A single rope, tossed over a high, sturdy branch

by

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Abstract

A single rope, tossed over a high, sturdy branch refers to a basic description of bear bagging, a practice of placing items attractive to a bear—such as food, scented products, or perishables—into a bag that is raised into the air using a rope—out of the reach of a bear. The exhibition continues my ongoing investigation into the thingness of found objects and considers the inarticulable energies they can convey. If I know it is there—even without caption—will it remain, and can audiences perceive it? This question has been assisted by the bag works in the exhibition, held in suspension through formal strategy and through a defamiliarization of their contents. The works demonstrate potentiality, activating as transitive paintings that attempt to convey social energies to the viewer in a layered approach, through internal and external passages.

Keywords: objects; painting; thing theory; transitive painting; potentiality; performance
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A single rope, tossed over a high, sturdy branch

Introduction

Near the street windows of the Audain Gallery are two arrangements of colourful textile bags, hanging from ropes slung over the lighting grid. The ropes are each distinct in colour and are anchored by cinder blocks, fanning out as they rise upward from floor to ceiling. The bags bulge with unseen contents and are covered to varying degrees in gesso and oil paint. Nearby are two wall-mounted works—also textiles with gesso and oil paint applications. One consists of found fabric draped over an unseen form, and the other is a heavy cotton shirt, pinned to the wall. Around the corner, a small wooden shelf holds an assortment of small objects each applied with gesso and oil paint. Lastly, in the vitrine at the gallery entrance, two paintings on found textiles drape on the knobs of a found door.

The following statement considers A single rope, tossed over a high, sturdy branch as a continuation of my previously exhibited collections of found objects that represent specific narratives. Approaching the work through its objects—those in the bear bags, and on the shelf or wall—I consider what these kinds of things can carry or convey even while cloaked by fabric, or paint. I divide the works into three categories—painted objects, “mountables” and bear bags—with the first two serving as a bridge between processes. Focusing on the bear bags, hung high in the gallery by rope, I consider how they are activated as transitive paintings through their contained potentiality.
Out of Reach

The title of this exhibition refers to a basic description of bear bagging\(^1\), a practice of placing items attractive to a bear—such as food, scented products, or perishables—into a bag that is raised into the air using a rope—out of the reach of a bear. The bag mediates the human/bear relationship, creating a site of shared interest that is neither the tent nor the den. Hanging from a branch high off the ground and away from the trunk of the tree, the bag’s content remains protected, away from the bear’s reach.

The viewer of this installation is in the position of the bear. The bag works become mysterious and alluring. They announce the various personal items that lend them shape—a uniform, a spice rack, shot glasses, candlesticks, a bowler hat, manuals, ornaments, and so on—while withholding further narrative detail. The bear bag is employed as formal strategy and metaphor: the painted works hang and contain objects unseen, or employ objects whose specific narratives are unspoken. The viewer searches for the basis of the artist’s assertion, but what happens to the artwork without affirmation, without ‘proof’?

Previous Work

Souvenirs, my ongoing collection of thematically grouped objects and corresponding material responses, was presented as part of “Thin White Line”\(^2\) and “Mixed Greens”\(^3\), exhibitions completed during my tenure in the SFU MFA program. The collection is comprised of found objects I have gathered over several years, each representing a specific narrative, and is exhibited as an arrangement of things; a loose collage of elements. Through the collection’s various modes of presentation, I have explored how and when to provide or withhold its anecdotal information. I have found, in conversations surrounding the work at opening receptions and elsewhere, that most viewers of the work express curiosity for the objects’ associated narratives. Observing seemingly ‘regular’ items, and seeing minimal intervention or construction manifested, they seek justification for my assertion of the relationships between the items, displayed on small shelves, in frames or pinned to the gallery walls.


Image 1. Installation view of *Souvenirs* (ongoing) at MFA Open Studios, January 2015. Photo by Curtis Grahauer.

**Thingness**

My motivation to use collected materials of this kind has been influenced by Bill Brown’s 2001 essay “Thing Theory” that considers how our material environment shapes us, making a distinction between objects and things. Things, he says, can be thought of “as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects–their force as a sensuous presence or as a
metaphysical presence”. Souvenirs includes: a pair of chicken feet that burst out of a 40-year-old handmade down pillow while it spun in my mother’s washing machine; a thin metal wire that served as a “house key” in Creighton, Saskatchewan, where a privacy lock suffices as home security measure; and the broken shoelace of a former lover, detached in a moment of rage—to give some examples. All of the objects exceed their phenomenological presence in some way, and the project hypothesizes that they do so more intensely when grouped together. They have been gathered through strictly personal means, an effort to ‘authenticate’ their thingness. I wanted to know it for certain. I have other collections of objects that I purchased, or acquired through strangers, but the narratives of Souvenirs are nearer to me; I am more witness to their thingness.

