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# The Story of Things

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*The University of Montana*

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THE STORY OF THINGS

By

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Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

The Story of Things examines the power of objects to hold narrative and inspire emotional responses of longing, loss and desire.

There is a tendency among humans to gather and save objects that hold personal significance. The most banal object is cherished perhaps kept in a box to be admired on occasion. An earring can symbolize the lost love of a boyfriend, a ticket to a basketball game can mark the day after a father's funeral or a fingernail brush is a stand in for pre-teen humiliation. The German scholar and scientist Goethe said, "everything is a symbol everything points to another thing." My thesis work concerns the object as confirmation of identity and personal history.

Along with it's quality of exactitude photography can be murky and mysterious. A photograph can be simultaneously a visual record and a poetic representation of the fragility of life. This is especially apparent in the cyanotype and photogram. Both techniques involve placing objects on a sensitized surface that is then exposed to light where an image is formed. The personal objects in my photographs are traces of lives lived. The photographs then become traces of traces.

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## THE STORY OF THINGS

### Intorduction

Two years ago I received in the mail a DVD of family movies from my brother. A cousin had suddenly relinquished possession of the originals of over fifteen old family movies. The grainy, poorly lit sometimes blurry film fragments were not mere records of birthday parties and Easter Egg Hunts, they provided animated versions of my parents whom I had not seen or heard since they died in a plane crash when I was seven years old. I had blocked out memories of them for years because to think of them as real human beings was too painful. They existed out of my reach. But there they were on film, holding drinks, walking across the lawn, lifting babies out of highchairs.



**Figure 1.** My parents in college, snapshot

Viewing the home movies for the first time took my breath away. I was again awed by the power of the photographic image to stop time, to hold that which has been lost. After my parent's death, my mother's sister and her husband lovingly raised my sister and brother and me along with their own four children. A younger brother was sent to live with an aunt and uncle on my father's side. My parents were rarely mentioned as I

was growing up. Their lives had held such promise. They were the golden couple-- my mother beautiful and kind and my father once president of his fraternity, a brilliant engineer said to have had a photographic memory. I clung to these particulars to try to form a vision of who they were. As a child I assumed that the reason my parents were never mentioned was because the grief would be too overpowering if let in. Silence was the only way the adults could cope with their death. The home movies were a link, a re-connection to a personal history that had been ruptured for many years.

As a teenager I took more notice of the few personal effects left behind by my missing parents. A scattering of snapshots, five or six framed family photographic portraits, a lamp, a mahogany credenza, a pair of cherub candelabra jacket and some shirts from my dad and over a dozen of my mother's beautiful, stylish dresses were the clues I had to work with. These items were stored in boxes in the attic or still used by our household. Their significance left un-explained.

According to poet and critic Susan Stewart if we experience a rupture in our own historical consciousness through time, especially if there has been a psychological trauma memories become faint, full of holes, discontinuous. Fortunately the loss of personal narrative can be restored through objects.

## **The Momento**

As humans we use objects to define, validate and protect ourselves. We live chaotic, messy lives and objects can act as markers to important events and emotional connections. Objects hold our stories and validate our existence.

We keep small tokens of experience in cigar boxes, jewelry boxes or carved wooden boxes stuffed in a drawer or under the bed or hidden away in the back of a closet. We save movie ticket stubs, earrings without mates, dried up rose petals--these objects have no commercial or functional value but hold great value to the possessor. The object when contemplated or held unleashes a flood of emotions. It is transformed from functional object to mnemonic device

The plot of one of the greatest American films ever made, Orson Wells', *Citizen Cane*, 1941 centers on the search for the meaning of newspaper magnet Charles Foster Cane's dying word, "Rosebud". After spending a lifetime accumulating great wealth and power the main character dies alone in his mansion. The only word this powerful man can utter on his deathbed is "Rosebud". Through the course of the film we learn "Rosebud" was the name painted on a tattered wooden child's sled, a reminder of the days he was truly happy as a small boy.



**Figure 2.** *Rosebud* from the Orson Wells film *Citizen Kane*, *RKO Pictures*

In Quentin Tarantino's film *Pulp Fiction* the entire plot of the film's second half shifts when the character Buck realizes his girlfriend forgot to pack his cherished watch for their get away trip. Buck is so determined to find this memento left to him by his dad who died in Viet Nam that he risks death by car accident, gunshot and torture.

In Tim O'Brians, short story "The Things They Carried", under the duress of war, American soldiers fighting in Viet Nam try to create some psychic stability through objects. Each soldier carries in his grimy knapsack personal possessions that define and protect him.

