

All Things Considered

by

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"My library is an archive of longings."

—Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks, 1964-1980*¹

"I may not be an explorer, or an adventurer, or a treasure-seeker, or a gunfighter, Mr. O'Connell, but I am proud of what I am... I... am a librarian."

—Evie Carnahan (portrayed by Rachel Weisz), *The Mummy*²

1.

The past has not been erased, its erasure has not been forgotten, the lie has not become truth. But the past of proof is strange and, on its uncertain future, much in public life turns. In the end, it comes down to this: the history of truth is cockamamie, and lately it's been getting cockamamier [...]

I am unpacking our library, yes I am. In borrowing this framework, *ex post facto*, from Walter Benjamin, I am not starting as he did, in the state of boxed and crated books—"not yet touched by the mild boredom of order"—but with the large and functioning library of the University of Alberta, where books are on the shelves, and I can, for the time being, "march up and down their ranks to pass them in review"^{3a}.

I'm not unpacking the books of the Rutherford Library, but the traces of readers that remain with these books. As they are borrowed, the items of this library, like any other, accumulate traces of their readership, things left behind within them. There are newspaper clippings promoting cures for depression and exposing German stamp-washing rackets; letters, in turn, from loved ones, pioneer newspaper-women, and to winners of swimming contests. A fax machine copy of Duchamp's *Large Glass* cohabitates with call signs for short-wave radio broadcasters, stamps of ownership by embassies of the Third Reich, and questions on the symbolism of wine in *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*.

Since September of 2017, I have been unpacking our library—a daily practice of wandering the stacks, flipping through books, and finding the evidence of previous human interactions. Unlike the systematic principles that order the library at large, the items I've found are unregulated, uncategorized, and delinquent from the oversight of the catalogue. Though at times marked by signatures, or deliberately placed in acts of alternative publication or religious proselytizing, most are incidental, and almost all entirely anonymous. Their accidental loss into the ordered shelves of the library could suggest an end to their ability to communicate: uncatalogued, they are lost in the archive, with no ability to be searched out or recalled. However, as Homi Bhabha says of disordered collections in his response to Benjamin, *Unpacking My Library Again*, "that disorder challenges the shelved order of the study, and displaces the Dewey decimal system [...] it is the contingency of these 'un-packed books,' through their concatenation and contestation, that produce a shared belief in the need for Benjamin's ethical and aesthetic imperative: 'the renewal of life' through relocation, dislocation, and re-situation"^{3b}. Removed from the particulars of their origins, and juxtaposed strangely to new eyes, these lost items engender new meanings, opening those who find them up to narratives the library catalogue could not have anticipated.

There's an incredibly rich scholarship on the history of evidence, which traces its rise in the Middle Ages in the world of law, its migration into historical writing, and then finally into the realm that we're most familiar with, journalism. That's a centuries-long migration of an idea that begins in a very particular time and place, basically the rise of trial by jury starting in 1215. This required a new doctrine of evidence and a new method of inquiry, and led to what the historian Barbara Shapiro has called "the culture of fact": the idea that an observed or witnessed act or thing—the substance, the matter, of fact—is the basis of truth and the only kind of evidence that's admissible not only in court but also in other realms where truth is arbitrated.

Social theorist David Bissell, in his *Inconsequential Materialities*, outlines the complex movements of objects once they "[depart] from [the] networks of intentional human agency". Far from immobilized, Bissell argues "that the way that lost objects [...] move, both physically and affectually, relies on the juxtaposition of two very different materialities [...] Where the materiality of the urban landscape, particularly pavements and roads where these items are commonly located, is optimized for particular flows, the materiality of lost items [...] jars and punctuates this by presenting a stark object of rupture to these flows."⁴ Bissell's use of the verb 'punctuate' here echoes Roland Barthes' *punctum*—the moment in the frame of a photographic image that pricks its viewer, launching in them a desire to see beyond what the image objectively reveals. The punctum of the photograph operates similarly to the lost object; it urges us to see beyond the trace evidence preserved, and to tend to the subjectivity of experience that provokes us⁵.

My speculation on the objects I find each day, though, is grounded in a geography that is rapidly shifting. Around the world, libraries and other depositories of public knowledge are facing fiscal cuts, ideological reframing, and physical closure. The networks through which items lost in the archives can operate are becoming scrambled, their stories irretrievable as institutions are forced to downsize, deaccession, and move remaining collections to high density storage. The dismantling of the ways in which stories have been told for millennia, from the disruption of oral tradition through to the foretold demise of the printed book, cuts us off not only from the historic flow of information and documents, but also their context—how each story comes to be told, maintained, and interacted with over its lifetime.

Fredric Jameson anticipates this process in his *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*, stating that "our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past [...] the informational function of the media would be to help us forget, to serve as the very agents and mechanisms for our historical amnesia"⁶. For Jameson, the postmodern world offers sense of linear progression from the past through to 'now', but a series of 'perpetual presents'. He posits that the fast turnover of information in popular media has led to a crisis of historicity, wherein stories are relegated to images, each quickly buried by the constant onslaught of new material. We do not commit material to print or to memory; rather, we anticipate the ability to find everything again at the click of a mouse.

Between the thirteenth century and the nineteenth, the fact spread from law outward to science, history, and journalism. Facts were replaced by numbers in the 18th and 19th centuries as the higher-status unit of knowledge [...] then came the Internet. The era of the fact is coming to an end: the place once held by 'facts' is being taken over by 'data' [...] the bigger the data, the better. This is making for more epistemological mayhem, not least because the collection and weighing of facts require investigation, discernment, and judgment, while the collection and analysis of data are outsourced to machines. When we Google-know, [Michael P.] Lynch argues, we no longer take responsibility for our own beliefs, and we lack the capacity to see how bits of facts fit into a larger whole.

In his *Fantasia of the Library*, Foucault declares that “the imaginary is not formed in opposition to reality as its denial or compensation; it grows among signs, from book to book, in the interstice of repetitions and commentaries; it is born and takes shape in the interval between books. It is a phenomenon of the library”. The word ‘intercalation’ usefully describes this ‘phenomenon’, where amidst one set of structures something new can be inserted. Endemic to geology, where it refers to interjections among strata of rock, as well as to literature, where it refers to the interwoven threads that join to form a narrative, intercalation carries remnants of its Latin etymology: “the word literally means something like ‘being inserted between an existing ‘proclamation’”— or, something that has been understood as official, and of great importance, is changed because of a new layer or element having entered the reified sequence”⁸. As a polysemic concept, intercalation offers a useful lens with which to view the space of possibility Foucault finds within the site of the library. If we are to continue our ability to weave together new meanings and speculate possible futures, we must maintain the frameworks that allow such interstices.

We have a much better vantage on the tenuousness of our own grasp of facts when we understand where facts come from.

Notes:

1. Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks, 1964-1980*. (New York: MacMillan, 2012) 510.
2. *The Mummy*, directed by Stephen Sommers (1999; Universal City, CA: Universal Films, 2010), DVD.
- 3a. Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1955) 59.
- 3b. Homi Bhabha, “Unpacking My Library Again,” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 28, No. 1, *Identities* (Spring, 1995): 5-6.
4. David Bissell, “Inconsequential Materialities,” *space and culture*, vol. 12 no. 1 (February 2009): 100, DOI: 10.1177/1206331208325602
5. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: MacMillan, 1981), 27.
6. Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 2002) 125.
7. Michel Foucault, “*Fantasia of the Library*”, in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard & Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 91.

8. Kirsten Einfeldt, Bernd Scherer & Daniela Wolf, introduction to *Fantasies of the Library*, eds. Anna-Sophie Springer & Etienne Turpin in association with Kirsten Einfeldt & Daniela Wolf (Berlin: K. Verlag, 2015), v.

