

Untitled

(complicate, devotion, dualism, evidence, fraternize, gap, interpretation, naiveté, riddle, unsettle) 2018

by

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Stuff, objects and things (abstract)

The following essay includes information that surrounds my investigations into the human desire to invest in objects. This writing accompanies questions concerning systems built for, by, and with things, as well as the possibilities of breaching those boundaries. Explorations around what becomes available in this stuff when significance becomes both flexible and untethered are considered from separate, sometimes overlapping vantages within my practice. Using complicate, devotion, dualism, evidence, fraternize, gap, interpretation, naiveté, riddle, and unsettle as anchor points, I contemplate the real and sensual, the emotional and physical, experiences that objects provoke in all types of possible relationships.

Introduction to organization (complicate)

In some ways this work should be relatively easy to write about; the forms are derivative, they can be traced back to found object referents. They are plainly situated in an available history of cast ceramics and handwork in textiles. The palette is not overly sophisticated and easy to attribute to ceramic surfaces, acrylic paint and domestic materials. Their refusal of the pedestal, use of the interstitial space where the wall meets the floor, and the direct and temporal mark-making can all be readily placed in contemporary practice.

There are also other more complicated details that could be speculated about; What role does materiality play? What is the relationship to the changing identity of formalism, craft, labor, fetish, etc.? A summary and description of these objects would then be complete if these installations were composites only of forms that are mimetic, but this 1:1 approach makes no accommodation for that which is best known through absence.

There are a lot of correct things that can be written about this work that are not the work itself. These pieces are objects and any attempt to know them through words starts with translation which implies a certain infidelity. I am interested in the specific shape of these failures and the further clues they offer. What questions are opened up when these objects cannot be fully apprehended by rationally and by description? Although necessarily rooted in the bounds of language, I would argue that what is not said between these pieces, offers more potent information. It would be a disservice to suggest that this work can be fully received by describing and summing its physical attributes. All of these ideas put into words form a cheering crowd, threatening to drown the objects themselves out. In Pamplona, you have a better chance of being trampled by other individuals running from the bulls, than you do of making contact yourself. The spectators become the sport. The traditional purpose of this paper is to offer support and framing to the work, I have organized this writing in acknowledgment of the risk of the work being trampled by naming the most accessible and least disputable points outright.

Rather than accepting the partial construct that is offered by words as a failure inherent to the medium, I have elected to collect this writing in a way that exploits what cannot be said and honors the inchoate connections that exist outside the semiotic¹. I have framed the writing in sections that instead of

following a linear flow, sit more adjacent to one another. This is achieved through arranging the ideas by alphabetical order of the subheadings of complicate, devotion, dualism, evidence, fraternize, gap, interpretation, naiveté, riddle, and unsettle, resulting in more of a list than a progression. Although potentially confounding to the immediate and complete description of my practice, alphabetical organization is employed as it is a method that follows the logic of letters (which are the material of language).

A list is a grouping of potentially disparate ideas or items that can best be made sense of in relationship- whether to each other or to an initial concept. List making accepts possible hierarchies and redundancies without relying on static structure. Lists are open-ended, chameleonic and fragmented. I see the resultant gaps between sections as possibilities similar to the spaces between the other elements of my work. Lists or litanies² have the ability to democratize, to present together literal, physical and conceptual. The proximity in the organization of this writing is intended to create pause as the reader bridges the space in-between. This is an attempt to include those parts for which there are no words, or where accuracy gives way to subjectivity, to give face to spaces that might otherwise be left out of language or dismissed with labels such as *coincidental* or *intuitive*. The seemingly arbitrary or alphabetical organization of this writing is meant to complicate singular and immediate understanding by creating a fragmented linkage that speaks just as much to difference as it does to similarity.

Security blanket (devotion)

Fabric is soft, it is of the body- on the body, on the bed, swaddled, bandaged, sanitary, conceived of by hands. It is contained, fibers bound together, it is spooled or rolled in balls, it is waiting, it is more potential. It covers and wraps as a shell, taking on the shape as it protects. I use this material to create a collection of tiny and imperfect knots, each one an individual record of the motion of my hand. So many loops linked together, fastened to one another, creating a net, blanket or pad. As objects they show marks of repetition, accumulation, obsession; in installation they become part of the organization. These pieces are in service, at the ready, an embodiment of preparation, permanence and durability. They are flattened color drawings, sculptural collections and domestic settings. Tiny knots are tied, one at a time, over and over again to create a tuft, cushion or carpet, a gentle demarcation (figure 8). In their history is a stockpile of attention that cares for, makes secure, and builds, a world.

In this process, I allow the material to take some responsibility for the shape of the work. I do not crochet masterfully, yet continue to loop the yarn. My lack of skill in this medium is apparent in the holes and abrupt pattern shifts. I have not presented row upon row of uniform stitches, polished and straight as soldiers. My army has blemishes, gaps, literal openings and confused directions. These interruptions are markers that remove the threat of perfection and anonymity. Each motion brings me back into this work. The artist and writer Jessica Stockholder connects the personal work of the artist to the greater implications of labor, as she points out:

Now we are aware of very little, if any, of the making of the things we need. It happens elsewhere, often overseas. We are able to have many things because they don't cost what they would if we ourselves were the makers. Where Marx worried about alienated labor—the effect of workers making things that they themselves could not afford to buy—today we experience the opposite (but no less alienating) phenomenon of being able to buy things that we could not afford to make.³

Stockholder references time as a commodity that might be considered wasted in creating these soft pieces, the end product is simply not worth it. Part of my interest is in the challenge of time that can be given, wasted, spent, passed, used and saved in relation to handwork. For this body of work, it is necessary that these textiles are made by hand and by me, that they display productivity and also that they are inefficient. Thousands of wool strings are looped one by one by my hand, into carpets that serve only as a soft record. They are the evidence of my attention, a devotional. I breathe in and out, my fingers move and together we control or catalogue the future through careful pacing... one knot, one row... The resultant wool forms are reminiscent of decorative textiles used primarily to cloak, comfort, domesticate⁴, or feminize. The specificity of their shape implies function, their softness and palette suggests personal affects, materials that are in service to bodies (figure 1).

