

The Last Objects

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Art in Jewelry + Metalsmithing in the Department of Jewelry + Metalsmithing of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

by

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Abstract

The Last Objects is an investigation into the intertwined lives of people and objects through interdisciplinary research and studio-based exploration. It is my experience as a jeweler (as one who deals with the life and death of valued objects that often relate to the lives and deaths of people) that first revealed to me the entanglement of life and material. It is true of jewelry, but also of all other material, that the last object will become the next. Bodies, homes, and personal objects are all temporary states on a material continuum. Given this reality, how do we and how can we use the preservation, destruction, creation, and study of objects to shape our world?

In "Tracing," I consider the work of artists following the multiple lives of objects through various media. Through my works *Inheritance* and *Received Transmissions*, I practice tracing of my own, and find that it reveals both unmapped connections and the limits of human knowledge. I look at conservation and archeology, which focus on the preservation of material in the face of inevitable destruction. In these fields I see an attempt at immortality. In "Destruction," I consider how change might be embraced and mortality accepted. I reflect on the work of others using destruction to test and reshape their worlds. *Homes* addresses material impermanence through the transformation of personal objects. A focus on material culture helps us to know and shape our world.

Introduction

All material carries a past. Whether we acknowledge this lineage or not, it exists. It may be to our advantage — as a way of orienting ourselves in our world — to consider the cycles of creation and destruction intrinsic to the objects and materials that surround us. By deliberately pushing material into its next incarnation, and tracing the history of objects, I simultaneously reach forward and backward, determining my place in the world.

My experience as a jeweler has led me to an understanding that what is true for metal is also true for us: matter is neither lost nor gained. We, and our belongings and environments, are made of the same cycling material. Anything *new* only seems that way because its origins are opaque to us, its history untraced. I practice the tracing of material histories. This tracing reveals that the life of matter is more expansive than our singular lives; it encompasses us.

Made of organic and fleeting stuff, we are arrangements in a temporary state. We use objects to extend ourselves beyond the boundaries of our bodies and lifespans. In the face of our mortality, we send transmissions to the future, to the world after our world, through more enduring materials like metal.

I test my reality by tracing select materials across incarnations, assaying associated behaviors and beliefs. I practice the limits of my influence by pushing materials forward; compiling object transmissions that tell of multiple generations. I question how our possessions—our jewelry, personal objects, and homes—relate to their roles and to their material. How do these abstract and concrete layers interact? As we change our material world, what does it change in us?

The Jeweler

Jewelers, as a type, create objects with the potential to hold intangibles and to carry those intangibles across generations. These are precious objects. As anthropologist Alfred Gell explains, “valued objects present themselves to us surrounded by a kind of halo-effect of resistance, and that it is this resistance to use which is the source of their value.”¹ This resistance is a kind of un-readability. We trust that, although the significance that has been invested in a piece of jewelry may not be easily readable, the embedded and encoded intangibles are there, and are a source of the object’s significance.

Lineage and memory, unreadable to many but part of the provenance of objects, are commonly deposited in jewelry by its wearers. Material, such as the metal that a necklace is made from, has its own history too. Material has the specific lineage of the forms and objects it has been, and a more broad and typical lineage. For example, copper carries with it what it means to be copper: the potential to hold a form, to melt and to re-solidify, to alloy, to carry electrical current. It is the jeweler’s role to transform a material, with all of its specific and broad history, into a piece of jewelry; a vessel ready to carry the wearer’s emotional load.

Jewelers, generally speaking, do not have access to the full lineage of their work. I am interested in the connection between the past and the future. To work closely with historically potent objects, but to be unable to follow them as they move forward frustrates me. The jeweler’s work often ends with an optimistic and sentimental projection. I want to know what really happens to personal belongings in the world. I want to find the limits of our ability to extend ourselves through those objects.

1 Gell, “Technology and Enchantment,” 48.

Inheritance

Jewelry
2017











Direct Material

There is potency in direct action and material; in doing something, rather than suggesting it or in using a thing rather than referencing it. For me, this means testing the nature of personal objects and our relationship to them through those objects.

