WHY BOTHER HANGING ON TO OLD SHIT

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School
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for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

by

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Walter Blaine Early, IV
For Blaine, Suanne, Robert, and Gregory who have to negotiate similar questions in their own varied ways.
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I will therefore ask those of my readers who feel no particular interest in me to pardon me if I undertake to answer some of these questions in this book. In most books, the I, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference... I should not talk so much about myself if there were any body [sic] else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience.¹

My youth was spent engulfed by the trappings of lived history.

I grew up in a small town that members of my paternal family had lived in and around for generations. My brothers and I made up the fifth generation of our family to live in the house in which we grew up. It was originally a small house that was greatly added onto after the original purchase to make room for the numerous offspring of the first family. Ownership of this house eventually trickled down to my grandmother. My grandfather’s side of the family lived on a farm just outside of town.

When my grandparents passed, everything went to my father: an only child. This meant he had two properties and generations worth of stuff to store, much of it deemed too valuable (either sentimentally or monetarily) to get rid of. So the bulk of these items got consolidated into one structure housing a young family.

¹ Thoreau, Henry David, Walden, or Life in the Woods (Secaucus: Castle Books, 2007), 113.
Others’ furniture, images, toys, books, and all the assorted items that one collects over the course of a lifetime surrounded me. Just multiplied by 15 or so. Even after considerable culling of the least-desirables this amounts to quite a bit of stuff.

Living in this condition one was assured that everything around was someone else’s and should be respected as such. Even many of the toys and books received had a story and often already came with a name scrawled on the underside. Don’t get me wrong; this was not a white gloves sort of upbringing. The objects left behind were put to full use. Moreover, it was stressed as a connection to and an understanding of those people that came before and shared a name and a location.²

I do not offer this autobiographical anecdote as justification for a way of making art, rather as insight into the foundations of an approach.³ My inclination has always been toward those objects, ideals, practices, etc. that transcend my generation.

Culturally, I feel this is a common sentiment proven by society’s interest in subjects including, among other things: vintage clothes, resurgences in old musical stylings, and the burgeoning amount of television programs related to the collecting and selling of antique objects. Many current cultural signifiers are coalescing around a nod to the past. In no way is this dip into history a new trend. New styles and forms have to come from somewhere and it is understood that fashions generally follow circular paths.

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² Indeed even my name is not my own, as evidenced by the suffix attached to it on any number of official documents.

³ It should be noted that this document is supplementary to a body of work produced during my time at the University of Notre Dame.
This jaunt through history is especially intriguing given the rapid rise in the importance of technology to our lives. As the ease of access and exchange of information both old and new increases, why do we feel it important to use tangible objects as a means to keep a finger in the long ago?
RUMINATIONS ON RUINATION

A traditional monument, as the origin of the word indicates, is an object which is supposed to remind us of something important. That is to say it exists to put people in mind of some obligation that they have incurred: a great public figure, a great public event, a great public declaration which the group had pledged itself to honor.  

In an essay written at the turn of the last century, Alois Riegl outlines and defines reasons people are attracted to monuments. He categorizes monuments into two types: intentional and unintentional; and then distinguishes these by four values: historical, age, use, and art (or aesthetic).

Historical value comes from objects not only being important in themselves, but also having some historical association with an event in human history. These objects serve as a tangible connection to that event. “Everything that has been and is no longer we call historical, in accordance with the modern notion that what has been can never be again.”

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5 Originally “Der moderne Denkmalkultus: Sein Wesen und seine Entstehung” (1903)

6 Though his definition of “monument” is flexible and can be interpreted as an umbrella term for any object resulting from human activity.

7 Emphasis original

A number of years ago the Smithsonian National Museum of American History acquired two armchairs used on the set of “All in the Family,” a television program that ran from 1971-1979. These were not particularly significant chairs in their design or materials, just in the fact they featured prominently as part of this popular series. The importance of the event, the role the object played, and the physical condition of the object in the present moment are all factors in assessing historical value.

