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Discarded:

**Exploring Material Stories
and Movements
Through Participatory,
Public Art Interventions**

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Zachary Stephens sits on my desk, resting beneath his screen-printed portrait. Zachary Stephens is an active part of my surroundings, but not in the sense you might imagine. Zach is a remote-control helicopter recovered from a river during an environmentally focused river clean-up. Quite unexpectedly, Zach and other discarded objects became intertwined in my life, fueling research, community engagement and creative practice.

As an artist in residence with the University of Georgia Office of Sustainability, I was invited to create a work of art using materials found in a local river and road clean-up. The hope was that a work of art would help raise awareness about the detrimental effects of things like plastic bottles in our local watersheds by putting these objects into view in ways that could not be avoided. The art piece was to live as part of

a Zero Waste Extravaganza, a one-day event in conjunction with the Patagonia Worn Wear Tour, which mends clothing free of charge. The day's event was focused on offering alternative approaches to environmentally and socially destructive consumption practices.

I had imagined the items found would consist mostly of torn plastic bags and bottles, recognizing these as materials that are regularly consumed and often discarded. Teasing apart the entangled materials from the clean-ups, I was surprised to find an array of domestic treasures like a moss-covered leather shoe with the moss still green; a dirty but otherwise intact child's rocking chair; a remote-control car carrying two miniature plastic babies; an iPad missing its screen; a woven blanket with a floral design; and a circuit board. A collection of objects that had been lost or left behind—

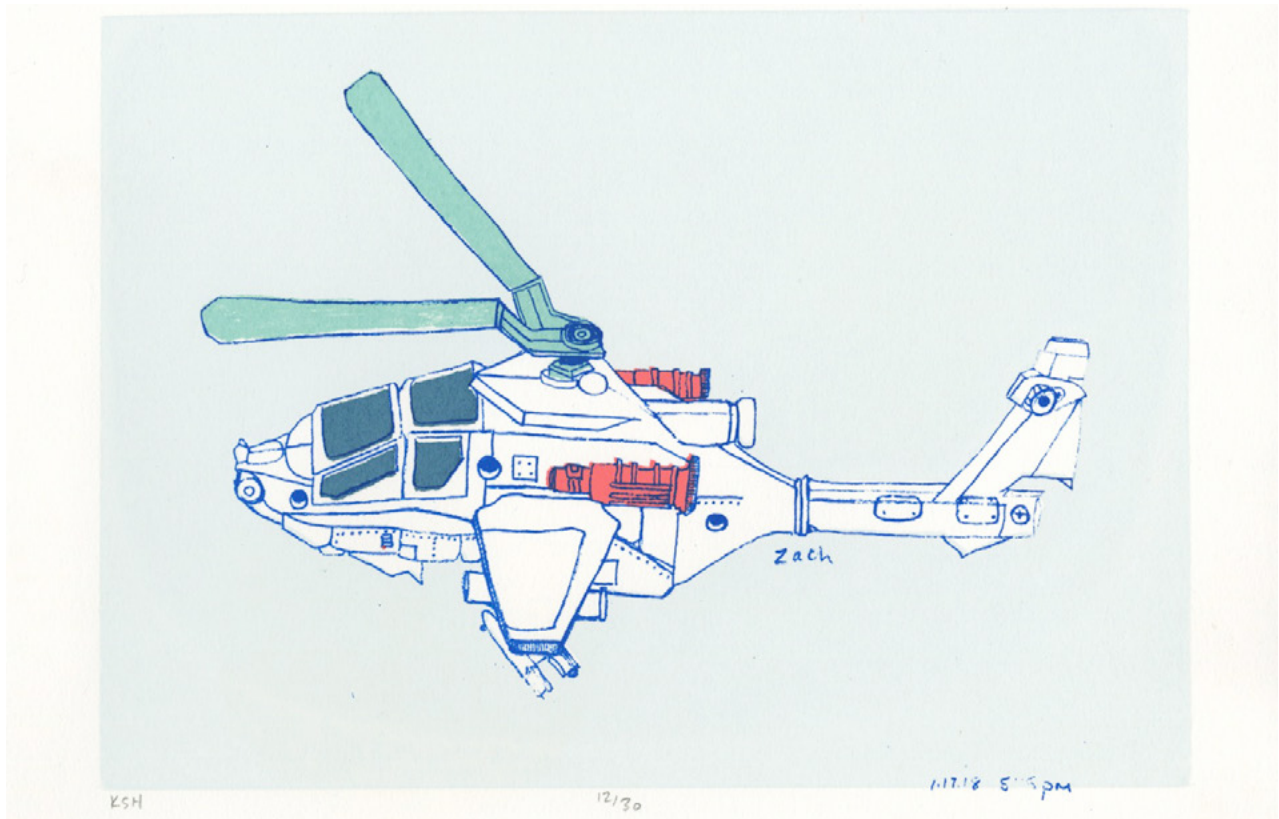




Figure 1. Objects from Athens Home for Discarded Objects (2017)

discarded— finding themselves along the banks of a river that runs through the university campus, or on the side of a local road.