I have come to understand that my use of the material at hand does not exist in isolation. It exists in the context of all of the ready-mades and found objects that have been part of the art world since Duchamp submitted his *Fountain*, or so the origin-story goes. As art historian Jaimey Hamilton Faris summarizes it,

In 1917 *Fountain* definitively engaged, opening up new onto-aesthetic strategies that challenged the perceptual acuity of viewers to relate art back to the materials of everyday life.²

My use of objects as material is also part of a longer lineage. The use of everyday objects as tools of reflection and reorganization did not begin with Duchamp, but has a long history that stretches across several constructed categories, including fine art, decorative art, design, and artifact. One of Duchamp's revolutionary acts was to collapse the reflective timeframe, eroding some of the distinctions between these fields.

Artifacts, removed from their sources, have been present in exhibition spaces for centuries longer than authored found-object-art. Responding to physical remnants of everyday culture is not a new or unique act, as evidenced by the existence of archeology and the use of revival styles in decorative arts. Such styles are used to intentionally construct a certain world or convey a specific message, which is equivalent to design. Like Duchamp, resourceful designers, "inspired" artists, and colonizing powers have often used the materiality and lineage of objects to transform their world.

Artist Josiah McElheny believes that objects, particularly historical or art objects, have experience embedded in their materials and forms. McElheny practices this theory by treating historical forms and narratives as pliable and using them as material in his work. On this subject, he says,

Art is essentially a physical remnant of a moment, in a way, and you can never know anymore what that moment was. All you have is this thing that you have to at some level reinvent for yourself for it to have any meaning.

We don't think about this necessarily that often, but when you go to just a normal fine arts museum, these are these objects that are completely divorced from their original intention to such a great degree that, in a certain sense, they have nothing to do with their history. We've destroyed the history quite literally. To rip out an altarpiece from a church and to put it in a museum is to very violently deny its history and its meaning. What's amazing is that the objects still have power anyway. They contain in their physical nature another kind of history and then you can reinvent that for yourself.³

I acknowledge and appreciate that I am steeped in a long history of object-transformation, and working in a post-*Fountain* art world, but an understanding of this lineage is not the origin of my use of direct material. My use of objects began as a matter of perspective. I want to work within the lives of personal objects rather than starting from the beginning of the object's known life. Starting in the middle, *in medias res*, allows me to trace the past life of an object, then transform it, and push the material into the future. This allows me to test the limits of the object's lifespan and understand how significance is applied and shed. I'm studying the lives or versions of material—its incarnations. They are plural and largely opaque, but are part of the nature of our material world.

Plural Perception

It is difficult to keep in mind more than one role for a single object. This may be the reason that we don't usually consider the cycles of creation, destruction, perception, and change that shape material and our lives. The idea of something, *anything*, suspended between more than one place is difficult to bear.

Caitlin DeSilvey is a cultural geographer with interests in conservation practices and cultural heritage. In writing about her encounters with an infested and decaying historical site, she describes the confusion created by material in a state of plurality.

I could understand the mess as the residue of a system of human memory storage, or I could see an impressive display of animal adaptation to available resources. It was difficult to hold both of these interpretations in my head at once, though. I had stumbled onto a rearrangement of matter that mixed up the categories I used to understand the world.⁴

I would say that we really use categories not to understand, but to defer our understanding of the world. Such divisions do more to put off true understanding than to promote it. What if we linger in the in-between stages of material transformation? Can we consider the forces at work in the slide between states, and open ourselves to an exchange with them? The ambiguous place between definitions is the most uncomfortable zone, but potentially the most fruitful in terms of understanding our world, the material in it, and ourselves. Even the impulse to destroy or to save, to push uncertainty in one direction or the other, can show us something about our nature.

