

Chain of Contagion

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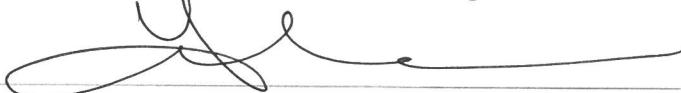
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Figure #1: Archive of Accrued Moments (50 Objects)

Chain of Contagion

Carolyn Clayton

MFA

THESIS
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Figure #2: *Chain of Contagion*

ABSTRACT

Chain of Contagion is part extraction laboratory and part morgue/seed bank for second-hand objects. This two-part art installation embraces the common human belief that everyday objects have an ability to retain and absorb invisible histories through contact. In the front of the exhibition space an archive of 50 systematically selected and vacuum-sealed thrift store objects captures and records new human-object relations through a 24-hour participatory lending system. In the back of the space, four sculptural machines attempt to extract historical residues from second-hand objects with ambiguous or untraceable pasts, through absurd yet persistent techniques. The installation seeks to investigate the following questions: What are the limits to our human capabilities for understanding the life of an object? Can and how do objects function as record keepers of humanity? How do our highly subjective psychological relationships to our material surroundings affect how we each move through and shape our collective material landscape?

KEY WORDS

object, thing, second-hand, contagion, material, residue, control, collection, souvenir, hoarding, cast-off, museum, object history, accumulate, possession, commodity, essence, traces

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My Granny Franny, my Dad's mom, was often referred to as "Mrs. Clean." She was an obsessive clean freak, who was constantly wiping down surfaces. She lived up to her elbows in bleach. People would joke that she knew the exact number of pebbles in her gravel driveway and made sure they were always kept in order. She was the one who taught me as a young girl how to fold hospital corners when making a bed and even how to "properly" clean myself when bathing. Towards the end of her life when she was confined to a reclining armchair for health reasons, she directed my grandfather and other family members to pick up crumbs off the carpet and dust off picture frames in her view. Granny Franny died of a rare muscle disease. I always wondered if her health failures had anything to do with her use of toxic cleaning chemicals.

My mom's mother, my Nana, had a taste for costume jewelry with Egyptian flare. She met my grandfather at the University of Massachusetts where she was studying chemistry. She followed him to dental school in Philadelphia where, rumor has it, she used her chemistry skills in secret work for the government. When they moved back to Massachusetts, they had four children and she assumed the role of housewife and mother. She had an addictive personality. Alcoholism led to divorce with my grandfather before I was born. Cigarette addiction led to emphysema, which eventually caused her death. When I knew her, she lived in a condo in the company of her cats. No longer addicted to cigarettes, she replaced the habit with an addiction to Snapple Peach Iced Tea. Her apartment smelled of cats, cigarettes and perfume; a terrible combination for young kids with allergies. She hoarded light bulbs and toilet paper and spent her final years in a reclining armchair ordering things from the shopping channel.



Figure #3, #4: My Grandmothers, Francis Clayton (left), Elizabeth Rigali (right)

INTRODUCTION

A significant part of my daily process for making *Chain of Contagion* involved wandering the never-ending aisles of Salvation Army, taking in the overwhelming excess of American consumer culture. At first, all I could pay attention to was the vast sea of seemingly useless junk as a whole, color-coded and homogenized. However, the more time I spent in these spaces, the more individual items stood out. When they did, they awakened a certain curiosity. Any commodity might cause consideration of features such as brand, model or quality, but the second-hand object invites a particular array of internal questioning...

How old is this object? Who owned it previously? How many owners has it had along the way? Who was the last person to touch it? Who decided it was no longer worthy of possession-hood?

There is an undeniable sadness in thrift stores. Objects here are intentionally orphaned. Nothing appears to go back further than a couple of generations. In their fatigued state, these objects are not useful enough to warrant hanging on to. Often the children and grandchildren of the recently deceased are the ones who make this choice. This happens in a bout of grief, helplessness and stress that comes with the task of sorting through a loved one's material leftovers.

Second-hand objects inevitably conjure up memories of our own deceased family members and friends. Perhaps this is why I find myself gravitating towards a certain vintage of domestic objects in my work. In the aisles of the thrift store, I find plastics of avocado and burnt orange that hint at another era, the 1950s and 60s, a time when plastic was a welcomed innovation and a sign of moving forward towards the future, embracing the new and not looking back. Perhaps I'm nostalgic for a time I never lived. Or maybe I long for the missing generation of women in my life. I think of my grandmothers who both died when I was a teenager. They were married in the early 1950's and assumed roles as housewives and mothers right as America was undergoing a major shift. The post-war economic boom ushered in an era of material production and the rise of consumer culture, which brought new pressures for women in maintaining proper domestic space. Pressures to acquire new material markers of social status

also came along with demands to uphold new standards of cleanliness and organization in the household. Both my grandmothers would have had to contend with the emergence of this entirely new domestic and material landscape at the same time as they learned how to be mothers.

I see both women as victims of their respective domestic landscapes and the material expectations of women of their time. Both dealt with their place in the material world by developing unhealthy habits and compulsions. I have no way of knowing how they really felt about their material surroundings and domestic duties throughout their lifetimes. I have only my observations and memories of them from my perspective as their oldest granddaughter. However, the more I work with objects that evoke the dawn of consumerism, I can't help but think of these two women who lived in this period. I am a combination of both of them. This year, my two grandmothers have come to exemplify the dual conflicting nature of my artistic persona. The conflict between order and disorder, control and chance is a persistent internal struggle for me. Perhaps the side of me that comes from my Nana is the one that involves longing for something meaningful and indulging in what feels good, thrilling and crazy in the moment. My Granny Franny is responsible for the side of me that needs to clean things up, ordering objects within sterile white displays and disguising the underlying insanity of my efforts with a sheen of order, system and rules. There is no doubt that this particular amalgamation of genetics, grandmothering and circumstance influenced my own relationship, habits and compulsions towards material objects and the choices I make as an artist.

From October to December 2015, I assigned myself a daily regimen of going to the Salvation Army thrift store in Ann Arbor (and twice in NYC) to purchase an object. I went every day Monday-Friday for 50 consecutive days, accumulating one object at a time. Scanning the steadily churning aisles of things, I would instinctually pick one object based on aesthetic appeal and gut reaction. Each visit I wore a Go-Pro video camera clipped to my backpack chest strap, documenting my daily navigation of the store in a frantic fish-eyed first-person view. While I had the final say in the decision, it felt like the correct object would call out to me, making it clear that it was a good choice. I would then purchase the object and invite it into my life for the following 24 hours.

While the objects were in my possession, I challenged myself to have a specific experience with each one that would cement it in my mind and highlight the fleeting time that our life-cycles overlapped. For some objects I chose an experience that allowed it to function once again for its intended purpose, such as using a decorative plate to serve and eat a slice of cake. Some objects required riskier moments of contact such as taking a bath with an empty bottle of perfume, a way to subdue the potent scent. Others inspired more romantic moments like taking a feather duster for a walk, dusting surfaces along the way. I photographed each moment with my iPhone. I am aware that because of this they speak the language of the screen, relating to social media platforms such as Instagram. I enjoy how they reference online shopping platforms such as Amazon or Craigslist. I wanted to document these moments in the way anyone might do, with the technology we have at hand.



Figure #5: object #1, object #2, object #3

Once satisfied with my moment, I would bring the object to my studio and shut it off from the outside world by vacuum sealing it in clear plastic. This gesture would mark the end of its time as my possession, leaving the space of my home and entering the space of the artist. Here the perfume bottle, decorative plate, and feather duster etc. were intentionally sealed and preserved in order to keep them from continuing to accumulate moments of human contact.

This process was a way for me to grapple with the equal pull of fear and attraction that I feel towards thrift store objects which comes from not having access to information about their pasts. In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas writes about how ambiguous things are threatening.

For me, this comes not only from the phobia of real contagion (i.e. germs) but also fear of pieces of the unknown user's personhood that linger in the object. While part of me is concerned about being contaminated by this lingering past, the artist side of me is drawn to the sentiment of participating in the legacy of an object and, in doing so, communing with its layered past. I long to know the history of these objects, to access and hold onto memories that belong to other people, outside of myself. Through touch, I can participate, adding a bit of myself and taking a bit of them.

The example of my grandmothers and their compulsions are poignant here. Half of my process involved the allure of letting things get out of hand and exposing myself to unclean surfaces, such as bathing with a dirty perfume bottle, licking the surface of an unwashed snow globe or drinking milk out of a used pitcher. Every object was an opportunity for me to challenge my standards of acceptable and clean object relations and learn how to be comfortable and accepting of this risk. The other half of my process involved compulsively reining in this "recklessness", making it more palatable by systematizing it within a greater construct of order and display.

