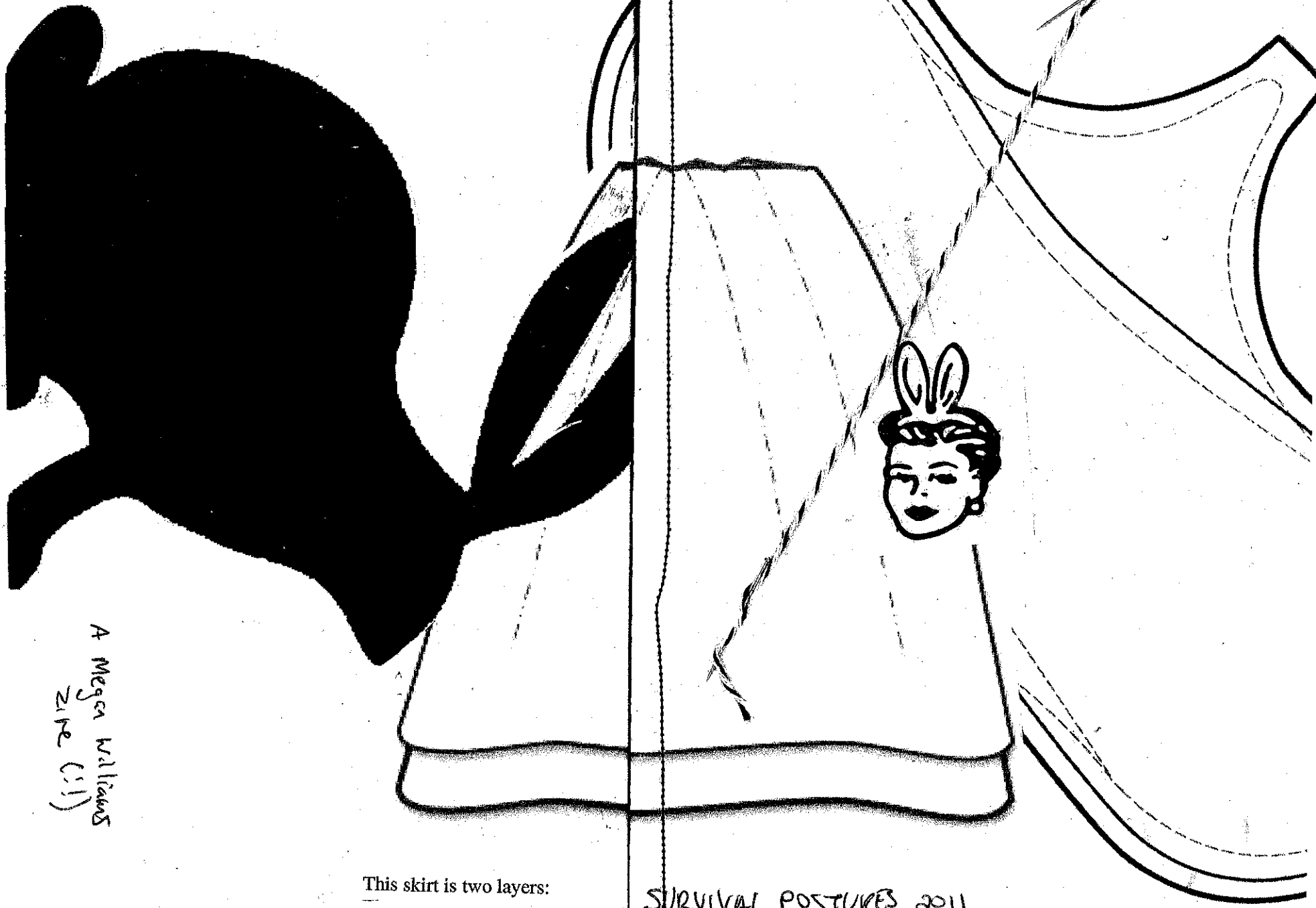


DO SEW



A Megan Williams
ZINE (1)