There is a futility inherent to this gesture. Because these rows of knots are easily and more accurately accomplished by machines, they beg the question of extravagance. The consumer choices are just as soft, yet cheap and often disposable. There is a paradox of distance at play here. Domestic textiles are kept separate (anonymous) from personal physical experience by means of efficient production, you simply cannot afford to make your own bath matt. Also, textiles that display personal investment are kept separate from base physical experience. If I so choose (however irresponsibly) to spend my time hooking a rug, it should be displayed, and appreciated with the higher senses and intellect, and kept at a distance from animal situations such as naked wet feet. The type of craft I am working with seems to be situated in a very specific position as a past-time. I would suggest that the products of this handwork are meant to be viewed as a record of the movements of the body and not as items for the use of the body. In both practice and product there is a controlled affirmation of existence that is separate from use value. The affordable and anonymous substitutes are more comfortably suited to serve corporeal duties. The personal labor of hands is kept at a distance from the danger of bodies, as the reality of bodies is relegated to the realm of disposable. A dividing line of control is drawn between personal evidence we are meant to see and that which seeps through the gaps.



Figure 1: Jess Portfleet *Untitled with crutches*, 2018

Having cake, eating Things (dualism)

Collecting involves grouping, placing and classifying- forms of not just subordination, but of consideration and care. As they are gathered, they are also claimed by the collection. As objects are abstracted by other significances, their subjective value becomes their first identity.

Baudrillard states, in his *Subjective Discourse*:

*For children, the act of collecting is a rudimentary way of mastering the outside world, of arranging, classifying and manipulating.*⁵

I am interested in collecting as a form of practicing control: control over objects, self-control and control over social status. It is in this act of collecting, the impulse to impose or codify that makes them objects to a subject. It also implies an other-ness latent in objects, an unruly quality that they must either possess or signify, a need to be corralled. Jane Bennet describes this as “thing-power”⁶, a term she uses to acknowledge the potential qualities in things that transgress the bounds of their human-centric contexts. I am interested in how objects can operate as magic mirrors and prosthetic devices, both reflecting and extending human experience (figure 2). This is not just in the act of ordering the unkempt, but in the tenderness of gathering, in combining the security of ownership with the possibility of potential.



Figure 2: Jess Portfleet *Untitled part 4* (installation detail) 2017

Souvenir⁷ is a name we give to objects that act as a physical corroboration of an experience that has a time and a place. These types of objects lend authenticity, they are metonymic. We develop terminology to frame specific significances; Commodifying firsts and lasts, celebrating rarity, prizing even obsolescence. A souvenir does not have the same value the next day as it does after years have passed. When we name a keepsake, we freeze it as a memento of a moment and place. We ask it to stay put while we travel on and grow. The trick of the souvenir- of memory in general, is the reunion of that original moment and the present. It is in the act of attempting to match them together again, to line up distortions. It is in this bending and realigning that new perspectives become available in the cracks. Time affords necessary distance to shift something we thought we knew as the need for accuracy is replaced with the trust of something we can touch in the present. Objects seem to offer physical, tangible evidence, but this evidence bows to our own personal lens. They are as we see them. Perhaps, this naming simply serves the desire to invest in objects, and *souvenir* is an accepted and relatively safe model (as it arguably has one foot rooted in truth, but whose truth?) of replacing use value with the subjectivity of the owner. Often these objects are elevated above their functional counterparts as they are tools of social distinction and aspirations, but this label also provides permission to task objects with holding emotional content. Souvenir could be a gateway object, one that opens admission of other possible significances. French philosopher Gilles Deleuze cites Spinoza's *Short Treatise II*:

*It is never we who affirm or deny something of a thing; it is the thing itself that affirms or denies something of itself in us.*⁸

It is this simple moment of strange reflection that I hope to open up in my work. There exists a blink of connection when light is shed into parts so withdrawn that they are perceived as separate, but not completely foreign, players. Using the arm-pit pads from a pair of crutches, I create casts that afford a

fragment of recognition- both visual and physical, yet their surface, shift in context, quantity and arrangement all work to keep them from being fully apprehended (figure 3).



Figure 3: Jess Portfleet *Untitled with crutches* (installation detail) 2018

The viewer is held in a place near recognition with suspended resolution. These objects aren't misrepresented, but left fragmented, they are changed and now offer a partial view. They are accessible, yet without conclusion that accompanies full understanding or naming. In this space their Thing-hood makes itself known. Objects offer a physical reflection, dependent and controllable. The term Thing implies a strangeness, an otherness, a primitive and unscripted physicality. Perhaps there is more to objects than can be entirely captured by the predictable subject/ object relationship. Object is something we know and have a place for, Thing includes possibility of other. I know I can't step outside of this relationship and that may not even be my desire, but I am curious about the Thing part of objects as another type of reflection, bent and fugitive.

The pieces I use in installation take advantage of this object dualism by being at once recognizable with their own logic as well as unresolved and feral. The act of collecting is to create order, to stage control, to bolster through physical manifestations. Many types of collections have prefigured solutions: stamps, sports cards, coins and other editions have a specific sequence and number of components, they have a predicated way of behaving together. This is by definition, effective when you collect objects, but more compelling when you collect Things.

Shopping as provocation (evidence)

The start of my process is both material and formal. I begin by visually shopping for shapes to crop and reframe. I use the term *shopping* intentionally here because I am looking for objects I can claim and take home to make and remake my own. Tools with specific ergonomics, nesting containers and toys are

objects I search for the curves and volume that will become the master for subsequent casts. Toys make effective starting places because they have already been reloaded with *play* as their first significance. Consider a toy hammer; it is functionless for pounding, it only embodies the idea of hammer, distilled and caricaturized.