† The history of truth as described by Jill Lepore in the preceding italics is combined from two sources. Section one is from “‘The Internet of Us’ and the End of Facts”⁹; section two to the end of the second sentence is from “The Academy Itself is Largely Responsible for It’s Own Peril”¹⁰. The remainder of the section is from “The Internet of Us”. Section three’s first sentence continues from the previous, the second sentence interjects from “The Academy...” , then returns to “The Internet of Us” save the interjection of “the bigger the data, the better.” The final sentence is from “The Academy Itself is Largely Responsible for It’s Own Peril”.

9. Jill Lepore, “‘The Internet of Us’ and the End of Facts,” *The New Yorker*, vol. 92, no. 16 (March 21, 2016), 91-94.

10. Evan Goldstein, interviewing Jill Lepore, “‘The Academy Is Largely Itself Responsible for Its Own Peril’,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (November 13, 2018), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Academy-Is-Largely/245080>

“Um yes I do, I do want to hear this. I want to hear everything.”

“Everything?”

“Yeah, everything.”

“Starting with the big bang?”

“Yes.”¹

I. IN THE BEGINNING,²

But how to establish the exact moment in which a story begins? Everything has already begun before, the first line of the first page of every novel refers to something that has already happened outside the book. Or else the real story is the one that begins ten or a hundred pages further on, and everything that precedes it is only a prologue. The lives of individuals of the human race form a constant plot, in which every attempt to isolate one piece of living that has a meaning separate from the rest—for example, the meeting of two people, which will become decisive for both—must bear in mind that each of the two brings with himself a texture of events, environments, other people, and that from the meeting, in turn, other stories will be derived which will break off from their common story³.

There is always the issue of beginnings. How to get the thing off the ground, how to initiate, to launch. It has to do with offering a series of possibilities and then deciding on a single route. It has to do with purging the list until there is only one option left [...] molding and shaping their form, settling on the best iterations, cutting and pruning and leaving things implied. The question is whether the work they’ve done is right or wrong. [...] In order to record a tale, something must always be lost. Some things must be left unsaid and disguised, his brother had said. For as everyone knows, the art of storytelling is all about where and how to leave the voids⁴.

Even when I was an artist in residence at the San Francisco dump, where my ostensible project was to research the manufacturing origins of discarded objects, their actual starting points as things eluded me. Researching a stuffed animal, for example, would force me to consider not only the cultural reasons for its production but the factory, the polyester, the oil used to make polyester, and eventually, ancient marine organisms that made that oil. Not only was it impossible to precisely pinpoint the actual origin of an object, it was also hard to say at what point the object definitively became trash.⁵

“You know, you can always begin anywhere.”⁶

Originally – an appropriate beginning, since the Greek word *arche*, from which the notion is derived, means “beginning” – an archive is a place of storage and ordering of the material objects that feed and facilitate cultural memory. Its primary feature is pastness. These objects and their

ordering must be administered in order to function as the access to the past of a culture they are supposed to represent. Archives are associated with dusty, crumbling old things locked in inhospitable places, but in the digital age the idea of archive has gained an opposite meaning: as a new, inventive, and alternative to traditional storytelling. The archive, today, supersedes narrative as a mode of regrouping cultural elements.⁷

*Reams of paper promise a veritable treasure trove: needles, haystacks. Then there's the problem of the dead. They have no privacy [...] I suppose I thought that the archive would produce a set of facts that I could marshal into a narrative: they did not and I have. But the gossip mounted, and I didn't consolidate the facts or the truths—which is one of its negative functions. Instead it cast a queer light on "official" documents, such as class notes, oral histories, and the many memoirs [...] the line between historical document and gossip began to blur. For what are class notes if not hearsay, a form of creative translation, rife with the possibility of mishearing [...] and what is a memoir other than one person's fallible memory masquerading as authority?*⁸

[The uncertainty principle] describes an inherent fuzziness that must exist in any attempt to describe nature. Our most precise description of nature must be in terms of probabilities [...] We can form an image of the hydrogen atom by imagining a "cloud" whose density is proportional to the probability density for observing the electron [...] thus our best "picture" of a hydrogen atom is a nucleus surrounded by an "electronic cloud" (although we really mean a "probability cloud") [...] In its efforts to learn as much as possible about nature, modern physics has found that certain things can never be "known" with certainty. Much of our knowledge must always remain uncertain. The most we can know is in terms of probabilities.⁹

Notes:

