1998

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REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE

By

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B.A. Anderson University, 1994

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

1998
REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE

It is Wednesday morning, and I finish serving coffee to about 20 elderly nursing home residents diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. On schedule, our next activity is “sensory stimulation.” In this period I work in small groups and have one-to-one interactions with the residents. Today, I gather several landscape photographs torn from old calendars for the residents to look at and discuss. I pull up a chair next to loleen, lay the pictures down on the sticky dining room table, and slowly go through each photograph. We get to a picture taken in Maine, and I tell her I always dreamed of going there. Her response changed my perception of Ioleen, as well as all other Alzheimer’s victims.

“I want you to go and enjoy your life. You have been going the same direction too long you need to turn and go back sometimes. Don’t forget who you are.”

At that moment I look right into her eyes, remembering what my father had told my sister and me before we went out on dates: “Don’t forget who you are.” I assure Ioleen I won’t forget. And then she says:

“Not who you are, but who you’re supposed to be. That’s what matters.”

For the past three years I have been working with people who suffer from a form of dementia known as Alzheimer’s. The interaction I have had with patients at various stages of the disease, and their families, has greatly affected my life. I have found that it doesn’t matter how each of us gets lost, but that we remember who we are.
As a visual artist, it has been a difficult but exciting journey processing both intellectually and creatively the intense images and emotions related to my work with Alzheimer’s. I had found myself unable to separate myself as an artist from my role as the caregiver. In searching for sculptural material that would convey stories of history and sudden loss of self, I became drawn to the found object. I could see the objects become fragments, words, or parts of the stories I had heard and the lives I had observed in Alzheimer’s patients. I was able to see both in the object and in the patient a previous life full of a usefulness that by society’s standards had ended. To me there are power and integrity in the voice that speaks through the historical marks engraved into an object over time, use, and love. The indicators of a full life give us clues into a time where the objects were needed, depended upon, and in fact, living. No one can reproduce or copy the dents, the rich marks of scratches, the chipped paint or the rust created over time. History cannot be so faithfully reproduced. Only time and use creates a rich patina. The human body equally shows marks of aging. The deep-set wrinkles, missing teeth and the fragile skeleton are proof of a life, a history. The deterioration of the mind and the body are reflected in the deterioration of the found objects. The objects become a single word that is pieced together with other words (materials) to create a dual visual statement of what has been and what is now

“A nice summer day could make you beautiful.”

My first encounters with the disease left me in a panic. I was frantically writing down every word, afraid that soon their thoughts would no longer exist. Since there is no set time-frame for the disease, the consistent yet unexpected deaths left me feeling helpless. In this paper I will share my encounters with people who have Alzheimer’s and
how I have been able to use sculpture as a visual aide to the soul. A soul that one can enter and reenter, inwardly examining the struggles that every human with or without Alzheimer’s has with acceptance of self. Understanding how our past has affected who we are today is just the beginning. Right now, who we are at this very moment is determining who we are becoming. And finally, my sculpture attempts to capture the struggle to remember who we are. Through sculpture and the words of the residents quoted throughout the thesis, I chronicle how this frightfully disturbing disease not only gives us a visual reminder of the power made perfect in weakness but the challenge of living every day with purpose.

“I wish I knew what I did with the days of my life. Does anyone know what they did with the days of their lives?”

My thesis work has conceptually derived from my interaction with Alzheimer’s patients. Although they have been my greatest inspiration and influence, understanding the disease has helped to put sculptural fragments together cohesively. In addition to researching the disease I also researched the history of the found object, the criticism that followed its use, as well as artists who I feel speak profoundly through the found object. I will begin this section of the paper with background information on the disease followed by researched information on the use of found objects and their use in sculpture.

“Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be…” (MAYO, 1) Unfortunately, for four million Americans who have Alzheimer’s disease (as well as their loved ones, who are affected), the promise of the golden years is denied. Alzheimer’s disease is a progressive, ultimately fatal disorder that attacks the brain. According to Mayo
The term "dementia" literally means "deprived of mind." For centuries people thought dementia was "senility" and believed it to be an inevitable part of aging. Now, doctors know that many conditions result in dementia. Most of what has been learned so far about dementia, has been from the observation of Alois Alzheimer in 1906. Alzheimer’s is one of a group of diseases called dementias. Alzheimer’s disease affects the brain tissue directly, causing progressive brain deterioration often lasting more than a decade. Because the brain cannot replace nerve cells, some brain function is lost. First memory goes, then cognition, then physical functioning, leaving only what appears to be a shell of a person. “The markers that help most of us to define ourselves in the world: memory, sensation and perceptions, interpersonal relations, thoughts and feelings, and the ability to organize these experiences into meaningful self-concept gradually erode, leaving the Alzheimer’s victim with a fragmented, confusing and sometimes frightening view of the world. This experience has been referred to as ‘the loss of self’” (Cohen, 270). In a journal written by Cary Henderson he writes: “Being dense is a very big part of Alzheimer’s, and forgetting things...When I make a real blunder, I tend to get defensive about it, a sense of shame for not knowing what I should have known” (Gallo, 62). Without memory, there is no past, no identity, no sense of self. Memory decline is a key feature in Alzheimer’s disease. Without memory functioning, the Alzheimer’s patient is unable to maintain the image of the internalized caretaker, a necessary prerequisite for self-soothing. With memory erosion the Alzheimer’s patient has minimal access to earlier experiences that
Alzheimer’s disease has become a serious societal and medical problem. “The reason for this increasing frequency of Alzheimer’s disease is that, quite simply, people are living longer. The census bureau estimates that 5.1 million Americans will be 85 or older by the year 2000, compared to 365,000 in that age category in 1940 and 2.5 million in 1982” (Check, 16). According to Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, the risk of Alzheimer’s disease increases with age. The condition affects up to 30 percent of people past age 85. More than four million Americans now have Alzheimer’s disease. Each year, more than 300,000 new cases are diagnosed and more than 100,000 people with the condition will die from it. The number of people with Alzheimer’s disease is expected to triple in the next 20 years.

The course of the disease is generally broken down into early, middle and late stages with the cognitive and physical decline rates varying greatly. The early stage is characterized by the onset of memory and language deficits. Symptoms are typically mild and usually involve misplacing objects, getting lost in familiar places, impairment of occupational and mathematical skills, as well as attention disorders and affective changes (Johnson, 270). In the middle stage of the disease, symptomatology is more overt. Symptoms may include more severe language deficits such as slower speech and verbal understanding. As common sense and judgement begin to disappear, disorientation with regard to time sometimes causes patients to slip back mentally into childhood. There is also deterioration in social skills. Paranoia that people are both watching and stealing result in aggressive behavior, added frustration, and resistance to offers of help. During this stage, intimacy and sexuality is also affected. Patients may
grab at strangers, touch themselves inappropriately, expose themselves, or demonstrate paranoia related to intimacy. This paranoia is part of the disease and cannot be argued or reasoned away (Caring for the Caregiver, 8). During the final stage of the disease, the individual suffers from almost total withdrawal from his or her environment. Patients may lose ability to control their bladder or bowels, becoming incontinent. The ability to speak or follow simple commands diminishes. Hallucinations often appear during this stage, and patients may respond physically by waving away snakes or hiding from monsters. Emotionally, patients may become abusive, removed or unresponsive. For short periods of time, as the intellectual loss increases, many Alzheimer’s patients become calmer and less distressed at the changes in themselves because they cannot truly remember the way things used to be (Caring for the Caregiver, 9).

“We all have our own little bumps and drips.”

