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1922

Closed Circuits

by

Ashley Wingo

Approved: _____



Demitra Thomloudis, Major Professor

April 15, 2024

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Closed Circuits

by

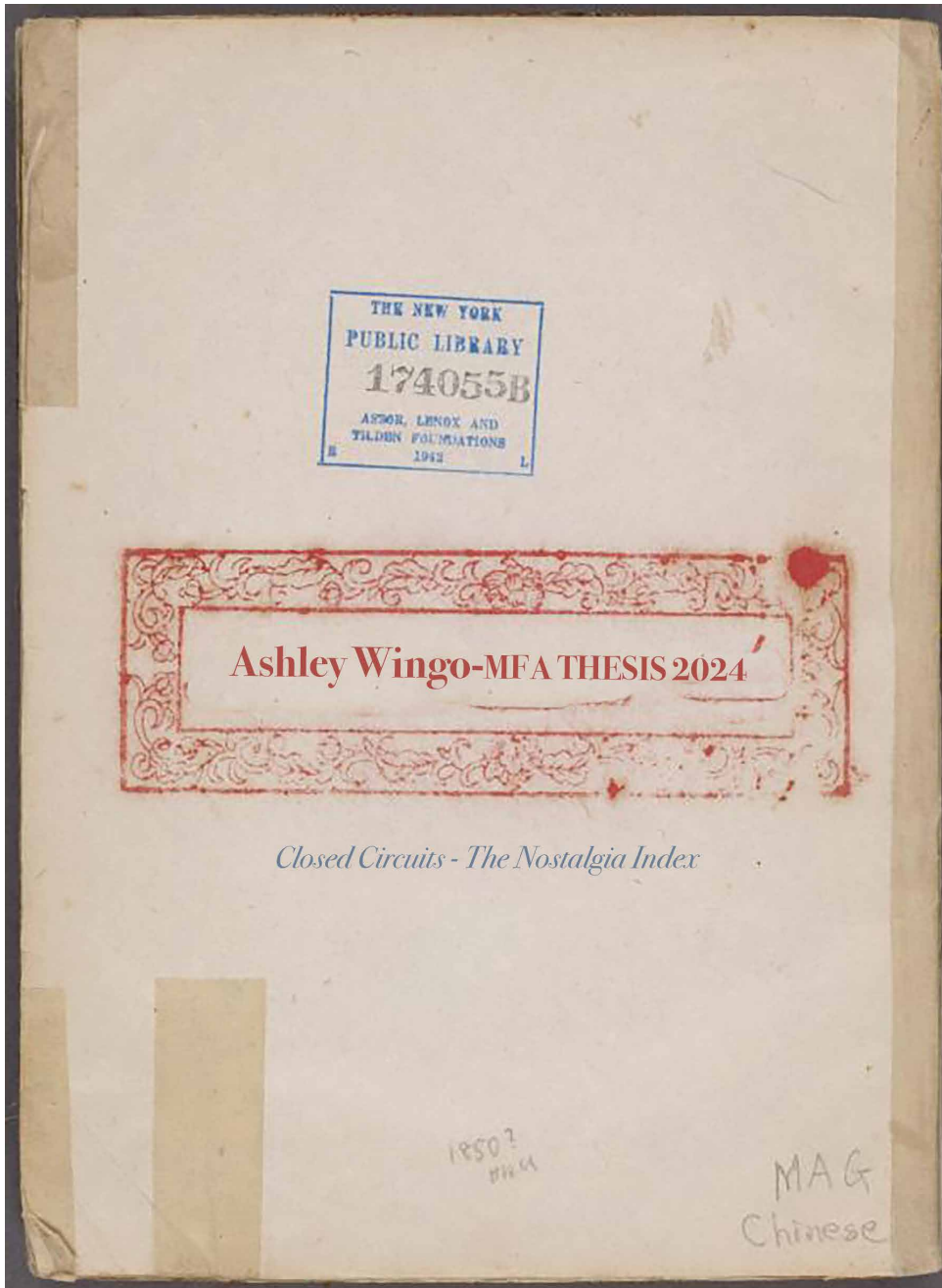
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The Construction of Memory

INTRODUCTION

My work investigates the fictional nature of memory and how nostalgia manipulates our personal record of events. I use what I call peripheral materials—trash, discarded household items, paper scraps, and objects that have lost their usefulness or function, to fabricate new narratives. I bring these materials and objects from the margins into focus to explore memory and the subconscious. I investigate these ideas through jewelry, small objects and installations, recording a history of use, while also capturing the cunning and deceptive nature of engaging with the past.

I am energized by found objects and the serendipitous nature of collecting and collage. Often I will attempt to make objects that look as though they have been found, imbuing them with a sense of degradation. I want my work to convey the beauty of the inconsequential details of an environment, object, or image, measuring value in emotional response rather than established concepts.



Window in New York City— Photo by Ashley Wingo

Prologue- Defining Nostalgic Memory

I want to begin with the origins of nostalgia and detail what interests me about this phenomenon as a foundation for my research and material explorations. We often have positive associations to the word Nostalgia but I'm interested in its dual identity. To remember the past with fondness is the colloquial understanding of the word, but what is rarely mentioned is the more foreboding nature of this psychological state. In Adrienne Matei's, *The Etymology of Nostalgia* she details the word Nostalgia, recounting the story of its origin stating, "In the late 1600s, Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer noticed a pattern in his patients who were living far from home. Those who were obsessed with returning to their estranged locations became physically, sometimes fatally, sick. To reflect this phenomena, he coined the medical term nostalgia in 1688, which he created by combining the Greek words nostos (homecoming) and alga (pain)"¹.