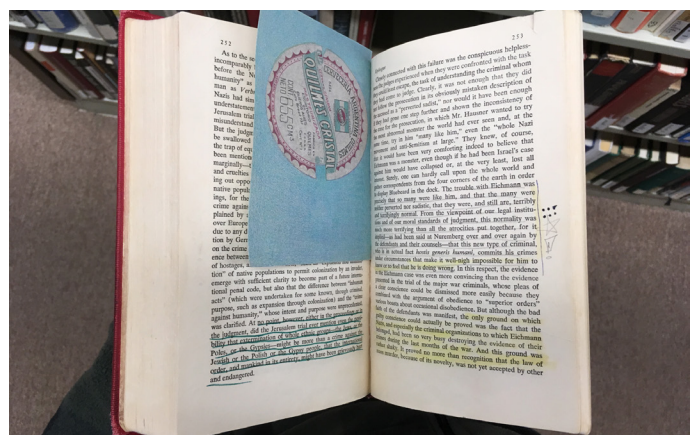
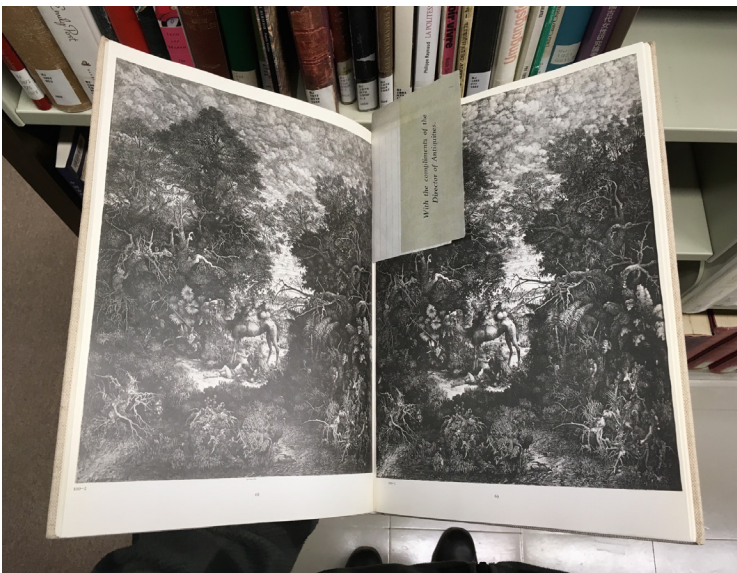
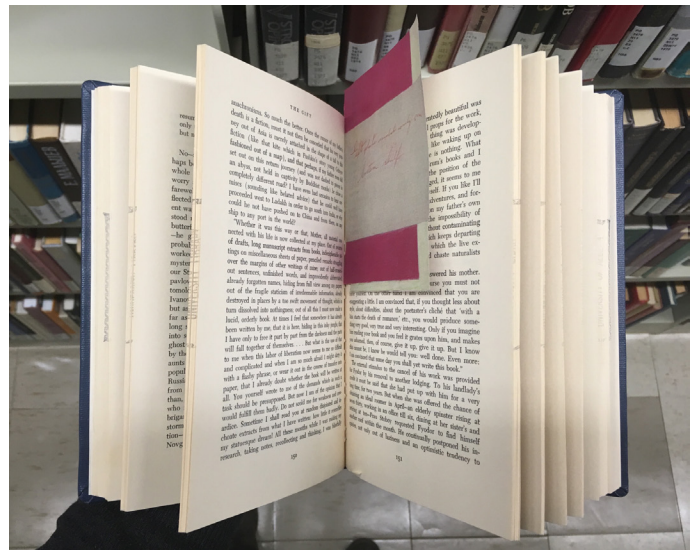
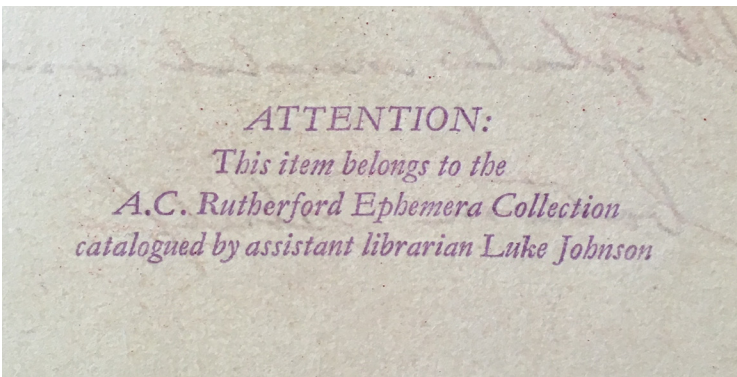
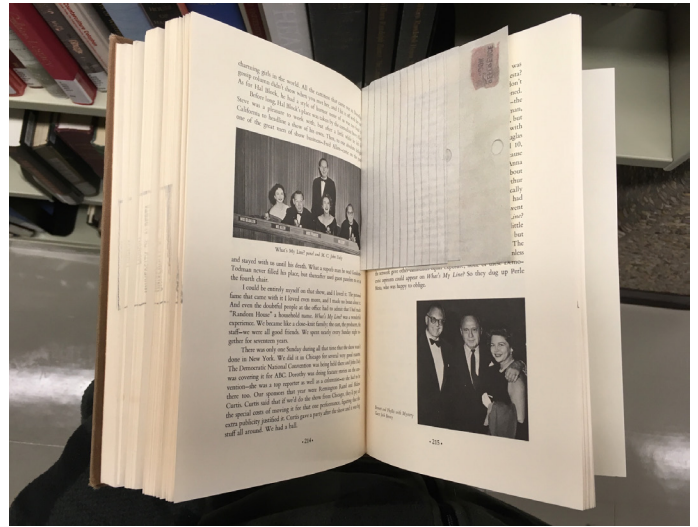
1. Nick Kocher and Brian McElhaney (BriTANick), "Everything.," YouTube, July 10, 2011, video, 3:05, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WeKVM6lxGp4>
2. A translation of *Bereishith*, the first word of the Hebrew Torah, and in turn the opening of Genesis in the Christian Old Testament.
3. Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveller*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt, 1981), 153.
4. Lindsey Drager, "Episodes toward an Elegy for Halley's Comet," *TriQuarterly*, Issue 155 (Winter/Spring 2019) <http://www.triquarterly.org/issues/issue-155/episodes-toward-elegy-halley's-comet>
5. Jenny ODell, "Designing for the In-Between," M Design, Medium, November 2, 2018, <http://www.medium.com/s/world-wide-wtf/designing-for-the-in-between-hybrids-1990s-net-art-and-a-giant-floating-worm-34be64b872d3>
6. John Cage, quoted by Joan Retallack, introduction to *Musicage*, ed. Joan Retallack (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), xv.
7. 'Encyclopedia', in *Something Strange This Way*, ed. Maria Kappel Blegvad, Janet Cardiff, and Georges Bures Miller (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2014), 87-88.
8. Helen Molesworth, "Imaginary Landscape," in *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, ed. Helen Molesworth with Ruth Erickson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 73.
9. Richard P. Feynman, *Lectures on Physics*, (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1963), 6-10, quoted in Klaus Ottmann, "The Solid and the Fluid: Perceiving Leib," in *Wolfgang Leib: A Retrospective*, ed. Klaus Ottmann (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2000), 19.



Above:
Field Guide to the A.C. Rutherford Ephemera Collection (installation view), 2017-2020

materials collected out of library books in the University of Alberta's Rutherford Library as part of daily acts of volunteer librarianship, file drawers, audio recordings of daily work done in library for duration of exhibit

(see also: frontispiece)



selection of printed facsimiles of found ephemera, placed in books found in the University of Alberta's Rutherford Library, 2017-2020
lithography, solvent transfer, relief, letterpress, hand-colouring

2.

“Does this spark joy?” This question is a central tenant of Marie Kondo’s ‘KonMari’ decluttering method, outlined in her book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, which in turn has spawned sequels, a Netflix series, a manga adaptation, and a flood of joy-questioning memes. Kondo advocates a “once-in-a-lifetime tidying marathon,” during which all personal belongings are sorted into categories (clothes, books, papers, miscellany, and mementos, in that order) and then are individually held to see if they elicit the physical sensation of joy. Those that do not are thanked for having served their purpose and discarded. “My dream is to organize the world,” said Kondo at the end of a lecture attended by New York Times columnist Taffy Brodesser-Akner (you can follow the progress of Kondo and her ‘Konverts’ online through their hashtag: #organizetheworld)¹¹.

This total global organization, as Kondo would have it, leaves little room for the materials that evoke complicated stories and histories with decidedly un-joyous affects. Take for instance the collection of Marion Stokes, the Philadelphia based television producer and radical communist activist, who began archiving news broadcasts on November 4, 1979, as reports came in of the developing Iran Hostage Crisis. Originally trained as a librarian, Stokes was interested in tracking “how news stories changed as they broke, [identifying] information dropped or suppressed, [looking] at how narratives were massaged and [seeing] what dramatic subplots and characters emerged as the news unfolded”. Starting at the dawn of the 24-hour news cycle, Stokes recorded all the major networks continuously on VHS and Betamax cassettes—an archive that would eventually fill over 70,000 tapes. For more than 30 years, ending only with her death on December 14th 2012, as news of the Sandy Hook school shooting broke, Stokes held herself responsible for the preservation of every story reported, meaningful and not; a reflection of American society through its media, collected in totality¹².

Stoke’s collection bears resemblance to other such catch-all archives assembled at various times worldwide. There are, for instance, the *genizoth*, Jewish repositories of texts that happen to invoke the name of God. These texts are collected according to Talmudic law to be given proper burial. *Genizoth* have been the source of numerous historical discoveries, particularly in the Middle East, where certain ones, such as the Cairo *Genizah*, contain documents deposited over many centuries of use. The Dead Sea Scrolls, autograph leaves of the philosopher Maimonides, and the oldest known Haggadahs are all preserved today having been found in these charnel houses for books. Like Stoke’s broadcast news archive, a *genizah* collects everything, objectively important and seemingly trivial—and it is often from documents with seemingly minor historical import that valuable information on daily life can be gleaned¹³.

Chicago-based artist Theaster Gates has built a career out of preserving vast collections precariously perched between their previous uses and their potential to be discarded. Liquidated record store inventories, obsolete university slide collections, salvaged furniture and interior decorations of the Johnson Publishing Company, and racist examples of ‘negrobilia’—all have come under his stewardship, becoming part of an ever-evolving *gesamkunstwerk* that reflects the history of African American life. Victoria Sung, organizer of a recent exhibit of the artist’s collections at the Walker Art Center, referred to Gates’ “almost

spiritual belief in the life of things;" asking then if an exhibition of his collections "could [...] prompt people to expand their understanding of what art is, or can be—not just a tangible object but a process, an approach, a gesture?"¹⁴ If the choice to discard these collections tacitly suggests that the narratives they suggest are not important to maintain, Gates emphatically questions these decisions, underscoring the overlooked narratives that do persist. The choice to maintain them despite their overwhelming scope and complicated nature become deeply politicized choices.

Gates is far from alone in recognizing the importance of the stories contained in the cast off materials of history. Dario Robleto in his tender dioramas unpacking the love stories bound up in scientific discovery; Jackie Mock in her shrines to the minute material traces of history; Yuji Agematsu in his cellophane-wrapped daily collections of New York's detritus—these artists, among many others, actively pursue the seemingly irrational work of transmitting stories on the verge of loss into new forms and potential futures.

