to draw attention to a

local economy or environmental sustainability through their writing, their discussions on proximity and closeness could imply that intentionally living with what is at hand may lead us to encounter things more meaningfully.

Also notable is how my grandmother, despite all her hardships, etched out time and energy to produce 'knitted throws' for many family members. Unlike Jonathon Crary's plea to fight for the sanctity of sleep, it has become apparent that Phyllis intentionally set aside time to labour manually away at the creation of 'objects' to demonstrate her love for family. In her preservation of leisure time, Phyllis, through her actions of hand knitting, also defied what Crary draws attention to as a "hyper-industrial era," (Crary, 2014, pp. 51, 52) that requires "the dissolution of the relations to the earth," (Crary, 2014, pp. 8, 62-63) and the relinquishing of knowledge, skill, expressions of care, and moments of solace to the systems and machines of capitalism; concepts restated by Karl Marx and inspired by the Scottish advocate for 'industrial rationalization,' Andrew Ure. (Marx, 1963) (Ure, 1835)

The sentimental value of these 'knitted throws' becomes even more dear when I consider how, despite her economic struggles, my grandmother stepped outside of the capitalist grips of consumerism to infuse value into these 'objects' by using her own time in a world where 'time is money.' One could also argue that by Phyllis hand-crafting these throws, she created 'objects' able to exist outside of insurance evaluations, fiscal depreciation and Boxing Day sales as well as transcend labels such as 'good,' 'thing,' 'product' or even 'throw.' In their escape from the capitalist and industrial modes of production at the moment of crafting, these knitted objects began to exist on a different plane and become fibre reliquaries that bind me and my grandmother across time, material, and space.

Finally, arriving at the third thing or "contingency" that leads to a "happy object," one must examine how or under what conditions objects are received. Ahmed suggests that to "experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only toward an object but to what is around that object, which includes what is behind the object and the conditions of its arrival." (Ahmed, 2010, p. 24) Although this statement requires us to look at an object's economic chain of production, for this section of the essay, because these 'knitted throws' were given to me by my grandmother, I will stay with the more personal narrative and begin by addressing Ahmed's quote:

If you are given something by someone you love, the object acquires more affective value: seeing it makes you think of the other who gave you the gift. If something is close to a happy object, then it can become happy by association. (Ahmed, 2010, p. 25)

This concept also points to Ahmed's statement later in the chapter that implies our "tendency to attribute an affect" to an object depends upon "closeness of association" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 27). Already revealed to some extent, it seems necessary to provide further insight into my relationship with my grandmother.

As my grandmother's first grandchild, I remember when she was young. Not interested in upholding "the public fantasy of happiness" as portrayed through the "American Housewife," (Ahmed, 2010, p. 50) I could sense that having a granddaughter did not suit her, as her youngest daughter was only three years old upon my birth. When I was old enough to play cards, I joined Phyllis at the ladies' afternoon Rummoli table with my very own roll of dimes. I enjoyed these high-spirited events, as this was where I would see her smile and laugh!

Never uttering a harsh word, even after getting into trouble with other teenagers from town, it was like my grandmother and I were there to keep each other's secrets, secrets that later found their way into letters while trying to get our heads around my parents' divorce, the trials of finding stable work and the sacrifices one makes for love. When my grandmother could no longer write, and it became difficult to get the entire family together over the holidays, I arranged trips to see her independently. Sometimes crashing on her couch or booking a creepy 1970s motel room outside her hometown, our visits always involved eating out, teasing each other about the men in our lives, and asking questions about family that had long become estranged.

In the fall of 2015, Phyllis was placed in a seniors' care centre. Weighing under one hundred pounds and constantly fighting off pneumonia, it was hard to see her trapped in her body and mind in a new way. Sometimes grumpy with other patients who would get in her way or display more severe signs of dementia; the best times were spent in the lounge while there was musical entertainment and wine was being served. Always honest with one another, two days before she passed, she asked me, "What is wrong with me?"

"Grandma, your heart is having difficulty keeping up with your spirit," I answered.

"Well, I guess I better stop worrying about it then," she replied.

This brings me to the point where Ahmed emphasizes that "good things [...] don't necessarily cause pleasure" and how a "happy object accumulates positive value even in situations of unhappiness." (Ahmed, 2010, pp. 23,33) Despite receiving the third and final 'knitted throw' upon my grandmother's death, a time of extreme loss, never had an inanimate object brought me such joy, comfort, and, in turn, 'happiness.' Although

Althusser may suggest that these ‘knitted throws’ only made me happy due to me, the subject, being “interpellated” by a variety of state, spiritual, and social ideologies that deem the family nucleus, labour, and knowledge as central to living a good life, the third and final ‘knitted throw’ pointed me back to the two other blankets she had made as well as to the letters we exchanged.

Never thoroughly appreciated at their time of receipt, they only “caught my attention” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 24) after my grandmother’s death. Pulling them out of cupboards from around the house, I brought the ‘knitted throws’ into my studio where, for the next two years, I began to trace each loop of each blanket to arrive at a series of ‘happy’ drawings in so much that ‘happiness’ meant I was feeling something beyond the pencil hitting the page. As the drawings progressed, the meditative practice of tracing the knitted yarn increased my ‘closeness’ to the throws and my grandmother. The actions nearly allowed me to mimic the motions Phyllis would have made while knitting, allowing me to truly understand the level of knowledge, skill, attention and care required in their completion. Not only inspiring me to learn how to knit, when reflecting on these acts, I see an example of how “the experience of pleasure is how some things become good for us over time” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 23) or how “the proximity between an effect and object is preserved through habit” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 28). This again draws attention to how proximity and duration become factors in creating a “happy object,” not just from a nostalgic point of view but from a perspective where we can envision new futures and time spent with that which already exists.