Though our modern understanding of Nostalgia is lightyears away from landing you in a psych ward or hospital, I believe Hofer recognized our tendency to ruminate on happier times as a remedy for our present discomfort, resulting in an "afflicted imaginación."² In *On Nostalgia*, David Berry explains that "when the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning"³.

He goes on to say that this tendency is most acute when we lack purpose or community. If we were situated in the authentic, we would not yearn for it, thus finding ourselves facing nostalgia. I wonder if it is this sentiment that animates my interest in Nostalgia and may be the provenance of my own longing for what has been. Trying to find some sense of the real, the authentic, by looking backwards, to a time when I laughed more or when I was closer to my college friends. It is the liminal space between presence and absence that I am aiming to capture.¹

My work embodies the uneasiness of these paradoxical realities by being both visually appealing, while also animated with the sense of agitation or deflation—having one flat tire. When the trace of what is gone activates the mind and body with images and emotions, they are often fuzzy and out of focus, like a low resolution reenactment. I want to grasp these fleeting experiences, fixing their aura in a stabilized form that can be viewed, handled, witnessed, and worn. Like fossils, which record a certain time and place in history, a brooch with an over-used hair curler, found at the thrift store, is documentation that someone, somewhere used to curl their hair. Not only does this object recall the life of the previous owner but also the former life of the now abandoned object itself.

I want my work to record the lineage of this descent into obsolescence by witnessing these objects and bringing them back into the fold to start a second life as a token of my attention and care.

¹ Adrienne Matei, *The Etymology of Nostalgia* (Quartz, 2017)

² Carolyn Kiser Anspach, *Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia by Johannes Hofer.* (August, Vol. 2, No. 6 Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine, 1934) 381.

³ David Berry, *On Nostalgia.* (Coach House Books, 2020) 9.

Closed Circuits - Addiction, Repetition, Warp

Perhaps photographs are the gateway drug to nostalgic memories. We are reminded of how we looked when we were 15, back when we lived at home with our parents, when we counted on someone else for our dinners and a ride to school. Now, our once fresh faces show newly etched wrinkles and a few gray hairs. Photographs are an invitation to look back to time that may have remained buried under a pile of remnants of “yesterdays”. Maybe we’re not supposed to look back. Perhaps documenting our history keeps us more thoroughly fixed between two places. We carry on living each new day and are continually coerced backwards into a space that we cannot change because we have already done our active living there. So we look, and we long, and we waste.

Why do we look back? David Berry explains this tendency stating that “the answer might lie in what actually appears to be the most common trigger for nostalgia: feeling bad. It would be wonderful to have some grander explanation, but here we are. In terms of the spectrum of bad feelings, loneliness seems to be the most common trigger, but really any sort of vaguely baddish mood will do, from anger or feeling threatened right on down to simple boredom”⁴. In the same way that revisiting old and emotionally evocative memories can take you out of your present discomfort and loneliness, addictive behaviors provide the same relief from discomfort. Like nostalgia, these coping mechanisms become problematic when they become compulsive and repetitive, morphing from a pleasant remembering into compensation for loss and present suffering. One of the hallmarks of addiction is the narrowing of perception to a single stimulus.

The person suffering from this disordered attachment has distilled their field of awareness to the object of their desire. The same can be said of nostalgic memories. As Helmut Illbruck explains in his book *Nostalgia: Origins and Ends of an Unenlightened Disease*, “the nostalgic suffer from a powerful obsession with their home that eventually makes them entirely insensate to any other experience or stimulation”.⁵ The relief is found in the repetitive revisiting of the behavior or memory. My work shows signs of this overuse through accumulation of surface by adding and then subtracting a multitude of media including, spray paint, stickers, old photos, paper scraps, markers, paint pens, etc.

I like to start with a foundational layer of paint and images. I then I begin to sand back the layers and continue this process over and over until the corners of the image start to curl, or the picture is now disfigured but still leaves a trace of the clarity of the original work. I welcome tears in the photographs, yellowing edges, rips, and warps. Each of these actions refer to over use and act as signifiers of time. I am interested in a habitual action. The memory or behavior is revisited so often that it begins to distort. With each retelling of the memory, it changes into something new, warping from the original. This progression is slow, cunning and almost imperceptible. If we could see the progression laid out before us, we would be able to map the evolution, charting the slight changes. The contrast would be recognizable and we might wonder how we did not notice the development, we might even intervene. But in the maelstrom of our minds and lives the frequency of a single thought goes unnoticed.

⁴ David Berry, *On Nostalgia*. (Coach House Books, 2020) 11.

⁵ Helmut Illbruck, *Nostalgia: Origins and Ends of an Unenlightened Disease*. (Evanston, Ill. : Northwestern University Press, 2012).