Age value arises simply from an object being old. While this is similar to historical value, one must overlook the associations with history and focus solely on the evidence of the passage of time and the object’s survival. These monuments spark in the observer simultaneous notions of mortality and immortality; that the persons responsible for their making no longer exist but a remnant (and therefore proof) of their existence remains. Age value requires some trace of human intervention with the material to be able to distinguish it from natural processes.

The oldest pair of Levi’s jeans sold in 1997 for $25,000.00. These dirty, torn, almost century-old jeans had been found buried in the mud in a coal mine. Their monetary value is not related to their unknown owner or his profession. Instead, it is

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10 The props department purchased them for $8 at Goodwill. [Ibid.]

the fact that they had survived so long when they were originally considered to be cheap work trousers. They were not designed to be cared for and kept for generations, yet are one of a handful of pairs that still exist from their time period.

Use value refers to people actually using the monument for utilitarian purposes and the benefits that are gained from the interaction between person and object. Use value quickly diminishes as the monument falls into disrepair. This runs counter to age value as the moment natural processes begin to invade, use value is threatened.

Art value is restricted to intentional monuments. Anything designed and executed as a monument was done so conforming to the fashions of the time. Therefore this category falls loosely under historic value.

Riegl argues that age value would prove to be the most important due to the number of monuments that existed, the fact that monuments would continue to be built, and to societal shifts at the time of writing toward a humanist approach. “Age value has one advantage over all other ideal values of the work of art: it claims to address everyone, to be valid for everyone without exception.”¹²

This statement may have held true had it not been for technological advances in the intervening years up to the present. Professionals and amateurs alike now effortlessly document what has been classified a monument in a variety of media. This documentation is likewise easily accessed through diverse means. We can extensively record the current condition of these monuments.

Assuming this information remains readily available to all, we will not only be able to view the past, but because of extensive documentation, we may not feel inclined to preserve physical examples. The recording of present or past examples frees us to make alterations or replacements without the fear of erasing a previous incarnation.

Fast-forward to the turn of this century and, in a revamped Rieglian analysis of monuments, architectural historian Mario Carpo argues use is currently the most important value. He notes a prolific shift from the solely physical monument where the primary interaction is visual to the functional monument. Instead of statues or obelisks, great persons are remembered by the placement of their name on the wing of a building or the dedication of a street. Labeled libraries, museums, airports, etc. serve as discrete reminders of our cultural heroes.

Some of this shift to the functional is attributed to the ease of distributing written and photographic documentation via technological means: causing monuments to become primarily about viewer involvement. People are able to have their memories triggered from a distance without ever having to travel to the site. Carpo prophesizes that monuments will soon “likely be played by music, voices, words, and all that can be digitally recorded, transmitted, and reenacted.”\(^\text{13}\)

As if in a nearly simultaneous affirmation of Carpo’s prediction, Erika Doss recently wrote about the abundance and importance of temporary monuments in contemporary mourning. While the temporary monument has been in practice for

some time (think road side memorials and makeshift crosses) as a form of more private mourning, these new public monuments are not just established by one person or group. Today’s temporary monuments are constructed of a conglomeration of disparate objects brought to a site by numerous people.

These monuments are composed of both personal and impersonal objects, often with a physical or suggested association with the victim(s). Toys, photographs, flowers, and other ephemera are heaped or strewn at or near the site of trauma. If the event has been well publicized, tourists might arrive to contribute to the existing memorial or empathizers might start one of there own: geographically far removed from the event. Doss proposes that the increasing popularity of makeshift monuments “suggest that traditional forms of mourning no longer meet the needs of today’s publics and prompt questions about what death, grief, and memory mean in the new millennium.”¹⁴

Given our hyper-mediated convergence culture,¹⁵ it is understandable that the adequacy of “traditional forms of mourning” is being called into question. In a culture littered with instant reporting and access to news, one area’s tragedy quickly becomes the nation’s, or the world’s. Professional and personal lives are punctuated with up-to-the-minute-reports or news flashes rolling across or popping up on the nearest screens.

