

CARETAKERS

1

Waste in the city is like an ocean, a perpetual tide of narratives and references that overlap and bleed into one another. Things that are swept into corners and guided under soles. Things that find themselves in collections, of an amateur, informal variety, such as the undiscerning landfill, or through more discriminating eyes, to be taken home for their sheen or how they lay against one another. There are things that give, things that take. Things the economy forgot, or things that peculiarize time. It's always high tide in New York City.

2

Yuji Agematsu does not remember. He does not want to. Since 1980, he has moved in and out of streets, like a dance, collecting things. Some refer to it as trash. Maybe they are gifts. Or orphans. Or something akin to a shadow, waiting to be whole. His movement across the city is without structure; he walks where he pleases and does not want to consider where he belongs, where he came from, or his own identity in the process. A form of liberation through aimless walking, after the work day, when composition ends and improvisation begins. Through chance, he encounters pieces of plastic and coils of hair, chunks of rock salt and brittle bird bones, newspaper mâchéd through rain and dirt. They are taken, and kept, as found. The tenuousness of these things is not a concern. Impermanence is almost desirable, a recognition that what falls into hands, artistic or otherwise, eventually disappears.

3

To collect is to believe in mystery. To subscribe to the idea that meaning stubbornly resides in things even after its apparent use value expires into waste. *The moss is talking again* "They are looking at me always," he says. "I am just a slave to the duty, passion, and convention of them. I will have to take care of them. If I do well it guarantees my slave's freedom."

4

By the time you are 58 years old you will have devoted nearly 1770 hours of your life to brushing your teeth.

5

Each day he creates a work in a cellophane sleeve slipped off a packet of cigarettes. Items are dropped inside the pouch, the composition defined without his influence. Their “completion” is determined intuitively, with these feral materials continuing to change shape, shift chemical states and crumble at the edges. Nothing stays the same, but why should it? Expectations for stasis are always met with disappointment. His is a habit that supports an addiction, and an addiction that structures a habit—the number of sleeves is determined by the amount of cigarettes he decides to smoke that day (that week, that month), while the search for the bodega to retrieve more cigarettes, or the seven minutes outside to smoke, places him in the hands of more material.

6

Findings are pinned to tables and walls, forming intricate patterns that reference his experimental music training. Compositions are improvised, and scattered between is an uneven procession of cigarette butts and chewing gum, perhaps two of the most common currencies in trash. Things that change dramatically, rendered unrecognizable by time and rot, rest alongside materials that persist, such as strips of tape and foil whose man-made resilience underline the contradiction in these arrangements. Although it is a collection that rejects nostalgia—a belly in constant digest—the emotional aura of the materials lingers. The affixed objects bob up and down in height but nothing is privileged over the other in their treatment. He does not seek out anything specific and there is no discovery more special than the previous. “I notice myself as a human being when I happen to meet them,” he says.

7

These compositions are not telling us secrets we do not already know, and there are no lessons to be learned. The dust settles. He makes it his business to watch, to observe, to create time capsules that make no allusions for forever. The collection wilts—it is added to but never grows. It falls apart, pools and evaporates, and is consumed by the living, creatures who thrive on decay. Finding things breeds fatigue, as is want for things that are never met. Wage increases that never come, laundry that needs to be washed, a box of cigarettes that need to be replenished.

8

What responsibility does he carry for this infinite waste? The vast ocean, a tangible void, gathers

things and binds us together. “Sides and bottom, of which the jug consists and by which it stands, are not really what does the holding. But if the holding is done by the jug’s void, then the potter who forms sides and bottom on his wheel does not, strictly speaking, make the jug. He only shapes the clay. No—he shapes the void. For it, in it, and out of it, he forms the clay into the form. From start to finish the potter takes hold of the impalpable void and brings it forth as the container in the shape of a containing vessel. The vessel’s thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds.”

9

He grows tired but he has to take care of them. He does his best.

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