

Fade-in (00:00)

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (00:04)

Welcome back, it's your host Ashar. Our second theme is a series of conversations around materials. I'll speak with creative practitioners and leaders who are exploring materials and waste through an ecological lens, engaging directly with materials such as textiles and plastics that have major environmental implications and pose enormous global problems through their production and waste cycles.

Throughout these conversations, we'll discuss how artists and curators are reimagining relationships with these materials, how they aspire to work differently with them, develop alternatives, and ultimately how creative practice can participate in solving these massive problems that have implications for global health, clean water, and the environment. Over the coming weeks, I'll be in conversation with Emily Chudnovsky, Gwyneth Chow, Kirsty Robertson, Pramila Choudhary, and Lois Klassen, each bringing unique perspectives on how art and materiality can shift our relationship with the planet.

Emily is an artist and educator who works at the intersection of material reuse and ecological awareness. Gwyneth is an interdisciplinary artist and researcher whose work involves making biomaterials from food refuse. Scholar and curator Kirsty brings us into the world of textile activism and museum practices. Designer and researcher Pramila explores the use of sheep wool in arid and semi-arid regions of India. And Lois, an artist, writer, and publisher, whose *Practices of Everyday Ethics* zine series explores the dilemmas of textile waste.

Materials such as textiles and plastics surround us, clothe and shelter us. They can be culturally important. They also leave behind environmental challenges, shedding microfibers into waterways, contributing to fast-fashion waste, and reinforcing extractive industries. We trace the journeys of textiles from hand woven traditions to industrial production, questioning their afterlife and impact on our oceans.

How can we reimagine materials beyond disposability? How can artists and researchers create more sustainable alternatives? Be sure to subscribe to the podcast and stay connected as we continue to explore the intersections of ecology, art and activism through materials in the weeks ahead. Until next time, take care, stay curious and let's keep the conversation flowing.

Intro Music (02:21)

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (02:32)

Alright, welcome back to another episode of the Ecologies in Practice podcast. Today I'm joined by the very talented Emily Chudnovski. Emily is an artist and educator currently living and working in Toronto. Her practice consists of collecting organic remnants and synthetic decay in order to draw out new iterations, connections and regenerations through sculpture-based installations. Her site specific research has taken place in Scotland, California, Yukon and Ontario. Thank you so much for joining us today, Emily. I hope you're doing well.

Emily (03:03)

I'm doing very well, very happy to be here.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (03:06)

Fantastic! Can you start by telling us a little bit about yourself and what it is you do?

Emily (03:11)

Sure. Well, I'm always asking myself what it is that I do. But there's, I sort of, like many people who are interdisciplinary inclined, I kind of weave between different mediums and ways of thinking and activism. But I would say the best way to synthesize would be that I am drawn to sort of, sites of waste or areas of excess and I try to take materials or ideas from those sites and then sort of transfer them into something that might be compelling. That's another way of putting it. Yeah, I'm always concerned about bringing objects into the world but I'm also, I sort of can't stop doing it so I'm trying to turn them into things or into something sort of play into their aliveness, I guess.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (04:14)

That's so interesting and let's dive deeper into that. So I know your work incorporates a lot of reclaimed and recycled materials. What inspired you to focus on these types of materials?

Emily (04:26)

I come from a family that's very, sort of, I guess, sustainably minded or, you know, my parents, my grandparents were, sort of had the ethos of you use, you know, the least amount and whatever you have you take care of and maintain. And, my grandmother made all my mom's clothes and they just, were those kinds of people.

So I think that generations back influenced me. And then I lived in the Yukon on and off for many years. And while there, I really learned about waste and reuse because there is, it's very challenging to remove waste. And we have a city dump, which, you know, it's a landfill. It's also very complicated, but there was actually a lot of interesting things that came from that site because there was a free store as it was called there. And I know that exists in other places too. So people would bring things they didn't want anymore or didn't need anymore. And then other people would find them and it would be like this treasure trove. And so that idea was really interesting to me.

