

*Stillness/Slowness*  
*It Is Woven Like a Transparent Thread*

by

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## Prologue: Treasured Things

*Collage, Enchantment, Shock*

There is a kind of satisfaction in finding an object, as if it were a rare treasure just waiting to be discovered. This could be said in the case of trinkets, tchotchkes, and even natural treasures like a perfect piece of beach glass or animal bones. Surrealist Roger Caillois, in his essay “The Myth of Secret Treasures in Childhood” describes treasures as being “constituted by privileged objects” (2003: 255). Such treasured objects become intensified as they are imbued with one’s own wonder and meaning through individualized experience, and almost fetishized. Caillois highlights this yearning to reclaim the wonder of the things, which are suffused with memories and meaning. Karl Marx also contemplated the ways in which commodities had a fetish-power and sociality, where the social life of things superseded the social relations between people. Such fetishism, tied to the market and exchange, value ultimately does harm to the laborers who make commodities by obscuring their toiling and biopower (1992). Caillois was well aware of Marx’s warning about the fetishism of commodities, but still wanted to explore a different appreciation for objects and things—a privileging that considers the enchantment or magic potential things hold, the sociality of which is grounded in memory and childlike affirmation, not in consumption and exchange value (2003: 255). Out of my own curiosity for my personal and nostalgic attachment to objects, “stuff”, and small treasures, I have become increasingly interested in the shared and varied experiences of other collectors. This extends beyond the nature of collecting and into the objects themselves which, according to Walter Benjamin, undergo a sort of transformation that when taken out of circulation, are absolved of their original function and therefore are able to take on an entirely new set of qualities.

With this senior project I hope to investigate the social realm of objects and the marketplace, breaking it apart to further focus on the individual experience and personalized importance placed on these collected objects. This allows me to explore the relationships to objects beyond more simplified and surface-level descriptions of enjoyment and appreciation. I aim to capture their appreciation of said objects through multilayered experiences that are not based solely on their status as commodities attached to exchange values, but potentially magical things which act as a vehicle for a set of emotions, sensations, and memories that can be activated primarily through the object. This approach facilitates a strong connection to Benjamin’s writing on collecting in *The Arcades Project*, where he discusses objects as divested of their commodified form which, through possession, can become evocative of “flash”-like moments that shock the past and bring it into the present (1999: 463).

*The Arcades Project* concentrates on the covered arcades of France and through investigating them as sites of consumption engages with ideas surrounding the commodity. Throughout the entire work he incorporates ideas related to collection and commodification. In his essay “The Collector,” in particular, Benjamin ruminates on the nature of collections and their tenuous relation to commodities—as things composed of “broken-down matter,” where commodities are detached from both function and exchange value, and elevated to the “status of allegory” (1999: 207) Though these objects are still able to engage with the past, they become

integrated into an “expressly devised historical system: the collection,” (1999: 205). By becoming detached from original function, connections between multiple objects become more flexible and therefore more easily incorporated into the same realm. In this case, the objects act as working, yet fragmented parts of a whole, taking on greater meaning and importance than they may have held in their original commodified form. Allegory, then, for Benjamin, is analogous to collage.

This senior project, much like grief, memory, and treasured objects, aims to take on the form of a collage—like patchwork, fragmented and layered in a way which allows for a much more dynamic connection of ideas. Nonlinear, it merely presents the possibility that objects, outside of the restrictions of the commodity form, can still hold a great deal of power over us, existing as small worlds within themselves which delve into both past and present, allowing for the potential to heal.

### *Nostalgia, Memory, Sensuousness*

Do those who develop collections love the items with a sense of longing, or does maintaining connections to them involve more immediate sensory based experiences such as touch and smell? In terms of nostalgia, there are many components that come together to harness a need to go back to the past.

In *Senses Still*, C. Nadia Seremetakis examines nostalgia initially by way of etymology, breaking down and distinguishing the differences of two versions of the term. She begins by describing the American understanding of the term as something which, frozen in the past, is unable to form any kind of dynamic relationship with the present. This interpretation however is far less compelling than that of the Greek’s which is layered with meanings and varying sensations. The Greek definition, as Seremetakis explains, is “linked to the personal consequences of historicizing sensory experience which is conceived as a painful bodily and emotional journey... Nostalgia speaks to the sensory reception of history,” (1994: 4). There is a heavy emphasis on sensory experience being crucial to the ways in which one remembers an object or experience that is particularly striking (to me this could easily be said in the case of dreams or music). Objects act as a way to store memory and therefore become a means through which a tie to the historical--as a sensory dimension--may be formed and sustained, taking into consideration the emphasis of time, distance, sensation, and myth (1994: 3).

One possible result of the cultivation of nostalgia is the fostering of sentimentality geared towards a time, experience, or culture through which one has not lived or experienced. How is it possible that an individual can long for and connect to something that was never theirs in the first place, and where is the line between appreciation and appropriation? For answers I turned to those who collect objects and such from other countries as well as decades in which they have not lived. I have found that many, like myself, feel an allure towards the nostalgia of a previous generation. However, it has been proven possible, through my fieldwork, that we, as individuals, are able formulate new and distanced connections despite degrees of separation.