Additionally, viewers are encouraged to contribute to the broadcast: either adding to or reflecting on. Not only subject to a barrage of current events, we are asked to participate in some manner. Smart phones, ease of editing digital information, and

¹⁴ Doss, Erika, “Grief” in Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2010), 64.

¹⁵ Henry Jenkins’s term from Convergence Culture (2006).
massive amounts of memory in a package the size of one’s little finger allow us to not only keep tabs on the world but we also let others know our goings-on.

This shift to democratic memorialization is evidenced by the uproar and continued controversy over how best to commemorate September 11, 2001. The event was broadcast around the world in real time. A nation, at the very least, tuned in to watch the events and the aftermath unfold. Mass and detailed exposure ensured even those that had never visited New York now had a personal stake in the place.

It is understandable that every witness wanted his or her personal voice heard. Each needed to come to terms with their grief in their own way. In a culture filled with opportunities and encouragement for self-expression, it is reasonable that a single structure is incapable of encapsulating the emotions of all.

After prolonged debate, a set plan is now in place for a sprawling reminder of the events occurring on and following September 11. However, to supplement the physical structure, on the website of the memorial there are numerous opportunities to contribute personal sentiments.\(^{16}\)

Participatory driven culture ingrains current events in our person. Present or not, the exposure and coverage ensure we are affected. The attachment this breeds can understandably make a small happening into a large affair resulting in appropriate public response. This means all who are affected and therefore connected will feel the necessity to be involved in a healing process.

They began to phone everyone they knew in New York. Their first dinner guest was Ray Johnson, the patriarch of mail art. He and Christo had corresponded but never met. Johnson recalled, “I first saw Christo’s work at the 1962 Sidney Janis show, ‘New Realists.’ I saw a burlap package on the floor that I wanted to buy. It cost twenty-nine dollars. I felt it and there were bottles inside. Later, I got Christo’s Paris address from Arman or Daniel Spoerri and wrote.” Johnson’s letter stated that he had little money but would like to have a piece. Eventually, a package arrived in the mail. Johnson opened it, only to find a Harry Shunk photograph of the unopened package, along with a letter from Christo saying that since the artwork had been destroyed, he could keep the picture as a souvenir. It also said that he and Jeanne-Claude were coming to New York and would like to meet him. “They invited me to dinner in their Chelsea room. I brought a gift of four forks that I had wrapped in a package with a hand-lettered label that said FEAR FOUR FORKS. They didn’t open the package. She made sausages. I don’t know how we ate them, maybe with our fingers. They had been eating barbequed chicken with scissors, which were the only cooking implements in their room.”

Throughout his career, Christo has wrapped objects ranging from small tin cans to architectural structures. While it is fitting that he would wrap the gift package, there is a larger issue involving why he would not inform Johnson of the value of the unopened package itself. Perhaps it was a good-natured joke. The wrapping was obviously considered very important, evidenced by the inclusion of the photograph.

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18 Johnson should’ve known better.
The importance of wrapping to the artist is also underscored by the refusal to unwrap the gift of utensils. Why would one be so preoccupied with the wrapping of a package?

Wrapping hides the interior: the good stuff, the gift-to-be-received. And we all love gifts. While any old box would accomplish this task, Christo chooses to emphasize the covering, letting the subject dictate the form. Through this we are occasionally able to grasp formal clues as to what is being concealed. But the importance lies in the obscurity. It is the game of trying to decipher what lies underneath that lends excitement and intrigue.

True, there are times this obscurity can be used to deceive. If, for instance, Christo’s wrapped buildings were in fact haphazard facsimiles of what they implied. Or in the instance of a box containing only a small photograph.