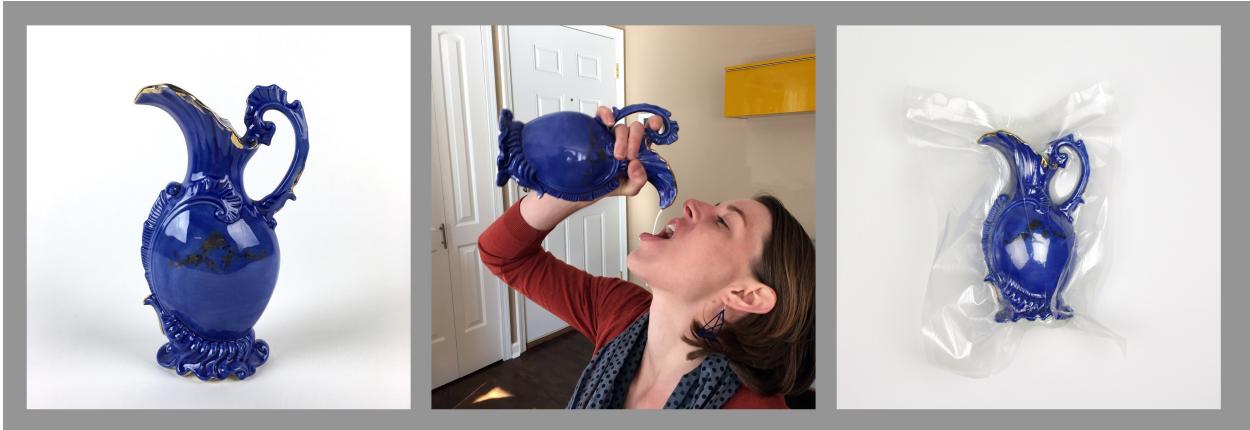


Figure #6: *Object #18*

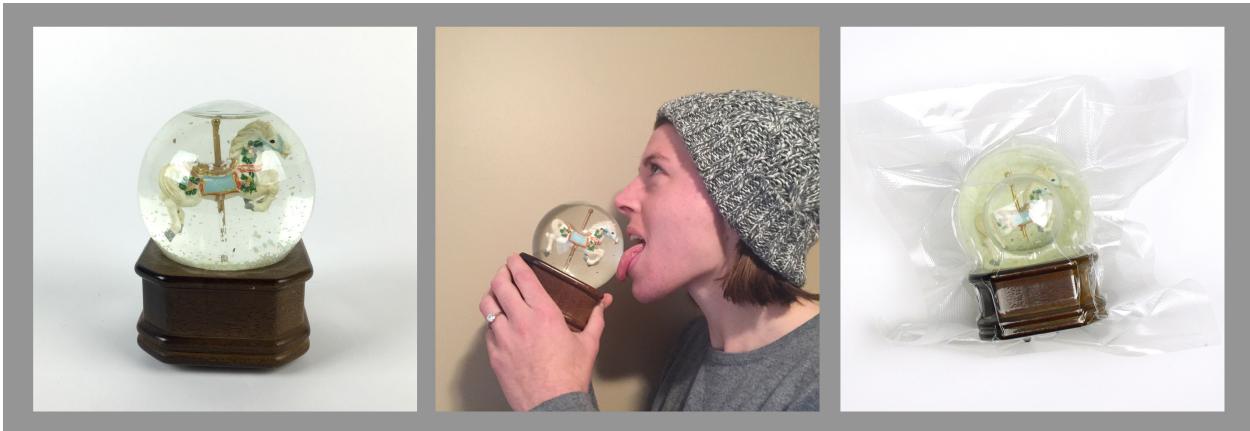


Figure #7: *Object #26*

Part I: Operating the Archive and Laboratory

I exhibited my thesis show *Chain of Contagion* from March 11th- April 2nd at the Work Gallery, a gallery situated on a street of retail businesses in downtown Ann Arbor. The exhibition was divided into two sections between the front and back of the gallery space. In the front of the space I installed *Archive of Accrued Moments*. The gallery walls in this portion of the space were painted a mid-gray to set this section apart from the back of the gallery. A viewer stepping in the front door of the gallery would encounter a front desk with a typewriter and office supplies, a large archive, a card catalog, a vacuum sealing station, and a video viewing station. The large, welded shelving system of the archive held numbered steel drawers, five rows of ten, that could be pulled out in a morgue-like fashion. Each drawer housed one of the 50 vacuum-sealed objects from my 50-day Salvation Army ritual. Objects such as a plastic spatula, feather duster, horse statue and snow globe, sealed in plastic with the air sucked out, took on an alien quality enhanced by the contrast of their cold steel drawer.

As the operator of my exhibition, I handed viewers a 12-step, fold-out instruction sheet explaining the proper procedure for viewing the work: First, head to the archive to pull out drawers and inspect the objects. Mentally select one object that you are drawn to. Proceed to the video viewing station displaying a grid of all 50 objects floating in white space. Operate the track pad to float the cursor on the screen over your object. Click to trigger a minute-long video from the Go-Pro footage of myself acquiring the object from Salvation Army. Witness the first moment that I spotted the now familiar object amongst a sea of other potential victims. Head to the card catalog, also organized in a five-by-ten grid. Flip through hand-typed cards with photographs that document my chosen moment with each object from my 50-day ritual.

A viewer who makes it through all of these steps is given the option of participating in the ritual themselves by checking out their chosen object, cutting it out of the vacuum seal, and inviting it into their life as a possession for up to 24 hours. During that period, they were required to take one photograph of their time with the object. I worked the desk each day in order to negotiate transactions with willing visitors, always wearing the same uniform of teal dress pants (the color of medical scrubs), a blouse buttoned up to the neck, gray blazer and pale patent

leather oxfords. This outfit became a uniform that existed somewhere between the realm of professional business suit, secretarial attire, and medical garb, roles that were each more or less appropriate for different tasks that I performed in the archive and laboratory. Once someone committed to the task at hand, I walked participants through a variety of paperwork before releasing the object into their care. I arranged a return time with each participant for the following day, when they would return to the gallery with the object. I instructed them to text me their image and tell me about their experience with the object. My task was then to print out their photo on a small wireless printer and type up their information on a new archive card that they would add to the card catalog on top of my already existing card. Finally, together we would re-vacuum seal the object in plastic and the participant would return it to its proper drawer in the archive. Each day, over the course of the show, the *Archive of Accrued Moments* card catalog accumulated new documented moments of human-to-object contact with the 50 objects. In this way I was able to control and document any added layers of contact to the collection and participants had more access to documents of real encounters in the object's history.



Figure #8: *Chain of Contagion, Archive of Accrued Moments* (foreground), *Extraction Laboratory* (background)

