

Of Treasures and Trash: BookCrossing, Mark Dion's Tate Thames Dig and the (lost) objects of urban intervention

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PHOTO: Saara Liinamaa

Last year, my roommates and I had moved out of our apartment but the apartment was still full: old lumpy futon couch with matching chair, shaky Ikea floor lamp, coffee and side table of unknown origins, warped bookcase, white wicker bathroom shelf, stools, kitchen utensils.... My roommates were moving to better-equipped dwellings. I was planning a nomadic summer and only willing to pay storage for my most prized and easily boxed possessions. When faced with such a plethora of unwanted objects, impossible to sell or keep, we did what everyone does in Toronto: take it to the street.



We proceeded to turn our apartment inside out. We set up the living room to look much like its arrangement inside and we lived outside for our last few hours under a cardboard banner labelled “FREE.” The scene looked like a much lesser version of photographer Peter Menzel’s extensive international series, *Material World*.¹ In these photographs, we view the entire contents of households, from average income families in 30 countries, moved from the interior to the exterior. Menzel’s photographs demonstrate the fluid and contradictory nature of cultural values and identifications, and confront the challenges within cross-cultural comparison and evaluation. In the photographs, the most valued possessions of each household indicate both the specificity of the individuals and the global structures of inequity and excess. Our “installation,” of course, was something quite different as a testament to our discarded, rather than most cherished, possessions.

Our outdoor living space changed hands quickly. Our cast-offs embarked on new lives drawn from the density of need that is the city. A family, new both to the city and the country, dragged the futon down the street. The two children awkwardly lugged the cushions while the parents cursed the intractable frame. They had to come back for the lamp, chair, bookshelf and other assorted bits (they politely refused the white wicker, despite our encouragement).

I am recalling this moment because it exemplifies a particular preoccupation of mine regarding the peculiar life of objects in the city. At once, I am taking the everyday plight of objects quite seriously, from the garbage in front of my house to the commuter newspapers that litter the floor of the subway. While I could be easily tracing the life of the commodity, the foremost example of circulation, value, and exchange in everyday life, I leave that to another, albeit associated, discussion. In this essay, I am looking to a haphazard form of object relations that is both related to and distinct from the psychoanalytic inflection; if we regard the city as a play of losses and recoveries, personal, historical, tangible, and intangible, there emerges the possibility of objects that, at least temporarily, intervene in the city in surprising and inventive ways. Sometimes these objects, are unwanted paperbacks; sometimes they are works of art.

In the recent past, I have glimpsed books in phone booths, hidden in the paper racks of the free local weeklies, and stashed under the bench in the park beside my house. These sightings are not merely the product of urban dumping, although there is an element of that as well, but part of the BookCrossing web network of book exchanges.² BookCrossing is an interesting example of the reinvention of the life of the object in the city that starts with a virtual community yet produces concrete exchanges. Books are passed along from reader to reader based on locations randomly chosen by individuals and posted on-line. When you post a book, it is given a tracking number. When you find a book you are to enter the code on-line to indicate it has been found. The most dutiful place the BookCrossing's nameplate in the front, but you can just write the number inside the cover. It is a game of hide-and-seek—books are “in the wild” and then “hunted.” The term bookcrossing was even recently added to the Concise Oxford English Dictionary. The definition reads as follows: “the practice of leaving a book in a public place to be picked up and read by others, who then do likewise.”

It is possible to locate “crossed” books in over 70 countries, but many of these countries have very little book exchanging activity. Certainly, popular access to computers and the Internet is a basic prerequisite for the sustainability of the network. Western travelers passing through are responsible for the limited book listings in many countries. Furthermore, success depends on the size and scale of the city. At the time of writing this essay, there were 249 books available in Toronto. There was one book released during the past thirty days in Iqaluit. The most active countries include Australia, Canada, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The idealism of the BookCrossing mandate to “make the whole world a library” is clear. And it starts by making the city a library, a collective site for sharing resources.

The web setup provides an anonymous and interactive form of relating to others through the history of an object; you indirectly communicate with others not only by sharing the same reading interests, but also by sharing the very same book. In one respect, these books intervene in the actual urban environment as offerings to the city, with the glimmer of an alternative economy built on equal access to the precious resources that the book can provide. BookCrossing is also a way of purging without guilt. There are desirable staples: mysteries and romances, as well as some prized new releases and critically acclaimed “literary” works. Yet often the books are given away for a reason, and, as it happens, no one else wants them either.