4 DeSilvey, "Observed Decay," 257.

Works of art that present information in conflict or can't be categorized may spark the viewer to consider something previously unexamined. As philosopher Alva Noë writes in his book about the nature of art, *Strange Tools*,

The artist shows you something that you can't see, or says something you can't understand. And the artist gives you the opportunity to catch yourself in the act of trying to get your bearings.⁵

Art that confronts our material reality helps us to orient ourselves. I will explore in further chapters how, through tracing and through destruction, contemporary artists have approached the examination of our material world. The work of these artists reveals overlooked connections and exposes the complex ways that our lives and the lives of objects co-exist and intertwine. In my own work, I aim to catch the experiencers' attention and spark a re-investigation of the world by working between and across familiar categories. Unclassifiable things provide opportunities to re-see the world around us, revealing objects to be many things at once. Can this transformative plural vision be carried forward and applied to un-altered objects? To ourselves?

Tracing

Material culture is a transdisciplinary field of study rooted in anthropology and open to broad participation. *Handbook of Material Culture* was published in 2006 with the goal of presenting a “review of the field”⁶ and establishing a base of texts on which to build further discussion. In their introduction, the editors of this book note that material culture studies,

emphasize the dialectical and recursive relationship between persons and things: that persons make and use things and that the things make persons. Subjects and objects are indelibly linked. Through considering one, we find the other.⁷

I call this tracing. Across a variety of fields I find others who work along these lines. These fellow investigators, including artists, curators, poets, and historians, share work that gives all of us the opportunity to see, in a new way, the layered lives of the materials around us. Some tracing is focused on patterns and history of use, some is focused on the resources and methods of production, while other looks forward towards deconstruction and the implication of future lives. David Morgan, a scholar of material religion, defines material culture as “world-making activity that happens in material form.”⁸ He explains that,

the value of an object will draw powerfully from its social career, that is, its circulation among people. As an object moves from one person to the next, from one social setting or one culture to the next, it acquires different values and associations, negotiating differences and carrying with it veneers of significance that will tell us much about what objects do.⁹

6 Tilley et al., *Handbook of Material Culture*, 1.

7 Ibid, 4.

8 Morgan, “The Materiality of Cultural Construction,” 101.

9 Ibid.



The Gold Standard, Part I, #7 STARBUCKS COFFEE, by Lisa Gralnick, 2004

In some cases, objects of material culture can be specific entities, such as the gold scraps collected, documented, processed, and reworked by artist Lisa Gralnick in her three-part series, *The Gold Standard*. In this work, distinct pieces of gold maintain context from their previous lives as pieces of jewelry, their retirement from use, their acquisition for Gralnick's project, and their price in the international gold market. Gralnick's use of each specific object is influenced by and even based on its social career. Gold contributions are labeled with notes such as, "broken gold hairpin belonged to my great Aunt Helen and I remember a collection of them sitting on her bedroom vanity."¹⁰ In other works in *The Gold Standard* series, Gralnick calculates the time-specific economic value of gold and demonstrates this as a relative value in her life by comparing amounts of gold to amounts of other daily products that have the same price. In still other works, Gralnick explores the role of distinct gold objects as keepers of history, real and fabricated, by making fantastic artifacts that are labeled with their imagined stories. As a series, *The Gold Standard* traces gold objects' ability to circulate and shapeshift from trinket, to currency, to artifact, and back again, accumulating stories along the way.



Silk Poems, by Jen Bervin, 2016

Jen Bervin also works along the line of a singular material. She traces the social career of silk in her work, *Silk Poems*. Bervin looks through the lineage of silk production at the way that worms create and humans process silk. She also looks at the history of silk's applications through textiles, tools, and writing about the material. Out of the context of this collected history, Bervin's poetry emerges as a crystallization of the worms' and humans' material experiences. The final poems are written in linear language, from the point of view of the silk worm, in a looping physical form that references both the worms' silk production and humans' weaving.¹¹ These poems are to be used in the newest application of silk: biosensors implanted in the human body. Through *Silk Poems*, Bervin shows how tracing any select material can reveal the intertwining of objects and lives, uniting histories through previously untraced connections. Bervin reveals how silk ties us to the past and the future, but also how we might determine similar connections through any and all material.