Through the study of Alzheimer’s disease, I began to explore different materials and their symbolic interpretation. I could see the permanency in cast metals representing such enduring ideals as faith and love, while the fragility of life was represented in less permanent materials such as paper mache. When creating these fragments and piecing them together, I began to find objects that complimented the pieces I had been making. I feel it was the addition of the found objects, fragments of a true past, that gave my work its own power to speak outside my limited vision. It added history beyond my own experience and gave more opportunities for the viewers to make connections. As I began to look at such artists as Nancy and Edward Kienholz, who I felt had a strong agenda and story to tell, I found it necessary to understand the history of the found object from a critical point of view.
I discovered that for centuries common objects had been used as subject matter in
art. In the 16th century, for example, paintings of objects on shelves or in curio cabinets
appeared. Many still life paintings realistically captured objects to symbolize and
document possessions, wealth, and beauty. By possessing the painting, the owner then
possessed what the object symbolized—often of great value or desire. Through the act of
representation, the object became art. In sculpture, when respectable materials such as
bronze and stone were manipulated by the artist’s hand, they entered the realm of art,
becoming distinctively different from the rest of the world’s objects. Art’s role as
representation has always allowed it to enter a symbolic dimension. Whether religious or
social, a representation could stand for what was absent; visible itself, it could give us
access to the invisible even the divine (Soutif, 158). These thoughts were challenged by
Duchamp’s introduction of the ready-made in 1913. After adding a signature to an
unaltered, mass-produced object such as a urinal or shovel, he exhibited it and
transformed it into a readymade sculpture.

Although it was common to see objects in art, considering the ordinary object
itself as art seemed ludicrous. The introduction of readymade objects as art caused a
radical dismantling of all traditional definitions of objects. Lucy Lippard called this
sudden revolt against traditional sculptural materials “the dematerialization of the work
of art” (October, 127). In the past, critics had distinguished between “good” art and
“bad” art but never entertained the question of what art was. Even in its supposed
transformation into art (from shelf to the studio and on to the museum), the readymade
object, critics felt, could not be art simply because it depicted nothing. It wasn’t enough
for critics to hear "this is art." In identifying art with the everyday object (and vice versa), the fear was that art would disappear.

What would happen when the everyday objects were elevated to the level of aesthetic objects? All traditional rules for evaluation of the object and art are inapplicable, leaving the viewer perplexed. Donald Kuspit, in his article entitled The End of Imagination, called readymade works of art insults to traditional handmade works of art.

They attacked (in the very act of exploiting) the conventional belief in arts' special dignity; uniqueness, or originality. They almost went so nihilistically far as to declare art bankrupt, however much they declared themselves works of art. Certainly they mocked the idea of art, reducing it to a stale notion. (Kuspit, 17)

A great deal of criticism came from the fear that without the distinction between art and common objects there would be difficulty in knowing what to evaluate. The critic, seemingly insulted, questioned how it was possible to evaluate something that was lacking in traditional aesthetic credibility? Thus ingrained in traditional thinking, critics thought that the artist by "condemning" the art object to a state of lifeless perfection had reached a point beyond which further action was impossible (Cooke, 59). If a household chair was art, then art no longer symbolized anything. There was no mystery, no meaning to interpret, and no higher purpose. If you could no longer be awed by the handiwork of the artist, then what was the point? This could also affect the position of the critic in the art world. If art was anti-art, meaning it had the character of art while at the same time challenging all preconceptions about the nature of art, where did the critic fit in? Criticism of the found object was followed by criticism of the artist. Some even debated whether such users of the object should be considered artists at all (Kuspit, 17).
To use the words of Phyllis Greenacre, to be an artist once meant to have creative imagination, that is, to “make something new, original or inventive” (Greenacre, 556). Artists using mass-produced objects directly off the shelves were questioned about the imagination it took to pick everyday objects out of the infinite universe and rob them of their original meaning. Was it simply through the artist’s signature that the object gained a more important and precious meaning? Duchamp’s power through the simple signature infuriated some critics. Andre Brenton, in his book *Marcel Duchamp: Lighthouse of the Bride* wrote: “Duchamp signed his name to selected ‘manufactured objects’ or ‘readymade,’ proudly expressing himself and supposedly promoting to the dignity of works of art” (Benton, 188). On the other hand, Kuspit, stood firmly on the belief that Duchamp not only emptied the object of meaning but that he reduced it to the vacuous act of signing. This signature did not miraculously make the readymade authentic. In fact, he proposed that once the object was signed, it became garbage and lost its value. “The signature indeed, completely devalued the object as such, just as it completely devalued art” (Kuspit, 18). For those who criticized Duchamp, the readymade represented an unfeeling, deliberately unimaginative, static object that was indifferent even in the way it was presented. The only difference at this point between selected, mass-produced objects and the rest of the identical objects on the shelf was a signature and the context in which it was presented.