When confronted with an unopened container we immediately compare its volume to other known entities in an attempt to solve the puzzle. Imagine a child shaking a birthday (or substitute any other occasion) present or tossing out guesses before opening. The guessing game is as important to the giver as it is to the receiver. And both sides equally enjoy it. One encourages the guessing knowing it to be wrong, and the other runs through any and all possibilities.

The unknown is attractive. The unknown is seductive.

When presented as a gift, the decision to discover what is concealed falls completely to the receiver. He or she may choose when and where, if at all, to remove the covering. When the wrapping becomes an art object it makes the moment of release, of opening, indefinite. Classification as art prolongs the sense of wonder and
suspense of what is concealed. We typically preserve art objects and are conditioned not to interfere with them.

The wrapped object has an almost limitless possible identity. Removing the wrapping removes all doubt and immediately locates the object as a known thing. When discussing painting, i.e. making any mark on a canvas, artist Piero Manzoni comments, “A surface with limitless possibilities has been reduced to a sort of receptacle in which inauthentic colours [sic], artificial expressions, press against each other. Why not empty the receptacle, liberate this surface? Why not try to make the limitless sense of total space... appear instead?”

Similarly, when defending his “Specific Objects,” Donald Judd wrote about the importance of the shape of the canvas on painting. The rectangle becomes the dominant form, dictating and overwhelming whatever marks may be made within its confines. Other artists at the time agreed and Minimalism emerged, emphasizing autonomous forms defining large volumes in a space. Like in Christo’s wrapping, there was a shift of focus from what was being contained to the container itself. Opening the interpretation of what filled that negative space to endless possibilities.

Simple, stark forms characteristic of Minimalism make it a popular style for representing public memory. The simplicity of the forms can be understood as a

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metaphoric blank canvas on and in which to project anything. A minimal cube or obelisk can be interpreted as a container to be filled or a vault in which to keep things safe.

It has not been uncommon in the past to observe the occasional flourish added to minimally styled memorials on certain occasions. However, contemporary mourners are no longer content with a metaphoric receptacle and are literally filling, and overflowing, the container. What began as flowers or trinkets placed on or near a headstone around an anniversary or wreaths and flags on war memorials near Veteran’s Day has snowballed into sprawling accumulations of seemingly unrelated parts, or fragments.

Like the wrapped box, fragments imply the presence of an absent other. While the box gives an indication of what it might contain simply by volume, fragments automatically imply a larger whole.

James Cuno, writing about the allure of the ceramic shard, remarks, “Fragments offer a pleasure that can’t typically be had from the whole vase or cup: you can hold them in your hands, feel their weight and surfaces, turn them over and over, and bring them to your eye for close examination. (Fragments) are a means of considering the relationship of the part to the whole...The beauty of a fragment is that it is at once part of something else, something larger, and is complete in itself, even in its partial form.”

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We can easily transfer this thinking for fragments to mourning. Personal property of the deceased becomes receptacles for memory or spirit. Because they were part of a life, these belongings serve as reminders of their owner.

To mark the passing of their elders, the Giryama of Kenya erect vigango\textsuperscript{22}, small wooden stylized figures, for the elders’ spirits to inhabit. These statues provide a host “body” as the spirits negotiate the space between life and afterlife. Vigango are clothed and given libations of beer and blood, but are not otherwise preserved or taken care of. Like the mortal bodies they represent, they have a life cycle. Commonly sited removed from the community centers, the wooden figures are left to the elements with the thought that, after they deteriorate, the spirit has successfully moved on.

Though this tradition is absent in our culture, we cling to the possessions of the deceased with a similar mindset: that these objects serve as a continuing bond between the living and the dead. Favorite objects are understandably treasured. However, the more commonplace objects suddenly take on new meaning as symbols of the deceased, typically tied to recollections of interpersonal interactions.

Walter Benjamin explains that, “inheritance is the soundest way of acquiring a collection. For a collector's attitude toward his possessions stems from an owner's feeling of responsibility toward his property. Thus it is, in the highest sense, the attitude

of an heir, and the most distinguished trait of a collection will always be its transmissibility.”