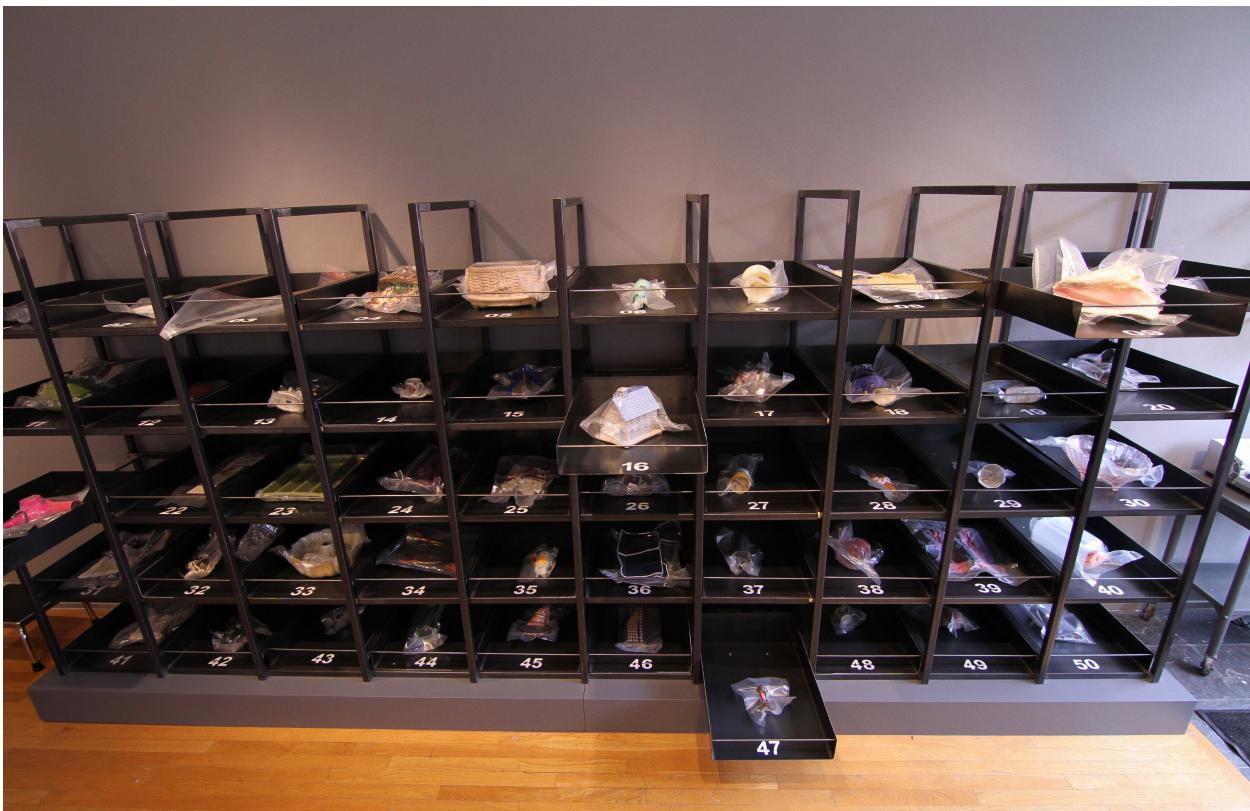


Figure #9: *Archive of Accrued Moments*

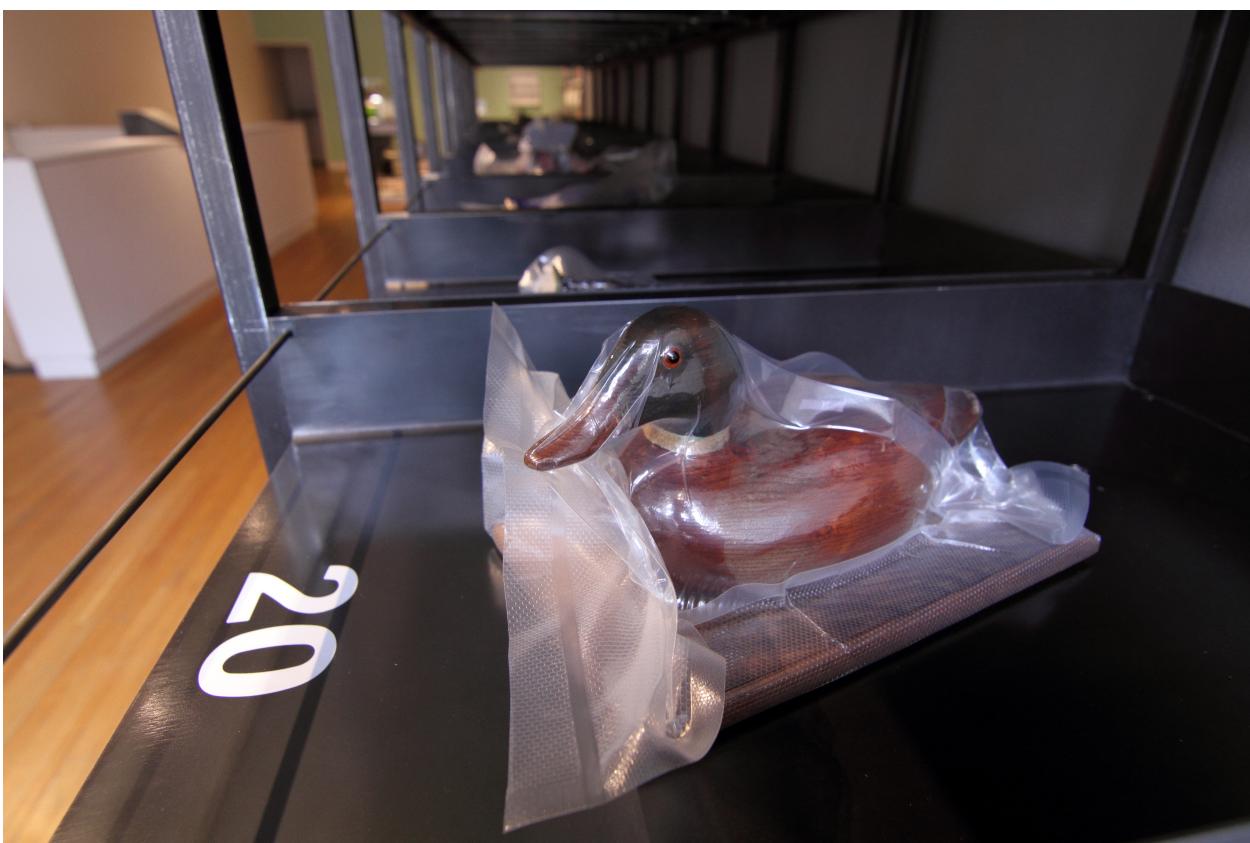


Figure #10: *Archive of Accrued Moments* (detail object #20)



Figure #11, #12: Archive of Accrued Moments (card catalog)



Figure #13: *Archive of Accrued Moments* (chain for object #20)



Figure #14: *Archive of Accrued Moments* (video viewing station)



Figure #15: *Archive of Accrued Moments* (video viewing station, playing object #18)



Figure #16: *Chain of Contagion* (left)

Figure #17, #18: *Archive of Accrued Moments* (stacks of twelve-step instruction pamphlets) (right)



Figure #19, #20: *Archive of Accrued Moments* (checkout procedure)

Beyond the archive and front desk, the gallery opened up into a larger space painted a pale green. Because I grew up with a dentist and orthodontist for parents, this color has come to exemplify the clinical and sterile spaces of their medical office and lab. This section of the gallery housed the *Extraction Laboratory* portion of *Chain of Contagion*. Here, four sculptural machines of welded steel with custom acrylic cases, kinetic elements and found parts attempted to extract historical residues from specific objects with ambiguous or untraceable pasts. Each machine used a different absurd, persistent technique to force an object into contact with a medium. In Machine #1, a ceramic rooster sheltered in the middle of an acrylic case is periodically enveloped in fog. In Machine #2, a heat lamp slowly melts the clear goop from a gel-encased porcelain figurine into a funnel below. Machine #3 slowly rotates a stubby floral vase so that it may be incessantly rubbed by a hovering Q-tip that maneuvers up and down across its surface. Machine #4 submerges a pair of purple pumps within a tank of water; on occasion, the shoe-water is drizzled on a bed of wheat grass, which I then juice. These mediums — the fog, gel, swab, and juice— in theory became saturated with invisible traces, producing samples that I collected over the course of the show. These gestures share a similar logic with homeopathic medicine, which relies on the belief that water has the power to retain the memory of previously dissolved substances. As the project operator, I activated the machines in their respective ways, extracting and collecting one sample from each machine every day. Over the course of the show, these samples accumulated on a set of white shelves mounted to the back wall. The samples functioned as contact reliques. In religious terms, a relic usually consists of the physical remains of a saint, where a contact relic or secondary relic is a physical object which has acquired the status of a relic from being in close physical contact to the body of a saint or holy figure.



Figure #21: *Extraction Laboratory*



Figure #22: *Extraction Laboratory* (operating Machine #2)