## *Magnetism and Flash*

Much of this project focuses on childhood toys and knick-knacks. Sensory experience is entwined with childhood, as the child constantly explores their environment as a way to familiarize and ground themselves in the objective world. Many of the memories we hold onto from childhood can be traced to moments of either intense emotional or sensory experience whether they are positive or negative. These memories are often bound to objects.

The charm and magnetism one may feel towards an object, according to Benjamin, can exist independently from the object's commodity form. The object, familiar or not, holds power within itself that allows for the generation of certain flashes—the objects “strike us” (1999: 206 – 207). These moments of intensity are what keep the collector drawn to said objects; not because of the object's origins but because of the power with which they are charged which allows us to feel something that extends far beyond an appreciation for the object itself.

With this set of concepts in mind I set off to find collectors whose objects and relationships towards them vary. Through conducting interviews both in person and via email, I was able to receive firsthand explanations from those who are either collectors themselves or sell these objects with collectors in mind. With the benefit of in-person qualitative interviews, I was additionally able to relish the unique experience of going through portions of such collections, while receiving colorfully detailed explanations and stories concerning the objects in question. Though the thought of participant observation excited me both from an anthropological standpoint, as well as that of a collector, it was evidently challenging to find myself in such situations as my surroundings began to shut down due to the recent Covid-19 pandemic.

## **PART I: Treasures and Allegories**

### *Nesting and Childhood*

As a child, I could often be found with pockets full of seashells (jingle shells as my family called them), or small bits and bobs left behind on the street, waiting to be plucked by my eager little hands. Though at times I was encouraged by my family, my habit for acquiring things in unexpected places resulted in referring to me as a magpie. Much like the thieving bird, I was often caught hoarding my bounty, tucked away in any nook and cranny I could find within my room. Growing up I learned to let my affinity for stuff inform the space around me, my collections overflowing my drawers and making their way onto shelves and surfaces, until my room evolved into a sort of nest.

Benjamin introduces the importance of the physiological in relation to collecting, comparing the collector to a bird building its nest (1999: 210). He explains that the act of collecting and forming a collection acquires a biological function; a means of collecting knowledge. The objects themselves become enriched through a learned understanding of their origin and duration in history and therefore transfigured into something more powerful than commodity. Benjamin, like Seremetakis in *Senses Still*, is invested in history. Benjamin argues for a delight in “evoking a world that is not just distant and long gone but also better” (1999: 19). Similar to Seremetakis, Benjamin introduces the notion that the past is easily idealized, objects are fetishized, and through this formulates a kind of myth, magic, or enchantment surrounding the object. Once entered into this “magic circle” of possession within the collection, the item is sealed and “turned to stone” (1999: 205).

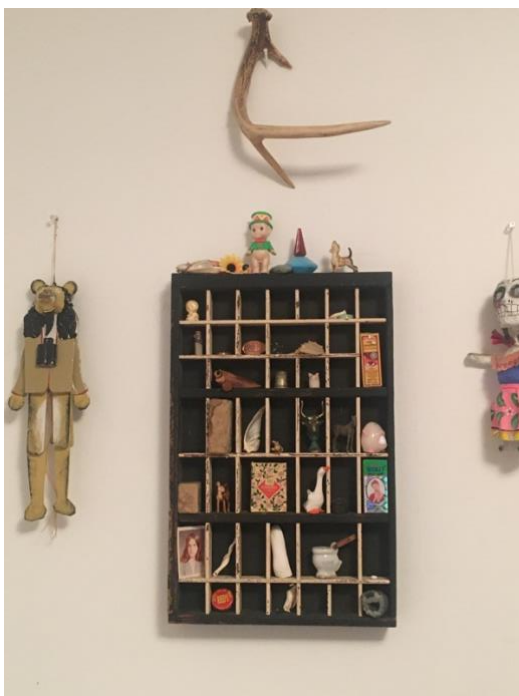


Figure 1



Figure 2

Sometimes my collecting was encouraged, especially when it applied to art making or finding alternative methods for attaining things I wanted or needed but could not as easily buy in stores. As I grew older, my mother and I began a shared enjoyment of eBay and yard sales as means of getting things that were both exciting and affordable. When my mother found something good, she was so pleased with herself and naturally, I too was excited. Going to these yard sales became more of a hobby for my mom and I as I got older, both of us giddy at the prospects of discovering something fantastic in somewhere completely unexpected. On Saturdays during the summer, we routinely drive passed several unofficial posting areas for yard sale signs in our town, hoping to strike gold and discover new treasures.

*Julia: Magic, Supplement, Warmth*

My mother keeps her collections safe and tucked away, each relished upon finding, and each lovingly displayed in their own careful spot on the dresser in her bedroom beside old family photos and seashells and stones or tucked away neatly in some niche of small wooden boxes bottles of her grandmother's perfume. Though she has many more of these objects, a great number of them are not on display, kept in labeled boxes under a film of dust in our attic. Though they are beloved, they often do not see the light of day, saved for times when she or I feel particularly melancholy, choosing to climb our old ladder up into that musty lair to indulge in sheer sentimentality.

I remember as a child sneaking into my parents' room to see what recent treasures she had acquired, especially if she had been traveling. I craved the excitement and the secrecy of discovering any new old knick knack which joined her little world. I particularly felt drawn to the small pile of Cracker Jack prizes which lay in a gentle pile in the bottom drawer of her jewelry box. I would stand on a stool and carefully pull the drawer open and peer in just to look at them. Sometimes I would be bold, taking out each one onto her bed, running my fingers over each pale little shape like rosary beads, feeling every faded plastic groove and dulled edge. I used to think they were magic.