Objects that have been cast in iron, plastic or resin are also compelling because they are both common, and fluent in the language of reproducibility. Artist Jessica Stockholder speaks to the materiality of everyday objects:

I use material that's inexpensive, readily available. It's really a pleasure that we have all this stuff around us. I love plastic; I think it's gorgeous, and I love it. All of these objects are full of design and other people's thinking, and I ride on the backs of that. I think that my work engages the means of production that we live with, even while it embodies things from a long time ago.⁹

The way Stockholder approaches materials points to many ideas I am considering in my practice: the way her works move between singular objects and installations, the way she incorporates different materials into one experience, and the way specific cultural hints work with her commitment to formalism. She works with found objects that are (sometimes) recognizable, save for their everydayness has been confounded by their arrangements, color, and added materials. Bits of the readymade objects peek through the work hinting at furniture, home improvement, and consumer culture, but without usurping the physicality of their combined experience. This flirting with objects that speak to consumption and use, such as tools, containers, fasteners, building components and so much plastic, grounds the work in consumer culture, but only enough to open up recognition. Stockholder is less concerned about the tropes certain types of things offer and more interested in investigating material relationships using what she calls “stuff”¹⁰. One might recognize the plastic pails, but that contextual hint drifts in and out. What remains is the red tapered cylinders, repeated (figure 4). The way that she disregards how these objects *should* be used strips them of their framing and invites in other interpretations. It's a quiet refusal that reads as possibility. I am also interested in the way she uses surface treatments to unify these disparate items, to challenge recognition and draw focus, especially with color. These pieces have been freed from their original cultural context to then adhere to their own logic. They are convincing, I believe that they are exactly where they should be, and am left to consider not how but why. Additionally, these objects are in relationship with people, they keep within the scale of the body, they are from a world that humans can physically understand. I think this is rich territory for my practice as I move back and forth between control and disorder.

Flea markets, thrift stores, junk yards and dollar stores all offer a wide range of inexpensive, sometimes broken items, that can be physically explored and bargained for. This act of searching involves seeking out places that have not branded their wares with slick packages, places that allow for reimagining through pawing and digging and gathering. The spaces I look to as starting places are margins, cultural dead zones that operate with their own value contexts. Scrap yards sell pieces by material and weight, regardless of how shiny and what brand. Dollar stores operate under the pretense that everything is the same price.

Thrift stores often hold bag sales, where anything you can fit in a bag is five dollars. This democratization of objects makes anything feel possible. By leveling traditional use value, it allows other, more formal attributes to shine out of context. I search these objects with my body, I carry them around, stage them, try them out together in an attempt to understand them more fully and coax more out of them.



Figure 4: Jessica Stockholder *JS 263* 1995 (furniture, red buckets, bread basket, lamp, yellow spool of thread, acrylic paint)

There is something in the cast-off, second class nature of these sources and their piles of offerings, that invoke the treasure hunt- the time spent searching informs the outcome, allowing for chance invites intuitive decision making. I know what I am looking for, but mostly, only when I find it. I know when objects feel right, but I need to have complete physical access to trust that intuition. I could not see images on a screen and then order objects and have them delivered as a starting place. All of my attempts to create my own templates skip this looking and feeling, cultural gleaning step. My experiments with hand modeling, digital imaging and 3D printing have taught me that this first life of the original is a touchstone for the resultant work. Although I attempt to reset significance in my pieces, I rely on found objects¹¹ as the starting place for my casting practice (figure 5).



Figure 5: found objects

Twenty percent glue (fraternize)

Specific objects, usually from refuse, are chosen and then reassigned through casting. Fabric pieces that offer a promise of security, an imperfect domesticity, a language of time, are staged in relationship to the ceramic objects. These elements are further connected by drawing, painting and arrangement to each other and the space. Proximity plays an important role.

The modularity of the materials I am working with allows them to be realized in response to each other and the spaces they inhabit. I approach the installation with several boxes of materials and make relationship choices in conversation with the site. The very technical and time-consuming nature of the processes I use to build the parts of each work, supports their intuitive looseness in installation. The gestural quality of the temporal elements, affords the other components the ability to connect without the restrictions of precision. Allowing them to have their own logic in response to the space and each other further blurs the line of subject/object relationship pushing questions of potential. The philosopher and writer Graham Harman, a champion of object-oriented ontology, offers that objects have their own discrete way of perceiving and responding to one another.

(They)...float in a sensual ether. When they interact, they do so only by the means they know internally but also in relation to the qualities [of the other object] in which they 'bathe'. In this vein, objects hold tremendous possibility, they are sleeping giants holding their forces in reserve, and do not unleash all their energies at once.¹²

He suggests that not only will the proximity of these objects to one another effect the way they are perceived by the viewer, but moreover it shifts the way they respond to each other. I have witnessed changes in the pieces in installation based on proximity, quantity and placement. I use the term *witness* intentionally to describe a phenomenon that is impartially observed. It is pretty exciting for me to consider that *they*, the objects, might be informing each other and operating outside of not just my anticipation, but my perception as well. This presents a provocative slip or release in the concept of object possession. It is a step towards letting go of some control, letting the objects make some of the decisions. This speculation shows up in my work in the form of play, in arranging and rearranging the components of each piece to see what happens. In moments I find object oriented ontology¹³ a useful tool, allowing those ideas to suspend some of the accountability that burdens my making.