11 Bervin, *Silk Poems*



Still from *Rare Earthenware*, by Toby Smith, with Unknown Fields and Kevin Callaghan , 2014

Toby Smith, in collaboration with Unknown Fields and ceramicist Kevin Callaghan, produced *Rare Earthenware*. The short film traces, through production and through time, the resources and systems involved in electronics manufacturing. Smith follows backwards the shipping, packaging, testing, assembly, manufacture, forging, refining, and extraction of rare earth materials for the production of cell phones, laptops, and smart car batteries. At the point of extraction, he takes a step sideways and focuses on the waste material left at the Mongolian mine site. He transforms our consideration of the radioactive mud from waste to material by using it to produce the kind of objects that might otherwise come from this muddy earth: ceramic vessels. Each vessel represents the volume of waste associated with the production of a different technological object.¹² By using waste directly as material, without any efforts at mechanical or ritual purification, Smith demonstrates an alternative, more aware, and more comprehensive relationship to this material process. By tracing and documenting, he illuminates the path that some of our most heavily used objects take on their way to us, and suggests alternative too.



String-pieced Quilt, by Loretta Pettway, 1963

Quilts made by Gees Bend quilters are collections of material charged by social history and reworked into new objects that preserve meaning through continuity of use. The catalog for *The Keeper*, a 2016 exhibition at The New Museum, tells one story from the creation of a quilt. “Loretta Pettway [of Gees Bend] recalls her mother doing this after her father passed away: ‘I’m going to take his work clothes,’ her mother said, ‘shape them into a quilt to remember him, and cover up under it for love.’”¹³ This is a striking example of comfort with (and because of) the plurality of an object, its material, and its role in experience. The key to this insightful plurality might be continuity. By skipping the societal steps that attempt to neutralize, distance, and re-boot a material, and instead pushing it directly to its next form, do the quilters give it the chance to share a longer story? A work shirt might not eternally tell about the individual life of the man who wore it, but after that story falls away, the shirt still holds information about a body, its clothing, its lifetime, and its material rebirth. Pettway and the other Gees Bend quilters allow material to remain traceable, even as they transform it into new objects.

13 Young, “Loretta Pettway,” 224.

By venturing into the homes around me, exploring my own territory and the private spaces of others, I identify an overwhelming common culture. The same layouts, forms, and versions of things fill our homes; so many of the same picture frame, wine rack, serving tray. There is a certain type of object that we keep—glasses, keys, crutches—even when they're not of use to us anymore. These are personal objects, extensions of our bodies, with personal histories. Their coincidence tells another story, of their type and of our culture and behaviors. I gather these materials and test them. I practice a form of assaying, not of purity or value, but of character and permanence. What exists? What lasts? What deforms? What merges and alloys? I collect, record, assess, destroy, re-build. I experience and participate in the reincarnation of materials, and this has changed my understanding of the world I'm in.

Received Transmissions

Text transcribed from personal objects
2017

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20 minutes. For sensitive skins

increase the amount of flour used to four parts flour to one part mustard.

HOT MUSTARD Mix gradually with **COLD WATER** to consistency of very thick cream, stirring well and breaking up all lumps. Allow to stand 10 minutes to develop full flavor. Never add fresh mustard to old. Mix daily.

HOT SWEET MUSTARD $\frac{1}{4}$ cup Colman's Mustard $1\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoon cornstarch $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sugar $\frac{2}{3}$ cup water $\frac{1}{3}$ cup vinegar Mix mustard with a little water. Allow to stand. Mix cornstarch, sugar, salt with remainder of water

until smooth. Add vinegar. Cook over low heat stirring constantly for 5 minutes. Remove from heat ; cool. Add mustard, mix well. Yield: 1 cup. FLAVORFUL SALAD DRESSING Blend 2 teaspoons of Colman's Mustard with a little water. Then add it to an 8 oz. jar of your favorite prepared mayonnaise or salad dressing. Mix well. BY APPOINTMENT TO HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II SUPPLIERS OF MUSTARD J. & J. COLMAN LTD. Colman's EXHIBITION HONORS CROSS OF THE LEGION OF HONOR

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Archeology

On April 18, 2017, I spoke with archeologist David Elitzer about his field. David and I were both assistants at the RISD Museum, where we worked together on an ongoing conservation project.

MJ TYSON. How would you define your role, as an archeologist?