The sterile presentation of the readymade also received criticism. Because the museum was catering to the artist by saying, “This is Art,” it was jeopardizing its own credibility as a place to house the sacred, the real. By testing both the boundaries of the work of art and the art world, Duchamp developed new ways of establishing authorship
that changed contemporary sculpture. If Duchamp's initial gesture of choosing the readymade referred to mass production, then the later forms of reproduction, through which readymades cycled, secured their status as art.

It is important to note that even when an extreme anti-art position is adopted, as with Marcel Duchamp's or the Dadaists, the sense of violation does not last long. The art world and critics, are effective at assimilating and taming what is considered ludicrous or profane at the time, but works are constantly being reevaluated and reaffirmed. Today, some art critics would say that Duchamps intention was to emphasize arts' intellectual and conceptual basis and, in the process, to shift attention away from the physical act or craft involved in its creation (Atkins, 82). That is not to say that criticism of the use of the found object as art is gone; clearly, in some cases it still remains. In a 1993 review of the Whitney Biennial one critic stated: "The end of creative imagination brings with it a proliferation of impostor artists and readymade symptoms of society. The artist himself or herself has become readymade and as such a social symptom, that is, a symptom of the disease called society" (Kuspit, 19).

Fortunately, as the art world has adapted to the use of the found object, much of the criticism has changed. The challenge for younger artists has been to keep the idea of the readymade fresh and relevant to the late twentieth century. Artists such as Nancy Rubins, Mike Kelly, Nancy and Ed Kienholz, who use found objects in their work, have used past criticism to strengthen their work. Not only have these artists been challenged through the ridicule toward their forefathers, but also the critic has stepped back and allowed the object to assume a new voice. Once it's possible to let go of the objects and look at the symbolism and historical context each object possess, the fear of art blurring
with life seems less threatening. Through the objects layers there is some kind of hidden truth to be found, a personalized yet universal reflection of our society. Once criticized in its perfect form, the object in art has a full functioning life and a history to support it. The object in many cases gains integrity, becoming only a part of a whole and dealing more with content that lends itself to new aesthetic evaluation. Like Duchamp, these late twentieth century sculptors have taken hold of the found object. For them, however, the objects are not taken directly off the shelf and presented in perfect form. They use objects collected on streets, at garage sales and in junk shops, discarded remnants of mass production. At one time critics looked at the signature for proof that Duchamp’s work was art. Now the object alone is looked to for its meaning.

Simple objects that have fallen into disuse and no longer belong in their original context are the subjects of Nancy Rubins’s sculpture. Working in monumental scale, Rubins uses materials such as wrecked airplane parts, abandoned mobile homes, and discarded appliances and mattresses. These massive remnants, scavenged wherever a piece is to be made, are bound or fit together and hoisted into position. To quote Michael Duncan, author of Transient Monuments, “The ephemeral nature of her sculptures makes each piece a theatrical event with a full range of emotionally narrative and conceptual elements concurrently at work” (Duncan, 79). Beyond the poetic associations of their odd materials, the sculptures are also social commentary on topics ranging from environmental pollution to sexual abuse and eating disorders. Inside the walls of a gallery or museum, the found object’s validity should no longer be in question but rather it should be seen as a medium through which to confront issues or to tell a
story. The objects are speaking and art critics are looking, feeling, and expecting to experience something.