Over the span of two years, beginning in February 2017, these objects acted as the medium for a series of participatory installations focused on interrupting movements through public spaces, primarily on or near university campuses. Each of the sites were created in an artistic collaboration between myself and an undergraduate art student, Abigail West, who also worked with the University Office of Sustainability. They were conceptualized as participatory, public art interventions, carrying an underlying goal of inviting intimate and playful interactions with objects deemed as “trash,” in-order-to challenge normative notions of material as devoid of value beyond the act of consumption. There were three interrelated installations in total, each developed in its own distinct context with a unique set of materials and engagements. In these works, I

found potential for empathetic, multisensory engagement with the materials of our lives. These empathetic engagements grew from an awareness of the interconnections between life-matter and the agency of all matter to affect and be affected by encounters with other matter (Bennett, 2004; 2010; Barad, 2007).

In the *Social Life of Things*, Appadurai (1986), describes the “commodity phase” of an object as just one phase in its life or biography (p.17). Objects do not cease to exist once they have been consumed but continue to act upon the world, even as their given or perceived functions have passed. Following this perspective, the objects we engage with carry stories, histories of movements and experiences. They carry their own *thing-power*, a term political philosopher Jane Bennett (2004; 2010) introduced to describe a vital energy or force that flows through all material. With this thing-power the materials of this project, and others, act upon the world, challenging world-views that render

non-human material inert beyond human engagement (p.xvi). Thing-power encourages a more awakened sense of the connectivity of all matter. In contrast to a hierarchical picture of the world, with human beings at the top, thing-power aims to “horizontalize the relations between human, biota, and abiota [non-living]” (Bennett, 2010, p.112), drawing humans toward a greater appreciation of the way human and non-human matter mutually affect one another. An awakening to these interconnections may then challenge anthropocentric views that exploit and deplete.

In the pages that follow, I will share the stories from this work, beginning with the development of the three installations. My approach to the work is grounded in Bennett’s (2004, 2010) concept of thing-power, as well as Karen Barad’s (2007) *intra-action*, which may be conceptualized as movements produced in relational engagements of matter brought together through contextual configurations. Regularly reconfiguring, these intra-actions leave traces of the encounters or becomings that occurred. The traces are presented here as a collection of materials gathered. Materials that include: Object stories written by participants; photographs taken during the installation experiences; conversations and interviews recorded throughout the process; and artworks created by the author.

As they are read together, the different elements of this work suggest ways in which participatory, creative interventions foster arts-based pedagogical encounters, encounters that are open, curious and imaginative as they embrace uncertainty, discovery and transformation (O’Sullivan, 2006). Through moments of physical touch and imaginative story-building, the encounters of this work invited attentive and embodied ways of being with life’s varied matter, beginning with collections of discarded objects. In their

attentiveness to the experiences of non-human matter, the encounters of this project may help re-define ways of engaging with mattered bodies that subvert social discourses built on notions of “othering” or hierarchical value.

Designing Interventions

This first installation took place on the University of Georgia Campus, in an outdoor space between the bookstore and student union. Situated along the path to a central bus stop, this setting invited a mix of people to engage, some who purposely attended the event and others who happened to walk by. In designing the space, we sought a purposeful juxtaposition where objects and materials normally found in contained spaces such as homes or offices were released into the wild of outdoor environments. This juxtaposition of materials was positioned to invite encounters and relations with objects and environments that strayed from what might be viewed as “normal.”

My eye was caught by the large machete and old rusty antiques. I can't lie; I wanted them badly. I stayed because I liked the idea of the project. In our consumerist society, people so often fail to get the full joy and utility of an object. We develop quick, functional relationship and then throw out things (and people) when they no longer seem as useful as the next new thing. I like that this exhibit makes people stop and use their imagination. It was playful and I don't get to play as much as I would like or need these days.

