

Wexner Center for the Arts School Programs Resources

The Object Lesson



Image Credit: Ian Douglas for The New York Times

*My objects dream and wear new costumes,
Compelled to, it seems, by all the words in my hands
And the sea that bangs in my throat.*

—Anne Sexton

About the Performance and the Artists

Do you have what you need? Do you need what you have? Imagine every “thing” that ever passed through your hands—a massive, meaningful, meaningless pile of junk that describes in debris your tiny human history. With boxes stacked to the ceiling, physical theater artist Geoff Sobelle transforms the BAM Fisher into an epic storage facility of gargantuan proportion. The audience, free to roam and poke through the jumble, becomes immersed in this performance-installation that unpacks our relationship to everyday objects: breaking, buying, finding, fixing, trading, selling, stealing, storing, and becoming buried under a world of things. Hilarious and heartbreaking, *The Object Lesson* is a meditation on the stuff we cling to and the crap we leave behind. (*source: bam.org*)

Geoff Sobelle is a theatre artist dedicated to the “sublime ridiculous.” He is the co-artistic director of Rainpan 43, a renegade absurdist outfit devoted to creating original actor-driven performance works. He has been a company member of Philadelphia’s Pig Iron Theatre Company since 2001. His original independent works include: *Flesh and Blood* and *Fish and Fowl*, a doomsday clown show



Image Credit: aoiaagency.com

(Fringe First Award, Edinburgh) and *Elephant Room* and *The Object Lesson* (a performance/installation for one man and 1500 cardboard boxes of “stuff.”). Geoff’s work has been supported by the Independence Foundation in Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Theatre Initiative, the Wyncote Foundation and United Artists International. He received a 2006 Pew Fellowship in the Arts and is a 2009 Creative Capital grantee. He is a graduate of Stanford University and trained at École Jacques Lecoq in Paris, France. He currently is on faculty at Bard College and at the Pig Iron School in Philadelphia. Geoff’s goal as a theatre artist is to challenge traditional modes of perspective through complex, multi-layered, virtuosic, visual theatre that uses performance itself as a metaphor for the human experience. Using illusion, film and out-dated mechanics, he creates surreal, poetic pieces that look for humanity where you least expect it and find grace where no one is looking. His practice resembles a colossal practical joke, lovingly made and diabolically let loose upon a captive audience. (*Source: www.aoiaagency.com/geoff-sobelle*)

David Neumann is the director of The Object Lesson. As Artistic Director of New York City-based Advanced Beginner Group, David Neumann has presented work at PS 122, New York Live Arts, The Kitchen and Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, to name a few. In her review of 'Restless Eye' at NYLA, Claudia La Rocco of The New York Times comments, "It is a powerful work, and a resonant one, showing Mr. Neumann once again to be an astute, sensitive observer of the human condition in all its funny and desperate and, finally, beautiful frailty."



Image Credit: Advancedbeginnergroup.org

As both a performer and choreographer, he works in theatre, opera and film, and is a renowned teacher having been on faculty at NYU, Yale, and Barnard. He is currently a tenured professor at Sarah Lawrence College. In addition to his collaborations with such directors as Hal Hartley, Laurie Anderson, Lee Breuer, and JoAnn Akalaitis, he has created two duets for himself and Mikhail Baryshnikov. Neumann and his company have received four Bessie Awards and several grants, including Creative Capital, BUILD, and MAP funds. Most recently, he was awarded a 2011 Foundation for Contemporary Arts Award for Dance, a 2013 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship in Choreography and a 2014 MacDowell Fellowship. (Source: americandance.org)

Other Relevant Links

- Interview with the director David Neumann featured on the Brooklyn Academy of Music Blog <http://bam150years.blogspot.com/2014/10/the-object-lesson-interview-with.html>
- Review of the Object Lesson by Ben Brantley on New York Times. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/07/theater/geoff-sobelles-the-object-lesson-at-bam.html>
- YouTube video about The Object Lesson. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7EJx9cx98U>