DAVID ELITZER. I've wondered, is what I do archeology? I've actually never really been sure of it. I have a hard time defining what archeology is, but this can be a strong point.

It's possible to look at archeology as a weak field in the fact that it's ill-defined, but I take a more optimistic approach and see it as a field that's less restricted than others. If your study is rooted in material culture, or even how people interact with their environment, materially or immaterially, a case for archeology can be made. Archeology is about learning about the world around you. It doesn't necessarily mean the past; contemporary archeology is an emerging field.

Archeology is a way of looking at what surrounds people, and any tools you can use are fair game. There are certain standards in the field, there is a body of theory and a body of practice, but I think archeology is willing to embrace other disciplines.

I am personally interested in what I would call cultural property protection, which doesn't really fall under archeology. The field itself is not, by definition, involved in the study of material culture. It is concerned with how cultural property can be best protected. The subject matter is the same as archeology, but the motivation is protection itself, not study.

TYSON. Why preserve? What do you think is the role of preservation?

ELITZER. While I do believe that cultural property should be preserved for its own sake. That's not why I'm doing it.

TYSON. Why are you doing it?

ELITZER. I'm doing it because the destruction of cultural property is often used as a tool to attack civilians. I think that aspect of cultural property destruction is understudied. I think that when people look at cultural property destruction often the assumption is that some people are attacking this culture and this is an affront to everybody's universal heritage, and that we need to

protect history for everyone to enjoy. This isn't what everyone thinks, but it's a pretty common idea, this idea of universal heritage.

So you see these pictures of Palmyra in the news, and there might be a line somewhere about how this is a symbol of national identity in Syria or how certain groups identify with Palmyra, but the stronger theme you hear is that by losing Palmyra we're losing a world-identity, losing a shared heritage. I think that's incredibly misguided. I think that what's more accurate is that when you attack someone's culture this goes hand in hand with attacking lives. A culture is attacked as a way to attack people themselves.

TYSON. I'm interested in the ways we use material to extend our lives, both by extending a body's utility while it is alive and extending personal influence past a lifetime. Writing and recording information, even digitally, is a way of making material that takes your life, your opinions, your experience, and pushes them into the future. That means that in some sense the lifespan of a person ends when that material ends.

What you're talking about is violence against people, the people who are the origins and inheritors of the material culture. There is no attack on everybody's story. If it's everybody's story then anything that happens is part of that story. Everybody includes the attackers.

ELITZER. There's something to be said for a shared appreciation for other people's heritage. I am a believer in the encyclopedic museum, which aspires to cover all

time periods and all geographic areas. We work at one. But I think that approach gets dangerous when you talk about protecting cultural property in conflict zones because I think it encourages the overshadowing of human life. Going back to Palmyra as an example, whenever Palmyra is attacked, by ISIS, huge headlines, "Palmyra Destroyed." The neighboring town of Tadmur, which has seen incredibly high civilian death tolls, sometimes won't get any a mention at all. When ISIS destroys cultural property, in their spectacular way, they film it and it takes on a life of its own. Even though the material itself is destroyed, it assumes this new life.

TYSON. The act does.

ELITZER. Right, the act itself becomes this replicating event.

TYSON. The act becomes a new record of history. They're creating material culture too, as they destroy.

ELITZER. They're rewriting the record. They're adding new things to the record. They're making some things unreadable while making these other highly-readable documents to disseminate.

Ironically, while they're making the material unreadable, many Western audiences—not to prioritize them, but in the context of them—while ISIS is destroying these archeological sites they're actually making Westerners confront them, making them read them. When I was first studying Mesopotamian art here, in the West, it was laughably esoteric to many people. I didn't think

so, but many people were like, “you’re studying what?”

TYSON. The connection to your life seemed very loose.

ELITZER. When ISIS started destroying the things I was already studying it started making front-page headlines. People in the west who had never heard of this stuff started lamenting the destruction of it.

TYSON. And therefore identifying themselves with it.

ELITZER. Right. There is something ironic about this readability issue. Although ISIS, by destroying this stuff, was making the material less readable, it was forcing it to be read by people who had never seen it before. This is definitely not an endorsement of ISIS, but now there is more funding, more job opportunities, and an elevated media presence around these issues, which used to be so esoteric.

