

second  
lives:



remixing  
the  
ordinary

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“The wood of the statue is no longer the wood of the tree; sculptured marble is no longer the marble of the quarry; melted and hammered gold becomes an altogether new and different metal; bricks that have been baked and then built into a wall bear no relation to the clay of the clay pit. The color, the integument, all the values that affect the sight have changed.” Henri Focillon<sup>1</sup>

“The objects I pick already have their own significance. I put them together to create new meanings.” Subodh Gupta<sup>2</sup>

“If I had a thousand of any given object, I know I could make anything, because I no longer see that thing as what it is. I see it as a molecule, a particle or a fractal.” Willie Cole<sup>3</sup>

“If there is anything I strive for as an artist, it is not so much what I communicate to anybody else, but that sort of rapture I achieve when I am fully engaged in making whatever it is. Those are the moments when time stands still.” Donald Lipski<sup>4</sup>

What determines whether a material is appropriate for making any object, including works of art and design? What is the nature of the change that an artist or designer effects when working with a given material, and how does the choice of that material contribute to the meaning or significance of the final result? How does an artist’s intervention inform our understanding of the material’s inherent, perceived, or assigned value?

*Second Lives* explores the richly varied and sometimes astonishing landscape of contemporary art and design through works that have been assembled from multiple examples of found, reclaimed, or repurposed objects. The exhibition examines why artists choose the materials they use in crafting their works and how the choice of materials and methods of assembly not only affect the content of the work but also inform the viewer’s response to these works. In so doing, the exhibition traces how these artists, who

come from around the world, repossess ordinary objects initially created for entirely different purposes, transform them into new raw materials, and from this redefined material, construct a new object with its own significance and purpose. The exhibition focuses on the conceptual and physical properties of these ordinary things, how they are exploited by artists to achieve a certain vision, and how their reformulation into a new object gives these often overlooked and unremarkable objects new meanings.

The artists and designs in *Second Lives* exploit both the inherent and the perceived characteristics of ordinary things, and in so doing, they raise questions about how the often laborious and time-consuming process of fabrication contributes to our understanding and appreciation of the completed work. Ultimately, these constructions interrogate individual and cultural values that cut across geographic, economic, and political boundaries. Looking at several general concepts that link together clusters of the work in *Second Lives*, this essay offers an overview of the issues and ideas that emerge from a close, artistic examination of repossessed and transformed materials. Of particular interest are questions related to how artistic acts of recognition and repurposing transform objects on a visual and also cultural level. The works in this show offer insights into how the original function or cultural meaning of an object now used as an artistic medium may inform the creative process of the maker. They reveal how the use of multiplicity and repetition in the assemblage and construction of artworks affects not only a work’s final form, but also its ultimate significance. Lastly, the art in *Second Lives* is exemplary of how traditional values of craftsmanship—crudely defined as the marriage of expertise and pleasure in making things—fit in the scheme of contemporary art and design.

Virtually all materials—clay, glass, metal, fiber, wood, stone, pigment—must undergo

some kind of preparatory alteration before they can be given their final transformation into works of art. They are extracted, refined, alloyed, melted, mixed, crushed, fired, or otherwise modified, and while the array of materials available to artists over the millennia is enormous, until quite recently, most materials were more or less directly connected with naturally occurring or organic sources—wood, pigments, fibers, metallic ores, stone, sand, oils, and extracts and dyes from plants. The inherent characteristics of any material—adaptability, luster, brilliance, texture—and assigned cultural values—beauty, rarity, permanence—both inform the purpose to which it is directed and define its artistic meaning and value.

In the nineteenth century, new materials were developed and introduced that shifted perceptions of what was “natural.” Scientific discoveries and industrial innovation brought forth entirely new families of synthetic or “man-made” materials. These were often regarded as substitutes for what was once natural: coal-derived aniline dyes replaced the dyes extracted from plants, insects, and animals; nitrocellulose-based celluloid (the first commercially viable thermoplastic) replaced not only ivory, which it often resembled, but also the wood and linen previously used for combs and shirt collars, respectively. In 1884, cellulose-derived rayon was introduced as a substitute for much costlier silk. The history of materials from the nineteenth century forward is one of perpetual innovation and increase; the availability and lower costs of most of the new materials, combined with advanced and efficient production technologies, meant that more and more manufactured goods came within the grasp of increasingly larger segments of the population. As production expanded, so did consumption and, ultimately, the proliferation of disused, worn out, or unfashionable waste products.

While early cultures had always needed some form of midden or dump for disposing of whatever had become functionally or culturally useless, it was the consumer culture of ancient Athens that required and organized the first official, administrative establishment of a public garbage dump. From the era of classical Greece through to the Industrial

Revolution two millennia later, civilizations generated a continuous stream of discarded things. However, it is only in the past two centuries, with ever-expanding production and consumption of goods, that the amount of waste has grown to suffocating levels. We routinely abandon short-lived disposables, such as packaging, furnishings, tools and utensils, machinery, and even clothing. We ignore or disdain what we routinely use or discard, particularly the humble, cheap, ordinary stuff of daily life. While not all of the artists in *Second Lives* use discarded materials, few of the things that make up these works of art have any unique or noteworthy value in and of themselves; the maker of each work has perceived and revealed the potential value of the ordinary detritus of our daily lives.

People have always harvested useful things from the discard pile, particularly in so-called “developing” countries in which poverty, need, and ingenuity allowed the repossession of used, overlooked, or discarded items, but it was in the twentieth century that the artistic repurposing of existing things turned found objects into the stuff of art. Since the early decades of the last century, artists have effected a profound change in what is generally understood to be a “raw” material. Cubist collages of everyday things, Duchamp’s iconic urinal, Meret Oppenheim’s pair of high-heel shoes on a silver platter, Arman and César’s accumulations, Rauschenberg’s combines, Tracey Emin’s installations, Dario Robleto’s altered memorabilia, the Campana Brothers’ teddy bear and PVC tubing chairs, Tejo Remy’s reclaimed furniture drawers, El Anatsui’s coruscating tapestries fashioned from the metal neckwrappings of liquor bottles, and Michael Rakowitz’s reclaimed packaging of Iranian foodstuffs have all contributed to the rich and varied history of artistic repurposing.<sup>5</sup>

Although the artists in *Second Lives* provoke fresh insights into the character, function, and abundance of consumer goods and post-consumer waste through their choice of materials, the exhibition does not intend specifically to examine internationally shared issues of recycling or sustainability today. That being said, the works of certain artists, by implication and by choice of material, bring forward these issues. Nnenna Okore makes use

of paper from magazines that are routinely discarded in the United States, but not in her native Nigeria. WOKmedia pleads for the reuse of the billions of chopsticks annually disposed of worldwide. El Anatsui rescues his metal foils from the trash heaps of used liquor bottles. And Boris Bally turns abandoned traffic signs into furniture and jewelry.

*Second Lives* remains first and foremost an exhibition about art making practice today. The artists included employ new things (hair combs, stainless steel food containers, spools of thread, hypodermic needles) and used things (designer clothing labels, gun triggers, eyeglasses, Neolithic Chinese pots).<sup>6</sup> They assign new uses for these products, ones most likely never envisioned by the original manufacturers; they deploy such objects in ways that transgress the expected function and significance of ordinary things. Because of their familiarity, these objects also call forth the associations and memories that each viewer may bring to the artwork, thus eliciting further subjective ruminations on what these things might have meant in their previous lives.<sup>7</sup>

Most of the works bring together dozens, hundreds, and sometimes thousands of individual elements obtained from a diverse variety of sources—souvenir vendors, city streets, grocery stores, and industrial junkyards.<sup>8</sup> They are objects that have been chosen because they already have compelling and engaging meanings for the artist. As Sonya Clark has explained it, “my creative process starts with a question about the function or use of an object . . . . Objects hold a bit of our identity and have the potential, like a synecdoche (especially when manipulated by artist) to re-frame and re-present the whole. They mirror us. They communicate something of our collective and cultural identity.” Although the works may have been composed using techniques associated with traditional collage or assemblage,<sup>9</sup> they have undergone both an aesthetic and a visual transformation. New objects, permanent or near-permanent reconstructions with their own independent life, have been created from a multiplicity of elements.<sup>10</sup> There is a self-conscious intentionality in these works that derives from a dedication to craftsmanship and pride in fabrication. They result from highly

focused attention to detail and are in no way accidental. They are made possible only through painstakingly precise and disciplined repetitive actions—stacking, cutting, linking, welding, and building. The works (and their artists) all share an exhilarating delight in the magic that awaits discovery in the mundane accoutrements of our lives.

The artists in *Second Lives* take pleasure in the labor that their art demands. They are all dedicated practitioners of their unique and individual craft; their relationship to craft as a mode of thought is fluid and self-defining.<sup>11</sup> An unavoidable sense of joy in the process of fabrication pervades all of these works, “compounding pure sensuality with intellect,” as Goethe defined the creative process. Whether it is through Donald Lipski’s “sort of rapture,” or what Laurie Britton Newell describes as “meticulous making,”<sup>12</sup> the focused intentionality and often astonishing craftsmanship in the construction of these works offer the viewer a “thought-stopping, jaw-dropping ‘wow’ factor.”<sup>13</sup>

Nearly every artist whose work is featured in *Second Lives* has chosen materials that have little or no inherent value. It is the labor of making, the “dedication to craftsmanship” mentioned earlier in this essay that reinvests these materials with their value.<sup>14</sup> Many of the objects reconsidered as raw materials were literally and figuratively rescued from the rubbish bin. Their miraculous reinvention as something that can elicit feelings of aesthetic pleasure and is therefore desirable, commodified, and worthy of preservation as a work of art is a near textbook example of “rubbish theory,” in which objects that no longer have even transient value and are thus classified as “rubbish” can become “durables,” but never the other way round.<sup>15</sup>

Another distinctive characteristic of the vision and practice of these artists is that the majority of the works in *Second Lives* are composed of objects whose original forms and/or purposes remain visible; they have not been modified, disguised, or altered beyond recognition. While they may have been cut, crushed, soldered, glued, or stitched, none have been manipulated to the degree that they are no longer redolent of their original lives, adding yet another layer of associative meaning.<sup>16</sup> This phenomenon provides a

wry twist on the historic “truth to materials” debate in architecture, design, and the decorative arts. Importantly, the components have been truly given a second life—one that took them from their humble original selves to a newly formulated meta-material with its own unique properties, requirements, and meaning. Dario Robleto, whose work frequently incorporates unique found objects that are slightly or radically altered (cut in one instance, melted and reformed in others) hopes that his “artworks put a coin in everyone and ignites [sic] some personal soundtrack through a song reference or a material we can all identify with. The works are not about me but about all our histories and how they find their way into objects.”<sup>17</sup>

These artists have recognized that there is knowledge and cultural memory embedded in objects that are often unnoticed, disregarded, or discarded. How do the choices of materials and the techniques of their transformation inform both the formal qualities of the works and also their meanings as statements of the artist’s intentions? How does the choice of materials challenge our perceptions and criteria of value in a world driven by mass consumption? Do the materials have local or global cultural meanings, and how are these meanings expressed in the work and workmanship? Are any of these works “beautiful” in the ideal sense, or are they primary expressions of a relative beauty, one dependent on context and familiarity with the objects from which they are made? Finally, how does the craftsmanship in fabrication inform or enhance our appreciation for and understanding of these works?

There are striking differences and equally striking correspondences among all of the artworks in *Second Lives*, but certain works reverberate with each other in their implicit or explicit meanings. While the works are organized in groups suggested by their thematic intent, these are not intended to be hard and fast categorizations. A significant number of works bear encoded references to personal or cultural identity and offer observations on how such identities may shift over time. Commentary on current global politics, power strategies, and social conditions surface in the work of a second group. A third interrogates the meaning and limits of function,

primarily through the vehicle of constructed or modified furniture and lighting designs. The final group of works focuses a spotlight on how familiar everyday objects, viewed in an unexpected context, gain a new power to inspire and impress.

## second skin: reconsidering identity

Steven Deo’s work addresses issues of personal and cultural identity as evoked through a wide variety of commonplace objects. “As a contemporary artist of Native American descent, identity has been a constant point of reference. Often, I’ve looked into the past through the eyes of the camera at images of my personal family or images that are provided in the context of Western history. In this examination and comparison of the Indian of the distant past to the present, the Native American is a reflection of his environment. As our environment has changed through the processes of modernity, so has our self perception.”<sup>18</sup> In many of his sculptures, Deo turns to the familiar accoutrements of daily life that he sees as revelatory of his personal and tribal identity. Crushed and laminated shoe-tops (including the artist’s own shoes worn on September 11) are shaped into ghostly suitcases in *Trailways Baggage* (2003), a poignant reminder of loss and despair. Although belonging to a specific moment in time, the suitcases and worn shoes also serve as reminders of the forced migration of his people, their physical and spiritual dislocation. Dozens of wooden rulers are transformed into featureless menacing torsos, against which individuals are to be measured in *Objects of Desire* (2005). Cheap, dime-store toy soldiers become three-dimensional figures of children in *Child’s Play* (2004), an unequivocal reference to the indoctrination of the young into the military culture of the United States, while mulched volumes of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* are cast as simulated human brains, receptacles of the epistemologies of the dominant culture in *Hearts and Minds* (2007).

*Perpetual Stream* (2004) depicts two near-life-sized figures cropped below the knees to suggest they are moving through water. For the artist, the figures of parent and child

evoke the transmission of culture across generations by way of the oral histories and storytelling traditions of his people. Specifically, the artist uses the figures to represent himself and family members (and by implication his ancestors) harvesting medicines and food from the South Canadian River in Oklahoma. The figures are constructed from thousands of jigsaw puzzle pieces. Like the pieces of the puzzle themselves, the artist sees his cultural identity as “relocated, dislocated, grouped and regrouped, numbered, and scattered. The one commonality we have left is an extended family called ‘Indian.’”<sup>19</sup>

Subodh Gupta of India creates imposing structures—glittering mandalas and tabletop cityscapes—from clustered layers of the brass or stainless steel containers and tools used by Indian families for preparing, transporting, and serving food. The very ordinariness and ubiquity of these essential properties of daily life re-present the location where “the secular meets the ritual, and the motions of daily life double as esoteric messages or religious prescriptions.” Gupta teases new meanings from the mundane. “The objects I pick already have their own significance. I put them together to create new meanings.”<sup>20</sup>

Gupta’s assemblages of pots and pans, jumbled together in a seemingly random pattern within a clearly defined shape, gain their grandeur and presence through their large scale. *Giant Leap of Faith* (2006) is an endless column created from a stack of outsized stainless steel buckets. An assemblage of bowls, covered lunch boxes, and tumblers becomes a leering massive skull in *Very Hungry God* (2006), installed on a plinth in the Grand Canal at the Venice Biennale in 2007. The utensils, of standardized shapes and sizes, evoke the anonymity of urban life; dislocated from their original environment and re-situated in an alien space, the vessels become universal and archetypal documents of material culture. At the same time, Gupta’s abstract or pictorial forms are vital signs of the artist’s presence and intervention in the world, reminders of his individual place within a culture undergoing rapid social and economic change. The utensils and the final forms they assume transform the

plethora of overlapping objects into a visually compelling reincarnation of the thousands of individuals they evoke. Who might have used these vessels is suggestively embedded within them. The practical and cultural functions of the objects are seamlessly intertwined, their spiritual and visual identities inseparable.

Jean Shin and Paul Villinski both transform their personal collections of vinyl phonograph records into raw material from which they construct visual metaphors of their lives or the lives of relatives. Shin, who has made a specialty of repurposing the ordinary, has worked with a range of materials from contributed items of personal clothing collaged and suspended on a public passageway (Museum of Modern Art, 2004) to broken umbrellas arranged like a skeletal blossom (Socrates Sculpture Park, Queens, New York, 2003) to \$24,496 worth of discarded lottery tickets she used to build a massive house of cards (Brooklyn Museum, 2004). Writing about Shin’s choice of materials, Eva Respini notes that “her materials often have a history of obsolescence and abandonment, giving them an identity that she attempts to preserve while also bringing it into new contexts.”<sup>21</sup> Shin’s work engages the viewer on multiple levels. Her *20/20* (2005), an installation featuring found prescription glasses embedded into a wall, encouraged viewers to, quite literally, see through another person’s eyes. Sound has also played a role in her work as in *TEXTile*, her 2006 collaboration with the Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, featuring a carpet of salvaged computer keys accompanied by a soundtrack of the clacking of a keyboard in use.

The highly personal nature of many of the objects that Shin uses is indicative of the artist’s vision to transform unique, and often generic and anonymous, mementoes (which the artist has referred to as “life’s leftovers”) of an individual into a format that engages the viewer on a much broader emotional and even spiritual level. In *Sound Wave* (2007), Shin has retrieved and repurposed dozens of phonograph records, which have been melted and bent over a wooden armature to create a cresting ocean wave. Shin acquired the records from her husband’s family years after the death, in 2000, of his grandfather, Joseph Ripel. Ripel had been an avid collector

of 78 rpm phonograph disks and had amassed hundreds during his lifetime. The music these records captured and preserved were emblematic of his own life, beginning with German and Bohemian ballads and folk songs from the 1920s and 1930s and evolving as he aged to big bands of the 1930s and 1940s and pop music in the 1940s and 1950s. For the artist, this collection “represents the musical tastes of one man over his lifetime. Embedded in these old records are lived experiences, listening to music and the passing of time.”

The Queens-based Paul Villinski has also chosen vintage phonograph records for *My Back Pages* (2006–2008), his site-referential installation comprised of a stack of cardboard LP album covers and a record player whose spinning turntable and arm produce unrecognizable scratching sounds. Emerging from the turntable and ascending up the gallery wall is a flock of black and polychrome butterflies cut from the albums.<sup>22</sup> With its title inspired by Arlo Guthrie’s 1969 song “My Front Pages,” the work comprises a selection of the albums that the artist had acquired over the course of thirty years, a collection he refers to as “the soundtrack of my life.”

The music on the disks functioned as “markers of personal events, personal anthems” for the artist; narratives from his own life are lodged within them. Villinski’s refusal to register with the Selective Service during the Vietnam War was conflated in the artist’s mind with the music of Joan Baez.

A 1978 recording by the Talking Heads called “Artists Only” adumbrated the artist’s eventual choice of career. Before Villinski alters each disk with a scroll saw, he listens to it, as a kind of eulogy for what the object represented before its modification. And even afterwards, the records continue to offer glimpses of the singer and/or the song captured in vinyl. The process of transformative destruction allows the artist to release the meaning of the albums, the collection, and the song into the world at large; it is about the “ideas of the musical artists I loved drifting out into the world, spreading [their] influence like seeds borne by the wind.” The process of transformation, which the artist conducts with attention to every detail of fabrication, allows the memories of others to become touchstones of the narrative written by the viewer.

