UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Range of Motion

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts by Jessica Estelle Sledge

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2012
The thesis of Jessica Estelle Sledge is approved and it is acceptable in quantity and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego
2012
For my family, biological and surrogate.

And for Richard. Thank you for everything.
All of my writing is about the recognition that there is no single reality. But the beauty of it is that you nevertheless go on, walking towards utopia, which may not exist, on a bridge which might end before you reach the other side.

Marguerite Young
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In my work, I’m invested in exploring the material world (which I access through my own collection of found objects/materials or those gifted to me by others) in order to explore the immaterial world and all of the twists and turns in between, including how we cope with our aging bodies and those of the ones we love. *Range of Motion* is a 28-minute 16mm black and white film that looks at my relationship with my elderly neighbor Judy McCloud, my relationship to her objects, her relationship to her objects, and our relationship to our bodies. In keeping with my interest in mobility, I move, stretch, and interact with Judy’s objects in an effort to better understand them and my own body. I use my still-nimble fingers to craft a structure from the materials I’ve been given, and I try to make sense of the huge pile of objects that has been passed onto me.
INTRODUCTION

I.

I collect things so that I won’t forget things.
I also make things so that I won’t forget things.
My grandmother was a collector
and a maker, and, then, a forgetter.

II.

My mother is a maker too,
but in a more cerebral, less corporeal way,
which makes sense.

III.

Sometimes I find things on the ground and pick them up.
Then I keep them, so I am a collector of those things too.
My grandmother was a collector of a different sort.
But, like me, she kept things that she imagined herself using to make something.
And she kept things so she wouldn’t forget things.

Some things I make because I want something different to happen.
I want my mother’s legs to heal
or for people to talk to their neighbors.
So I make something,
(something part-found, part-collected, part-made)
to make that different thing happen,
or make something not happen,
whichever the case may be.

IV.

My mother keeps things so that we won’t forget.
And she keeps things, usually old things, that she thinks are beautiful.
Too affected by my grandmother’s collecting to really collect herself,
she fights it.
And so do I, to an extent.
Sometimes I hate my objects,
and other people’s objects.

V.

Sometimes I make work about that feeling.
Immobile,
the weight of objects and memories and forgetting.
Physical immobility frightens me.
VI.

My neighbor is a collector too.

She was a maker but making has become difficult
with stiffness
and forgetting.

I like to sort through her objects
and make things with her.

It keeps us limber,
and is a kind of magic,
which is the main reason I make things at all.

When I moved into my studio at UCSD, I brought with me only one representation of my previous work – a small sculpture that I finally exhibited last fall under the title *Today I Feel Strange*. The piece consists of a nylon rope wrapped in multi-colored pieces of fabric, coiled and hung on the top of a metal pole rising out of a square wood and concrete base. Sitting on the blocky part of the base in the center of the ring created by the rope stands a brown glass bottle filled with a bit of sand and bearing a gold-leafed “YES” on one side and “NO” on the other. This piece holds the title for “most commented on piece” in my studio, despite its being the oldest and, as such, seems an appropriate point of departure for this paper.
illustration 1: Today I Feel Strange
First, a word about the system behind the construction of this sculpture. The rope was purchased new as a “canvas” for a meditative exercise. At the time, I was in limbo, having just moved out of my apartment in New Orleans thanks to Hurricane Katrina, and was not yet settled into a new location. I had packed up all of my salvaged belongings and was living with them in the attic of my childhood home. Included among these possessions was a box of clothing I was having a hard time letting go of. The clothes were water-damaged, but I’d hoarded them thinking I might someday use the fabric. I needed a healing task and also wanted to divest myself of attachment to objects, so I bought the rope, cut the clothing into strips and spent the next several months methodically wrapping the fabric around the rope. I made several rope bundles from this clothing over the next year with no plan for displaying the resultant objects, the process itself being the focus of the exercise. I originally intended to burn the bundles, but was seduced by their beauty, and, thus, lost that particular battle with objecthood. My favorite of the bundles (the one incorporated into the final sculpture) later made an appearance as a prop in a participatory performative piece Taking Up Space (which will be discussed more later) when it was used as a child leash in an operetta by a viewer-turned-performer. The child and her father served as extras in the operetta, functioning to underscore the issues of control and containment that the piece attempted to explore. The brown bottle I found in the desert on my drive from Louisiana to California. (At the time I was trying to give up drinking, though I didn’t consciously recognize that connection when I picked it up off of the ground.) I kept it on my desk for about a year and one day impulsively decided to gold leaf the words “YES” and “NO” on it. I bought the base for the sculpture at a typical San Diego yard sale not long after moving into my new
apartment, which is how I discovered its original purpose – a support for a pathetic artificial white Christmas tree, which I also hoarded for a few years before eventually throwing it away without ever using it. It wasn’t until I moved into my new studio at UCSD and longed for the comforting presence of a familiar talisman that I assembled Today I Feel Strange as it now exists. I placed the rope and bottle on the base and set it in the corner of my studio, turning the bottle from day to day like a mood ring. Some days I felt “YES”, some days I felt “NO.” The trajectory of this piece continued last fall when it was finally given a title and exhibited.

Throughout its time in the exhibition space, viewers were compelled to touch it, caressing the rope bundle and turning the bottle at will. Eventually one viewer picked up the bottle and turned it over thinking the sand that was stuck inside the neck wouldn’t fall out (which it never had in all the years I’d owned it). This time though, the sand came pouring out and landed in a small pile on the base, which, in my mind, finally completed the piece and put its elements to rest.

Today I Feel Strange was assembled from “found” objects - some literally found (the bottle), some purchased second-hand (the base), some “hoarded” (the clothes) – and objects bought new as raw materials (the gold-leaf, the rope). Of the found objects, the base remained unaltered while the rest were intervened upon, the gold-leafed bottle being the prime example. I then assembled those part-found, part-made objects into a structure not with the intention of making a sculpture for exhibition per se but rather with a talismanic thrust, with the intention of creating an object with potential energy, an object that functioned for its maker. The last piece of the puzzle came with the intervention of the viewing subject. Exhibiting the piece allowed it to morph from a tool for exclusively
private ritual to one that could be shared and allowed its potential energy to become kinetic as it served to engage the viewer in the ritualistic act of turning the bottle, the pile of sand serving as a trace of that subtle interactivity. The sculpture now functions as a relic of its journey across the country, from a water-logged apartment in New Orleans, a desert somewhere in the West, and a front yard in North Park, to the “sacred” exhibition space, with a brief stopover in an ephemeral “happening.”

