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The Object Memory Palace

by

Amra Causevic

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts Studio Art, Hunter College
The City University of New York

2020

May 15, 2020

Date

Constance De Jong

Thesis Sponsor

May 15, 2020

Date

Carrie Moyer

Second Reader

Dedication

To the future self
To the future in motion

Acknowledgements

Dear Constance De Jong, Carrie Moyer, Nari Ward, Lynda Klich, Alex Segade, Paul Ramirez Jonas, Tom Weaver, A.K. Burns, Anthony Hawley, Daniel Bozkov, Joel Carreiro, my dear friends, and family.

Thank you for your support and guidance. Thank you from the deepest part of my heart.

<3

Amra

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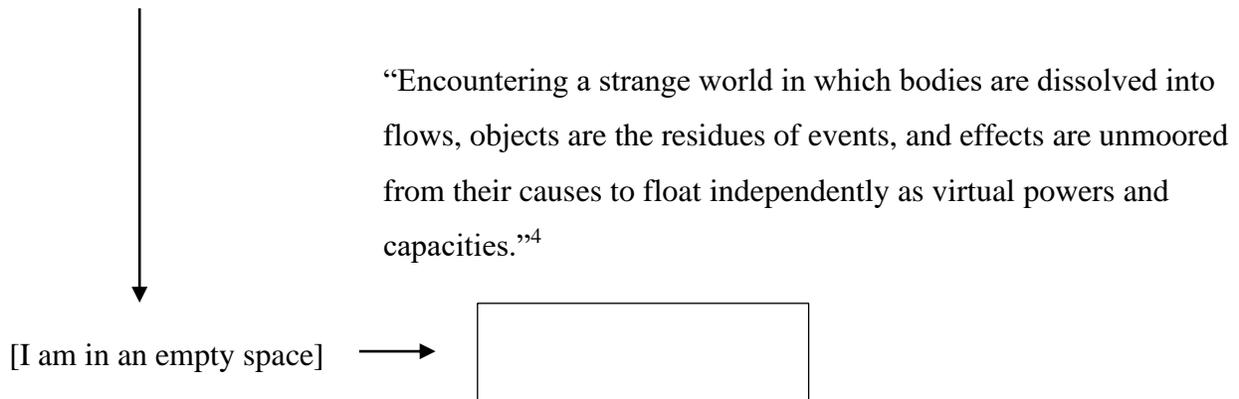
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I am collecting and creating objects as a means to locate myself, to leave a marker, to map the present, to create a future. In *The Spirit of Utopia*, Ernst Bloch writes: “I am. We are.¹ So am I. So are we still.”² As if to announce the present self: I exist and am staying! The self as a marker, a gatherer, collector, to remain recorded beyond its time. A utopic assemblage. A poem.

My process is a journey of making order out of chaos, by submerging in an imagination through collected objects once possessed by nature and the streets. The objects remain a concrete constant, while the self is in flux. It is a question of how we outwardly view the world and interact with its surroundings. The object, a memento mori if you will, becomes more complex when considering its materiality and relationship to the ephemera. Each object acts as a fragment within a whole. To turn normalcy into absurdity, we rediscover the everyday by embracing a process of chance.

“That is enough. Now we have to begin.”³

Place. **Movement.** Object. Memory. Data.



In order to create a microcosm, an accumulation of meaning, like words to form a sentence to form a story to be told over and over again, forming and shaping the perception of time, space and experiences, I begin with movement.

¹ Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, p. 1

² Ibid, p. 233

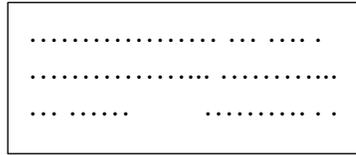
³ Ibid, p. 1

⁴ Christoph Cox, *Sonic Thought*, p. 107

[Insert place]



[Canal Street, New York]



[Each dot represents a footstep. Each space represents a moment of stillness from movement — a prolonged stop. The space of the pause determines the time spent within this pause.]