- Comedian George Carlin's routine called "Stuff" was one of the inspirations for The Object Lesson. You can watch the routine in this YouTube video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryy_QgDXnX4.
- Article on brainpickings.com that talks about the psychology of why creative work hinges on memory and connecting the unrelated. <http://www.brainpickings.org/2014/09/02/notebooks-of-the-mind-memory-creativity/>
- Object Lessons is an essay and book series about the hidden lives of ordinary things, from Scripps to economists, pairings to reads. Series Editors: Ian Bogost and Christopher Schaberg <http://objectsofobjects.com/>
- Stuff does matter. And it's only when we understand this that we can fill our lives with stuff that is good for us, that nourishes our body, mind, and soul. This website is a celebration of our relationship with the good stuff. <http://stuffdoesmatter.com/>
- This article from the New York Times explains how artifacts from the past are full of culture and history and are not simply lifeless objects. Read to find out how an old cookbook shed light on what defines African-American cuisine from the 19th century. http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/featured_articles/20071122thursday.html
- The Participatory Museum explains the idea of objects not holding any historical or artistic significance, rather an objects ability to allow for interaction between people. This article investigates the different ways objects influence our social lives and relationships with others. <http://www.participatorymuseum.org/chapter4/>

Artists Exploring Similar Themes

Waste Not: An exhibition by a Chinese artist Song Dong assembled more than 10,000 items hoarded by his mother over a five decade period. The exhibit focused on the vast collection of Song Dong's mother Zhao Xiangyan, who refused to throw anything away after her husband died. She was an adult during the Cultural Revolution in China when everyone was poor and had to keep anything they could. It was a prerequisite for survival during periods of social and political turmoil. So it's a story of family and childhood memories.

<http://www.treehugger.com/culture/artist-song-dong-exhibits-items-collected-packrat-mom.html>

Capturing Memories in Video Art: Using video mapping and projection, artist Gabriel Barcia-Colombo captures and shares his memories and friendships. At TED Fellow Talks, he shows his charming, thoughtful work — which appears to preserve the people in his life in jars, suitcases, blenders...

https://www.ted.com/talks/gabriel_barcia_colombo_capturing_memories_in_video_art?language=en

Memory: How does memory function? What is history? How do contemporary artists frame the past in their work? The "Art in the Twenty-First Century" documentary "Memory" explores these questions through the work of the artists Susan Rothenberg, Mike Kelley,

Hiroshi Sugimoto, and Josiah McElheny, and concludes with an original video artwork by Teresa Hubbard / Alexander Birchler.... <http://www.pbs.org/art21/films/memory>

[Shinro Ohtake](#) takes the world as his source, using journeys, dreams and diaries to examine the inner surface of his layered perceptions. He worked as an expressive painter and sculptor before a stay in London where he chanced to meet an old man who had obsessively collected matchbooks and glued them into pages of a notebook. Ohtake purchased the collection and began to create his own „street books“, intense travel scrapbooks crammed with discarded cultural artifacts-scavenged tickets, snapshots,

tags, currency, newspapers and other mass-produced printed matter shrugged off by popular culture. His book works, both one-of-a-kind and multiples, are sculptural, multi-colored, excessive layerings of found images and objects that interact with his own painting and drawing before he seals them with coats of wax, stain, and varnish, plastic or fiberglass.



Image Credit: Take Ninagawa, Tokyo

stuff does matter

STUFF HAS A PLACE IN OUR
WORLD AND IN YOUR LIFE

OBJECTS MATTER BEYOND THEIR UTILITY

caring about things is not wrong
your stuff helps you make sense of the world

stuff connects you to people - to your past, present, and future.
stuff provides beauty, meaning, and experience.
stuff helps you remember and share.

THERE'S A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MINDLESS
CONSUMPTION AND THE WAY YOU FEEL
**SAVOR WHAT YOU HAVE.
BUY ONLY WHAT YOU LOVE.**

allow your things to enrich your life
choose gratitude over guilt

know that the things you love do matter.

STUFFDOESMATTER.COM
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Image Credit: stuffdoesmatter.com

Teaching Ideas and Lesson Plans

[Cardboard History](#): This lesson builds on students' interests in both sports and collections, and uses a literature connection. The lesson begins with a PBS clip featuring sports memorabilia. A trade book, *Honus and Me* by Dan Gutman, is then used to lure students to baseball's past and history. This book is the first in his series of baseball card adventures using time travel to visit with featured sports figures found on baseball cards. The lesson continues with researching and recording historical information on cards with sports figures and leads to a class "card sharing session" that is a disguise for teaching students some history facts. All the while, students will be practicing language arts and research skills while enjoying the biographies of sports figures. The lesson ends with student-authored creative stories based on one of their discovered history facts. Modeling Gutman's style, the students will mix fiction with fact. Adaptable to grade level or subject area, this lesson screams "play ball"!