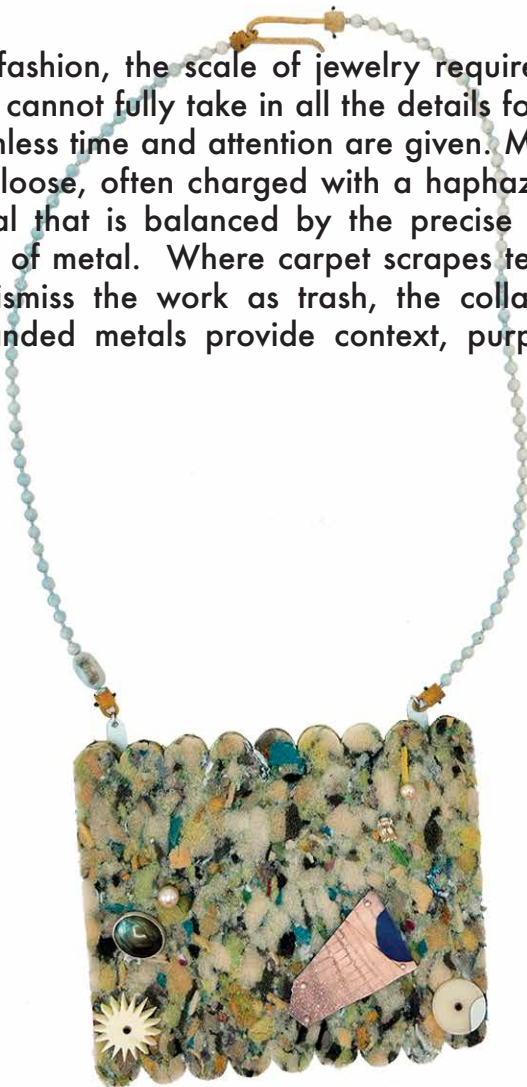
(Fig. 1) *In Three Parts*, mixed media collage on paper, 2022

I was thinking about these ideas when making the mixed media collage *In Three Parts* shown in (Fig. 1) where I used the scanner to manipulate a found photograph. With each new work I pulled the image across the surface of the scanner which resulted in the slow distortion of the photo. The content of the photograph was less important than the evolution of the amorphous form. The surging blue ground of the three panels simulates the atmospheric and undefined space of our minds. In each panel, the central image is surrounded by fragments that impede the visibility of the slow progressive evolution of the image. There are recognizable images, like the hair curler, that coexist with more unrecognizable forms like the fragments of scrap paper. I employed the laser cutter to create sharp and high resolution cut outs as a relief from the soft and meandering colors and forms.

The precision of the cuts is a welcome contrast and a moment of wakefulness in the sleepy scene. These cutouts are portal-like holes that take the viewer from the confines of the four corners of the paper into an unseen galaxy of thought. Where do these wormholes lead? Is there more happening behind the work? These portals beckon the viewer closer to investigate.

The absence of material has the potential to propel the witness back into their own body to think and wonder— to contemplate their own relationship to the work and recall personal memories— instead of just viewing what had been laid bare on the wall. These material absences can create internal presence and generate ideas beyond the detectable.

In similar fashion, the scale of jewelry require as closer look. One cannot fully take in all the details found on the surface unless time and attention are given. Much of my jewelry is loose, often charged with a haphazard chaos of material that is balanced by the precise and structured nature of metal. Where carpet scrapes tempt the viewer to dismiss the work as trash, the collaged elements and sanded metals provide context, purpose and intention.



Don't Forget the Tape, silver, laser cut acrylic, pearls, plastic beads, cellophane, carpet foam, 2023





SNOW DAY

"I tend to agree with the theory that if you want to keep a memory pristine, you must not call upon it too often, for each time it is revisited, you alter it irrevocably, remembering not the original impression left by experience but the last time you recalled it. With tiny differences creeping in at each cycle, the exercise of our memory does not bring us closer to the past but draws us further away".

Sally Mann



Snow Day January 6, 2017 , taken with iphone from SM's apartment parking lot

Snow Day 1— It was 2017, I think. We were broken up so I was feeling a little guilty about being back over at his place but it started snowing so I suspended my hesitancy for when the snow melted. We walked 4 miles to Jim and Nick's because it was the only place open. I felt a distance between us that he didn't seem to notice. If he did, he didn't let on, he never did. He was cool as a cucumber, stiff competition for our current weather conditions. We ate BBQ and watched the snow and tried to act like things were normal. I think we were both pretending that we might get back together to assuage the inevitable ending that would come when the streets thawed and I was able to drive to my apartment, but for now I was trapped right where I wanted to be.

Snow Day 2— I can remember how relieved I felt that we were hanging out but also the anxiety of the approaching end. The snow was a sort of permission that I needed to relax and just be in the moment. We were broken up. Or were we in a fight? We mostly just sat on his sofa bed and watched movies and didn't talk. Or maybe we did talk plenty but I'm a glass half empty kinda gal and like to focus pathologically on what's missing no matter how small. Either way I just remember not feeling close and wanting to. I remember the poster of Bart Simpson hanging over the TV made me feel uneasy, like he was some sort of mythic symbol of our immature and selfish love. His dirty kitchen was the prelude to a horror movie where everyone but me saw what was coming.

Snow Day 3— "The only honest thing between us was the sound the snow made under our feet as we walked home. No pretense, no altering—just the purity of the unchanged sound". I remember writing this after we got home from walking around in the snow. I felt so disconnected— too much space between.

I wanted to close the distance but didn't know how. I'm sure so much happened that day but all I can remember is the distance. I would have crawled inside of him if I could, maybe that was more an indication of my own neediness than any aloofness on his part.