Sonya Clark works in many fiber or fiber-related media including thread, yarn, cloth, and beads. Using many traditional handcraft techniques, such as embroidery and beading, she creates works that are autobiographical and generic at the same time. She gained recognition for a seminal series of headdresses and headpieces exploring the complex nature of the artist's personal identity as an African American woman of Caribbean ancestry and addressing the ways in which hair and head ornamentation describes and defines the cultural implications of history as lived and history as remembered. She has also created a series of crocheted or beaded "wigs" that reproduce popular or stereotypical African American hairstyles.

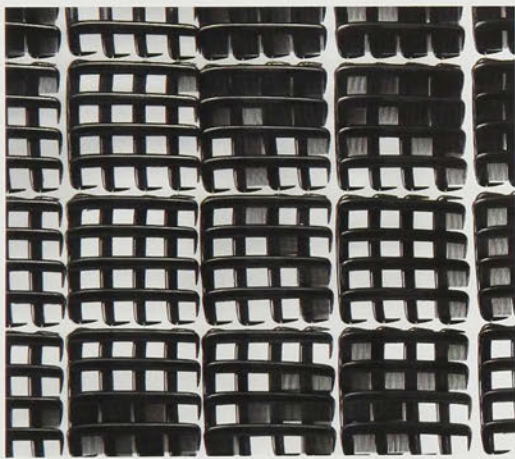


Fig. 1  
Sonya Clark, *Madam C. J. Walker* (large), 2008 (detail)  
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*Madam C. J. Walker* (2008) (Fig. 1) is a large and imposing portrait of the first African American female millionaire, Madam Walker (1867–1919), who was born Sarah Breedlove in Louisiana to a family of former slaves and died in New York City. Her fortune was made by way of the cosmetics and hair-care empire that she founded, the first to cater to the needs of black women. Clark's portrait is composed by assembling hundreds of ordinary black hair combs to create a black and white pixelated image. For the artist, the comb takes on more significance than its obvious reference to Madam Walker's business; Clark sees the comb as "an icon of assimilation."<sup>23</sup> For many African Americans, the comb carries with it complex layers of associative meanings: "The black plastic combs evoke a legacy of hair culture, race politics, and antiquated notions of good hair and bad hair...Combs are tools in as

much as they order the fibers that we grow... when a comb has missing teeth, there is evidence of a struggle."<sup>24</sup>

Nicholas Galanin revisits the traditions of his Tlingit heritage in his sculpted books that take the form of masks or portrait heads. For the artist "tradition is a gift, diversity is a form of wealth. Coming from a culture with a strong visual language, I risk cutting myself free from this when I work away from these forms. Through my current works I am exploring issues of indigenous identity."<sup>25</sup> Galanin uses a laser cutter to shape his wall-mounted faces, which are comprised of texts carefully chosen by the artist. For example, a totemic animal mask familiar to Tlingit culture is made from an anthropological history that presents the white man's version of Tlingit beliefs and customs. For *Second Lives*, Galanin has carved three masks using books and Bibles, symbols of the temporal and spiritual authority of the dominant culture.

Carlo Marcucci traces his personal history and identity by way of the food products—various colored pasta and udon noodles—he transforms into sculpture. *Wheatfields LXXII* (2008), a geometric sculpture in black and brown, is made of squid ink pasta and udon noodles. Marcucci takes this everyday comestible and transforms both its purpose and its significance by changing its function. The artist views his material as metaphorical of other issues of contemporary culture. The manner in which food is produced, negotiated, prepared, and consumed changed radically in the decades following first the nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution and then the equally dramatic agricultural revolution of the twentieth century, which spawned the term "agrobusiness." The artist traces the profound changes that have affected our relationship with the food we produce and consume: "modern man now forages and hunts for food in market and restaurants, rather than the forest and prairies of our ancient forebears." By repurposing this humble and everyday edible, Marcucci lays bare issues of perceived and true value; what is taken for granted—cheap, readymade, pre-packaged food—is given value through the intervention of the artist.

Nadine Robinson's installations have been constructed from a variety of reclaimed and repurposed materials, all of which are revelatory documents of her life and culture. She examines questions of individual identity as both a challenge and response to societal modes of thought and action. Sound is a common element in many of her installations, such as her 2000 "audio-painting" *Das Rattenfängerhaus* (*The Ratcatcher's House*), an image of a janitor with nine speakers embedded in canvas panels. The title is in reference to the familiar childhood tale of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, recounted by both the brothers Grimm and Robert Browning. In the cautionary tale, a musical rat-catcher eradicates the vermin from the village by luring them with music to their death in the river; when the villagers refuse to pay for this service, the Pied Piper retaliates by leading all of their children to a similar death. Robinson reworks the fairy tale in sound and image to tell a contemporary story about the stereotypical role of black music, domestic labor, and what the artist has called a "marginalized generation."<sup>26</sup>

*Great White Me (Version Two)* (2008) and *Self Portrait #1 (China Shag)* are pendant wall installations made of synthetic blond and black hair extensions, respectively. Together, they raise issues central to postcolonial studies, including the construction of variant standards of beauty and how women's physical attributes are held to define character and shape behavior. Wigs are intended to enhance physical beauty, but they are also forms of deception. *Great White Me* is a blatantly artificial Jean Harlow trophy pelt mounted on the wall that almost blinds in its purity and radiance. The scintillating surface is made from modified, cheap, store-bought wigs fashioned into a seductive, but ultimately fallow, field of dreams. *Self Portrait #1* is comprised of the hair extensions the artist wore over a four-year period. In these works, Robinson sets up a provocative interplay of cultural paradigms that structure and inform relationships between individuals and between ethnic groups. She has said, "I create artworks that bring social and historical politics together with a modernism/postmodernism which is allocated from a reference point of black

urbanism. I work with subjects and objects that are specific to my experience."<sup>27</sup>

Long-Bin Chen's work is created from printed matter, ranging from discarded text books and training manuals to magazines, telephone directories, and computer printouts. Outmoded and outdated, these items represent what the artist calls "the cultural debris of our information society."<sup>28</sup> The retrieved materials are stacked and then carved and sanded to create new three-dimensional forms—human bodies, portrait busts, and Buddha heads. The careful sanding of the surfaces to create a soft and unified grey gives the paper and printed texts the appearance of stone or wood. The individual pages of the book are not glued together, other than at the original binding spine.

Chen's carved paper sculptures have been evolving since his first efforts in 1992 to use books as raw material at the School of Visual Arts. The artist has made paper versions of Mount Rushmore and portraits of other figures, but he most frequently creates Buddha heads that reference his Asian heritage. The heads are not generic or stylized images of the Buddha, but faithful reproductions of specific Buddha heads in public and private collections. The heads, separated from their bodies, are symbolic of the plundering of Asian culture by collectors. The artist favors specific types of English-language texts for the heads, including stacks of the "For Dummies" instructional books, catalogues from auction houses, or telephone directories that contain the thousands of names "under the care of the Buddha."<sup>29</sup> Chen's personal and cultural identity is revealed in these sculptures, but so too is his wry and often satirical sense of humor.

Chen's *Chair with Buddha Heads* (2007), shown in *Second Lives*, presents the image of the Buddha on a monumental scale. The artist has arranged multiple stacks of telephone directories to create a Buddha head that forms the solid wall of a reading room complete with seat and table. Entering the head of the Buddha, the viewer is able to scan the spines of the texts that form the back of the sculpture in a gesture that plays on the space and content of language. The artist refers to books as the "container of knowledge and information" whose "function has been

totally changed by the computer."<sup>30</sup> He also acknowledges the iconic power of the book as a culturally sensitive artifact, especially in Asia. The reluctance to destroy a book—a repository that records and preserves shared cultural ideas and beliefs—is a discomfort with which the viewer can identify.<sup>31</sup>

Grandeur of conception and brilliance of execution are hallmarks of the work of Ghanaian artist El Anatsui, who today works and teaches in Nigeria. Anatsui has used a wide range of materials, natural and man-made, many of which are the remnants of an expanding Nigerian consumer culture. The artist's compelling *Wastepaper Bag* (2004) series features works made from the crumpled metal plates used for printing newspaper obituaries. He has used punch perforated food graters in his sculpture, referencing their use in Nigerian households for the preparation of the common staple, cassava root. Anatsui has explained his choice of media, stating, "I am drawn more to materials that have been subjected to considerable human use: mortars, trays, graters, and, of late, liquor bottle tops."<sup>32</sup> A series of large sculptures created in the 1990s employed abandoned fragments of wood, woodchips, and even sawdust. The wood was stacked prior to its being cut into jagged shapes with a chainsaw. An important aspect of the work was the fact that as it cut, the chainsaw burned the surfaces, charring them to a rich black, a metaphorical reference to the life cycle of the material in nature and its destruction through human intervention. Other works in wood from the same era are cut and charred to reproduce the geometric patterns of indigenous Adinkra textiles from Ghana, which figure prominently in Anatsui's design repertoire. In his culture, textiles indicate role and status and commemorate important events and individuals through a range of colors and patterns.

El Anatsui is probably best known for his large metal "tapestries" coruscating with light. These tapestries are not woven from fiber, but assembled using thousands of tops, screw-caps, and neck wraps from bottles that once contained Nigerian-made and consumed liquor. The gold, silver, or colorfully printed pieces of metal are individually flattened and folded into a rough square. Each square is

pierced with up to four holes through which copper wires pass, becoming the attachment links for chains of bottle caps. In these works, the textile traditions of Africa are once again cited, in this case the bold geometry and rich colors of Kente cloth, with vertical and horizontal lines creating passages of gold, silver, red, blue, green, and black.

Multiple layers of significance resonate in both the artist's adoption of a textile format for his work as well as his choice of materials. In addition to their cultural significance, fabrics were traded early on by Europeans for gold and slaves. Liquor, another trading currency used by Europeans and Americans to buy slaves, had nearly replaced local currencies like cowrie shells by the end of the nineteenth century. Finally, the brand names that remain visible in the tapestries, such as "Dark Sailor" rum, "Liquor Headmaster," and "Father of All Liquor," add and evoke additional layers of cultural significance.

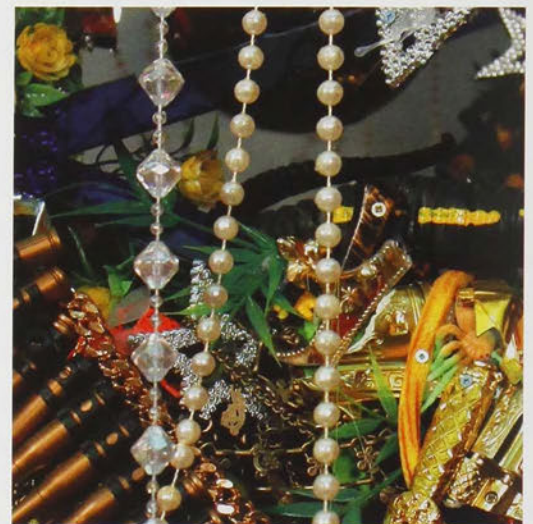


Fig. 2  
Hew Locke, *Golden Horde*, 2006 (detail)  
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Icons are important and enduring symbols of personal and cultural identity. Hew Locke's five-part construction, *Golden Horde* (2006) (Fig. 2) is at first glance a bewildering potpourri of dime-store treasures—toy swords and shields, cheap Christmas decorations, plastic plants and animals, chains, mirrors, and strands of Mardi Gras beads. The artist describes these objects, which he has also used to fashion giant portraits of Queen Elizabeth II, as "cheap rubbish trying to look like our most idealized concept of precious things."<sup>33</sup> The boat-like forms of *Golden Horde* evoke the splendor of late medieval table nefs—boat-shaped, gilded-silver containers



for the eating utensils and napkins placed before a high status individual at a sumptuous banquet—an imposing visual symbol of rank and privilege. The glittering hordes of gold, silver, and bejeweled treasure in palaces and museums have been an inspiration to the artist over the years, especially for their theatrical presentation of wealth. At the same time, the image of a boat laden with pseudo-treasure is also a reference to Locke's own obsession with boats as a symbol of migration, liberation, and escape, an obsession that began during his childhood, when he often sailed to England from his home in Guyana.

For Locke, these boats carry “an impression of wealth and riches patently non-existent,” and they also signify migration, invasion, and cultural exchange. The original Golden Horde referenced in the work's title was the name given to one of the Mongol armies descended from Genghis Khan, and as Locke explains, “the influx of illegal immigrants or asylum seekers from Africa to Europe has likewise created a mental image of them as an invading force.” Migration implicates both a former home and a sought-after refuge, dreams of both past and future. As such, these ships carry forward a cautionary message: “They contain the hopes and fears of the passengers. These aggressive babies are warriors. They are desperate to reach a positive shore, where they will be welcomed and happy. Get rich or die trying.”

## second thoughts: traversing power and politics

Terese Agnew's works made from various fabrics address political issues that range from environmental degradation and destruction to economic and military power. In *Portrait of a Textile Worker* (completed in 2005), Agnew presents a large-scale version of a photograph of a young woman laboring in a Bangladeshi sweatshop, seated behind her Juki sewing machine.<sup>34</sup> The work was assembled from 30,000 designer clothing labels, taken from apparel sold at leading retailers. Agnew did not have to purchase the labels for her two-year stitching project; they were donated by an impressive national network of organizations and individuals who

cut the labels from their items of personal clothing. Each label served as a picture element or pixel to achieve the implied depth and the gradation of tones in the original photograph.

For the artist, this work “makes one person among millions of unseen workers visible. One day while shopping in a department store I noticed huge signs everywhere—Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren, Kathy Lee, and so on. They were all proper names. I'd recently met two garment workers and realized by contrast, their identity was rarely thought of and often deliberately hidden. That anonymity could be undone by assembling a view of one worker using the well-known names on apparel she produced.”

Thomas Glassford creates sculpture from a variety of reclaimed objects found in the streets and flea markets of Guadalajara, Mexico, where he lives and works. His raw materials have included organic matter such as the gourds grown in Mexico and used for serving liquids or sold as tourist souvenirs. The gourds were given a new purpose and context when Glassford fitted them with tightly latched or screwed metal straps, bars, and cages in order to create a sense of bodily unease. He has worked with found objects, used in multiples, ranging from broom handles to fluorescent light tubes. Recently another material, melamine dinnerware, has entered his arsenal. These bowls, plates, and saucers are used to construct tall stacks that resemble totemic artifacts suspended on chains along with bones, glass balls, gourds, and other found objects. The result is a hybrid and mutant form resembling a series of outsized amuletic necklaces that dangle from the ceiling on curved metal branches, as in his *Madame Butterfly* (Fig. 3) from 2005.



Fig. 3  
Thomas Glassford, *Madame Butterfly*, 2006 (detail)  
See page 102

Glassford's work frequently delineates the shadowy territory that exists between the living and the non-living, between organic and synthetic, the anonymous consumer product and those prized personal possessions.<sup>35</sup> His work is informed by his perceptive take on the evocative power of consumer detritus and the fragments of nature. The work is profoundly social and confrontative, seducing the viewer with color and glitter and then reminding him or her of the transitory nature of assigned hierarchies of value.

For *Second Lives*, Glassford has created a work that makes use of large melamine bowls fitted together lip-to-lip to make self-contained beads. The beads are strung on a metal counting frame to create a larger-than-life-sized abacus. Glassford salvages and animates these humble housewares, once regarded as the pinnacle of modern good taste but today banal reminders of the tawdriness of daily life. Earlier in his career, Glassford commented, “I'm talking about everyday bad taste—the type of beauty that comes about by the perversion of society—about bad taste in the urban landscape.”<sup>36</sup> The abacus is customarily used for arithmetic calculations, often of great complexity. Glassford's counting device, which gives the impression of being a large toy more than an archetypal machine, is called into actual function; it records world population during the months that *Second Lives* is on view.

Several artists offer commentaries on contemporary urban life, street violence, and drug culture in their designs. Jewelry maker and metalworker Boris Bally has produced a large and diverse body of work through the retrieval of aluminum traffic signs, discarded by local government bureaus, which he cuts, folds, and rivets into chairs or tables; spins on a lathe to produce concave bowls; or equips with findings as brooches. The artist believes his choice of materials is informed by current environmental concerns and a recognition of the urban waste that grew up along with road systems. “Scrap street signs are materials ripe for the battles of this decade: Their obvious environmental message; the mockery of precious materials, which are symbolic of the American struggle for wealth and success; their subtle defiance of authority.”

*Brave #2* (2006) is a weighty neck ornament that follows the form of aboriginal pendants or necklaces that preserved the strength, agility, and power of animal teeth or claws. However, this necklace is made up of dozens of triggers from street weapons turned in during a “gun buy-back” program in Pittsburgh sponsored by the Anti-Violence Coalition. With its aggressive reminders of violence, here rendered impotent by dismantling, the necklace is a grim accessory for a contemporary urban street warrior.

Gun violence on a national scale and the sad history of the destruction left behind in the wake of Mozambique’s sixteen-year civil war (1975–1994) are the subjects of Gonçalo Armando Mabunda’s furniture and sculptures created from found armaments. The war, which was responsible for the deaths by fighting or famine of over 900,000 people and which resulted in the displacement of over five million others, left in its wake a bounty of discarded weapons, spent and live ammunition, bombs, and land mines (many of which are still live and continue to kill and mangle today) that have been buried in fields throughout the battle zones. In 1995, a faith-based organization launched a program of “Transforming Arms into Ploughshares;” they accept guns and ammunition, often discovered in fields by resident farmers, dismantle them, and turn them over to artists for refashioning into works of art.

Mabunda’s *The Throne of New Presidents* (2007) is a chilling testament to and constant reminder of the violence of the past, vested in the retrieved and repurposed arms he uses. Bombs comprise the four legs of this imposing chair, which is symbolically intended for the highest official of state. Handguns are positioned as hand rests on the arms, while rifles provide the spine of the chair’s back. Ammunition from the weapons is strung as ornament, a haunting and ironically festive touch. Ultimately, this work unravels various strands and levels of violence, recalling Jean Genet’s statement that “power may be at the end of a gun, but sometimes it’s also at the end of the shadow or the image of a gun.”<sup>37</sup>

The urban environment and contemporary drug culture is addressed by collaborative artists Laurel Roth and Andy Diaz Hope in *Trinity* (aka *Bubbles, Grandma, and Spike*)

(2007), a three-part hanging chandelier. The artists constructed the lighting device by draping existing chandelier frames with neoclassical swags and pendants comprised of hypodermic needles, empty medicine capsules, and Swarovski crystals. Two drug cultures operating side-by-side today—illegal street drugs symbolized by the hypodermic needles and legal “drawing room” drugs used by another segment of society—are inextricably interwoven in *Trinity*.