In a recent Artforum article pertaining to Vietnamese-born Danish artist Dahn Vo’s “Slip of the Tongue,” an exhibition at the François Pinault Foundation’s Punta della Dogana, Claire Bishop describes several of Vo’s sculptural works—comprised of family keepsakes—as being heavily dependent on accompanying text: “By themselves, these objects and their arrangement are utterly unremarkable. What matters is the elaborate backstory, which is conveyed via a caption in the brochure”⁵. As it turns out, a vitrine containing three objects—a watch, a lighter, and a military ring—displays the items that the artist’s father acquired from his first earnings subsequent to escaping to Denmark from Vietnam in 1979. “Without this information, the sculptures are just arbitrary agglomerations of consumables.”⁶, Bishop asserts. But can’t all sculpture be reduced to


⁶ Artforum, September 2015
an arbitrary agglomeration of consumables? A painting, too, can be reduced to the sum of its materials—such as oil, canvas, calcium carbonate, polymer, pigment, and poplar—but to do so approaches the artwork as though for nutritional analysis. To be a ‘foodie’ is not to approach a meal as would a dietician. Put another way, I have some understanding of phenomenology—of being human, of being alive—while still aware that my body is made up of cells, or molecules, or atoms. The thing is there. It doesn't lose its thingness—its sensuous or metaphysical presence—without a caption, it merely speaks it in another language.

The Voices of Objects

In an October 2014 interview with SFU’s The Peak, Curtis Grahauer asked me whether I imagined the objects in “Thin White Line” as having an associated “voice”. My answer bears repeating: “[I]t's difficult to think of objects as having a voice that is capable of [human] dialogue. They are not megaphones for previous owners and don't contain some ghostly message, even if specific individuals have enriched them somehow.” Even so, they speak to me, drawing my attraction in an inarticulable way: an energetic pull that I recognize as something worth holding onto, perhaps strictly because I can’t articulate it with words.

In his essay “The Devils Inside the Thing Speak to the Devils Outside”, Jan Verwoert speaks of an energy field he calls “the public”, a swirl of relations that

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7 Curtis Grahauer, “Thin White Line is a Collection of Overlooked Objects”, The Peak (Oct. 20, 2014):17
8 Jan Verwoert, “The Devils Inside the Thing Speak to the Devils Outside”, in Eva Grubinger, Jörg Heiser, eds., Sculpture Unlimited (Berlin: Steinberg Press, 2011), 83
surrounds the thing and the people it engages, speaking to those who have it, or hold it, or wear it, and to others who observe it. Using the example of magic, and its use of objects (“a juju, a talisman, a specimen, sample or extract taken from a substance, plant, animal, or person, etc”), Verwoert illustrates the relational power of things:

An object used in the practice of magic in this sense, strictly speaking, does not “picture”, “signify” or refer to anything outside of itself. No, it “activates” (incorporates, channels and potentially changes) the relationship that exists between different people (entities, elements, or substances) in this world, precisely because it is itself, materially, a part of this relationship—it is its medium or conductor—the dynamics that constitute the relation “run through” the magical artifact, like electricity runs through a wire.

The objects collected for this exhibition were negotiated between people that I know and me. They were collected from the homes of friends and relatives, and are implicated by the fact that they belonged to someone that I know, who gave them up to me as artworks. As with Verwoert’s magical objects, the collected items activate the relationship between their donors and me: I have taken something that belonged to its donor, that meant something to its donor, and that spoke to me, and the two of us—the donor and I—have agreed to let the object support a painting. The public, between object, artist and donor, or patron, is now buzzing with already contained relational

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9 Verwoert, 83

10 Verwoert, 84
energy between makers, givers, receivers, holders, and so on. I can’t see it but I know that it is there.