Essentially, this network is also a form of surveillance for either our garbage and/or our gifts (depending on your perspective). This intricate tracking system means we can chart our lost objects once we have let them go, providing a new satisfaction as well as sense of control. BookCrossing promises that this system

“lets you share your books with the world, and track their individual journeys forever more.”³ With this example in mind, I am captured by the idea that the city, quite literally, never really loses anything. So far, I have been pointing to an urban archaeology of the everyday through moments that remind us of the city’s inevitable material accumulations, and thus there exists the possibility of digging through the surface of the city for random, unexpected finds. To this end, and to locate another moment, I will also draw on the instance that is art—American artist Mark Dion’s *Tate Thames Dig* (1999) in particular.



The City’s Lost Objects

Mark Dion’s *Tate Thames Dig* (1999) is one of a group of projects that have been termed his “archaeological” works.⁴ Dion, already a chameleon artist-explorer-detective-natural scientist, has added archaeologist to the list. Through acts such as digging, dredging, or scavenging in the city, he collects a random plethora of things that are cleaned and organized (however capriciously) to eventually become part of a gallery installation. These archaeological works share key features but take on slightly different shapes and forms according to the specific conditions of the site and gallery display. The Tate project highlights the natural landscape of the city. The Thames has always influenced settlement patterns, communication, activity, and movement. The river reminds us of the histories of trade and development that constructed London—activities sprung from the desire for exploration and encounter with difference, as well as mastery and fear of the unknown.

During July and August of 1999, Dion used two riverbank locations to conduct his project. One site, Millbank, lies close to the older Tate (now Tate Britain), while the other site, Bankside, is close to the then yet-to-be-opened Tate Modern. The project was a key part of the Tate Modern’s pre-opening programming. Spending one week scavenging at each site, Dion’s digs were really more a version of fieldwalking—scouring the riverbed for visible objects. Dion and a team of volunteers dug no more than 6 inches, which was the recommended depth according to an environmental assessment. The objects found ranged from the exceptional to the everyday: a human shin bone, knives, a round of blanks, manacles, two messages in a bottle (one in Arabic, the other Italian), a cell phone, credit cards, shoes, cutlery, children’s toys, innumerable bottle caps, clay pipes, oyster shells, cattle teeth, nails, and shards of ceramic and glass. The ensuing cleaning and organization of the items was a public affair on the shore of Millbank. For the gallery installation, which was first displayed at the Tate Britain and is currently still on display at the Tate Modern, Dion produced a contemporary incarnation of the cabinet of curiosity, one devoted to multiple taxonomies and associations, with objects arranged by colours, textures, or themes. The sizeable, double-side cabinet solicits visitors to open drawers, pursue, and make sense of the material as they see fit.

Dion's project is charming in its literalness—or, as it is described in a review, and with reference to Brecht, in its “pragmatism, humour and crude thinking.”⁵ The plan is quite simple: delineate an area, gather everything found, and contemplate the overwhelming accretion of the city's lost objects. The result is a plethora of junk, from the mundane to the exceptional, with items of every sort and various time periods. Dion's work is based on a clear assumption: uncovering objects from the riverbed of the Thames can tell us something about the city and its indiscriminate accumulations. These objects are reminders of the tensions between circulation and sedimentation that frame and form the city. And within this world of objects, there is the purgatory zone—a world between the discarded and the lived—that becomes art. Or to put it differently, as Walter Benjamin does in his theory of allegory, “the profane world is both elevated and devalued.”⁶ So, here are the objects, but we still might ask: what is the question? And for this, I return to my initial assessment but now in the form of a question: Does the city ever lose anything? This seems an absurd line of enquiry, and yet the insights (and absurdities to be sure) of Freud seem to have something to offer in this respect.

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud compares the structure of the mind to that of the city of Rome with its buried histories, changing boundaries and perpetual transformations. He uses this analogy to account for the indestructible character of memory traces; we are reminded at the start of his discussion that “in mental life, nothing that has once taken shape can be lost.”⁷ The city, a product of accumulation and fragmentation, is synonymous with the psyche. Past and present co-exist; in Rome, “the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus would once more stand on



PHOTO: Dennis Lago



the site of the Palazzo Caffarelli, without there being any need to dismantle the latter structure.⁸ Of course, and with a characteristic Freudian rhetorical trope, he establishes his tentative trajectory of thought only to dismiss it as “unimaginable, indeed absurd.”⁹ Freud is resisting a static interpretation of the mind; his analogy fails and he abandons the city as an appropriate comparison precisely because he loses any sense of dynamic urban history.¹⁰