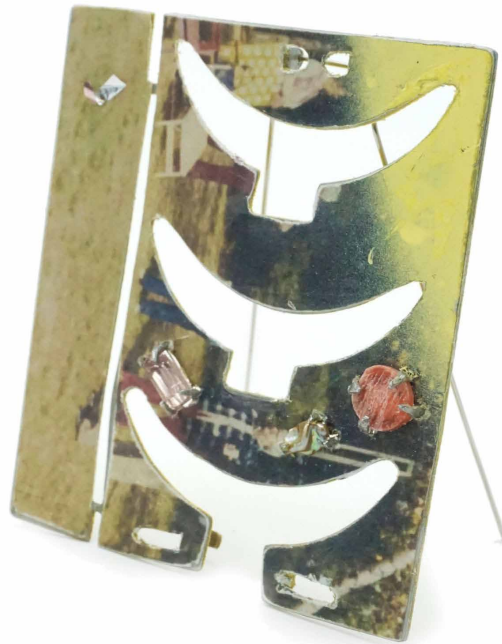
Snow Day 4— That day was almost exactly 8 years ago and I can feel the emotion with such intensity. I would pay money to go back to that day but I don't know why. That was a sad day, filled with longing and regret and temporary relief that turned back into longing as soon as the snow melted and I had to go back to work, and sleep in my own apartment alone. I wonder if there will be a day when I look at the picture and feel nothing but antiseptic indifference, sterilized by more time and more experience, void of intensity.

Snow Day 5— I could never quite settle into that day because I was greedy for it to never end. So I tried hoarding the minutes, aware of each one that passed. How is it already 2am? I didn't want to go to sleep because I knew that the sunrise would melt the snow and my illusions. Time moved a little faster that day. I remember watching movies all day but I don't remember a single one ... a documentary about the opioid crisis, I think.

Snow Day 6— This day still burns in my stomach. I smoked cigarettes on his back porch. I don't think he joined me. I just sat out there and watched the snow fall. It never snows in Alabama so I felt the excitement of Christmas morning...just as fleeting. I was thankful for the absolution the snow gave me to not have to do the "right thing" and leave. I was trapped and happy about it.

Snow Day 7— I remember the snow, and the distance, and the love.





(Fig. 2) Afternoon Visit, steel, rhinestone, plastic, found photo, 2024



(Fig. 2) Afternoon Visit- Back Detail

Gray Gardens

In the 1975 documentary *Gray Gardens*, Edith Ewing Bouvier Beale “Big Edie” and her daughter Edith Bouvier Beale “Little Edie”, live in the once majestic, now derelict mansion in East Hampton, New York. These two women, former socialites and the cousin and aunt of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, are living in squalor yet the true condition of their environment escapes their awareness. Little Edie, now in her late forties, still clothed in elaborate dresses, head scarves, and costume jewelry, sits on her bed and sings operatically at the command of her mother. The scene borders on grotesque. They both wax poetic about their years of wealth and debutante balls, while dilapidated walls and nibbling raccoons contrast their fanciful musings. It is clear they are living in their minds, addicted to their memories, successfully erasing the pain and discontent of the present by habitually revisiting their younger selves.

The movie is a cult classic and “its primary appeal is probably the combination of squalor and glamour”⁶. It is this same incongruity that I return to in my work. Like Little Edie, my work exists in a state of unawareness—no longer shiny and new but unconscious of having lapsed into disrepair, creating a conflicted unease. In my work, you might find precious pearls hovering in the same orbit as acrylic, or find silver supporting party beads and worn-out fabrics; the beautiful is shoulder-to-shoulder with the forgotten.

Inside of Little Edie lives a beacon of her youth that she is attempting to preserve. However, she emits an almost imperceptible uneasiness, a thin layer of grime that snaps the viewer back to her present condition. The fine particles of time and its passage cover her, “the dust that falls on modern things is the decay of the aura, the decomposition of a previous era that, like tons of shells and detritus that continually sink to the ocean bottom, creates a new layer of sediment”⁷.

⁶ Joan Acocella, Let It Go. *The New Yorker*, December 8, 2014.

⁷ Celeste Olalquiaga, *Artificial Kingdom*. (Bloomsbury, 1999), 91.

I want that little Edie essence to be present in my work. The brooch *Afternoon Visit* in (Fig 2) shows an image with worn edges, leading the viewer to believe that the piece has been worn and reworn. The implied repetition has begun to erase the once pristine image. Time and use have left their mark. The pigments on the brooch are dingy while still maintaining a bit of vibrancy, but the edges reveal the true reality.

Similarly, Little Edie's powdered face doesn't quite mask the years that have paved the way to the present moment. She is worn at the edges, "the layer of dust makes things into opaque phantoms of themselves"⁸. I want to be clear, I am not disparaging Edie for having aged, it is her unwillingness to live in the present and seeming unawareness of the progression of her life that fascinates me. She has morphed into a caricature that's closer to theater than genuine presence. Over time she has flattened into a stage prop, masquerading as the mountains when we know it's just a cardboard cutout, we can see the farce. Edie is living in an alternate universe, littered with the glitter of her past life.

By contrast the onlooker is only privy to the present, seeing what is left now. However, we are aware of this nostalgic build-up in an oblique sense when we listen to her recounting elaborate tales of wealth and leisure, but we create our own images, likely dissimilar projections unrelated to the true stills of her former life. In Edie's retelling, we are invited. We imagine ourselves there with her—which adds another layer of fiction, further warping the lines between reality and falsehood, and past from present. The ring *Another Charade* in (Fig 3) is pointing to this nostalgic residue, while its size alludes to the charade Edie is trapped perpetually performing. Its bulbous form and oversized band would prevent any authentic wearability.



Little Edie at the Gray Gardens Estate

Like costume jewelry which is a stand in for the authentic, the ring *Another Charade* is a parody. It looks like a ring and feels like a ring but when you go to put it on the weight of the piece causes it to slump to one side, revealing its counterfeit nature. Most of us are familiar with "the ring". Even if we don't wear jewelry we know that the object belongs on our fingers. In figure 4 I am using this same format but with a bit of added distortion to confuse and intrigue.