Michael Rakowitz’s *The invisible enemy should not exist* (Recovered, Missing, Stolen Series) (2007) is part of a continuing exploration into the relationships between people and their environments that he has addressed over the years in a body of work that includes installation, performance, sculpture, graphics, and design projects such as his vision/creation of portable plastic shelters that can be attached and inflated at the heat exhaust grills of urban buildings, which he accomplished working collaboratively with homeless individuals.<sup>38</sup> The artist has investigated his own Jewish-Iraqi heritage in *Return (Brooklyn)* (2006), a reconstruction of his grandfather’s Brooklyn import/export business and storefront. The tragedy of the current war in Iraq is the focal point for *The invisible enemy should not exist*. The individual elements that comprise the work—recreations of artifacts plundered and lost from the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad in April, 2003—are displayed on a large table that follows the pattern of the original street in ancient Babylon leading through the Ishtar Gate, a monument that survives today in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. The often priceless and unique documents of Iraqi culture, core to the history of human civilization, have been recreated by the artist using local Arabic newspapers and the cheap packaging materials from Middle Eastern foods all bought in his Chicago neighborhood. The ironic combination of material and message is powerful and memorable.

Fred Wilson has become internationally recognized for his perceptive and often unsettling “interventions” using existing museum collections of art and artifacts, beginning with his landmark *Mining the Museum* exhibition at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 1992, in which he juxtaposed many

familiar and seemingly “neutral” objects, such as an heirloom silver tea service, with such powerful documentary artifacts as slave shackles to highlight the painful story of slavery in America.

Wilson’s work reveals the ambiguity of power relationships in American society through works such as his *Love and Loss in the Milky Way* (2005). Presented on a clinically white table is an array of what the artist has referred to as “tchotchkes,” worthless baubles and knick-knacks. The familiar shapes of cups and saucers, butter dishes, milk jugs, flower vases, sugar bowls, and cake plates, all made from white milk glass, are scattered like the unkempt remains of a dining table. Placed strategically amongst the domestic array are a broken plaster bust of a classical European male; a tall, standing neoclassical female figure; and a plaster bust of an African woman with elaborately coiffed hair. The only color found in this snowy landscape is a cookie jar depicting a black mammy with a hair bow and dress painted in the same garish red as her smiling lips. The dynamics of racial relations are captured in this unsettling still life—the purity of the white classical European female stands in juxtaposition to the broken fragments of her male counterpart; the long-necked and elegant African female bust is an idealization as stereotypical as the blatantly racist mammy cookie jar. A final note of irony pervades the work as the result of the artist’s choice of milk glass—a cheap and artificial version of expensive porcelain—to represent the heirlooms that are passed on from one generation to another, along with inherited perceptions of race.

*Mandela & Anne Frank Forever: The Endless Column* (2006) by Joe Lewis is a tribute to these two individuals and their lives. Although these people were separated by time and geography, Lewis discovered that Nelson Mandela had read Anne Frank’s diary while imprisoned, and that he recognized in her story a parable of the plight of his nation and people. Lewis has retold the story in a version of Brancusi’s *Endless Column*, erected in 1938 as a monument to the Romanian soldiers who lost their lives in World War I. Drawing parallels between the beliefs of Anne Frank during the Holocaust and those of Mandela during apartheid, the artist has positioned the names of the two

protagonists at the top of a zigzagging stack of international telephone books intended to represent the names and lives of the six million murdered Jews and the twelve million Africans forced into slavery—names that remain primarily anonymous and forgotten.

Do Ho Suh has made a specialty of creating new sculptural forms using multiples of the same ordinary objects, ranging from molded plastic toy figures to thousands of portraits taken from high school year books. He has also built dreamlike environments—spaces, rooms, furnishings, and structures—out of sheer fabrics that evoke the vague and transparent memories of times and places we have all known at some point in our lives. While many of these works are autobiographical—he has made floating versions of his own childhood home as well as the interiors of apartments he has inhabited in New York City—they become generic visual and emotional touchstones for the viewer.

Among Suh's best known and most compelling works are a series of stylized jackets or robes made of thousands of stainless steel military dog tags. Each tag identifies a distinct individual, here merged into a homogenous layer of metal armor, the impermeable façade of military power. The specificity of each tag is lost in translation as it becomes a garment to be donned by a giant, and while Suh may not be intentionally commenting on U.S./Korea relations, these powerful presences do bring with them memories of the thousands of American soldiers from the Eighth Army who entered Korea with General Douglas MacArthur in 1950, as well as the 30,000 U.S. soldiers still present in Korea today.

## second comings: resurrecting the everyday

Several of the artists in *Second Lives* have concentrated their attention on the transformation of the most mundane items into abstract sculptural forms and lighting fixtures, giving overlooked tools, implements, and products—aluminum food strainers, plastic forks, automobile tires, and eyeglasses—new lives on many different levels. Many of these works also subvert our understanding of the original function these

objects served without disguising their unique characteristics and properties.

Susie MacMurray's large-scale, labor-intensive, and site-referential installations have been carried out in a wide variety of settings ranging from historic houses<sup>39</sup> to religious edifices.<sup>40</sup> MacMurray deals with iconic spaces—whether domestic, industrial, or ecclesiastical—as stages set for exploring the role of history as a shared reference point for personal and cultural narratives. Her materials are chosen to further the narratives of specific histories. For example, at Pallant House, a seventeenth-century structure, MacMurray painstakingly installed 20,000 mussel shells, each bivalve outfitted with a red velvet lining that protruded in a blatantly sexual manner. The shells were installed, tightly arranged, up and through the walls of the house's grand staircase. The shell—a closed and impermeable environment containing hidden life—was used as a metaphor for the restrictive and emotionally distant relationship between the couple who lived in the home. At the same time, the iconic symbol of the shell—often associated with religious fervor and pilgrimage—became a pointed reference to repressed earthly sexuality.

The ordinary, manufactured products that form the basis of MacMurray's artwork often resonate for the viewer as metonyms or icons. In the use of objects such as hairnets and rubber gloves, the artist calls forth memories of the body, often a specifically female, working and possibly even working class body.



Fig. 4  
Susie MacMurray, *A Mixture of Frailties*, 2004 (detail)  
See page 141

In *A Mixture of Frailties* (2004) (Fig. 4), the familiar, standard, yellow rubber gloves used for dishwashing and other domestic chores have been reversed to create matte white surfaces. The work references various other uses of gloves in the construction of dresses that lie somewhere on the continuum linking fashion, design, and art.<sup>41</sup> Here, the overlapping layers of white rubber create a six-foot tall gown evocative of an elaborately constructed and ornamented wedding dress. The original bodily function of the gloves—to protect and preserve women's hands during repetitive, undervalued, and tedious labor—is given another layer of associative meaning in *A Mixture of Frailties* as it becomes a potentially wearable, even glamorous, object. The implied “absent, but present, body haunts MacMurray's installations.”<sup>42</sup>

Soyeon Cho's hanging light constructed from plastic picnic or takeout forks, Q-tips, and electric light resembles a botanical mutant. The work, titled *Self-Portrait 2* (2007), is related in concept and intent to her other works, including an abstract self-portrait, also comprised of plastic forks and black electrical tape, that acknowledges the city, the artist's presence in it, its street detritus, and its disposable material goods, as well as the ultimate possibility of transformation through creative intervention. Cho's own thoughts on the potential artistic value in mundane and disregarded objects that can be revealed through an artist's intervention and transformation bridge the reality of the everyday and the ephemeral world of dreams: “By showing the hidden magic in the most trivial of things, I allow viewers to see what my dreams are and to revalue their relationship with much that they have taken for granted.”

WOKmedia, a partnership between Julie Mathias and Wolfgang Kaepfner, has designed installations as well as furniture. Their *Once* (2008) furniture responds to the astonishing abundance of cheap disposable wooden chopsticks worldwide, and particularly in China, where it is estimated that some forty-five billion pairs are used annually, requiring the wood of twenty-five million full-grown trees. The repurposing of one of the humblest of implements was driven by the team's response to the waste of such a valuable material. The chairs, stools,

and tables in the series each consist of thousands of reclaimed chopsticks, randomly dropped into a stack that becomes not only self-supporting (even without an adhesive), but capable of sustaining the weight of a human.

Visual memories of iconic images are presented as a game of perception and knowledge by Devorah Sperber. Using thousands of spools of commercial thread produced in standard colors, Sperber creates inverted, pixilated images of familiar landmarks from the history of art, images that can be resolved only when viewed through a reversing lens or on the surface of a convex mirror. The images are scanned into a computer to analyze the color pixel pattern that is then translated into spools of colored thread. While the array of colored spools may appear to be an abstract composition when viewed directly, their transformation via a viewing device brings the image into clearer focus. Her *After the Mona Lisa 7* (2008) is from a series of the same title that has used these various viewing devices in combination with an anamorphic image to explore Leonardo's celebrated portrait. While all of Sperber's work deals with the intersection of vision and memory played out on two levels—the wall composition of thread spools and the image presented in the image-reversing globe or mirror—*After the Mona Lisa 7* (2008) adds another level. Directly in front of the Mona Lisa's face, blocking it from view, is a digital camera held aloft by the arm of a tourist. Sperber's work delves deeply into the perception of vision and how our memory of what we think we see changes how we see. She invokes the scientific term "neurological priming" to refer to how the brain is trained to remember what a familiar image looks like, even when it is only "suggested" by the spools. "Offering two distinct versions of reality illustrates the limitations of visual perception and presents reality as a subjective experience vs. an absolute truth. It demonstrates that the visual world, as perceived by the human eye and brain, consists of a miniscule layer of scale-based perception existing within infinite layers of imperceptible realities."<sup>43</sup>

The question of what defines "ordinary" and "valuable" is mockingly asked by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei when he transgresses the

sacred spaces of revered historical objects. He has dismantled and reconstructed antique Ming and Qing furniture, rendering them of any function—practical or otherwise. His iconoclastic and highly conceptual works stand cultural beliefs about rarity, value, and preciousness on end. A landmark work in this vein was his 1995 performance piece called *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, in which the artist released a nearly 2,000-year-old ceramic artifact above a bricked courtyard, a process that was photographically documented. The "dis-ease" that Ai Wei Wei's interventions cause is achieved through radical modification, if not outright destruction, of what are deemed culturally sensitive artifacts. With a single gesture, the unique prize is recast as an expendable accessory.

In *Colored Vases* of 2008, the artist has assembled twenty-two ceramic vessels, ostensibly dating to China's Neolithic period (5000-3000 BCE). These "rare documents of civilization" have been coated with cheap industrial paint in garish shades of baby blue and pink, apple green, and tomato red, thus eradicating the cultural and economic "value" of the pots. The artist has said, "by changing the meaning of the object, shaking its foundation, we are also changing our own condition. We can question what we are." This work also looks at the redefined concept of ordinary within the artist's complex methodology; while Neolithic pots may be regarded as rare and valuable artifacts from the past, in their own day, these were most likely simple, functional pots and vessels used on a daily basis, and most likely produced in numbers that for the time and technology, echo mass-produced manufactured goods.

Jill Townsley extracts another layer of potential meaning from what is deemed ordinary by choreographing her work to shift its form over time. For *Spoons* (2008), Townsley grouped white plastic spoons into units of three and secured each with a standard rubber band in order to form a tripod. She then stacked the tripods on top of each other, creating a dynamic pyramid. The composition of 9,273 spoons and 3,091 rubber bands resembles a mathematical theorem in three-dimensions and clearly relates to the artist's interest in fractal geometry. However, Townsley's intention is to introduce the

element of chance fragmentation into the work; over the course of time, environmental conditions compromise the elastic, and the rubber bands snap. When they do, what appeared to be a rational exercise in geometry becomes an inevitable process of erosion that ends in the work of art destroying itself, transforming back into a pile of humble, disposable objects. By including decomposition as a factor in her artwork, Townsley confronts us with the notion that, "The structure reveals not only the infinite chain of shifting context, but also each action within time. The actual 'moment' of process can never exist retrospectively; it leaves only a 'trace' of its action."

Among the most frequently encountered visual elements worldwide are contemporary public icons—those generic symbols designed to inform, guide, and instruct, signaling where to go, where not to go, which actions to perform, and which to avoid. The familiar diagonal line that slashes through a circle, the stylized male and female figures on bathroom doors, and roadside signs featuring simplified forks and knives or the handle of a telephone, along with thousands of others, comprise a visual language that proliferates in both the tangible and the virtual worlds. Xu Bing's *Book from the Ground* (2003-present) is a collection of graphic icons the artist has accrued over the years, starting with those found on a variety of manuals and airline safety instruction cards. As Xu points out, "these symbols are most commonly found in areas of concentrated human density and diversity, and so it follows that the airport was among the first locales to make wide use of them. The airport epitomizes the global village." Today the collection has grown to tens of thousands of discrete visual language units, including those from specialized fields such as mathematics, chemistry, music, and of course, the Internet. These icons are the working components of an alphabet, of complete and translatable pictures rather than individual letters. In *Book from the Ground*, they are used in tandem with a software program the artist has devised that permits phrases or sentences (at this point in time, generally declarative sentences or questions) to be input on a normal keyboard; the words are then translated into readable

“icon sentences.” The artist thus reveals the liaison between early Chinese writing, which began as ideograms—pictorially based symbols that stand for words—and its contemporary descendants.

*Rorschach (Endless Column)* (2004) is from Cornelia Parker’s series of installations using found, acquired, or modified cultural artifacts and created over the course of the last two decades. A hallmark of Parker’s work is her distinctive take on the cultural and emotional content of history as embedded in commonplace and frequently anonymous objects. For example, Parker has drawn a silver wire the height of the Statue of Liberty from a single silver dollar; she has exhibited soil excavated from underneath the Leaning Tower of Pisa; and she has cut objects such as a necktie, gloves, and playing cards on the same guillotine that was used to behead Marie Antoinette. Parker’s work inhabits a grey territory between fact and fiction, between reality and delusion, between the intentional and the accidental.

In the late 1980s, Parker created a work entitled *Thirty Pieces of Silver*, an arrangement of familiar domestic silver objects such as candlesticks, pitchers, and urns that the artist had crushed beneath a massive weight. The objects all fulfilled some functional purpose, but they also expressed the cultural value of silver as an indication of social status and wealth, for use in ritual and tradition, and as a gift commemorating social situations like marriages, births, and anniversaries. The visual and cultural time embedded in the objects became figuratively and literally flattened as they morphed into silhouette reminders of what once was. The action Parker takes in modifying such objects breaches the standard decorum accorded to the precious, rare, or symbolic. In a similar vein, Parker sees her artistic practice as contrary to accepted standards of craftsmanship. She has said, “I like the idea of not being an expert. I’m the opposite of the craftsman. I’m not trying to hone a craft over many years. I’m almost trying to do the opposite, to undo those skills.”<sup>44</sup>

For over two decades, Willie Cole has tweaked new meaning from discarded, used, or overlooked objects. He has transformed electric irons into latter-day simulations of totemic

African sculpture (*Home Hero*, 2003); he has assembled thousands of ordinary friction matches into compelling political commentary (*Malcolm’s Chickens I*, 2002); and he has dismantled and reassembled bicycle parts to construct Picasso-esque beings (*Speedster jiwara*, 2002). Since the 1990s, Cole has also assembled thousands of used shoes—most frequently women’s high heels—into tantric mandalas (*With A Heart of Gold*, 2005–2006) resembling lotus blossoms, a symbol of renewal and resurrection. Cole literally resurrects the shoes from the dustbin or thrift shop; in his work, the individual shoes, separated from their original mate and from their original purpose, become a choir of presences whose identity has been subsumed in a new visual and psychic union. They retain a psychic “energy” that the artist exploits with deft assurance.<sup>45</sup>

His *Loveseat* (2007) is built from ranks of stacked women’s high-heel shoes. The shoes that form the sides and back of the sofa penetrate each other’s heel into heel, a gesture of intimacy in-keeping with the thematic program of the work. The shoes in the front row are turned sole side out, like a signal of protection or a territorial warning, establishing a note of ambivalent tension in an object that allures but does not encourage touch.

Australia’s Donna Marcus composes her seed-pod-like faceted spheres from commonplace objects that evoke memories of middle-class domestic life in the decades following World War II, when “modernism” meant decorative bliss and the wonder of new timesaving electric appliances as well as a bounty of kitchenware such as strainers, ornamental gelatin molds and Bundt cake pans, and electric skillets. The historical reverberations these objects carry with them has been described as “the Jetsons meets minimalism.”<sup>46</sup> Marcus assembles her retrieved kitchen treasures into globular forms in which the dimensional units become essays in geometric patterning, exterior skins for an unseen nucleus of growth. Not surprisingly, her forms have been compared to the geodesic domes of Buckminster Fuller.<sup>47</sup>

Nnenna Okore, who studied with El Anatsui in Nigeria, uses both organic and manufactured found objects in her wall, floor, and hanging sculptures. Twigs and branches, vines, found paper, and clay have served the artist’s

purposes over the years. The forms that she creates are frequently complex, interwoven structures that inhabit an architectural space or create their own internal spaces. “Interested in creating architectural and intimate spaces by referencing and replicating familiar structures from nature or man-made environments such as fences, nests, and webs,” Okore has also focused much effort on retrieving and repurposing materials, particularly those that are generally held to be “unwanted.” This interest stems at least partly from her background in Africa, where improvisation and necessity often transform discards into useful tools and accessories for daily life: “simple living structures, furniture, cooking utensils and other things are devised from discarded materials.” Recent work has explored the aesthetic and functional potential of found paper, specifically the glossy, printed sheets from used magazines. Her *Lamps* (2004), with their richly textured and colored pendant ropes of twisted and knotted paper, reveal hidden beauty in the humble material. Reusing cast off paper to make something useful as well as beautiful also reflects the artist’s reaction to the profligate waste she encountered in daily life in the United States: “My work often employs ordinary media like magazines and newspapers, which are disposed of in the United States, but are considered usable commodities in my native country, Nigeria. My works highlight wastefulness through beautiful and graceful forms we can readily relate to.”