It would seem, then, that the image of the city Freud dismisses is vivid in its fragments, ruins, and recreations, and a more poignant image both of the mind and the city than, in the end, he is willing to admit. The psychoanalytic position is one where we never lose anything. There is still remembering and forgetting; these are what make loss itself so painful, and at times, pathological. However, the topography of the mind, which Freud links to but will not commit to in terms of a way for thinking about the city, provides a slightly different way of emphasizing the problem of memory and forgetting the city engenders. Projects like the Tate dig, through this proliferation of lost objects, seem to present in material form histories of recollection that must contend with a dimension of being in the world that means, in fact, to never lose anything, but to uncover the disparate and uncertain. The abundance of objects risks becoming the fetish, the anxiety of loss, and the burden of things neither lost nor discovered in the city. Somewhere amidst the city’s losses that erupt in Dion’s excavations, he establishes the city’s everyday rhythms of work and play.

The Art of Labour

Projects like the Thames dig demand a high level of labour, both practically in the form of the numerous volunteers necessary for such a large project, and metaphorically, in terms of the concept of working through the past. The Thames sites created a dialogue between the old and new institutions of art. Building the Tate Modern was an attempt to reinvent and rejuvenate the cultural role of the Tate in the city, and it called upon a wide range of groups and participants to do such. Dion’s project was commissioned in order to introduce the community to the new gallery. As Tate Modern curator Iwona Blazwick explains, “Rather than parachute this vast institution [Tate Modern] unannounced into the Borough of Southwark, we were anxious to make some introductions.”¹¹ As a process-based project that demanded numerous intersections between the artist, the Tate, the volunteer participants, and the viewing public, the building of the Tate Modern is perhaps a moment where any possibility of the “underground” (of art and the Thames) is reconfigured as community and locality. However, this component of the work that maps the process of art making as a series of immediate interactions based on local forms must also contend with contemporary trends in urban and cultural planning.

The Tate Modern opened in May 2000 in the massive, former Bankside Power Station. The gallery is indicative of the types of changes that have happened in the area as this “new” heart of London reaps the benefits of extensive planning and redevelopment. Moving away from uneven industrial development that previously defined the area, and with key projects such as the Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre (1997) and the Millennium Bridge footpath connecting Bankside to St. Paul’s Cathedral and the city centre, Bankside now boasts strong tourism, with all the requisite services, and a burgeoning cultural scene with museums, galleries, and film and performing arts theatres. As the north part of the London borough Southwark, Bankside has been carefully cultivated by local authorities as a definable district, although previously unknown, in the interest of increased cultural capital.¹² At a moment when both the private and public sector are keenly looking to capture the value of culture, Bankside, as well as Southwark on the whole, has become a model for successful urban renewal in the UK.

While Dion critiques hierarchies of knowledge and forms of classification and narration that restrict and order, this project also highlights the gentrifying process happening to the surrounding area. If gentrification always entails the willing consumption of the past, the project fits quite nicely into that model, not only in terms of the objects of history it presents, but also in terms of its place within the nexus of contemporaneous urban development. We are reminded that this process is double-edged—risky, but with rewards. The district is in a process of regeneration, and the value of the project for the community and their reward for participation is the value of art added to the community. In this sense, the project’s demand for labour (even though of the most unusual, even absurd, sort) is recuperated for the cultural market. And perhaps, within this configuration, this underground of muddy discoveries becomes figurative here for the work of art in a world of displacements where the international demands of culture leave no riverbed, as it seems, undisturbed.

Dion’s artistic practice reminds us that it is possible to mine, dredge, dig, and glean for knowledge, for stories, and for memories that inhere in city spaces. Through this terminology, we are reminded that recollecting the past is work, and that the inscription of the labouring body provides a comforting corporeality to memory’s uncertainties. Mining refers to the extraction of resources; it is the use of raw material with some eye to profit, however defined in its cultural or economic dimensions. Dredging returns relatively useless material but with the larger goal of maintaining conduits of circulation. Gleaning is the marginalized labour of the already disadvantaged—picking off the market’s refuse. Digging is twofold. It is at times archaeology, the searching for objects underneath the surface with a clear desire to redeem the past for the present. And, it is at times constructive, a form of renewal, yet one that depends on the excavations of the old so that new forms may be built. All of these activities are heavy, dirty, and difficult, and the disadvantages of each action are clear—the risk of reckless consumption and relentless

destruction. And yet, through a form of labour that is also the work of art, Dion's project also captures the invigorations of play. By turning from work to play it is equally possible to regard Dion's work as a giant moment of playing in the mud. The city's lost objects in this context become toys.