*Participant response,
Personal correspondence, 2017*



Figure 2. Athens Home for Discarded Objects (2017)

The Athens Home For Discarded Objects February 21, 2017

The objects were curated and laid out on 4 moving blankets, slightly overlapping one another to reference a carpeted space. Behind them stood three tall—roughly eight foot—bookshelves that began the day with nothing on them. Throughout the day, participants were invited to move around the space and touch, explore or connect with the objects. They were invited to adopt an object by filling out a certificate that asked them to imagine its name, date of birth, place of birth and write its story; thinking about what its life had been like and how it ended up in the river or roadway.

The stories were recorded on certificates that were collected in a central place for other participants and visitors to read. Once the objects were “adopted” they were moved to one

of the bookshelves. These bookshelves were intended to serve as visual markers for “new homes” as adopted objects were lifted from the ground and placed on empty shelves. Over the course of the day’s events, many of the objects were taken by participants to live in their homes instead. We facilitated the engagement throughout the day, explaining the project and inviting participants to take part as much or as little as they liked. Adjacent to the bookshelves, bordering another side of the central square of objects, were a sofa and two end tables. These furniture elements were incorporated to further reference domestic space and invite individuals to stop, sit, and “hang out” for a moment, encouraging a moment of pause from the daily routine of moving between classes, events and obligations.



Figure 3. Athens Home for Discarded Objects (2017)



Figure 4. Participants adopting objects (2017)



The Athens Home for Discarded Objects II September 2017-January 2018

Building off the first site, the second site was created from the objects and stories produced in the first installation. A hybrid between an exhibition and an intervention, we aimed to reach wider audiences, sharing the work of the first site while producing additional space for participants to pause from daily moments and intra-act with additional objects recovered in local cleanups. We displayed stories and adopted objects from the first event in a glass case given to us by the university Science Library for a four-month duration. Playing off the idea of a “room” we interspersed the objects with their etched “portraits” and framed screen prints of selected stories. These objects sat on shelves with patterned backdrops to give a sense of domesticity.

A handmade book catalogued each of the stories with their corresponding objects offered

contextual information on the location where the objects were found and shared photographs from the first installation. It rested on a podium beside the case so visitors could leaf through it at their own pace.

In addition to the display, we installed another “room” which lived in the entry corridor of the library, across from the circulation desk. This room was made to resemble an eclectic living room. In the center was a woven rag rug that actually came from my own kitchen. The rug was surrounded by selected furniture: an orange rocking chair, a wooden desk chair, a small wooden desk with a cabinet that folded down to form the writing portion of the desk, and a wooden display case with three glass doors. Inside the case we placed newly found objects gathered in one of Bag the Bag’s road cleanups from September 2017. We placed a book of blank certificates on the folded-out table of the small desk with hand-written instructions for adopting objects. Installed from September



Figure 5. Athens Home for Discarded Objects II (2017)