Figure 3

Throughout the years, as her collection has increased, the Cracker Jack prizes have found their way into becoming part of a chain. A brilliant red thread loops through the small hole at the head of each charm; a black cow, an old milk bottle, several small dogs, pigs, etc... They lay in stillness, nested in their loosely tangled red string, their once shiny surfaces now faded, scratched, and dulled. They are never worn (except by me on one day when I was feeling particularly bold) only taken out to be played with and admired, idolized for the childhood powers they possess.

I asked her why she does this instead of treating them as something more stoic or usable. To this she replied that to keep them pristine and untouched would be to make them into something they are not. She elaborated, explaining that if they were not appreciated physically or at all touched and enjoyed, they would exist for her as something more decorative or trophy-like. It is true in the case of many collectors whose focus is not on their relationships to the objects, that these things are all too easily prized for their worth as commodities than something truly nostalgic- “it’s an investment, you’re not actually enjoying the object- it doesn’t do it for me- they aren’t loved.”

These little ornaments, much like her other treasures, are stained with memories from a place in time before my mother knew pain. They are vibrant with memories of hot Florida air, of bare feet, and the warmth of her family under one roof, together only for a short time before any of the eventual chasms took place. Existing as keepsakes from a childhood cut short, before gentle Florida air became harsh winter gusts off the Long Island Sound, and bare feet were confined to the interiors of relatives’ homes where her and her mother and siblings took shelter, these charms hold an intensity that, to anyone else, is otherwise undetectable.

However, even without this knowledge of my mother, it is hard now, as it was as a child, not to imagine the lives each little plastic charm has passed through before being picked out of piles combed through at musty garage sales and cluttered flea market tables and then eventually pieced together into their present assembly. Evidence of their prior uses remains locked in their yellowish tints and roughed up edges as old dust and grime from their previous owners is caked heavily into each and every waxy plastic crevice.

During the summers, yard sales become almost a sport for my mother and I. Working two part time jobs, there is ultimately very little time off for her to enjoy. For as long as I can remember, these precious hours of leisure have been spent making slow drive-bys past spots around town which have, over the years, been unofficially designated as posting areas for yard sale signs. Many times, she is disappointed, driving up slowly to small houses only to see tables piled high with unappealing kitchen supplies, gently used stuffed animals, and towels scratchy from one too many cycles in the washing machine. Despite this, her hunt continues as every so often she is lucky and strikes gold, returning home to tell us and others of her fruitful excursions. Though often her findings consist of clothes or home supplies, there is clear joy in her face when presenting something she finds truly wonderful.

She has described her hunt for toys as “a way of going back to a time that’s very evocative of feeling whole,” meaning before her family became separated. As she and I spoke, on multiple occasions, my mother brought up the possibility of collecting as a way to fill the



gaps of her childhood, one that was cut short after her family broke apart. Growing up, my head would be filled with exciting stories about her college and early adult years, attending important protests, going on cross country hitchhiking trips with her older brother, and bizarre travel experiences. Memories pertaining to earlier years were often left out of these conversations. What I originally suspected as secrecy, I later understood to be merely an absence of memories. Her collections existing as small tokens charged with memories she could not easily access or express on her own. Her relationship with many of these things are just as foggy to her as they are when relayed back to me, often consisting of deeper layers and flashes of sensation. These things, for her, are a supplement for what cannot be expressed or reduced to words.

As I've gotten older, I have become more and more curious about her childhood, a time to which she rarely refers back. However, as she has repeated many times, her early memories are sparse and fuzzy, limited to sensations such as the feel of her family's kitchen floor or the damp smell of Florida breeze. "My memories were very foggy, and you can't always tell if they were real or not," she says. Though she can bring up a collection of lighthearted and very vague stories, often very little is relayed back to me. Julia spent her first six years or so in Port Orange, Florida, where her father held a parish as a priest. Though she has offered a variety of blithe and comical anecdotes that lend themselves to his sharp character, it has also been made very clear over the years that he made life at home rather precarious and troublesome as he developed a life-long drinking problem that evidently brought out the worst in him, often times taking out his woes on his wife and three children.

Her objects, as she says, are incredibly evocative of times prior to the breaking up of her family. Amongst these are small trinkets, pins, and pieces of fabric which, in addition to providing visual stimulus, generate vivid memories of those whom she has lost, particularly her grandmother and older sister who passed away at a young age. Some items she associates directly with her father while in other cases there seems to be no solid memory or person in direct correlation to the objects. In fact, the lines between what could have been real and may have been imagined or dreamt as a child have blurred.

### *Phil & Kate: Ephemera, Touch, and Melancholy*

Phil and Kate live in a small quaint house tucked away beside a major highway, surrounded by tall trees and expansive ivy that seems to almost devour the house's outer structure. Accessible only by a small and incredibly bumpy dirt road, the house feels like it might be from some secret garden in a storybook, though it is what is within the house that is truly marvelous. Ushered in with a loud and enthusiastic welcome from their two dogs Dan and Daisy, there is the immediate sense that this is a special place. The old wooden floors are cold, and the air thick with incense. The walls and shelves are completely covered, occupied by all sorts of wonders; old pin up photos, masks, dentures, glass bottles etc. When asked about their decorating choices they both laughed, remarking that they have an "affinity for weirdness". The house exists almost as a collage within itself (patchwork repairs, repurposed signs and food packaging) in its endless miscellany.