Through the partial erasure of the image, I am attempting to mimic what happens experientially. By including mundane objects that are ripe with overuse, I am striving to create an environment more akin to the witnessing of behavior. Faded hues help to tell the story of time passing, while vibrant iridescent colors collapse this distance, mooring us to the present. When we encounter nostalgic memory, what is no longer physically present remains real and alive, but only in our minds.



(Fig. 3 Another Charade, silver, copper, pearls, plastic, found photos, 2024)



(Fig. 4) Concoction, silver, steel, pearls, plastic, found photos, 2024



(Fig. 4) Concoction, back details

Materials and Nostalgia

There is much debate about how to parse out objects, material, matter, and things. Is material a “thing” or is it just the raw matter used to create said “things”? Are objects and things one and the same or are there rightful delinations that designate one from the other? These are important and thoughtful questions but I tend to simplify this objective by seeing **everything as material**. For example, you might be tempted to view a spoon as exclusively an object made for its usefulness or function. This spoon was intended for one job, to get the soup from the bowl to your mouth. I like to think about how to run these objects through the material sieve so that everything in my field of experience has potential.

Similarly, like the thought of someone drawing registration marks on a wall to hang a shelf or spilling their tea on the ground and how these actions were never really meant to be witnessed and certainly not recorded. I’m interested in capturing and reconstituting this type of information as material for use. I am interested in the fine details of an object or space, utilizing the information that already exists therein. I see my work as an ever evolving, ongoing collage of objects, images, and behaviors where no one thing is too insignificant to include and everything belongs.

Democratizing materials- Collections and Collage



(Fig. 5) Sample Collection, freshwater pearl, plastic beads, acrylic, glass, rhinestone

Collecting is the linchpin of my work and the foundation for my collages. In *Collage Culture*, David Banash recognized this connection stating “behind the critical masks of the most prolific collage artists of the century there is almost always a secretly nostalgic collector”⁹. Banash goes on to discuss the 1941 film *Citizen Kane*, in which protagonist Charles Foster Kane spends his lifetime amassing a staggering collection on his private mountain, Xanadu. Ultimately, Kane dies alone with only his collection to keep him company.

It’s a sad story of greed, power, and consumerism but also a tale of a lonely man finding solace in things, “through his objects he hopes to order his world, to exercise a godlike power over the vicissitudes of existence, emotional pain, and death”¹⁰. Collecting— seen from one vantage point might suggest curiosity and novelty but seen from another might uncover the more surreptitious motive— fear and control. The action of gathering things to oneself might actually be an unconscious attempt at quelling an existential aloneness.

By gathering objects, photographs, trinkets, and other odd and ends, one can begin to sift through the past assembling some modicum of order in the present and moreover “recapture and understand the past through the process of collection”¹¹. Like Charles Kane, perhaps the impetus of most collectors is to control the microcosmic ecosystems of their collections and arrange them into something that makes sense. However, according to Baudrillard “the process of collecting is necessarily recurrent and finite; its very constituents—being objects—are too concrete, too discontinuous for it to be capable of articulating itself as a real dialectical structure”¹². By itself the collection is a curated index of the interests and preferences of the collector, forever exiled to dark boxes, dusty shelves and trapped behind dirty finger printed glass, where it will stay.

I collect, not for the sake of hoarding or for the love of objects alone, but with translation and generation in mind. A worn out ratchet strap might spend years sitting in a box on my studio shelf, not because the item has landed in its final resting place but rather has reached a sort of purgatory until I find the right display. Sometimes, one collected object will provide visual context or relevance for another, making creative action possible.

⁹ David Banash, *Collage Culture, Readymades, Meaning, and the Age of Consumption*. (Vol. 49, Postmodern Studies) 177.

¹⁰ David Banash, *Collage Culture, Readymades, Meaning, and the Age of Consumption*. (Vol. 49, Postmodern Studies) 177.

¹¹ David Banash, *Collage Culture, Readymades, Meaning, and the Age of Consumption*. (Vol. 49, Postmodern Studies) 178.

¹² Jean Baudrillard, *Systems of collecting*. (Verso, 1996), 24.



(Fig 6) Material Found and Made, two part apoxie clay, plastic beads, acrylic, glass, carpet

The animating movement “in which the melancholy stillness of the collection can be set dialectically spinning into something new, transformative, and beyond itself is that of collage”¹³. *The collage activates the collection*. When speaking of his series *Hoarfrost*, Robert Rauschenberg was recorded saying an “object itself was changed by its context and therefore it became a new thing”.¹⁴ The solitary identity of an object can be emboldened, transformed and subsumed by another resulting in an alchemical outcome. This is a rather romantic way of looking at collecting and collage but there is an undeniable serendipitous quality about the merging of objects and images into a final gestalt. On many occasions, I have discovered the very fragment that finishes a gridlocked collage by going on a chance walk or taking a trip to the thrift store to find a new dress, only to discover the missing piece.

My eyes are always scouting out my environment looking for clues, noticing what I find attractive and why. I often take cues on arrangement and form from ordinary objects, abandoned weed patches, demolished signs or shoddy patchwork on a painted wall. With plaster, I memorialize overlooked cracks in the walls and fragments by creating plasticine impressions. I use the plasticine as the mold to hold the plaster, creating a more stabilized collage of these neglected bits. I have experimented with pouring two-part epoxy plastic into similar molds, often adding collected material. Like sedimentary rock, sanding, carving and drilling reveal the hidden layers of fragments, colors, textures, and material buried beneath plastic. These experiments were the springboard for *Sediment Rings* in figure 6. In similar fashion, I used two part apoxie clay as the principle material for the sedimentary explorations, embedding stones, pearls and plastic in the malleable material. Once the found materials, were added I sculpted and formed the mixture around silver and brass ing substrates. When using brass as the base for the rings, I would powercoat the band, lightly sanding back the edges simulating use and wear and revealing a shimmering sliver of exposed brass. Once cured, I would sand back the material exposing the stones underneath and further defining the signet form.