Fig. 5  
Yuken Teruya, *Untitled*, 2006 (detail)  
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Yuken Teruya also repurposes paper products, specifically, shopping bags (Fig. 5). Teruya examines the urban landscape by studying how trees in specific locations negotiate their relationship with the city around them. The artist believes “the tree is a community, it

moves around with its branches to make sure all of the leaves get sunlight evenly . . . a contrast to the urban environment.”<sup>48</sup> Teruya transforms designer shopping bags from such retail outlets as Hermès, Tiffany’s, and Louis Vuitton into magical spaces filled with atmosphere and light. He begins with a photograph of a specific tree in the city, which he then replicates as a cut-paper portrait. Using tiny blades, Teruya painstakingly cuts a detailed image of the tree, down to its branch and leaf configuration, from the side panels of the shopping bag. When turned on its side and folded inwards, what is now the top of the bag becomes the branches, and the lower side forms the trunk. The effect is otherworldly; the negative spaces created by cutting permit light to enter and fall across the tree as if it were part of a Lilliputian stage set. Critic Roberta Smith has aptly described this effect as “an enchanting combination of diminutive bravura and crystalline economy.”<sup>49</sup> While Teruya’s intention is not a specific critique of consumer culture as symbolized by glossy shopping bags from expensive stores, there is a poetic justice achieved by returning the tree to its original appearance, before it was pulped to create a shopping bag.

Another ubiquitous material strongly identified with the urban landscape is employed by Chakaia Booker. “Old tires never die but in Ms. Booker’s hands they become pure poetry,”<sup>50</sup> wrote critic Grace Glueck in describing Booker’s dramatic and ambitious sculptures created from cut, shredded, stacked, and entwined strips of industrially redolent, black rubber automobile tires. In their scale and presence, Booker’s works are evocative of the body, although their forms often look more like spiky black orchids that may or may not be harmless. The artist creates a tension between the masculinity of the black rubber and the dangerously seductive femininity of the flower form. The sliced treads are suggestive of both power and movement, while the tread patterns themselves take on the character of identifying marks that give each work its own distinctive personality.

The beauty of ordinary steel construction nails has been recognized by Korean artist Jae-Hyo Lee. Lee has worked in a variety of natural materials including stone and wood,

assembling them into large-scale units. In the case of the wood sculptures, the rough pieces of wood are first bound together and then cut and sanded to create smooth geometric shapes that reveal both the unique organic quality of the natural material and the intervention of the artist’s hand.

Lee’s *0121-1110=106062* (2006) takes the form of a large bench carved from a solid slab. Hammered into the wood are hundreds of nails which, after initial insertion, are carefully bent to create patterns that evoke the ripples of water or currents of air. After scorching the entire surface of the work to achieve a rich black patina, Lee grinds the nails to expose the raw silver metal, using the nails “to draw a picture on wood,” according to the artist. Lee also sees this process as a metaphor for physical labor and the way in which labor can create beauty. He explains, “It may be a rusty bent nail. If you take a close look at it, however, you’ll find how beautiful it is.”

A number of the artists in *Second Lives* have focused on repurposing their chosen material as lighting fixtures and thereby giving a celestial quality to what would otherwise be considered dross. Stuart Haygarth’s *Spectacle* (2006) is a sardonic pun—not only is the large and glittering fixture a spectacle to behold, it is composed of just over 1,000 pairs of prescription glasses that have been arranged in a descending cascade of translucent plastic, light-shattering lenses, and electric bulbs. The artist’s other essays in lighting have consisted of plastic trash washed up on beaches as well as the ubiquitous plastic “spring water” bottles that confound any attempts at ecological conservation. This approach unites many of the artists featured in *Second Lives*; they take inspiration for their work from the collected materials themselves, using this found and retrieved armory of things as stimulus for new ways of seeing. Rather than designing a fixture and then collecting the materials from which to make it, Haygarth allows the “finds” to inspire the final form of his work: “Normally I find objects or material that I want to work with . . . I collect more and more and more until I have enough material to make what I want to make. I don’t have an idea and then find the object.”<sup>51</sup>

Tara Donovan’s appearance in the 2000 Whitney Biennial in New York, where she created an installation of ordinary electrical wire that “grew” across the floor of the gallery, introduced her to the New York art world. Since that time, Donovan has made use of hundreds of thousands of humble materials—toothpicks, drinking straws, paper plates, Styrofoam cups—to achieve her awe-inspiring and painstakingly crafted works. While a considerable amount of Donovan’s work is made from disposable consumer goods and thus serves as a reminder of our ambivalence towards the detritus of a throwaway culture, her pieces are more poetry than polemic. In her installations and sculptures, Donovan is able to effect a visual transformation that sets up discordance between what we know about these ordinary things and what we see in their new incarnation.



Fig. 6  
Tara Donovan, *Bluffs*, 2006 (detail)  
See page 89

Composed of stacks of shirt buttons, *Bluffs* (2007) (Fig. 6) appears to be a rare species of coral or some other underwater life form. The buttons have been stacked one upon the other with slight variations of center to create elongated strands that seem to be undulating with shifts in the currents that surround them. Donovan has also consistently exploited the ways in which her materials interact with light; her installations of translucent drinking straws and of Styrofoam cups, for example, were rendered ethereal by incident light that made the works appear to ripple with light and shadow. In *Bluffs*, the artist has used the translucency of the buttons to give the work a soft inner glow that animates the lush organic forms. Donovan’s mastery of materials is

memorable—the viewer is seduced by the beauty she creates from the things that we most often take for granted.

Like Donovan, throughout his career, Donald Lipski has focused his keen eye on the ordinary stuff around us. Using multiples of his materials, Lipski arranges them in precisely calculated ways to stimulate memories and elicit emotions. The artist has chosen his materials with consummate care and often uses objects that are not only ordinary but also well used in their former life. His work has included mandalas composed of rusting garden shovels with rich, red-brown patinas; white porcelain bathtubs stacked in seemingly teetering arrangements to form the structure for an outdoor fountain; and sealed glass and metal vials, tubes, and vessels containing once-living plant material. He has also inserted thousands of double-edged razor blades directly into the gallery wall to create undulating patterns of reflected light that are both engaging and threatening.

Lipski achieves a delicate balance between humor and poignancy in many of these works. He elevates the commonplace to a new station in the aesthetic hierarchy. While the objects Lipski accumulates and assembles may be banal—such as the ordinary bottles, half-filled with a viscous, milky liquid that he has chosen for *Spilt Milk No. 99* (2008), featured in this exhibition—they become mysterious and even dreamlike through their arrangement in staccato sequences.

Performance and installation artist Senga Nengudi has turned to the machinery of a textile mill and the movements and sounds that it produces as the basis of her *Warp Trance* (2007), a video installation originally created during her residency at the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia. The work, reconceived and installed in *Second Lives*, consists of a three-channel projection of footage and sound recorded at several Pennsylvania weaving firms that use Jacquard punch card weaving technology. Manipulated by the artist, the images are arranged in rhythmic patterns and accompanied by a soundtrack written and recorded by musician and composer Butch Morris. The combined effect of the work's audiovisual elements is hypnotic and trance inducing, as patterns of light, color, and imagery intersect with

sounds that would ordinarily be disregarded as intrusive noise.

Nengudi cites the weaving techniques invented by Joseph Marie Jacquard in 1801 that revolutionized the textile industry by replacing the handwork system of production with punch cards that could raise and lower warp threads to create patterns. This landmark event of the Industrial Revolution was the first instance of the use of hardware to direct the sequences of processes needed to create patterned textiles, and thus, it forms a conceptual and contextual background for today's computer technology. For Nengudi, the interweaving of histories of fabric, technology, music, and movement are central to the significance of *Warp Trance*, simultaneously engaging the viewer on many levels.

Two jewelry artists included in *Second Lives* derive their inspiration from the humble and the commonplace. Japanese-born Tamiko Kawata began her career as a designer for the Kagami Crystal firm, but shortly thereafter launched an independent career as a jewelry designer and installation artist. Her introduction to the artistic potential of simple, found objects occurred at a Woolworth's department store in New York when she saw bundles of safety pins. While one of the earliest uses the artist made of safety pins was to "shorten all-too-long American clothing," Kawata also glimpsed their value as independent body ornaments. Necklaces and brooches made from the pins were followed by wall tapestries composed entirely of up to 20,000 interlocking pins and then by even larger scale outdoor installations consisting of massive ropes of pins interwoven in the branches of trees. The magic of her designs derives from the elegant patterns that the pins create when used in repetitive sequences. In these works, the artist draws together two aspects of her life, citing the repetitive patterns of the tatami mats that are ubiquitous in her native country and the influence of the Bauhaus by way of Anni Albers, who made innovative jewelry from such ordinary implements as sink drains and safety pins.

Kiff Slemmons uses such found materials as cut-up rulers, dismantled fountain pens, knobs from stoves and ovens, and "rattle tags," the metal framed cardboard identification

tag attached to consumer goods. *Little Egypt* (1999) is a neck ornament made from deconstructed collapsible measuring sticks and designed to evoke the ceremonial splendor of Egyptian jewelry. While the identity of the materials from which the necklace is made remains obvious, Slemmons fragments the rational numerical sequences of the gauge indications, causing the numbers and dividing lines to take on the mystery of undecoded hieroglyphs. *Rattle Tags* (2004) is an assemblage of dozens of rectangular tags, each bearing the artist's white fingerprint. Slemmons's designs frequently reference the material culture of work, whether measuring, writing, or cooking. For the most part, her materials are things that were in actual use before their transformation. The artist thus establishes a liaison between the value of labor and the value and status hierarchies assigned to jewelry. In *Rattle Tag*, Slemmons also offers a sly comment on retail consumerism: not only is the necklace made entirely of price tags, each also bears a reminder of the artist who has been "purchased" along with the jewelry.

## second guessing: reconsidering function

Pablo Reinoso has designed glass and furniture, but he has also created sculpture, performance installations, and video. A recent series of works incorporates No. 14 Thonet bentwood café chairs that have been attached in multiples, deconstructed and reassembled, or otherwise modified to create freestanding sculptural forms and wearable props for performance. Originally designed in the mid-nineteenth century, the Thonet chair has been in near-continuous production since. The technological innovation of bending wood and the affordable, practical, and adaptable form that resulted has made the chair into a design icon. "Chairs," says Reinoso, "have always interested me. I see in them a work of architecture, of structure, style, anthropology, semiotics; they are the negative of the human seating position. They are the sign of the absent user." Reinoso's *Spiral Thonet* (2008) is a site-referential installation in the museum gallery. A family of Thonet chairs has been assembled in a helix that stretches from the fourth floor through the gallery ceiling

to emerge on the floor above. While the assembled chairs are individually rendered non-functional, as a structure they suggest an endless genetic design link connecting contemporary Thonet chairs to their ancestors of a century and a half ago. The form is lyrical and elegant, but the sheer size and volume of the structure turn the humble and familiar design into a theatrical gesture of transcendence.

The changing definitions of function have engaged many designers who, nearly two decades ago, began transforming mundane consumer products and castoffs into new shapes that bridged fine art and industrial design. Three of them—Tejo Remy, Ingo Maurer, and the Campana Brothers—have been innovators and trendsetters in turning found everyday objects into raw materials for functional design. Tejo Remy has been a participant in the Dutch design enterprise Droog since 1993, when his “*You Can’t Lay Down Your Memory*” *Chest of Drawers* (1991), was shown at the Milan Furniture Fair. Like many other artists working with Droog, Remy has made a specialty of designing new furniture and lighting using found or pre-existing products or components. He has created easy chairs out of stacked and strap-bound bundles of used clothing and a hanging chandelier from commercial milk bottles. His *Chest of Drawers* has become iconic in the history of repurposing and reuse, and it has now even become the basis for a participatory art project devised by the High Museum of Art and the city of Atlanta, in which members of the public submit photographs of the drawer they wish to contribute to the final design that Remy will create.<sup>52</sup> What began as an idiosyncratic effort to re-envision and repurpose discarded and overlooked elements has itself been transformed into an effective promotional device.

For over four decades, Ingo Maurer has been one of the most innovative designers of lighting. Like Remy, Maurer has made dozens of lighting fixtures using materials ranging from bird feathers to a remade Campbell’s soup can originally by Andy Warhol to the newest LED lighting systems. Maurer’s designs are witty, making magic of the unexpected and overlooked. He has fitted men’s commercial brimmed hats with LED light bands, and in 1994, the designer created

*Porca Miseria!*, a chandelier that has become a signature work. *Porca Miseria!* suggests an explosion in a dining room: fragments of porcelain plates and cutlery appear to burst from the central light in a work that depicts the drama of the dining room with consummate whimsy.



Fig. 7  
Ingo Maurer and Ron Arad, *Tu-Be Lüster*, 2007 (detail)  
See page 153

*Tu-Be Lüster* (2007) (Fig. 7), featured in *Second Lives*, is a collaborative work between Maurer and Ron Arad. The original idea occurred to Arad while working on the design of a new toothpaste tube. Thirty steel toothpaste tubes are combined with halogen bulbs and LEDs in a work that transmits light through the tubes but also reflects it from the LEDs onto the metal surfaces.

Fernando and Humberto Campana have established a unique territory in the design arena through their use of discarded, found, and ordinary materials to create various types of seating. The original *Favela* chair of 1991 brought together hundreds of leftover fragments of lumber retrieved from one of the slums, or *favelas*, of São Paulo, while the *Banquete* and *Sushi* chairs of 2002, were made from stuffed toy animals and scraps of fabric, respectively. Repurposing such humble materials brings with it certain concerns about the viability of the design from an aesthetic point of view. The brothers have stated, “We make a kind of deviation by using existing industrial materials that have been forgotten by consumers and then adapt them for our projects. This is a thin and dangerous line that can transform design into something kitsch or folksy. It has to have a balance in order to avoid all traps and vices.”<sup>53</sup>

In their *Vermelha* (red) chair (1993), a metal supporting frame has been hand wrapped with 500 meters of colored rope, a laborious process that requires several days to complete. The hand-crafted nature of each woven design assures that each chair will have its own unique character.

The *Vermelha* chair of the Campana Brothers resonates with the work of British designer Tom Price, who has developed a series of chairs that make use of a variety of plastics, including ordinary polypropylene rope and PVC pipes. For his *Meltdown Chair* series, Price assembles a cluster of his materials and presses them with a heated, seat-shaped former to melt the rope, pipes, or tubes, fusing them together to create a concave seat.

In furniture designs created from discarded timber that he has often salvaged from scrap yards and abandoned structures, Piet Hein Eek lays emphasis on traditional craftsmanship. His cabinets, tables, and headboards are assembled from carefully chosen and arranged scraps of wood, which often retain their original paint and patina. The result is a composition of muted colors and rich textures. Eek celebrates the subtle beauty of the imperfections that time and wear have produced. His inventive reuse of discarded materials is a response to contemporary issues of recycling and sustainability, but it also has economic implications in that by reducing the cost of his raw materials, Eek can invest more in the labor and pleasures of craftsmanship.

*In Dust Real* (2003–2005) is a body of work by Polish-born ceramic artist Marek Cecula. The artist considers the work a “creative collision between art, craft, and design” that intends to produce random and accidental effects from standardized commercial products, in this case porcelain tableware—teapots, sugar bowls, cups, and saucers—obtained from leading firms that manufacture traditional fine china. The selected forms were assembled in groups and then re-fired in a traditional *anagama*, or wood-burning kiln that was introduced into Japan in the fifth century from Korea, via China. In this type of kiln, the burning wood not only results in high temperatures, but produces ash that settles and adheres permanently to the ceramics. The resulting surfaces are



mottled, often highly textured, and occur in a wide range of earthy colors. The effects are completely beyond the control of the artist; for Cecula “imperfection and deformation are intentional values, bringing the formal aesthetic content under scrutiny.”

Taking his inspiration from the simple forms and humble demeanor of Shaker furniture, Jim Rose recasts Shaker design within the context of post-industrial offal. Raiding automobile and scrap metal junkyards, Rose salvages the worn, rusted, and battered remnants of urban life, and with the skills of a fine woodworker, transforms the pieces into doppelgängers of the Shaker originals. His *Stacked Bricks Quilt Sill Cupboard* (2008) is a double cabinet with hinged doors, supported on four found steel tubes. There is an obvious parallel between the direct and straightforward use of wood in Shaker furniture and the equally uninflected metal of Rose’s design. The raw steel and enameled inset plaques on the cabinet doors have been assembled without any cosmetic intervention to “improve” the surfaces. This focused and disciplined attitude brings the “truth to materials” argument to a new level—what you see is what you get. Rose’s furniture is intended to serve the practical functions for which the Shaker originals were made, but his intervention in and interrogation of function also gives the work an independent identity as a resurrection of castoffs, a rescue of the unloved and under-appreciated material that otherwise clutters the industrial landscape.

Roughly \$350 of U.S. currency in the form of nickels has been transformed into a piece of furniture by sculptor Johnny Swing. By removing currency from circulation, welding the units into a permanent configuration, and thus eradicating its value for negotiation, Swing negotiates another aspect of value—that of the labor required by virtually every artist whose work is featured in *Second Lives*, which was earlier referred to as a “dedication to craftsmanship.” Value has been given a double meaning in Swing’s creation, one that requires a renegotiation of the relationship between art and commerce.

Courtney Smith’s *Psyché Complexo* (2003) is a magician’s prop—a single, tall, hinge-doored armoire that unfolds like a piece of wooden

origami to furnish a fictitious boudoir replete with vanity table, stool, and two side table/cabinets. Smith has taken existing pieces of furniture, dismantled and dissected them, and then like Frankenstein, brought them back to life in a new form that speaks less to practical function than it does to the redefining of a personal space. Her scheme appears rational to a degree, but this sense of order is challenged by the mutant yet animated forms she has devised. If furniture can be read as a metaphor of the body, Smith’s work casts the corporeal in the light of dreams rather than reason.