The tactics and aesthetic choices used by archivally based artists are frequently reminiscent of those utilized by artists of the 'Romantic Conceptualist' movement, a group defined by Jörg Heiser as:

*"treating the unsystematic systematically [...] conciseness is not simply a puritanical control mechanism, a withholding of emotions and desires [...] but rather, on the contrary, a particular language for articulating and communicating them: the idea of letting things and processes speak for themselves, of conceptually and performatively offering them up for consideration."*¹⁵

Referring to Susan Hiller's work *Dedicated to the Unknown Artists*—a collection of postcards portraying rough seas off the English coast, arranged in a grid on the wall along with notations by the artist—Heiser states that "[Heller] forgoes the loud impact achieved by grand individual images, but this is made up for by the quiet emphasis on duplication and serialization [...] the simple Conceptual 'trick' of combining two things that don't actually belong together generates an awareness that we are constantly trying to make faces and stories, emotions and information, add up in some way, however improbable this may be."¹⁶

With a practice located between artist and curator, Ydessa Hendeles, like Hiller, has devoted herself to the collection of one type of artifact; in her case, thousands of vernacular photographs featuring teddy bears. A curatorial composition of overwhelming proportion, *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)*, presents these images floor to ceiling, occasionally accompanied by the bears themselves, or other archival materials, displayed in vitrines. Offering a dizzying number of entryways into the past lives of objects invested with meaning by previous owners, Hendeles takes on the role of keeper of their stories, and offers the viewer the chance to become complicit in her task¹⁷. Her actions are in line with another curator of singular vision, Harald Szeemann, who saw the role of exhibits as "[places] where fragility can be preserved and where new connections can be experimented with [...] a place where an ever-changing sum of speculations with various sources of nourishment struggle for visualization."¹⁸ These teddy bears may no longer 'spark joy' for their lost owners, but through

the recontextualization of the museological display they transform, making space to generate new affects and meanings that are no less valuable.

When Vartan Gregorian came to the New York City Public Library in 1981, he found in their collection numerous telephone directories for most of the world's major cities, dating back several decades. As newly appointed president of the United States' second largest public library, Gregorian was questioning the institution in order to understand its practices and identify places for change. Why did the library need all these phonebooks? Why did they collect materials which go so quickly out of date, take up so much space, and were never designed to be archived? What purpose could, say, the 1939 Warsaw telephone directory have in the 1980s, long after it was obsolete, and in a city far away from its intended users?

As it turns out, in this case, the 1939 Warsaw telephone directory was one of the collection's most frequently consulted books in the collection during the post-war era, when it made possible the identification of Holocaust victims after so many other traces of their lives had been eradicated. Here in New York was the only known list of all the Jews of Warsaw—their names, phone numbers, addresses—preserved in a the kind of cheaply printed annual that most libraries would have discarded decades before (if they even collected them in the first place). Gregorian extols this as a prime example of how seemingly outdated, worthless data can be transformed through the reframing of use—"it became a document, a legal document, a document of social history and economic history and national history. That is how through proper guidance and questioning, the 1939 Warsaw telephone directory became knowledge, because information has to be transformed, to be given a structure, in order that we are to control and understand it, and not be manipulated by it. Nothing is useless, because we don't know what is useless temporarily, what is useless absolutely¹⁹."

Notes:

11. Taffy Brodesser-Akner, "Marie Kondo, Tidying Up and the Ruthless War on Stuff," *The New York Times*, (New York, NY), July 6, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/10/magazine/marie-kondo-and-the-ruthless-war-on-stuff.html>

12. Dan Fox, "The Woman Who Recorded 400,000 Hours of Television News," *Frieze*, November 15, 2019, <http://frieze.com/article/woman-who-recorded-400000-hours-television-news>

13. Emily Greenhouse, "Treasures in the Wall," *The New Yorker*, (March 1, 2013), <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/treasures-in-the-wall>

14. Victoria Sung, "A Spiritual Belief in the Life of Things," *Walker Reader*, (September 16, 2019), <http://www.walkerart.org?magazine/curatorial-perspective-victoria-sung-on-theaster-gates-assembly-hall>

15. Jörg Heiser, Collier Schorr and Jan Verwoert, *Romantic Conceptualism* (Nuremberg: Kunsthalle Nürnberg and BAWAG Foundation, Vienna, 2007), 139-143.

16. Ibid. 143-148

17. John Yau, "Encounter With a Gazillion Teddy Bears," *Hyperallergic*, (August 7, 2016), <http://hyperallergic.com/316108/ydessa-hendeles-the-keeper-new-museum-the-teddy-bear-project/>

18. Harald Szeemann, "Museum of Obsessions", in *Harald Szeemann: Selected Writings*, eds. Doris Chon, Glenn Phillips, & Pietro Rigolo, trans. Jonathan Blower & Elizabeth Tucker (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2018), 91.

19. Bernard Levin, *A Walk Up Fifth Avenue* (London: Sceptre, 1989), 122-123.

Until modern times, most of the long and uncertain history of humankind is not recorded in majestic annals. Instead the chronicle has to be discerned from what our progenitors and the accidents that befell them have chanced to leave behind, sometimes in the ruins of great monuments or the fragmentary surviving writings of philosophers or poets, but far more often and effectively among the everyday middens and wastes: hoards of coins, seeds, implements and vessels; catalogs and registers of goods and transactions, whether scratched on stone or tabled in ink. What the antiquarian, the archivist, the scientist and the archaeologist have always shared in investigating these random accidents of the things human history has left behind is an eye impelled to scrutinize, not to observe or gather impressions but to categorize, classify, and examine—as Lucretius famously called it—the “nature of things” before them¹⁰.

In the days before books came into general use people learned their history the easy way, by anecdote. To meticulous scholars this wasn't the best way. Often dates got mixed up and facts became enlarged or obscured. But the essential element, the truth about people, was seldom lost; for the anecdote immortalized persons¹¹.

The other Middle Ages produced, at the end, the Renaissance, which took delight in archaeology; but actually the Middle Ages did not carry out any systematic preservation; rather it performed a heedless destruction and a disordered preservation: It lost essential manuscripts and saved others that were quite negligible; it scratched away marvelous poems to write riddles or prayers in their place, it falsified sacred texts, interpolating other passages and, in doing so, wrote “its own” books [...] The Middle Ages preserved in its way the heritage of the past but not through hibernation, rather through a constant retranslation and reuse; it was an immense work of bricolage, balanced among nostalgia, hope, and despair¹².

History is a clock that people use to tell their political and cultural time of day. It is also a compass that people use to find themselves on the map of human geography. History tells a people where they have been and what they have been, where they are, and what they are. Most important, history tells people where they still must go, what they still must be¹³.

At some point all “living” history turns into “official” history. As I write this, there are only eighteen people still alive who were born in the nineteenth century^{††}. The last living World War I veteran passed away a little over a year and a half ago. With 600 to 800 World War II veterans dying each day, it is estimated that we will have lost them all by 2036. This loss is important to reflect upon. There is a mostly invisible, ignored, incredibly fragile line in the sand that is constantly trailing us, the living. This line is the difference between existing and being forgotten. When we lose the last surviving link to a moment, we lose something irreplaceable: memories shared in the first person. We should never underestimate the value these particular memories hold¹⁵.

When someone passes on to the next world the mysterious forces at work can seem even more intangible. In that place where our stories and memories are suspended and are so very real and true. It makes it all that more important for us to keep our stories sincere, close to our hearts, and with respect. Keeping, retelling, sharing, and passing those stories on to the future generations is a responsibility to be exercised with great honour and care¹⁶.

I am a listener and have been listening to stories told around me for longer than I care to admit. I mean to honour my teachers by passing on the stories that they have passed on to me. We are told that stories are living beings, they grow, they develop, they remember, they change not in their essence, but sometimes in their dress. They are shared and shaped by the land and the culture and the teller, so that one story may be told widely and differently. Sometimes only a fragment is shared, showing just one face of a many faceted story, depending on its purpose¹⁷.