Making the Inarticulable Louder

A question I have posed for myself by making this work is whether or not, by adding paint to this type of object, I can somehow enhance its surrounding energy field. Can I make the inarticulable louder? Furthermore, what energies can thingness lend to painting? These objects—materials suitable for painting while not intended for it—become defamiliarized as supports and substrates for gesso and oil paint: the shot glasses, candlesticks, manuals and ornaments, etc., masquerade as stretcher bars; found fabric, gathered from sewing rooms and folded into pockets, plays the role of canvas or linen; and smaller objects act as irregular panels, displayed upon a shelf of white maple.

I consider the painted works in this exhibition as comprising three categories. The first pertains to the works wherein paint has been directly applied to objects. This category includes the shelf of objects (Group 3) as well as Uniform, and serves as a bridge between processes. It experiments with painting applications and demonstrates more openly the types of objects I have collected for this exhibition—a piece of leather from my grandfather’s World War II bomber jacket, my sister’s old cast, my boyfriend’s toenail—to give examples. Category two, which I am calling “mountables”, includes Door Knobs and Paper Towel Cutter and continues a path toward a productive mystification. To identify the mountables’ supportive objects all that is needed is a crouch, or craned neck, in order to peek under draped and painted fabric.
The third category, the “bear bags”, Group 1 and Group 2, is where the leading questions of this exhibition crystallize. Its approach to painting employs two strategies. First, and most practical, the paint helps to reveal something of the contained item: applied to the bag as it hangs, the wet gesso permeates the found fabric, causing it to hug the irregular curves and corners of its internal object as it weighs against the gesso layer, pulling towards the floor. The gessoed substrate stiffens, allowing oil paint on certain bags to lick and peak off of its surface. Other paint applications combine with mediums to thin oil colours and increase transparency and gloss, pooling in hardened seams and emphasizing protruding details. The combination of fabric and paint changes the object contained within, obscuring certain identifiers of the object—its colour, its brand, its level of wear—while still conveying something of its type—its shape and size, its relative weight—providing a balance between conceal and reveal, facilitating its defamiliarization for the viewer.

Second, the paint brings with it its own “language”, or perhaps more appropriately, its “nonlanguage”. It “voices” in a similarly inarticulable way as my Souvenirs, through an unspoken energy. It represents an artistic expression, an energetic pull noteworthy, again, perhaps strictly because it can’t be articulated with words. In an essay for Abstract Critical, painter Alan Gouk questions the propriety of ascribing the concept of language to painting’s visual manner of communication:

So the relationship of words, either spoken or written, to “things”, is a world away from that of visual sensation to its pictorial presentment. The pictographic representation of a tree has a morphological link to its object—this means that its significatory function is radically different from that of sign to “thing” in writing. In developed languages the link between signs and their objects has become
arbitrary; not the case when it comes to painting. It is much closer to “reality” (however defined) than is the word. 11

Considered as outside of language, this exhibition presents a meeting of two inarticulables: that of thingness and of the “aesthetic act” 12 of painting. Its objects, or things, kept metaphorically out of reach through a painted ‘disguise’ of sorts, create a potentiality for the viewer, who cannot fully identify the contained object, its narrative, or its sensuous presence. This potentiality is echoed in the formal strategy of the bear bag, hung high above the viewer yet not completely inaccessible: one could ostensibly untie the rope and lower the bag. And yet, the contents of the bag are idealized through their potentiality. Like the hungry bear identifying an attractive scent, pursuing what she presumes to be a fulfilling meal, the best version of the bags’ contents exist in their potential. While potentially carrying plump smokies, or crisp trail mix for the bear, the bear bag could prove to hold an astringent mouthful of deodorant, or bitter mosquito lotion; the attractive scent is better left unspecified by the mouth.

This potentiality brings to mind David Joselit’s concept of transitive painting put forward in his essay “Painting Beside Itself”, which he defines by “its capacity to hold in suspension the passages internal to a canvas, and those external to it” 13. The bag paintings are literally held in suspension from the gallery lighting grid, and metaphorically


12 Abstract Critical, May 8, 2013

13 David Joselit, “Painting Beside Itself”, October Magazine, Fall 2009, No. 130: 129 (http://www.jstor.org/)
held in suspension through the defamiliarization of their objects. Joselit’s text investigates the ways in which painting can belong to a network, serving “to suture spectators to extra-perceptual social networks rather than merely situating them in a phenomenological relationship of individual perception”\textsuperscript{14}. The bag paintings do exactly this. The objects contained within the painting and their associated energetic fields—Voerwert’s “the public”—connect the viewer to extra-perceptual social networks, lending a further reality to the aesthetic act.