Nevertheless, whether it is the critic, the artist, or the viewer, it is quite certain that the use of the ordinary object in art continues to be criticized by some. Yet, for those who have moved beyond the thought that this is junk, it is not what these objects look like, but rather the content they represent that now lends itself to critical debate. By using found objects, whether in assemblage where partial objects are like pieces of a puzzle belonging not to one puzzle but to many, or in installations, artists are challenging the viewers to once again look more deeply into the symbolism. The question should be “What is the artist saying through the objects?” Because the objects are so recognizable, so personal, what they represent to the viewer can be dangerously confrontational. We can see ourselves, our society, our dirt, and it’s not always pretty. When art was about idealized, aesthetic beauty, it was easier to take in, as it made the viewer feel good. When the object looks at real issues, the mirror can be uncomfortably close. In a review on the work of Mike Kelly, who has used found toys in his work, James Lewis talked about the delight one feels at the discovery of familiar materials in an unexpected context and how the sheer, silly fun of it is quickly supplanted by the recognition of their essential wretchedness. “The temptation to read some parable of innocence or naïve friendliness into the pieces evaporates as their degeracy becomes clear” (Lewis, 75). Through close observation some objects can assist with understanding or experiencing something not before seen or experienced. The poverty of the found elements in a more classical assemblage would, with a few exceptions, tend to vanish under the assumption that whatever it was once, it is art now. These objects are now artifacts, carriers (often in
highly distorted forms) of our collective cultural memory. In contrast, more recent works using found objects bear the marks of hands that have held it, the wear of grubby grasps, of sweat and spit. These indelible traces, so visceral, tactile and real, give authority to the work. Though used, tossed around, discarded and forgotten, they are now placed in a position to speak up.

The found object leaves behind ownership and becomes a universal symbol or statement to anyone who is ready to see and/or listen. Involving and confrontational, the changing role of the found object, has helped to expand the vocabulary of art as well as the artist. The artist has become a collector, a thinker, a storyteller, a preserver of history, and as a result the viewer is challenged to look not only at the art object but also within him or herself.

“We won’t want to fall and break our eyes.”

In addition to the found object as art and the criticism that has followed, in my own sculpture there have been concerns regarding choice of materials, both permanent and impermanent, not only in piecing them together but in making sure there is clarity in the story I wish to tell. I believe that all art captures sections of life, giving it focus. Narrative art gives that focus a storyline. It indicates a sense of time, of events and things past, present and future. In creating a storyline through sculptural materials, I have chosen not to use my own words but those of Alzheimer patients. It soon became clear that my first step would not only involve being an observer but an active listener. This meant entering another dimension that involved role-playing. In relating to my professional position as a caretaker, it happened over a period of time that could range from three minutes to a year. I wove in and out of different roles. Through the eyes of
the Alzheimer’s patient I was at various times a mother, a daughter, a thief, a murderer, a saint. I could embody their worst nightmare or their fantasy in a matter of seconds. This continues to be the most difficult part of the process. In listening to the fragmented thoughts, I became a part of their reality, their present story. I was humbled daily by ridiculing accusations and in the next moment overwhelmed by the depth of love and faith one person could possess. As an artist the difficulty was not in collecting and creating the fragments that symbolized both words and actions, but rather in piecing the found object and cast materials together to create a clear statement. Coming from a fourth generation family of textile artists, I made sense of this whole process by imagining a “crazy quilt.” In a crazy quilt, odd scraps of materials, often leftovers from previous projects, are used. Different shapes and sizes are randomly pieced together with bold stitching, creating an unsystematic but unified whole. This became both my challenge and my goal.

“Please be my baby soldier.”

As I go through the individual pieces of sculpture I will specifically discuss the materials used and the symbolism each possesses. Through close observation of the disease and its ability to steadily rob a person of his or her mental power, I began to see the resulting dependency parallel with what is seen in young children. Objects such as bottles, strollers, and playpens became parts of a visual language that would be assembled into sculptural forms. Unlike children, though, these adults had throughout life formed an identity that they were grasping to retain. The question kept recurring in
my mind; How does one remember who one is? Through observation I discovered one way: I’ll know who I am because I’ll be doing what I’ve always done. One resident in particular would flip over his walker and push it up and down the hallway. Later I learned from his social history that he had been a farmer and was now plowing the fields. I found other residents folding clothes, making and remaking beds, sanding off two day old orange spills, and polishing shoes with toothpaste.

I have chosen to include in much of my work the spiritual identity of many of the residents. Their strong belief in God is expressed through frequent repeated fragments of verses and old hymns. Eventually through the process of the disease even these connections are lost. In carrying around the popular picture of Jesus done by artist Warner Solomon I asked several residents, “Who is this Man?” Their responses varied from “Looks like old Jesus Christ himself right there,” to “It looks like an imitation of our past governor,” and “It might be me or one of the boys.”