(Fig 6) Sediment Rings, silver, two part apoxie clay, plastic beads, acrylic, glass, pearls, 2024

¹³ David Banash, *Collage Culture, Readymades, Meaning, and the Age of Consumption*. (Vol. 49, *Postmodern Studies*) 181

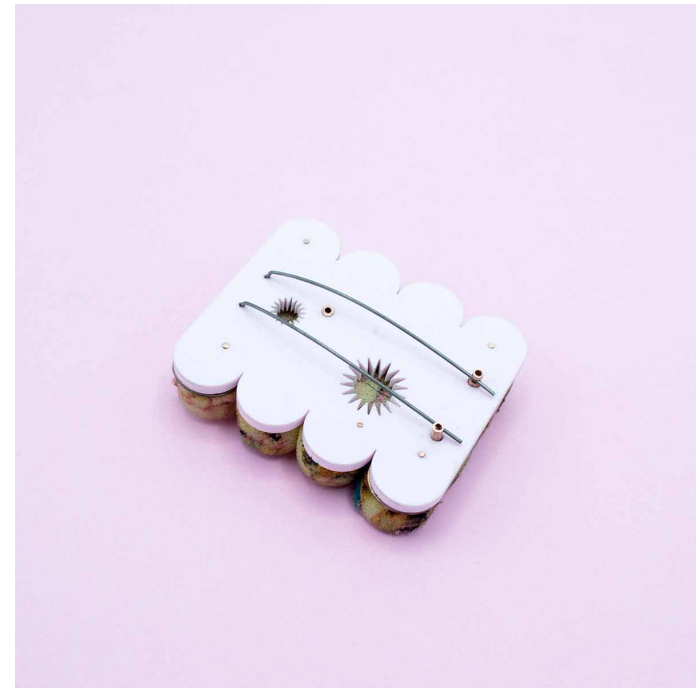
¹⁴ Rosetta Brooks, Interview, *Round the Block Once or Twice*. (<https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org>) 2005.



(Fig 7) A Gift, silver, laser cut acrylic, pearls, plastic beads, cellophane, carpet foam, 2023

I'm collecting, using, discarding, recycling, and recombining materials. The scraps left over from one project are used in the next piece, always generating and reusing. Nothing is too small or insignificant to include. I'm not totally interested in the inherent signs or symbols of the object that I'm collecting but rather their defunct status; the trace of use or history apparent on the surface or the object's obsolescence. If I have one criteria for collecting, it is this—the object or material is imbued with a degraded essence.

In *A Gift in* (fig 7), you see freshwater pearls and tubeset acrylic alongside a beaded pull cord from discarded blinds that divides the piece, separating the precious sea treasure and cheap plastic from a wisp of cellophane. The pearls, pink hues, and shiny bits attract until the viewer is hit with the realization that the whole scene takes place on a piece of carpet foam.



(Fig 7) A Gift, back details

Using conventionally precious materials like pearls with items considered to be refuse, levels the playing field and establishes material equity—nothing is elevated or devalued. Recalling a work of Joseph Cornell's, David Banash describes a piece where the artist uses fake plastic ice cubes stating, "amazingly, here the crass commercial fake becomes alchemy, a startling jewel more arresting than actual jewels could ever be since these stones become the memento of an evanescent experience of the imagination".¹⁵

In the same way, I want the discarded hair curler in *Pink Tiles* in (fig 8) to conjure the personal recollections and experiences of the viewer, rather than make explicit statements about hair or sustainability. I want the viewer to interact with their own latent sense of nostalgia, activating a sort of synesthesia wherein the smell of their childhood bathroom and the drawers filled with these pink curlers comes alive to their senses.

The 'brooch' is an ever present reminder of these memories. Fastened to the front of the wearer, often on the chest, over the heart, the brooch acts as a time capsule. Every time the wearer feels the weight or movement of the piece, attention and therefor recognition propels the wearer into a nostaglic index of memories.