**Converging Unproofs**

*A single rope, tossed over a high, sturdy branch* continues my ongoing investigation into the thingness of found objects and considers the inarticulable energies they can carry or convey even while cloaked by fabric or paint. Through a personalized method of collecting, I have attempted to first verify the thingness of each object, to know it for certain, however inarticulable. If I know it is there—even without caption—will it remain, and can it be perceived by audiences? This question has been assisted by the bag works in the exhibition, held in suspension through formal strategy and a defamiliarization of their contents. The works demonstrate potentiality, activating as transitive paintings that attempt to convey social energies to the viewer in a layered approach, through internal and external passages. The process of mixing the “realities” of painting and thingness invigorates my artistic assertion, serving as two converging ‘unproofs’ to form the basis of the work when ‘proof’ cannot be found.

\textsuperscript{14} Joselit, 132
Documentation

Photo by Curtis Grahauer.
Appendix A

This Paper as Fossilized Wood

Let me acknowledge that this paper is a PDF document, a Portable Document Format document, cataloged in the library as a digital file. It's plausible that this paper will never be printed. In other words, this paper may never actually be paper. I imagine you sat with an illuminated screen, much like I am now. These backlit whitish rectangles, on which I type my words, represent eight and a half by eleven inches each. I'm currently zoomed out, so the document appears closer to 7 inches wide to me. And you? Are you zoomed in? Even at actual size these rectangles exceed the dimensions of current screens in either width or height.

PDF is a file format used to present documents independent of the application software, hardware, and operating systems used to create them, of the devices on which they are to be displayed, and the machines by which they are to be printed. As a PDF, this document could be downloaded, saved, sent, or deleted, copied or pasted, but it needs no staple. It will not be splashed with your coffee. It will not be folded or crumpled, or divided into sixths and repurposed for your grocery lists. It will not burn, will not light your fire as kindling on a camping trip. It won't be read in the bathtub and made soggy. It won't line your compost bin or bird's cage, and won't be spread out on your studio floor to catch stray paint. What little material quality this paper possesses is overshadowed by the screen it rests behind. It currently exists solely on my computer, which sits in front of me now as I type, a gray, anodized aluminum body, a glossy, LED backlit display and a

full-size keyboard. At the right angle I can see smudges on its screen, from fingerprints
and cleaner residue, and there’s dust and grime between its keys. What looks to be an
arm or eyebrow hair rests near its trackpad. If I threw my computer into the ocean today,
my paper would sink with it, having never been printed. And yet, I can easily imagine
what this document would look like as paper. It has forfeited material paper composition,
yet retains certain paper qualities, such as shape and colour. Can it also absorb
something of the material of other tangible objects?
It now surrounds a ninety-million-year-old lump of fossilized palm wood found by geoscientist Gwyneth Cathyl-Huhn. She spied it sticking out of the tunnelled walls coal miners call the ‘rib’, four hundred meters down inside a mine that runs adjacent to Middle Quinsam Lake, on Vancouver Island. The mine site is about twenty-two kilometres west of Campbell River, British Columbia, and another four kilometres down a gravel road, so I’m told\textsuperscript{16}. The fossilized lump is a small portion of a larger vein, what I imagine was once the trunk of the great palm. It has a warm black colour with a matte core and a slightly glossy crust. Although it is stone, it looks fragile, as though it would shatter when dropped on the floor. This by the lump. The fossilized the layout of this paper, displacing ease of readability. This paper is as million-year-old fossil as it is sheets of paper.

\textsuperscript{16} Drew Lamirande, Personal interview. November 24, 2014.
Objects and Things

A Canadian family is currently attempting to locate a lost handmade tray\(^{17}\). It was crafted from Douglas fir with an intricate inlay pattern of walnut, maple and ebony. Pender Island woodworker David MacKenzie crafted the tray as a gift in 2003 for his mother, Babs, who adored the object until her death ten years later. After Babs’ passing, the tray was to be re-gifted to David’s cousin, Denise, who had cared for Babs in her old age. David had brought the tray home to his workshop on Pender Island, had refinished it with oil and had carved an inscription into it’s backside. It was on its way to Denise via her daughter when, in an unfortunate turn of events, the daughter left the tray forgotten at a bus stop on Laurier Avenue in Ottawa\(^{18}\).