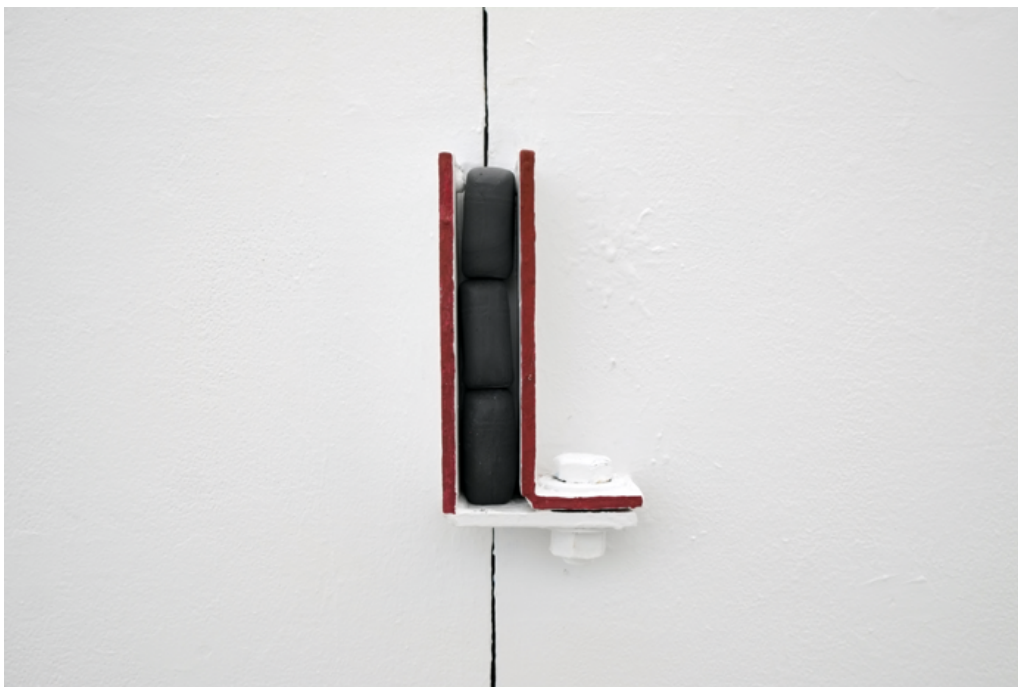


Figure 6: Jess Portfleet *Untitled part 11* (installation detail) 2017

In addition to what these objects give each other, viewers can't help but ad lib the bridges between them. Because objects are fugitive until they are understood, it is human to attempt to bring them to rest by constructing connections, to tame the wilderness, to own the Things. By combing experience and understanding, we *make sense*, we subordinate into a predictable system, our own system. The further the objects seem to drift from one another, the more sense is required to hold them together, the deeper the search through the internal catalog for binding referents and clues. By putting objects together that do not follow an immediate linear narrative, I am asking the viewer to conjure part of that stickum. Gertrude Stein speaks to a similar paratactic use of language in an interview regarding her approach to *Tender Buttons*:

I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word, and at this same time I found out very soon that there is no such thing as putting them together without sense...Any human being putting down words had to make sense out of them¹⁴

Stein recognizes that she cannot keep her words separate and complete just in their individuality, they always exist in relationship. Any attempt to isolate them only makes space more obvious and their bond more desperate. It is the gaps between these words, the construction of their together-meaning that informs my making-in-the-gallery approach. I introduce the objects to each other and build the installation in response to their interactions, my perception of their interactions (figure 6). Through the use of play and responsive rearranging, subjective relationships are invested and reinvested in and by these Things. I view my role as a provocateur of object relations and their participation in human experience.



Figure 7: Jess Portfleet *Chair, Stove, Candle* 2017, found objects, acrylic, ceramic

Modern marvels (gap)

I find myself in junkyards walking the aisles of wrecked vehicles pulling at housings and fluid reservoirs. This is looking with my hands at objects that are not for retail sale, they have not been shined up for consumption and individually priced, but remain raw, vulnerable, sticky with oil or transmission fluid. I am an interloper in this system of wrecked designs all lying dormant with their guts splayed and available. I am fascinated by the specificity of newer car parts. Their inner workings provide a slick and molded puzzle of interlocking bits that not only serve specific functions but cradle each other. When the washer fluid tank is removed, it retains the shape of its placement, making that absence known. It is articulated to fit and function in the wheel-well, in specific relation (figure 8). Its shape offers a language of installation and removal. In such a tight system, any break creates a gap. A gap is a space between two things, it only exists in relationship. Gaps can be physical, but that is not a necessary limitation. A gap is unfinished, it is a provocation. A gap implies both absence and connection. It is a thing created by implication.

The French psychoanalyst and theorist Jacques Lacan asserts:

(The Thing) "will always be represented by emptiness, precisely because it cannot be represented by anything else-or, more exactly, because it can only be represented by something else".¹⁵



Figure 8: Jess Portfleet *Untitled 4* (installation view) 2017, ceramic, cotton

Removing the part from the vehicle creates a displacement. It moves the object from a place of belonging to other. Cropping part of the piece for a mold creates another gap. Casting the piece in clay, gap. Between each incremental shift there is a space. This displacement speaks to an absence of original context. These gaps do not behave in a line the way a trail of breadcrumbs might, but more like the spacing between chords from a shattered vase. They branch out in every direction, and although they

suggest a volume, the original shape is anyone's fancy. If you were to put that vase back together, it would not only be altered by the guesswork of your hands, it would now be twenty percent glue, contaminated by the *something else* necessary to hold it together.

Lady Mondegreen (interpretation)

All of this fussing about with the material of language is not borne of a need to create catchy titles, or even to complete this writing. Moreover, I am curious about the potential in the pitfalls of translation. For example, take the word "fussing" (a term whose phonetics are fortunately in line with its meaning); what might that word look like if translated into clay, into yarn, oil pastel, into a dance, or a meal? What parts of the intellectual symbol are retained and which parts are informed by the translator and new medium? What is the relationship of these renditions to one another or the original signification? What slippage that occurs in these iterations is not necessarily a failure or betrayal, but the specific mark of each shift. Instead of omitting language, I have opted to open my perspective to include words in this material game of telephone. It is the places that don't match that highlight individual voices. It is the impossibility of complete fidelity that showcases subjectivity. Interpretation could be seen as an approximation, a kludge of discourse — in generates something new and specific to each situation. In these approximations there is possibility of something new being turned up.

There is a specificity in language, a precision that takes on new meanings through shifting context or *misuse*. Children play a game where by repeating a word over and over again, signification falls away revealing the phonetic framework, which then slips off leaving the aural experience and the physical vocalization. The system of language becomes only a perimeter and any breach of that boundary invites other sense, or nonsense. This transgression is a game -absurd and playful, but it is also a denial of the controlling grip of language. This is not unlike the way that I am utilizing the casting process. Multiplicity asks: can the signification of an object be stressed through repetition such that it becomes saturated and preassigned meaning sloughs off? Freed from original connections, these spaces may open up to repopulation in any direction.

Song lyrics are ripe for misinterpretations, they are filled with poetic liberties, emotional intonations, regional accents and a host of other stylistic choices. It goes without saying that decisions are made outside of concern for fidelity to any one vocabulary. These complications do not keep listeners from signing along, and muddy lyrics become possibilities for interpretation. Personal subjectivities present themselves in this experience of guessing and mumbling along with the music. Shower-singers are willing to fill-in and overwrite, in order to make their own sense in accordance with personal logic. This is the backbone of any adhocism, it speaks to what is available as much to what is needed. In this case, personal histories define available interpretations. I bring this analogy in because the popular and low risk of fumbling song lyrics showcases unedited translations of perceptions that have not been filtered through the intellect or ego. It is the opportunity for this confident rounding-up, this playful guess-work, that I hope to create in my arrangements.