The City as Urban Playground

Artists have persistently grappled with the flux and chance of the metropolis such that the city becomes an integral part of the process of art making; within this dynamic, there is a lineage of artists, of which Dion is a part, who have approached the city as a physical and psychical "playground" and drawn on the tensions and energies, from the destructive to the reparative, that play encompasses.

Walter Benjamin, as an exemplary and eclectic theorist of culture and the city, was particularly attentive to the role of the child and play within the spaces of the city. Exemplifying both the utopian and melancholic proportions of the dream work of modernity, the child and the act of play re-animate the detritus of material culture and offer a glimpse into the elusive work of individual and collective memory. Benjamin attempts to reveal and decipher, to give voice to modern social forms through the minutiae and detritus of urban existence. The trivial and despised offer precious insights, and as such, artefacts can be liberated from their oppressive commodity contexts. In *One-Way Street*, Benjamin writes of the preoccupation of children with the by-products and unwanted objects found in the urban landscape, "in waste products they recognize the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them."¹³ The act and process of collecting challenges the rule of the metropolis and its system of values that cherishes only the new and destroys even the most recent past. Thus, the child's playful urban reconstitutions are acts of "bringing together, in the artefact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship."¹⁴

Both Benjamin and Dion embrace the practice of searching for the most unusual things in the most unlikely of places; these findings then become recombined into provocative, unusual configurations, capturing the liberations of play.¹⁵ For Benjamin, the child prefigures the adult-as-archaeologist charged with the task, as Benjamin's autobiographical texts acknowledge, of excavating personal memory through the spaces of the city; for Dion, the artist-as-archaeologist returns to the child who treats the city as a site of playful discoveries and reinventions. Within these frameworks, searching is as important as discovery; searching pays tribute to the losses that we know exist just below the surface.

Of the act of uncovering the past, Benjamin declares: "True, for successful excavations a plan is needed. Yet no less indispensable is the cautious probing of the spade in the dark loam, and it is to cheat oneself of the richest prize to preserve as a record merely the inventory of one's discoveries, and not this dark joy

of the place of finding itself.” Thus, with Dion, we are returned to the “dark joy of the place of finding itself”¹⁶ in its most curious and exuberant articulations. For artists and citizens alike, from both BookCrossings to the *Tate Thames Dig*, we are reminded of the necessity of coming to terms with our individual collections (and being wary of just providing a classification of losses) as well as our personal and collective histories, histories that are always about searching, losing and being lost. At times, objects of art and everyday existence surprise and intervene in the collective space of the city as reminders of the displacements and reinventions that structure the city precisely because the city never truly *loses* anything.

NOTES

1 See Peter Menzel, Charles Mann (text) and Paul Kennedy (intro), *Material World: A Global Family Portrait* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1994).

2 www.bookcrossing.com

3 Ibid.

4 See Alex Coles and Mark Dion, ed., *Mark Dion: Archaeology* (London: Black Dog, 1999) for an overview of these projects. In addition, he completed his most recent project last year, *Rescue Archaeology*, New York, MOMA, 2004.

5 Alex Coles, "Mark Dion," *Parachute* 98 (2000): 64.

6 Walter Benjamin, *Origins of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, intro. George Steiner (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 175.

7 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. David McLintock, intro. Leo Bersani (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 7.

8 Ibid., 8.

9 Ibid., 9.

10 His dismissal is distinctly unsatisfying particularly because of the relation between psyche and city spaces that appears elsewhere in his work, and often through the figure of the ruin. For example, other ruminations on cities in Freud include Genoa in "The 'Uncanny,'" Pompeii in "Jensen's Gradiva," Athens in "An Experience on the Acropolis." And, of course, Freud's conception of the psyche overall is thoroughly topographical.

11 Iwona Blazwick, "Mark Dion's 'Tate Thames Dig,'" *Oxford Art Journal* 24.2 (2001): 103.

12 P. Teedon, "Designing a place called Bankside: On defining an unknown space in London," *European Planning Studies* 9.4 (2001): 476-481.

13 Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, trans. Edmond Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, intro. Susan Sontag (London: NLB, 1979), 52.

14 Ibid., 53.

15 Mark Dion addresses his interest in Benjamin in his interview with Alex Coles, "Critical Strategies of Fictional Address: Field Work and The Natural History Museum" in *The Optic of Walter Benjamin, de-, dis-, ex-. 3* (1999): 38-57. And Coles has often discussed the resonance of Dion's artistic practice with Benjamin's work.

16 *One-Way Street*, 314.