Though their life-long love of “stuff” is primarily out of appreciation and the joy of finding such things, they both find ways to incorporate it into their careers in a way that is reflective of their affinity for combining and arranging stuff—“a magical encyclopedia,” an enchanted “world order” (Benjamin 1999: 207). This is complemented by Kate’s artworks which, made primarily through encaustics, are almost dreamlike, their surfaces heavily layered and somewhat hazy from wax and old photo transfers. Phil works from home as a graphic designer, often working on long term collaborations with the Jimi Hendrix estate as well as other musicians such as Magpie Salute and Janis Joplin, occasionally taking on other projects such as the designs for the “Encyclopedia of Punk” and graphics for local businesses and venues.



Old teeth, packaging, and miniature figurines all aligned. Though perhaps placed at random, the shelves’ colors, vibrant and repetitive, create a shape and landscape which exists and lives as something singular and whole, despite its smaller parts.

Figure 4

While to some it has the potential to generate strong feelings of claustrophobia, to me, walking through their narrow hallway and into the house feels warm and inviting, surrounded by things that are playful, strange, and deeply cherished. Much of their house presents itself without a single dull corner or vacant surface; windowsills in the kitchen and dining room are laden with barbie heads, old photographs and silly product packaging. Even the piano is stacked with small piles of books, paintings, and miscellaneous art materials to someday be used. There is one room in particular that perhaps best exemplifies their unique knack for odd and old things.

The office functions as both Phil's workspace, where he spends most of his time, as well as an optimal storage spot for Kate's art supplies and projects, many of which remain in process for several years. As it seems to be sort of an epicenter for both of their work it makes perfect sense as to why the remaining areas of the room are completely covered in exciting things that hope to generate some sort of inspiration for either one of them.

Above the computer is a small but wonderfully cluttered shelf piled high with skulls, old lighters, Pez dispensers and other small objects, each delicately coated in a thin layer of grey dust. Though to anyone unfamiliar with either Phil or Kate this shelf could easily be seen as a cluttered mess, it in fact serves a greater purpose than keepsakes or decoration. These knick knacks, while also layered with sentimental meaning and value, are vital components to Phil's work as a graphic designer and offer highly valuable visual reference and inspiration.



Figure 5

Kate later took me through a collection of items such as a glass jar filled with Barbie heads and old cigar boxes which she pulls out from time to time to incorporate into her artwork. I asked Kate, who does not use objects as reference but instead fully incorporates them into her work as a sort of multi-material collage, what it was like to take something she loves and is excited about and turn it into art. In my own experience I face conflicting feelings even just rearranging my things. I could not imagine taking something I love so deeply and risking a great deal by incorporating it into something entirely different. She explained her dilemma, “I’ve annoyed myself with that lately because it’s like, okay I have these things, I have like 12 of these things, or whatever that thing is I’m gonna do something with those, but then I’m so attached to the thing that I’m afraid that I’m gonna like, when I actually make something, that I’m gonna like screw it up and it will be destroyed but now I’m just trying to kinda kick myself in the ass and try and get over that and make things.” It is a kind of internal need to do the objects justice, to create work that adds to the thing as opposed to tarnishing it.



Figure 6

Amongst their objects is an old green bottle, the top sealed off tightly by some sort of wax or rubber. Hugging its cold solid shape, an old textured piece of paper, sits, its writing so faded that it could very easily go unnoticed. I pointed to it and Kate excitedly grabbed it and pulled it down from the windowsill. “We don’t even know what this is, it’s like a bronzing liquid, and there’s handwriting but I don’t know, I love it! And it’s all strangely sealed up, so it’s

got like this weird story, so it's like what is that from?... I know I should just never open it.” We began to discuss our mutual collection of bones and bizarre old medical appliances. Phil told the story about a prosthetic leg he had received from his mother as a birthday gift a few years back. He laughed as he demonstrated with his hand its enormous height (the bottom of the hip reached to his chest), “so this guy would have been like a 7 foot tall, one legged so-and-so, so that's out on the porch...we use it to hold plants.” This enormous leg, which now resides on their front porch amongst old metal milk barrels and striking pieces of driftwood, offers a small hint to those who may not know about the odd and unique wonders that make up the house's interior.

Many of their objects have hints of their previous lives either through their textured surfaces or the nature of the objects themselves, an example being a set of now-yellowed dentures tucked away in a small compartment on a large wall of trinkets. Walter Benjamin's emphasis in his essay, “Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting,” on the importance of the previous stages of an object resonated heavily with me. There is a deep feeling which, through our interview, I discovered Phil, Kate, and I share. Through acquiring, holding, touching, and even smelling objects that are not new, but instead have had existences prior to one's ownership, one's appreciation extends beyond aesthetics. One is still able to see, by way of phantasmagoria, through the object itself and attach to it one's own memory and meaning whilst connecting to the possibility of the other lives through which it has passed. Therein lies a melancholic feeling and the idea that an object holds weight in the world that extends beyond one's own experience.