Kid wealth (naiveté)

Object value is a human construct, a physical manifestation of a connection to a larger idea. Riches can be represented through quantity, with abundance and scarcity on either end of the spectrum. Bounty is connected to security and support, to the ideas of *having enough* and *never running out*. Quantity suggests potential, there is always another opportunity- always more, but it can also describe past experience. There are objects we can't let go simply because we have not yet done so, accumulation of shared history creates responsibility. So many days together builds and changes experience. Wealth can also be constructed through singularity; the impossibility of reproduction defines objects as irreplaceable and limited. Unique objects conjure importance in their finality. Although in seeming opposition, both of these concepts operate as mirrors for human experience. They are subject to the push and pull a basic need for acceptance and security and the desire for importance and individuality.

Value is often associated with money, maybe because dollars offer a contained system, quantifying what might otherwise be impossibly varied. My work seeks out and showcases objects as they operate outside of this dollar system, and their direction of departure. What monetary value is there the hint of an old fluid reservoir, a broken headlight, a railroad tie bracket, or an empty Tic-Tac container? These are not expensive objects or prized for their singularity. By not just removing these items from the system they originally operate in, but recasting them in their own, I reset their value potential by confounding their cultural label. How do we experience value before we get swept up in the dominating structure of money and ownership? Can these objects be emotionally reconfigured and recycled? What are the functions of value that are not predicated by the subject/object relationship lead by a system whose measure is vanity? Perhaps instead of needing more objects, we desire more ways of knowing objects?

The rubric for assigning meaning is flooded with moving parts, unfixed and relational. Perhaps instead of needing more objects, we desire more ways of knowing objects? It would be impossible to detail all outcomes, significance drifts around in a perpetual game of "if this, then that". My employment of objects that refuse this naming is more than the classic prince and the pauper trick, it is a way of reknowing by first unknowing. It offers permission to consider these objects individually, physically, and in relation to each other and our experience.

Haim Steinbach is an artist whose work is also interested in the malleability of value. In his Shelf works, the construction and arrangement of the display are a primary focus (figure 9). Steinbach positions and contains objects on different iterations of the shelf as a display of the complicated constructs of personal and cultural identity. He exploits the social structures that support these object value systems through a refusal or a leveling. He questions hierarchies by placing disparate objects together on the same shelf. This move could be seen as a more sophisticated thrift store bag sale, where the significance of the subjective system falls away and is replaced by something democratic. In order to accomplish this tension, Steinbach asks the viewer to consider what these objects are in relationship to each other, but first, the viewer must figure out what the objects are in relationship to themselves. The viewer is forced to confront how they identify with objects and the markets that support them.



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Figure 9: Haim Steinbach *ultra red #2*, 1986

Plucking objects from their place in the system, is one way to open them up to subjective ways of valuing, but removing the system from the objects might allow them to be experienced even more freely. Bennet describes this potential as a “before knowing”.

*My primary goal has been to give expression to thing-power... My contention is that this peculiar dimension persists even inside the ubiquitous framing of human thought and perception. I have also suggested that a playful, naive stance toward nonhuman things is a way for us to render more manifest a fugitive dimension of experience.*¹⁶

Her playful stance invites experience of things outside of how they are conventionally catalogued by collective experience.

Steinbach and Bennet are both interested in the power of objects, but come at the relationship from very different sides. While Steinbach suggests human connections with objects are a product of a learned desire for physical reflections of what we perceive as our identity, Bennet is focused more on the unlimited possibilities that things might offer without foreclosing the relationship. The dividing line seems to be the idea of possession, with Steinbach asking the viewer to question the validity and structure of their predetermined and dominate relationships with objects and Bennet wondering what might happen if we throw out preconceptions and just allow things (to be).

Hours of my childhood were spent lugging things around, a thermos filled with pleasing stones, a backpack with horse chestnuts carefully selected and sorted, popsicle sticks and pine needles tucked into tiny zippered pockets. I learned though experiencing them, coding their attributes and arranging them in accordance to our together rationale. The burden of their weight told me I was rich, with each step the chestnuts rattled against my metal lunch box proclaiming my wealth, my security, my belonging. I was not alone, and as I struggled to make sense of my power in the physical world around me, my chestnuts, flattened leaves, river rocks and popsicle sticks became allies. I build my own team from objects I care for with a logic we develop together. They participate both as a physical reflection of my human-ness and with their own strange other-ness. My ownership and consideration for them creates significance that usurps their tree-seed being while part of their alien biology informs my concept of self. Freud describes this doubling in his 1919 essay:

*... the one possesses knowledge, feeling and experience in common with the other, identifies himself with another person, so that his self becomes confounded, or the foreign self is substituted for his own—in other words, by doubling, di-viding and interchanging the self.*¹⁷

There is a moment of consideration where there is a dissolution of the boundary between self and other, where the chestnut shines back human qualities to inner chestnut-ness. The objects act as surrogates and prosthetics. Once these connections are discovered, awareness heightens to anticipate and even promote, further such connections until the world is filled with mirrors and doors.



Figure 10: Jess Portfleet *Untitled part 3, 4, 7, 11 and 2* (installation view) 2017

My relationship to objects straddles this line in the sand. On one hand I align with Steinbach, these chestnuts are mine, they are currency, physical security, booty, they lift me up because they are under me, I use them as an echolocation device to determine where I fit in. Conversely, they are also Bennet's possibility, unknown. Because they are not acknowledged by the main socio-economic value system, their potential is limitless. They are primarily as I perceive, and I have not drawn boundaries around them. I am excited to see what else they might (offer, give, provoke, do, need) be. I see this duality operating most strongly in the presentation of the work. In some arrangements objects are bound, held in reserve, stockpiled, while other installations appear more as congregations than collections (figure 10). Some installations utilize known furniture, but challenge the traditional human centric way in which it functions (figure 11).