This skirt is two layers:

SURVIVAL POSTURES 2011

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LET'S START WITH THE LOW POINT. I

am on my boyfriend D.R.'s futon mattress in the basement of his fraternity house watching an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and texting my friend K.B. to tell her that I can't come over to sew today. I say that I just woke up and rarely get to see D. This month, both these claims are lies. I'm already digesting a pancake and I've seen D. more than I've seen my new sewing machine. I make the decision to watch more TV because I feel insecure and my logic is that if I stay, D. will have more chances to make me feel better about myself.

I AM LEARNING TO SEW as a *Survival*

Posture—part of a social experiment inspired by Mierle Laderman Ukeles's "Maintenance Art," the notion that "Art begins at the same level as basic survival systems." The assignment seemed simple: *choose a task essential to your survival or well-being that you don't know how to do, and within the month of February, learn how to do it.* I chose to learn how to sew because I rely on my mother to repair my buttons, even when she lives over 2000 miles away. I refused to learn to sew when I was a child because it was what women did—what my mother did. I associated it with being powerless. I didn't want to be powerless, stuck at home with the ability to do tasks that go unrecognized. Ukele's art aimed to reveal the importance of this maintenance work. My misguided teenage feminism aimed to bury it beneath a pile of pay stubs cluttered on a desk someone else would clean while I went about my career—whatever that would be—



Mierle Ukeles

IT WAS NOT ONLY MIERLE UKELES

who made me realize that my resistance to sewing was not necessarily rare or odd, nor was it odd to want to pick it up now. A number of individuals chose learning to sew as their survival posture. When describing my project to my friend J.S.,

she finished my sentence, knowing that to my 12-year-old-self, sewing was “too domestic.” My friend K.B. borrowed an impressive pile of books from the Boise Public Library! for me, and in *Stitch by Stitch: Learning to Sew, One Project at a Time*, Deborah Moebes talks about “The Craft Gap,” her “theory of why crafting—and sewing specifically—seems to suddenly be everywhere all the time.” She believes that the generation born between 1965 to about 1990 did not “have sewing presented to us as a viable, valuable outlet for creativity.” According to Moebes, sewing was increasingly being viewed as “dowdy and out of touch.” Sewing was unhip to liberal feminists who wanted equal power to men, not to make the activities traditionally associated with femininity visible. Ukeles herself noticed the “feminist movement never understood what it was walking away from”—

LET'S DEFINE MAINTENANCE

WORK: “Maintenance Work” is the work that needs to be done in order to support activity—capitalist activity, artistic activity, etc. It is the work frequently/traditionally done by women and brown people. Maintenance work is kept invisible to uphold the illusion of the autonomy of the artist or entrepreneur. In her presentation introducing “Survival Postures,” K.S. asked us to complete a maintenance audit, look at what maintenance practices sustain our creative lives. My “maintenance audit” revealed to me that I do a lot of my own basic maintenance work—the cleaning, the cooking—or know the conditions under which my maintenance is completed. I know my farmer and that the fabric of my clothes is recycled. I try to be responsible. I also do maintenance work as my paid work. For up to 50 hours a week I work as a personal assistant to S.H., a woman with Spinal Muscular Atrophy. She is a quadriplegic, and as her Craigslist job posting claimed, she

needs help with *absolutely everything*. I help dress her and feed her and do her dishes and laundry. Common clothing does not fit her body. S. has a whole pile of thrift-store finds that wait to be adjusted.