Notes:

10. Nicholas Olsberg, "The Art of Scrutiny", in *Place, History, and the Archive*, ed. Shoair Mavlian (Bologna: Damiani, 2018), 6.
11. Mary Hester S.S.N.D., *Canticle for the Harvest*, (New York: P.J. Kenedy, 1951), vii.
12. Umberto Eco, "The Return of the Middle Ages", in *Faith in Fakes*, trans. William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1998), 84.
13. John Henrik Clarke, source not known, (1996), quoted in Nicolaus Schafhausen, Mirjam Zadoff, Juliane Bischoff, "Tell me about yesterday tomorrow," NS-Dokumentationszentrum München, 2019, <http://yesterdaytomorrow.nsdoku.de/en/translate>
- †† Emma Morano (Nov. 29 1899-April 15, 2017) was the last living person verified to have been born in the 1800s. Nabi Tajima (Aug. 4, 1900-April 21, 2018) was the living person verified to have been born in the 19th century¹⁴.
14. "GRG World Supercentenarian Rankings List," Gerontology Research Group, April 1, 2020, <http://supercentenarian-research-foundation.org/TableE.aspx>
15. Dario Robleto, "If You Remember, I'll Remember," in *Disembodied Portraits: Portrait Miniatures and Their Contemporary Relatives*, ed. Cory Korkow (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 2013), <http://www.dariorobleto.com/works/304>
16. Tanya Harnett, "Recollections" in *The Writing on the Wall*, ed. Lindsey V. Sharman (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2017), 118.
17. Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 386.

3.

Selections from the *Deaccession Suite*:

1. (installation view)
2. *Keeping Our Small Boat Afloat*, inkjet, relief through stencil, hand-colouring, covers from meteorological records deaccessioned from the University of Wisconsin's Science Library, shelving, 2020
3. *Everything Experienced is an Answer*, inkjet, relief through stencil, CBC audition tape of Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance deaccessioned from the Sandra Faye Guberman Reading Room, Department of Drama, University of Alberta, shelving, 2020
4. *So Many Different Kinds of Sparrow*, inkjet, relief, nine volumes of an incomplete set of the complete works of Goethe, deaccessioned from the Department of Modern Language, University of Alberta, shelving
5. *Tell Them I Said No*, financial ledger book, 2019-2020 deaccessioned from the Department of Art and Design, University of Alberta, pinholes, shelving, 2020









It is often argued that any information rescued from a site about to be destroyed is better than none. If the documentary analogy is allowed to continue, one must imagine a newly-discovered manuscript available for a minute or two before destruction. Under good conditions a few sentences or even whole paragraphs might be rescued before the document vanishes forever. Some of these sentences might contain information which could revolutionize ideas; others may be highly ambiguous or positively misleading. A single paragraph, torn from its context, could lead to misconceptions on which a whole series of false assumptions might be based¹⁸.

Madame Arcati:

Time is the reef upon which all our frail mystic ships are wrecked.

Ruth Condomine:

You mean because it has never yet been proved that the past and the present and the future are not one and the same thing?

Madame Arcati:

I long ago came to the conclusion that nothing has ever been definitely proved about anything¹⁹.

"But then how can we trust ancient wisdom, whose traces you are always seeking, if it is handed down by lying books that have interpreted it with such license?"

"Books are not made to be believed, but to be subjected to inquiry. When we consider a book, we mustn't ask ourselves what it says but what it means, a precept that the commentators of the holy books had very clearly in mind. The unicorn, as these books speak of him, embodies a moral truth, or allegorical, or analogical, but one that remains true²⁰"

Oedipa wondered whether, at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold; which must always blaze out, destroying its own message irreversibly, leaving an overexposed blank when the ordinary world came back²¹.

All those things for which we have no words are lost. The mind—the culture— has two little tools, grammar and lexicon: a decorated sand bucket and a matching shovel. With these we bluster about the continents and do all the world's work. With these we try to save our very lives²².

What material reality has history outside language, outside our interpretive belief in essentially linguistic records (silence knows no history)? Where worms, fires of London, or totalitarian régimes obliterate such records, our consciousness of past being comes on a blank space. We have no total history, no history which could be defined as objectively real because it contained the literal sum of past life. To remember everything is a condition of madness. We remember culturally, as we do individually, by conventions of emphasis, foreshortening, and omission²³.

It is not surprising that the witness' gesture is also that of the poet, the auctor par excellence. Hölderlin's statement that 'what remains is what the poets found' (Was bleibt, stiften die Dichter) is not to be understood in the trivial sense that poets' works are things that last and

remain through time. Rather, it means that the poetic word is the one that is always situated in the position of a remnant and that can, therefore, bear witness. Poets – witnesses – found language as what remains, as what actually survives the possibility, or impossibility, of speaking²⁴.

Knowledge is not something you can own. It is fluid, it is a gift, it is collective, it has a past, a present, and a future. What I have come to know, through many great Indigenous peers, leaders, mentors, and elders, is that you have to work for your knowledge. Their knowledge also came from those before them, and it is our responsibility to hold on to our knowledges, as well as our responsibility to consider what to do with it²⁵.

*There are no new ideas. This is a well-worn theme, itself as old as mankind. 'Everything has been said, and we are come too late'; but La Bruyère did not stop at this flash of irony; he surrendered to the pleasure of thinking. This idea that everything has already been said is not depressing; quite the contrary, it is invigorating. The human paradox is that everything has been said but nothing has been understood.*²⁶

Notes:

18. P. Baker, *Techniques of Archaeological Excavation* (2nd edition) (New York: Universe Books, 1983), 172, quoted in Steven Dixon, *Fragments* (portfolio of etchings published by the artist, 1994) plate 7.

19. Noël Coward, *Blithe Spirit*, in *Three Plays by Noël Coward* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1965), 26.

20. Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt, 1983), 338.

21. Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Harper Collins, 1966), 95.

22. Annie Dillard, *Total Eclipse*, in *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1982), 24.

23. George Steiner, *After Babel* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 29.

24. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (London: Zone Books, 1999), 161.

25. Laura Grier, *The Power of Indigenous Print and The Power of Indigenous Refusal*, SNAPline 2019.2 (Summer 2019), 11.

26. Alain, 'Mnemosyne', in *Propos I*, trans. Margaret Curran (Paris: NRF, 1956), 437-438, quoted in *The Sublime Void*, eds. Bart Cassiman, Greet Ramael, Frank Vande Veire (Wetteren: Erasmus, 1993), 49.

4.

The images that compose the third room of my thesis exhibit each stand in for one individual who graduated from the University of Alberta's Department of Art and Design with an MVA/MFA/PhD degree between 1972 and 2020, based on the documentation present in the department's thesis collection. Formerly a closed-stack resource of the University's Rutherford Library, following their deaccession, the collection was placed in room 1-20A of the Fine Arts Building, a closet within a closet, which contained financial records and departmental Christmas decorations. Despite reports to the contrary, they have not been digitized.

The images are installed chronologically by date of thesis defense, or, when the date is not known, alphabetically following the last dated defense in the year of graduation. Using titles of works presented as part of each final exhibition, images were generated from Google's image search function, and chosen at random. In only two cases was the work being searched for found—Janet Cardiff* and Matthew Rangel.

For artists whose thesis documents are absent from the archive, solid-coloured panels are substituted, derived from Google's placeholder images displayed when internet connectivity interrupts a search—in this case for the name of the missing artist. Thesis documents may be lost due to theft or misplacement, cases where the individual did not present a final document to the archive, and in instances where a final presentation occurred but the individual did not receive a degree; when the reason for an absence of a thesis document is known, it is indicated on the panel. Names of missing artists are derived from departmental records. Beginning in the 2015-16 academic year, all new theses have been submitted electronically, and are likewise absent from the physical archive.