[Nostalgia in Literature and Life](#): This lesson plan explores the meaning of the word "nostalgia"—its definitions, connotations, cultural relevance, and function as a motivating factor in fiction and autobiography. Students will examine the definition of nostalgia, read a short story by García Márquez and an essay by Cisneros, and write an autobiographical essay reflecting on a nostalgic time in their own lives.

[Lesson Plans on Collecting from the Andy Warhol Museum](#): Warhol.org provides four amazing lesson plans for introducing students to the principles of collecting and understanding collecting as an artistic practice. The lesson plans include handouts and detailed instructions for class activities and projects.

[Lesson One](#): This lesson introduces students to the basic concept of collecting. First, students use brainstorming strategies and discussion to understand why an artist might be inspired to collect, and then through two activities, Pocket Project and Collecting Homework, they explore and display their own collecting practices.

[Lesson Two](#): Andy Warhol's own elaborate practice of collecting is investigated in this lesson. Students are introduced to his Time Capsules and asked to think about their own cultural context in relation to articles found in Time Capsule 21. Joseph Cornell's collage boxes are also introduced and analyzed.

[Lesson Three](#): Students are introduced to artistic practices that use personal, professional and institutional collecting, as well as a wide array of contemporary artists employing these practices. Symbolism, anthropology and archival information are presented and discussed.

[Lesson Four](#): Students construct a display based on principles of collecting. Brainstorming leads to a project proposal, a work of art and finally a critique session of other students' work using critical analysis and evaluation skills.



[Nothingbutbonfires](#): A very cool blog post about a daughter who collected sixty memories for her dad's sixtieth birthday. This could be the starting point for students interested in creating art that documents personal stories.

Image Credit: Nothingbutbonfires.com

Relevant Terms

Memorabilia: Objects kept or collected because of their historical interest, especially those associated with memorable people or events.

Nostalgia: A sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations.

Collectible: An object suitable for a collection, originally a work of fine art or an antique, now including also any of a wide variety of items collected as a hobby, for display, or as an investment whose value may appreciate.

Collecting: Collecting is a visual activity, fundamentally about seeing and perceiving things together, whether they are objects, images, or sounds.

Found: A found object in art often comes from everyday objects that people do not usually associate with being artistic. Although these objects are not abstracted, they are usually modified in some way to help convey the artist's message.

Purge: To rid of whatever is impure or undesirable; cleanse; purify. This could be in reference to many different aspects of life including the purging of excess things taking up space.

Museum: A building or place where works of art, scientific specimens, or other objects of permanent value are kept and displayed.

Active Object: Objects that directly and physically insert themselves into the spaces between strangers can serve as shared reference points for discussion. Active objects provide opportunities for people to engage in conversation based on how the objects are

Living Object: Living objects, like animals in zoos, frequently motivate conversation when they move or make surprising sounds. Inanimate objects can also exhibit active behavior and cause the same response from those impacted as living objects.

Social Object: A social object is one that connects the people who create, own, use, critique, or consume it. Social objects are transactional, facilitating exchanges among those who encounter them.

Possession: Possession is the act of possessing/owning an object or the state of being owned.

Personal Artifact: A personal artifact is something that has meaning and significance to the owner. A personal artifact is usually a possession that has emotional, historical, or artistic meaning for the owner in some way and holds its own stories.

Collection: Something that is collected; a group of objects or an amount of material accumulated in one location, especially for some purpose or as a result of some process.

Questions to think about

What did you collect when you were young?

What do we collect? Why do we collect? How do we keep what we collect?

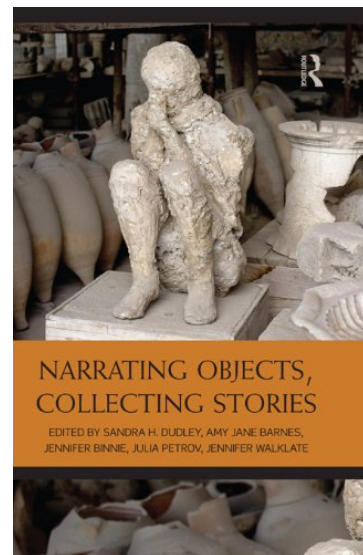
How much thought do we put into the things that we buy and collect?