TYSON. Is what you’re describing contemporary archeology?

ELITZER. Yeah, sure. I think ISIS is creating new material record. The landscape now is different.

TYSON. It seems that to be invested in a lifetime of work in archeology, or history, or a museum, one must work under the threat of potential loss of information. Does the constant state of change and the threat of loss motivate all of this work?

ELITZER. That’s one of the things I’m most suspicious of with big encyclopedic museums. A justification one often hears for the existence of encyclopedic museums is that objects are safer in these museums than they would be in their source countries. Therefore, these objects should be here and not in their source countries. This was, for years, the argument that went for the Parthenon Marbles.

TYSON. Could you also say that they are safer in the museum than out in the rest of the world because that is somehow different? Anywhere that’s not the museum is more dangerous than the museum?

ELITZER. I think there are two lines you could draw. There is inside and outside the museum, but I think that the stronger line is between large Western museums and everything else. I think that everything else includes museums in a lot of these countries from which objects have historically been taken.

TYSON. Because those museums have been more in flux?

ELITZER. Or they’re newer. There is this idea of the museum as a sanctuary, a sacred space, but I think that within that there can be this division. For years the British Museum used, as one of its central arguments for holding onto the Elgin Marbles, or the Parthenon Marbles, depending on how you like to label them, that Greece does not have good enough facilities to house the Marbles, therefore they are better off in the British Museum. For years it was true that there was no

comparable museum in Greece, the museums there were not up to the British conservation standards, security standards. In response the Greek government funded the building of a state of the art museum facing the Parthenon on the Acropolis. In the Acropolis Museum is a space for the to-be-returned Parthenon Marbles. This case especially starkly draws these lines.

There is the Acropolis there, outside, tourists walking all over it, not necessarily that secure, then there is inside the Museum, which is pristine, which is this symbol of holiness, but then there is this other line between this Museum and other museums in the US and Western Europe.

There is this concern about the destruction, the degradation of the Marbles. The British Museum protects it against that. The Acropolis Museum promises to protect it against that, but there is another form of destruction we can talk about, and this is the destruction of international identity. This is Greece's main claim with the Parthenon Marbles, that this is an attack on Greek identity, which is innately tied to material culture.

TYSON. And as long as they exist in the other reality of the British Museum they are no longer a part of the culture that they came from?

We recognize the power of destruction to transform our world, but can we acknowledge destruction as an element of creation, and as a world-making activity? Using a material lens informed by archaeology, it becomes clear that the destructive world-making power that ISIS utilizes today stems from the same source—the irreversible physical altering of material culture—used by Lord Elgin in the nineteenth century. In each case culture is simultaneously destroyed and created. Nothing can be reduced to just one or the other.

ELITZER. Worse than no longer being an active record, they are actively attacking the record.

TYSON. By pinning it to a single narrative?

ELITZER. By pinning it to a colonial narrative. These marbles were taken in a colonial context and as long as they are still in that context, there is an ongoing attack on the identity tied to the material.

TYSON. I'm interested in the layers this creates. I start to think of them as removed from their context, but then they are just in this bigger currently-unfolding context. As soon as they go back they will also be a record of that colonialism being over. So the path that this material takes is still the record of history. Even when we are debating whether it is or not, it still is.

ELITZER. Right, because there is no such thing as no context.

TYSON. The debate is very active and swirls around, and what it is always swirling around is the actual material.

ELITZER. It's all rooted in the material.

Destruction

Caitlin DeSilvey traces materials forward, peeking ahead at the eventual wasting and deconstruction of cultural objects. She and her colleagues have named this approach *anticipatory history*.¹⁴ She is looking at the end of an object's social career, as it slides out of a recognizable state. Her examination of decaying historical sites, originally from a conservator's perspective, led her to the realization that sites for sharing, such as the museum, do not need to be sites of eternal preservation. DeSilvey's writing shares the belief that these sites could instead embrace and share the changing nature of material, revealing formerly suppressed truths. As she puts it,