I start with this piece because as much as it represents my literal journey to the West, it also embodies my artistic journey over the last several years. It contains many thematic, formal and procedural elements that I am still exploring – collecting/hoarding, wrapping/binding, assemblage, the “found” object, the talisman, the fetish/mojo object, private/shared ritual, the autobiographical, the relationship between process and product, and the “organic” nature of the objects I make.\(^1\) It also serves to remind me of the problems with my process that I’ve attempted to better understand over the last several years - the relationship between conscious and unconscious artistic choices, the origin of the materials I use, the mnemonic/narrative/ceremonial functions of these sculptures, the interaction of process and product in my work, the decision to use certain pieces in ephemeral performances, and the destiny of those pieces after they are used, to name a few. In this paper I intend to explore my engagement with these themes and methodologies, as well as their complications, by discussing my work over the past three years. The numbered stanzas on the first page serve to structure the writing as a whole, each stanza corresponding to a numbered section of the paper. The paper is also loosely chronological in terms of discussing my work. I will use the first three sections to introduce broad themes and consider how they were explored in early pieces, and will
then elaborate on those topics in the final three sections by discussing my thesis project.
I.

Collecting, Memory, and Mortality

One major feature of my work is the practice of collecting, both conscious/structured and unconscious/unstructured. By the former, I mean the traditional custom of assembling a thematic collection of objects of a certain type or function, such as a stamp collection or, as is the case with my thesis project, a collection of lamp parts. I distinguish this from the latter, an example of which would be the habit of picking detritus off of the ground, creating a set of objects that relate to one another only in the indescribable quality that causes the collector to be drawn to them. Nostalgic “collecting” (in quotes here because some would call this “hoarding”), represented by saving photographs, paper ephemera, or objects from childhood, is complicated and, for me, falls somewhere in the middle of this conscious/unconscious spectrum.

As is evidenced in \textit{Today I Feel Strange}, the habit of collecting detritus (both organic and man-made), second-hand items, and objects that are connected to a personal memory are central to my sculptural process. Along with store-bought elements, these categories of material may be combined in any permutation to create a piece. I rarely make sculpture “from nothing”, or completely from new raw material. In fact, looking back, I think much of my drive to become an artist proper came in childhood when I needed an explanation for why I was saving the things I saved, and I still make work from this impulse. If I use something (like my water-stained clothing from New Orleans) in a sculpture, then I won’t have to throw it away. (Throwing these things away, to me, sometimes represents a failure to harness their power.) So I learned from an early age
that reframing collecting and repurposing as a creative act had the authority to elevate the otherwise “useless” object in a way that was digestible to most people. But only recently have I begun to understand how that tactic can be explored, complicated, and employed to blur the lines between culturally constructed notions of the sacred and the mundane, the useful and the useless, the artful and the artless.

Many artists have dealt with collecting in their work, each handling the subject uniquely, just as every collector is slightly different in how their habit manifests. Mark Dion, for example, compulsively studies various systems, creating huge installations that resemble curiosity cabinets or natural history museum display cases.

Candy Jernigan’s *Found Dope* is a multi-colored, obsessively labeled grid of all the crack vials she found near her apartment over a 16-day period.
The broken pieces are pinned down and displayed under glass, like butterflies or bugs. Most of my experiments in presenting work this way occurred in childhood. In fact, I distinctly remember having a display that looked somewhat like Jernigan’s. It was a collection of rocks, each with a piece of Scotch tape securing it to a sticky page meant to hold photographs. Above each rock a label bearing the date, time, and circumstances of its discovery was scribbled in pencil, difficult to read on the adhesive surface. I also had sets of stamps and buttons, collected and displayed in a similar manner.

In *My Mother Made Me This Way*, an arrangement piece from 2008 borne out of homesickness, I laid out all of the objects in my apartment that were either given to me by my mother or reminded me of her.
Most of the objects were “old-fashioned” in some way and echoed my mother’s habit of collecting antiques. This is perhaps the closest I have come to displaying a “collection” as the work itself. I realized fairly early on in my time at UCSD, that this approach did not serve my interests (aesthetically or conceptually) but was a good tool for me to use in my studio. I collect things and hang them on my wall or keep them in little boxes or bins (sometimes organized and labeled like Jernigan’s work) and this often helps me ritualize a project or, at the very least, provides me with sculptural material that I have a mnemonic or ceremonial relationship with. I even used a collecting procedure in a photographic manner in preparing for my thesis project, which I will discuss later.

In his memoir about his own personal collecting obsession, *Collections of Nothing*, William Davies King writes, “Collecting is a way of linking past, present, and future.” Indeed, I and many collectors I have met, including my grandmother, cite memory and nostalgia as major motivating forces behind our compulsion to save things.
Walter Benjamin writes, “Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories.”³ Freud and Breuer even declared, “Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences,” an intriguing word choice.⁴ I am interested in the mechanics and complications of memory itself, particularly its ability to blur “reality” and its relationship to the unconscious. I often feel that the particular pathos with which I respond to a found object is somehow connected to this unconscious memory function. Freud, speaking about the kind of memory trace that originates in systems other than the conscious one, writes that “Such memory-traces, then, having nothing to do with the fact of becoming conscious; indeed they are often most powerful and most enduring when the process which left them behind was one which never entered consciousness.”⁵ Perhaps this helps account for why I felt that I absolutely had to own that fake white Christmas tree or why my friend, upon entering my latest gallery installation, told me it “brought his grandmother back” for him. These mnemonic associations with objects, particularly the objects we are compelled to collect, are often unconscious. It is by embracing the possibility that found or inherited objects have the power to unlock, hint at, or rub up against these traces in me, the artist, that I am able to transmit that sensation to the viewer. Additionally, I have realized that I am, of course, not simply an intermediary in this process. I also project my own associations and import onto an object (or situation or relationship) that I handle artistically, thus generating, rather than simply accessing, an aura of my own making.

However, I feel it must be noted that in my work, I’m interested in the mnemonic impulse itself (as it relates to the material world) and what it reflects about a person’s connection to his/her body and own mortality than I am in actually engaging with
nostalgia, which can have the unhealthy habit of idealizing the past and, in an art context, relegate work to being read only on that level. I’m more interested in the sacred than I am in the nostalgic. King writes that most children collect things as a way to cope with “a lost connection to the mother” because “before memory kicks in,” we need such objects “to remind us that parental love is continuous, even if it is not immediately at hand.” He writes, “We learn nostalgia, the tug of past objects, very early.” So it is in being disconnected from the mother - the first step in understanding our own mortality and the separateness of our selves as contained in our own bodies- that we begin to understand “the tug” of objects. King even explicitly states later, “The compulsion to collect is a struggle against death.”