Bill Brown’s 2001 essay *Thing Theory* considers how our material environment shapes us, making a distinction between objects and things. Things, he says, is a word that tends “to hover over the threshold between the nameable and unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and unidentifiable”\(^{19}\). Brown instructs us to imagine things “as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects—their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence”\(^{20}\).

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\(^{20}\) Brown, 5.
Following the tray’s disappearance, over a year ago, David Mackenzie painstakingly made an exact replica—of Douglas fir with an intricate inlay pattern of walnut, maple and ebony—not to gift to Denise in place of the original, but to serve as an offering: should the finder of the original tray come forward, the family will swap the exact replica for the rescued original as well as offer the finder a cash reward\(^{21}\). The object is replaceable, the ‘thing’ is not.

This Paper as Toenail

Because a thing is usually not a shiny new Boeing taking off on its virgin flight. Rather, it might be its wreck, painstakingly pieced together from scrap inside a hangar after its unexpected nosedive into catastrophe. A thing is the ruin of a house in Gaza. A film reel lost or destroyed in civil war. A female body tied up with ropes, fixed in obscene positions. Things condense power and violence. Just as a thing accumulates productive forces and desires, so does it also accumulate destruction and decay. - Hito Steyerl, *A thing like you and me*\(^{22}\)

You lost this one afternoon in July while we were making out, reunited after some time apart. It popped off and fell to the floor, clicking as it skipped across the laminate, and you winced, out of indignity rather than pain. You didn’t want to tell me, as though saying it out loud would make it true. You said: “my toenail just fell off”, and we looked for it together, naked.

\(^{21}\) Egan, November 24, 2014.  
When you first got back from Iceland and showed it to me, still attached, it looked so much better than it had before your trip. Those long sits in geothermal pools had changed it from grey-green to pale ochre and you were hopeful it would stick around. I wasn’t optimistic for you, but I played along.

I nearly lost my own toenail once, stomping a snow sculpture into shape in minus 30 weather. That’s my guess, anyway. I don’t remember any particular incident but I had stomped snow into wooden forms for 10 hours a day, for several days previous, so I figure it was a cumulative injury. My toenail was black from three quarters of the way down—what they call subungual hematoma—and eventually there was a hollow pocket underneath where the skin had detached. It took 6 months before it looked normal again, and my injury was minor compared to yours.

Oh God! What a terrible month you’d had. Your father is vision-impaired, and your mom has recently been diagnosed with breast cancer. You had flown home to Alberton, Prince Edward Island, to help out, to drive her to appointments in Summerside and to make meals for the two of them. Going home in itself is not simple for you. The trip is pricey and, even under better circumstances, emotionally taxing for a gay man who was once a young boy in a tiny fishing village. Your parents still don’t celebrate you the way that I think they should, and yet, your intention was to be the able-bodied son until, on a trip to the garbage dump, you dropped the steel gate of the trailer onto your right big toe. The tip of the toe was broken, and the nail’s days—36 of them—were numbered.

I was surprised by how nice it looked when we found it under the bed: off-white and fairly clean, like a bone from a well-weathered carcass. The shape is hardly different from how it looked when it was attached. I had imagined the unseen end to be gnarly,
like the roots of a great tree pulled from the earth. Instead, its bottom edge has a graceful curve, similar to its top. I can wear it over my thumb like an acrylic press-on, although it is slightly more curled now that it has dried. It has known you longer than I have, up to 18 months, and was with you when we fell in love. It walked with you on the streets of Vancouver, Las Vegas and New York, and followed you to Ai Wei Wei at the Brooklyn Museum. It danced with you to Iggy Pop, Public Enemy and Run The Jewels in Keflavik. It soaked with you in Grettislaug.

**Potsherds**

I flew to Iceland in July 3, 2014 to facilitate *Potsherds*, a temporary public art project by Keeley Haftner. The exhibition featured scattered porcelain fragments and the sublime landscapes they were strewn over at various locations across the island nation. The potsherds marked Haftner’s chosen path during her expansive wandering along Route 1, Iceland’s national road that runs around the island and connects most of the inhabited parts of the country. My role as facilitator, a full three months later, was to assist with transporting viewers to select sites and to document the fragments should they remain. I also brought with me a stack of custom postcards to hand out as promotional material. Featuring an image of the shards on the banks of a massive waterfall, they were mailed to Canadian artists, curators and institutions prior to the exhibition dates.