It's the thought that counts.



Above:

The Thought That Counts (installation view), 2019-2020
the documentation above shows years 1972-2015

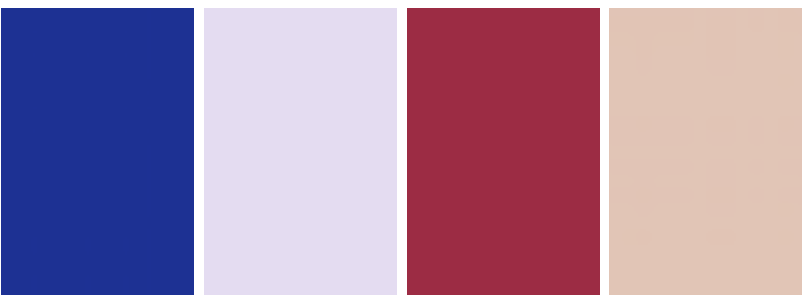
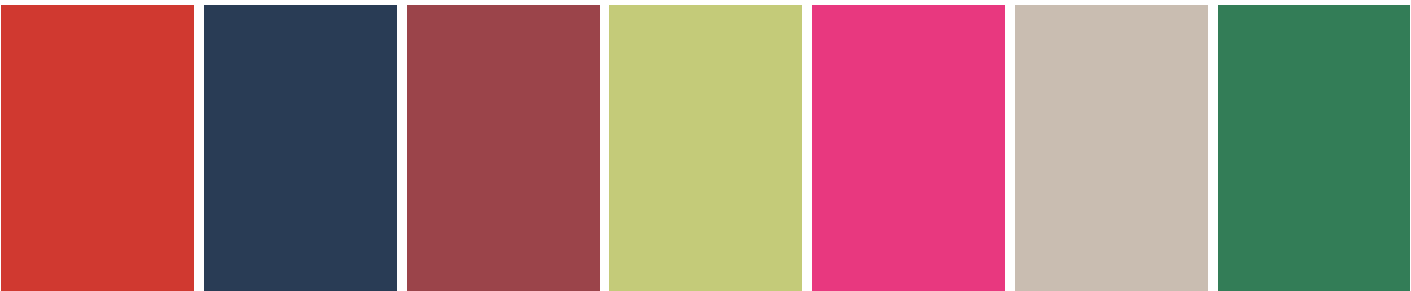
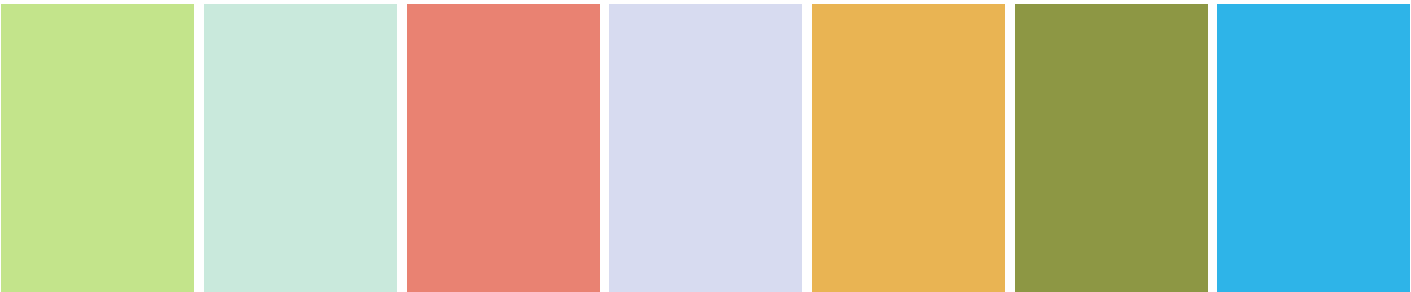
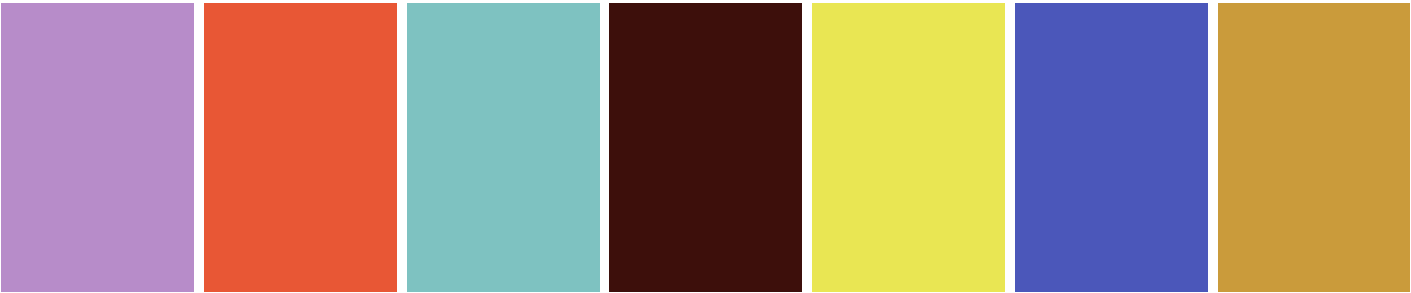
Following:

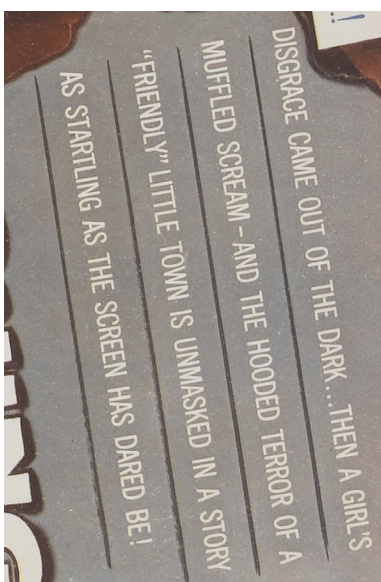
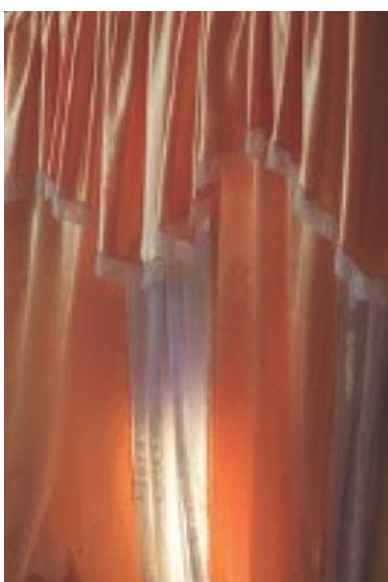
The Thought That Counts (schematic, detail: 2016-2020 (2016: 1-7, 2017: 8-14, 2018: 15-18, 2019: 16-19, 2020 (to Feb. 27): 20-22)

The Thought That Counts (details, clockwise from top left: 1. Ruth Beer - 'Alberta '71', 1971, 96 x 45 x 45, fibreglas (sic), turf; 2. Janet Cardiff - 'Marlowe backstage at the Bolshoi', 1983, 42" x 35", silkscreen; 3. Tanya Harnett - 'Storm Warning', 2001, 62 5/8" x 49", oil paint on photograph; 4. Sean Caulfield - 'Before the Journey: Interior', 1995, 8 x 10 in, etching and silkscreen) 2019-2020

Notes:

* An image of Janet Cardiff's piece, *Marlowe backstage at the Bolshoi*, did initially appear in search results, but was later found to have been pulled at the copyright holder's request. The image has been replaced for the sake of this project as well to reflect this change in access.