Bataille hints at a similar idea in his Theory of Religion stating, “The weakness (the contradiction) of the world of things is that it imparts an unreal character to death even though man’s membership in this world is tied to the positing of the body as a thing insofar as it is mortal.” And Michael Taussig in his essay “Dying Is an Art, Like Everything Else” asks, “How is it that the distinction between subject and object, between me and things, is so crucially dependent on life and death?” Taussig also writes later, “…we all agree that something has happened to death with the modern age. It seems to have disappeared from sight, and there is an awkwardness all round about what to do and say other than wallow in death-kitsch.” And so it would seem to be a strange push/pull. By hyper-focusing on the material world of things, as collectors do (as do most Western consumerist societies for that matter), awareness of death is repressed, yet it is the very fact of death itself that delineates our embodied selves and the things around us. As Bataille states, “death is the great affirmer, the wonder-struck cry of
life,”12 and Taussig declares, “death animates things.”13 In my work, I’m invested in exploring the material world (which I access through my own collection of found objects/materials or those gifted to me by others) in order to explore the immaterial world and all of the twists and turns in between, including how we cope with our aging bodies and those of the ones we love.
II.

The Body

It is clear that there are infinite types of collectors and that the compulsion to collect cannot possibly be traced to any singular root that explains every collector’s habit. However, though, according to King, “no collector is exactly like any other,” he posits that “The widely shared impulse to collect comes partly from a wound we feel deep inside this richest, most materialistic of all societies, and partly from a wound that many of us feel in our personal histories. Collecting may not be the most direct means of healing those wounds, but it serves well enough. It finds order in things, virtue in preservation, knowledge in obscurity, and above all it discovers and even creates value.”

What is this shared contemporary wound that King is alluding to, and how does it relate to the ideas of Existentialism, for example, or that “nostalgia for a lost oneness,” as Italo Calvino calls it? In my first-year paper I wrote at length about the notion of “the killing split” and the fractured consciousness of modern society created by various power structures, so I don’t feel it is necessary to reiterate that here. However, I do think it is interesting to consider collecting as a stitch for a wound (or antidote to death, as it were), as literal healing of the body is an important topic in my work and in my thesis project specifically. So allow me a moment to reflect on the ways in which notions of the body, the wound, the limp, and the stitch were considered in some of my work from my first year of school.

The first piece I created at UCSD, Inside Out, was a corset-like form made of
Mylar and hung from the ceiling in a corner of the gallery. A motorized bare light bulb swung back and forth in front of it, creating a pulsing shadow like the lung of an unsteady breather or a palpitating heart.
The piece was inspired by two of my favorite trees, which lean in close to one another but don’t ever quite touch.

The form was also an echo of my mother’s legs, left uneven by a childhood bout with polio. For me, this was a very strange piece made during a period of experimentation,

illustration 6: photographic study for *Inside Out*
bearing little resemblance to the work I’d made before or have made since. The sculpture was generated entirely from store-bought material and, though formally pleasant, it didn’t convey the autobiographical roots of its form. The lines connecting the two halves of the overall shape were drawn but not literally stitched, an element that would have perhaps better invoked the healing gesture. However, either way, the main problem of that piece, beyond any formal interest it generated, was that it functioned as a metaphor or symbol of the themes I was interested in, rather than actually embodying them as a talisman or fetish object would. (More on this later.) The most successful aspect of the work was the vibrating shadow cast on the wall of the gallery, which hinted at uneasy containment and a desire to break free from the confines of the space entirely. This was underscored by the piece’s corner placement. Gaston Bachelard in his seminal text, *The Poetics of Space*, writes, “To begin with, the corner is a haven that ensures us one of the things we prize most highly – immobility. It is the sure place, the place next to my immobility.”

Looking at the final piece during the exhibition, I imagined its fishing line wires snapping and pictured the floppy Mylar form limping down the sidewalk in an uncanny crawl. I realized that I needed to further animate the form, either by literally mobilizing the piece or by using material indexically connected to the themes I was exploring. I later experimented with both approaches, with varying degrees of success.

The next piece I made was, again, fabricated from store-bought raw material, this time aluminum mesh, the type used for screening in porches. (This medium had an autobiographical familiarity, as screened in porches are popular in the South and my brother does this as a side business.) After having that image of *Inside Out* crawling down the sidewalk, I decided to create a piece that could be worn by a performer. I rolled
and wrapped the wire mesh into spindly tubes and hand stitched them together with fishing line. I collected broken glass around my apartment and filled the “tentacles” with it. Eventually I had a large octopus-like form that a performer could wear on her arm like a grotesque appendage, which I simply call *Sleeve*.
This piece was used in various one-night events and, again, was a learning experience for me. Like *Inside Out*, the work only metaphorically referred to the issues I was interested in (wounding/healing, control of the female body and nature), there being no ritualized procedure behind its making, save the daily glass-collecting and the inherent meditative nature of a process like sewing.¹⁸

I think *Sleeve* was used most successfully in an underground event put on by a collaborator of mine in the music department at an undisclosable location. A dancer dressed in white donned the sleeve and wandered around halls and stairwells, dragging the oversized appendage behind her, tinkling glass echoing through the space. Meanwhile, I was stationed at a “home base” dressed as a seamstress with my tools in hand – needles, fishing line, and scissors. When the performer needed a “tune-up” (a result of the broken glass slicing holes in the mesh), she would silently come to me and stand while I repaired the appendage. I also had a small chair and radio next to me, which was transmitting (via a pirate radio transmitter built for another piece in the event) music recorded by a friend of mine who, at the time of the performance, was lying in a coma after being hit by a car. Most attendees knew this person and recognized her voice on the radio so it was a case of timing and the appropriate setting that made this particular use of the mesh sleeve successful and unrepeatable.

Which brings me to the next point about this work – what is its destiny after the performance has ended? Though it ran into many of the same problems as *Inside Out*, one major difference is that unlike that formal, delicate Mylar piece, *Sleeve* was created with its use in mind and with considerably less consideration for the object as a sculpture itself. The piece was literally drug through the streets, on several occasions. In fact, a
friend of mine took it to Seattle for a conference about the body and performance
(Embodying Landscape) and dragged it all over the place on a drizzly day. The resultant
photographs are perhaps more interesting than the sculpture/performance itself.

![Image](image1)

**illustration 8:** *Sleeve* being used at *Embodying Landscape*

![Image](image2)

**illustration 9:** *Sleeve* being used at *Embodying Landscape*
I did experiment with displaying the object as a static sculpture in a gallery space, but though it, like *Inside Out*, had some formal strength, it didn’t accurately represent my interests at the time, as it was shown without the body or any reference to the body attached to it.