This suggests that whether it be time spent with items during stages of construction or prolonged durations of relation, each additional second spent engaging with an ‘object’ helps us understand the actual value of materials, knowledge and skill erased with the loss of generations and the introduction of machines claiming to make our lives easier. My extensive and intensive engagement with the blankets also led to me “decoding” them as part of a much larger narrative about our family dynamics, with the holes representing all that was never told or forgotten, the patterns visualizing the repetitive mundaneness and beauty of day-to-day life and the three ‘knitted throws’ symbolizing the three family members from this side of the family who had already passed.

So how did these three ‘knitted throws’ beget more “happy objects”? The narratives shared above, along with the blankets, drawings and stitched renderings of the letters, were surprisingly selected for my first two-person public art gallery exhibition. By once again “intimately coming into contact with what is not happy,” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 31) my grandmother and I touched someone else’s heart, so all that was once mundane and sad became joyful expressions of the love that we had shared.



Two Legacies Installation Shot, MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie, Ontario, Artworks by Jill Price, 2018 (Photo by Frances Thomas)

To turn around and somewhat address the ecological realities of these ‘knitted throws,’ there is an opportunity to draw a parallel between the origins, existence, and persistence of these blankets with how one can ensure they are surrounded by and generate objects that start, stay and return to earth as ‘happy.’ A cradle-to-cradle mentality encourages designers, from the point of ideation, to ask, will these materials be happier or have more value left in the ground? During production, manufacturers could inquire if all other materials or bodies that come into contact with their objects are considered ‘happy,’ meaning they are not harmed nor lead to the harming of different objects through their introduction. (Descartes, [1649] 1989, p. 51) (Ahmed, 2010, p. 23)

To pose such questions before the production and dissemination of objects, we can also explore how an object may “help or restrain,” (Spinoza, [1677] 2001, p. 170) (Ahmed, 2010, p. 23) other objects in different environments. Unfortunately, it is up to the consumer to educate themselves on what is behind or below international systems of industrial colonization and economic imperialism operating under the guise of hedge funds, subsidiaries, outsourcing, and corporate branding. Consumers could ask what they do not know about an object. This simple question would help quickly identify if we are collecting or inheriting “happy objects.”

During use and while contemplating disposal, one can also reframe ourselves as ‘objects’ to imagine how it might feel to be disregarded, discarded or destroyed simply because we are no longer new in fashion or meet a person’s taste. Such ponderings may lead us to revisit, revive, reimagine and refashion unhappy objects to refocus our perspective of them as ‘happy.’ When no longer suitable, needed, or usable, we can also take the

time to research how donating, sharing, exchanging, relinquishing, or unmaking objects may bring happiness to others and once again repositioning an object as a 'happy' one.

From all these propositions, we establish that proximity, time and care become integral to gathering knowledge about what happens and who is involved at every stage of an object's creation, use and disposal. By taking time to familiarize ourselves with the unhappy and happy stories attached to an object's material existence, one becomes closer to that which one is purchasing and to those with whom one's country trades. A challenge for any consumer is that one must be prepared to care about what other materials are attached to objects we presume will make us happy and perhaps take more time to learn the skills needed to care for the objects we already have. This new knowledge may also inspire us to make choices that will eventually help eliminate unhappy happenings that can occur to the elements, animals, and humans in global production chains. This shift in behaviour requires one to return to or redefine practices that could align with Aristotle's concepts of "instrumental goods" and the "realization of the possibility of living a good or virtuous life" that leads to 'happiness.' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 26) (Aristotle, 1998)

Personally, imagining how we might return to living, creating, exchanging, sharing, and reusing "happy objects," we might also speculate on how feelings, particularly 'happiness,' might intensify while embracing closeness as a strategy. Would 'goods' become better because we knew where they came from, why they were made, who made them, what they were made of, how they were made and how and where they will go after? Would an increased nearness to materials, methods and makers lead to an increased closeness between humans, animals and land? Will it be this closeness that, in the end, offers us a 'happiness' that can sustain us? I would propose that, like Jacques Lacan's explanation of courtly love, by abstaining, in this case, from the global chains of capitalism, we choose to 'like' or put the 'happiness' of the planet ahead of 'liking' or 'desiring' all other things. Through this redirection of our attention, one may be able to sustain the 'promise of happiness' and redesign the future as a 'happy object' for generations to come. (Lacan, 1982, p. 141) (Ahmed, 2010, p. 32)

Ending with how the 'happy object' of my relationship with my grandmother led to the 'happy objects' of hand-knitted throws, hand-written letters, a series of performative drawings, and eventually a vital art exhibition that was able to reach and touch the hearts of others, I hope I have been successful in illustrating how 'happy objects' beget 'happy objects.' It is also my wish that that this account, along with all its accompanied stories and theoretical contextualization, are read as continuing to 'shape' what is near to me, ensures these 'knitted throws' have increased in value, and upon passing them on will "fill a gap," (Ahmed, 2010, p. 24) for all who encounter them next.

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