The artists in *Second Lives: Remixing the Ordinary* ask us to re-view and re-think our attitudes toward the ordinary objects around us and their virtually limitless potential to describe. In their works, they reveal the transformative nature of making art and design. They delve deeply into the significance of the everyday things that surround us and tease out new layers of meaning. They remind us of the visual power that accompanies the multiplicity of parts, and how the processes of assembly, construction, and re-presentation reveal yet another aspect of signification and value. And, in the final analysis, through their works, these artists reestablish their own relationship with traditional values of craftsmanship while remaining firmly engaged with the present. Overall, the works in *Second Lives* offer insights into our beliefs and value systems. They ask us to focus on the perceived and received systems of worth through which we evaluate the world and through which we define our place in that world. Above all, they remind us of the pleasures of experiencing any work of art, the joy in seeing that animates and sustains us all.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 97.
- 2 Subodh Gupta, quoted in Pernilla Holmes, "Cow Dung, Curry Pots, and a Hungry God," *ARTnews* (Summer 2007), 108. Unless otherwise cited, quotes from artists are taken from conversations, email communication, or artist's statements.
- 3 quoted in Catherine Bernard, "Transformer—The Work of Willie Cole," *Nka-Journal of Contemporary African Art* (Fall/Winter 2001), 68.
- 4 Donald Lipski, quoted in Terrie Sultan, "Triangulating Head and Hand and Heart: The Art of Donald Lipski," *Donald Lipski: A Brief History of Twine*, exh. cat. (Madison, Wisconsin: Madison Art Center, 2000), 19.
- 5 Using existing manmade objects in the fabrication of a work of art in the twentieth century is substantively different from the longstanding tradition of *collecting* manmade objects as works of art, a practice highlighted most dramatically in sixteenth-century collectors' cabinets known as *Wunderkammer*, in which natural specimens (*naturalia*) were displayed alongside manmade products (*arteficialia*) and scientific instruments and tools (*scientifica*). The methods of display of these objects, however, was an artistic enterprise on its own, and elaborate schemes for display of specimens were devised that, in themselves, could qualify as works of art. For further information, see Horst Bredekamp, *The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine: The Kunstkammer and the Evolution of Nature, Art, and Technology*, trans. Allison Brown (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 1995).
- 6 The artists in *Second Lives* restrict their choice of materials to manufactured products. Another iteration of the exhibition concept will examine works that give a second life to materials that were once living organisms in whole or in part (insects, bones, feathers, shells, etc.).
- 7 A different approach to the use of reclaimed materials (but with a similar goal) was taken by the artists highlighted in *Unmonumental*, the inaugural exhibition of the New Museum, New York in 2007. According to one critic, their reclamations were created by "heaping thing together in unfathomable combinations—piles of shattered debris, formless and inconclusive, or sealed, solipsistic conglomerations of everyday objects. All of these works implicate memory." Barbara A. Macadam, "Object Overruled," *ARTnews* (December 2007), 125-126.
- 8 Due to the number of artists today who repurpose existing objects in their work, *Second Lives: Remixing the Ordinary* was narrowed to focus on artists who use multiples of basically identical manufactured objects, and not artists who repurpose single found or otherwise acquired readymades.
- 9 A point noted by Willem Vokersz: "collage and assemblage have always been arts of transformation and transcendence. Common objects, personal collections, and even trash find new life and significance in the hands of the artist who derives meaning from and gives new meaning to the commonplace." Vokersz, "The Plastic Madonna: the found object as a personal and cultural signifier in contemporary art," *National Forum: Phi Kappa Phi Journal* vol.76, no.2 (Spring 1996), 24.
- 10 "Transience is embedded in our encounters with both the fleeting art installation and the throw-away manufactured product, while permanence has been a self-conscious avowed characteristic of the crafts." Linda Sandino, "Here Today, Gone Tomorrow: Transient Materials in Contemporary Cultural Artifacts," *Journal of Design History* vol.17, no.3 (September 2004), 283.
- 11 Glenn Adamson comments, "Craft only exists in motion. It is a way of doing things, not a classification of objects, institutions, or people." Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2007), 4.
- 12 Laurie Britton Newell, ed., *Out of the Ordinary: Spectacular Craft*, exh. cat. (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, V&A Publications, 2007), 11.
- 13 Adamson, op. cit., 18.
- 14 Kathy M'Closkey posits that "making, regardless of the medium, involves tacit knowledge, which is unconscious, implicit, intuitive, and analogical. Makers are as much concerned with process as end products," although the latter point may be challenged by some makers. See M'Closkey, "Towards a Language of Craft," Gloria Hickey, ed., *Making and Metaphor: A Discussion of Meaning in Contemporary Craft*, (Hull, Québec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1994), 63.
- 15 Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (Oxford University Press, 1979).
- 16 Architect Will Chase—who, in 2007, worked with the Finch Mob Arts Collective, Rebar, and CMG Landscape Architecture on the Panhandle Bandshell in San Francisco, which was constructed from sixty-five used car hoods, sixty sets of French doors, and 3,000 plastic water bottles—describes how the identifiable nature of the components and their transformation into a new autonomous object effectively link their appearance with their meaning, "leaving the structure legible, rather than being a kind of collage, which is an easy thing to end up with when you're dealing with found or repurposed materials." Quoted in *Architect Magazine*, July 23, 2007. <http://www.architectmagazine.com/industry-news-print.asp?sectionID=1012&articleID=540346>.
- 17 Artist quoted in "The Magic That's Possible: Dario Robleto talks about his work with Bea Camacho," *Present!* 2004. <http://www.presentspace.com/presenttwo/presents/robleto/robleto.htm> (accessed May 2008).
- 18 Quoted in David Revere McFadden and Ellen Napiura Taubman, *Changing Hands: Without Reservation 2: Contemporary Native North American Art from the West, Northwest & Pacific*, exh. cat. (Museum of

- Arts and Design, New York, Dalton, MA: The Studley Press, 2005), 65.
- 19 Quoted in McFadden and Taubman, *op. cit.*, 65.
- 20 Holmes, *op. cit.*, 108-110.
- 21 Eva Respini, *Projects 81: Jean Shin*, exh. brochure (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, June 10-September 27, 2004), unpaginated.
- 22 For the Museum of Arts and Design installation, Villinski continued the flight of the insects up to the ceiling and window, to emerge once again on the upper gallery floor.
- 23 Kalia Brooks, "Combing Through," *Sonya Clark*, brochure (2005), unpaginated.
- 24 *Sonya Clark: Tangles, Teeth & Touch*, exh. brochure (Commonwealth University Gallery of Art & Design, Richmond, Virginia, 2006), unpaginated.
- 25 Quoted in McFadden and Taubman, *op. cit.*, 29.
- 26 <http://www.ps1.org/cut/gny/nrobinson.html> (accessed October 2007).
- 27 Quoted by Horace Brockingham, "Nadine Robinson and Camille Norment, Slow Jam," *NY Arts* (January-February 2008) [http://www.nyartsmagazine.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=3748&Itemid=](http://www.nyartsmagazine.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3748&Itemid=)
- 28 Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky, "Long-Bin Chen: Content in Books," *YISHU Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* (December 2004), 52.
- 29 <http://www.massmoca.org/kidspace/past/lbc/index.html> (accessed January 2007).
- 30 Quoted in Rebecca Dimling Cochran, "The Medium is the Message," *Art and Antiques* (November 2004), 60.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 61.
- 32 Robert Preece, "Out of West Africa: A Conversation with El Anatsui," *Sculpture* vol. 25, no. 6 (July/August 2006), 38.
- 33 Quoted in Pernilla Holmes, "Swords, Lizards, and the Queen," *ARTnews* (October 2007), 140.
- 34 The photograph was taken in 2002 by Charles Kernaghan, director of the National Labor Committee, a human rights advocacy group, on an unauthorized visit to the factory in Bangladesh.
- 35 Osvaldo Sánchez writes, "His sculptures raise questions about situations related to late modernism: mutant articulation between forms, the magnetism of an object in space, the threatening illusion of textures." Rosa Olivares, ed., *100 Latin American Artists* (Madrid: Exit Publicaciones, 2007), 186.
- 36 Quoted in "A Touch of Anguish (or two peas in a pod and a self-serving gourd): A Conversation between Manuel Hernández, Cuauhtémoc Medina & Thomas Glassford," *Cadáver Exquisito: Thomas Glassford*, exh. cat. (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2006), 50.
- 37 Jean Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York Review of Books, 2003), 84.
- 38 See "Michael Rakowitz," *Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2005), 118-125.
- 39 Catherine Harper, "Susie MacMurray: Shell," exh. brochure (Pallant House, Chichester, 2007), unpaginated.
- 40 Caroline Worthington, "Susie MacMurray—Echo," exh. brochure (St. Mary's Church, York, 2006), unpaginated.
- 41 Harper, *op. cit.*
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 Ana Finel Honigman, "The Art of Seeing: A Conversation with Devorah Sperber," *Sculpture Magazine*, (May 2006), 51.
- 44 Quoted in Ann Wilson Lloyd, "Cornelia Parker's Fine Undoing," *Metalsmith* (Winter, 2005), 19.
- 45 Matthew Guy Nichols, "Willie Cole: The Energy of Objects," *Art in America* (May 2006), 152.
- 46 Alison Kubler, "I [heart] Metal," Michael Snelling, ed., *Donna Marcus: 99% Pure Aluminium* (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 2003), 9.
- 47 Birgitta Olubas, "That Which is Made in Making It': Practices of Efficiency, Waste and Modernity in Recent Work by Donna Marcus," *Ibid.*, 19.
- 48 Quoted by Taro Amano in Teruya catalogue entry, Lynne Sear and Suhanya Raffel, eds., *The 5<sup>th</sup> Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. (Queensland Art Gallery Publishing, 2006), 234.
- 49 Roberta Smith, "Art in Review: Yuken Teruya—Arboretum," *New York Times*, May 10, 2002, E37.
- 50 Grace Glueck, "Art in Review: Chakaia Booker," *New York Times*, March 16, 2001, E37.
- 51 Grant Gibson, "The Theatre of the Spectacle," *Crafts*, no. 2010 (January/February 2008), 28.
- 52 [http://www.high.org/experience/exhibitions/exhib\\_content.aspx?id1=3239](http://www.high.org/experience/exhibitions/exhib_content.aspx?id1=3239) (accessed May 2008).
- 53 Quoted in "Fernando and Humberto Campana: Design Museum Touring Exhibition," interview with Fernando and Humberto Campana, <http://www.designmuseum.org/design/fernando-humberto-campana> (accessed May 2008).

THE OBJECT  
IN *SECOND LIVES*:  
REINCARNATION  
OR RUMPELSTILTSKIN'S  
GOLD?

Lowery Stokes Sims

There are few contexts in the global art market of the twenty-first century in which dialogues about the purpose, use, existence, and even destiny of an object beyond its original function are not in evidence. The various strategies described as “recycling,” “reuse,” or “repurposing” speak to our awareness of and anxiety about both the state of the environment and the consumables and detritus that we humans leave in the wake of our post-industrial, technologically driven lives. The artwork included in *Second Lives: Remixing the Ordinary* is indeed about the reuse or repurposing of manufactured objects—those small often banal and insignificant “objets” that populate our daily lives, and that can be acquired in bulk, usually cheaply. While recycling in the sense of reusing is not the primary focus of the work in this exhibition, the objects employed are in fact repurposed into a new life, one quite different from any original intent.

What distinguishes the artists in *Second Lives* is that they bring alchemical and transformative ideas to the presentation and perception of those ordinary objects. As such, the artistic actions represented in the exhibition can be characterized as acts of assessment and judgment that constitute the basis of moral beliefs and behavioral actions. Reincarnated into new forms, manifestations, and purposes, like Rumpelstiltskin's gold they challenge us to declare what we think of as valuable, to question the role appearance plays in that adjudication, and to consider what such decisions reveal about our individual value systems and those of society at large.

In the catalogue essay for her 2006 exhibition *Part Object Part Sculpture*, Helen Molesworth observes that questions of value in industrialized societies are specifically mired in the workings of a consumer culture that has had a long trajectory from the nineteenth century to today.<sup>1</sup> Such notions are further complicated

by the historical distinction between “craft” and “art.” In dialogues in the “craft” world, questions of an object's worth involve moral assessments concerning the handmade versus the industrially rendered, where beliefs about meaningful work are based on individual impulse and creativity as opposed to the mindless assembly of manufacture, which is devoid of such initiative and originality.<sup>2</sup> In the “art” world, ideas about value were historically adjudicated through an assessment of a work's formal and physical properties, including its materials and surface treatment; such notions then became a source of intellectual and conceptual skepticism with the dawn of modernism. Furthermore, both modernism and postmodernism have privileged the manufactured object as the focus of provocative deconstruction in art criticism and theory as well as in actual art making.

All of these issues have been the organizing principles for a number of exhibitions presented at various venues during this first decade of the twenty-first century. Four can be identified for our purposes here: Molesworth's *Part Object Part Sculpture* at the Wexner Center, Columbus, Ohio; *Out of the Ordinary: Spectacular Craft*, organized in 2007 by Laurie Britton Newell at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, England;<sup>3</sup> *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, organized in 2007 by Richard Flood and Laura Hoptmann for the inauguration of the new home for the New Museum in New York City;<sup>4</sup> and *Manuf@ctured: The Conspicuous Transformation of Everyday Objects* at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in Portland, Oregon, which coincides with the presentation of *Second Lives* at the Museum of Arts and Design in the fall of 2008. While the Victoria and Albert and Portland exhibitions privilege the work of artists who “place craft at the heart of their practice,”<sup>5</sup> those at the Wexner and New Museum query the modifiers of “functionality” and “art,”

and they dismantle the more monumental pretensions of forms and objects.

The use of found or readymade surrogates for media usually associated with painting or sculpture is prevalent in the art world, but the works of art chosen for *Second Lives* not only evidence multiple and repetitive uses of a single object or class of objects, they also have a resonant or dissonant relationship to the materials that comprise their final entity. During the early stages of planning this exhibition, the curatorial team identified three major approaches used by the participating artists to achieve the alchemical nuance that defines the relationship between the original materials and the finished art work: *revelation*, *conversion*, and *transgression*. These three tendencies reflected our own exhibition criteria that the work: *reveal* something new and/or marvelous about the artistic potential of the humble, ordinary, manufactured goods; that it *convert* our sense of the original shape and use of the goods while preserving their identity through the interventionist process; or that it *transgress* the original intended use of the component goods and/or the forms into which they were shaped so that the final work strayed far afield from the cultural, social, or economic associations provoked by the original goods. Given these approaches, the works in this exhibition encompass both what may be described as the “ethos” of craft and the “logos” of art—specifically in modern art practice.<sup>6</sup>

However inadequate and essentialist the initial categorization of these approaches may have been, it demonstrated how the work in this exhibition participates in the continuing dialogue between modernist and postmodernist art and the mundane commodities that populate the landscape of contemporary life. Through their engagement with “readymade” and “found” objects, the participating artists created works whose identity at times seems to fall within the realm of the craft or decorative arts (lighting fixtures, furniture, textiles) or whose configuration disrupts our sense of the original and essential utilitarian purpose of a given object. The works in *Second Lives* clearly engage the current, vibrant debate around the status of craft in the vast and expanding field of art, and they also

share with those in *Out of the Ordinary* what Tanya Harrod described as an “attention to detail” that at times can be “spectacular and unsettling”<sup>7</sup> and an approach to materials that invites us to “reflect on the process of making.”<sup>8</sup> Complying with these criteria, they therefore participate in the discussion around function and non-function that has persisted in both “art” and “craft” since the late 1940s and early 1950s. In addition, the attention these works call to questions of artistic process and selection of materials leads, as Harrod has observed, to a consideration of issues that are now shared by the worlds of “art” and “craft,” including the ways in which a work engages with “art historical anecdotes, replications and trompe l’oeil, folk art and science, the nature of work and time consumption and the physical rhythms of making.”<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, this essay will suggest ways to position the work in *Second Lives* in relation to various issues concerning the object in modernist and postmodernist discourse. While more in-depth analyses of mass produced objects in contemporary life and art exist in the canonical writings of Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Fredric Jameson, and more recently, Glenn Adamson,<sup>10</sup> this essay addresses how the works in *Second Lives* evoke, question, and transform values, characteristics, and themes specific to the history of art and craft practice and which, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, are now in a state of flux and expansion.

## intimations of the revelatory interventions of dada and surrealism

By now the enduring legacy of Dadaism in general and the creative enterprise of Marcel Duchamp in particular within modern and postmodern art is a matter of fact. However, as Molesworth perceptively observes, even the master of revelatory interventions with readymade, mass-produced objects was not immune to the fine art associations of the handmade and the crafted. Margaret Iversen has examined how the readymade shifted the discourse around the aesthetic experience to include the issue of what constituted a work of art. She notes that the “readymade”

calls into question “our deeply embedded expectations of a work of art” and whether it need involve craft.<sup>11</sup> Molesworth points out that this art/craft issue arises in Duchamp’s work of the 1950s and 1960s when he supervised the making of “replicas of the readymades” that were “laboriously crafted by Italian artisans.” The end results were not left to the discretion of the artisans, they were “subject to Duchamp’s approval.”<sup>12</sup> Clearly, this attention to detail on the part of Duchamp is markedly different from what Iversen describes as the “disinterested” posture of the readymade, which is itself distinct from the psychologically freighted “found object,” whose meaning is transformed by its encounter with the individual viewer’s fetishistic associations, which have been, in turn, shaped by his or her own existential history.<sup>13</sup>

For Molesworth, the “temporal proximity of the intimate hand-made erotic sculptures” of the early 1950s, such as *Female Fig Leaf* of 1950 or *Objet-Dard* of 1951, and the “replicas of the readymades . . . suggest that the erotics of the body and the allure of the commodity are connected in Duchamp’s practice.”<sup>14</sup> She continues:

*Duchamp’s triumvirate of concerns: the problem of the object, the most predominant form of which is the commodity; the situation of desire—and the inevitability of the displacement of erotic desire onto the desire for objects; and a continual play with various forms of reproduction, replication and repetition create a field of aesthetic play for artists of the postwar period.*<sup>15</sup>

This erotic attachment to objects, which has been a recurring theme in postmodern discourse, is implicit in many of the works in *Second Lives*. For example, Willie Cole’s assemblages made from women’s shoes use a specifically fetishistic relationship to the object in order to produce works replete with metaphorical nuance; his mandala shapes morph from a meditation device into an actualization of the focus of meditation expressed in the shoe fetish. While for all of us *Sex in the City* fans, the character of Carrie Bradshaw immediately comes to mind, Cole has paid homage to another, more notorious shoe enthusiast, Imelda Marcos. His 1993 *Made*

in the Philippines is an early furniture form that brings this fetish directly into the domestic realm, the parlor, the site of polite social interaction.<sup>16</sup> Cole's appropriation of a feminine object (albeit one often tied to male sexuality in the fetish) provides a counterpoint to Yayoi Kusama and Louise Bourgeois's deployment of sexually charged, phallic, projecting forms. However, all three artists share an impulse to multiply and serialize the prototypes provided by Duchamp's erotic, fetishistic forms, while also locating the experience and meaning of these forms within a more personal nexus than that provided by the coolly detached Dadameister.