Figure #23: *Extraction Laboratory*



Figure #24: *Machine #1*



Figure #25: *Machine #1*



Figure #26: Operating *Machine #1*



Figure #27, #28: *Machine #2*

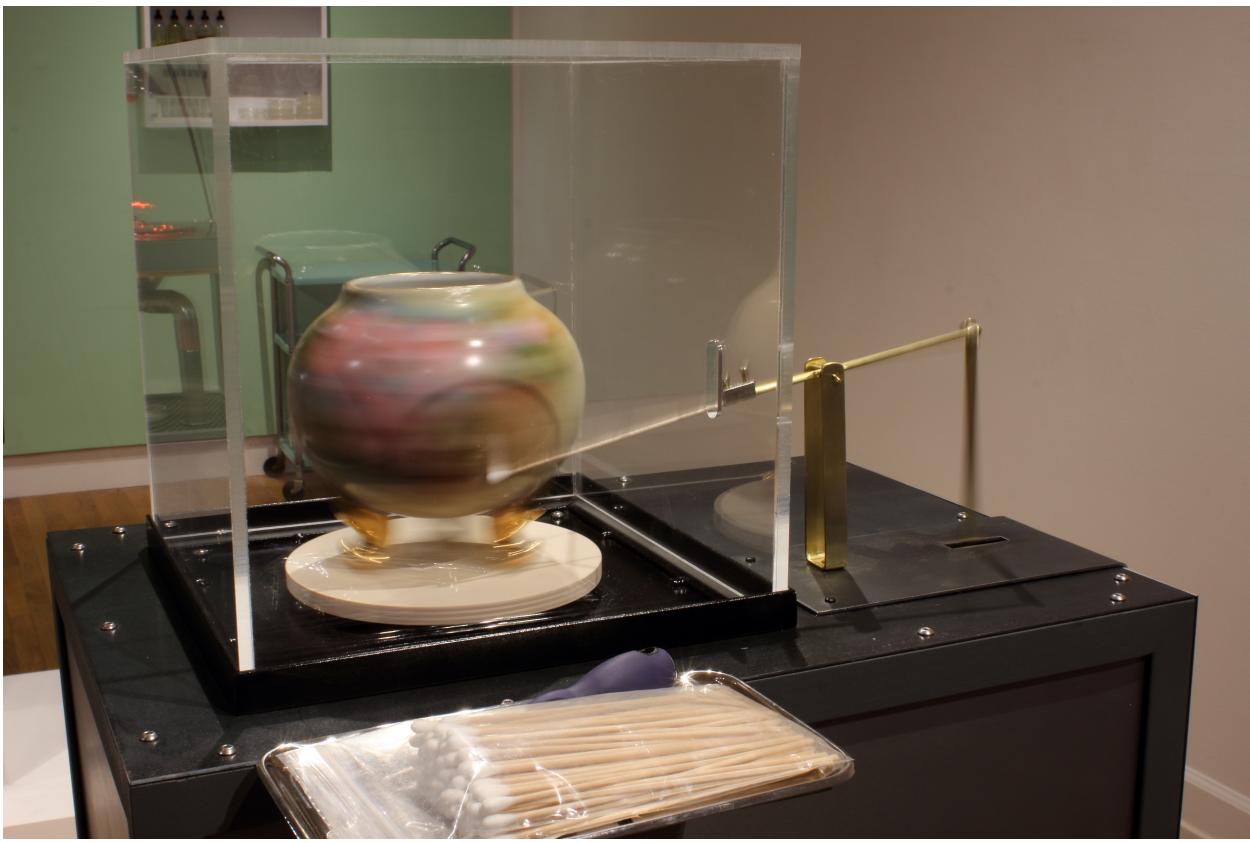


Figure #29: Machine #3



Figure #30: Machine #3



Figure #31: Operating *Machine #4*



Figure #32: *Machine #4* (left)

Figure #33: Operating *Machine #4* (right)



Figure #34: Extraction Laboratory (Samples)

Part II: Social Lives of Objects

“Objects are endlessly open and generous and that makes them vulnerable. It’s the fact that they give out, give themselves up to us so fully that makes them so fragile, so often subjected to our will.”

-Sam Jacob

I often think how arbitrary it is that one object can end up preserved in a museum while another ends up in a landfill. Both gain their status through the very nature of being used. I’m interested in the circumstances of contact, ownership and historical authenticity that cause each scenario. How does one object gain the positive power of museum worthiness while others are cast off as unwanted?

The first step for me was to recognize that every individual object has a life-path. In the collection of essays, *The Social Life of Things*, Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff discuss how things, like people, have social lives. Objects gain their own biographies as they move through their lifecycles, from production to disposal. During this lifecycle objects may enter and exit commodity phases. A thing can move in and out of a commodity phase rather than existing solely as a commodity or not a commodity, or only becoming a commodity at the moment of exchange.¹ The commodity phase is not necessarily the sole defining moment in an object’s biography.² Kopytoff claims that since objects have biographies, we also have expectations for them to follow certain biographical paths. For example, Kopytoff says “To us, a biography of a painting by Renoir that ends up in an incinerator is as tragic, in a way, as the biography of a person who ends up murdered.”³ Appadurai refers to this intended biographical path of an object as its “career path.” Some commodities are meant to be consumed and disposed of immediately, while others are intended to be passed down for generations.

¹ Appadurai, Arjun. *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective* Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] ; Cambridge University Press, c1986. , 13

² Kopytoff, Igor. The Cultural Biography of Things: The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] ; Cambridge University Press, c1986. , 64

³ Ibid., 67

Objects have a certain fluidity that allows them to move in and out of categories of value. These intended “career paths” can be diverted, suddenly sending an object off on entirely different or unexpected paths. Appadurai goes on to explain that this “commodity diversion” can be best seen in the realms of fine art, fashion, and interior design, where things are removed from their typical environment and placed into a new context, often with aesthetic intentions. Museum collections are a great example of this: everyday objects are taken, conserved and displayed as a preservation of history. As an artist, I am interested in this power of diversion and how it can so instantly alter the value of an object through even the most subtly shifted context. The most famous, and perhaps least subtle, art historical example of this type of diversion would be Marcel Duchamp’s 1917 *Fountain*, his appropriation of a urinal as a work of art. His conception of the readymade as a form of art gave artists the power to, by simple declaration, elevate mass-produced objects into art.

The readymade is so successful because it refocuses a viewer’s attention to the labor, skill and craft involved in the making of *any* object, mass-produced or work of art. I am particularly attracted to the idea of the readymade for the refocusing of attention on the *individual* object: the idea that that one object has its very own, extremely unique “DNA” based on its personal biography and accrual of historical moments. The role of the artist as the one who gets to point to these invisible layers of value is what I find to be most magical. In my work, I construct clean, intricate and well-crafted displays in order to point to these invisible layers of value carried by found objects. Because people are so familiar with the shifted-context trick of the readymade, I find that, as an artist today, it takes more technical consideration in order to emphasize the magic in objects. My welded steel and acrylic machines communicate a polished level of craft and industrial professionalism that conveys how seriously I take this magic. At the same time, I recognize that my excessively produced and refined, obsessive attempt at extracting essence from second-hand objects is funny and adds a humorous element to viewing the work.

If an object can enter into a commodity phase multiple times over the course of its lifetime, then the intended moment after the commodity phase would be a possession phase. In his book *Gifts and Commodities*, James Carrier makes a major cultural distinction between work life and home life in western societies. He defines commodities as impersonal objects that are

alienated from the people who transact them. We therefore align commodities within the realm of work, associating them with labor, mandatory duty and impersonal relations. In contrast, the home becomes a place associated with the gift, exemplified by the warmth of family and friends for whom labors of love are performed. Carrier goes on to explain that people must appropriate objects from commodities into possessions “in order to make them suitable for use within the household.”⁴ Appropriation involves the process of selecting from the seemingly sterile mass of commodities in stores and initiating a more intimate bond with the chosen ones. This appropriation from commodity to possession can begin in the early stages of shopping by simply imagining how an object might fill a certain role in your home or be the perfect gift for a special recipient. When you try on clothing in the store or handle an object before ever making the decision to purchase it, your mind is already beginning the work of appropriating an object from commodity to possession.

Typically, when diverting an object from its intended career path for the purpose of art, it would move straight into the studio or gallery where it would undergo a transition into a fairly stable art object. In the case of my 50-day Salvation Army ritual, it was important to me to first test the ways I could turn these acquisitions into possessions before they became art. Each day was an attempt to appropriate an object as a possession in a new way, bringing it into the vicinity of my body and allowing it into the personal space of my home.

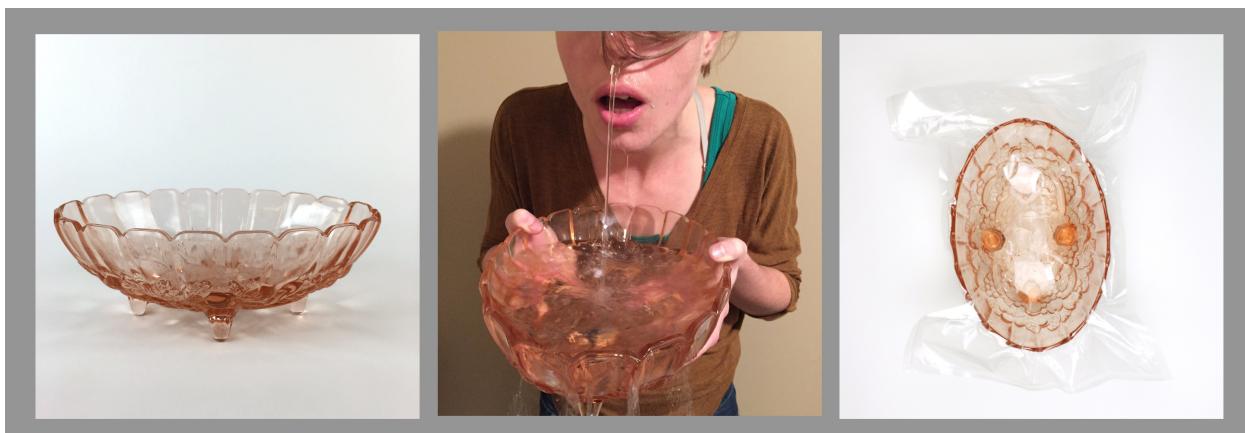


Figure #35: *Object #30*

⁴ Carrier, James G. *Gifts and commodities : exchange and western capitalism since 1700.* London New York: Routledge, 1995. Print., 110