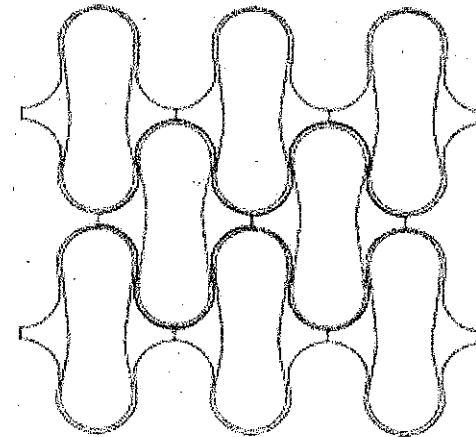


I AM LEARNING TO SEW so she can have a variety of clothing without holes, stains, rips, or other signs of wear.

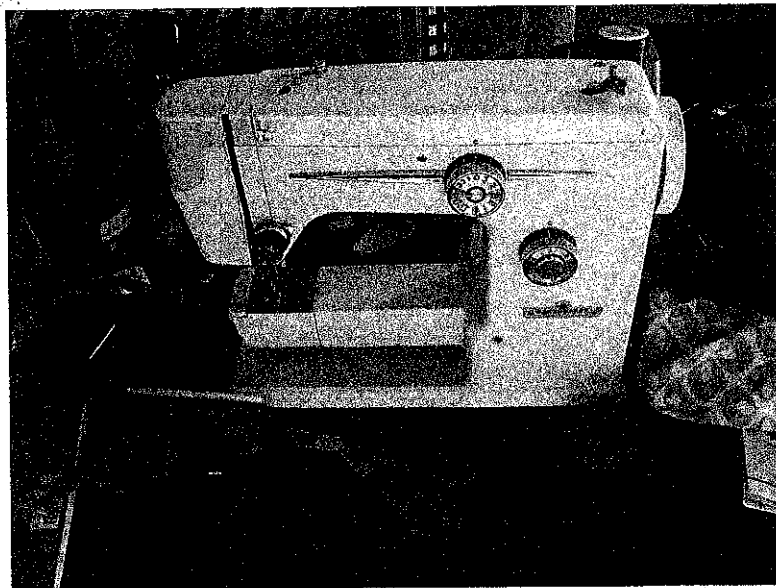
LIKE ALL NARRATIVES OF THIS ILK, things started out well. I placed a call for willing sewing teachers on Facebook and connected with my friend K. B. and Boise artist G. O. The thought of calling G. to set up a lesson terrified me. A week of February passed. I sewed a felt rabbit patch onto more felt by hand and talked with my friends about how I didn't want to call G. but didn't think to send him a Facebook message that confessed to my fear of disembodied voices, particularly the disembodied voices of those to whom I have not been introduced. Friends offered to call G. for me. I sewed with K. twice, did a thread drawing of a rabbit that ended up having ears the shape of spears. The Facebook message was sent. I arranged to meet with G. at his studio—he had a sewing machine he was willing to give or sell me, depending on who was asked. I arrived at the law office where he hides his studio and no one was there.

G. LEARNED TO SEW BECAUSE HE LOVES WOOL. I called him on my way back to my house and he arrived with a sewing machine that looked like a prop from *The Jetsons*—not because it is at all robotic, but because it has the best space-age details that match my roommate's modern-ish interior decoration. G. drew me diagrams, explained how to wind a bobbin and thread the machine. He advised that I go slowly, that that more than anything would help me to keep a consistent seam allowance. I taped his phone number to my machine. Besides wool, G. sews for reasons with which I empathize—so much material goes to waste. One can find perfectly good fabric at thrift stores or in someone's garage. In the beginning, I felt weird about going to Jo-Ann Fabrics for this project. Shopping at a huge chain store seemed dissonant with the idea of acquiring a skill meant "to re-link culture and survival deep within our bodies." This was not supposed to be a consumer posture, but I have to admit that I was at a loss as to where to acquire thread and dressmaker's shears. I confess: I bought beautiful Gingher shears and natural batting for sanitary napkins at Jo-Ann. For everything else, I took G.'s cue and looked to thrift stores and garages.

IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WERE FOUR GOALS: (1.) Survival sewing. To mend and sew buttons. On February 1st, I replaced two buttons on my winter coat. (2.) Sew sanitary napkins, which I usually buy off of Etsy. I've been using cloth sanitary napkins since I was 16 and read Inga Muscio's *Cunt* for the first time. Not only are commercial "feminine hygiene" products toxic, but it seems wrong that big corporations profit off of unavoidable biological function. (3.) Make the Two-Hour Travel Skirt, a free pattern off of BurdaStyle.com. This pattern only requires a yard of elastic and a yard of skirting. It took less than two hours. (4.) Alter a few of S.'s shirts.



I had these goals in mind when I responded to a Craigslist posting for a garage full of fabric somewhere out in Bumblefuck, West Boise. I got lost and had to call the woman selling the fabric, which was displayed on two folding tables that would have looked more at home in a firehouse. For \$20, I bought three kinds of shirting and two kinds of flannel. Yards upon yards of it, remnants from Wal-Mart or purchased at yard sales. Much of this fabric is still folded on shelves in my studio—it was more than enough for someone learning how to sew.



my machine

EARLY ON, I IDENTIFIED MY CONTROL ISSUES AS A POTENTIAL PROBLEM in this whole learning-to-sew project. I understand how to use the machine (and can sew things by hand!), but maintaining a consistent seam allowance (also known as sewing in a straight line) is difficult for me. I think this is because I want to control the fabric too much. I have the same problem with skiing—I want to feel in control of my speed at ALL times. I have the same problem with my relationship—I want to be certain that, if need be, I can make D. love me, even though I know it doesn't work that way.

IT SEEMS COUNTERINTUITIVE TO
TAKE CONCRETE STEPS TOWARD
LOSING CONTROL.

I STILL AVOID THE PHONE.

I WENT SKIING THE OTHER DAY and decided that it was time to let go. I skied my first black diamond run. I fell more than I ever have in one day. I didn't feel afraid. I wanted this to be a metaphor for sewing sanitary napkins today, but it wasn't. I've made three so far, none functional. I let go and decided to sew the two-hour skirt. It is functional, but the seams aren't straight. G. said to go slow. Maybe this pace is normal. Maybe I need to keep assuming this posture until straight seams seem natural.

WHEN I STARTED THIS PROJECT I HAD THIS GRAND IDEA THAT THE POSTURE HAD TO BE ASSUMED EVERY DAY in order to be learned at a bodily level. This was probably the right idea. However, projects that involve a rigid must-be-completed-every-day caveat usually do not fit with my life—or maybe they only fit into the lives of those who have someone else to do their maintenance work. My excuse? Someone quit at work so S. got depressed and did not feel motivated to look for her clothes or get out her sewing machine even though I was working more hours than I had planned. **AND I ADMIT, I DIDN'T INSIST THAT WE DO IT, EITHER.** I enjoyed taking notes on sewing books, learning about thread and the history of sewing machines. This is the kind of learning I'm good at, that "comes naturally" to me. It is not learning to sew on at a bodily level.



I WANTED SEWING TO COME

NATURALLY TO ME. Sewing requires patience and deep love of process. By learning to sew, I faced my own impatience.

**I KIND OF GOT TO THE POINT WHERE
I UNDERSTOOD THE POSTURE IT TOOK
TO LEARN TO SEW.**

**HOW MANY TIMES DID I CHOOSE
NOT TO SEW IN ORDER TO WATCH BUFFY
THE VAMPIRE SLAYER?** How many times did I
choose not to sew in order to work a few more hours? How
many times did I choose not to sew in order to cook myself
dinner?



WHAT POWER DOES SEWING GIVE

ME if I don't make my own textiles? Do I need to buy a sheep? Or is it all remake, revise the garments I once bought from Target or an Amish Country Thrift Store? What can I contribute?



WHEN D. MOVES IN, WILL I DARN HIS SOCKS? WHAT WILL THIS SAY ABOUT POWER?