The disarticulation of the object may lead to the articulation of other histories and other geographies. An approach that understands the artifact as a process, rather than a stable entity with a durable physical form, is perhaps able to address some of the more ambiguous aspects of material presence (and disappearance).¹⁵

14 DeSilvey, Naylor, and Sackett, *Anticipatory History*.

15 DeSilvey, *Curated Decay*, 31.



Artifacts from the National Museum of Beirut, preserved by Maurice Chehab

In 2016, The New Museum in New York embraced this evidence of change in artifacts when it exhibited a collection of “Artifacts from the National Museum of Beirut Preserved by Maurice Chehab” as part of *The Keeper*. As the curator of the National Museum of Beirut, Chehab had hidden these artifacts, ensuring they would be preserved through war. What he couldn’t have anticipated when he “desperately tried to protect the collection, hiding objects in tight recesses and often encasing them in concrete to avoid bombs, artillery, and fires,” was that the objects would be saved, but also changed. “These objects survived, but only with extreme scars, burnt to near-obscurity and fused together with other nearby objects. They are beautiful, and stand as a testament to Lebanese history, both ancient and recent, violent and heroic, in a single object.”¹⁶

If material culture is “world-making activity that happens in material form,”¹⁷ what place does destruction have? DeSilvey and Chehab’s approaches are appropriate for the field of curation, and incorporate passive destruction, or destruction as a byproduct of time, weather, and war, but more direct and active forms of disarticulation are possible in other arenas. Through my work I test the art-making and world-making potential of deliberate destruction.

Anthropologist and writer Jan Geisbusch, in his essay, “For Your Eyes Only? The Magic Touch of Relics,” writes about the idea of exchange between a handler (as opposed to a viewer) and the handled object. This “magic touch” is the idea of an experience shared between two entities.

In contrast to the ideology of the eye, touch recognises that subjects are not really detachable from the world. It is only sensual perception that works as a mutual, two-way process — while touching I am being touched, while being touched I touch the other — allowing the experience of the world as contingent and interconnected, questioning the sharp divide between object and subject.¹⁸

Though Geisbusch refers specifically to the touch of a worshiper, which implies a certain respect and sensitivity, this two-way sensual perception applies to objects that are experienced in other ways. Anytime we perceive through our senses there is an interaction between our bodies and the material object. If a work of art is smelled, heard, or seen, the relationship between perceiver and object is just as interconnected as it is with the relics. Can we infer that the extent of this interaction has a correlation to the extent of its effect? If we engage with something so extensively that we change its form or even destroy it, this is also a way of knowing it. And hasn’t it engaged with us to the same degree?

17 Morgan, “The Materiality of Cultural Construction,” 101.

18 Geisbusch, “For Your Eyes Only,” 207.



Scrap Club #15 at V22 in London, 2012

Scrap Club is a London-based project founded by Wajid Yaseen and Joel Cahen. Scrap Club hosts events at which participants aggressively destroy scrapped consumer goods.¹⁹ The group stages intentional destructions, which they refer to as *deconstructivist* events because they find destruction “such a powerful dynamic in society,” one which is “associated with offensive violence, vandalism, and chaos, but also with constructive and creative processes.”²⁰ Through the events, Scrap Club founders question, “can the human destructive dynamic be interrogated before it accumulates any prescribed meaning?”²¹ That question remains open, but through feedback from participants they have concluded, “the destruction of the [consumer] object becomes the peak of the relationship with it.”²² I don’t know how Yaseen and Cahen define this peak, but based on my own experience destroying objects, I think that they are referring to an embodied understanding of the object, its material, its duration. Like the worshiper touching relics, we share materiality with the objects we destroy. No matter is lost, but lives end, limits are reached, and existence is understood.