(Fig 8) Pink Tiles, silver, copper, two part apoxie clay, plastic beads, 2022



Downtown Athens sidewalk— Photo by Ashley Wingo

Process- Dead Ends

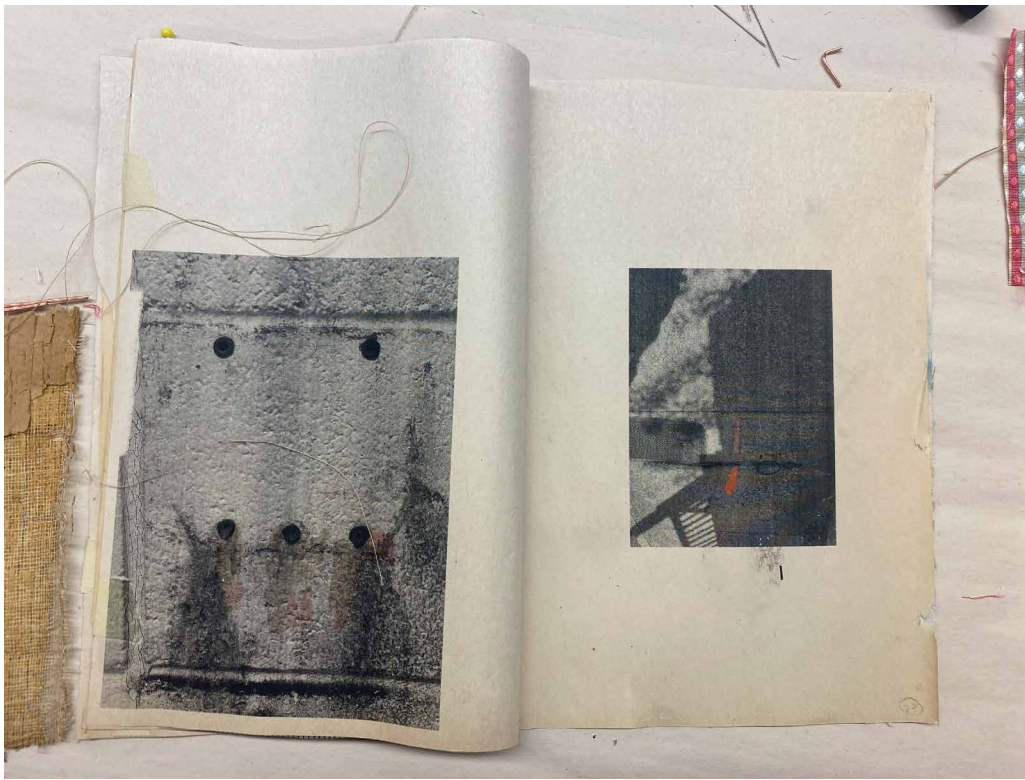
Dead ends are about the discovery not the destination.

I found a dead end road a few blocks from my house when I was on a walk one day. I remember this because I hesitated to turn down the street knowing that it wouldn't lead me anywhere and I would just have to turn around. I presumptively assumed that I knew what was at the end of the street...nothing. However, curiosity got the best of me and I decided to investigate. When I reached what I thought was the end, the road opened up into a clearing situated right next to the train tracks. There was no one living in the house on the property so I felt comfortable to explore. There were sculptures and shipping containers in the sprawling yard and a family of a deer lingering making the encounter seem kismet and magical. The trees surrounding the property were overgrown with Kudzu, acting as sculptural soldiers protecting the oasis from the rest of the neighborhood.



Junk Yard in Birmingham, AL— Photo by Ashley Wingo

This is important because, while I did in fact have to double back, out of the street to nowhere, my visit was inspiring, hopeful and unexpected. We want to be going somewhere, moving forward, making headway and a dead end implies that we are wasting our time or failing to achieve. My arrival at the impasse was a discovery; an experience that I can draw from and revisit, not because of its utility, or linear momentum but rather for the reminder that naive curiosity and spontaneity is often the well-spring of discovery in my practice. My projection of an experience and more specifically, a work of art, does not necessarily bear any resemblance of what might occur. Venturing down the dead end sometimes yields interesting and exciting results. This anecdote is also a lesson in improvisation and spontaneity which is also important to the way that I make.



(Fig 9) Surveyed Space , book made of newsprint and images sourced from Thomas Street

Act, React: Lessons on Improvisation

I'll start this section with another personal anecdote. I have a shy streak, so with the hopes of facing and conquering my fears I signed up for a 10 week improv course with the local theater troupe. While my attempt at exposure therapy was a flop and didn't really move the needle on my social anxiety, and really just made my face hot and red for an hour every week, it did introduce me to the concept of "YES, AND".

Through exploring the components of improvisation, and more specifically the concept of "Yes, And" known most commonly through the framework of improv comedy I've discovered associations that inform my studio practice.



Thomas Street Flex Space wall during install – Photo by Ashley Wingo

Dr. Bridget Erica Elam, PHD, from the University of Pennsylvania, explores the concept of "Yes, And" in her 2020 dissertation. I will be responding to a series of excerpts from her thesis, drawing comparisons to my own way of working. "Learning to really listen and be present in the moment, to accept what is rather than what we wish were happening, to respond creatively and positively when confronted with a challenge, and to build on the ideas of others is the foundation of good improv."

- "Yes" is awareness, acceptance, and appreciation.

- "And" is agency, autonomy, and action."¹⁶

Dr. Elam details the core tenets of improv, explaining that presence, acceptance, and agency are foundational components of successful improv comedy. In improv, paying close attention to your partner is the linchpin in the success of the scene.

If you are in your head you are not able to adequately respond to what is happening, rather you are responding to the dialog in your head which may or may not be relevant.

In the same way, I am always paying attention to my environment and the objects therein, collecting things that are heavy with visual information and emotional charge to later include into my work. Improvisers are also paying attention to the trivial experiences in their lives, and in turn are able to create relatable connections in their comedy. They are always paying attention, everything in life is material to include in their work. Everything is material for my work, discarded hair curlers, metal scrap, even the tips of markers. Likewise, inspiration can come from a crack in the wall or spray paint on the pavement. I am tuned into the banal details that can often seem inconsequential.

The second tenant of improv is positive and creative response. Similarly, I am taking the objects of interest and responding to them. When using found objects that are often imbued with meaning and charged with history both visually and thematically, there is a multitude of information to actively respond to. The crease in the found photograph is a site for creative activation, equivalent to a scene partner encouraging action by their positive engagement in the exercise. I am co-collaborating with the objects and materials, participating in a dynamic exchange. In the same way a blank page and blinking cursor causes paralysis and inaction, so too does a raw piece of mild steel or a blank canvas. This inertia is remedied by the inclusion of found material and objects— there is something already there to respond to, a springboard for creative action.