This idea of the background of an object, or in Benjamin's case a collection of books, is one that appealed to every single one of my interviewees. Each, in their own way, described the appeal of acquiring an object that holds visible history. Yes, these things are no longer in circulation as new and useful. In fact in many cases they do not undergo much change. However, the lens through which they are seen is a curious one which not only sparks charm in the object's physicality but its life history. Benjamin describes this as “the most profound enchantment for the collector...the locking of individual items within a magic circle in which they are fixed as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition” (1968: 60). It is a kind of childlike fascination, much like that previously described by Caillois, that, when mingled with old age, creates a space for the renewal of objects and treasures whilst hanging onto fragments of the past. Though a collector may not have shared the original experience of the object, the idea of finding treasure is inherently childlike and through recognizing the magic in an object whose life and history prior to one's ownership of such is unknown but detectable, be it through its visual condition or circumstance, the cultivation of nostalgia is still possible and arguably equally meaningful. Things become comforting reminders of simpler times filled with childish innocence and ignorance that is only re-experienced through such objects.

This argument, says Benjamin, is that of the allegorist, one who debases an object by its “inestimable value of novelty” versus its price as a commodity (1968: 22). The collector and the allegorist, for Benjamin, are closely entwined with one another. The allegorist is one who seeks out meaningful objects to then, like patchwork, reincorporate, meaning that a collection is never truly complete so long as it has the possibility of growth.

Julia, Phil, and Kate take this idea and send it outwards be it through artwork, gifts, preservation, or small-scale retail. While they themselves collect, they enable the passing on of

nostalgia that extends beyond their personal ownership, an idea which contrasts heavily with those collectors whose experience extends no further than gazing up at their prizes on their shelves. The collecting ebbs and flows, existing without a final stopping point in mind. The feeling is bittersweet. As my mother eloquently put in our second interview, “people’s memories of childhood are sparse as you get older...you can’t recapture your childhood, really, it’s ephemeral.”

### *Marika’s: Life Magazine*

For those who find themselves out on the east end of Long Island and happen to have an interest in peculiar and unexpected things, there is a small jungle of things to be found right beside Shelter Island’s main roadway. One can pay the ever-increasing fee to board the small and somewhat dinky ferry that, rain or shine, makes the trek from the North and South Forks onto the island. About midway across the island sits a yellowish house. Beside it, a small shed of the same yellow hue, several tired looking white tents, and a tattered old garage spread themselves out to the property edge. A pink wooden sign with the name “Marika’s” delicately painted on either side draws in passersby of all kinds, though often those who stop to poke their heads in are summer tourists, unfamiliar with the layout of an island which has yet to succumb to the “hamptonization” that spreads like wildfire across Suffolk County.

Shelter Island, still quaint and not yet glamorous like its surrounding land, has a feeling of friendliness and informality. These qualities are perhaps what stand out the most at Marika’s. Not quite an antique store so much as a year-round yard sale turned business, the shop is densely packed with items of all kinds; furniture, LIFE magazines, taxidermy, and at times unidentifiable trinkets. In the summer, these things seem as if they have burst from the store’s interior, spreading out to the property’s edge along the highway and visibly piled high beneath the white tents. Marika, the owner and namesake of this particular store, sometimes, though not always, wanders around its interior. While on some occasions she may greet those who step onto her property, more often than not a disembodied holler can be heard coming from somewhere deep within the shop’s clutter. This, along with music by Julio Iglesias, her favorite, which seems to be playing at any given time, and the occasional neighborhood cat meowing, makes up much of the store’s sonic environment.

Marika’s attracts a certain type of customer – one who is in it for the hunt perhaps just as much as the merchandise. Those in the know are careful to take time to open drawers and cabinets and secret compartments in order to reveal hidden surprises; Polly-Pocket dolls, antiquated local election pins, or bizarre family photographs. One must enter with the propensity of a sleuth or a scavenger in order to make the most of what is there. However, no matter how deep one digs in order to come up with treasure and no matter how neglected these things may appear to be, Marika is able to instantly recall each object and can joyfully provide customers with further information, typically followed by a very reasonable and off-the-cuff price.

During my last stay at home, prior to the current pandemic, I stopped into Marika’s shop hoping I might be able to have a conversation about her work that extended beyond our usual

friendly exchanges in order to find out more about her and her work. I looked around for a good half hour opening drawers, going through stacked LIFE magazines, and petting the cat which, having come from a neighbor's home, occasionally sneaks in to find new places to sleep or perch for a while.

Marika did not appear. Instead, I was met by her brother who, though lovely to talk to, was only watching the shop while she was away and could not talk to me about the objects surrounding us in the way I knew his sister could. I had hoped to inquire about the store itself existing as a collection; How does Marika acquire these things and what is her interest? Why are the contents of her shop so varied, not limited by the sign on the street that advertises antiques? I wonder what the experience is like for her when an object in her store, as something she has found and collected, gets sold to a stranger.



[The image above is particularly striking to me as it was when I saw its contents in person. Having a background in art history I was amused to find that Francisco de Goya's famous painting of 1787, "The Red Boy" (itself depicting a collection of cats and birds) had made its way onto a ceramic tile, only to be covered in dust and algae after months of sitting out in the sun. It sits, untouched amongst antique ceramicware, the water from the last rainfall pools on top catching reflections of the trees and sky above.]