19 Cahen and Yaseen, *Scrap Club*

20 Cahen, “*Destructivistas*.”

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*



Another Matter, by Cornelia Parker, 1994

In her work *Another Matter*, artist Cornelia Parker uses touch and destruction to know and to confront the specter of death. For her, the destructive process reveals the material nature of the coffin, a symbol of looming death. Destroying the coffin, Parker says,

that's a terrifying thing to do, because you only really touch a coffin if you go to someone's funeral or die yourself. Actually buying one and breaking it into pieces you get to defuse the fear, you get to know the physical stuff it's made of—you realize it's just a piece of wood, like a table, it's the shape that makes it symbolic.²³

By turning the coffin's remains into matches, she changes the waste into fuel, revealing that, "each piece of the coffin has its own potential life and death of its own."²⁴ In this work, the coffin stands in for the body it implies, which also undergoes the transformation from a fearful symbol of death into the fuel for new life. Enacting the death of the symbol allows Parker to comprehend her own blunt material future, and her presentation of this work allows us to share in the version of death she has realized.

23 Parker, *Cornelia Parker*, 46.

24 Ibid.



Splitting (322 Humphrey Street, Englewood, New Jersey), by Gordon Matta-Clark, 1974

Artist Gordon Matta-Clark's disruptive work on existing architecture highlights the transitional state of buildings on their way to demolition. He may work on already uninhabited buildings, but by interrupting their structure he calls out their state. By cutting into architecture, he is exposing a building's state of vacancy and disrepair, forcing it to stand wounded and declare its impermanence. The walls we would usually consider stable are revealed to be transitory. His destructive action, though not total, allows us (and the building) to linger in an in-between state. He explains,

There's something about the house which is very substantial, especially in terms of the environment in which it exists. It's like juggling with syntax, or disintegrating some kind of established sequence of parts. [...] it's a way to disorient by using a clear and given system.²⁵

If one building is proven less stable than it seems, how can we trust that any wall will not be split? Matta-Clark's destructive action shifts our perception and causes us to question our world.

In jeweler and metalsmith Peter Bauhuis' dictionary-format monograph, *Abecedarium: Jewel. Vessel. Implement.*, an entry on melting, by writer and philosopher Pravu Mazumdar, reads,

From the standpoint of physics, the process of melting is a complex but neutral transformation of a solid state consisting in the breakdown of a crystal lattice structure. For art, however, melting is a tragic event, for it entails an irreversible loss of form. What the eye of the artist thus discovers in the process of melting is nothing less than death, so that the artistic investigation of the melting process [...] can be seen as a possible technique belonging to a more extensive area of research called thanatology.²⁶

I agree. Willful destruction and melting are thorough explorations of materiality carried out physically, through the body, which can't be separated from an implication for all material, including the material of the body. Destructive processes ground us in the reality of our materiality and impermanent state.

26 Mazumdar, "Melting", 104.

Homes

Personal objects left behind by the deceased
2016-2017





246 Rumstick Road
2016





25 Meadowbrook Drive
2016





11 Mayfair Road
2016



11 Mayfair Road
2016





93 Crestwood Road
2017





93 Crestwood Road
2017





102 Garden Hills Drive
2017



80 Church Street
2017





80 Church Street
2017





Transformation

If destruction is a way of knowing, of practicing and accepting influence, then my work must change me as I change it. Objects that I cut, melt, and crush affect me as I affect them. Transformation is mutual.

I dream I am in the kitchen with my mother and my youngest brother, together in a familiar and well-worn place. Lights glow on the wall; it's dusk outside. My vision turns dark. I feel a great pressure on my chest, in my head. Straining, I reopen my eyes. My family is still with me, we've all dropped to the ground. They are unable to breath, are feeling the same strain. Our air has gone from the room. I wake up and know the limit. This is how it ends.

Conclusion

In our world, where no matter is lost or gained, destruction is part of every creative action. If we can suspend moral judgment (our attempt to categorize the abstract) and focus on the path of the material, we might recognize patterns of destructive world-making across contexts and scales, and learn something about the entanglement of the metaphysical and physical.

The fact that material culture can be destroyed, removed, and otherwise manipulated and wielded as a tool of power reveals the extent of our dependence on materials. We have great potential to shape our own worlds, but remain vulnerable to shaping by others. Through acknowledgement of this reality, is it possible to strike a balance within ourselves? Can we invest in the material world in order to live a rich and extended life, but remain detached enough to expect our own story to meet a destructive end at the expense of some other creation? I find solace in the understanding that material will live on past the limits of my knowledge and the end of me.

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