The objects already have a voice and way of speaking and it's my prerogative as the maker to interpret and build upon what already exists either in surface or concept. Often, these objects have an unselfconscious quality that animates the work in unpredictable ways. In improv, anything you add that builds upon what has already been established gives your scene partner something to explore and heighten. I see my work through the same framework, enhancing and recontextualizing these found bits and pieces.

Often when working improvisationally you find yourself at a crossroad—one can continue with the designated plan or allow the work to unfold, surrendering your agenda. Often mistakes are what take you in a direction that the calculated mind could not have predicted. This leads to new discoveries. When we are rigid, we are missing an opportunity for innovation. Accidents are opportunities for creative response.

Rather than getting embarrassed or ashamed by mistakes, they can become opportunities for deep connection and learning, in both improv and art making. When you work intuitively or improvisationally you are allowing the unconscious part of yourself to take control. With art and improv, you are trusting that your collection of experiences and your attention to the present work will inform your movements, whether it's in front of an audience or alone in your studio. What you may not remember consciously makes its way out through your hands or body. Trust in yourself, your partner, and in the process is necessary for a creative and active result.

Chapter 4. Jewelry, Memory, and The Body



Thomas Street metals studio ceiling— Photo by Ashley Wingo

The body is the springboard for creative action, a hiding place for memories that lie dormant, and a site from which we engage with the world and all that exists therein. We carry with us old versions of ourselves in our memories while simultaneously holding the projection of what we would like to become. I'm excited by the representation of "becoming" that is present in the tension between the old and the new. Likewise, found materials are unique in that they remind us of a former time and place and at the same time allude to a continual state of change. I'm interested in taking items of the lowest order and substantiating them with the support of the body. I'm excited by taking the ordinary and validating it by attention, arrangement, context, and placement. Collaging these found materials into jewelry and putting them on the body, further legitimizes these objects that have been long since forgotten.

In "Current Obsession" article, contemporary jeweler Kiko Gianocca explains his relationship with found objects saying the "new potential of an object opens the boundaries of its interpretation and provokes in the viewer a new way to relate to them. I like the notion that a piece of jewellery stands between the body (the self) and the world, representing a sort of link between the inner and the outer." What we put on our bodies can provide a window into the interior spaces we will never have access to in another, while also initiating a connection to the world outside of the singular body. The wearer has a connection with the jewelry that simultaneously faces outward toward the viewer.

Jewelry can be viewed as a signal of identity to be witnessed by a viewer. Oftentimes when the jewelry is on the body, the wearer can no longer see the work, but engages only somatically. We feel the sway from our ears or the pressure on our chests, or the cold metal on our skin. Most of us are deliberate about what we choose to put on our bodies. What we wear becomes an extension of ourselves and an element in the composition of our identities. These ideas intersect with my interests in the construction of an identity and which parts of us that we choose to validate, adopt, and incorporate and what we choose to discard, neglect, and sometimes punish. Jewelry can be seen as an extension of these beliefs, and a signifier of what we value. In the jewelry I make, similar to our physical bodies, I want to cultivate an environment characterized by inclusivity. Embracing the beautiful alongside the rejected paints a picture of equanimity and acceptance.



Plastic Experiments— Photo by Ashley Wingo

The rusty nail and the pearl can coexist— gentleness and jealousy can share the same space— everything belongs. In her book *Radical Acceptance*, Tara Brach states “The boundary to what we can accept is the boundary to our freedom”. I want to explore the boundaries within my jewelry and likewise within my body.



Ring install – Photo by Ashley Wingo

Final Thoughts

Objects and images can act as a powerful vehicle, transporting the viewer into their minds where they can reconnect with memories and often reenact a dramatized fiction. I'm always searching for objects that have an emotional charge or inspire a visceral response. Every object has inherent characteristics, each one imbued with its own distinct materiality. These objects often have an unselfconscious quality that animates the work in unpredictable ways. Found materials already have a voice and way of speaking, and it's my job as the maker to interpret them. I'm thinking about how objects influence each other, ultimately dictating the outcome of the work. I am interested in deliberate artistic or creative movement versus the acts that happen outside of this framework that can then be included—paint residue on a wall, the cracks beginning to surface in the floor.

The works detailed here are an attempt at crystallizing the longing found in our bodies due to the passing of time and the loss we all face. Through discarded things I want to encapsulate the burden of these experiences, calling attention to what slips through the cracks of our minds and our environments by recusing, curating, and recontextualizing. How do I mimic the effects of time through surface? This question animates most of my research and provides an anchor that I revisit over and over. Jewelry provides a framework for the translation of these ideas through visual art.

If my compulsion to look backward to fonder times or to frantically collect objects is, in the end, just an attempt to ward off my existential aloneness or control my environment, I suppose I am glad that I have found the avenue to translate these anxieties into something more generative—namely art. I will leave you with a poem about letting go.



There is no controlling life.

Try corralling a lightning bolt, containing a tornado.

Dam a stream and it will create a new channel.

Resist, and the tide will sweep you off your feet.

Allow, and grace will carry you to higher ground.

The only safety lies in letting it all in -

the wild and the weak; fear, fantasies, failures and success.

When loss rips off the doors of the heart, or sadness veils your vision with despair,

practice becomes simply bearing the truth.

In the choice to let go of your known way of being, the whole world is revealed to your new eyes.

Danna Faulds

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Found Photo—Found by Ashley Wingo