Figure 11: Jess Portfleet *Untitled with crutches*, 2018

Words make different things (riddles)


Words are signifiers for images which are signifiers for things for which there are no words. Indeed, a picture is worth a thousand words; But is that exhaustive, and which thousand and to whom? Language involves translating perceptions into an ordered system, it requires intellectual digestion. In the rawest human moments, vocal communication strips down to emotional noise, we are at a loss for words because finding them requires stepping into the system. Recognition cannot be contained, it is something that happens everywhere and all at once. Objects say lots of things that bypass the structure of language. Words, labels and classification risk anchoring the work and announcing it as one thing, or at least a participant in an order. As the writer Malcom Gladwell suggests:

*We all have an instinctive memory for faces. But by forcing you to verbalize that memory — to explain yourself — I separate you from those instincts.*¹⁸

My recent work occupies a fragile space that could easily be stunted by explanation. The grounding nature of description and definition act as a bright light that scares away any shadows that foster subjective (mis)interpretations. Intuition is personal, it feels innate. Too much information overcooks what is already known.

Historically, I've side-stepped this potential thunder-stealing by keeping my work untitled or using non-informative numerics for reference. I have been reluctant to write directly about my work because words feel permanent, they substantiate, they imply a one truth that never feels satisfactory. I could spend several thousand words trying to reveal something easily understood with the body, to find that in the end I have mostly succeeded in explaining it away. Perhaps it is more useful to work with the failures of language rather than attempting to apprehend all there is to know through writing.

I look to the way Haim Steinbach uses plain language in his *Untitled* pieces. By labeling what the work simply physically is, Steinbach not only refuses to over direct the viewer, but the strongest provocation of the work is left intentionally unspoken. The terms he chooses to classify each component in the *Untitled* works are direct and accurate, but incomplete. They offer only a fragment of information, a partial view from one side. Consider *Untitled (rabbit, sailor)*, the labels *rabbit* and *sailor* are not incorrect, but in choosing these, Steinbach steps over the obvious and loaded, instead settling on limited and simplified (figure 11). The Stay Puft marshmallow man is inarguably a sailor, but only someone outside of the cultural system in which he operates would find that label useful. By highlighting this accessory element in the title, Steinbach further flattens the collective/individual value system this piece is already troubling.



Removed Due To Copyright Restrictions

Figure 12: Haim Steinbach, *Untitled (rabbit, sailor)* 2015

In relation to my recent work, I have been examining structures of language that use their directness to complicate rather than explain. I am drawn to paratactic style, to limericks¹⁹ and riddles, to prose so bare it obfuscates with obviousness. The structure of riddles and limericks are especially compelling as it connects to the way I install the work in a space. Both are built of clues that operate individually but work in relationship through phonetics, rhyming, and rhythm, each offering a glimpse or partial uncovering of the whole. With each hint, the reader moves closer to an understanding, which can only be completely experienced with all parts considered together. There is a teasing in this slow reveal that often concludes in a twist of language and resultant paradigm shift.

Haunted house (unsettled)

These casts are made of clay which is poured into the mold as liquid, then freed from the plaster as vulnerable and malleable, and finally fired into permanence. The soft handling of clay yields to both the exact edges of the molds as well as the touch of my hand. It both records and serves as a record. Additional production marks such as seams and pour spurs are left or smoothed by my fingers, both clues of process, hints at replication.

The results of slipcasting are hollow forms that serve both as an edition and as individual objects themselves, both type and token. They are stand-ins, they are place-holders, props, they are an outline, they hold a shape in space. They are also an army, an accumulation, a pile of leaves, an obsession, abundance. Casting offers a repeatable print of just the surface, ethereal, recognizable, empty. This idea of imprinting or echoing is furthered by multiplication.

Consider footprints on the beach as distortion of space by the walker. Their multiplicity alludes to time, an overlapping accumulation more than a progression. Could this repetition also be fingernail trimmings or the worn-down blade of a kitchen knife? These marks of process offer an incomplete and fractured glimpse of the processes of the body, but not the body itself. Their multiplicity offers a distorted reverberation one step out of synch, a misregistration, another gap. Bending the perspective to reflect one-half click off center opens the space between anticipated knowing and *other*. The point of the pieces is not to figure them out, but the heightened awareness that comes from examining the gaps. It is not to answer and know, but a path to another perspective.



Figure 13: Jess Portfleet *untitled part 3* (installation detail) 2017, ceramic, cotton jersey

The absence of the interior of the cast is also a vacancy. It suggests a possible return, a housing, a husk, a container. Not only does casting create an actual shell, but it fragments and abstracts the original, touching the unnamable space before recognition by shifting materiality. This displacement removes the mask of familiarity and exposes attributes that may go unnoticed in context.

In the routine of daily life, perception perpetually forecloses sensuous experience in order to render the physical world phenomenal (which means to render it habitable). The difference between the apperceptive constitution of the thing, in what we might call its objecthood, and the experience of the thing in what we might call its thinghood, emerges in the moment (and no doubt, only as a moment) of re-objectification that results from a kind of misuse- turning the picture bottom up, standing on one's head. We might materialize the world around us through habit, but only the interruption of habit will call our attention to brute physicality.²⁰

Might material misrepresentation serve as misuse in this idea? Recasting pieces of metal and plastic in ceramic displaces their first identity in order to lay bare their physicality and open them up to new

significance, or another significance. I've removed the plastic washer fluid reservoir from a vehicle and cast it in clay, over and over. The surfaces are opaque, showcasing clay and ceramic processes (figure 12). With function or use-value shifted, these objects are not free from, but now opened up to other interpretations and investment. They are familiar, but not recognizable, domestic but irrational.

Perhaps they are specters of familiar objects.

Ghosts are compelling because they are a continuation, a living on, a bending of something once known. They are an unfinished hallucination. Through transformation, they are unbound from the systems that govern the mortal world and gifted abilities that render them personally potent. They transcend time, gravity, and other rational boundaries. Haunting²¹ could be described as an illogical treatment of that which is deeply personal, the loss of control over that which you thought you conducted. The power of this fiction is only limited, and also directed, by the imagination of the obsessed. The difference between the repetition of haunting and that of habituation is defined by control (the perception of safety). Ghosts invite a breach of emotional etiquette by exploiting boundaries. In their nebulousness, they provide a space and a shape for entertaining the unresolved and unsettling.



Figure 14: Jess Portfleet *Untitled 7* (installation detail) 2017, chair, acrylic, ceramic

Although the ideas that complicate, devotion, dualism, evidence, fraternize, gap, interpretation, naiveté, riddles, and unsettle each offer are partial and specific views of my practice, this list is not intended to be exhaustive. It is in the linkages²² between these ideas, what connects and separates them, that keeps me

engaged in the process. This list could be seen as a narrative with pieces missing, a truth filled with vacancies. It is a detailed and ordered structure that could reflect any fancy of kinship. In this case the unspoken heading is: “what I am able to share about my practice”.

