Curating the Collective Conscience

An Honors Thesis (AFA 491)

By

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Ball State University
Muncie, In
December 2010

Expected Date of Graduation
May 2011
Abstract

There is a certain kind of intimacy experienced when you can hold something in your hand. Even if I couldn't articulate what that was at four or five years old, I was aware of its pull. I have always been a picker-upper, an admirer of objects. Coupled with a resourceful mind, this tendency often leads to not only admiring objects, but acquiring them as well. Anyone close to me knows I do my fair share, and so do hundreds of thousands of other people in our society. I wanted to use my thesis exhibition opportunity to work within the context of human/object relationships. Through experimenting with installation and display of gathered and manipulated materials, I attempted to convey a more delicate and admirable take on several methods of accumulation.

Having accepted my own inclination to acquire, I began exploring various relationships between people and their things. Antique malls and yard sales were visited with a different kind of discerning eye. Why do we buy the things we buy and keep the things we keep? What is it about possessing that has so many of us hooked? My thesis exhibit loosely addressed these questions.

I worked with mostly borrowed, salvaged, or thrifted items, characteristic of my personal favorite means of acquiring. The exhibit consisted of seven pieces exploring various means of accumulation that worked together to encourage a new perspective for viewers to understand collective tendencies. Confronting and exploiting these tendencies was personally therapeutic and worked to bring light to behaviors that deserve more positive attention.
Projected significance/history/value.
Desire.
Greed.
Possession.
Obsession.
Expression. How else can we let people know who we want to be, what we value.
Habits.
Hobbies.
General interest.
Curiosity.
Memory.
Aesthetic.
Attraction.

Why do we buy the things we buy and keep the things we keep?

It is through the object that we gain an understanding of the world around us, and often define our own. The relationship between object and act is telling. In valuing the object, knowledge and experience are valued.

This exhibit explores various human relationships with objects, specifically those of a cumulative nature. The products of which become documents of time, place, and self, capable of recording both intended and accidental histories.

Long influenced by an appreciation for the aesthetic qualities inherently possible with every object, while living in a throwaway society, I gather, I scavenge, I keep. The interplay between human and object creates context that is often underappreciated and overlooked. Humanizing each work through its title reinforces this dialogue. I hope to direct a kind of wonder and perspective by elevating or simply altering a common understanding of our material world.
Acknowledgements

I would like to offer my academic advisors and personal mentors, several of whom fit the bill for both, many, many thanks. Their guidance and support has been instrumental in advancing my perceptive abilities and in turn a developing me.
Process

Attempting to define my creative process always seems to confine my creative process. From academia, I have learned the importance of concept and being able to convey it. Typically though, I am more inspired by pre-existing objects or images and their latent content. Collecting materials that speak to me on obvious levels and then experimenting with design possibilities is a process that often informs my ideas about content. The visible passage of time is a common characteristic among the materials I choose to work with. Time and process have been consistent themes in much of my recent work.

I explored ideas for my thesis exhibit by compiling several books that have been continuous sources for either immediate inspiration or simply getting my brain back on track. Maira Kalman's *The Principles of Uncertainty*, Paul Arden's *Whatever You Think, Think the Opposite*, Felipe Fernández Armesto's *Ideas that Changed the World*, and Una McGovern's *Lost Crafts* were a few gathered, but I was struck by Keri Smith's *How to be an Explorer of the World*. Her informal artbook/guidebook to exercising your appreciation and understanding of the world around you just connected with me. I have always been prone to building relationships with objects and decided to take cues from that.

An immediate borderline obsession with accumulating began. I started working with that as a primary theme, inspired by conscious collecting and unconscious collecting simultaneously. I completed a piece the summer of 2010, while trying to develop ideas for my show, that I believe informed my decision without even noticing until I had already spent a few weeks rummaging through thoughts. It fit perfectly into my 'unconscious collecting' file. I concentrated then on varying degrees and methods of object accumulation, focusing on the types of objects that I am naturally attracted to. But I began feeling too conscious of my own habits. I began editing. Filtering. I was altering my collective behaviors to accommodate the demands I had placed on myself. This didn't seem to coincide with my original intent. I decided to do some intensive research, scouring the Internet for visuals, reading psychological theories about collecting, and exploring the work of a few
specific artists, namely Mark Dion, Mark Bradford, Joseph Cornell, and Maira Kalman. Still unable to neglect my interest in gathering prospective material, I began collecting other people's collections. I became a curator of collections. Any item of unnatural quantity just appealed to me, fascinated by the life of the collection, the idea that something at one time had been so coveted by a person, and at another so easily let go. I am drawn to objects with obvious history, previous lives, almost as if they are heirlooms up for grabs. It's an urge to save objects from neglect. Working within the context of accumulation, I was able to identify and confront my own collective conscience. After deciding that perhaps I had approached my entire theme on a much too personal level, I attempted to contact others with similar collective habits. Ray, who lived across the street, collected buttons. Dave, who sold me a case of Ball jars, collected nearly everything. Amy, who I met in London, collected old cameras. The idea was that editing their obsessions would prove to be a little easier.