The works in *Second Lives* highlight the relationship between the manufactured and the handmade by turning the tables on our sense of sequence and progression. The traumatic trepidation that has surrounded the fate of the handmade object since the mid-nineteenth century in particular is the fear of its being supplanted by the cheap, the crass, the disposable, the ersatz, in short, the manufactured. The works under consideration here manipulate the presentation of the manufactured, seizing upon its cheapness, crassness, disposability, and ersatz nature to create forms that allude to handmade objects or the experience of them. In that activity, the artists specifically perform within the revelatory, converting, and transgressive strategies outlined earlier. What could be more revelatory than El Anatsui's vision for the myriad castaways of the consumption of liquor and other beverages? He bypasses the bottles themselves, which can be readily repurposed, and instead deploys the bottle caps and the metallic labels that protect the opening of the bottle, declare its brand name, and frustrate access to its contents. These elements are truly trash, usually ripped, torn, twisted off, flipped from the bottle, and discarded—worthless except in the imagination of a young skelly player, who would covet the bottle caps, and of course, in the fertile imagination of the artist.

Fred Wilson's adroit arrangement of ordinary ceramic, plaster, and milk-glass items in *Love and Loss in the Milky Way* (2005) includes a variety of objects, from a reproduction of a classically charged

statue to the edgy stereotype of a mammy-head cookie jar to plates, pitchers, bowls, and other things that fall on the continuum between the decorative and the functional. The assemblage/arrangement—seemingly random but extraordinarily calculated—jolts us with its revelation that even ordinary objects, manufactured en masse to provide a veneer of gentility in ordinary lives can express and reveal the societal and political workings of class, race, and gender. Over the last two decades, Wilson's artistic enterprise has included this "curatorial" action, which has encompassed not only the assembly and (re)arrangement of objects within a work of art, but also a re-orientation of habitual museological installations that calls into question the presumptions of hierarchy and value in such a context. His perspective, therefore, is paradigmatic of the curatorial concerns of *Second Lives*.

Andy Diaz Hope and Laurel Roth's imitations of the swags, hangings, and looping arrangements of the classical chandelier in the syringes and plastic packets associated with illicit drug trade smack of mischief, even deviance, as they destabilize our cultural notions of what is valuable, "upscale," and respectable. In addition to charting, or what Scott Lash and Celia Lury would describe as "mapping,"<sup>17</sup> the life of objects as they move within the networks of local and global exchange, they are potent examples of parody, which has been seen as a cornerstone of Dadaist object making, especially in the work of Duchamp. We understand the transgression and get the joke in these works because, more than we realize, we are well-versed in what Simon Dentith would describe as the language of parody. For Dentith, parodist activity is "a never-ending to and fro of rejoinders" indicating that language "is much more than . . . a command of . . . grammar and vocabulary;" it "entails using these resources to adopt an evaluative attitude—both to the person to whom one speaks, and to the topic of discussion."<sup>18</sup>

We should not overlook the role media plays in what is tantamount to a normalizing of this parodist sensibility in contemporary culture. Any viewing of the advertising, television programs, or movies of the last

few decades, reveals how often we are led to enjoy and absorb a deflationary sense of even serious matters. For example, a response to the Diaz Hope/Roth chandeliers has surely been primed by endless sketches on popular television programs like *Saturday Night Live* and *Mad TV*, which parody a variety of television genres and advertisements, from news to reality TV to the ubiquitous late-night infomercial. A breakfast cereal hailed for its fiber content is parodied as a box of granary rocks; a food processor is outfitted with mechanisms that pose immediate physical danger to users (harked convincingly by characters played by comedian Dan Aykroyd). There is always a thrill marking the absurd premises of these skits, and that absurdity contributes to the ironic sense of pleasure that co-exists with a frisson of danger provoked by debunking the self-importance of consumer culture. This parodic mode has so permeated our consciousness that even if we do not realize it, we are constantly engaged in a Dadaist reconstruction of the object in our everyday life, whether conceptually or actually.

## the deconstruction of the object during the abstract expressionist era

If the ceramic artist Peter Voulkos and his contemporaries in the 1950s and 1960s threw the functional aspects of handmade objects into crisis by literally closing off access to the vessel and deconstructing its form, we see glimpses of that dramatic restructuring in Cornelia Parker's flattening of utilitarian silver or in Chakaia Booker's reconfiguring of automobile tires. As Voulkos enacted what Glenn Adamson describes as "a liberating violence"<sup>19</sup> on pottery, Parker liberates our attachment to the preciousness of all that silver and silver-plated flatware, tea sets, and platters that we love and hate and inherit with trepidation from our parents and grandparents. There is a certain poignancy to her intervention, as we realize that individuals of a certain age, perhaps the baby boomer generation, may be the last to grapple with that type of legacy, since the generations after them no longer place social or aesthetic value in manufactured knock-offs of historically styled silverware. Parker may indeed be

creating an extended eulogy for objects now exclusively relegated to antique shops, flea markets, and eBay as artifacts of a time gone by.

Chakaia Booker's work can be seen as the inverse of Voulkos's "violence" done to material and form. Whereas Voulkos commenced by using a material that bore the expectations of a beautiful, pleasing, and utilitarian end, Booker starts from a preexisting functional form and ends with a reconfiguration that defies the value we place on the original. She renders the crassly utilitarian, utterly unromantic form of the tire into fantastic shapes that belie the material.

In this context, we might also consider Tejo Remy's "*You Can't Lay Down Your Memory*" *Chest of Drawers* (1991). Certainly snatching the drawers out of the chest, piling them precariously on top of one another, and securing the pile with a strap speak to a quintessentially postmodern deconstruction of form. It may also be argued that the resulting structure, which seems always on the brink of collapse or disintegration, expresses the tension between order and chaos and recalls the concern with the instability of matter that preoccupied the post-atomic generation. Furthermore, we cannot ignore the blatant violation of notions of craft that this work also encompasses with its associative elements of handwork and cabinetry. Remy's evocation of nostalgia through these elements—when combined with the attendant historical positioning of our reception of the form—is the ultimate postmodern gesture.

## pop and postminimalism: vernacularization, accumulation, and performance

Stuart Haygarth, Jill Townsley, and Courtney Smith find their closest predecessors in the art-making strategies of vernacularization, accumulation, and performance that emerged in the 1960s. Each artist can claim a different aspect. Haygarth's imposing chandelier evokes the ordinary object celebrated in cubist still-life compositions as well as in Dadaism and surrealism; it also speaks to the literalization of mass

production and accumulation that marked the serial imagery of Andy Warhol, and it evokes the branding and commodification of banal objects such as eyeglasses. (Dare we admit that we look into the marvelous tiers of found spectacles to glimpse a brand name that provides the social and sartorial cache that we so value today?) We are also reminded of the precedents set by the artist Arman, a force in the *nouvelle réalisme* movement in France (which coincided with pop art in the United States), whose model of "accumulations" endows objects with a critical function. Paint tubes affixed to a surface and squirting color work as a parody or "surrogate"—to borrow a phrase from artist Allan McCollum—for the direct working method of abstract expressionism; cut-up and reassembled violins become evidence of transgressive actions; automobiles piled atop one another to make a column offer an absurdist take on the memorializing inherent in public monuments. Haygarth's focus on a single, repetitive object—however subtle the variations in that form—expresses this accumulative action and presents the totality of an object in a way that corresponds to minimalist approaches to form, repetition, and serialization.

Jill Townsley introduces the aspect of performance, reminiscent of not only process interventions in the art world, but also time-based happenings. The configuration of *Spoons* (2008) is pure minimalism, a pristine repetition of predetermined shapes found in the consumer environment that are attached to one another with rubber bands and reconfigured into a pure geometric form—the pyramid. She betrays affinities to Robert Smithson in her cultivation of disintegration through the natural processes of the materials—here, the drying out of the rubber bands allows the structure to gradually collapse during the period of exhibition. Given the formalist theoretical underpinnings of Townsley's minimalist predecessors and their engagement with issues of kitsch and "high art," which they mediated through notions of "truth to materials" and through a "primary" presentation of materials and structures, how are we to process her arrangement of plastic utensils in this "high art" function? Are the mechanisms of parody at work here? Perhaps we cannot

totally dismiss this intention, given the artist's own expressed immersion in postmodern discourse.

Contrary to the "traditional" look of her furniture deconstruction in this installation, Courtney Smith also found great inspiration in abstract artists of the minimalist era, whose work existed in a vague purgatory between function and utility. Julia Dragonovic points to the inspiration offered by Donald Judd, specifically, "in the serial progression she [Smith] follows as the work unfolds its internal logics in the repetitive patterns on the border between sculpture and furniture."<sup>20</sup> Richard Artschwager presents a case of another artist who "seemed to be a free floating figure in the art historical context, existing somewhere in an ironic crossover between pop and minimalism." Additionally, Artschwager offered Smith a way to subvert "illusionism . . . by rendering clearly recognizable everyday objects—chairs, tables, etc.—as pictures of furniture onto fully volumized cubes."<sup>21</sup> Smith brings a similar combination of unfolding, sequencing, and illusion to *Psyché Complexo* (2003), where a staid armoire unfolds in riotous detail to reveal an improbably complete furniture suite.

Pablo Reinoso's sculptural arrangements of the ubiquitous Thonet chair in multiples pose questions concerning the role that repetition, artistic intervention, and cultural association play in transforming a given object from kitsch into "high art." Is the accumulation of chairs inherently more sculptural than a single chair alone? Or do these chairs require the artist's vision in order to become more than functional objects? What impact do our own associations with furniture have on how we experience this piece? Given the importance to the Thonet chair of woodworking and caning—two skill-based activities that have been subsumed by industrialization—do we experience a sense of nostalgia when viewing this piece? While Reinoso's work relies on reiterating, recontextualizing, and altering a piece of furniture to mine its sculptural possibilities, there is none of the dramatic, often abrupt and blunt reconstructive and recombinant actions of Gordon Pederan here. Rather, as with the work of Donald Lipski, we are confronted with an interrogation of how the

manipulation, repetition, and serialization of found objects or materials establish a dialogue with lingering Greenbergian formalist theories that continue to shape discussions about “craft” (read as “kitsch”) and “art.”

In any case, designers and artists such as Reinoso and Lipski strain the definition of “transmutation—the transformation of material via process,” which, for M. Anna Fariello, is what distinguishes “craft” in particular from the arts in general.<sup>22</sup> As opposed to the alchemical transmutations of woodworking—the cutting, stripping, staining, and carving into the surface—or ceramics—preparing the clay-based earth, kneading it, shaping it by hand or at the wheel, glazing it, and firing it in the kiln—the work of Reinoso, Lipski, and like artists operates on a more virtual transmutation, one accommodated by the conceptual bent of both modernism and postmodernism. Positioning these artists within the context of the Museum of Arts and Design, with its continuing legacy in “craft” even as it increasingly engages the liminal space between “art” and “craft,” calls into question lingering notions about the oppositional aspects of these two approaches to object making and working, where the essence of “craft” is seen as skill at hand-making functional objects, while that of “art” is located within the concept and its execution.

As noted at the beginning of this essay, in the continuing dialogue that propelled the project of *Second Lives*, the curators constantly challenged the ways in which works by artists usually positioned outside the craft world might conform to expectations of craft, and how artists typically associated with craft might transcend the boundaries of such notions. In the work of Lipski and Reinoso, the issues of function and utility are particularly challenged, especially in light of those usually assigned to the relatively un-moderated objects they accumulate in their work. In addition, both artists consistently choose to *evoke* the crafted object, rather than *use* it as what I described earlier as a surrogate for painting and sculpture. In the end, it was the degree to which the presentation of the objects in the particular configurations devised by Reinoso and Lipski maintained

enough of the identity of the original—the chair, the bottle, the tool—that ensured the viability of their inclusion in this project.

## the political and gendered moments of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s

Among the most interesting aspects of the life of the object in art were the contributions that issues of gender and race brought to the repertoire of objects in the bank of modernism during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, including the way such objects were read and interpreted within the overall context of art discourse. Repetition, serialization, and an engagement of the vernacular remained present in the work of African, Native, Latino, Asian American, and women artists during these decades, but the political and social concerns around what would be subsumed by the postmodern notion of “identity” also provided them with ample fodder. Steven Deo, for example, uses the action of constructing his figures out of puzzle pieces as a metaphor for “figuring out” his “own identity with a modern sense of art and material.”<sup>23</sup> The pieces can be said to represent the fragmentation he and other Native peoples have experienced as they have been “relocated, dislocated, grouped and regrouped, numbered and scattered.” As he brings together the puzzle pieces, he is caught up in a familiar struggle to be “brought back together” on a personal and cultural level.<sup>24</sup>

The mundane rubber glove is the modular component of Susie MacMurray’s outsized evening gown. She finds a precedent in the white glove gown that, in the mid-1980s, provided the metaphorical and experiential focus for Lorraine O’Grady, who used this signifier of the ultimate feminine construct as a ballast for a performance of defiance and transgression (Fig. 1). In a public appearance at an art opening, O’Grady arrived in her glove dress, wearing a tiara and poised on the arm of a tuxedo-clad escort. Her anomalous dress, set amid New York art world chic, spoke not only of stereotypical female images embedded in the debutante cotillion or beauty contest, but also of specifically African American social pretensions: her character wore a

sash emblazoned with the phrase “Mlle Bourgeoise Noire,” a damning designation in the post-black power era. O’Grady revealed the deceptive nature of this guise when in the middle of the opening, she suddenly pulled out a cat-o-nine-tails and whipped herself, declaring in full voice that black artists were not to be subservient to art world interests or to compromise in any way.<sup>25</sup> MacMurray’s own elaborate gown, constructed of rubber gloves turned inside out to reveal the lining, evokes a similar sense of ironic deconstruction, and extends the dialogue to include questions of women’s work versus women’s display, thus forcing the issue of the class divisions that exist among women and that, in the global economy, are often delineated along racial and ethnic lines.



Fig. 1  
Lorraine O’Grady  
*Untitled (Mlle Bourgeoise Noire shouts out her poem)*, 1981  
Public appearance  
Courtesy of the artist  
O’Grady and MacMurray’s practice of creating clothing out of allusive materials that prick at social consciousness has its precedents in the work of Mimi Smith and Senga Nengudi in the 1960s and 1970s. Smith created clothing and underwear using traditional fabric, but also functional materials like steel wool—as in her 1966 *Steel Wool Peignoir*—and various wrapped sweets (including Tootsie Rolls)—as in *Candy Bra* (Fig. 2) and *Jockstrap* of 1972. She also anticipated ecological concerns in





Fig. 2  
Mimi Smith  
*Candy Bra*, 1972  
Candy, elastic, thread, hooks  
11 x 34 x 2 in. (28 x 86 x 5 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist; Anna Kustera Gallery, New York

her *Recycle Coat* (1965), made of plastic bags and other plastic elements, bottle caps, and an aluminum hanger. Judith Tannenbaum notes that Smith's choices of "materials that deteriorate and color . . . address issues of vulnerability and impermanence"<sup>26</sup> that are also germane to MacMurray's own work.

Nengudi's early sculptures transformed ordinary women's pantyhose into visceral expressions of biological tension as she stretched the hose across space and weighted them down or anchored them to the floor with sand (Fig. 3). Linda Goode Bryant and Marcy S. Philips have noted that these work indicated Nengudi's "background in dance," as "she seemingly choreographs the object's movement" so that "[l]yrical movement is embodied within the stretched and pulled linear extensions and appendages of the object's central axis."<sup>27</sup> The artist herself evokes experiences of changes in her body after childbirth, when she was acutely aware of "elasticity of the human body."<sup>28</sup>



Fig. 3  
Senga Nengudi  
*RSVP Performance*, 1978

In *Warp Trance* of 2007, which is included in *Second Lives*, Nengudi continues her long engagement with the feminist implications of textiles. This amazing video installation alludes to the history of automated textile

production by including Jacquard panels and presenting the mechanical movement of the spools of thread programmed to produce the various patterns, textures, and weaves of commercial fabrics. For a set period of time within each cycle of the video, we are engulfed in the cacophony of the textile factory, at once participating in the environmental challenges of a worker and entranced by the relentless, repetitive rhythm of the machine.

The intersection of this work—which uses vernacular, "found" objects—with pop art has been discussed by Cécile Whiting in her 1997 revisionist study of pop. She notes that in the engagement of contemporary domestic interiors and their appliances, artists like Tom Wesselmann and Claes Oldenburg began to collapse cultural hierarchies in the realm of taste and locate the domestic and the feminine at the center of art. However, they maintained the superiority of male over female, valuing a "highbrow aesthetic culture over a feminized consumer culture."<sup>29</sup> By contrast, in addition to blurring the distinction between "high" and "low," Nengudi, Smith, O'Grady, and MacMurray reveal the cultural processes by which both labor and objects are raced, classed, and gendered. The relationship of all this work to the ethos of craft is replete in the repetitive and additive acts implicit in its making. In that sense, it points to the innate crossover between craft and women's work in the accumulation of gestures and elements, speaking to what Helen Molesworth describes as means of sorting out the human condition."<sup>30</sup> She explains that such recurrences:

*suggest that bodily, psychic and industrial modes of repetition are mutually contingent upon one another as the desire to repeat the pleasureableness of the erotic encounter transmogrifies into the repetition of the workday.*<sup>31</sup>

This aspect of the work in *Second Lives* would ascribe to Bruce Metcalf's declaration that "good production of craft makes what might otherwise be an ordinary experience interesting and satisfying."<sup>32</sup> For example, in Yuken Teruya's painstakingly rendered portraits of trees cut into the structures of shopping bags, we can see the presence of feminist art theory expanded beyond the work of women artists and combined with a

physical and psychological involvement on the part of the artist that fulfills Metcalf's qualifications. The prosaic nature of materials in these works exemplifies Jonathan Harris's description of the particular "feat" of modern art, as it was able to "invest . . . 'minor genre' materials with a significance and value hitherto reserved for History Painting."<sup>33</sup> By singling out Van Gogh's paintings of humble objects such as shoes, Harris argues that when such mundane, vernacular objects become the center of the pictorial message, they can function as "a *morceau*, a fragment, from which a whole world of meaning and value might be gleaned."<sup>34</sup> Such is the mechanism behind Nadine Robinson's use of human and manufactured hair as a diaristic action that initially marked the passage of time recorded in her additions of used hair extensions. Not incidentally, her works also speak to the dualistic construction of race along black/white lines and the obsession with "reading" hair texture and color, seen in this installation in the artful juxtaposition of framed wall coverings in white and black synthetic hair.<sup>35</sup>

## postmodernism: "writing back" through pastiche, kitsch, and deconstruction

We have already located the possibility of parody in the artistic strategies of the *Second Lives* artists. In addition to the Dadaist context referred to above, we can also examine aspects of parody in relation to the deconstruction of history and historiography in contemporary art and craft. As Simon Dentith notes, in the "contemporary world . . . a more polemical relation to the cultural past often expresses itself in the practice of 'writing back': the canonic texts (or works of art and craft) of the past are scrutinized, challenged and parodied in the name of the subject positions (of class, race or gender) which they are seen to exclude."<sup>36</sup> That "writing back" takes the form of Xu Bing's creation of a language based on found directional and indicational icons that transcends fixed meanings and national nuances. It is enacted comparably in Ai Weiwei's transgressive painting over Neolithic vessels. Both artists trivialize the fixed values we assign to the modalities of language and art, and in the process, they commit acts of

rebellion against authoritative institutions such as the academy or the museum.