The preface to Foucault’s *Order of Things* makes clear how subjectivity builds not only what we know, but what we can know, in the form of *how*. It exposes the concept that there is always a system, a method, an organization, as well as the limits/limitlessness of correlations. He references Borge’s description of a “certain Chinese encyclopedia”²³ whose absurdity puts on display not only the failure of language to describe completely, but its triumph of aligning otherwise impossible worlds. It is a list that collapses the boundaries between what is known intellectually, experienced physically, and that which cannot be known. Possibility resides in the parts that are left incomplete, in the leaps required to flatten those gaps. In my practice this shows up in playing in and out of order, the dance around recognition, value and identity, and the possibility of other potentials in objects. Each of these ideas describe fluid relationships humans have with objects. Each offer situations that support playful and unfixed significances that participate in the continuous feedback loop we have with Things.

Work as work (verdict)

Each day of the installation as well as the exhibition, I would look at the work and consider how it was operating, and then determine if I felt things needed to be (re)moved. Throughout the MFA exhibition I received questions about audience response, especially with regards to (s)pacing, orientation and proximity. How was this shifting and rearranging caring for the viewer’s experience? Was it fair to move the work around the space, to swap the pieces included in the installation? There are precedents for progressive installations, pieces that move with the space under certain criteria, but usually a set of constraints is identified as part integral to the content of the work. In this case, the shifts carried only the broad content of exploration as driven by the artist. Was this self-indulgent, a learning process, a vulnerability?



Figure 15: Jess Portfleet details from iterations of Nonagon exhibition, 2018

I arranged and rearranged in response to the space, and the other pieces in the gallery and around them- but also in response to what the work wants²⁴- or the logic that these pieces build together (figure 14). For me this installation process is very much a process. It involves editing and physically rearranging, differentiating between individual objects, compositions and the installation as a whole. I am not sure it will ever be complete- much of the troubling place in my practice is in this practice, there always feels like more these objects could show me and each other. I find kinship in the description of artist Geoffrey Farmer who is known to consider installations as works in progress, even after they have opened to the public. In an interview with Sky Godden in 2012, he states:

*The work is work, which is to say, a process... I like the possibility of rearrangement, reassessment, another chance.*²⁵

These endless reveals are drawn out by provoking relationships and continued responsive play²⁶. Connections of materials, shapes, colors, proximity, posture, texture are starting places for these investigations. What does ceramic have to say to wool or plaster or concrete and how can those discreet languages be cultivated in a gallery space filled with pillars and ledges (figure 15) and animated signage? Where is the balance of order and disorder that allows the pieces to breathe both on their own and as a collective?



Figure 16: Jess Portfleet *Untitled with bridges*, 2018

It seemed that the overwhelming reception of the work shown in the MFA installation was centered around a commentary on how the space was used, sidestepping description of and response to, the physicality of the work itself. I have to admit that I was challenged not only by this conversation, but to have any other type of conversation at all. Many of the individual pieces that felt provocative in the studio (figure 16), became too singular or resolved in the gallery context. Compositions I had carefully detailed became overwhelmed in the real space of installation. The focus turned from nuanced relationships to crowd control. It was hard not to respond to this seeming shift in ambition²⁷ as a failure initially, and as a result of the strength of the feedback I received surrounding the placement of the objects, there were several attempts to open the installation up, to make it feel less designed, to better obey the Happy Hour's Command²⁸.



Figure 17: Jess Portfleet Play-doh gallery mock up #3, 2018

This consideration came to a sharp point for me during the de-install. I organized the removal of my objects by loose order of size and related packing materials. As components began to leave the installation in somewhat arbitrary droves, I noticed the compositions shifting not only in their singularity, but in their ability to relate to one another. The whole space opened up. It took random removal to reach new relationships between the objects. This moment came as bittersweet punctuation. It had been strongly suggested, more than once, that I remove some of the pieces in the installation to make room for the others to interact. Although I embraced this thinking, I was not able to successfully take much of the work out. I viewed all of the pieces in relation to one another and was both consciously and unconsciously very committed to those interactions. I would remove several pieces only to replace them with other works that filled their gaps. The installation was not changing density, only shape. It required me to lift consideration of any audience (including myself), to really see the components anew individually as well as together in the space.



Figure 18: Jess Portfleet *Untitled with carpet* (detail), 2018

Incidentally, several of the objects from this installation walked off with admirers (six of the ceramic pieces shown in figure 17). If I hadn't been with these pieces checking on them, moving them around, tucking them in, I may not have noticed their absence. This provoked two additional realizations 1) if specific attention is required to notice small removals, what else could be taken before the pieces lost/changed their integrity? 2) some viewers were willing to risk stepping outside of the social norms in a gallery setting to remove components of the installation. Were they inspired by a need for ownership/possession, a desire to interact physically, the taboo and elicited value of touching and taking? Although I could not have predicted these results, I am excited to further explore possible physical interactions between the viewer and the work, especially as they relate to shifting space and perceived value.

¹ Gell, Alfred. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Clarendon Press, 2013.

Gell claims to eschew semiotics because he identifies it with language and language with signification, which is of little use for understanding things because it makes no space for the qualities of the objects themselves. He states "We talk about art objects using signs, but art objects are not, except in special cases, signs themselves..." (Gell 6)

² Ian Bogost coins the term *Latour Litany* to describe lists of things as they occur in writing primarily as oblique metaphorical devices. Bogost created a Latour Litanizer which is a philosophical tool and internet gadget that uses Wikipedia to generate random lists of things and places them next to each other. It can be found on his website.

Latour Litanizer. (n.d.). Retrieved April 22, 2018, from <http://bogost.com/>

Another prominent thinker in Object Oriented Ontology, Graham Harman, adopts this term and further describes its value to establish the autonomous force and personality of individual actors, rather than allowing them to be reduced to or swallowed up by some supposedly grand principle or structure. In the case of this writing, the list or litany is used to allow the sections to remain individual yet rub up against one another without falling victim to the summing of common framing devices.

Larval Subjects. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://larval-subjects.blogspot.com/>

³ Stockholder, Jessica. *Art and Labor*. jessicastockholder.info/projects/writing/art-and-labor/.