Figure 7

## **Part II: Flaneury, Flea Market, Patina**

The sun pressed down on me as I walked, navigating my way around dogs, strollers, and militant pedestrians – each darting across the pavement to get to their next destination. Stifling fumes of flowers, cigarettes, and stale trash passed through me as I became engulfed in the cacophony that filled the city sidewalk. Turning onto 28<sup>th</sup> street, the chaos left me as the sounds of my own dull footsteps once again returned to my ears and the screeches and sirens all trailed away. It was there, halfway down the block, that I stopped. Standing beneath the pale green awning of what was definitely an overpriced café judging from the line of overdressed people which had spilled out all across the pavement- I set my gaze on the chain link fence that faced me on the other side of the street. I had forgotten my glasses that day, but I was certain from the faded sounds of old jazz, the stench of dust and weathered leather, and the irregular murmurs and laughter which passed over that fence, that I was exactly where I had needed to be. I was, for the day, a flaneur, described as one who resides “within as well as outside the marketplace, between the worlds of money and magic,” (Eiland and McLaughlin 1999: xii). The flaneur sees the crowd of the marketplace though does not get absorbed into it. Instead, one weaves itself within the ins and outs of the crowd, playfully observant of the theatrics of their surroundings.

The Annex Flea Market is situated in an empty lot in Chelsea, pressed against red brick walls cocooned from the endless chaos that overloads Broadway and 5<sup>th</sup> avenue. For the nominal price of one dollar as well as the imprint of a stamp which, no matter how many times you may try, is guaranteed to stain your hand green for at least the next three days, you can enter into this bustling alcove. Sprawled within its confines, a labyrinth of white tents and fatigued plastic tables, upon which just about anything could be found, fill up almost every square inch of that lot. On a good day, one can find themselves a flaneur situated amongst a loosely scattered congregation of passersby, able to float from table to table with ease. On other days, even the most ardent spectator may feel overwhelmed by the throngs of people eagerly darting across the tarmac from table to table or those who simply choose to stand in space observant and squared in by the pulse of their surroundings. Regardless, each time spent wandering the markets narrow gridded pathways brings about new findings. Each nook, corner, and cranny speckled with eye candy.

Since 1976, this bustling little market has been open year-round, remaining pretty much unchanged by the forty-three years that have passed since it first began. Of the approximately one hundred vendors that set up their stations each weekend, there are a select few who have been there long term. Many of the tables and booths look the same with almost every inch of surface area covered; buckets and cigar boxes filled with mismatched jewelry, old pins rusted at the edges, and sunglasses which more often than not are missing at least one arm or lens. At the other end may be a disheveled pile of old unclaimed family photos or a line of milk crates filled with records which, with each one flipped through, blow a puff of mildew stained air into the face of their innocent pursuers. There seems to be almost no system or thought concerned with the ways in which each table is displayed, as if the contents of someone’s attic were hastily and unceremoniously dumped out. Vendors stand nonchalantly, chatting amongst each other like old friends. Some are dressed in tattered undershirts and scuffed up jeans, others decked out to a



degree of eccentricity that allows them to almost camouflage themselves amongst their wares. While many seem to pay no mind to those picking through their disheveled tabletops, some vendors are all too eager to approach customers, delivering vivid detail of the history and value of any and every object that is shown any sign of interest.

One tent covers four tables, all arranged to form a square. Each table is clad with glass cases, dust caked into their corners, containing an assortment of essentially any small metallic accessory one could possibly imagine - brooches, charms, pocketknives, watches, jewelry, etc. - their oxidized surfaces causing them to blend together into a messy sea of grey tinge and patina. Piles have formed along the perimeters of each case, clumping together the excess that could not be enclosed within the glass confines- these less privileged objects wait on more curious onlookers who see them in their stacks and yearn to plunder through them for hidden surprises. Locked within the center of these tables stands a wild looking woman, her greyish blonde hair reaching out in frizzy tendrils from beneath her loosely knit hat, her neck heavy with beads, looming eagerly and carefully over her station. Any sign of interest in an object from a passerby and she is quick to rush over. With her fingerless gloves, she gingerly pulls the item from its case and holds it out proudly to be looked at more closely. The item could be essentially worthless, an old Disney keychain or a cigarette tin speckled with rust, yet she describes it as if it were a piece of treasure, something far more worthy than what it appears to be. Whether this generous description is out of genuine appreciation or merely a sales technique used to reel in uninformed buyers is unclear. Nevertheless, her ability to spin some kind of story from almost any object at her station is impressive.

These objects, in many cases, no longer work. Absolved from their original purposes they operate on a new level. Every scratched surface, every crack, and every crevice caked in a seemingly permanent layer of dust, like the rings on a tree maintain the idea that these objects carry with them details of life prior to their humdrum days of sitting on plastic tables in the middle of a windy lot in Chelsea. No longer useful in the ways that were intended for them, these objects are frozen in time, loved for qualities that exist beyond their use value. These objects, which in other instances may be considered trash, exist together in a space in which their excess holds greater power than their commodified worth, existing now as relics, evoking an old and distant world. While a great portion of the flea market experience is typically focused on exchange and shopping, there lies the chance to experience such a scene on an entirely different level. When looking not for the sake of buying but for the sake of observing, certain things begin to emerge and come into focus that perhaps would otherwise remain undetected; the layout of a booth, the shapes it takes, the colors and textures, the types of people it attracts, even the smells good or bad.