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I’m a new driver, so we had planned for my friend and collaborator, Katie Kozak, to assist me throughout the week. She was on her way back to Saskatchewan from Europe and, like me, was taking advantage of Iceland Air’s free stopover which allowed us stay up to seven nights at no additional airfare. We were booked in at The Association of Icelandic Visual Artists (Samband Íslenskra Myndlistarmanna) guest house in downtown Reykjavik and had rented a car in Katie’s name to do day excursions out to some of Haftner’s sites. It was going to be a great week with an old friend.

There’s a seven hour time difference between Vancouver and Reykjavik, so I was quite jet lagged the first day that I arrived. I couldn’t sleep, and when I finally did, I slept right through my alarm. Finally waking at 3:30pm, I was greeted by terrible news:

Katie Kozak
7/3, 11:32am
Ok, I'm very sorry to tell you I'm not coming to Iceland.
My flight number is fi451 I think it gets in a 3:30, but check and meet me at the airport so I can give you my camera.
Cause then I’m catching another flight to Canada.
My mom thinks babas going to die and I just have to get home now.24

It took me over an hour to get to airport in Keflavik, and by that time Katie had come and gone, leaving her camera with a baggage check service. When she landed in Winnipeg after a long flight, with another 8 hour drive ahead of her, Baba had already passed away. My dear friend, Sophie Ostrowski, and Katie’s Baba (which is Ukrainian for

Grandmother) died suddenly of pneumonia in Creighton, Saskatchewan, after a short battle with cancer. So, I was alone in Iceland, thinking of Baba and pondering mortality, and without the means to drive.

Haftner’s exhibition took place at thirteen sites in total, from the very touristy Bláa Lónið—a luxury geothermal spa located in a lava field in Grindavík on the Reykjanes Peninsula—to the far-off Dettifoss, a powerful waterfall in Vatnajökull National Park. The porcelain fragments that peppered these locations were made from pieces of Canadian toilets the artist shattered and altered in a rock tumbler before packing them in her suitcase. In the tumbler, the sharp glazed pieces retained their angular shapes while becoming worn and smooth. They were rough and porous, materially evocative of beach stones or seashells ground by crashing waves. The potsherds were thicker than beach glass you would find on the shore, which made them slightly confusing, not immediately classifiable as manmade objects.

_Potsherds_ had potentially three types of viewers. Of the first type were visitors to Iceland who were not aware of the exhibition but who discovered porcelain shards at one or more locations. They perhaps mistook the shards as originating from the natural landscape, or maybe dismissed them as careless litter. The second type of visitor arrived at the porcelain shards with information in hand, was witness to the relationship between material and landscape, and could envision Haftner’s elaborate performance of distribution. I was among the third type of visitor: I was aware of the exhibition and sought it out, but did not chance upon a single shard. What I experienced were the sublime landscapes, without evidence of the artist’s intervention. This being said, given my circumstances, I was only able to travel to three of the exhibition sites.
The first site was near Sólfar (Sun Voyager), a sculpture by Jón Gunnar Árnason next to the ocean in the centre of Reykjavík. The wind was so strong that day that I feared it might blow the contact lenses from my eyes. Walking towards the site, I was doubtful that anything unfastened could remain there for an hour, let alone three months. Looking out at the ocean, and to the islands Viðey and Engey, I wondered if Haftner had given me an impossible task. Surely she knew her shards would blow away?

The second location was on the dark banks of the Bláa Lónið, where I soaked in the mineral rich water of the geothermal spa on the same day that Baba died. I stared up at the sky and pictured her smiling down on me. The white potsherds, had I seen any, would have contrasted greatly on the charcoal coloured banks, beckoning to visitors or attendants like sparkling jewels. Between tourists, hungry for souvenirs, and the spa staff, working hard to maintain a pristine illusion of otherworldliness, I'm certain the shards were removed immediately. Once again, surely Haftner would have known this.