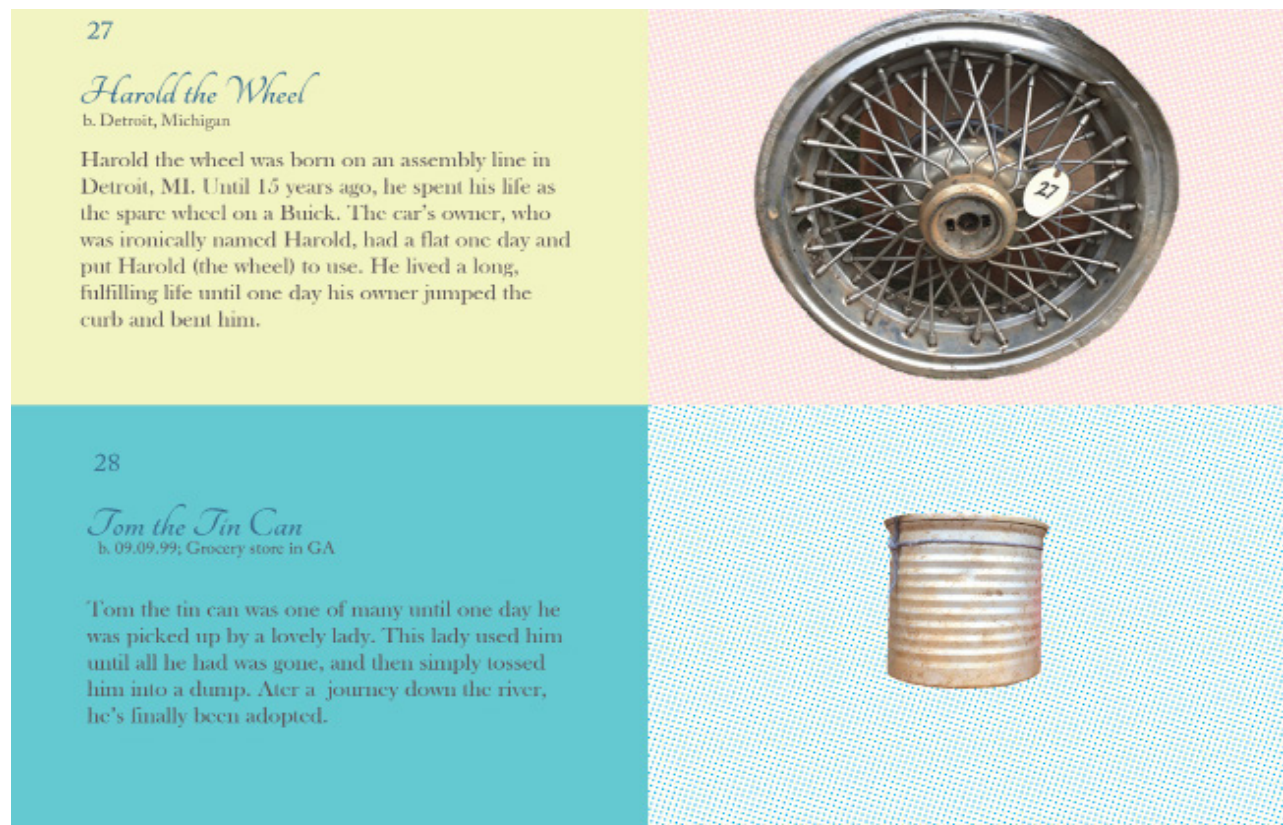


Figure 6. Page from Athens Home for Discarded Objects Artist book (2017)

2017 to January 2018, this site was an experiment to explore what types of encounters would occur in a more long-term installation that did not have a human facilitator. This setting shifted ideas of public space from the first installation, removing the outdoor corridor element, but maintaining the goal of unexpected interactions in a non-traditional arts environment.

Visiting the Science Library, One Participant Reflected:

After walking across campus on a day when the sun was beating down. I finally made it to the Science Library where the exhibit, "Athens' Home for Discarded Objects" was located. My initial intention was to go in to the library, take a few quick and efficient photographs due to a busy week then be on my way to study for a test. The

only thing is that it did not quite go that way, I strolled in through the metal detectors (always subconsciously thinking I will be the one that triggers them to beep for some unknown reason) and noticed two chairs that looked out of place due to their antique appearance surrounded by the more modern accessories that come along with a 21st century library. I soon realized that this is the exhibit that I am here for due to the signage. One of the first things that the sign says to me is that I need to make myself comfortable, and for some reason that spoke to me and with a sort of why not attitude I sat myself down in a chair and began to look at the display case in front of me. I noticed lots of stuff, stuff that I could have considered trash or clutter if it was on the side of the road or behind a run-down warehouse, but it was not, it was actually put in a display case which immediately triggered significance. It made me ponder upon the "lives"



Figure 8. Athens Home for Discarded Objects II, (2017)

of these abstract objects. Asking questions to myself, such as, "How long since this object was made?", "Did the creator ever think it would end up in a display case?", and many more.

(Personal correspondence, 2017)

Dear Discarded Object, What's Your Story?
Philadelphia, PA
November 2-3, 2017

A participant described their experience:

I was mildly curious in several of the objects, at first for practical reasons (there was a really nice basket that turned out to be a claimed sewing kit), but eventually I set eyes on a broken menorah, which reminded me of some of my ill-practiced traditions at home.

I had broken a menorah when I was a kid, and so it made me laugh to think I wasn't the only one. I then started to think about my family, especially

my grandfather who always pushed me towards Judaism.

I started to think about the symbolism of a broken menorah, and how common it is to have fractured faith or practices during and especially after childhood, which is something that I resonate with. I had a bit more of a respect for the menorah as compared to my general indifference usually. I think about the experience quite often now, especially as we enter Hanukkah. I have not returned to faith, but I have had intentional conversations with my (varying degrees of) Jewish friends. I returned the object partly because I choose not to hold onto sentimental objects and it was logistically hard to carry home.