After trying to follow up on too many ideas, I sat down to edit. Edit in a necessary way. I decided to approach my show as a collection in itself, a grouping of works related to one another without necessarily following the same straight line. I sketched possible layouts of different ideas for individual pieces. I pre-arranged items in an empty room in my house, trying to gain a better understanding of the relationships and content created by placement and proximity. At times, I drew from early inspirations, but tried to focus on what juxtapositions made sense to me, made me feel comfortable, quizzical, even uneasy. I chose to exhibit works that represent a more cohesive me and promote an understanding of object appreciation.
Evaluation of Works

The Scavenger

Without knowing the direction of my thesis exhibition, I began working on a piece that would become one of the strongest in my show. For years I have been an admirer of the everyday, often-unnoticed textures that fill the spaces few of us ever look twice. One of my favorites is well-used flyer/propaganda substrate. With the help of a Ball State Grounds employee, I was able to salvage several loads of kiosk material that otherwise would have been discarded. I have attempted recreating this surface, but without as much success. Working instinctually with this scavenged media, I was unknowingly informing my ideas about exhibiting an appreciative point of view.

I knew I wanted to present the kiosk boards in a way that emphasized the aesthetic qualities that had inspired me to acquire it. Keeping them as a whole was important. I began by separating full-sized pieces from broken pieces, and then cut the full-sized pieces as needed to ensure that they were all the same length. Because the finished product would be relatively two-dimensional, I soon realized the importance of composition as well. I worked with the material on the floor while experimenting with arrangement, primarily paying attention to texture and contrast. When I was finally happy with the composition, I built five cedar frames, the same wood used on the kiosks, that became the structure for the arranged kiosk boards. Dividing the work into five pieces was obviously done for practical purposes. When at all possible, I try to make my work more user-friendly than not. Moving the final piece, had it been one 61” x 160” board would have been nearly impossible. I glued and nailed each slat to the frames, reassembling the arrangement I was most happy with.

Originally, I had planned on hanging this piece. But, as has happened before in my making process, I was forced to actually create the work in an orientation different from my intended display orientation. While working on the floor, I was still able to appreciate the aesthetic qualities I wanted to maintain. The unexpected floor
placement also invited viewers to approach the commonplace material from a different perspective, physically and hopefully conceptually.

Considering the purpose of my exhibit, *The Scavenger* was an important inclusion, depicting an appreciation for material or object that often ends with just that, an appreciation. Through repurposing these kiosk slats I was able to comment on accumulation of several kinds, the unintentional build-up of urban ephemera and the material's potential appeal to a scavenger.
The Hoarder

Hoarding was the first behavioral aesthetic I was specifically interested in exhibiting. As someone who can identify with the intentions of many of the hoarder cases profiled by the media, I was interested in finding a way to profile hoarding in a different light, without the negativity and drama reinforced by television exploits. Initially, I imagined an environmental experience for the viewer. But the gallery restrictions forced me to adapt my design ideas, and consequently refine the conceptual ideas behind my entire show.

Slowly I began to adapt my exhibit around the idea of using the gallery space as a way to communicate my admiration of human/object relationships, and my intent with *The Hoarder* became dependent on its association with the other works in the show. This reformatting gave me more freedom to work with various methods of accumulation, both intentional and unintentional.

Still concerned with finding the most appropriate way to display a work based on hoarding, I consulted Kenton Hall, who brilliantly suggested I utilize the awkward space between the Atrium Gallery entrance and the angled wall just outside. The odd architectural space allowed me to take advantage of multiple prospective viewpoints, and I was able to create what could easily be a cross-section of a hoarder’s house. Because this space was accessible at all times, it became obvious that I would need a way to discourage visitors to the Atrium from tampering with or removing items from the installation. The front door solution worked perfectly to even further enhance the idea of actual living space. After the framework had been constructed and I knew the original space would be adequately protected, I began moving household items in. This improvised installation of objects varied greatly from the other pieces I exhibited, but successfully represented the ‘hoarder’ mentality because of its spontaneous and chaotic assembly. I loved how using this space allowed for a more complete and accurate portrayal of the typical hoarding scenario. Because hoarders are easily self-conscious of their inability to maintain a household and risk being evicted, from the exterior, these circumstances are often
unidentifiable. Upon entering the house, or in this case the gallery, an awareness of these self-imposed living conditions became apparent.

Despite having faced presentation obstacles early in the developmental stages of this work, this installation solution was more successful than any of my other ideas would have been. This comment on the hoarding condition, while not presented as neatly as most of my other pieces, allowed the viewer to observe and process another type of human/object relationship without being confronted by the negative, dramatic side-effects of sustaining this kind of living environment.
The Hoarder  2010
Mixed media

The Stacker  2010
Quilts
The Keeper  2010
Bookcase, display table, heirlooms

The Keeper, detail
When I asked Mr. Young about his collections, we talked about stamps, coins, and swizzle sticks. He loaned part of his pencil collection.
The Collector, detail
The Scavenger  2010
Found kiosk slats, assembled

The Organizer  2010
Type cabinet, mixed media
The Gatherer  2010
Mixed media

The Gatherer, detail
The Hunter  
2010
Quilt rack, hangers, mixed media

The Hunter, detail
Bibliography