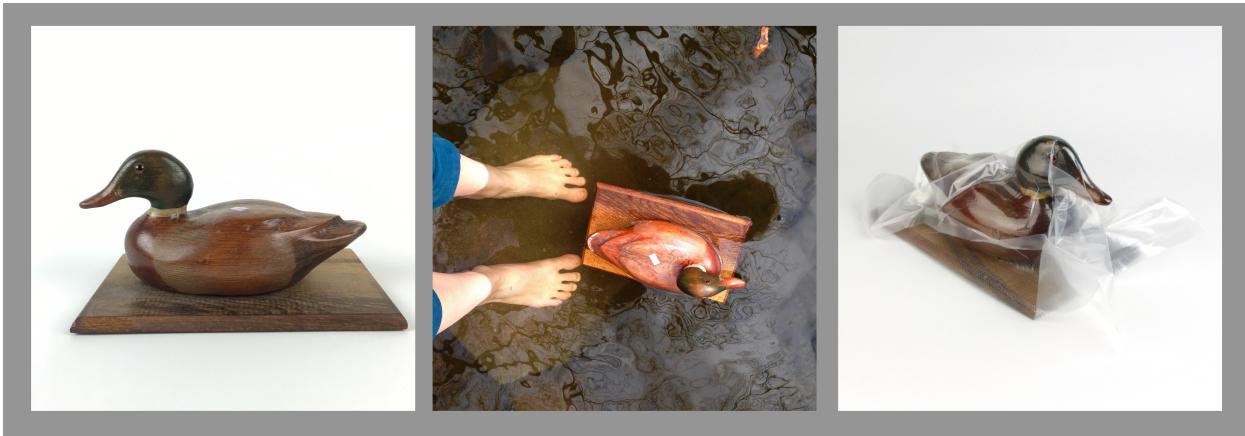


Figure #36: Object #20

After being appropriated as a possession, I would take the object to the studio to be vacuum-sealed. Through this practice, I completed the diversion process by transforming commodities turned possessions into art objects. Once placed in the steel drawers of the archive during the exhibition, the now vacuum-sealed objects took on a dual status as commodities and art objects. By inviting visitors to rent objects, engaging in the 24-hour ritual themselves, these now commodity/art objects once again had the opportunity to leave the space of the gallery and be appropriated as possessions, if only temporarily. In this way, the *Archive of Accrued Moments* became an experiment in teaching others how to become aware of this appropriation process and also to test our awareness of the capacity of objects to shift in and out of different phases of value. All 46 objects that were checked out during the course of the show were safely returned, vacuum-sealed and stored away in the archive by the end of the exhibition. Even though the system worked as it was intended, there was always the accepted risk that one of the objects would escape its newfound status as art and be permanently appropriated back into the possession world.

Carrier discusses how a certain amount of personal investment is necessary to successfully transform objects from their store-bought status into the realm of the home as a gift to one's family. Carrier cites a story about the marketing of instant cake mixes in the post-war era from Vance Packard's 1957 book, *The Hidden Persuaders*, a study on consumer motivational research and media manipulation. The first cake mixes on the market required only the addition of water, but housewives, feeling that they wanted to contribute to the recipe, insisted on adding

milk anyway, causing the recipe to fail.⁵ As a response, in the 1950's General Mills began advertising and selling cake mixes that required the addition of fresh eggs and milk. This new marketing saved housewives time while allowing them to feel as though they were adding their "personal touch" to the process; the investment of eggs and milk facilitated the appropriation of cake mix from the realm of the commodity into the space of the home. Like adding eggs to the cake mix, the process of documenting an intentional moment with an object became the essential moment where the object transitioned into personal object. The photograph documenting this process can be compared with the presentation of the cake.

Before heading to the thrift store, side of the road, or landfill, most objects were in a possession phase for some portion of their lives. These are the objects that I am interested in working with, objects that have undergone this process of appropriation, this invisible transformation or rite of passage.

⁵ Carrier, *Gifts and Commodities*, 112

Part III: Traces left on Objects

I have long been interested in the traces that humans leave on material things. While an object may exhibit an observable scratch, smudge or smell that hints at a past occurrence, for each of these visible traces there must be hundreds of unseen and undetectable moments of human contact. I believe that along with the unavoidable germs and skin cells, objects have the ability to absorb and retain these moments.

The objects that end up at Salvation Army are often not high quality. They do not have the makings of family heirlooms, more like family trinkets, bric-a-brac and do-dads. They are objects built to fade and fail. Some are dull plastic, the colors of lost decades, sticky, dense and the same throughout. Their surfaces are scrape-able with your fingernails, hardened but flexible to the point when white wounds appear, bend and snap, releasing invisible toxins. Others are decorative illusionistic attempts at nature; artificial flower arrangements flaunt synthetic petals saturated in dye, clamped between specific plastic pieces. They protrude out of terracotta pots filled with Styrofoam masquerading as dirt. Lining the shelves are bottles, ceramic and chalky, caked with aromas as stubborn as the objects themselves. Or vessels made of clear glass receding behind sneaky films of flaky colored cellophane.

While many of these objects are worn out and mass-produced, they are material nonetheless. Before being cast-off, they played roles in our homes and spaces as real physical things. They passed through our hands and aided in the most mundane moments of our lived lives. Like any material, they silently clung onto and recorded these moments, each gathering their own inaudible life-story. I'm drawn to these objects because they've slipped through the cracks of our day-to-day lives. I want to commemorate every thing, not the special things, but the everything.

No matter how mass-produced, every material object becomes entirely one-of-a-kind through their individual lived histories. Two identical objects produced in the same factory can follow entirely different life paths, gathering their own individual biographies or accrued histories along the way. The historical authenticity of an object plays a major role in how we understand ownership and value in objects. Susan Gelman, a professor of psychology at the

University of Michigan, claims that psychological essentialism, which is most often relevant to natural categories, is also useful in studying how people make judgments about the authenticity, ownership and value of objects. Gelman defines psychological essentialism in her article “Artifacts and Essentialism”:

Psychological Essentialism is an intuitive folk belief, that for certain entities, (including animal kinds, plant species, and chemical elements, but potentially social categories involving gender, race, ethnicity, or personal characteristics, and other categories as well), there is a deep reality that extends beyond superficial features, and that there is some inner causal something (a quality or substance –blood, DNA, perhaps something unknown) that is responsible for the item’s identity and underlying features.⁶

Gelman sets up an argument for how people use similar essence-based reasoning in making judgments about non-living objects. As a specialist in child psychology, Gelman found that, by the age of 3, children already pay attention to the non-obvious feature of object history. In the case of objects, the “non-obvious feature of object history” is what becomes essential. Because of Gelman’s work, I have come to think of the accrued history of an object as “object DNA,” a unique code that makes every material object one-of-a-kind. This unique object history is akin to DNA in animal species but, rather than being inborn, is accrued over a lifetime. Like DNA, object history functions as an invisible core reality. For this reason, I describe object history as “invisible essence” and use this term to describe what I am seeking in objects. This historical authenticity is how objects derive value. Objects that have a significant tracked provenance, i.e. a coat known to have belonged to George Washington, are chosen to live in museums and permanent collections. Studying such objects may reveal new knowledge about past cultures and our collective history. This true “underlying reality” cannot be studied from replicas, reproductions or duplicates. Only the authentic object will do.

I have always been fascinated by the ease in which an ordinary object can become a souvenir just by being around during a significant or insignificant event. During my thesis exhibition, when I was working at the galley, I encountered a visitor eager to talk to me about his take on the power of objects. The man relayed a touching story about the last time he visited his

⁶ Gelman, 2

mother's grave, saying that while he was there, he picked up a nearby stick and traced it around the surface of the headstone. After this action he recalled feeling like the stick had been infused with this moment and that he must keep it. He told me that this was a common practice of his, that he often carries little pieces of wood around in his pockets and that, during times of grief, he funnels those feelings into the wood by fiddling with it in his hands. When he is feeling better, he passes the piece of wood on to a friend in need of some mindfulness. This little gesture reminded me of the Smithsonian's collection of Early American Souvenirs. The objects in this collection are mostly small pieces of wood, rock or fabric that had been pilfered from national monuments. They are adorned with handwritten labels, proof they were treasured by those who coveted them. Many of us feel a similar urge that causes us to hold onto personal memorabilia in order to remain in close proximity to the histories and events we want to remember. Susan Stewart says "...that this capacity of objects to serve as traces of authentic experience, is in fact, exemplified by the souvenir."⁷

I have also fantasized about what it would be like to touch an object and be able to see its entire history play before your eyes. While I personally acknowledge the impossibility of this desire, some people claim to have a psychic ability to sense relevant historical truths by making physical contact with objects of unknown history. The term for this type of extra-sensory perception is "psychometry," conceived by the American physician Joseph Rodes Buchanan in 1842. The term means to measure the soul and relies on the belief that all things give off emanations that can be sensed. Even if you will never really know (at least in a psychic sense) an object's true historical play-by-play, the sense of touch is our closest gateway to the past.