***The things they carried were determined to some extent by superstition. Lieutenant Cross carried his good luck pebble; Dave Jensen carried a rabbit's foot. Norman Bowker, otherwise a very gentle person, carried a thumb that had been presented to him as a gift by Mitchell Sanders. The thumb was dark brown, rubbery to the touch, and weighed 4 ounces at most. It had been cut from a VC corpse, a boy of fifteen or sixteen.***

*They carried USO stationary and pencils and pens. They carried Sterno, safety pins, trip flares, signal flares, spools of wire, razor blades, chewing tobacco, liberated joss sticks and statuettes of smiling Buddha, candles, grease pencils, The Stars and Stripes, fingernail clippers, Psy Ops leaflets, bush hats, bolos and much more. ...They shared the weight of memory. They took up what others could no longer bear."*

Tim O'Brian

For this thesis project I interviewed eleven individuals ranging in age from thirteen to fifty-eight who kept boxes of memorabilia. I was interested in gathering their stories and making photographs that revealed the secret importance of these cherished items.

The objects served as memory place holders for lost romantic love, lost aspiration or lost childhood. A faded bus ticket is a clue to a journey in pursuit of unrequited love. A pillbox already an outmoded object, reminds its owner of a grandmother who was continually taking pills to keep her frail body running. A giant safety pin once belonged to a young husband in the Navy who would later take his own life. A religious card with the image of Mary reminds a young woman of the time she wanted to make herself over as a Catholic. A cracked plastic fingernail brush is a reminder of the humiliation felt by a young girl constantly being reminded to stop biting her nails

The sense of the unattainable is evoked through mementos. Childish writing scrawled on a dime store valentine brings to mind memories of desires for approval by an older sister. A cassette tape of the soundtrack "Stand by Me" brings back childhood memories of singing songs in the back of the station wagon.

The grid of color photographs (see figure 3) show the objects held in the hands of their owners. The hand is one of the most expressive of all the parts of the human body.

Including the hand in the photographs humanizes the objects creating warmth and intimacy. The photographs are shot in a casual manner using traditional color film referencing the family snapshot. The use of color backdrops isolates the objects and suggests perhaps an era gone by.



**Figure 3.** *Hands Holding Things*, installation photograph

The things we save and hide away in a box are symbolic links to a particular event, place or loved one. For this project I re-visited my anthropology roots gathering data and documenting artifacts. Photography shares with anthropology the hunger to document and gather evidence. According to Diane Arbus, the photographer is a super tourist an extension of the anthropologist visiting natives and bringing back news of their

exotic doings and strange gear.<sup>1</sup> In my thesis exhibition I examined the personal artifacts of others in my quest to understand my own personal ethnography.



**Figure 4.** *Hands Holding Things, pillbox, 8x10, digital print from negative*

*My grandmother's pillbox: holding it brings back the anxiety I felt seeing her sick and frail during the last years of her life.*



**Figure 5.** *Boyfriend's Hair saved in box, installation view*

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*. (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1977) 42.