In his work, Hew Locke attaches superannuated value to trivial consumables found in “dime” stores—trinkets, kitsch, expendable items that litter the contemporary landscape—fashioning them into trophy items that function as the remnants of European colonial history. Born in Edinburgh, Scotland and raised in British Guyana, Locke’s own relationship to these items—be they portraits of the British monarchy or ceremonial paraphernalia bestowed as a symbol of status or assimilation—is ambiguous; he lampoons the finished and sumptuous look of the symbols of empire through the glitz and glitter of his own ersatz treasures. Presenting his materials—plastics, cheap metals, industrial by-products—in critical mass, Locke achieves a transmutation of our sense of the values ascribed to these humble, non-precious objects through what Harrod has described as the “repetitive rhythms of vernacular production.”<sup>37</sup> Here value is accrued through quantity, a clustering by affinity, and what Boris Bally describes as a “mockery of precious materials” that is “symbolic of the American [or in this case British] struggle for wealth and success,” which simultaneously exudes a “subtle defiance of authority.”<sup>38</sup> Murray Edelman would concur, noting that such actions, made with a politically subversive intent, also “force audiences to think about their conventional ideological assumptions respecting status and social inequalities and the buttressing role of art in both.”<sup>39</sup> In this context, then, Willie Cole’s shoe furniture involves what Patterson Sims describes as the fashioning of “a throne dedicated to the powerful and rich and impoverishing others.”<sup>40</sup>

Locke’s work in particular encounters the aesthetic of “bling”—a type of conspicuous consumption predicated on the surface effect of the object, be it jewelry, automobile accessories, or even dental decoration. As it has crossed over into the mainstream, this hip hop designation has revealed its correlations with the surface ornamentation of the baroque and rococo—as seen in the paintings of Kehinde Wiley and Micheline Thomas. Additionally, it references African aesthetic sensibilities not unrelated to what Robert Farris Thompson has identified as the “Flash

of the Spirit” in Yoruba aesthetics.<sup>41</sup> Bling-ing or flash-ing is as much about an aesthetic as it is about technique; the former representing a philosophy of elaborate and dazzling surface treatment and the latter a means of accruing power and energy by accumulating materials and elements that incidentally result in a richly embellished surface. In this context, we could note again Sims’s discussion of Cole’s work where he evokes the Congo *nkisi* figure, another African power modality that involves the ritualistic adding to the surface of an object.<sup>42</sup>

Dentith notes further that popular culture becomes a focus of parody “in a world without cultural hierarchies,” where it can take on notions of what is “high” and “low.”<sup>43</sup> Locke’s accumulations recall Archimboldo’s clever assemblages of fruits and vegetables that provide a “paranoid critical” revelation of a face (à la Dalí) and the bricolage sculpture of ceramicist Viola Frey, who, in the 1960s and 1970s, assembled forms based on everyday ceramic figurines typical of those found in popular market venues (Fig. 4). Whereas Fred Wilson would leave such bric-a-brac as is, arranging them the way a curator would in an exhibition, Frey re-fabricated these forms, enlarged them, and re-glazed them to achieve visual unity. What links Frey, Wilson, and Locke is not only their acts of “bricolage,” but also their sense that the objects they “patch together” are “more than recycled trash, for they are imbued with personal associations



Fig. 4  
Viola Frey  
*Man in Suit & Column*, 1996  
Ceramic  
30 ½ x 27 x 16 in. (77 x 69 x 41 cm)  
Courtesy of Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York; Artists’  
Legacy Foundation, Oakland, California

This type of work exists within eyesight of assemblage, which had its first fluorescence in the art scene of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Frey anticipated the vernacular focus of pop art and the cultivation of sentiment that was once again permitted by postmodernism when she accessed the sentimental values attached to those everyday ceramic figures. In its arrangements of specific objects, Wilson’s work adds a note of warning about the dangers of sentiment and the ways that kitsch often reinforces dominant ideologies, a notion implicit in Locke’s exploration of imperial treasures. Additionally, the works of all three artists offer examples of what Lash and Lury describe as the gift-giving manifestation in the flow of objects on a global scale.<sup>45</sup>

We cannot leave the postmodern moment without acknowledging the prevalence of homage in the work of various artists. It is striking that at least two works in this selection, by Cornelia Parker and Joe Lewis, reference the venerable modernist icon of Constantin Brancusi’s *Endless Column*, completed in 1938 as a monument to Romanian soldiers who died in World War I. Brancusi noted that the column was both “a symbolic means of ascension to heaven for dead soldiers’ souls and a way to sustain the vault of heaven.”<sup>46</sup> Lewis accesses this meaning in his own interpretation, *Mandela & Anne Frank Forever: The Endless Column* (2006), which he describes as:

*A floor to ceiling “Endless column” adorned with phone books . . . that signify 18 million names of two groups whose life experiences intertwine throughout history . . . 12 million Africans sold into slavery . . . and 6 million Jews who lost their lives during a different, more contemporary Holocaust.*

*The column is sandwiched between two mirrors that create an optical illusion of infinity. No beginning, no ending, no top, no bottom, just a continuum, an axis through the earth’s history.*<sup>47</sup>

The connection of Nelson Mandela and Anne Frank reflects the African statesman’s revelation that many inmates on Robben Island, where he was incarcerated for eighteen of his twenty-six years in prison, read Frank’s diary and “derived much encouragement of

it.”<sup>48</sup> What is clear as we consider the work in *Second Lives* is that the dialogue between art and craft has to be conducted not only in the context of media and technique (materials and process) but also in light of the artist’s own conceptual positioning of his or her artistic enterprise.

## the global moment: the transference of meaning in the transference of objects

Lash and Lury suggest that the methodology for comprehending the “global culture industry” is to “follow the objects.”<sup>49</sup> This strategy is implicit in the content of *Second Lives* given the nature of the various manufactured objects used by the different artists. Economic phenomena such as the outsourcing of labor and services to foreign countries in order to reduce costs, combined with the franchising or expansion of national businesses in other countries to increase the global reach of specific products, have left us to deal with the fact that we can no longer assume the site of manufacture of even products embedded in specific national identities. In the case of a team like WOKmedia, the diverse national origins of the materials, the objects, and the makers point to a new market phenomenon that is shifting the locus of not only manufacturing but also the production and distribution of works of art, from Europe and the Americas (especially the United States) to elsewhere, in this case Asia.

Julie Mathias and Wolfgang Kaepfner of WOKmedia, while based in London, work in Shanghai. Their initial impetus for “outsourcing” themselves was the promise of a new and economical environment for achieving their creative goals; however, as indicated by the chair and other furniture forms made from chopsticks that they recently conceived of for their product line, they have gradually succumbed to the material possibilities inherent in their current working environment for inspiration. Struck by the fact that millions of cheap, disposable chopsticks were being used and discarded everyday, Mathias and Kaepfner looked to

find a use for them that would stimulate their own imaginations and conform to current twenty-first century preoccupations with the environmental impact of the discarded residue of consumerist society.

If we extrapolate the global dimensions and implications of their enterprise, we must avoid essentializing associations of a product with a single country or culture. After all, China is not the only source of chopsticks; they are just as likely to be made in Brooklyn, New York or myriad other locales across the globe. It is not inconceivable that, under the ever-changing conditions of global economics, China might import chopsticks for domestic use from, say, the United States, just as the United States imports such quintessentially “American” apparel as denim pants—irrevocably associated with frontier history—from overseas manufacturing sites in China, the Philippines, or Sri Lanka.

The outsourcing of the fashion sectors in Europe and the United States is the pointed subject of Terese Agnew’s imposing fabric collage in this exhibition, *Portrait of a Textile Worker* (2005). Agnew has skillfully employed techniques of pixilation, the reduction of images to component parts, in order to reproduce a photograph of a garment worker taken in a factory in Bangladesh.<sup>50</sup> Her sense of scale and skill at converting the light and dark elements of found components into the form of the figure sitting at the sewing machine participates in the long-standing dialogue about the nature of perception, how our eyes respond to light and dark values, and the knowledge of how images were first transmitted over electronic media by breaking the original into constituent bits and “reassembling” it over the wire—so to speak.

Agnew’s method and technique reach back to impressionism, but her work speaks more specifically to pop art’s fascination with images conveyed by print and electronic media and how such images examined and exposed methods of reproduction, including photography, film, and video. This aligns Agnew’s perceptual techniques with those of Roy Lichtenstein (Ben Day dots) and Chuck Close. But she uses this technical approach as a powerful metaphor of our awakening awareness of the situation and condition of the woman depicted in this image, which is itself

composed by sewing together thousands of designer labels that represent the very entities that have outsourced the production of their work to countries with less developed economies, less stringent labor laws, and therefore, cheaper labor costs. Given the relationship between meaning and medium in Agnew’s work, whether intentionally or not, Devorah Sperber’s own masterful renderings of familiar images from art history and popular media, pixilated by her arrangement of spools of Coats and Clark thread, enters this dialogue through its transformative use of the ordinary means of textile and garment manufacture.

In a reversal of the disempowered position of Agnew’s worker, Sonya Clark takes as her subject an economically powerful woman of color in her portrait of Madam C.J. Walker, the first black millionairess in American history, which is rendered in hair combs. Clark’s technique encompasses a type of pixilation, as she removed the tines of the combs to create the “negative” spaces in her black-and-white rendition of Madam Walker’s likeness. Here, the site of installation is crucial to the completion of the work: the white or contrasting color of the gallery wall reveals the results of Clark’s eliminations and accumulations. In addition to playing on the phenomena of atomizing matter into component parts, Clark alludes to racial dynamics in the work’s black/white contrast, and in her choices of materials, she references the particular vehicle for Walker’s wealth—the sale of combs and pomades used in straightening hair. The comb then is a signifier for the person it is used to convey.

That the objects and components in the work in *Second Lives* retain the residue of the historical events, conditions, and relationships that mark the lifespan of commodities is evident with artists such as Cole, who makes bulk purchases of “thrift and Salvation Army shoes”<sup>51</sup> that might as well have been shipped overseas for resale and reuse in economically challenged communities all over the world. The monumental and sumptuous assemblages of El Anatsui that recycle caps, tops, and the labels of liquor bottles recall a model of art making emanating from Africa that was once described by the Senegalese artist Fodé Camara as “amalgamation and recycling.”<sup>52</sup>

Upon close examination of the carefully banded, crushed, and reconfigured flotsam and jetsam of Anatsui's assemblages, we note the brand names indicating both the international and local origins of liquor circulated in Africa. Polly Savage has further noted the ironic implications of Anatsui's choice to recycle elements that carry allusions to the role of liquor in the history of Africa and Europe:

*Considering that liquor was another major commodity traded by Europeans for slaves, Anatsui's bottle-tops take on deeper resonance with histories of international point of contact . . . Spirits from distilleries specifically established in Liverpool to supply exports to Africa, and rum, a by-product of the Caribbean sugar plantations for which Africa had supplied the labour [i.e. slaves], were highly profitable for European traders, and to a large extent detrimental to the societies into which they were imported.<sup>53</sup>*

Anatsui's work is a brilliant and ironic re-contextualizing of economic and cultural artifacts that not only challenges our notion of preciousness by shifting the signifiers of surface and effect but also transfers the original associations of the materials into a new context which, not incidentally, carries environmental nuances. And, as Savage continues, in evoking "the human histories and relationships behind the materials that surround us," Anatsui effectively "interlac[es] object and metaphor like elements within a cloth."<sup>54</sup>

Lash and Lury affirm this extra-material meaning, noting that our aesthetic and theoretic experience of objects and their constituent parts is a matter of "not only the temporal sequencing of production, distribution and consumption"<sup>55</sup> but also the fact that "the object's state is embedded in a complex space and cannot separated from it."<sup>56</sup> These artists afford their chosen objects a "second life," a "second" incarnation that then provides the viewer/consumer with an embellished and enhanced experience of the quotidian. These works "'move'" and "'transition' between many states,"<sup>57</sup> begging the distinction between the machine-made and the handmade, between local industry and global expansion. They represent, in one way or another, the culmination of

centuries of cultural and economic exchanges where indigenous productions have been so extensively dispersed through other times and places that we have lost almost all sense of their original context. This feeling of disequilibrium is expressed on WOKmedia's website, where they declare their work to be "primarily concerned with the emotional dimension" existing "in between where chaos is showing structure and confusion is beginning to make sense. Where out of devastation and destruction emerges a new world."<sup>58</sup> We are then left to ponder the psychological as well as the aesthetic and cultural implications of such phenomena in our present society and to interrogate the habitual categorization of art along gender, ethnic, racial, class, or national lines. And, we are left to face the recurring question of the existence of a global culture and what, exactly, that constitutes.

For, in addition to the migration of objects, their sites, and means of making, there is also the phenomenon of the movement of artists in the world. If El Anatsui moves from Ghana to Nigeria, if Yuken Teruya, Soyeon Cho and Long-Bin Chen relocate to the United States from Japan, Korea, and Taiwan respectively, how much of their original and seminal cultural upbringing do they bring with themselves, and how is that existential being transformed in the movement? At times, it is the moment in life when one moves that determines the answers to these questions. As a child, Jean Shin moved to the United States from Korea with her parents, and she has noted how their work ethic and their persistence in making a life here became important factors in her own ethic, approach to materials, and method of working.<sup>59</sup> Lash and Lury also remind us that even the curators involved in this project are affected, for as we "descend into the world with the objects" and the artists, and are "on the move with them," we are at one "ontologized and mobile." In other words: "To be in the world with the objects means a shift in knowledge relations. . . [W]hen objects. . . encounter other subjects and subjects as environments . . . [those] . . . environments are transformed into webs of connectivity."<sup>60</sup>

What these considerations leave us with are questions that would be the purview of another project at another time. We began by

alluding to notions of destiny and transmutation in the use of materials by the artists in *Second Lives*. As we consider the implications of the transfer of goods created in one cultural context to another in a global economy, we would additionally need to consider how branding figures into the desirability of such objects. Lash and Lury provide a road map for determining this in their consideration of the global destiny of products such as Nike sportswear and Swatch watches. While we have hinted here at the effect of repurposing an object, we would need to consider the dynamics of creating a transnational comprehension and use of all objects created in various global economies. Are there instances where the functions ascribed to objects taken outside of their culture of origin are necessarily transgressive?



*Fig. 5*  
Mounir Fatmi  
*Save Manhattan*, 2007  
Copies of the Koran, books, table, spotlight  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica, California

Michael Rakowitz hints at this possibility in his artwork, which recreates works important to the cultural patrimony of Iraq in materials that are in effect street detritus. A related 2004 work by Mounir Fatmi, *Save Manhattan* (Fig. 5), evoked the sense of loss pervading the skyline of post-9/11 Manhattan through an arrangement of books, including two volumes of the Koran, lit frontally, so that the cast shadows replicated the silhouettes of the now-destroyed Twin Towers. This composition would be reproduced again, first with VHS tapes (2005) and then with stereo speakers (2007) providing the forms to be projected in silhouette. Such instances would have us consider the possibilities of more layered, complex—"hybrid" if you will—meanings emerging from the encounter of diverse cultures though the use of a particular object.

Finally, Terese Agnew has vividly brought home to us how issues such as value, product, and labor—both in terms of who is producing objects and where as well as the technique or approach of artists—figure into the global cultural picture. With the greater internationalizing of the art market in terms of new venues for consumption and locales for production, these issues beg the question of artistic distance and “disinterestedness.” In that aspect, the artists in *Second Lives* and their work move beyond the long established dichotomies that have been delineated between art and craft, concept and execution and provide a glimpse into an “other way”<sup>61</sup> where diverse elements are reunited and transcend categories.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Helen Molesworth, *Part Object Part Sculpture*, exh. cat. (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).
- 2 The implications of that lack have not gone unnoticed by industry, which recognized that the introduction of gestures of personal initiative on the assembly line went a long way towards increasing efficiency and reducing the job-related accidents that interrupted productivity and increased costs.
- 3 Laurie Britton-Newell, ed., *Out of the Ordinary: Spectacular Craft*, exh. cat. (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, V&A Publications, 2007).
- 4 Laura Hoptman, Richard Flood, Massimiliano Gioni, and Trevor Smith, *Unmonumental*, exh. cat. (New York: New Museum, Phaidon Press, 2007).
- 5 See [http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1637\\_outoftheordinary/index.php](http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1637_outoftheordinary/index.php) (accessed May 2008).
- 6 I thank Kate Levin, Commissioner of Cultural Affairs, City of New York, for reminding me of the concepts of logos and ethos in conversation over breakfast on March 3, 2008.
- 7 Tanya Harrod, “How to cast spells: A new show coming to the V&A proves technique is not the enemy of ideas,” *Crafts* no. 209 (November/December 2007), 23.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 24.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 24.
- 10 Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford, England and New York: Berg Publishers, 2007).
- 11 Margaret Iversen, “Readymade, found object, photograph,” [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_mo45/is\\_2\\_63/ai\\_n6155497/print](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_mo45/is_2_63/ai_n6155497/print) (accessed May 2008). Originally published in *Art Journal* vol. 63, no. 2 (Summer 2004), 44-57.
- 12 Molesworth, op. cit., 19.
- 13 Iversen, op. cit.
- 14 Molesworth, op. cit., 19.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 19-20.
- 16 See Patterson Sims, *Anxious Objects: Willie Cole's Favorite Brands*, exh. cat. (Montclair, NJ: Montclair Art Museum and Rutgers University Press, 2006), 50.
- 17 Scott Lash and Celia Lury, *Global Culture Industry: The Mediation of Things*. (Cambridge, England and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007).
- 18 Simon Dentith, *Parody* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 2.
- 19 Adamson, op. cit., 44.
- 20 Julia Draganovic, “Hinges, pivots and turning points,” *Courtney Smith: Tongue and Groove, Movable Sculpture*, exh. cat. (New York: Chelsea Art Museum, 2006), unpaginated.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 M. Anna Fariello, “‘Reading’ the language of Objects,” M. Anna Fariello and Paula Owen, eds., *Objects and Meaning: New Perspectives on Art and Craft* (Lanham, MD and Oxford, England: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 153.
- 23 Nancy Salem, “Contemporary American Indian artists struggle for attention in a market focused on tradition,” *The Albuquerque Tribune*, Friday, October 13, 2006, <http://www.abqtrib.com/news/2006/oct/13/contemporary-american-indian-artists-struggle-atte>.
- 24 David Revere McFadden and Ellen Napiura Taubman, *Changing Hands: Without Reservation 2: Contemporary Native North American Art from the West, Northwest & Pacific*, exh. cat. (Museum of Arts and Design, New York, Dalton, MA: The Studley Press, 2005), 65.