“Bodies are always about to leave, on the verge of a movement, a fall, a gap, a dislocation. Even the simplest departure is just this: the moment when some body’s no longer there, right here where he was. The moment he makes room for a lone gulf in the spacing that he himself is. A departing body carries its spacing away, itself gets carried away as spacing, and somehow it sets it self aside, withdraws into itself — while leaving its very spacing “behind” — as one says — in its place, with this place remaining its own, at once absolutely intact and absolutely abandoned.”⁵

Moving through a rapid passage of varied ambiances,⁶ I see a thing that catches my eye. The street is gray, littered with bland forms, liquid messes, gum glued to the pavement. Dirt. Within the space of the moment, between each step, the brain has two possibilities; to pick up or to ignore. To take on *one* route— this moment is a moment of multiplying. A chance to create and answer questions, to continue and enable the possibilities to enfold.

⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, p. 33

⁶ Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 62

“For if we do not go along,
absolutely no note moves.”⁷

Place. Movement. **Object**. Memory. Data.

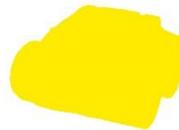


It is a yellow thing. It has a shape. A particular shape. As I examine further, my senses operate. Sifting through the mental archive of possible matches, I determine its materiality without touching the object.

“Here, the haptic realm is shown to play a tangible, tactile role in our communicative sense of spatiality and motility, thus shaping the texture of habitable space and ultimately, mapping out ways of being in touch with our environment.”⁸

It’s a plastic thing. With comfort, I pick it up. I examine its form in my hands and stowing away in my pocket later to be analyzed.

[Insert a small picture of this thing]



My pockets are full of street goods, lost, discarded, unwanted goods. A futurist’s archeological collection, an examination of samples of the ‘now’ strata.

⁷ Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, p. 130

⁸ Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys of Art, Architecture, and Film*, p. 6

Deep down the capitalist machine, someone out there desired this thing and bought it. Used it. Or perhaps not even used it at all. Their finger marks and memory remain on this object. Now laying on the street to be kicked, stepped on, washed away, dumped. The street has its own fingerprints and memory. I collect both but I am only able to extract one form of information.

We are living in an object nightmare. Objects upon objects upon things upon a heap of nuclear waste, left for generations, as capitalism dictates obsolescence, and a desire for the 'new' dominates. *One person's trash is another person's treasure.* Perhaps we can start building new structures out of this trash. Or reuse the material for something else, like eye glasses, or shoes, or cement, or even fabric. In the Netherlands, plastic is recycled to make cement for roads and bike paths.⁹ A town of Kamikatsu Japan, recycles 100% of all their waste.¹⁰ A company in San Francisco creates thread out of discarded plastic bottles to produce hand bags.¹¹ A sea of possibilities.

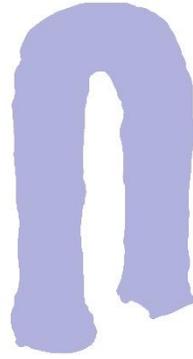
By composing an installation of collected, remade, reused, fragmented components, I propose to create new meaning and value, an imagined world, a Nerudian ode to [un]common things.¹²

⁹ Plastic Road, "A Revolution in Building Roads," <https://www.plasticroad.eu/en/>

¹⁰ Sonia Narang, "Zero Waste Town Recycles Most of Its Trash," <https://why.org/segments/zero-waste-town-recycles-most-of-its-trash/>

¹¹ Rothy <https://rothys.com/sustainability>

¹² Pablo Neruda, *Neruda & Vallejo: Selected Poems*, "Ode to My Socks," p.140



*Arch*¹³

An archway composed entirely of collected egg cartons, stands 7ft feet tall and wide enough for one person to pass through. A passageway, a milestone, a symbol of a transitional space. An arch, seen as a stable structure, now stands on wheels. A mobile passageway into a communal world. I am thinking about objects as residues of events. This moveable archive of events is embedded with little silver and gold levers. When wound by hand each lever plays a distinct sound. They can be played singularly or all at once to create a cacophony, obfuscating the idea of the traditional and known. Swallowed by the egg cartons, the potential sound signifies a past moment.

[To hear an object]

[To hold a sound]

“If we do not go along, then, nothing can continue singing.”¹⁴

Imagine a world where acts of play are embedded within structural and architectural forms, and acts of whimsy are ingrained in the psyche of the passerby. A walk turned into an adventure. This archway structure is a stand-in for conflict resolution, calling the viewer to deeply listen and experience the materiality of a gesture, of movement, of every day objects. By participating, you are playing.

¹³ ‘Arch,’ egg cartons, foam, wood, rubber casters, found music boxes, 7ft. x 5ft, 2020.

¹⁴ Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, p. 141

Place. Movement. Object. **Memory**. Data.