Tucked into the shady far away crevice of the Annex market, pressed flat up against one of the cold grey buildings that makes up the market's perimeter, is a dark green tent. Amongst the usual noise and kerfuffle is the faint sound of music. Played from an old boombox, the tinny sound bounces off the walls of the alley, hushing the ever-persisting noise of the market's larger atrium. Curious walkers like myself who allow themselves to be lured in by these sounds find themselves met by something immediately different from all else on the premises. Though already striking on a sonic level, there is more to this 5' by 5' space than perhaps one may anticipate. Three small tables form a "U" shape which opens out to the main path. Beside the

tables, small stools and crates spill out from under the tent and onto the tarmac, inviting onlookers in with offers of dollar postcards and assorted family photos. Beyond sit the tables, covered just as much as any other in the market but arranged carefully and playfully, creating space for each and every object to be immediately visible.

This tent, unlike its neighbors, seems to be much more self-aware. Objects are not only granted the power of standing separately but are grouped together playfully. Starting from the very outer edge of the left table, a section of objects in shades of blue, any shade one could possibly imagine. Following, a portion of yellow, then oranges, reds, and greens until these systematically arranged planes dissolve into the miscellany that reaches out to the pavement. It is strangely beautiful, its array of colors almost more exciting than the objects themselves.



Figure 8

This image, though lifted from the market's website, depicts a typical day at the market. Tucked neatly into an enclave of apartment buildings, waiting to be found by the curious passerby.

I didn't buy anything that day though I wish I had as it later became apparent that returning would no longer be an option for myself or anyone else. In early March I made the drive down from Westchester, back over to 28<sup>th</sup> street. It was cold and windy which certainly did not compliment the disappointment I felt when I arrived; a dreary omen for what was to come. At first, I thought I'd made some kind of mistake and gone down the wrong street. Checking my map, I realized that though I'd found my way correctly, the market itself had gone. The lot, still partially fenced off, was tightly packed with cars and almost unrecognizable. There was no sign, no information online or anywhere at all that could explain why a market that notoriously never closes had completely vanished. In the following weeks, however, it became very clear. Visiting the flea market as well as nearly any other field site I'd had in mind quickly became something of the past when news of COVID-19 and its numerous cases had spread to New York and across the rest of the country. I, like many others, sprang into action, rapidly packing up my life at school to come home and be with my family.

### *Part III: Ache*

Despite the distress that was and is being felt on a global scale, there have been moments during which I am able to slow down, seeking tenderness in small fragments, which have been able to provide me with much necessary comfort. Once again Benjamin comes to mind, particularly in the context of his unfinished work, “Unpacking My Library.” This process of slowing down and mulling over the things that had made up my life at school became very healing as I was given such a rapid and abrupt end to a large chapter of my life. This carried over when, having returned home, it became clear that much of my belongings consist of objects which, much like those for Phil, Kate, and my mother, are constantly in circulation, making up a large portion of my life. The task of rearranging my small space to accommodate to the second nest I had built for myself away from home became particularly daunting when it became apparent that, much to my dismay, not all of my collected treasures could be out on display or easily accessible; there was simply too much stuff, so much so that it seemed as if it was an invasive species, like ivy, covering every square inch of surface area until all that was left was my small twin bed. Still somewhat in denial, a portion of these things recently brought back to my home sit out on my desk, though I occasionally make the attempt to organize them and find places to keep them safe and out of the way. Once they are picked up and turned over, I become all too easily absorbed and my fascination with them is rekindled.

The same could be said for something which has only just recently come into my possession. My grandmother was notorious for her eclectic taste in both fashion and jewelry. To see her without earrings was to see her naked, lacking from how she proudly presented herself. Wild colors, materials, beads and patterns made up her stash, only to be tucked away into a plain wooden jewelry box. As a child I was drawn to it, the treasure chest. Together we’d sit on her quilted bed and one by one remove each clunky piece, arranging them all out flat together. Sometimes I would try things on though that was not my true interest. With each piece taken into my hands came a colorful story of its origin. It was our little ritual. Some pieces I was drawn to in particular.

By the time I had come home to officially be quarantined it became apparent that my grandmother had fallen sick. The next few weeks became a blur of hospital visits, calls to family and friends. Amid this blur, my grandfather, a cheeky eighty-nine-year-old who was probably in better shape than me or anyone else in the family, became sick as well. COVID-19, as we all know now, is aggressive, and though the time it takes for symptoms to arrive is over about two weeks, within days both of my grandparents passed away, confined to a closed off hospital room, unable to feel the love and warmth of anyone they loved or knew.

It has been nearly a month and a half since then, yet to my family and I time has seemed to both flash before us and slow to almost a complete stop. With all else going on, the stresses of finishing school, losing my job, and worrying about other family and friends, it felt natural and almost necessary to block out the loss completely. Grief, something I have experienced only on a few occasions, is not linear. It can certainly be pushed back down and set aside, yet it will still be there, lying beneath the surface, waiting to come back up and be released. When it manages to

find its way back it is often in fragments, sharp and painful flashes. There have been moments now when I find myself reaching for the phone to call, just as I had done almost every day when they were still alive, and I am forced to come to terms with the fact that there simply is no one to call anymore. Then I am flooded, and the flashes combine into one enormous weight on my chest. Unable to be with them was a challenge within itself yet now, unable to come together as a family or surround ourselves with their things, their smell, and the atmosphere that comes from being in their space, my family is left with little evidence of their parting making it all too easy to turn away from what has happened.