Despite such memory loss I was drawn to the innate qualities found specifically in the women. Extremely confused and agitated female residents could instantly become loving and nurturing when given a doll. This ability to love and care for an object to which they had no connection was powerful and was not something that could be explained medically. How could there be a loss of self but an ability to love, protect and nurture? This recurring connection between motherhood and devotion, despite circumstance, has been the focus of my work. It seemed very consistent and natural for women residents to revert back to motherhood. In their mind they are young therefore the past is the present. 1932 is today. Issues of time and historical preservation also come up in my work as I explore the young female body, often in the position of
restraint. Dressforms become a major part of my sculptural work as I see them representing a time that has passed. I interpret this shell or hard covering as a protective layer of what lies beneath.

**Hope:** (fig. 1) I have used a stroller to represent a wheelchair and the dependency upon someone or something, often unseen, pushing from behind. The bronze hands are our only windows into the role of the caregiver. The aluminum tray, partially deteriorated, becomes a symbolic restraint of hope. On it bronze brides are wandering around looking for their groom who happens to be very close to the edge. These small figures direct our attention to the isolation and loneliness that come with aging and specifically with this disease.

(Figure 1)
**Bottled Beauty- Age Spots:** (fig. 2) Identity becomes the main focus. The sculpture shows society's influence on forming who we are. The metal cabinet full of perfume bottles is just one example. A fur collar is sewn to the neck of a fragile paper mache torso. This shell has been covered with hair, remnants from the nursing home, as well as wax and resin, to give another illustration of how gross and insignificant this false beauty becomes.

(Figure 2)
Mother: (fig. 3) I focused on the role of motherhood that has had and continues to have on many of the women residents. This piece specifically illustrates the disconnected fragments the disease has on mind and body. The coldness of aluminum bottles document a time that has long passed. The bottles sit on a bronze waist, both encased by a transparent wire torso that alludes to something more than just surface missing. Under the body lies an old doll on a glass shelf. Directly beneath the shelf is a drawer full of rubber nipples each encased and lit from the bottom representing a life that is no longer seen or tangible.
Going Nowhere: (fig. 4) The inability to function within the restraints of your own body is seen. In this work, an aluminum dress hangs from a wooden hanger. The dress, which has obvious pieces missing, becomes symbolic of the gradual destructive process of the disease and the frustration of not knowing exactly what it is that’s missing. Under the dress are bronze feet in roller skates. Yet, the freedom to be mobile and self reliant abruptly ends as the wooden play pin restricts all movement. In each corner are the directional guides North, South, East and West, which make clear the inability to make decisions or to have any control of direction.
**Lost and Found:** (fig. 5) depicts the final stage of the disease when the fleshly body is gone. In this work, torso shells have been made from paper mache patterns. These patterns become symbolic of the piecing together of an entire life’s work; projects completed and incompletely; the stages of maturation with their physical growth and changes. Each body has been tagged with a numbered metal pin representing left over remnants of a recently institutionalized identity. The playpen not only contains these shells, but also suggests, through the engraved lyrics of “Amazing Grace,” there is something beyond this life.
Throughout this thesis work, within the body of sculpture, I have dealt with the fragmented body as seen in the life of people with Alzheimer’s patients. I have struggled with the limitations of materials and skill necessary to build up a depth of layers representing an individual’s lifetime, evolved over time, as well as the ever quick loss of these layers. With the disease in mind, I have had to force myself to step back both as an artist and a caretaker to get a clear picture of the overall issue. This work has challenged me sculpturally, as well as conceptually, and forced me to think about what I am doing that makes me who I am. How would I recognize myself in a crowd? Through this exploration it has become increasingly clear how easy it is to piece together a superficial identity that is acceptable, comfortable and approved of by the world’s standards. I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s not until the world’s standards cease to exist in our minds, and the worth of the individual is explored without the tyranny of comparison, that we can begin to see the true innate beauty each of us possesses.
Bibliography