(Personal correspondence, 2017)



Figure 7. Athens Home for Discarded Objects II participatory room (2017)

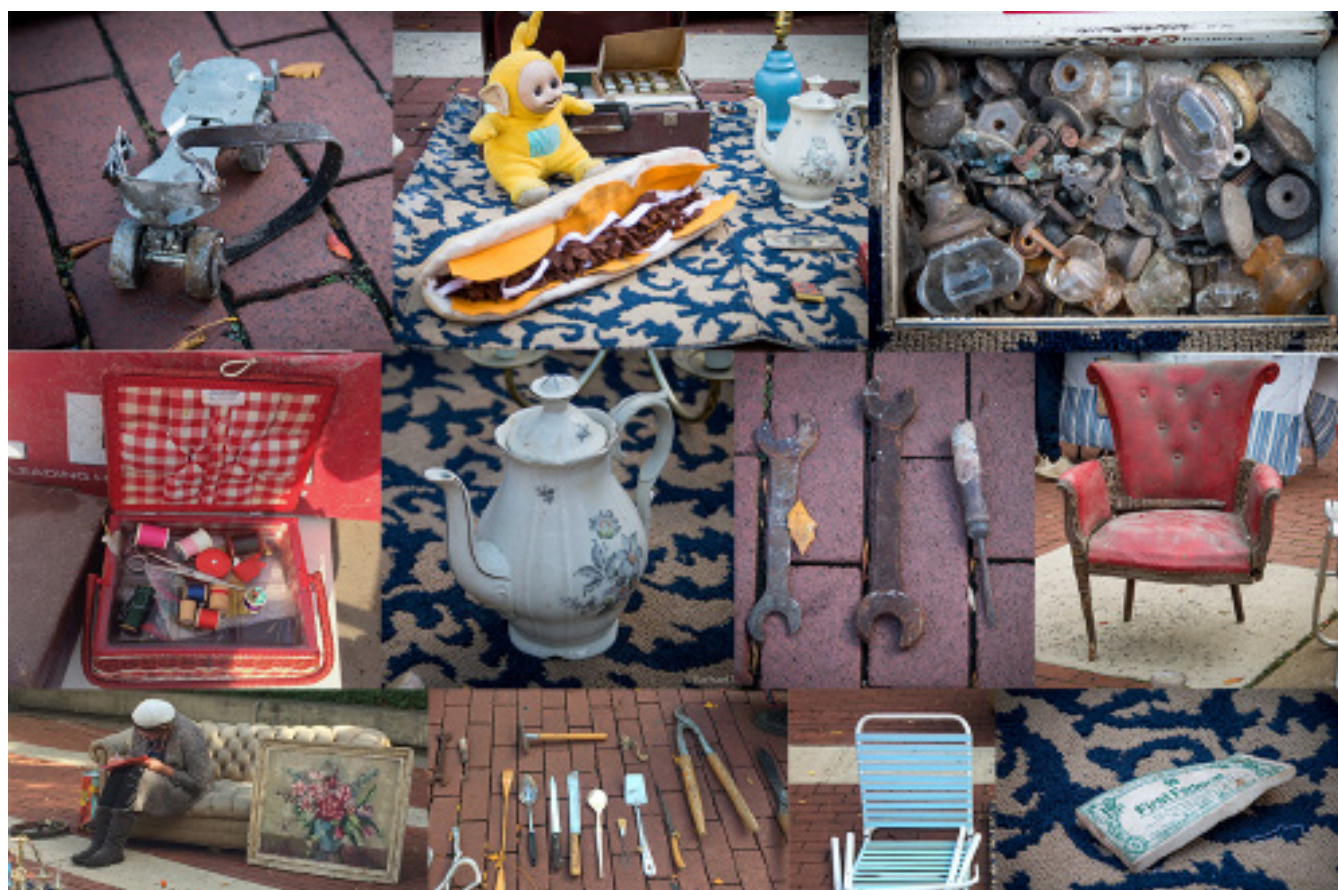


Figure 9. Object collage from Dear Discarded Objects, What's Your Story (2017)

Photographs by author and Rachael Warriner.



Figure 10. Dear Discarded Objects, What's Your Story Site View (2017)

Photographs by Rachael Warriner.

The third installation took place in conjunction with an annual PLAN conference in Philadelphia, PA. PLAN refers to the Post Landfill Action Network, which works with students and campuses around the nation to promote zero waste activities and sustainable initiatives (PLAN, N.D.) As a part of the PLAN conference we were invited to create a site-specific variation of the Athens Home installation in Philadelphia, PA. The space we used was a brick pedestrian street that runs through a university campus and beside a heavily trafficked and major road in Philadelphia. While many of the buildings along this road belonged to the university, it was a public pedestrian mall used by non-affiliated residents as well as university staff and students.