For other reasons, a family member was able to gain access to their homes, returning back to us the beloved jewelry box that had such a magnetic power over me as a child. It's strange and difficult to think of some of those things as mine now. Instead, the ritual I once shared with my grandmother has been revived and continued on the few occasions my mother and I have been able to bring ourselves to open the box, take out each piece, and tell their stories. It is a gentle nod towards our grief, but one we can fondly access together. By going about the steps of this twenty-one-year-old ritual, space is made for the sacred, which implements great importance in each careful step of the process. It remains, by my mother and I, preserved in small acts of ceremony.

A bird's eye view,  
my grandmother's  
jewelry becomes a  
sea of green, old  
wood, and metallic  
reflection.

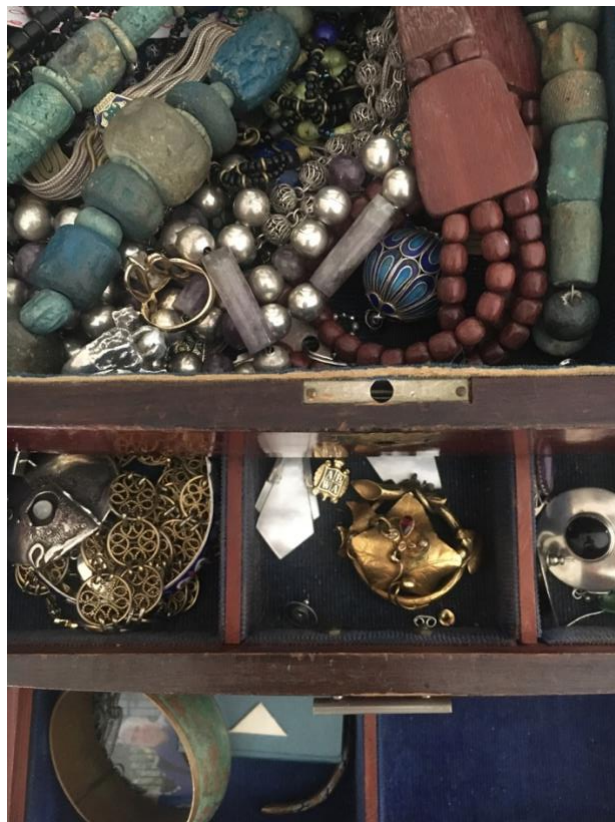


Figure 9

Though she may return to me in small flashes generated by the contours of a golden horse's head or the legendary globs of tissues still tucked away in her signature fleece, now kept in my closet for whenever I may feel the sudden need to remember her smell. Though for years she wasn't all there, she was determined to never quite leave us completely, quietly resisting her rapid recline. My memories of her as more than just what I can hold on to right now are fleeting and sharp. Through her offerings she has given me over the course of our lives together. I can stitch back together some idea of a whole, a world which I have created out of sheer desperation to not let my anger and my pain get the best of me. Constructed and limited by my naivety surrounding whom she was as a person beyond simply being my grandmother, it is where I need to be, even if just for a little while.

Seremetakis writes of nostalgia as being entwined with pain, an ache being more aligned with the Greek usage of the term- something far more melancholic than simply searching through the past. This Spring my understanding of this concept shifted as it began to affect me on a more personal note than I could have anticipated. There are things in life that we will always take for granted. Things, material or not, easily go unnoticed and all too easily exist within the landscape of day to day life. Though while caring for her I was burdened by my own internal reminders not to take any moment for granted or to let a single moment pass where I was not present and with her in every way I could be, I felt I did not know her or at least not in the ways I once did or really felt I needed to.

### *Epilogue: Petrification, Healing*

I am stuck, literally, where I am. Her things and his things sit in their respective homes, untouched. The last meals I made for him, the lilies and boxes of rugelach we routinely brought in for her, all sit there waiting to be claimed, picked up and contemplated by all of us whom they left behind.

I think that for a long time during her rapid decline as a result of Alzheimer's I was eager to push aside the ways in which I once knew her though the ways we connected were very much the same. Each time we met I was determined to make her laugh, and I mean really laugh, not just in the way she did when she felt her response though choked and misunderstood was necessary in the absence of her words. My memories I had of her- her characteristically mediocre cooking, her dancing (once a major embarrassment to me), her stories, and her songs which though pushed out through smokers lungs managed to delight my brother and I just the same- all of these things I set aside for as long as I could. I had to be with her and what she was to me in that moment without carrying the weight of what I was missing.

Now these memories begin to come back. Things I thought I'd forgotten such as their house prior to assisted living, my grandmother's laugh, and the games we used to play, make their way into my dream almost every night, a sort of phantasmagoria, reminding me of what I had really been missing all of these years. The pieces in her jewelry box, like my mother's cracker jack prizes, generate memories stored for years that I thought I'd lost completely.

Her collection of large coins, which once felt so heavy in my hand, still resting in their small compartment, an old locket with photographs I remember I used to wear, draped in my mouth, leaving a lasting metallic flavor, even the smell of the box's interior. These things, as Benjamin had described, have become frozen, or petrified like a precious stone. Unable to exist in their original function, they are just things, prized for something entirely new. They are no longer used in the same manner but are instead charmed, stored with memories and sensations that have helped me begin to heal.

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