



## Art/Design Works

# Milk & Bread: A found-object collage series

Susan Goldberg\*

### Abstract

The found-object collage series *Milk & Bread* was inspired in large part by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and mothers in particular, who bore the brunt of increased domestic duties and childcare during lockdowns and school closures, and who left the workforce in far greater numbers than fathers. The relentless domesticity and unchanging nature of family

life under lockdown is mirrored in the repetitive, sometimes obsessive, arrangement of the tags: identical, with only minor variations to mark the time. *Milk & Bread* was created with milk and bread tags donated by individual households, daycare centres, and community organizations with the mission of providing food to vulnerable populations.

**Keywords:** Collage; COVID-19 pandemic; found-object collage; impact of COVID-19 pandemic on mothers; impact of COVID-19 pandemic on women; motherhood

### Résumé

La série de collages d'objets trouvés *Milk & Bread* a été inspirée en grande partie par les répercussions de la pandémie de COVID-19 sur les femmes, et les mères en particulier, qui ont porté la charge de l'augmentation des tâches domestiques et de la garde des enfants pendant les confinements et les fermetures d'écoles, et qui ont quitté le marché du travail en bien plus grand nombre que les pères. L'inéluctable travail domestique

et l'immuabilité de la vie familiale en période de confinement se reflètent dans la disposition répétitive, parfois obsessionnelle, des étiquettes, identiques, avec des variations mineures pour marquer le temps. *Milk & Bread* a été créé à partir d'étiquettes de lait et de pain données par des ménages, des garderies et des organisations communautaires ayant pour mission de fournir de la nourriture aux populations vulnérables.

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## Milk & Bread

In a house with young children, an overturned cutlery drawer is an act of hope.

In a house with small children, an overturned cutlery drawer is an act of defiance. It is  
audacious, a  
double-dog dare, a  
promise from you to your future self  
of temporary chaos yielding a future dividend of  
  
order.

In a house with children, with  
animals,  
with  
anyone who needs something from you  
— and God forbid that the someone who needs something from you is  
  
you —

an overturned cutlery drawer is a flare in the night that says

*I'm still here.*

In a house filled with needs, an overturned cutlery drawer  
is a sign that you have given up  
on a vision of a future, sexy, rested, rockstar  
version of yourself,  
the one where you wear tailored trousers instead of leggings  
and arrange fresh flowers on your sculptural tables  
and that you aren't the kind of person who, when she can't sleep at night,  
consoles herself by  
leaving her bed,  
padding downstairs, and  
gazing into an open drawer.

In a house you can't leave, you turn over the cutlery drawer, spill out

forks, yes,  
knives as well and  
spoons of course, but also  
a thousand glinting twist ties, the plastic tags that seal bags of bread, paper clips, bottle caps, Lego pieces, the clipped corners of milk bags, sippy-cup lids, packets of ketchup and vinegar, soy sauce and mustard,  
a world of crumbs.  
You wipe away the spilled outlines of milk, wine,  
the hardened detritus of honey.  
You contemplate a future of only empty drawers.

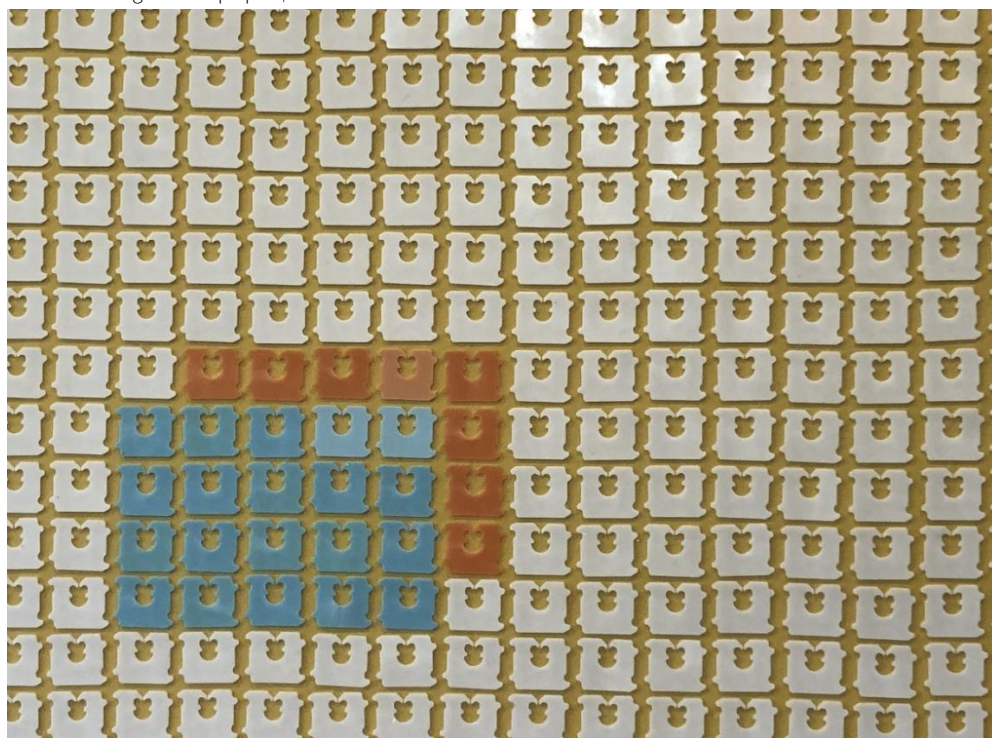
In a house where you have carried babies, nursed infants, fed toddlers and small children, where you feed the ever-growing versions of themselves, you ask yourself how many plastic forks is too many.