This third installation expanded the collaboration to include the staff of the Recycled

Artist in Residency Program (RAIR), which offers educational programs and residency opportunities with access to over 450 tons of materials per day at a construction and waste demolition recycling facility in Philadelphia (RairPhilly, N.D.). The program is housed at a private waste management site, which strives to divert as much material from the landfill as possible. While many materials may be re-sold, some, such as domestic objects from estate clean-ups, cannot be sold to recycling markets. As a result, they head to the landfill. These landfill bound objects became the materials of this installation.

Traces and Marks

Each of the three installations brought different bodies into proximity with one another. The material configurations were responsive. They arose from the relational engagements



Figure 11. Participants engaging with objects, *Dear Discarded Objects, What's Your Story* (2017)

Photographs by Rachael Warriner.

of human and object matter present as they related to the environments of a given site. For educational scholars Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kind and Kocher (2017), matter is in movement. When we encounter matter, we encounter a process of reconfiguring that responds to a complex and active network of relations. In this work, the material bodies present are marked and re-shaped through the entanglement. They carry the marks or “cuts” (Barad, 2007) of previous experiences, which help to give them form in these contexts. A bottle may be found in the river. When it is placed in one of these installations, it appears as a “bottle.” With this title, it carries various connotations that have been formed through previous entanglements such as socio-cultural perceptions of form and function; its history as a container for holding liquid; its characteristic narrow neck often used for drinking or consuming a liquid substance. In the Athens Home for Discarded Objects it may hold these marks and connotations, while

also becoming “Hope Returned,” forgotten and abandoned in the river to be discovered “hopeful of new life, acceptance, joy”; or, “Old Coke Bottle”, “Its contents consumed long ago by an unknown but powerful being” (story excerpts from Athens Home for Discarded Objects, February 2017). It may be re-shaped, even slightly through the relational intra-actions that occurred in these moments of entanglement.

Karen Barad’s (2007) concept of intra-action helps to articulate these varied movements, both visible and invisible, that occur as matter is entangled with other matter for a time. Intra-actions may be imagined as the space between matter as they move together. In such space, bodies mutually affect one another. For Karin Hultman and Hillevi Lenz Taguchi (2010), “human and non-human bodies can thus be thought upon as forces that overlap and relate to each other. In doing so, they can be

understood to borrow or exchange properties with each other” (p. 529).

The stories recorded on the certificates of these installations provide markers of such movements and overlaps. As creative acts, these stories produced something new. They were the product of the relationship between a given object, story writer, and their respective histories as they came together in this given place and configuration. Many of the stories written for the objects carried traces of the human participants’ own histories and experiences. Through look, feel, texture, or wear the non-human matter may conjure memories.

After writing her story, “Clyde’s” author described her experiences receiving her first bike at the age of 7 and the excitement of getting on, falling off, getting back on and riding again. She then recounted an experience later in life where she commuted 45 minutes to work on

a bicycle and the daily perseverance it required to ride through weather, hills and self-doubt (personal correspondence, 2017).

In this story Clyde’s adventure took on elements of Hannah’s own, learning to ride a bike. I imagine that as Hannah holds Clyde, the words of their respective stories passed through one another. In this intra-action the wheel invited thoughts of symbolism, memories of perseverance and recognition of the work inspired by the particular conference we were a part of and the broader needs for action, hope and resilience. The wheel became both a unique entity, Clyde, the boy who rode the bike that carried this wheel on his seventh birthday, and also many other wheels, young cyclists and moments of perseverance in the layers of lived experience.

37. “Clyde”

Philadelphia, PA
November 4, 1992

Clyde pushed the pedals forward of his brand new bike, wobbling as he struggled to balance. Gaining momentum as he pushed through the resistance of the pavement beneath him. His heart racing with excitement as he rushed down the other side of the big hill on his street. He was doing it! He was riding a bike for the first time! And even if he fell off and skinned his knees or the palms of his hands, he would get back up and try again, because today he was 7 years old. Clyde represents the perseverance through the opposition we face, youthful idealism, and the “cycles: that give us the momentum to move forward.



Figure 12: Clyde the Wheel. Dear Discarded Object, What’s Your Story (2017).