A psychological study by Tolin, Worhunsky and Maltby in 2004 illustrated that people with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) believe in a longer chain of contagion than people without. In tests, the experimenter opened a brand new box of #2 pencils and touched the first pencil to an object that the subject believed to be contaminated. The scientist then touched that first pencil to the next "clean" pencil in the box and asked the subject what percentage of contaminant from the host object did they believe to have been transferred to the second pencil. Next they touched the second contaminated pencil to a third "clean" pencil, and so on, until they

⁷ Stewart, 135

had exhausted the entire box of twelve pencils. People with OCD believed in a chain of contagion that travelled through the majority of pencils, while the average subject believed the contagion dissipated after two or three. OCD or not, this study beautifully illustrates how people have varying degrees of sensitivity towards the power of objects as vehicles for retaining invisible traces.

In an episode from 2014 titled *Things*, Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich test out the power of touch on their popular radio podcast WNYC's Radiolab. In the show, Krulwich sets out to The Explorers Club in Manhattan to test a disagreement that he and his wife Tamar Lewin have about the power of objects. For Krulwich, touching something of known historical significance is a deep and unique type of connection. Krulwich elaborates on air about his attitude towards objects using an autograph by Abraham Lincoln as an example:

Abe Lincoln stood in front of this very piece of paper in order to write his signature in this very way. He had to be standing exactly where I'm standing and therefore he and I share this space. I literally believe that I am standing in Abraham Lincoln's shadow, so to touch an Abraham Lincoln autograph is a form of time travel, a form of love, it's all those things.⁸

Lewin, on the other hand, does not feel this magic. Together, they are shown objects in the collection: a bell from the S.S. Roosevelt's first trip to the North Pole, a chair that belonged to the Empress Dowager of China, scraps of fabric from the Wright brother's first airplane, and even the actual flag carried by Neil Armstrong when he first landed on the moon. Lewin admits that the objects are very cool and interesting and that the collection is fabulous, but claims not to gain anything or even feel anything by touching them. Nothing is going to "seep into me" she says. Krulwich has the opposite feeling, absorbing and connecting across time and history with every touch. For me, this experiment perfectly illustrates how people relate to objects in highly idiosyncratic ways and that only some people appear to be psychologically susceptible to an object's leaching.

In psychology, this belief that an object that has been in contact with a celebrity or someone of significance and is somehow imbued with the qualities of that person and able to

⁸ Radiolab

positively infect anyone one who later comes in contact with it, is called positive contagion. In 2011 a psychological study by Lee, Linkager, Bakdash, Joy-Gaba and Profit showed that amateur golfers actually performed better when told they were using a professional golfer's clubs.⁹ It is not difficult to see that this is a fairly ubiquitous belief in contemporary society, especially given our culture's obsession with celebrity possessions or sports paraphernalia, such as jerseys worn by famous players. Such objects are considered even more valuable when unwashed. Many people would agree that something physically changes about an object that has been worn by a celebrity.

According to the laws of Sympathetic Magic developed by Sir James George Frazer in his 1890 text *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, “[t]hings which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed.”¹⁰ This would mean that in handling an object, one is connecting with everyone who ever touched it before, even if any traceable presence of them is long gone. In his book *Art and Agency*, Alfred Gell discusses how sympathetic and contagious magic are used in volt sorcery practices. Sympathetic magic or imitative magic is the practice of inflicting harm on others via an article with visual similarity, such as a photograph.¹¹ Exuviae sorcery, or contagious magic on the other hand works because of detached fragments that have been in contact with one's body or come directly from ones body, such as a nail or hair clipping. Gell calls this “distributed personhood,” physical bits of humanness are released beyond the boundary of the body and into the surrounding atmosphere.¹² We are constantly growing from the inside out, causing the outside layers of us to shed like skins. Gell, by way of Lucretius, takes it so far as to say that thin membranes of your body/image are refracted through the air into the eyes of others and collected on surfaces, which is the reason that seeing and photography work. Gell

⁹ Gelman, S. A. 2013. Artifacts and essentialism *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 4 (3) (Sep 1): 449-63, 9

¹⁰ Frost, Randy O., and Gail Steketee. *Stuff : compulsive hoarding and the meaning of things*. Boston: Mariner Books Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011., 45

¹¹ Gell, Alfred. 1998. *Art and agency: An anthropological theory* . Oxford: Clarendon Press. , 99

¹² Ibid., 104

discusses how these little bits of us ironically cause us to become victims of our own agency in the world:

Vulnerability stems from the bare possibility of representation, which cannot be avoided, because the vulnerability to sorcery is the unintended consequence of the diffusion of the person into the milieu, via a thousand causal influences and pathways, not all which can be monitored and controlled.¹³

It is not so far to extend this idea of distributed personhood to include one's possessions. Objects are often considered to be extensions of the body or part of one's self. We build our sense of self through the process of acquiring "things we call ours."¹⁴ Through Gell's discussion of Lucretius, we can visualize how the surfaces of objects in theory are accumulating shed layers of personhood in their vicinity. Perhaps the drive that some hoarders feel to monitor and control everything they have ever been in contact with (as I will discuss in Part IV) stems from this vulnerability rooted in sorcery that Gell describes.

Russell W. Belk, a professor of marketing at the York School of Business, explores this idea that humans create an "extended self" through the accumulation of possessions:

Rather than a single product or brand representing all of one's self concept, only a complete ensemble of consumption objects may be able to represent the diverse and possibly incongruous aspects of the total self.¹⁵

Our ability to possess and control our own personal assemblage of objects is an integral part of defining one's self-image. In doing so we consider our possessions to become part of ourselves. We curate our own histories through this accumulation of possessions and we dispose of or ignore those that no longer fit into this crafted self-image.¹⁶ Some objects remain possessions eternally, others are cast-off and, if lucky, are commodified and appropriated once again.

¹³Gell, *Art and Agency*, 103

¹⁴ Belk, Russell W. *Possessions and the Extended Self* Journal of Consumer Research Vol. 15, No. 2 (Sep., 1988), pp. 139-168, 139

¹⁵ Ibid., 140

¹⁶ Ibid, 159

Because each of the second-hand objects I appropriated had at one time been someone else's possession, my daily ritual allowed me to overpower the past with traces of my own personhood. In doing this time and time again, I recognized how important this step was in easing me into accepting a used object into my life.

Ownership is integral to how we think about possessions. According to Jean-Paul Sartre, ownership comes from the active acquisition or creation of tangible items or the mastery over passively acquired ones.¹⁷ By inspecting what we own we can understand and learn about who we are as individuals. As Randy Frost expresses in his book *Stuff, Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, "What is "me" fuses with what is "mine," and our "self" consists of what we possess."¹⁸ Interestingly enough, before the age of two and a half, most children have developed the use of the possessive pronoun "mine," only to start using "yours" when it becomes necessary to defend what has already been deemed "mine."¹⁹ Possessions are the tools that allow us to perform tasks and maintain control over our environment and, in doing so, they help us build a sense of self. As tools are often referred to as extensions of the body, it's not far-fetched to view other material belongings as part of that body, as material limbs that carry the significance of our personhood.

¹⁷ Frost, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding*, 47

¹⁸ Ibid., 48

¹⁹ Ibid., 53

Part IV: Proper Collecting and Collections Gone Awry

“The space of the collection is a complex interplay of exposure and hiding, organization and the chaos of infinity. The collection relies upon the box, the cabinet, the cupboard, the seriality of shelves. It is determined by these boundaries, just as the self is invited to expand within the confines of bourgeois domestic space”.