In a house full of food, you still don't know what to make for dinner.

In a house that has become your whole world  
you wash and dry the cutlery rack  
replace forks, spoons, knives  
gather plastic tags into a pile  
note their date stamps, cities  
marking time and place in a world that has contracted  
charting new seasons, measured out milk and bread  
toast and milky cups of tea.  
a calendar of needs met.

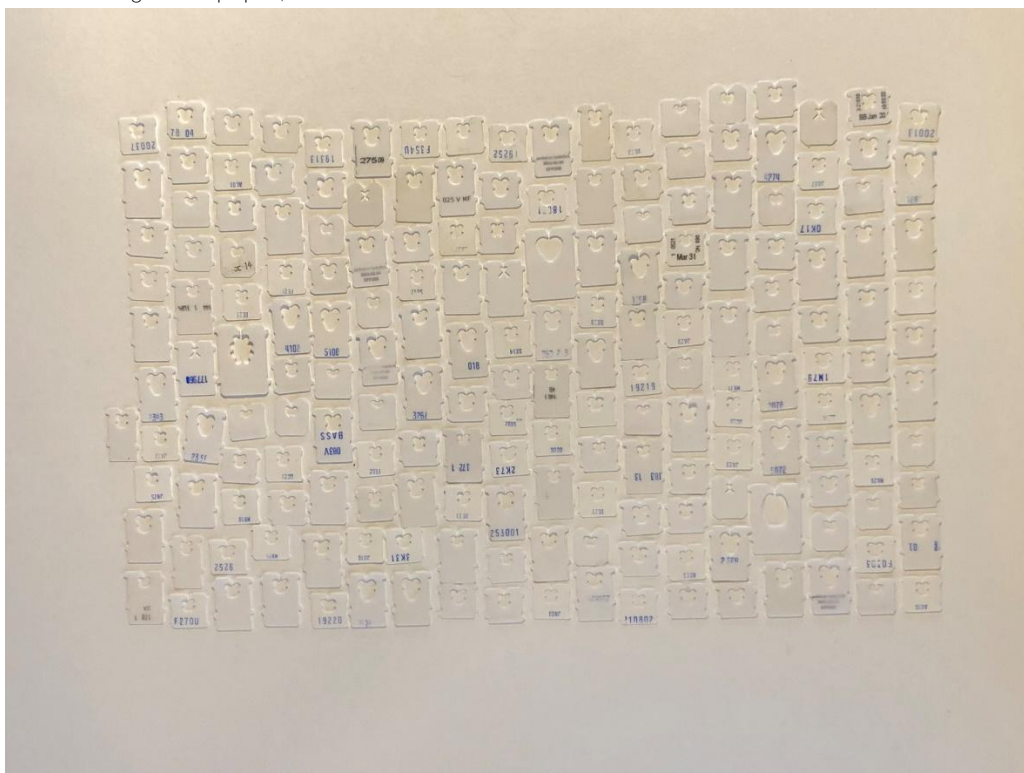
Any need met is met well enough.