And then I was on a residency in Northern Scotland during my masters in Scotland and I was seeing sheep's wool sort of strewn about on fences and there's just so much, there's a huge agricultural industry there and tons of excess wool. And I love textiles and I'm drawn to the textile arts and I would see it everywhere and I thought, this is interesting. "Oh, what is this?" Like what's happening with all of this kind of extra and there must be more of it. So there was that just sort of like in my immediate sight, seeing and learning new ways of doing things, living in different places, and then coming to the question of being a sculpture artist and the kind of, I

have a philosophy background and critical theory and I thought, yeah, what are the implications of being an artist?

And so I'm rambling probably, but that's sort of how I came to this idea. And then I thought, what is the material that we have the most in abundance and that we sort of have a problem and we don't know what to do with? I thought, well, plastic is a material that we have too much of that's relatively new and that's everywhere. So could that be a new challenge?

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (07:13)

Yeah, that's such an interesting perspective and I feel like there's so much to unpack there. I want to talk a little bit more about textiles. I know a lot of your recent work explores these sort of innovative connections and solutions you've worked with, invasive grapevines, microfibers. I'm wondering if you could share maybe some of the most interesting or unexpected discoveries you've made while working with these kinds of materials.

Emily (07:35)

Hmm. Yeah, I feel like I'm still in the early stages of working with both of those materials. I think that microfibers, like all plastic, are very elusive. It's hard to handle. It's hard to... I find it's hard to know how to adhere it. It's hard to know... It's hard to actually grasp it like it just disappears as you're trying to hold it, especially such a fine, tiny little micro material. So trying to sort of... much like trying to almost have ownership over it kind of like the irony of trying to control nature. I feel like it kind of behaves in the same way you can't... it has a mind of its own it sort of becomes alive and that's that's an interesting area for me.

So I guess that's been, I don't know if it's surprising, but it's definitely been challenging. And I suppose a little surprising. Yeah, just trying to manipulate this material that seems like it's in abundance, but has sort of a mind of its own in a way. When trying to felt specifically would be a time that I'd encounter that as an issue.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (08:49)

Interesting. And I know your work then sort of goes on, not just in the art world, but you're also involved in lot of community cleanup initiatives, community engagement, education. Can you tell us a little bit more about projects that have been meaningful to you in that realm? I'm also interested to hear about the work that you do with the University of Toronto's Trash Team.

Emily (09:12)

Yeah, I lately have been doing more workshops and I did one at the Art Gallery of Burlington in the early summer and at Hard House and yeah, I've been really enjoying engaging with the public and teaching them or sharing with them some practices for felting with sustainable or with microfiber materials and sheep's wool and in combination. And I also did that at a senior's home. So the conversations that come up from that are just always really interesting.

At the Art Gallery of Burlington, that was with Burlington Green. So they were funding some local projects and they're a cleanup initiative in Burlington. And so they brought pine cones, they

brought mesh bags from grocery stores that they had saved. They brought some clean, like just items from their cleanups. And we tried on the spot incorporating them. Like I hadn't ever worked with either of those in my felting practice. So it was really exciting to kind of endeavor into a new experiment with a group of people that I was facilitating a workshop with, you know, that element, talking about the element of experimentation and play when it comes to a heavy subject like waste. And I found people really receptive to that.

And that definitely stems from my time with the U of T Trash Team and doing cleanups with them and arts based educational campaigns and kind of going out and being open and curious about what you might find rather than being weighed down by the weight of, you know, our climate crisis and sustainable challenges. I mean, not to ignore them, but just to say, okay, cleanups are a successful way of mostly bringing people together and being out on the land and being appreciative of the land in a way. So I think that kind of mentality has been really fruitful for me.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (11:32)

I'm really interested with what you were talking about in terms of the workshop and sort of the spontaneity that came with working with these newer materials that you may have not worked with before. And I want to connect that back to what you were saying earlier about this sort of background that you have in philosophy and critical theory. When you think of these materials, do you think of them through that lens? You know, sort of this holistic way of looking at it?

I'm also interested if there's sort of scientific research that you're doing behind the scenes to maybe understand a little bit more about the elements, how they function, how they come together, and if that informs your work in any ways.

Emily (12:12)

Yeah, for sure. I feel like I'm kind of, I don't feel like I, there's so much to know. And I know I'm no expert. So any research I do is just probably what anyone would do when they're interested in something, just sort of delving into different articles. And, but I'm also really inspired by different artists' approaches to scientific problems. And, and definitely, yes, the philosophical background does, I think the "why", like being curious and noticing things and asking questions, I think comes from that holistic view.