*Illustration 10: Sleeve displayed statically in gallery space*
Besides, if it were merely to be a formal exercise in sculpture, like a chandelier from the Addams Family mansion, then I could have done a better job making it a successful static sculpture and would have put my energy there, rather than in making it with “wearability” in mind. I feel that, in the end, the piece fell into the trap of being a prop without a story (unlike the objects used in my thesis film). I still have this piece and have hung it in my studio. Once when I was playing with it outside on a very bright day, I noticed the amazingly precise shadow that it casts, the rugged hand-stitching coming through in exquisite detail. I have saved it with the intention of making large photograms with it one day. One day…

These first forays into making work about the body (appendages in particular) were very useful in helping me to understand my personal approach to integrating store-bought material with that which is found, inherited, or collected and the ways in which the former can aide in elevating the latter, which is often mundane or “useless” in nature. I realized that the answer for my practice lies not in entirely divesting my sculptures of the found object (and thus making work that looks like High Art and is therefore worthy of the sacred space of the gallery), nor in rigidly resisting the use of new material and the gallery. Rather, it lies in utilizing all of these elements in concert, including harnessing the power of the hallowed exhibition space to elevate everyday objects and materials. These experiments were also useful in helping me understand my relationship to ephemerality and performance. It seems that making work like Sleeve doesn’t fully satisfy my artistic interests, unless I am working in a purely theatrical context for a carefully considered performance piece or have been asked to create a prop or costume for a collaborator. In terms of making sculpture, however, I realized after making these
two pieces that I needed to get back to my roots.
III.

The Craft

One major problem I encountered in the pieces mentioned above is that rather than embracing the private, ritualistic, craft-based processes that I had learned from my childhood in Louisiana (particularly from the women in my family) and had used to create work all of my life, I instead felt that those approaches were purely diaristic in nature and had no place in exhibitions that would invite strangers to look at what I was doing. When I first arrived at UCSD, I felt naked and unprepared. I had never really exhibited work in galleries (except during my undergraduate career, the last time I’d been in an institutionalized art program), and I felt like the visual language and creative process I was accustomed to - Mardi Gras floats, bottle trees, “folk” art, gris-gris sacks – was something I had to relegate to my studio. Finally after three years of people telling me how interesting they found my studio space, I’m starting to figure out my process and how it relates to my product and the way that product is shared/displayed.

For my first-year review, I decided (unconsciously at the time) to return to procedures of creativity that I was more familiar with, namely the carnivalesque. Taking Up Space (my piece for a larger collaborative festival called There Goes the Neighborhood) began with a 30-minute operetta titled La Boheme 2 (composed by Phil Skaller), which was performed in the haunting alley of the La Boheme condominium complex. I had become familiar with the space during the four years I had lived in North Park. In fact, that particular complex (which takes up an entire city block) was just being built when I moved to North Park in 2006, and I distinctly remember thinking then that
the life-size cutouts in front of the scaffolding telling passersby to “Come live at La Boheme!” – one of a very thin white man holding a martini glass and the other of an equally lithe white woman walking a small dog – seemed very disconnected from the actual population of the neighborhood that I saw walking around 30th and University. Much of the libretto for the opera was taken from the 30+ page tenant rules and regulations, the ominously titled *Convenants, Conditions, and Restrictions*. At the end of the operetta, a soprano sang, “Where is the marching band?” at which point a bandleader emerged from the audience and handed out homemade instruments to the spectators who then became participants. The group headed off down Lincoln Avenue (tracing a route I had walked a thousand times) and ended at a wild, overgrown lot that looks out over all of North Park. Because of its unstable ground, this lot has literally resisted containment and development. Spectators were given lavender and hot stones and invited to sit as the final aria was performed.

For this piece, I created several sculptures to be carried by procession participants, one of which was created from a palm frond that I had picked up off the ground along the procession route. I covered the fibrous part of the frond with black tar and wrapped each individual leaf in red fabric (old curtains from my first apartment in New York City which I had been unable to part with), a process that echoed the wrapped rope from *Today I Feel Strange*. A young man and his female companion carried this piece during the procession, and I really enjoyed watching them interact with it. At one point the man tucked the frond down the back of his jacket in such a way that the wrapped leaves appeared to be sprouting out of the top of his head like a headdress of sorts. I made another piece out of sticks (again collected from the procession route beforehand), which
I dipped in tar and tied together with thick manila rope bought new from a hardware store. This piece was worn on the back of a participant, the sticks and rope dragging behind him. At one point another processor picked up the ends of the rope and, holding one in each hand, started yelling “Yah! Yah!” as if he was riding a horse, the rope transforming into reigns through his intervention. I also made several crowns from sticks, leaves, flowers, tar, paint, and fabric for audience members to wear. The last piece borrowed the form of the black umbrellas typically carried during jazz funeral processions in New Orleans and was made from dead flowers and sticks dipped in tar.

Illustration 11: documentation of Taking Up Space
illustration 12: crown from *Taking Up Space*
If I had it to do over again, I would have changed a few things about the sculptural elements of *Taking Up Space*. Firstly, I would have made many more so that the pieces began to resonate as a set of objects with similar material qualities. I originally envisioned the sculptures functioning anthropomorphically as “mobile bodies” themselves, but in the end they didn’t achieve this type of uncanny animation because there simply weren’t enough of them. I also wish I had removed *Sleeve* from the procession. Even though it had a nice grotesque quality, an important aspect of carnival, it didn’t jive materially with the other pieces and was disconnected from the ritualistic process that created them – collecting detritus during daily walks along the procession route. However, I do feel that creating the sculptures for this ephemeral performance of
communal ritual was a step in the right direction after my experiments with *Inside Out* and *Sleeve* because not only did it bring me back to the material interests that I felt more at home with, it also helped me understand my sculptural process and the appropriate trajectory for the pieces it produces. It starts with a private ritual of collecting the material. That raw material then undergoes an intervention. This is usually either very spontaneous, unconscious, and slight (a leaf dipped in tar or a swipe of red paint) or meditative and tedious (two pieces of scrap paper hand-stitched together with gold thread or leaves painstakingly wrapped in fabric). The final sculpture usually contains a bit of both of these procedures, along with the addition of any store-bought material or bit of hardware that is necessary to join certain elements or enhance the overall form. Again I am reminded here of Walter Benjamin who states, “Among children, collecting is only one process of renewal; other processes are the painting of objects, the cutting out of figures, the application of decals – the whole range of childlike modes of acquisition, from touching things to giving them names.”¹⁹ For a sculpture to mean something to me, its maker, I must engage in such a “childlike” process of acquisition of its material, material which then undergoes a process of renewal through my touch, intention, and naming. But what is the nature of these things I am making? How do they function? What is their destiny after they are used in performance? And does everything I make have to literally be used (worn, carried, dragged) to have power? How else can these items be “animated”?