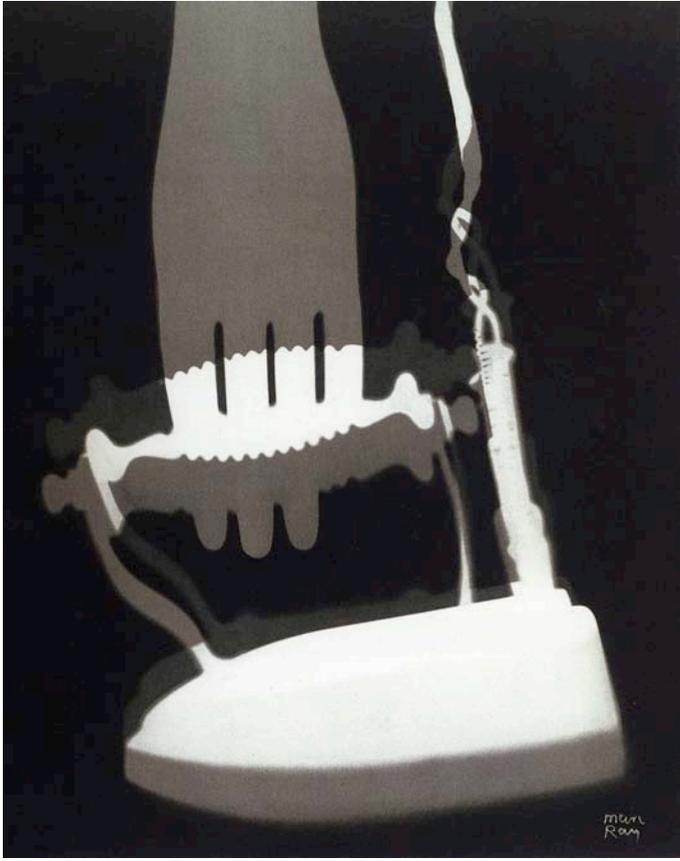
## Shadow Traces: The Photogram

Photograms are the direct traces of objects on a photosensitive surface made without a lense or a camera. An object is placed on a surface such as gelatin silver photographic paper and exposed to light. The print is then developed in traditional chemistry and as if by magic the shadow of the object appears. Two of the most notable artists to embrace the photogram were Man Ray (1890-1976) and Lazlo Moholy Nagy (1895-1946). As Dadaists they were interested in the unpredictability, the happy accident, the lack of authorship inherent in this one- of –a-kind camera less technique. In Man Ray's image, *Electricité, rayograph*, 1931, the glove and iron are irradiated, luminous and translucent. Similar to an x-ray the photogram pushes the viewer beyond the range of human vision into a mysterious shadow world of glowing shapes. The image is not only an interaction between the light and the object, but it also has a tactile quality coming from the physical contact between the object and the photographic paper: both the light and the object were in contact with the paper during exposure and left their traces.

According to German photographer and critic Ranz Roh the photogram “hovers excitingly between abstract geometrical tracery and the echo of objects<sup>2</sup>”.

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<sup>2</sup> Noam Elcott, “The Shadow of the World James Welling’s Cameraless and Abstract Photography,” *Aperture* 190, (Spring 2008), 33.



**Figure 6.** *Electricité*, rayograph, Man Ray, 1931

British born photographer Adam Fuss makes hauntingly beautiful photograms of rippled water, flowers, rabbit entrails and wafts of smoke. His works are frontal, painterly and almost supernatural. The photograms have a mysterious quality and according to Fuss is an attempt to “create again something, which has been lost”. The silvery shadows of the Christening Dress from the melancholic series, *My Ghosts* suggests the child to be baptized is no longer alive. Rabbit entrails reflect the elusive nature of life.

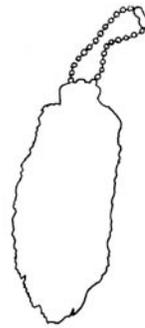


**Figure 7.** Adam Fuss, *Untitled*, from the series *My Ghost*, 1999



**Figure 8.** Adam Fuss, *Love*, 1992

I employed the photogram technique to give ordinary objects such as a cassette tape; a good luck rabbit's foot and a fingernail brush a feeling of mystery. The glowing shapes floating in black space are aura-like and make the objects appear to hold power.



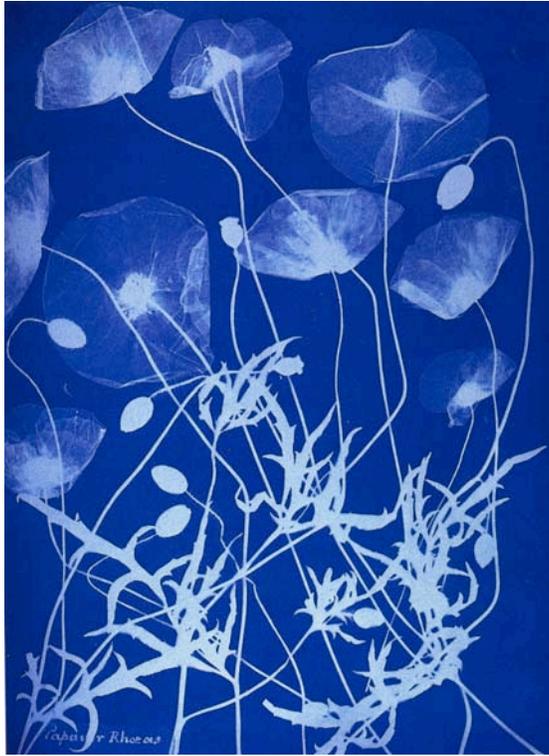
Rabbit's foot - my good luck charm- so soft! I always kept it in my purse.  
Another gift from Dad probably received when I was 4 or 5 years old.

**Figure 9.** *Rabbit's foot- my good luck charm- so soft! I always kept it in my purse. Another gift from Dad probably received when I was 4 or 5 years old. photogram and pen and ink drawing.*

The cyanotype was named after the Greek work for “deep blue”(cyan)

The cyanotype is one of the oldest photographic processes, invented in 1842 by Sir John Hershel. It provided an inexpensive simple permanent process in an elegant array of blue values. A cyanotype image is created by brushing a solution of ferric ammonium citrate and potassium ferricyanide onto a substrate and exposing it to light.