WHAT IS PROGRESS?

she queried in a clever if slightly mechanical tone. Bewildered by her precocious demeanor and the strangeness of the situation, I stammered something about growing wiser with age. Nodding, she directed me to continue walking, leading me up the ramp a few feet where we were intercepted by "David," a boy of about 17 years old. After Orly introduced us, she summarized my answer on "progress" to David, and left. Picking up where Orly left off, David gestured for me to move on as he engaged me in a discussion on the same topic. As I chatted and strolled with David, a woman of about 30 named "Alyssa" walked up to us, interrupting our conversation. She took over, guiding me to continue walking. Soon after, rounding a bend and finding myself midsentence in a conversation about reproductive rights, I realized that Alyssa had suddenly disappeared. Luckily, a kindly older gentleman by the name of "Smoky" was there to greet me, and accompanied me on the final leg of my tour, engaging me in a fascinating personal account of a long-lost brother he had recently discovered, but who had passed away, leaving Smoky with a range of conflicting emotions. "This work is entitled This Progress," he informed me at the top of the ramp, bidding me farewell.²⁷

*You were not there for The Beginning. You will not be there for The End... Your knowledge of what is going on can only be superficial and relative.*²⁸

Real events don't have endings, only the stories about them do.²⁹

*I exist at the centre of a big circle. My 'stories' are circular, the end and the beginning linked, referenced ... and I can cross over the circle and spin off into little circles rediscovering aspects I have missed or that remained undeveloped in previous works. Sometimes I cross that circle as a challenge to rediscover, to find out what I missed at first glance.*³⁰

A circle was drawn around these things
that no one ever crosses.

...

I have seen this tree in the forest
and shall remember it
as long as songs keep their roots.

...

Poems about the cosmos
could only be whispers.³¹

Notes:

27. Gillian Sneed, "Tino Sehgal Presents a Work in Progress" *Art in America* (February 3, 2010) <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/tino-sehgal-guggenheim-this-progress-57894/>

28. William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 184.

29. James Galvin, "The Story of the End of the Story," *Poetry Foundation*, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49948/the-story-of-the-end-of-the-story>

30. Joane Cardinal-Schubert, interviewed by Jennifer MacLeod, "Joane Cardinal Schubert, At the Centre of Her Circle," *Galleries West* (December 31, 2002), <http://www.gallerieswest.ca/magazine/stories/joane-cardinal-schubert%C3%9C-at-the-centre-of-her-circle/>

31. Edith Södergran, "Motley Observations," in *Edith Södergran: Complete Poems*, trans. David McDuff (Bloodaxe Books, 1984), 148.

5.

"The question is: what are the consequences of the digital, the remote, and the lack of the artist's hand in recent artistic production?²⁰"

This question was posed by Ruth Weisberg, the American printmaker and scholar, on the occasion of her acceptance of the Printmaker Emeritus Award at the Southern Graphics Council International conference in 2015. Using the chance to revisit her seminal text, *The Syntax of the Print*, Weisberg updates that text's structuralist theorization of print media with meditations on the possibilities of print in the wake of digital technology. Tracing the history of the graphic arts, she cites Walter Benjamin's expressed regret at the 'withering aura' of the reproduction as he formulates in "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". Rather than acquiescing to Benjamin's nearly century-old thesis, in the form of contemporary print she sees a chance for "a reconsideration and an affirmation of aura²¹" that changes the ways in which we consider our interactions with the reproduced image.

Weisberg is not alone in reclaiming the aura long since banished from the understood capabilities of the reproduced image. For instance, recent discourse on members of the Pictures Generation, in particular Sherrie Levine and Louise Lawler, have privileged the sense that their actions in rephotographing existing works (reproductions in Levine's case, arrangements of artworks in collections for Lawler) act to re-bestow the aura of the original from one work of art to another. More than coolly illustrating postmodern theories like the death of the author, their works place their role as artists in "radical relationship²²" to their production, while suspending their viewers in the oscillating space between seeing and looking²³. In this space opens a chance to create meanings bound up in the referent but entirely new.

It is exactly this desire to make meaning that Weisberg cites in the closing of her revisitation of *The Syntax of the Print* as the clearest proof that the mechanically, and now digitally, reproduced image is not to be viewed solely in dim relation to the auratic original: "The images chosen, the juxtapositions and evocations, are not just casual or uncaring choices—something is being owned, and something is being defined about being human. So should this involve the artist's hand directly? In the end, it is some manifestation of the printmakers skill, imagination, and obsession that leads to the intrigue and visual seduction, and, in a word, *the aura*, of the printed image.²⁴"

Notes:

20. Ruth Weisberg, "SGCI Printmaker Emeritus Award Speech," March 19, 2015, Knoxville Convention Center, 56:22, <http://vimeo.com/126532816>

21. Ibid.

22. Johanna Burton, "Sherrie Levine, Beside Herself," in *Sherrie Levine: Mayhem*, ed. Johanna Burton & Elisabeth Sussman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012) 19.

23. Hal Foster, "Exterminating Angel," in *Louise Lawler: Adjusted* (Munich: Prestel, 2013), 111.

24. Ruth Weisberg, "SGCI Printmaker Emeritus Award Speech," March 19, 2015, Knoxville Convention Center, 56:22, <http://vimeo.com/126532816>

*Time is, of course, doing its steady work on every object ever made. This complex relationship between the maker, an emotionally invested object, and the growing distance between them is not new, only rediscovered each generation, whether by an artist, a mourner, a mother, or a soldier. This doesn't make the sting any less startling. There is a vast ocean of objects like this in the world. They are carriers of an intimacy that once mattered, but they are now unanchored from their context and creators. Like tear stains on ocean waves, the individual meaning is lost to the larger tide of unintentional disregard. Being aware of this process has altered my relationships with objects in a way I could not have predicted. This realization of the untenable level of intensity I thought I could maintain with each and every object I've made has only reinforced my faith in the power of objects to expand our capabilities of empathy and stretch our notions of responsibility through time.*³²

What guides poetic thinking is the conviction that although the living is the subject to the ruin of time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things "suffer sea-change" and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living...³³

"It's the historian's job to wake the dead, to bring them back to life." I've thought about that a lot. It's the historian's job to wake the dead.

But we can't make them stay.

*I think that's partly the point. In coming to understand our dead, we also find a way to lay them to rest. This is what we do: for everyone, but also for ourselves.*³⁴

Notes:

32. Dario Robleto, "If You Remember, I'll Remember," in *Disembodied Portraits: Portrait Miniatures and Their Contemporary Relatives*, ed. Cory Korkow (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 2013), <http://www.dariorobleto.com/works/304>

33. Hannah Arendt, introduction to *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1955) lxiii.

34. Jacqui Shine, "How to Wake the Dead," *The Toast* (May 25, 2016), <http://www.the-toast.net/2016/05/25/how-to-wake-the-dead-a-commencement-address/>



I remember arriving in an Italian village by train after midnight and walking past a cemetery where candles burned at every grave, with no one around. Or I think I remember it [...] memory is a liar. It's a heap of dog-eared, smudged incessantly revised fictions [...] meaning is a scrap among other scraps though stickier. Meaning is so much better than nothing, in that it defines 'nothing' as everything that meaning is not. Meaning prevents nothing from being only nothing.³⁵

*Interpretation bears love and continues to nourish it. Love then emerges from questions, from a gap between what one thinks one knows and a singularity from which we cannot divert our attention. In this sense, when interpretation and love are comingled, interpretation cannot have as its goal the total elucidation of an object. The point is not the end, as it were, but the task.*³⁶

This is a story inside history. Opinions differ on this point, but the error lies in believing that the problem can be resolved merely through special knowledge of perspicacity—that it is a mystery to be solved ... A true mystery is unfathomable and nothing is hidden inside it. There is nothing to explain [...] Do not look for a way out. You will not be able to find it... there is no way out.³⁷

*Where a chain of events appears before us, [the angel of history] sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm.*³⁸

I mean it's probably too late for all this, anyway... You know how, like in cartoons, when the building gets hit by the wrecking ball, right before the building falls down, there's always this moment where it's perfectly still right before it collapses? We're in that moment. The wrecking ball has already hit all of this, and this is just the moment before it all falls down... That's just my gut feeling... I thought this was great. All of this. You know, the grass. The people in the houses. The cars and the TV and the music. I loved this place.³⁹