In *The Problem of the Fetish*, William Pietz tackles the complications of the term “fetish” and its use in many areas of theory ranging from psychoanalysis to art history to ethnography. Pietz lays out four basic characteristics of a fetish that recur throughout
theoretical discourse – “irreducible materiality; a fixed power to repeat an original event of singular synthesis or ordering; the institutional construction of consciousness of the social value of things; and self-identity of individuals whose personhood is conceived as inseparable from their bodies.” I believe that my sculptures function in this way - as contemporary fetish objects. Today I Feel Strange certainly did, as did many of the sculptures for Taking Up Space. This is one way that I feel my practice differs from that of traditional conceptual artists for whom the immaterial idea is the core of the work. In fact, Sol LeWitt said, “Ideas alone can be works of art; they are in a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be made physical.” Some contemporary artists who wouldn’t describe themselves as “conceptual artists” per se, still think of their work as symbolizing an idea rather than being an actual embodiment of “irreducible materiality,” even artists who employ some of the same processes as I do. To cite an artist I’ve already mentioned, Candy Jernigan, for example, obsessively collected and documented all kinds of objects with which she herself had come into contact, her physical touch being the criteria for her collection. Yet in describing one project, Evidence, a journal which contains objects from successive trips to Europe, Jernigan writes “these collections grew to include food smears, hotel keys, found litter, local news, pop tops, rocks, weather notations, leaves, bags of dirt - anything that would add information about a moment or a place, so that the viewer could make a new picture from the remnants. Objects emerged for me as ‘icons’ for particular cities and these objects became the material for Evidence.” It seems that instead of projecting a particular power/intention onto the objects themselves upon first encountering them (which relates to Pietz’s second criteria which I will explore further
shortly), Jernigan is more interested in presenting a somewhat “mundane” collection which serves to represent the trip and city itself and allow the viewer to access it. It is Jernigan’s use of the word “icon” here which really drives the point home. In speaking about the difference between the idol and the fetish, Pietz writes, “The truth of the fetish resides in its status as a material embodiment; its truth is not that of the idol, for the idol’s truth lies in its relation of iconic resemblance to some immaterial model or entity.” I, on the other hand, view my sculptures as embodying the ritual practice of their making, each one functioning allegorically (or fetishistically) in its own right rather than representing the totality of a larger idea as a symbol, icon, or idol would.

Pietz’s second criterion, which draws from the ethnographic “first encounter” theory, is interesting to consider. Here Pietz cites the Dutch merchant Willem Bosman who wrote *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*. Pietz writes, “Bosman’s principal informant Ouidah, when asked how many gods his people worshiped, replied, ‘that the number of their Gods was endless and innumerable: For (said he) any of us being resolved to undertake anything of importance, we first of all search out a God to prosper our designed Undertaking; and going out of doors with this Design, take the first creature that presents it self to our Eyes, whether Dog, Cat, or the most contemptible Animal in the World, for our God; or perhaps instead of that any Inanimate that falls in our way, whether a stone, a piece of Wood, or any thing else of the same Nature.’” Pietz later frames this idea in an art historical context saying, “Similarly, the idea of an enduring effect of aesthetic unity produced by the singular chance encounter of heterogeneous elements (the umbrella and the sewing machine) is fundamental to modernist art.” Though I wasn’t raised to ascribe to the organized
religious structure Bosman is describing, these ideas have seeped into the culture of Louisiana - a fusion of European, West African, and Caribbean cosmologies. Allow me a specific example. One day when I was 11 years old, just after my parents divorced, my father was taking me to school when I started fiddling around with some strings hanging from my unraveling backpack. I remember rolling them around in my fingers until they eventually started to fuse together and form one fairly long string, which I proceeded to tie around my dad’s right wrist. I don’t really remember stating my intention when I put it on (though he might), but I’m sure it was a therapeutic gesture, a reaching out as I was still coping with his leaving the house. That desire to stay connected was projected onto whatever thing I happened to encounter at that moment, in this case, a backpack string. The string was very fragile and thin, and most fathers would probably have removed it on the way to work, but, amazingly, mine still wears it to this day. He tells me he has had to reinforce it many times with bits of wax and such, and it is truly a miracle that it has never broken as my father is extremely active (or was before a recent health crisis). This is just one example among many of how the notion of a fetish object and Pietz’s criteria were familiar to me well before I had the language and theory with which to talk about it. In addition, the practice of wearing such an object on the body, particularly to aid in healing, relates to Pietz’s fourth criteria. It is worth noting that, much like that backpack string, the Taking Up Space sculptures, and many of the objects I make, are meant to be worn, carried, or otherwise related to the body of an animator. In addition, the potential for these objects to have a true therapeutic effect is important to me.26

In “Take As Needed: Therapeutic Art and Images in Context,” David Levi Strauss discusses his experience recovering from surgery in a Western hospital. He writes,
“What I found, almost without exception, was bad art: color photographs of cocker spaniel puppies perched precariously on saddles, incomparably bad reproductions of Monet’s water lilies, pictures of Jesus of the sort one gets free when buying cheap frames, and a vast array of anaesthetic landscapes.” Strauss notes that these décor choices are completely in keeping with the allopathic (symptom-quieting) approach that is the foundation of Western medicine – you feel bad, so you need agreeable, inoffensive images to feel better. Strauss compares this approach to that of his five-year-old daughter who, upon his returning home, gave him a drawing she had made on two sheets of violet-colored paper taped together at a slight angle. From Strauss’s description, the drawing looked like an Abstract Expressionist painting and slightly resembled a crooked thermometer or spinal cord. His daughter instructed him to keep the drawing near him at all times and to actually wear it over his injured shoulder, especially at night. She seemed to instinctually understand the idea of a talisman and the power of an image to literally heal the body, “very old knowledge,” as Strauss notes. He writes, “These non-allopathic approaches recognize that images and symbols are real, and that the crystallization of a desire or concept in the form of an image can become a potent agent, directing effecting the course of events.” In Taking Up Space, I was interested in healing an architectural and sociological wound. The audience and performers gathered in the wide ominous La Boheme alley served almost as sutures, bringing residents out of their private domiciles and encouraging them to look at and talk to one another across the divide.
Yet, unlike images of puppies or water lilies, the music wasn’t easy listening. It was opera and the libretto, at times, was difficult and disturbing, the music sometimes seemingly descending into chaos. This kind of disruption, according to Strauss, is the essence of true healing which, he writes, “is transformative, recognizing the cycle of illness and healing, and living and dying, as an active process, what Joseph Beuys called ‘healthy chaos, which makes possible future forms.’”

This brings me to the notion of the artist as shaman, which I think is very important to my practice.