The earliest photographer to embrace the cyanotype process was British botanist Anna Atkins (1799-1871). As was common with many of the early photography enthusiasts she used photography for scientific investigation and illustration. For ten years beginning in 1843 she collected algae and produced thousands of blueprints later published in the first known book of photographs *British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* (1843-1853). Although she was initially primarily interested in the scientific study of algae her works are surprisingly elegant and strange. Happily the Prussian blue of the cyanotype was appropriate for documenting water plants. Atkin’s stunningly beautiful photograms of botanical specimens live on as some of the best examples of the cyanotype to date.



**Figure 10.** *Anna Atkins, untitled cyanotype 1943-1953*

*The cyanotype's blue color probably has no intrinsic significance; however, it does have distinct physical properties that can be marshaled in the context of an image, properties that can suggest historical and emotional associations, accentuate formal relations, and make the familiar strange.*

Lyle Rexler

Clothing made up the bulk of what was left to me by my parents. After experimenting with various methods of photographing them (digital, large format color and medium format black and white) I discovered the cyanotype as the best way to interpret this rich material. Similar to Anna Atkins I was saving and recording a collection. However in my case the object in the collection, my parent's clothing, were more than neutral scientific specimens they were emotionally charged personal artifacts.



**Figure 11.** family snapshot *My mother wearing dress from Black and White Print Dress*

below



**Figure 12.** *My Mother's Black and White Print Dress* cyanotype on paper

Traditional photographic processes such as the cyanotype have a way of humanizing and rematerializing photography. Unmediated by the camera, there is sensuality to the process. Depending upon the transparency of the material used, cyanotypes exhibit exquisite detail and subtle tonality. The elements of chance determine the success or failure of the cyanotype image, unpredictable weather (lack of sun); uneven brush strokes; and the positioning of the object on the paper (once placed within the sun's range it cannot be adjusted).

Cyanotypes are direct shadows of things placed on sensitized paper and then exposed to the sun. The Cyanotypes of dresses in the exhibition are the shadows of the actual garments worn by my parents. The fluttering life-size dresses and shirts act as stand ins for them. The cyanotype in its dual capacity to trace shape and create mystery is an appropriate medium for my subject matter.



**Figure 13.** Installation view, cyanotypes and hair sculpture, 2011



**Figure 14.** *My Mothers Red Dress*, cyanotype 2011



**Figure 15.** My Father's Shirt, cyanotype 2011



**Figure 16.** *My Mother's Dressing Gown*, cyanotype 2011

## CONCLUSION

*Because of its connection to biography and its place in constituting the notion of an individual life, the memento becomes emblematic of the worth of that life and of the self's capacity to generate worthiness.*

Susan Stewart

In the Russian language the word “vesch” means “a thing with a soul”. “It describes anything that resonates and possesses vitality and significance and has become imbued by human attachment with presence and feeling .<sup>3</sup>“

I am interested in exploring personal mementos and the stories they hold. Since its invention photography has played an important role in magically transforming the most banal of objects into things imbued with meaning. Edward Weston's iconic photograph, *Pepper*, 1930 depicting an ordinary garden vegetable is radiant and evocative of the musculature of the human body. Anna Atkins cyanotypes transformed ordinary sea algae into delicate line and shape.

Many of the objects we save remind us of the fact that humans fail and make mistakes--the plastic drink monkey from the time we had our first illicit cocktail, the headless Infant Jesus of Prague statuette given to us by a boyfriend of ten years ago or the stained, fingernail brush reminding us of the shame felt for not keeping our nails clean.

The photograph in its many manifestations has always been connected to memory and death. Susan Sontag wrote, “All photographs are memento mori, To take a

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Hayworth-Booth, ed., *Things A Spectrum of Photography 1850 –2001*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), 7.

photograph is to participate in another person (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, and mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it all photographs testify to time's relentless melt."

The works in this exhibition reference the duality of photography. A photograph can be simultaneously a visual record and a poetic statement. In this case a statement about life, loss and longing. The photograms, color photographs and cyanotypes in this exhibition describe through light falling on paper, how things appear and also act as signifiers of emotional events. The objects in the photographs are traces of lives lived the photographs are traces of these traces.

The attempt to mark our lives through objects makes us human. It speaks of our attempt to validate our selves, to connect with the past and to perhaps control our fate.

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