-Susan Stewart

The term “collectible” only appeared in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for the first time in 1955.²⁰ Previously, collecting culture referred to antiquing and focused on objects of ornamental and historical value over 100 years old. The collectible was an entirely different kind of object from the antique: relatively inexpensive (under \$100), mass-produced, made or collected on American soil and made in the twentieth century.²¹ Collecting was no longer just a hobby for the rich and well traveled, now middle and lower class Americans could partake in this leisure activity.²² According to Scott Herring, a couple from Ohio named Ralph and Terry Kovel standardized the culture of collectables. The Kovels wrote a newspaper column on collectibles for the *Cleveland Press* and released guidebook after guidebook instructing the general public on how to successfully appraise and acquire “valuable” stuff. With their guidance, collecting as an American hobby spread across the nation. Garage sales, yard sales and tags sales followed, arriving on the scene in the 1960s and 70’s as a mainstream American practice.²³ America was producing stuff. America was selling stuff. America was getting rid of stuff and America was now collecting that stuff. With their tips for collectors, the Kovels established a “norm” for what was an acceptable object to accumulate and what was not. It was eye opening to discover that the dawn of the collectible set the stage for the existence and prevalence of the types of objects I

²⁰ Herring, Scott. *The hoarders : material deviance in modern American culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014., 57

²¹ Ibid., 57

²² Ibid., 57

²³ Ibid., 56

happened to be naturally inclined towards in Salvation Army, objects such as vintage figurines made in Occupied Japan.

Since objects have these aforementioned qualities that cause us to want to hold on to them, we must also find spaces for arranging them and systems for ordering them. The domestic space of the home functions as a container for the possessions we personally value. I am interested in the psychological motivations behind choices about what is allowed in and out of these containers. I have a strong instinct to organize and contain my own possessions within the space of containers: boxes, drawers, cabinets, rooms and the home as a whole. I carry this instinct into my art practice as a way to better understand my material surroundings. Though I've never committed to any one collection as a lifetime hobby, systems of collecting, sorting, containing and displaying pervade all of my work. Living in a world where material objects overwhelm so much of the landscape, my work may be driven by a compulsion to manipulate the existing world of things. For me, capturing, tracking and suspending the lives of individual objects is a way that I can address and maintain some control over the ever-encroaching material world. Especially within the spaces of my home and studio, having my possessions in order provides a reassuring sense of ease. Spreading things out in neatly defined spaces allows me to better understand and appreciate the individual qualities, values and purposes of objects in my life.

The whole idea of building a collection relies on Appadurai's idea of diversion. The process insists on interrupting objects from their intended lives to examine them in close proximity to other objects. In making a collection, objects become relevant to each other due to forced juxtaposition. Here, an object's individual history is less relevant as a tool to recall the past but, rather, now serves the collection as a whole.²⁴ System and logic are essential to the collection. The collection places objects into a fictional logic where aesthetic value replaces use value. The collection is dependent on order, categorization, seriality, classification and principles of organization. These various forms of containment allow the collection to function as a group, displaced from reality, its own closed world a metaphor for something bigger. Stewart refers to

²⁴ Stewart, Susan. *On longing: Narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection* Durham, N.C. ; Duke University Press, c1993. , 151

this as a “hermetic” world, complete and authoritative. Stewart uses Noah’s Ark as an example of the ultimate collection. Two of every animal are removed from the landscape, divorced from their pasts and carried into a world where it is possible to start fresh, generate a new world, all based on the discernment of the collector, in this case Noah working for God. As Stewart says “*The point of the collection is forgetting - starting again in such a way that a finite number of elements create, by virtue of their combination, an infinite reverie.*”²⁵ Cabinets of curiosities (in German, *Wunderkamer*), popular in sixteenth century Europe, are also good examples of the collection as a condensed, contained and selective world. Constructed within one’s home and displayed in ornate cases ranging from cabinet sized to room sized, these eclectic combinations of rare natural specimens, relics and artifacts of interest functioned as precursors to early museums.²⁶

Randy Frost, a psychology professor at Smith College is interested in the mindset of the collector. Frost describes the detached and subjective value created when use value is disregarded as a magical quality. He describes the acquisition of a new object as a “hunt” and the mind-set of the collector while active in the hunt as akin to the mental “flow-state” of an athlete absorbed by the game. In my daily practice of wandering the aisles of Salvation Army, I would enter a mental space of heightened desperation in the search for just the right thing to take home. Longing for something that I *should* have, I wasn’t looking for any one category of object I could articulate, I was just looking for the one that felt right. It was always clear to me when the choice was right. In my hands, a correct object would go through a recognizable value shift over the course of about 20 seconds as, suddenly, it would transcend use-value and take on the magic quality that Frost describes. While these objects were special because I chose them, they were also victims of the hunt, victims of diversion and the agency of my hand. Fated by my system, these objects are condemned to a life of preservation and display. I did not kill them, but lovingly sealed and preserved each of them until an occasional awakening where they could be alive and useful again. My attitude towards them is similar to the need for control manifested by the suffocating love of an overprotective parent.

²⁵ Stewart, *On Longing*, 152

²⁶ Frost, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding*, 57

If anything qualifies as improper collecting, it is the mass accumulation of possessions, otherwise known as hoarding. Since compulsion, control and order are essential to my practice, hoarding as the perceived antithesis of this behavior has become a focal point of my research. Hoarding has revealed itself to me as a compulsive attempt to monitor and control one's material possessions that ironically presents as a collision and confusion of these behaviors. My personal instinct for controlling my material surroundings is wrapped up in this mess of how order and disorder are perceived. The Kovels warned against hoarding, pointing out that the collecting enthusiast should always make sure to have room for the "objects you covet."²⁷ In his captivating book *The Hoarders: Material Deviance in Modern American Culture*, Scott Herring lays out how fragile this line is between collecting and hoarding:

Hoarding often turns up as the deviation of this popular pastime: as interest in collectibles instilled itself into the hearts and onto the display shelves of many Americans, threats of pathological collecting haunted the presumed ordinariness of this leisure activity.²⁸

Herring is a Gender Studies and American Studies professor at the University of Indiana who comes to this topic from the perspective of queer studies. He frames hoarding as "deviance" from the societal expectations of "normal" material relations established in America from the mid-twentieth century on. As Herring understands it, hoarding has incited a moral panic in America. The uncontrollable spreading of physical matter awakens unease deeply ingrained in us by societal pressures to maintain, clean and manage it. Hoarders become a visible threat to society, to public health and the American dream. Obsessive cleanliness could also be seen as disorder landing on the opposite extreme of the spectrum, though as far as societal deviance, it slips under the radar.

I often think about how stressful, rather than enjoyable, it was for my Granny Franny to maintain such a high standard of cleanliness in her home. Along with protocols classifying appropriate objects to collect and possess, we also have strict conventions that define the removal of dirt from our homes, objects and bodies. These societal expectations are deeply imbedded in

²⁷ Herring, *The Hoarders*, 62

²⁸ Ibid., 62

our psyche. According to Herring, before late 1800s Americans were not as concerned with dirt in the household. The late 1800s and early 1900s saw the emergence of a major hygiene reform with the discovery of germs and microbes and their terrifying ability to attach to objects' surfaces. This sanitation reform brought on shifts in American household amenities such as indoor plumbing, electricity, ventilation and the vacuum cleaner; ways to expel, remove and hide dirt and stench.²⁹ The kitchen and the bathroom emerged as private places for personal hygiene. The previous Victorian aesthetic of extreme ornamentation and décor lost its allure as surrounding oneself with unnecessary domestic objects meant the collection of dirt, dust and germs. In this way, superfluous objects started to be seen as a health hazards. Herring quotes Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1898 book *Women and Economics* from a chapter titled "The Tyranny of Bric-a-Brac":

The female housekeeper has crowded her limited habitat with unlimited things, -things useful and un-useful, ornamental and unornamented, comfortable and uncomfortable; and the labor of her life is to wait upon these things, to keep them clean.³⁰

Proper protocols for cleanliness evolved alongside the pursuit of Christian morality in America.³¹ The whole idea of clutter was born out of this involved history, establishing a clutter-free norm in America that exploded in the post WWII era.³² The 1970s saw the emergence of a new breed of housecleaners, the professional organizer offering assistance and proper protocol for the maintenance of this now established norm. Today we live in an ever-evolving world of new cleaning products and organizing strategies.

Herring uses Mary Douglass' 1966 book *Purity and Danger* as groundwork to support his argument. Douglas defines dirt as "matter out of place" and believes that dirt is as social construct rather than an absolute.³³ Dirt is social disorder. The messy lifestyle of the hoarder

²⁹ Herring, *The Hoarders*, 89

³⁰ Ibid., 92

³¹ Ibid., 95

³² Ibid., 91

³³ Ibid., 8

exemplifies the idea of matter out of place. When you break down the term disorder you get disorder. The unorganized messy life of the hoarder epitomizes matter out of place, the hoarder becoming the archetypal deviant of material culture.

Randy Frost was the first to classify hoarding as a disorder separate from OCD. For Frost, distress and dysfunction are the determining factors as to whether something qualifies as a disorder and this can vary from case to case. Though I'm captivated by how Scott Herring directly challenges Frost's diagnosis of hoarding as a mental disorder, Frost's book *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things* initially sparked my interest in the behavior. As someone who cares a great deal about order and cleanliness, I was surprised to find myself strongly empathizing with the way the hoarders in this book see their accumulated possessions as an intricate web of personhood, when outsiders would likely describe it as a mess.