I touched on this topic in my first-year paper, calling on Orenstein’s “Artists as Healers.” In that essay, she writes, “The ritual permits us to live a new myth, to
experience its cosmogony and its symbols, its traditions, its modes of expression. As we enter the ritual, we begin to embody these new knowledges and new feelings. Ritual hastens the processes of community creation and alliance building, of psychic transformation, and personal and group empowerment.\textsuperscript{30} I am interested in individual and communal ritual and in the role that artists can play in a contemporary society that is deprived of it, and this was certainly my interest in \textit{Taking Up Space}. There are many ways to address space, particularly impersonal, imposing architecture and the sociological phenomenon of condominium complexes, but I chose a format that was familiar to me – the procession – and viewed my role as that of “ritual facilitator,” inviting participants to bang a drum and walk, en masse, as a subtle act of resistance. However, do I really believe I am a shaman or priestess? I don’t want to answer that question. Not so much because I feel that it is private or because I don’t think you’ll like my response, but rather because I feel that it is irrelevant. I believe a few things to be true - I believe that art can literally be therapeutic for the maker and for those who receive it, I believe that artists can guide people toward having an ecstatic experience, and I believe contemporary Western society does not value this idea and thus has no exact equivalents for those called “shamans” in other traditions. I don’t think the terminology is terribly important when the situation is dire, when a culture is desperate for healing. In “Between Showman and Shaman,” an essay on the work of post-war German artist Joseph Beuys, Donald Kuspit writes that Beuys “used showman strategies creatively, that is, transformed a frustrated wish for being an authentic self…into the gratifying reality of functioning as a shaman to a society badly in need of belief in itself and of symbols of self-renewal.”\textsuperscript{31} Kuspit defends Beuys against critics who attack him
for exaggerating or even fabricating his own autobiography. Kuspit argues that the artist’s personal mythology was a response to trauma, indeed “the foundation of his creativity.” He also contends that “a necessary if not sufficient condition for good art is that it be informed by a strongly held personal mythology. It gives the art a contagious aura of conviction.” For me, I must say I never exaggerate the “facts” of my autobiography. But I do have a seemingly transmissible way of interpreting the meaning or spookiness of the events of my life, and I am a good storyteller. Call it superstition or hoodoo, it doesn’t really matter to me. Things happen to me, I internalize and unscramble them, I make art from the literal and metaphoric material of my life, and I attempt to share this process - not by directly presenting it as such but rather by going through it myself and somehow transmitting an aura or residue of it onto the material I’m handling thus allowing the viewer to unconsciously access my world and share the passion with which I navigate through it. And, I must admit, I long to find magic in what others might call coincidence. My thesis project is about my relationship with my neighbor, our interactions in our shared domestic space, and my communications with her objects, and it all started with a gift.
IV.

The Gift

During the fall of my second year of study at UCSD, I became very ill. I had gone through a huge transition in my work, questioning what I did and why I did it. I felt somewhat out of place and wondered if participating in an MFA program even made sense for the kind of work I was making. I was also going through drastic changes in my personal life and felt like my world had been turned upside down. It was during this process of illness and self-healing that I began to work with my friend and neighbor of six years, a woman named Judy McCloud who had herself been dealing with entering a new phase of her life as an elderly woman who wasn’t as physically or mentally capable as she had once been. She had started to consider her own mortality and was beginning to worry about the fate of her possessions, particularly the objects she had amassed relating to her craft of making lamps and lampshades. I was often too sick to travel up to my studio and started to work with and learn from her. We mostly worked on making lampshades and gardening, as she had begun to need assistance with her prized rose garden. One day we were standing in her garage looking for a particular piece of hardware that we needed to repair a floor lamp in her house that her husband, whose mobility had become more and more compromised thanks to diabetes, kept knocking over. She turned to me and, out of the blue, told me that she wanted me to have everything in her garage. I looked around at all of the hanging lampshades, fan blades, boxes covered in dust and, while I completely understood her desire to pass these objects on, felt simultaneously overwhelmed by her generosity and intimidated by the
responsibility that such a gift implied. In the end, I decided to accept the gift and, thus, all of the complications that went along with it.

In an essay from *The Enigma of Gift and Sacrifice*, Maurice Godelier summarizes Marcel Mauss’s famous analysis of gift-giving saying that according to Mauss, while a gift “brings the giver closer to the receiver,” it also “creates a debt, obligations for the receiver.” Godelier writes that Mauss sets out three obligations that the act of gift-giving entails - “the obligation to give, the obligation to accept the gift, and the obligation to reciprocate once one has accepted.” Thus, for Mauss, gift-giving creates a two-way relationship and is best described by a circle rather than a line. This is one basic analysis of the process that I am engaged in with Judy. The gift she gave me connected us in a way that is complicated, and sometimes the burden of such a bequest frightens me, not only on a practical level – what will I do with all of this stuff? what if I decide to move? – but also on an emotional one. How can I honor the gift and the history and potential of these objects? And how can I honor the aging and ailing giver? To what extent am I prepared, willing, capable of caring for her and is that even my responsibility? Will it become mine if I accept her generosity? After accepting the gift, it took me almost a year to actually start fully exploring the garage and its contents. I decided that I needed to ritualize the process to fully understand and accept it, which resulted in the first part of my thesis, a large-scale installation in the VAF Gallery titled *Lay Me Down*. 
At the beginning of my third year in the program, after having gone through this process of illness, healing, and inheritance, a professor who visited my studio and heard me speak of my nascent project with Judy told me that she would be very interested to see my work (which she herself likened to Pietz’s notion of the fetish) in the “sacred” space of the gallery. I was initially unsure owing to my suspicions of the gallery and the model of art display that it represents, but I accepted the challenge and booked a week in the VAF Gallery. I had no idea what I was going to do and at first couldn’t wrap my mind around the concept of bringing a project so fundamentally tied to a particular domestic space into a somewhat sterile environment. However, a week or so after booking the room, I went inside and walked around with a new set of eyes. I noticed the
drop ceiling and its missing tiles, saw the remnants of hastily spackled holes and hurried paint jobs, and noted the lines on the concrete floor dividing the square room into almost perfect quadrants. I left with renewed hope and the realization that the VAF Gallery has its own aura and mythology of use, having housed thousands of student shows week after week for years. Yet, as the show date approached, I still hadn’t figured out what to do. Finally, one other serendipitous element fell into place – I noticed that a fellow student and close friend had the gallery booked for the two weeks preceding mine. I knew, from talking with this student, that his show wasn’t ready and told him to let me know if he decided to give up reservation, which he did. All of a sudden I found myself with an almost unheard of continuous three-week time slot in the gallery. After a couple of days of mulling over the possibilities, I decided that the next natural step in the procedure I was going through with Judy was to completely empty her garage and bring all of the objects in it up to the gallery. I realized I needed to live with them, sort and catalog them, clean them – in short, get to know them – and I needed a sacred space to house this ritual.