In a conversation after the event, this participant mentioned that Letter and Bill Holder reminded them of their grandmother, who had a similar holder in her home. The likeness of the object to one in the grandmother's home might have inspired elements of the story. In the relationship, the holder became a recipient for the participant's experiences; for thoughts and ideas to come into being. It is unclear how autobiographical this story was for the participant or how biographical it may be for Letter and Bill Holder, but it carried reference to the separate life streams. The *thing-power* of the letter holder may have invited attention and awareness to the presence of similar material in the human participants' journeys. It may have called forth certain images or memories that connected to the broader network of lived experiences at play in the world.

As the holder conjured these thoughts and stories for participants in the intra-action, it also received these stories, adding them to the repertoire of stories carried within its fibers. As it moves forward it is imprinted with these words. This particular holder may reside in the participant's home, who mentioned wanting to paint it and display it. Or it may have had only a temporary residence there, and may now be in another place, but may bring the story created from this intra-action forth in future intra-actions. As the participant and Letter and Bill Holder continue to relate with other matter, their stories and experience from this intra-action may morph and interwine with other stories, to create a new story(ies).

Certificate of Adoption

Name of Object: Letter + Bill Holder Tag Number: 21

Place of Origin: Ridge Spring, South Carolina Date of birth: 4/7/1947

Biography:

After a long day of housekeeping, Mae was eager to collect letters from her loved ones who migrated north due to increase lynchings. She saved up all her money and purchased this holder to keep track of her cards. This holder has seen many stories, many stressors (bills), and the family legacy Mae left behind.

Name of Adopter: Ansley Pope Date of Adoption: 11/4/17

Signature: _____

One of our goals with this project is to continue to engage with new audiences, share our stories, and explore ways to creatively address issues of waste

Is it okay to use your story and name in potential articles, publications or art shows about this project? Yes No

Is it okay to use photographs of you from today's event in potential articles, publications, or art shows about this project? Yes No

Figure 13. Object certificate and transcription of story. Dear Discarded Object, What's Your Story. (2017)

21. Letter and Bill Holder, Ridge Spring, South Carolina. 4.7.1947

After a long day of housekeeping, Mae was eager to collect letters from her loved ones who migrated north due to increase lynching. She saved up all the money and purchased this holder to keep track of her cards. This holder has seen many stories, many stressors (bills), and the family legacy Mae left behind.

A participant wrote:

*I chose the Jeep sign, particularly because I LOVE Jeeps. I also come from a military family, so this sign has a connection with me. The sign itself is very capturing of the Jeep spirit and I was very happy when I saw it. It made me feel great, probably because of my past experiences and family history with Jeeps.
(personal correspondence, 2018)*

Traces of Movements

After the experiences, we are left with traces of the connections made. Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2007), describes trace as “any enduring mark left in or on a solid surface by continuous movement” (p. 43). Traces act both as imprints of moments passed and invitations for future shifts. In their encounters, the intra-actions of different material configurations leave marks.

Some are visible—dirt on a hand, a story written on a page. Others touch different senses—a memory called forth, a connection formed that may resurface again in spaces not yet known, or a shift in perception, feeling or mood instigated by the relational, temporary engagement. In their marks, they also invite further wandering, journeying, moving, entangling, entwining and unfolding, opening up space for pedagogical experiences.

Across the three installations, 134 objects were officially adopted. Additional stories were spoken but not recorded, and others were imagined but not yet shared in visual or verbal ways. Many object-participants went on to live with human companions, who sent messages and photographs of their new configurations. Letter and Bill Holder was painted and now hangs on a wall, holding bits and pieces of other life matter. Dox, a slated spoon cooks meals for homeless youth in Florida. Other object matter



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Timothy the Chair

b. August 1, 1972; Maryland

Timothy was hand-made for the youngest granddaughter of a carpenter. Her name was Alice, and she loved the little wooden chair for many years. When she outgrew, it her stuffed animals sat in it. It was passed down to her daughters, who passed it down to their own children. But alas, Timothy fell out of a moving truck one day en route to Georgia, and he was lost in the river. Until now.

Figure 14. Page from Athens Home for Discarded Objects Artist book (2017)

wasn't offered a new home but still continued to intra-act with new matter and stories. I received a collection of essays from an English class that visited the Science Library exhibition. In their essays, many shared their own points of connection with the objects presented, taking the stories in new pathways.