I'm really interested in weeds. This is my invasive material, like invasive water plants, grapevines. And now just I'm working a bit with creeping nettle. You see it everywhere. I'm just interested in the way that plants sort of, I don't know, fight back or something. So yeah, there is definitely a philosophical element of questioning and that tradition.

But I think I don't do anything in a very like sort of orthodox way. So and then yeah, scientifically, I suppose it's more so like citizen science and I you know, I read about how do invasive plants function and the plastic cycle. But I couldn't, there's so much more to know. I still feel like such a novice. Yeah. I feel like I'm always, I'm trying to learn and I'm always like, my gosh, there's so much more to know now. But yeah.

And also understanding a little bit more about, would like to continue to understand more about how plastic is made. From the industry side we have so many plastic producers in Ontario and I would like to visit some of those sites and have that opportunity. But I have had the opportunity to work with people who are trying to collect that material via trash trapping devices and also scientists from the microplastics lab, the Rockman lab, who are studying the Don River and how plastics are ending up there as well as in the lake, Lake Ontario. So that's been, I think it's really through conversation and time with people that I've learned and that is the way that I learned the best.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (14:50)

Yeah, and so would you say these sorts of various modes of engagement are also what helps you stay up to date with, you know, new practices in the world of sustainability, new materials that are being bioengineered in the art world?

Emily (15:05)

Yes, I also... there are a lot of interesting initiatives, I think a lot of them coming out of art institutions or collaborations with design, art and science like the Jan van Eyck Institute, the Natural Materials, the New Materials Bank, and then the Natural Materials Lab in New York, like there's a lot of really amazing innovations. And they all stem from that interdisciplinary approach. Obviously, the Synthetic Collective was hugely inspirational to me, and I think they're doing really interesting. And now there's a lot of conversations around public art and sustainable practices. Evergreen, I know, has an institute. Now the Bentway, there's some really neat work happening all across the city.

Yeah, so I think those initiatives and the kind of grassroots work has been really inspirational. And then also, yeah, my time in the Yukon and I worked for the First Nations government up there, the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in. And there is obviously a huge appreciation, understanding and approach to waste and being on the land and yeah, so I humbly learned there as well and yeah, so that was definitely influential.

And the art school up there, SOVA, the School of Visual Arts, a friend of mine, Aubyn O 'Grady, she's running the program and they have a really neat new field school with an artist educator, Jackie Olson, who's from Dawson City. She's Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and they're reclaiming mining sites and growing willow. They have a willow farm, like just really interesting work. So yeah, I'm inspired by a lot of different people.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (16:57)

Yeah, that's great. So let's talk about your work purely from an art standpoint. I know some of your works have been publicly displayed. Have you noticed or have you been able to engage with the public in how they've responded to your works that may address things like plastic pollution and sustainability? What kind of responses and thoughts and feedback have you gotten from folks? I'm curious to know.

Emily (17:26)

Yeah, I've had a very interesting experience showing my work. I think because I made a large-scale public artwork and I didn't really realize how much that opens you up to a dialogue with the public, whether you like it or not, it seems pretty naive of me to not have sort of really, but I went, I again in my way sort of went full tilt and put this piece in the Peter Street Basin which is a hub of garbage, like it's an absolute hub. And it's surrounded by condominiums. And I was, yeah, I was working with a few different stakeholders, Ports Toronto, well, Toronto parks, not Parks Canada, Toronto parks. Yeah, the city was involved. There was a lot going on.

And the whole intention of the piece was to draw attention to the role of invasive water plants and the plastic that clings to those plants. And because of that process, the removal of that plastic when students from the U of T trash team would clean the water daily and take a harmonized data set in order to understand what types of waste we're finding in the water. So I wanted to create a trash-trap-like device using willow and invasive water plants and a composite.

And the piece was very organic and quite wild-looking and not to everyone's taste for a public artwork. You know, it was a temporary public artwork and I had a bit of backlash from the condo dwellers who said, "I don't know about art, but this isn't, this isn't what I want," "And why is there a nest floating in the basin," and "why aren't you just cleaning the water," which actually we were, but there was a bit of a lack of understanding there. There were a couple of very loud voices that protested the work. Then we had other people who came up and said, "thank you so much for what you're doing." "This is so interesting." "We had no idea this work was happening. Tell us more."