On the first day of my time in the gallery, I rented a U-Haul and transported the contents of Judy’s garage from North Park to La Jolla. It was obvious that some of the items hadn’t been touched in many years and, after starting to pull everything out, I realized that it was more stuff than I had anticipated. (It is amazing how the items in a garage can take up two, three, four times the square footage when laid out flat.) I pretty quickly realized that I couldn’t be so rigid about my original idea to bring every single item and started the first of what would be several editing procedures. I decided to leave behind the boxes that contained knick-knacks, china, or other household items, and, when confronted with an object that didn’t obviously fall into any particular category, I went
with my gut. If something compelled me to explore the object further, I brought it. I
delivered the items to the gallery, quickly arranging them in the four rough quadrants of
the space according to loose categories. The milk crates containing metal hardware and
lamp parts went into one quadrant, the lampshades and fabric items into another, and so on. Then I went home and prepared myself.

The next day I went up to the gallery and set out a schedule and daily routine. I
won’t go into too much detail about this, but suffice it to say that there were actions I
performed every day and a general overall plan for how I would handle, sort, photograph,
and begin to understand the objects and materials I was dealing with. Every day I made a
sculpture, assemblage, or arrangement (I called them spells) that I disassembled the next
day unless I felt it was a “keeper” for the exhibition, which didn’t happen until about a
week into the process. This was a little bit frightening, but I tried to focus on the goal of
getting to know the objects and understood that I was just beginning to crack open their
potential, which took off some of the pressure to create a new product right away.
During this time I was also cleaning and photographing as many objects as I could.

At the end of the day, *Lay Me Down* was a way for me to share this step of my
thesis project, but was not about simply opening the door to a workspace or just allowing
a glimpse into a private ritual. I wanted to transform the gallery into a ceremonial space
that carried with it the aura of the process and allowed viewers to access it both
consciously and unconsciously, and this required editing. I ended up removing many of the objects, some of them untouched, to honor the power of the remaining ones to hold their space. To return to Mauss’s notion of the gift, I wanted to continue the cycle of exchange by creating an environment that was pleasurable and calming. This was my gift to my viewers, much like Beuys’ “gift to the world…an offering of love and empathy to an unloving, unempathetic world.” But what about all of the other aspects of the project? What about my fear of the responsibility of this legacy? Was I addressing those issues and, if not, was this artistically irresponsible?

illustration 18: Lay Me Down, detailed view
During my second week in the space, I was at home with insomnia thinking about the objects up in La Jolla and grabbed the first book I could reach from my bed. It was called *American Churches*, and I happened to flip it open to a chapter entitled “Pleasure and Joy.” In it, author Roger G. Kennedy draws a distinction between pleasure, which responds to the senses, and joy, which could be felt “suspended in space.” Kennedy goes on to explain that pleasure is a feeling intrinsically tied to fear and dread and that this idea is incorporated into sacred Christian architecture. I realized that my desire to create a soothing, meditative space did not preclude my other interests in this project, and this understanding allowed me to include some uncanny objects or slightly disconcerting arrangements among the more sensual and immediately pleasing ones. In fact, it allowed me to make sure I was in the territory of sanctuary as opposed to sanctimony. To me, the problem with sanctimony is its disregard for the possibility of ugliness or evil in the one who deems him/herself superior. Sanctuary, on the other hand, acknowledges evil if not in this very room, at least lurking just outside the door.
illustration 19: *Lay Me Down*, detailed view
V.

Mobility

Some days I hate Judy’s objects. There are so many of them and sometimes I feel like I’m suffocating. On top of it, Judy isn’t aging gracefully, so to speak. She hates old age and isn’t afraid to say so. I have watched her mobility suffer, and I’m reminded of my grandmother whose shattered hip caused her pain and, in the end, a loss of dignity. I remember her repeated requests for a bicycle in the last few months of her life. I think about the freedom I feel when riding my bike. I consider my mother’s already compromised mobility and fear the future. I wonder what would happen to Judy if I were to move or go traveling for an extended period of time. I have to remind myself that, in the end, one has to heal oneself. I watch her struggling to do the things that used to make her feel alive and I think about my dad’s denial of the seriousness of his “Rheumatoid Arthritis.”38 These are some of the issues and emotions that I have faced throughout this project. In my thesis film, I boil them down to basic gestures. In one scene I drag a long train of joined lampshade frames behind me as I crawl up a pitched stretch of sidewalk. In another, my hand is literally tied to Judy’s as we wash rocks in a bowl of water. Mobility is an important issue in all of my work and particularly in my thesis film. I move, stretch, and interact with Judy’s objects in an effort to better understand them and my own body. I use my still-nimble fingers to craft a structure from the materials I’ve been given, and I try to make sense of the huge pile of stuff that’s been passed onto me.
Yet while my personal associations with the burden of collecting (and the immobility that can result) stemming my grandmother’s and Judy’s hoarding inform my work, I am not interested in foregrounding the pathology of collecting as the subject matter of the work itself. Of Mark Dion’s work, Lisa Graziose Corrin writes, “Although the objects he amasses or fabricates form a fascinating compendium of flotsam and jetsam, what is on display are the processes of naming and sorting and the political and ideological conditions framing them.” In this way, I feel my work differs from Dion’s, Jernigan’s or other artists that display work in this way. I do not display the act of collecting as art but rather use my collections to make art and use art to manage my collecting. In Michael Landy’s piece *Breakdown*, the artist literally destroyed all of his
possessions over a two-week period. While I respect his bravery and do feel a kinship to this piece in its investigation of the burden of material objects, I believe that Landy was more interested in undermining the notion of ownership itself, rather than exploring sacrifice, the aura of individual objects, and the ability of the artist to elevate the everyday item and project talismanic power onto certain materials, like Beuys’ use of felt, for example. In an interview about the project Landy states, “I was more immersed in the anti-consumerist position, thinking about the status of commodities – people don’t feel the need to question the validity of consumerism as a way of life.” Like many viewers, I relate more to one specific aspect of Breakdown, namely the last item destroyed, a sheepskin coat formerly worn by his father before he was injured in a mining accident that rendered him unable to wear it. Landy says, “Over those two weeks the coat became my Dad in a way.” I am reminded of Godelier’s description of the sacred object in kula ring societies. He writes, “For those who handle and exhibit them, sacred objects are not symbols. They are experienced and thought of as the real presence of forces that are the source of the powers that reside in them.” For me, each of Judy’s objects is a stand-in for her and for her aging body.
VI.