*In the desert are preserved traces of an ancient road along which Marco Polo passed six centuries before I did: its markers are piles of stones [...] When the great explorer was dying, his friends gathered by his bedside and implored him to reject what in his book had seemed incredible to them—to water down its miracles by means of judicious deletions; but he responded that he had not recounted even half of what he had in fact seen.*⁴⁰

Like our bodies' imprint
Not a sign will remain that we were in this place.
The world closes behind us,
The sand straightens itself.⁴¹

Someone will remember us,
I say,
even in another time⁴²

Notes:

35. Peter Schjeldahl, "The Art of Dying," *The New Yorker* (December 23, 2019), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/12/23/the-art-of-dying>
36. Nathan Snaza, *Animate Literacies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019) 25.
37. Orson Welles, *The Trial: A Film by Orson Welles* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970) 17.
38. Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1955) 257-258.
39. *The Future*, directed by Miranda July (2011; Toronto: Mongrel Media) <https://ualberta.kanopy.com/video/future-0>
40. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift*, (New York: Random House, 1963), quoted in Peter Sis, *Tibet: Through the Red Box*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998) 55.
41. Yehuda Amichai, "Like Our Bodies' Imprint," trans. Assia Gutmann, Poetry Foundation, 2015, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/58627/like-our-bodies-imprint>
42. Sappho, Fragment 147, *If Not Winter*, trans. Anne Carson, (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2009) 299.

7.

The image is from an amateur production of Noël Coward's *Blithe Spirit*, staged in 1972. The 35mm Kodachrome slide the image is scanned from was thrown away, along with others, by a box office worker at the theatre several decades later.

Looking for the books in this prop-library is admittedly a fool's errand. They were assembled, one would think, based on their looks; that from 50 feet, their gilded spines would help set the scene of a well-to-do author's home of about 30 years prior and an ocean apart, even if, on closer inspection, they proved thematically disjointed and anachronistic to their setting. However, I feel some need to try—an attempt to make sense of this scene saved from the trash, to make it mean *something* when its original purpose has been deemed unnecessary.

In this act of exegesis, performed in realtime over the duration of the exhibit, I found six books that passed muster as believable stand-ins for those in the photograph. Many others were close, but did not hold up on closer inspection. While initially setting out to fill in the gaps of knowledge suggested by the gray voids framed around the room, I was ultimately relieved, in a way, to find that I had no desire to fix the results of the investigation onto the wall. It's not that no conclusions were reached—I had fascinating conversations about many of the books with gallery visitors, and each volume proved to have unexpected insights into how history is told and passed on. It's more so that, while these results were interesting, the absence that presupposed the search became more apparent and powerful the more I attempted to fill it.

It proved that things can become irretrievably lost, which underscores the importance to keeping what does survive safe, and retold with care and respect. I think of journalist Amanda Petrusich, who describes her failure to find a rare 78rpm record while on the hunt with collector and audio archivist Chris King. "The whole world was the goddamn haystack. What I had learned was how intoxicating—how overwhelming and how crushing—the search could be, even (or especially) when it didn't yield any results [...] the act of looking provided an instant remedy to the oversaturation of contemporary life. I could have it all whenever I wanted, but I couldn't have this, or at least not right away, and I savored every moment of that ache.²⁵" The care-filled labour of finding and sourcing information, the testing and expanding data into facts, the re-winding of the concept of truth—expanding its definitions at times, protecting its borders at others—is not a task that can be completed²⁶.

"Blasted landscapes are what we have," says Anna Tsing, anthropologist and cultural theorist, in her essay on the subject in *The Multispecies Salon*. She works to describe the habitats that humans have disturbed through acts of war, resource extraction, and in misguided attempts at rehabilitation to suit anthropocentric needs and desires. "It is no longer possible to offer an easy dichotomy between

pristine and damaged landscapes [...] Which disturbance regimes are we willing to live with? Given the realities of disturbances we do not like, how shall we live?²⁷” Tsing’s conceptualization of these disturbance regimes, situated in a multispecies ethics, open an inquiry in to how we hold ourselves accountable to and responsible for the ecological systems we inhabit. Arguing that precarity characterizes the state of our global ecosystems, she turns to Matsutake mushrooms as a model of collaborative survival. Donna Haraway, considering the ‘salvage accumulation’ and ‘patchy capitalism’ Tsing describes, states of our time and our responsibility: “these are the times we must think; these are the times of urgencies that need stories [...] this is not a longing for salvation or some other sort of optimistic politics; neither is it a cynical quietism in the face of the depth of the trouble. Rather, Tsing proposes a commitment to living and dying with response-ability in unexpected company. Such living and dying have the best chance of cultivating conditions for ongoingness.”²⁸

Cultivating conditions for ongoingness...

If the blasted landscapes of nature are read parallel to, and indeed intimately bound up in a broader ecology of, the ‘blasted’ state of our repositories of knowledge, which disturbances to these institutions will we continue to allow, and how will we live with them?

I turn to the acts of maintenance and micropolitical care I have attempted over the last three years in the site of the library; actions equally indebted to archival artists and relational aesthetics, librarians and gardeners. From each of these sources I see some version of Haraway’s call to ‘stay with the trouble;’ to dwell with, to learn, to be unsettled by—and to pointedly refuse retreat from—the complexities of the world.

This suggests, once more then, an ecological symmetry: the lesson learned by Voltaire’s *Candide*, who, having travelled widely and grown disillusioned with the endless disorder and chaos of the world, chooses to contribute his practical skills to doing what he can in the small part he can play. We must tend our gardens.

“I was thinking of that extraordinary little work called the Pirkei Avot in Hebrew [...] take the single statement that means the most to me, by Rabbi Tarphon: ‘You are not required to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.’”

—Harold Bloom, *CBC Sunday Edition*²⁹

“I add my own love to the history of people who have loved beautiful things, and looked out for them, and pulled them from the fire, and sought them when they were lost, and tried to preserve them and save them while passing them along literally from hand to hand, singing out brilliantly from the wreck of time to the next generation of lovers, and the next.”

—Donna Tartt, *The Goldfinch*³⁰

Notes:

25. Amanda Petrusich, *Do Not Sell at Any Price: The Wild, Obsessive Hunt for the World’s Rarest 78rpm Records* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 112.

26. I here look to the words of Natalie Loveless on the works of Lyndal Osborne: Loveless, “Mutation and Care in the Anthropocene,” in *Lyndal Osborne: Mutation of the Commons* (Calgary: University of Calgary, 2018), 19.

27. Anna Tsing, “Blasted Landscapes (and the Gentle Arts of Mushroom Picking),” in *The Multispecies Salon* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 92.

28. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 37-38.

29. Harold Bloom, interviewed by Michael Enright. Recorded May 2005, repeated October 18, 2019. *CBC Sunday Edition*. CBC, <http://www.cbc.ca/amp/1.5325834>

30. Donna Tartt, *The Goldfinch* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2013), 771.

Works Cited

Works cited in black are referenced in the central text of the thesis.

Works cited in purple are quoted in the running marginalia.

Works cited in gray are not textually referenced in either of the above, but play a part in my conceptualization of the artworks that form the visual elements of the thesis.

Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. London: Zone Books, 1999.

Alain. "Mnemosyne." In *Propos I*. Trans. Margaret Curran. Paris: NRF, 1956. Quoted in *The Sublime Void*. Eds. Bart Cassiman, Greet Ramael, Frank Vande Veire. Wetteren: Erasmus, 1993.

Amichai, Yehuda. "Like Our Bodies' Imprint." Trans. Assia Gutmann. *Poetry Foundation*. 2015. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/58627/like-our-bodies-imprint>

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Below:

The Thought That Counts (post-show packing)



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