Plastic and glue on paper, 27.5 x 19.75 inches



**Image 2:** White Out, 2022

Plastic and glue on paper, 27.5 x 19.75 inches





**Image 3:** Milk & Bread Periodic Table II, 2021  
Plastic and glue on paper, 27.5 x 19.75 inches



**Image 4:** Tank Tops, 2021  
Plastic and glue on paper, 11 x 14 inches



Well before the pandemic hit, I had wondered about bread tags: those colourful plastic squares, the size of a postage stamp, used to seal plastic bags of bread, milk, vegetables, fruit. I didn't wonder so much about the tags' function, which was obvious enough — preservation — but rather about my own instinct to preserve *them*: to toss them into the cutlery drawer, pile them on the kitchen windowsill, rather than throw them into the trash. What about these bits of plastic, printed with their cryptic identifiers, compelled me to keep them?

Maybe it was their weird beauty. The colours: so much white, but also red and pink, baby blue and green, yellow and beige. Violet was rare and therefore valuable ("It's on garlic bread!" a friend once texted me from the grocery store). Their rounded edges and curved tabs, nestling into each other like puzzle pieces. I lined them up like elements in a periodic table, squares in a quilt, arranging them in grids according to colour, shape, date, time, city.

Maybe it was their utility, their sturdiness. Like Allen keys or twist ties (or maybe cockroaches), the tags felt too alive, too full of function, to bin after one use. Surely, they were owed a longer existence, the chance to fulfil their mission, their ministry, as guitar picks or organizers of electrical cords. Surely something else would need to be held closed, secured.

Maybe it wasn't just me? In the spring of 2019, I put out a call on social media, asking if other people also held on to bread tags. And, I asked, if they did, would they send them to me? I wasn't sure exactly why, just yet.

Reader, it wasn't just me. Bread tags flowed into my mailbox: in envelopes, in anonymous Ziploc baggies, in jam jars. A local daycare, in the business of feeding young children, provided riches of tags, huge bagsful that I dumped onto the dining room table, organized by colour the way I used to arrange Smarties as a kid. I came across [Holotypic Occlupanid Research Group](#), "a database of

synthetic taxonomy" to classify "**Occlupanida** (Occlu = to close, pan = bread)," part of the "Kingdom Microsynthera, of the Phylum Plasticae."

I experimented, briefly, with using a needle and thread to affix bread tags to paper, or to cloth. When that proved untenable, I hit upon the idea of a glue gun: fusing plastic to paper via melted plastic. I futzed, and played, and put aside the project as outside life continued.

And then COVID-19 arrived, and we retreated indoors with our pods and our people and our projects. We lined up at grocery stores, wiped down door handles, light switches, groceries. My hands cracked and bled with constant washing. We fretted about toilet paper, supply chains. We pivoted, pivoted, pivoted: my sons bounced back and forth between my house and that of their other mother, our separated households reunited in an odd safety. We weighed the risks of connection versus isolation, obedience versus despair. Some of us hoarded, and others purged. Our homes turned into schools, offices. My evenings stretched out interminably, the same night every night, each square on the calendar as relentlessly blank as the one before and the one following it: how do you measure time when the world no longer has benchmarks?

I began, again, to glue my tiny propylene squares to paper.

As my kids homeschooled/did not homeschool, tethered to their devices, as my freelance work ebbed and flowed and safety nets tightened, I arranged, glued, collaged, framed. On the days when I didn't have kids, I often forgot to eat. "Food is medicine," a friend reminded me, and I reminded myself, daily, to enter the kitchen, to nourish myself, more than just toast and tea. The news was ceaseless and the same, uncertainty the throughline. Another throughline was domesticity and who bore its brunt: women — mothers — were

shouldering the burden of increased childcare, domestic duties. They were leaving the workforce in far greater numbers than men, earning and saving less. My younger son made pancakes every day. I made scrambled eggs, more toast; I baked bread, scavenged yeast, read stories on my phone and on my computer about all the mothers also trying to keep their children off of screens.

I glued and did online yoga, collaged and went on walks — the same walks — six feet apart. I measured out life in squares: the cracked concrete of the sidewalks, the blocks of my neighbourhood, the screen of my phone,

the meat-starch-veg of meals, the calendar, zones of safety. My friends sent me tags, and I arranged them into art — an entire year's worth of milk, encapsulated — sent them back. The seasons changed. The virus mutated. My children grew. And I glued, arranged, colour-coded and marked the time, the relentless domesticity, the uncertain closeness, the creativity of constraint, the plasticity of time: marking the days and details of the moment in a medium, designed to be disposable, that would ultimately survive us all.

Susan Goldberg is a writer, psychotherapist, and artist who lives in Thunder Bay, Ontario.