So I went through quite a moment of, wait a minute, I wasn't trying to make kind of a... I was trying to make sort of a celebratory piece, a hopeful piece. I didn't intend to make an antagonistic piece, but art is always antagonistic in some ways, I think, to some people, if you don't like it, and especially when it's in the public realm. My main concern, I know I'm rambling, but my main concern was being considerate of the creatures in the water and being respectful of showing work in the water. And I didn't actually put a lot of thought into what would the people that live in the condos, how would they regard the piece. And so it was definitely a learning experience for me and it was challenging for sure.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (20:41)

That's an interesting story. Thank you for sharing that and I appreciate the honesty. I'm interested to unpack that a little bit more if you're okay with that.

Emily (20:46)

Yeah.

Emily (20:52)

Yeah, please.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (20:53)

I like what you said there about how art can be antagonistic sometimes. My question is because you're working in this realm of sustainability, environmentalism, which is tied to these sort of global broader issues which then bring emotions like despair, sadness, anger, how does negative feedback like that then impact the work that you're doing, right? You mentioned how you try to keep up with all these great initiatives that are happening in the city, these centers that are opening up, reading about different materials, about studies. I guess what I'm trying to ask is like, how do you sustain this sort of passion and motivation that you clearly have for the work that you're doing when it can be hard to do so sometimes?

Emily (21:44)

Totally, I think it's very hard, especially if your goal for being an artist is not monetarily driven. And I don't say that with any judgment. I think people should be re-numerated for their work, but that isn't what I'm doing. And so, yeah, again, I come back to the "why" a lot. And I think that's important for me because I think it's just what I think, how do I maintain? Sometimes I don't and I get down. But I think, well, in the case of that public artwork, the story has a happy ending because the condo actually contributed to funding the research the following summer. So it actually affected change. And I'm not saying that was strictly because of the piece, but I think that it brought attention to the site and the work there. And that was really exciting and going through that kind of roller coaster of human emotion and it felt very real and very true to public art, I suppose.

Yeah, so I guess I just maintain by reaching out and looking at what's around me and trying to get out of myself. And I think when we do that we tend to find some hope, not all the time. It's a pretty hard moment we're in here, but I think it's people that bring me hope and also, and yeah, like looking at the natural world, so to speak, like looking around me at the resilience of what's around us despite. And also the kind of ferocity of the natural world. I don't know, I'm kind of finding that awe and that place of humbleness and respect for the world we live in. Yeah, I guess it sounds a little hippie-dippy, but I think that's kind of how I do it. And yeah, trying to stay connected to other people who are doing this work who I think are way more incredible than me and then be motivated from that.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (24:00)

Yeah, that's wonderfully put. Thank you. I guess going off that, what kind of advice would you give to emerging artists that are also interested in exploring environmental themes in their work?

Emily (24:11)

I would say that's just the best because we just need, that's what we need. We need innovations from creative thinkers and yeah, I think there's, I think my advice would be, be curious and yeah, and be, and look around you, like really look and look back because there's so much knowledge from what has been and there's... yeah study, I don't know, I guess I'm now on this track about weeds, but there's just, there's so much that's come before us that we can learn from in terms of sustainable practices, but also, yeah, look ahead as well. I don't know. I guess just trust your instincts and keep trying. Yeah.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (25:10)

Yeah, no, I like that. So you mentioned the work that you did over the summer in terms of, again, running these workshops. I was hoping maybe you could talk a little bit more about the workshops because I'm really interested to hear about the different kinds of work that you did, particularly from a pedagogical standpoint because, you know, the work that you're doing is so important, but I feel like there's also this sort of lens of education that needs to mesh with the work itself. I think with the changes that all of us have to make, really, it starts from within. But unless we're not aware of the impacts of the decisions we make, we may not be able to make those changes. So, yeah, if you could talk a little bit more about the workshops and just the types of educational work that you were delving into. I'd like to hear more about that.