The first few days in the guest house in downtown Reykjavik were strange. I was caught off guard by suddenly facing the city alone, and was sleeping at odd times. The Reykjavik sun hardly sets in July, so light streamed into my room at every time of day. I took long walks late at night, when the main streets were loud with drinkers, spilling out of bars on Laugavegur, their pints still in hand. I had lost my social courage and was beginning to think I would fail my task of gathering viewers. One morning later in the week, when my sleep pattern began to correct itself, I met two young Austrians, Claus and Simon, in the guest house dining room. They were so persistently friendly, it's as though they secretly knew my prerogative and had arrived to take pity on me. I told them about the exhibition and with little convincing they agreed to rent a car together and travel with me to Haftner’s third site, Seljavallalaug, a 25-metre outdoor pool nestled in a narrow valley near Seljavellir.
Potsherds was about following a promise to an artist’s work. For many who received the postcard in the mail the exhibition was already farfetched, separated from them by an ocean, a flight, a rental car. Add to this the fact that the shards were not fastened down, so making the trek was not a guarantee to see the work. Haftner supposedly intended for the shards to remain, but what I found when I arrived at various locations was undecorated, unfamiliar landscapes. The promise asked me to look down, to search for fallen crumbs, but when I could find nothing I would always look up, at the ocean and sky, at the narrow valley that surrounds and hides Seljavallalaug. Haftner gave us—Claus, Simon and me—incentive to follow her for 20 minutes on foot down into the valley, arriving at the nearly century-old pool fed by natural hot springs. When we couldn’t find her porcelain shards, we swam.

Taking the Artist’s Word

This page will be read aloud to two adult grizzly bears on Grouse Mountain, one of the North Shore Mountains of the Pacific Ranges in the District Municipality of North Vancouver, British Columbia. The bears, named Grinder and Coola, were both found orphaned in the wild in 2001 and now live in a fenced-in wildlife refuge managed by Grouse Mountain staff25. Preparing this text, knowing its purpose before forming its content, I struggle with what to include. What cadence falls kindly on Grizzly ears? Can I make my voice as apples dipped in honey? Will I know if they are listening? Will they

sense the irrational fear in my voice, fostered by countless vivid dreams of narrow
escapes, of maulings of slower friends and acquaintances? What purpose do these
words serve for you now? Will they lose their language, overshadowed by the act itself of
reading to caged bears? Does it matter what I write here? Let me write a grocery list
instead: rye bread, pickled herring, candied salmon, cinnamon, lemons, limes, goat
cheese, celery, fennel, walnuts, granny smith apples, red grapes.

Michael Drebert’s 2009 performative work River Ganges Crash Crawly’s asks us
to take his word for it. Part of Vancouver Contemporary Art Gallery’s Sentimental
Journey, an exhibition of the same year, the work was exhibited as three descriptive
sentences painted on posters appearing in the windows of the gallery26. For the work,
Drebert took a small ball, from the ball pit at Crash Crawly’s in Coquitlam, B.C. and
travelled with it to Varanasi, India, where he dipped it in the Ganges. Prior to making the
work, Drebert learned that Crash Crawly’s was the only business in British Columbia
with a play ball pit, at the time, due to rising concerns regarding the once popular
feature’s level of sanitation27. Drebert dipped the ball in the notoriously polluted Ganges,
and kept it in his possession until February 21, 2009, when he returned the ball back to
Crash Crawly’s, or so the posters claim.

As a viewer of the work we are not shown the ball itself, let alone visual
documentation of its ambitious journey. We are forced to trust the artist’s claim that the
act occurred at all, and to visualize the performance ourselves. Does it matter whether

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27 “Michael Drebert: Artist Michael Drebert discusses his work and the exhibition 'Sentimental
Drebert’s claims are factual? We envision the now worldly ball, once just a regular ball in a pit of other regular balls, waiting inconspicuously, offering drooling juveniles unsolicited exposure to Ganges residue.

The bears are aware of me but are disinterested. Grinder paws at half an apple. Coola is up to his neck in the large pond. “There is a world outside of your enclosure!” I yell. Neither bear flinches.
Appendix B

Exhibition Guide
LUCIEN DUREY
A SINGLE ROPE, TOSSSED OVER A HIGH, STURDY BRANCH

A single rope, tossed over a high, sturdy branch refers to a basic description of bear bagging, a practice of placing items attractive to a bear—such as food, scented products, or perishables—into a bag that is raised into the air using a rope—out of the reach of a bear. The bag mediates the human/bear relationship, creating a site of shared interest that is neither the tent nor the den. The bear bag is employed as formal strategy and metaphor: painted works that comprise the exhibition announce the various personal items that lend them shape—a uniform, a spice rack, shot glasses, candlesticks, a bowler hat, manuals, ornaments, and so on—while withholding further narrative detail. In an effort to make the inarticulable louder, these objects—materials suitable for painting while not intended for it—become defamiliarized as concealed supports and substrates for gesso and oil paint. The exhibition addresses the auratic nature of painting and art, its donated materials lending a reality to indefinite works that hang, drape or stand in the gallery.