Attending to the object matter through storytelling invited an empathic way of being with matter that may extend beyond the objects of these installations to guide ways of being with other human, animal and environmental matter. Gray (2015) described empathy as "the practice of putting oneself in another person's position; getting curious, imagining, or recalling/observing personal events that promote understanding the other's point of view" (p. 53). In crafting the stories for these objects, there was an element of forcing the objects into our shoes, of attending to them as if they were human matter; thinking of names, "births" and actions in a human social capacity. With these acts, the objects also forced human participants to step into their shoes. The human participants were asked not only to consider the objects' experiences from a human framework of being, but also to imagine themselves as another form of matter, such as a bottle found in a river. They were asked to question what the object matter might have been doing? Where it might have been situated? What it might have considered playtime, worktime or leisure time? What its response may have been to being found in a river or roadway?

The act of imagining provides openings to experience different perspectives and modes of being (Greene, 1995). To extend this opening to non-human matter may help expand the idea of kinship beyond the confines of family, community, or even human matter. Kinship may instead be visualized through the web that holds varied matter together in an overlapping and collaborative system. In such a knotted and

interconnected world, "to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself" (Bennett, 2010, p.13).

An awakening to these interconnections through attentiveness and imagination challenges anthropocentric views that exploit and deplete. As they challenge the primacy of human matter these acts also bring ideas of hierarchy and value into question and invite participants to consider what matter benefits from value structures and what matter defines such structures.

A participant reflects on adopting an object at the Science Library Exhibition opening:

I remember the objects in the display case at the Science Library feeling very nostalgic. The reclaimed toys and electronics also felt elevated and celebrated in their presentation. The framed prints were lovely and gave the objects a personal-homey feel. I was a bit bewildered by how these objects felt so important after having lived in a body of water for a time. In writing the cassette tape's history, I considered my own tapes and the relationship I've had with them over time: from listening to tapes, recording bits on the radio, and eventually disregarding them--they now live under my bed, untouched. Remembering my tapes made me sad to think of this one having been trashed. But through the display in the science library and "home for discarded objects project", I felt more hope for objects and the care/sentiment they can bring through people's stories.

Pedagogical Possibilities

Participatory, playful, public projects such as these extend learning to unexpected locations as they intervene in daily movements. As interventions, they invite "unintentional, involuntary learning" (Ellsworth, 2005). A specific learning destination is not pre-determined but emerges through intra-actions with the materials of the configuration that are

purposefully put into a place as an invitation to engage and attend. These installations were designed to unfold as they might. They operated as a pedagogical experiment, exploring what might happen if varied mattered bodies were invited to come together in these spaces through playful, narrative acts. What journeys or relationships might emerge? Where might the stories lead us and how might the participants, human and other share in directing the course of events?

As spaces for embracing unknowns, these sites also became the conditions of possibility for pedagogical encounters. A pedagogical encounter is open and curious. It honors an exchange between active and vibrant matter through listening and paying attention to the influences such vibrant matter may bring. Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kind and Kocher (2017) align attentiveness with a desire to linger, spend time with, or “dwell in” something. To be attentive requires a pause, a “being with” other matter in moments of “emergent listening” (Davies, 2014) that honor and respond to the experiences and contributions of other bodies present in the configuration without pre-determined outcome. In their configurations, these installations invited moments of attentiveness to the varied matter of the world, including objects deemed as trash. Such moments of attentiveness offered invitations to see matter differently. An object that was once considered useless or beyond value found itself transformed to an agent with stories and influence, “Dox” who cooks meals at a Florida shelter, or “Timothy the Chair”, who brought happiness to a family of sisters.

Particular possibilities for acting exist at every moment, and these changing possibilities entail a responsibility to intervene in the world's becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering (Barad, 2003, p.827).

Beyond works of art and pedagogical encounters, these installations were designed to be artful tactics, intervening in the quotidian movements of public spaces in order to play with social, political and economic ideas (de Certeau, 1984; Richardson, 2010). As Desai and Darts (2016) contested, public spaces “still serve as important spaces for democratic participation, where people engage in dialogue, dissent, and protest regarding issues of concern to them” (p. 192). Conceptually and pedagogically, the work of these installations honored a responsibility to care for the “world's becoming” (Barad, 2003, p. 827). They were challenges to a system that kills the vibrancy of matter in pursuit of comfort and convenience; one that erases the stories of matter and material bodies.

As forms of dissent in public sites, works such as these offer a call to collectively reshape the world. Promoting care for matter, such as the discarded objects of these configurations, encourages the creation of more sustainable systems, turning away from systems that discriminate, oppress, or discard based on ideas of separation and difference to honor instead, the value and interconnections of life's varied matter.

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