These objects, along with surrogates from those unwilling to give up the original thing, and traditional mourning paraphernalia make up the menagerie that is temporary monuments. It is not uncommon to see photographs, flowers, handwritten notes, clothing, and official signage all converging on the same small patch of grass.

Even though we have the ability to build a seemingly endless and infinitely more accessible virtual monument, we are not yet entirely comfortable with intangible methods of mourning. After the loss of a body we still feel the need to compensate with physical objects. The corporeal absence needs to be occupied.

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AIN’T NOTHING SPECIAL

Michael Hall taught sculpture at Cranbrook Academy of Art from 1970 to 1990 and “is a widely published author, a legendary educator and lecturer, and a noted connoisseur of folk and regional art.” Serving as keynote speaker at the MidSouth Sculpture Alliance’s 2007 meeting he chose to relay a series of art-related stories rather than discuss his personal work.

One of these stories centered around Peter Voulkos and Louise Bourgeois sitting on a panel at some art-related event. An audience member inquired as to what it was like to make art.

Bourgeois answered first. She gushed about the similarities between art making and childbirth. How satisfying it was to bring something into the world. And after the something came in to existence, to mold and see how it changed over time. The art object eventually took on a personality all its own. In her New York Times obituary Bourgeois’ work was described as sharing “a set of repeated themes centered on the human body and its need for nurture and protection in a frightening world.”

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25 Author’s attendance

understandable that an artist working from this thematic grounding would consider the objects made to be stand-ins for the body and guard them as such.

When it came time for Voulkos to respond he grunted and then rasped, “It’s like taking a shit.”  Volkos’ view: An artist consumes and gets full of ideas, and then when there’s no more room, this Thing is produced. The object is somehow derived of all that was in the artist, but is unable to fully embody those ideas. And then, what do people say when they come to your studio? “Hey man, I like your shit.”

Voulkos’ preoccupation with the scatological is further explored in a tale relayed by sculptor John Bisbee.27

While at an informal gathering at Voulkos’ California studio the guests gradually became aware of their host’s absence. His spouse and all others were accounted for but he had disappeared. As the conversation ebbed and flowed over the next while the loss was noted but forgotten. Eventually the man arrived cradling something in a white cloth much like a newborn babe. The time away had been spent on the throne and he had fished the excrement from the bowl. So long in coming and so excited was he to pass it, that it had to be presented to all.

Both artists acknowledge the fact that once made, the work exists independently from the maker: constantly changing, shifting, evolving. The concepts of creation differ in the relationship between maker and product. One concept approaching nurturing, the other, after the initial excitement in creation, almost disregard. In the former, the product is something that requires continued interaction. As if this fresh inert object

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27 Personal interview with the author
held some knowledge that could be made available to the maker. In the latter, the product is simply a result and one that would be very difficult to trace back to its origins. Similar to having to dissect and analyze an owl pellet to figure out what the owl ate rather than knowing at first glance.

In his use of unaltered found objects, Marcel Duchamp exemplifies an extreme example of this separation from the work. For the man (in)famous for submitting a purchased urinal as artwork, time and the evolution of a work of art were important elements. At first glance, Duchamp’s objects were seemingly procured from a department store and tossed on a pedestal as a potential tongue-in-cheek challenge to the viewer to discover some deeper meaning. His “readymade” sculptures (snow shovel, urinal, bicycle wheel, etc.) exhibit a sense of endless time discovered by the act of looking.

We expect certain things from art objects. At the very least we expect an aesthetic experience. Duchamp’s readymades deny the usual satisfaction of looking. Because they are objects we easily recognize in unspectacular juxtapositions, there’s nothing to “get” or discover. No reward for spending time with the object. Our mind tries to make the object something more than what it is but is unable, so we must go back to the beginning and try a different approach.28 This cycle continues indefinitely.