⁴ Schwenger looks to Heidegger's definition of "world" as described by the systems humans build around themselves. He uses the term "domestication" interchangeably with this concept of world.

Schwenger, Peter. *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

⁵ Baudrillard, Jean. *The System of Objects*. New Delhi: Navayana, 2008. Print.

⁶ Bennett, Jane. "The Force of Things." *Political Theory*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2004, pp. 347–372., Bennett defines things as "entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics". She coins the term "thing-power" as an "acknowledgment, respect, and sometimes fear of the materiality of the thing and to articulate ways in which human being and thinghood overlap". (Bennet 349-351)

⁷ Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Duke University Press. 1993.

⁸ Deleuze, Gilles. *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. San Francisco: City Lights, 2007. Print.

⁹ "Tag Archives: Jessica Stockholder." *Art21 Magazine*, magazine.art21.org/tag/jessica-stockholder/.

"I do a lot of shopping at Home Depot. I don't know how much I want to give credit to all those different big conglomerates, but stuff is cheap and easy to buy, and I participate in that. I use material that's inexpensive, readily available."

This quote was pulled from an interview conducted in 2005. I would suggest that 13 years later, the crisis of disposable plastics is embedded in the use of these materials in a way that reads differently than it may have when they were originally employed. Stockholder states that she "loves plastic", which is a disturbing and provocative announcement. It is something so many North Americans say freely with their wallets, but are culturally almost forced to deny. As the push and pull of immediately available, yet irresponsible, becomes a stronger social voice, it arguably shifts the content of this work.

¹⁰ "Jessica Stockholder." *Art21*, art21.org/artist/jessica-stockholder/.

"I use castoff things and new, bright, and shiny things. My work is not about a particular kind of object so much as it's about stuff in general. I'm not interested in having the work be caught in one kind of stuff."

¹¹ In his 2005 text, Mitchell best defines found objects by what they are not, ie : "the sought object, the aesthetic, desired, valued, symbolic, hated, or lost object"

Mitchell, W. J. Thomas. *What Do Pictures Want: The Lives and Loves of Images*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010.

¹² Harman, Graham. *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory (Theory Redux)* (Kindle Locations 180-182). Wiley. Kindle Edition.

¹³ As defined by Ian Bogost: "Ontology is the philosophical study of existence. Object-oriented ontology ("OOO" for short) puts *things* at the center of this study. Its proponents contend that nothing has special status, but that everything exists equally—plumbers, cotton, bonobos, DVD players, and sandstone, for example. In contemporary thought, things are usually taken either as the aggregation of ever smaller bits

(scientific naturalism) or as constructions of human behavior and society (social relativism). OOO steers a path between the two, drawing attention to things at all scales (from atoms to alpacas, bits to blinis), and pondering their nature and relations with one another as much with ourselves.”

What is OOO? (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://bogost.com/>

¹⁴ Stein, Gertrude. "A Transatlantic Interview, 1946," *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Robert Bartlett Haas (Los Angeles, 1971), p. 18

¹⁵ Schwenger, Peter. "Words and the Murder of the Thing." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2001, pp. 99–113., doi:10.1086/449034.

¹⁶ Bennett, Jane. "The Force of Things." *Political Theory*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2004, pp. 347–372.

¹⁷ Freud, Sigmund, David McLintock, and Hugh Haughton. *The Uncanny*. New York: Penguin, 2003. Print.

¹⁸ Gladwell, Malcolm. *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking*. Back Bay Books, 2013.

¹⁹ *Who becomes droll*
While shifting control
Collecting objects
Revealing abjects
Hello rabbithole

²⁰ Brown, Bill. *A sense of things: the object matter of American literature*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007.

²¹ Linn, H. J., Adams, T. E., & Ellis, C. (2016). *Handbook of autoethnography: Glossary of Haunting*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

²² Maleuvre, Didier. *A Cabinet of Curiosities: Encyclopedism and the Collection in the Nineteenth-Century French Novel*. 1993.

“The paradoxical nature of linkages is that it is built on the singular link, the puzzling moment of non-identity which gives identity to what it holds together.” (296)This idea of overlap usurping identity is important to both the organization of the pieces and to the potential dissolution of boundaries between the viewer and the objects.

²³ Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Routledge, 2002.

“I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought - our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography - breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other.”

So begins the preface of Foucault's text as he describes how the impossibilities of cataloguing- or full knowing are demonstrated through the employment of very specific and seemingly arbitrary categories arranged outside of consideration of their informing one another. He continues "In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*." (xv)

²⁴ I see these shifts as descriptive of possibility rather than mobility and guard against making the work seem anthropomorphic outright. I am not anti-anthropomorphic, but prefer the democracy of non-anthropomorphic.

²⁵ Tate. (n.d.). Who is Geoffrey Farmer? Retrieved August 08, 2018, from <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/geoffrey-farmer-10350/who-is-geoffrey-farmer>

²⁶ The use of the word 'play' here is to describe process that is necessarily open-ended and unresolved. Jessica Stockholder describes it as a kind of learning in a 2005 segment of Art21 entitled *Play* "Kids' play is a kind of learning and thinking that doesn't have a predetermined end. I think I'm involved in that." Play. (n.d.). Retrieved August 12, 2018, from <http://www.pbs.org/art21/episodes/season-3-2005/play/>

²⁷ Upon further reflection and subsequent edits to this writing, I am unsure of the use of the word 'ambition' in this sense. It does seem that I have quite an investment in the spaces between and that which surrounds the physical objects themselves. This persistent discussion may have been perceived as off-target only in my inability to read past the suggestions that I remove some of the work. I have elected to leave this statement in tact as it points to continued questions of space and concepts of success.

²⁸ In his entry *The Happy Hour's Command*, Whitman describes not only the immediate impulse (described by the title) to create without concern for completeness or polished final product, but also the potential joy and indulgence of its open ended reception: "—to go home, untie the bundle, reel out diary-scrap and memoranda, just as they are, large or small, one after another, into print-pages, and let the mélange's lackings and wants of connection take care of themselves." He continues: "Maybe, if I don't do anything else, I shall send out the most wayward, spontaneous, fragmentary book ever printed."

Whitman, W. (2016). *Specimen days & collect*. Milton Keynes: Wentworth Press.

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