Emily (26:05)

Mm-hmm. Yeah, I mean, it's interesting because any group that you work with, you've got to kind of consider what's relevant and, sort of, how to relate depending on who you're speaking with, because there's just so many different people out there. And so working with a group of seniors and thinking about, "what will be meaningful for them at this point?" Obviously, I'm not a senior yet, so I can only imagine, but how can I tailor... I'm basically showing a piece of my process, which is pretty...it's a little bit unusual. It's felting, but it's got this other element to it. And it's got, there's a lot of trust that's put in me because most people don't even know what felting is initially or have a different idea of what wet-felting is specifically. It's kind of like paper making. It's quite a similar process. And it just requires a lot of patience and trust in the person that's teaching you because you don't get the result for a couple of hours.

So I think I consider kind of the different abilities and hopefully interests of the group that I'm working with and try and gauge that energy when I meet the group. And obviously size makes a big difference too. Like if I'm with a huge group, it's gonna be different than five people. But trying to build some kind of like relationship, be it short term or if it extends out and get to know the people that I'm working with. I think all of that goes into my process, my pedagogical process and, sort of, meeting people where they are as we're working together. Yeah, I think it's more like a facilitation in some ways.

And yeah, talking to people about their own artistic practices, even if they're, you know, don't consider themselves artists so many especially people who sign up to workshops like they're creative like they're drawn there because they want to learn a new creative process so oftentimes they have something that they do that's creative in their life and I like engaging with them about that and I often learn quite a bit like the one I did in Burlington I met a couple of folks who were yeah weavers and like knitters and just bringing a lot of different skills to the table that they could share when we were talking about wool and another person connected me with an alpaca farm outside of Burlington so yeah there's so much knowledge.

So I think that's my approach. And then in terms of the physical, it's yeah, trying to... I'm always adapting how I like, I think these workshops help me to felt to be a better felter because I notice, this is actually, it's easier to do this with a glove on or this soap can be used in a, I can use less

of this soap and save it for longer. And so I'm always trying to also reduce as well when I'm doing these processes.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (29:23)

That's wonderful. Yeah, so there's so much happening for you and I'm curious to know what's next on the horizon for you. Is there any sort of cool public art coming out that you'll be showcasing? Maybe more workshops that you're doing? Tell us more about what's happening, what's coming up for you.

Emily (29:41)

Yeah, I'm in a group show in December at OCAD and I'm working towards that.

At the moment, I'm - like I mentioned - I've, actually collected, there's a house near me that's going to be either torn down or renovated, I guess. And they've got, they had for a time in the summer, like just thousands of these creeping nettle plants. And I love fluffs. I just love fluffs. So the creeping nettle becomes fluff before it dies. And it's definitely invasive. People really don't like it, but I went with a friend and we picked the fluffs. And so now I've got not a ton. I didn't take everything, but I took some of the fluffs and so I'm working with that and I want to experiment with felting with the fluff and, and the plastic.

And then yeah, I'm also doing some more knitting experiments with some wire that I got from a lighting designer that works across the way from me in my studio space. So yeah, kind of continuing with the same experiments in different iterations, which I feel like is probably what it will be for me for the next decade, just delving deeper into what I've already laid the groundwork for and trying to build further relationships with the materials that I'm drawn to.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (31:57)

Yeah, that's fantastic. I'm wishing you all the best with that. I sort of love how you approach this and also just the methodology. There's something really interesting behind that. So yeah, thank you for sharing all of that. I think we've asked you all the questions that we wanted. And it's great that we're right on time too, like half hour. We're kind of aiming for that as well.

But yeah, I feel like we only scratched the surface again of all the amazing stuff that you're up to. But yeah, thank you again for just taking time out of your day and joining us and sharing all this cool work that you're doing. I certainly think that is super cool and I obviously encourage you and I hope that, you you go on to do great things and I'll be obviously cheering you on and trying to see all the stuff that you're up to. But yeah.

Emily (32:06)

Likewise.

Music (32:09)

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (32:12)

Ecologies in Practice is hosted by Ashar Mobeen and produced by editors Elysia French and Amanda White, with music and audio editing by Adam Wiebe. This season was made possible through the generous support of the Sustainability Impact Fund at Western University, in collaboration with Brock University and the Centre for Sustainable Curating. We'd love to hear from you. Visit our website at ecologiesinpractice.ca to get in touch. There, you'll find details about each episode, transcripts, and further information about our guests and links to relevant projects and organizations. The book *Ecologies and Practice in Environmentally Engaged Arts in Canada* is now available through Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Outro Music (32:49)