

# RETHINKING MATERIAL

through remote collaboration



Original pink polyethylene inflatable, juxtaposed to a bioplastic duplicate, as explored in virtual reality.

## RETHINKING MATERIAL THROUGH REMOTE COLLABORATION

My creative output ground to a halt in the beginning of the global pandemic. Projects, workshops and residencies were all canceled. While this seemed like a disaster initially, it turned into an opportunity to examine and search for a solution to a serious problem that has been bothering me for years:

*I make temporary installations out of permanent materials.*

This is an irreconcilable crime against our environment. This is especially true given that more than one of my projects involves collaborating with video artists, choreographers and sound artists to create performance installations that bring attention to crises affecting marine life. In particular, an installation involving a massive pink polyethylene anemone-inspired sea creature performance space, monumentalizes the crisis of plastic waste in our ocean. While the use of plastic was intentional in this project, my collaborators and I all know that it would be a better project if the plastic could biodegrade and not contribute to the problem. Thus, the pause in commissions opened an opportunity for me to try to reconcile

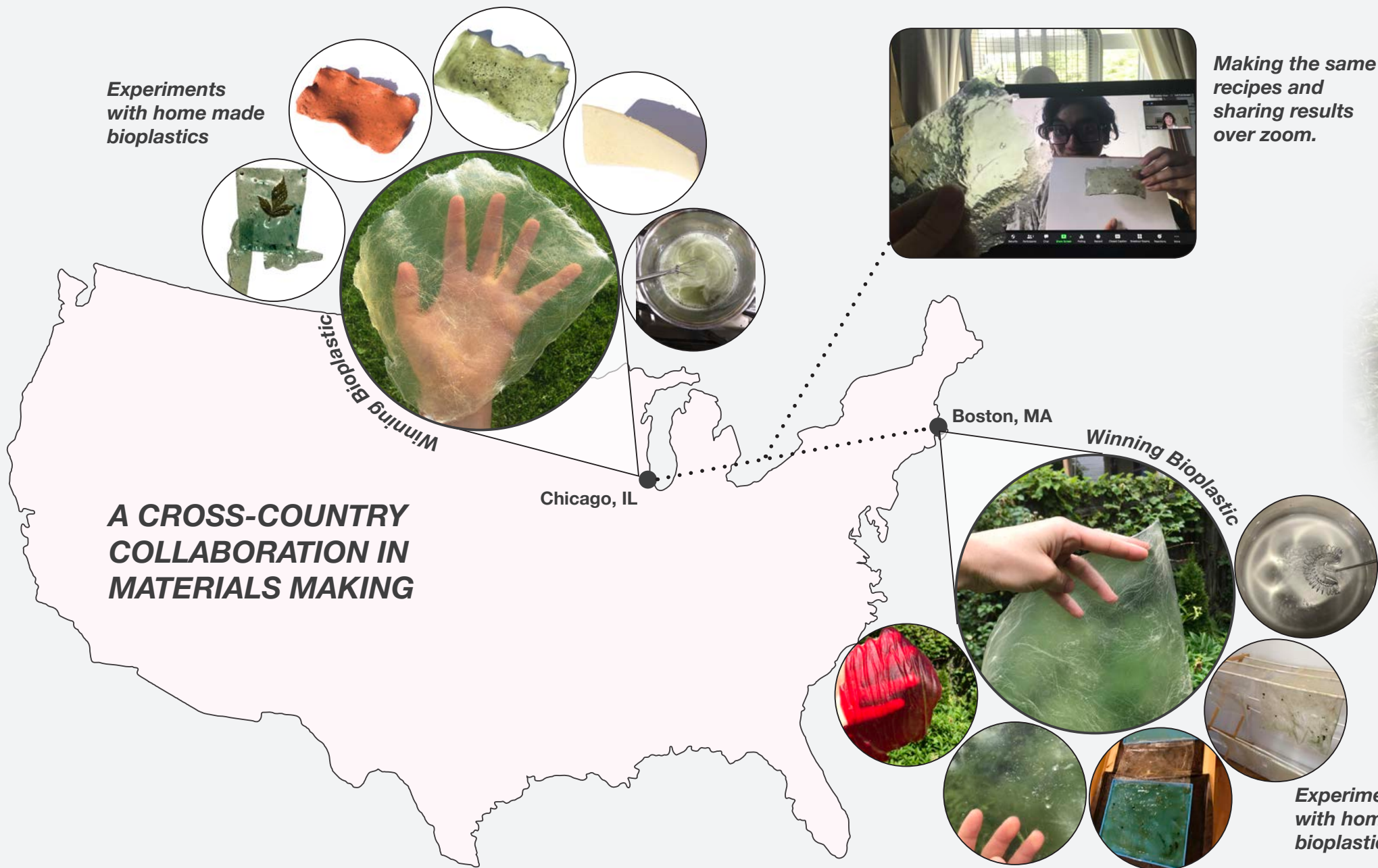
this temporal disconnect between the materials I use and the objects I create.

Working together with a student collaborator, we searched many avenues. We started looking into what the ocean could provide. Could we create a plastic-like film out of the ocean microplastics swirling in the gyres? What would it take to harvest the disintegrated versions of plastics in the ocean? We investigated the lifecycles of materials, and found that this would consume so much energy as not to be an environmentally conscious path forward. Could we create a plastic-like film by recycling and reconstituting materials found in beach clean-ups? Still, the temporary nature of the installation would be at odds with permanence of even these recycled materials. As we wrestled with this conundrum, the ocean eventually supplied us an answer in the form of red algae from which we can make biodegradable bioplastics.

Together, though 1800 miles apart, my student collaborator and I set to creating bioplastics in our own kitchens. We cooked them, cast them, experimented with them, and fine tuned recipes. In the process, we discovered a material that could replace polyethylene for my purposes. A blend of a red algae extract, glycerine,

water and hemp roving, this material has similar affordances in that it is lightweight, translucent and can be heat sealed with an iron. We set to work, producing many sheets of this material. Then my student collaborator sent her materials to me to weld into an inflatable prototype.

The prototype proved that this new raw material could be adopted into my practice. I shared this bioplastic with a collaborator at NYU's Tisch School of Dance. We agreed to fold it into our project, the aforementioned anemone-inspired pink polyethylene performance space, once the pandemic ebbs and we can once again convene together. In the meantime, with the constraints of working remotely, we are now exploring the form and future of these structures through virtual reality. Of course, this virtual version of the project has opened further avenues to experiment with dematerialization. What prior to the pandemic we would have only considered possible in shared physical space, we have found new ways of sharing space in the virtual world.



Prototype inflatable made from "winning bioplastic", a red algae-based film