What are some of the inanimate objects that you assign emotions to?

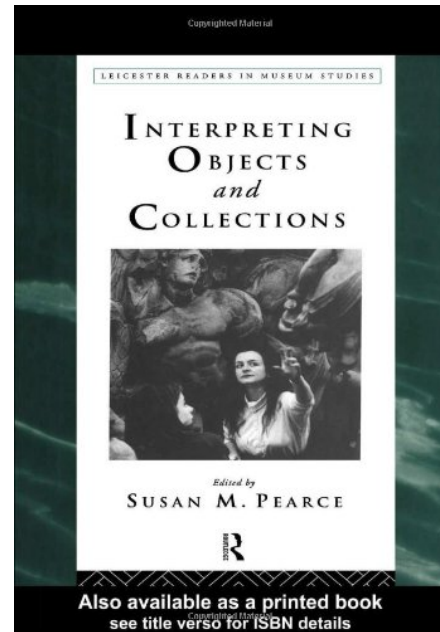
What is the difference between hoarding and collecting?

Related Books

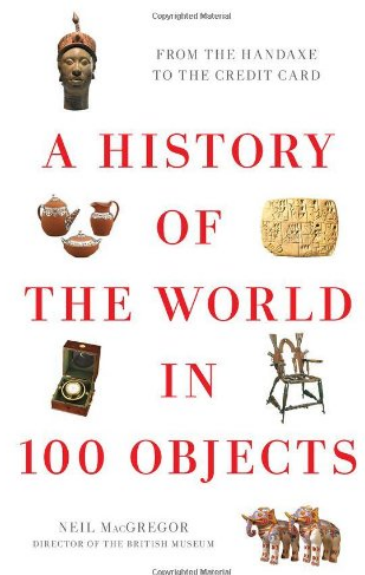
[Narrating Objects, Collecting Stories](#) is a wide-ranging collection of essays exploring the stories that can be told about objects and those who choose to collect them. Examining objects and collecting in different historical, social and institutional contexts, an international, interdisciplinary group of authors consider the meanings and values with which objects are imputed and the processes and implications of collecting. This includes considering the entanglement of objects and collectors alike in webs of social relations, the creation of value and social change; object biographies and the stories – often conflicting – that objects come to represent; and the strategies used to reconstruct and retell the narratives of objects. The book includes considerations of individual objects and groups of objects, such as domestic interiors, Chinese Buddhist artefacts, novelty tea-pots, Scottish stone monuments, African ironworking, a postcolonial painting and memorials to those killed on the roads in Australia. It also contains chapters dealing with particular collectors – including Charles Bell and Beatrix Potter – and representational techniques.



[Interpreting Objects and Collections](#): This volume brings together for the first time the most significant papers on the interpretation of objects and collections and examines how people relate to material culture and why they collect things. The first section of the book discusses the interpretation of objects, setting the philosophical and historical context of object interpretation. Papers are included which discuss objects variously as historical documents, functioning material, and as semiotic texts, as well as those which examine the politics of objects and the methodology of object study. The second section, on the interpretation of collections, looks at the study of collections in their historical and conceptual context. Many topics are covered such as the study of collecting to structure individual identity, its effect on time and space and the construction of gender. There are also papers discussing collection and ideology, collection and social action and the methodology of collection study. This unique anthology of articles and extracts will be of inestimable value to all students and professionals involved in the interpretation of objects and collections.



[A History of the World in 100 Objects](#): When did people first start to wear jewelry or play music? When were cows domesticated and why do we feed their milk to our children? Where were the first cities and what made them succeed? Who invented math-or came up with money? The history of humanity is a history of invention and innovation, as we have continually created new items to use, to admire, or to leave our mark on the world. In this original and thought-provoking book, Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum, has selected one hundred man-made artifacts, each of which gives us an intimate glimpse of an unexpected turning point in human civilization. *A History of the World in 100 Objects* stretches back two million years and covers the globe. From the very first hand axe to the ubiquitous credit card, each item has a story to tell; together they relate the larger history of mankind-revealing who we are by looking at what we have made.



Writers Explore Related Themes

Related Poetry

[Fork](#) by Charles Simic

[One Art](#) by Elizabeth Bishop

Related Articles

[The Importance of Memories in Older Adults](#) by Lillian A. Phenicea & Robert J. Griffore