- 25 O'Grady made notes on her manifesto of liberation for black artists available to the writer:
- No more boot-lickin  
 No more ass-kissin  
 No more buttering up  
 No more Posturing  
 of superass...imulates  
 BLACK ARTISTS MUST TAKE MORE RISKS
- Lowery Stokes Sims, "Aspects of Performance in the Work of Black American Women Artists," Arlene Raven, Cassandra L. Langer, and Joanna Frueh, eds., *Feminist Art Criticism: An Anthology* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1988), 215.
- 26 See Judith Tannenbaum, *Mimi Smith: Steel Wool Politics*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1994), 12.
- 27 Linda Goode-Bryant and Marcy S. Philips, *Contextures* (New York: Just Above Midtown, Inc., 1978), 45.
- 28 Ibid, 46.
- 29 Cécile Whiting, *A Taste for Pop: Pop Art, Gender and Consumer Culture* (Cambridge, England, New York, and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 64.
- 30 Molesworth, op. cit., 25.
- 31 Ibid, 25.
- 32 Bruce Metcalf, "Evolutionary Biology and Its Implications for Craft," Fariello and Owen, op. cit., 227.
- 33 Jonathan Harris, *Writing Back to Modern Art: After Greenberg, Fried and Clark* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 135.
- 34 Ibid, 156.
- 35 See Horace Brockington, "Nadine Robinson and Camille Norment, Slow Jam," *NYArts*, [http://www.nyartsmagazine.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=3748&Itemid=](http://www.nyartsmagazine.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3748&Itemid=) (accessed May 2008).
- 36 Dentith, op. cit. 29.
- 37 Harrod, op. cit., 23.
- 38 See Boris Bally's website, <http://www.borishally.com/statement.php> (accessed May 2008).
- 39 Murray Edelman, *From Art to Politics: How Artistic Creations Shape Political Conceptions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 55.
- 40 Patterson Sims, op. cit., 50.
- 41 Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Press, 1984).
- 42 Patterson Sims, op. cit., 50.
- 43 Dentith, op. cit., 29.
- 44 Kenneth R. Trap, "Viola Frey: A Lasting Legacy," *Viola Frey: A Lasting Legacy*, exh. cat. (New York: Nancy Hoffman Gallery, 2005), 7.
- 45 Lash and Lury, op. cit., 136-140.
- 46 As quoted in Joe Lewis, "Artist's Statement," email from Joseph S. Lewis III to Elizabeth Edwards, February 12, 2008.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Lash and Lury, op. cit., 6.
- 50 The photograph was taken in 2002 by Charles Kernaghan, director of the National Labor Committee, a human rights advocacy group, on an unauthorized visit to the factory in Bangladesh.
- 51 Patterson Sims, op. cit., 50.
- 52 Susan Vogel, "The Official Story," Susan Vogel and Ima Ebong, eds. *Africa Explores: 20<sup>th</sup> Century African Art*, exh. cat. (New York: The Center for African Art in association with Prestel, Munich, 1991), 184.
- 53 Polly Savage, "El Anatsui: Contexts, Textiles and Gin," *El Anatsui 2006*, exh. cat. (New York: David Krut Projects and October Gallery, London, 2006), unpaginated.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Lash and Lury, op. cit., 17.
- 56 Ibid, 18.
- 57 Ibid, 19.
- 58 See the WOKmedia website, [http://www.wokmedia.com/?page\\_id=3](http://www.wokmedia.com/?page_id=3) (accessed May 2008).
- 59 Presentation by Jean Shin, attended by the writer, sponsored by Art Table, Inc. at the AXA Building, New York City, November 16, 2007.
- 60 Lash and Lury, op. cit., 29.
- 61 The allusion is to Hernando de Soto *The Other Path: The Invisible Revolution in the Third World* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1989).

## Sonya Clark

### plastic combs

#### *Madam C. J. Walker*

(*large*), 2008

Unbreakable plastic combs

(Courtesy of American  
Comb Corp.)

10 ft. 2 in. x 7 ft. 3 in. x 25 in.

(310 x 224 x 25 cm)

Collection of the artist

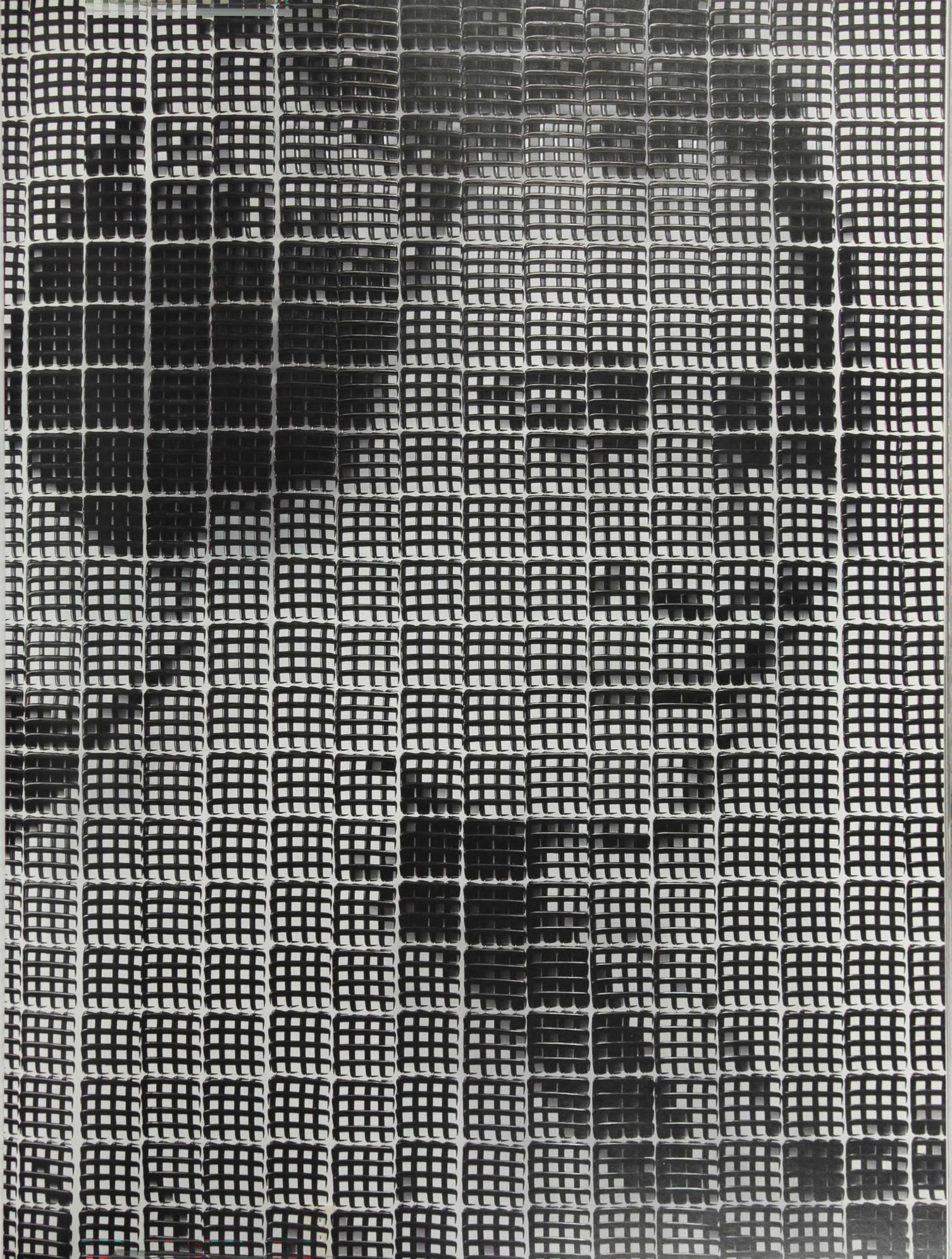
Most recently, combs have piqued my curiosity. Particularly, black plastic fine-tooth combs stamped with the word “unbreakable.” These mass-produced objects conjure images of 1950s men’s barbershops, Brylcreem, and combs kept breast-pocket close so as to not let a hair stray out of place. Though not the appropriate tool for my own thick hair, any comb conjures memories from my youth of my hair parted and pulled into fantastic sculptural feats at the skilled hands of female relatives.

In general, grooming tools provide a wealth of information about cultural notions of hygiene, civilized behavior, and aesthetics. Fine-tooth combs in particular speak of a legacy in the United States of hair culture and race politics. Madam C.J. Walker, the mother of Black hairdressing, figures prominently in this legacy. Born shortly after the end of slavery, she became a millionaire by the early 1900s.

Because of Walker’s prominence and prosperity, some consider her the Oprah of her day. Because Walker provided economic opportunity and was dedicated to aesthetics, others equate her with the Yoruba deity Oshun, “owner of the golden comb.” Still others accuse Walker of repressing the natural beauty of African hair by selling hair-straightening products. I use combs to speak of her career as a pioneer in hair care. The size of the work, my largest to date, is an homage to her legacy as an “unbreakable” icon of American culture.

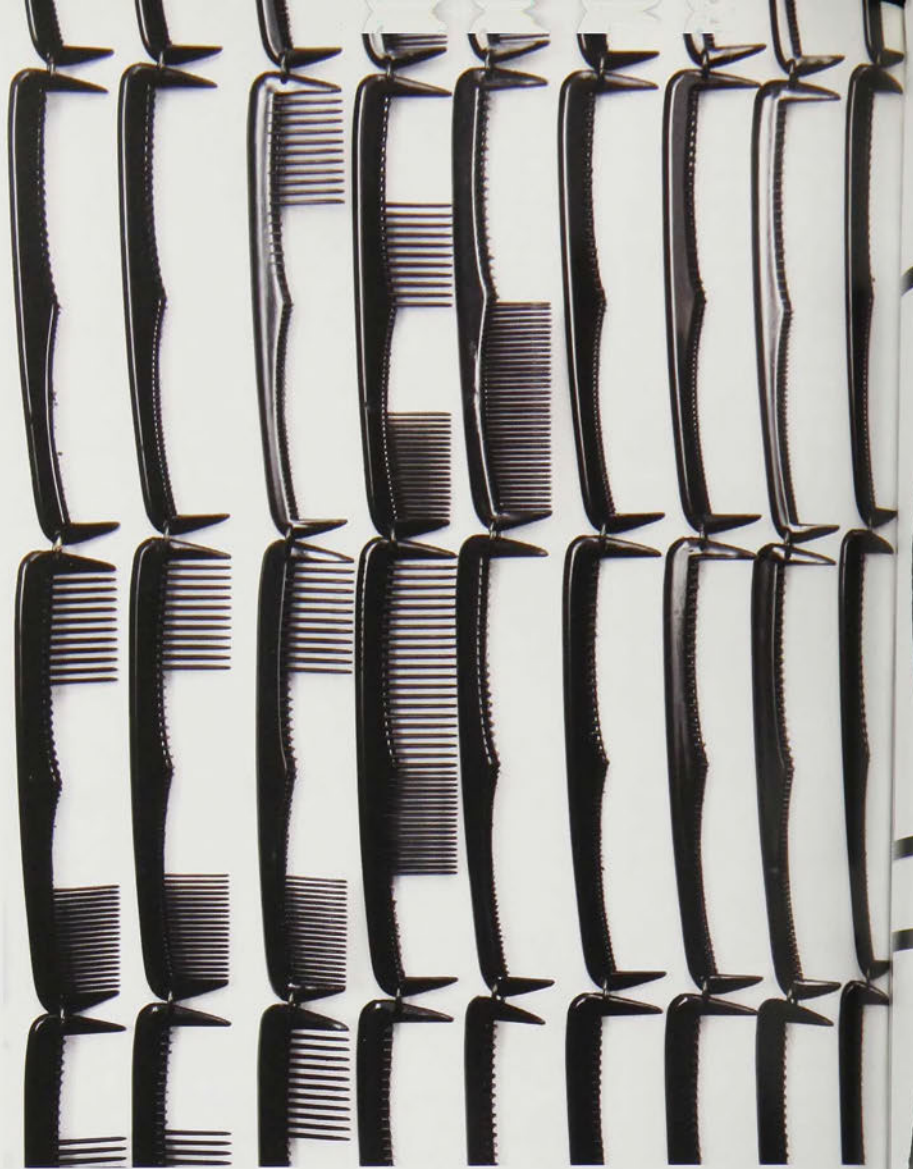
As cultural critic Bill Gaskins said in a review of my work, “Hairdressing is the primordial fiber art.” And so it is that the reed on a loom and the pocket comb are siblings. As a fiber artist, I believe an artwork made of combs and a hairstyle piled high should comfortably coexist with a woven cloth.



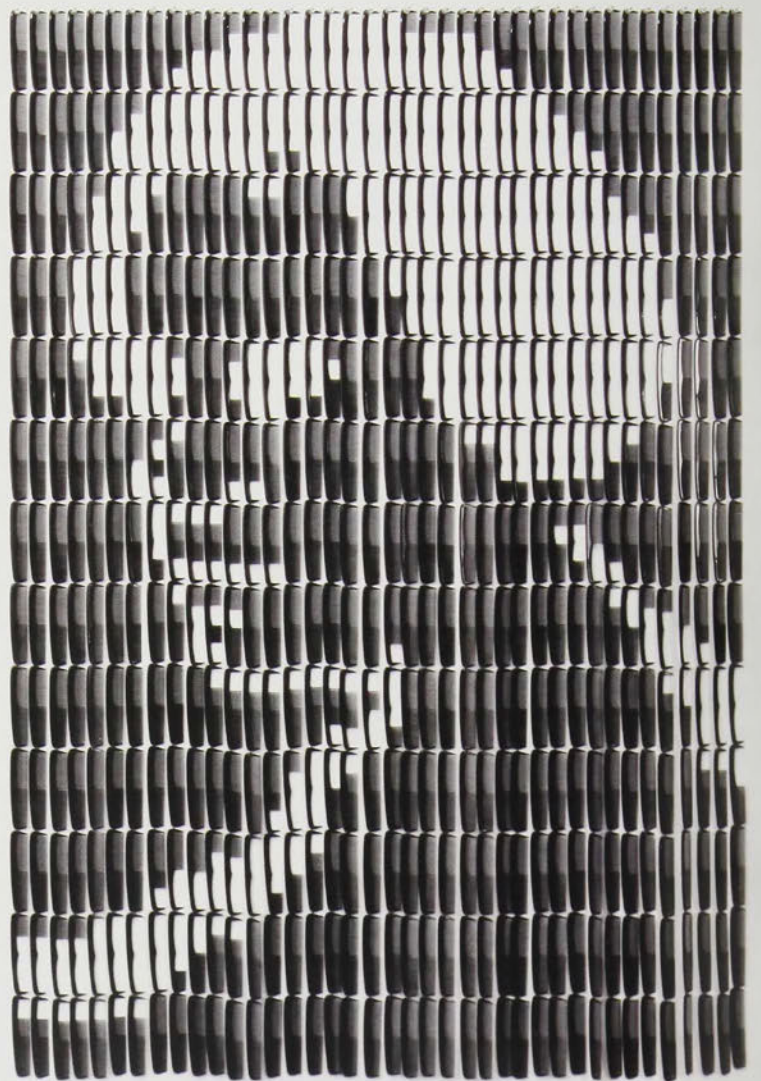
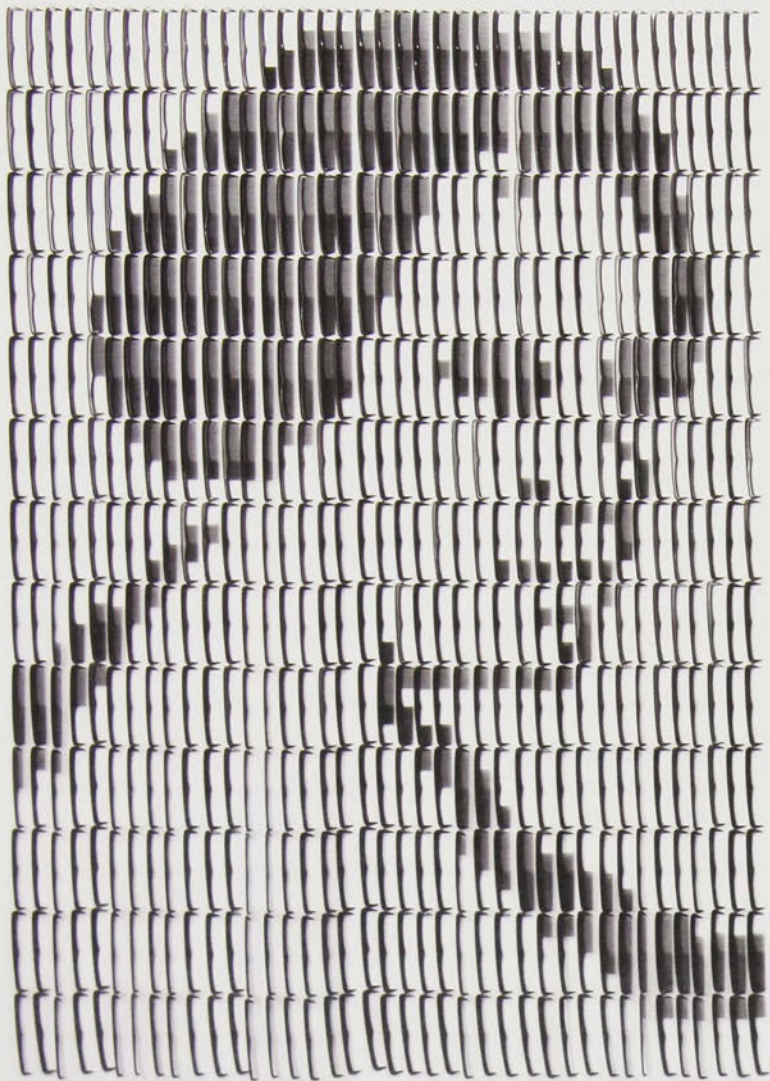




*Madam C. J. Walker,*  
2007 (detail)  
Black plastic fine-  
tooth combs  
65 in. x 9 ft. 2 in.  
(165 x 279 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist



*Madam C. J. Walker,* 2007  
Black plastic fine-  
tooth combs  
65 in. x 9 ft. 2 in.  
(165 x 279 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist



Part, 2005

Photographs

70 x 70 in. (178 x 178 cm)

Courtesy of the artist