His main case study, referred to as Irene for the purposes of the book, had difficulties distinguishing levels of value between objects in her hoard. For Irene, coupons, junk mail and scraps of paper with outdated grocery lists scrawled on them were just as important as old family photographs. Every possession evoked a story she could relay in impressive detail. Another woman named Debra had a strong urge to keep all of things "in containment." She maintained detailed lists and mental images of where all her things were at any one time. Anything that slipped away from her constraints was "out of containment." Debra expressed to Frost, "Whatever comes into my life has come for a purpose. I'm supposed to have it. It's a part of me—an extension of me. If I throw too much away, there'll be nothing left of me."³⁴ Here we see Belk's idea of possessions as an "extended self" taken to the extreme.

I find it serendipitous that I happened to be growing up in Northampton, Massachusetts about a half a mile from the Smith College Campus, while Frost would have been doing this research on OCD and hoarding. In the fifth grade I dealt with similar obsessive rituals to Irene and Debra in order to combat a fear of contacting things that I believed to be contaminated. I particularly feared second-hand things, sure that the presence of a past owner retained by the object would overpower my own presence. If I touched something that I felt was contaminated, I would wipe my hands back and forth an even number of times, imagining that the presence I

³⁴ Frost, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding*, 116

feared was getting smaller and smaller until it was small enough to drift away from my body. While I no longer rely on such ritual, I'm fascinated by the idea that a small action can shift a physical object between of contamination and decontamination. What I find most interesting here are the invisible boundaries created by these categorical value shifts and how nuanced the perception of these changes are from person to person.

In an email exchange I had with Frost this past summer, he mentioned his belief that people with hoarding disorder may actually have an extraordinary ability. He said, "I think there is a kind of aesthetic sensitivity regarding the physical world that is part of hoarding disorder." He elaborates on this in his book:

For hoarders, every object is rich with detail. We disregard the color and hue of a magazine cover as we search for the article inside. But if we paid attention, we might notice the soothing effect of the colors and the meaning of the object would expand in the process. In this way, the physical world of hoarders is different and much more expansive than the rest of us. Whether we look at them and see limitless potential, limitless information, limitless utility or limitless waste, the people in this book are undeniably free of the usual rules that affect how we view and treat our stuff.³⁵

Here Randy Frost and Scott Herring actually agree. I imagine that this aesthetic sensitivity is similar to what many artists claim to have, especially in seeing the creative potential in objects and materials. This begs the question for me of how fragile the line is between disorder and artist. Do all hoarders have artistic sensibilities that are responsible for how they view and relate to objects? Are all artists to some extent materially deviant? Stewart speculates that this urge to accumulate for its own sake is "an attempt to erase the limits of the body that is at the same time an attempt, marked by desperation, to keep body and soul together."³⁶ Perhaps the hoard or landfill is the ultimate collection, breaking free of the confines of order, overflowing the limitations of the museum and conforming to some higher structure barely maintainable or even comprehensible by humans.

³⁵ Frost, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding*, 15

³⁶ Stewart, *On Longing*, 154

Part V: Artist Influences

Jenny Odell's *Bureau of Suspended Objects* is a project from her time spent at Recology. This is an artist residency at the San Francisco Dump, where artists can take a shopping cart around to scavenge for things to make work with. During her residency, Odell made a large archive of her finds, where each object is researched, documented and displayed. In viewing her work, you look at particular objects, but the research Odell conducts about them highlights their mass-produced qualities, showing that there are actually many of the same object floating around in the world. However, the dirty and tattered qualities of the displayed objects, scavenged from the trash, hint at their own uniquely-lived lives. By reading Odell's hand-written cards, you may learn how, when, and where the object was produced but you will never be able to access that individual history. The impossibility of that very task has been the underlying drive and struggle in my thesis work.



Figure #37: Jenny Odell, *Bureau of Suspended Objects* (2015 - ongoing)



Figure #38: Jenny Odell, *Havruta: The Bureau of Suspended Objects* at the

Temporal Aggregate/Social Configuration (Borrowed Beuys) is a piece by Stephanie Syjuco made in homage to Joseph Beuys. In 2009, for conservation reasons, Beuys's iconic work “The Sled” could not be included in MoMA’s **1969 exhibition**. Syjuco made a sculptural multiple in response to the absence of this major work in the exhibition. Through email, Facebook and other social networks, she was able to collect an assortment of temporary replacement objects borrowed from friends in order to re-make an assembled copy of Beuys’ original work. Syjuco’s work is a fantastic example of Appadurai and Kopytoffs diversion in two directions, from possession to artwork and then artwork back to possession. On her website, Syjuco states “What has been brought together as an artwork referencing a 20th-century icon and his social ideals, ultimately will be dispersed, the items returned to their original owners and put to more quotidian tasks.”



Figure #39, #40: Stephanie Syjuco,
*Temporal Aggregate/ Social Configuration
(Borrowed Beuys)* (2009)

In China Adam's *The Official Hide and Stitch Procedure*, she determined that 77.13% of her possessions felt burdensome. To deal with this conundrum she individually wrapped her burdensome possessions in white fabric, meticulously stitching them closed. By covering each in a shroud of white, she slowly erased them from her life. They lose their former meanings, uses and associations and instead become pure forms. Possessions are the tools that allow us to perform tasks and maintain control over our environment. If possessions are extensions of the body, Adams' sculptures become physical masses, almost severed limbs.



Figure #41: China Adams, *The Official Hide and Stitch Procedure*, 2009



Figure 42: Mary Mattingly, *Life of Objects* (2013)

In Mary Mattingly's work *Life of Objects*, her possessions are bundled up, photographed and performed with as physical extensions of the body, almost tumor-like. Like Adams, this process is a way for Mattingly to grapple with the burden of her possessions. Before bundling the objects into these temporary performative sculptures, she researches how and where each object was produced, photographs them and posts them to an digital archive on her website.



Figure #43: Sophie Calle, *The Birthday Ceremony* (1980-1993)

Sophie Calle's *The Birthday Ceremony* is comprised of glass display cases that each represent an individual closed world, a unique collection. Each case represents the space of one day of one year of her life, her birthday. Each year, Calle invited guests to a large dinner party. The birthday gifts she received would all be sealed together in a glass display case and never used. Rather than appropriating the gifts as possessions, she collected them as symbols of the affection of her friends and family members during a specific moment of her life. My 50-day activity for the *Archive of Accrued Moments* established a similar ritual which then became the cause for the formation and logic of my collection. In both cases, an arbitrary assortment of objects that have come together by chance must be considered as a cohesive unit.

In Jenny Odell's *295 Roadside Signs*, we see how the collection can function as a metaphor. Odell's collection is made up of images digitally removed from google earth documentation. This piece is part of her series, *Signs of Life*. She calls the work "a record of messages from humanity to itself." I only became familiar with Odell's work after having made my thesis work. There is a striking similarity to how I digitally display my 50 objects in the video viewing station of the *Archive of Accrued Moments*, removed from context and displayed as digital objects floating on a sterile white screen. Both works could be seen as a nod to the growing familiarity of online shopping and the screen as an interface for interacting with objects.



Figure 44: Jenny Odell, *295 Roadside Signs* (2012)

CONCLUSION

By attempting to monitor and control a collection of objects through the systems of the *Archive of Accrued Moments* and the four machines in the *Extraction Laboratory*, I forced myself and viewers to contend with the limits of our capacity to understand the lives of objects. My thesis work was ultimately an experiment in letting objects in and out of containment, as articulated by Frost's Debra, establishing them as part of my own personhood in order to understand how they have already retained layers of past personhood. I undertook this work in order to test the ease with which physical material, in the form of objects, can absorb real but invisible layers of meaning through experience and contact with myself and others. I built and activated machines in order to access an essence in objects that is felt by many but never seen. I used the mediums gel, water, grass, cotton and photographs to make visual the contagious transference of this essence between physical objects and bodies. Whether welcomed, feared or ignored, I wanted to make this invisible presence in objects more palpable to those who encountered the work.

The *Archive of Accrued Moments* fails to capture and record every moment of touch. The four machines in the *Extraction Laboratory* fail to psychically reveal the past. They fail to even produce anything measurably significant. They only make more substance, more material that carries the chain of human experience. Ultimate failure is where the core of the work exists, reminding us that our sense of touch and imagination are already the best tools we have for understanding the silent world of things. The intensity of the work, the refinement of the craft and dedication of the artist is evidence enough that there is something worth paying attention to, something the objects know that we will never access.

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