The cyclical timelessness encapsulated by everyday objects makes them ideal candidates for memorials. These more vernacular objects, which operate as a substitute

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connection to a specific person or place, are rapidly replacing the notions of permanence previously represented by the materials used to construct monuments; namely stone.

In 2007 the New Museum in New York hosted an exhibition attempting to address the emergence of haphazard, assemblage-based contemporary sculpture. In their catalogue essays, the curators are quick to recognize the cultural shifts outlined earlier in this document: the mass communication, the sprouting of temporary memorials, and the amount of material stuff available to mourners. Say the curators: “(It) should come as no surprise that this first decade of the twenty-first century produced a sculpture of fragments, a debased, precarious trembling form we have called unmonumental.”

Massimiliano Gioni is probably the most vocal about his group of artists blazing a new trail. He outlines different movements in art and cleverly inserts the contemporary work into a logical timeline continuing previous art historical agendas while upsetting traditional monument values. He is quick to note this turn is not generational or a defined movement. Instead it is attributed to timing: that this work is specifically of the cultural attitude of the beginning of this century.

What is not addressed is how these new sculptures might actually be mistaken as “new” monuments, rather than as objects lacking monumental values.

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The rambling sculptures represented in this and subsequent exhibitions owe a debt to a culture inundated with stuff. “Everything exists simultaneously in an unending tumble cycle.” Almost designed to shortly fall to pieces, the sculptures stress fragility; alluding to the precarious nature of the mass-produced, easily discarded objects our culture consumes. The artists employ a wide variety of objects and materials considered impermanent and possibly non-archival. Every idea, process, and material has become potential fodder for sculpture. “[A] large part of the art of making sculpture lies with the mechanism of filtering, selecting and assembling. Think of the do-it-yourselfer in a basement with a glue gun. Think of a DJ. Think of a search engine... [a] three-dimensional MySpace page.”

The artists accept this hodgepodge spirit and, rather than focus on individual contributions to something like a temporary memorial/monument, are singly trying to emulate a community engagement. However, they produce mostly freestanding pieces. The work does not take on the overwhelming, ungainly appearance of a temporary monument. Instead the works are composed and compact objects with glimpses of past sculptural language. The difference lies in the material. The focus is on the at-hand objects that retain their sense of self, while simultaneously operating as a whole.

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BRINGIN’ IT ALL HOME

My work centers on the role objects play in our day-to-day lives; specifically how we assign value to those objects. What to keep, how long to keep it, how to live with it. Why do we keep things at all? Often the objects we choose to preserve are mere pieces of some larger physical or emotional entity serving as a link to the past. These pieces are an echo of otherwise intangible places or people.

These ideas manifest in forms that make reference to pieces of an unknown whole. I undermine traditional notions of monumentality by employing disposable, less-than-heirloom materials. Ephemeral materials switch the focus from permanent reminders for the future to mementos of a bygone existence. Referencing fragments I raise questions about the importance of their origins and why one tries to save, collect, or preserve what remains.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX:

FIGURES

The following pages contain examples of work following conceptual criteria outlined in this document and created during my three years at the University of Notre Dame.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{32} All images by the author
The Gate Hangs Well; steel; 70 x 54 x 23 inches; 2009; sited at the Ironbridge Open Air Museum of Steel Sculpture, Coalbrookdale, England
The Elephant’s Head; steel; 29 x 18 x 8 inches; 2009; sited at the Ironbridge Open Air Museum of Steel Sculpture, Coalbrookdale, England
untitled (bottom bracket); dirt and grease on cotton; 24 x 15 inches; 2010
untitled (green thing); dirt on cotton; 30 x 30 inches; 2010
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minster; found and painted wood; installation view; 2010
sherid 2; styrofoam; 24 x 46 x 21 inches; 2011
sherid 3; painted MDF; 15 x 23 x 10 inches; 2011
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