Range of Motion

I decided not long after Judy passed her things to me that I should start documenting this process, and, though I used many media to do this, I knew I ultimately wanted to make a film, on film. It just felt like a natural fit for something so wavering, complex, and material/object-based. I photographed the space and its objects with a medium format camera for about a year before I started filming, to explore different framing possibilities, get to know the light, and so on. Returning to a procedure of “collection” and ritual, I eventually set up a system of taking one photograph every day and keeping notes about each one in a small diary.
Eventually I started shooting with an HD video camera and, finally, an antique 16mm Arriflex-S. Due to the nature and expense of shooting with 16mm, the process was a nice parallel to the one enacted for *Lay Me Down* in terms of it being clearly a result of an intervention by me (after all, a film is, quite literally, edited.) Most shots, particularly those that involve me alone, were carefully planned and framed, and I took comfort in the ritual of setting the tripod, measuring the light, pulling the focus. The resultant film, *Range of Motion*, is a mixture of a documentary and a staged work of fiction. Once when I was in the early stages of this project, a professor told me that I seemed to be working and shifting among three layers – the reality, the dream, and the fantasy. The reality is, naturally, my life with the project – doctor’s appointments, dust, frustrated maneuvering inside the overstuffed garage. *Lay Me Down* was the dream/nightmare, and *Range of Motion*, though something of a mixture of all three, is mostly the fantasy. It is my “longing to be bewitched.” Judy is a shaman, I am her apprentice, and at times it is hard to tell where one woman begins and the other ends. In considering this world of threes, I have edited the film for my thesis screening on three screens. I have not designated each screen distinctly as one for the reality, one for the dream, one for the fantasy, but rather each function at times as all three, working together within this conceptual framework.
But would it matter if the story of my relationship with Judy were “true”? What if she was just an actress hired for my film? The answer is, though Kuspit has succeeded in convincing me that it may not matter for the purposes of the viewer’s analysis of the artwork, it would matter to me as the maker. Yes, I project subjective, often “superstitious” significance onto the events, relationships, and circumstances in my life (as we all do, to one degree or another), but the content of my work is derived directly from actual things that have happened to me. The same day I loaded all of the items in Judy’s garage into a big white U-Haul, Judy was loaded into a big white ambulance. As her things traveled up to UCSD in La Jolla, she traveled to the UCSD hospital in Hillcrest, and for my first two weeks in the gallery, living among her dusty objects, I
shuttled back and forth between the two places (and spaces.) Kuspit writes, “The literal truth of Beuys’ life is beside the point of the emotional strength his identification with the Tartars gave him.” Range of Motion is an effort to share the strength and the complications of my relationship with Judy and her gift.
Epilogue

During my time at UCSD, I have begun to develop a system of production that I am comfortable with. I understand how I can integrate the visual systems I was raised on with my knowledge of art history and experience of contemporary methods and trends in artistic production. I am learning how to share my personal ritualistic practices and to guide the viewer in experiencing some of the feelings I experience while engaged in a project. I am starting to reconcile my desire for ephemerality with my love of material objects, and I am excited to explore the possibilities of incorporating pure sculptural processes drawn from store-bought raw material with my assemblage techniques using found/inherited objects. I am realizing the potential for photographs and films, as well as sculptures, to serve as relics of long-term procedures that are performative in nature. I am interested in how filmic and photographic processes can produce work that, rather than functioning solely as documentation, can stand alone without the viewer’s awareness of the total system or function to represent the entire project to an “initiated” viewer. I am beginning to understand the relationship between the objects I make for a film or performance and the tactics I can use to alter or repurpose them as sculptures in their own right. Yet I am still unsure of the destiny of the objects I make, and I still have the desire to ultimately “sacrifice” them somehow. Godelier writes, “sacred objects and valuables are first and foremost objects of belief; and their nature is imaginary before it is symbolic, because these beliefs concern the nature and the sources of power and wealth, whose content has always been, in part, imaginary.” He later discusses the ceremonial exchange system practiced in kula ring societies and notes that when an original donor
gives a gift, that item “becomes a vaygu’a, an object that can no longer be used for any purpose other than kula exchanges. What he cedes when he gives the object is not its ownership, but the right to use it for making other gifts.” I relate to these ideas and I don’t quite know what to make of this when presented with the idea of pricing or selling these objects. Thanks to the support of UCSD and the MFA program, I haven’t yet had to deal with this and, though it may sound strange, so far I am grateful for that. However, I am not ignorant of the fact that I have to pay my bills and I don’t really know how to be anything but an artist, so I’m not sure how to reconcile all of these issues.

On a personal note (and after all, this is a rather personal experience, this committee/thesis thing) over the last three years I have become a confident artist. I was always an artist, but confidence is a little harder to come by when you’re used to working as privately as I am. I am a social being but was always more of a private artist. But I’ll throw myself into most anything (thanks Papa) so I figured I may as well take the opportunity here to experiment, question what I did, try working in different ways and with different people, play with conscious and unconscious processes and the interactions between the two, and experience San Diego and this neighborhood I lived in. I had been in this city for three years before starting school, but I was really just getting to know it. It is a quirky place. So I dove in and, inevitably, shook my world up a bit. Eventually I got very ill, which isn’t so surprising. I came out the other side after a time, but it was a mess for a while. I now understand the body differently, I feel my connection to it in a new way, and I think this has had a positive effect on my art making. I’ve also seen people I love getting ill….in fact, it seems something of an epidemic. Or I suppose it is old age as well, which is inevitable no matter the conditions of society. I guess the most
valuable lessons I have learned here are to believe in myself even during the moments when I don’t totally believe in my work and to make work from inside - me, in this body, reacting to the world. And I am a thinking being as well, so the mind isn’t totally absent from the process. But I need to live with my work, and my work needs to live with me.

1 Here I use the word organic not in its traditional definition as “of, relating to, or derived from living matter” but rather in its looser interpretation as “characterized by continuous or natural development.”
2 King, *Collections of Nothing*, 27.
3 Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library,” 60.
4 Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 12.
5 Ibid, 27.
6 King’s use of the term “nostalgia” seems to refer less to its definition in relation to the sentimental or romantic and more to its use in psychoanalytic theory.
7 King, *Collections of Nothing*, 37.
8 Ibid, 77.
10 Taussig, “Dying Is an Art,” 381.
11 Ibid, 386.
14 King, *Collections of Nothing*, 7.
15 Italo Calvino, *The Complete Cosmicomics*, 120.
17 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 137.
18 I would like to note that I have no problem with metaphor as a tool, and, indeed I think much of the content and images in my work function this way. It is when a piece functions only on that level that I personally feel dissatisfied with it.
21 Wolf, “Conceptual Art.”
22 Dolphin, *Evidence*.
24 Ibid, 8.
This is the latest piece I’ve made for my father, a former accountant. It is called *Abacus* and is made from bones, wire, hardware, plaster, and glass.

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28 Ibid, 15.
29 Ibid, 23.
32 Ibid, 28.
33 Ibid, 30.
36 I alternated my nights during this three-week process, sleeping one night in the gallery, the next at my apartment, then back to the gallery, and so on.
38 I put this in quotation marks because I want to be sure to acknowledge that it is an allopathic, Western diagnosis.
39 Corrin, “Mark Dion’s Project,” 38.
40 A conversation between Michael Landy and James Lingwood from *Michael Landy*, 107.
41 Ibid, 108.
43 Edmundson, introduction, xvi.
46 Ibid, p. 29.
Works Cited