There are three main forms of memory systems, long term, sensory, and short term.¹⁵ Memory is processed not only in the brain, but throughout the body. The hippocampus is located in the center of the brain, and is one of the main parts where memory lives. Within it, there is a specific place that responds to time and place, called place cells.¹⁶

When we are remembering, our brains become travel logs by using a technique called memory palace, a mnemonic device that relies on spatial relationships between locations on a familiar route or rooms in a familiar building to arrange and recollect a specific memory content [memory palace is also an ancient concept].¹⁷ But somethings that strengthen our memories, can also warp them.¹⁸ We remember the central aspect, our attention zooms into the core of the moment, while avoiding the periphery. As a result, memories deteriorate over time.

Memories are not fine recording; they are like live performances created from different parts of the brain in the present moment. They are myth creations. We can't remember every detail of every experience, and so we use preexisting knowledge, biases, and beliefs, to fill in those spaces.

Why do we have a memory system that is so unreliable or error prone?

¹⁵ Saundra K. Ciccarelli, Noland J. White, *Psychology*, Fifth Edition, p. 227

¹⁶ Dr. Emma Wood and Dr. Paul Dudchenko, "Using Place Cells to Test Memory," Memory and place cells (Memory and Space Laboratory (MSL), accessed May 12, 2020, <https://www.memoryspace.mvm.ed.ac.uk/memoryandplacecells.html>) "Place cells are neurons in the hippocampus that fire when the animal occupies a specific location within its environment. As different place cells have different place fields (locations where they fire), they are thought to provide a cognitive map for the rat."

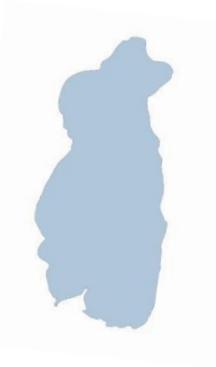
¹⁷ Ayisha Qureshi et al., "The Method of Loci as a Mnemonic Device to Facilitate Learning in Endocrinology Leads to Improvement in Student Performance as Measured by Assessments," *Advances in Physiology Education* (American Physiological Society, June 2014), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4056179/>

¹⁸ Ciccarelli, White, *Psychology*, p. 242

The future and past seem to be linked together in the brain.¹⁹ In a MRI scan study, people were asked to remember their past and also imagine the future. The results indicated; the parts of the brain engaged for remembering the past, the same network was engaged when imaging the future.²⁰ This study leads me to wonder if our mind is the time machine we have been dreaming about?

When we are remembering, we are also imagining, and creating. Our brain weaves memories from the past to create the future to create a sense of self.

*Tapestry*²¹



This *Tapestry* is my sofa cover and my blanket. Cloth, the bodies first architecture²², envelops like a bio-hazard suit, a membrane of protection from the outside world, redirecting one's self into another.

Draped over bodies and furniture, embroidered with various threads, velvet was once associated with nobility and opulence. As a precious and luxurious item, it was worn only by royalty and the wealthy, and seen as an expression of power, wealth, and taste. A linen, that resembled velvet, originated in Egypt around 2000 BC, however the material that we know as velvet today, originated in China around the thirteenth century.²³ Woven out of silk, motifs associated with a family's reputation and coat of arms, were seen as the most valuable. It was a material confined to the upper class that excluded those who produced it, those of the lower class. Certain colors, like crimson reds, greens and blues, were the most popular. Goldsmiths prepared fine strips of gold and silver to

¹⁹ Schacter, Daniel L., et al. "The Future of Memory: Remembering, Imagining, and the Brain." *NIH Public Access*, p. 1

²⁰ Idib, p. 12

²¹ "Tapestry," velvet, thread, 12ft. x 5ft., 2020.

²² Ann Hamilton, "The Event of a Thread," (Park Avenue Armory, December 2012), https://www.annhamiltonstudio.com/images/projects/armory/AHamilton_armory_pkg_final_full_res_public.pdf, p.7

²³ Melinda Watt, "Renaissance Velvet Textiles," Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, August 2011), https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/velv/hd_velv.htm

wind around the silk threads for elaborate decoration. During the Renaissance, the production of velvet was crafted secretly and done by highly skilled craftspeople²⁴, and even protected by the law. People were prohibited to leave their native cities for the fear that they would share their expertise with rival manufactures.²⁵ Today, scrolling through 50 pages on eBay, new velvet sofas are priced anywhere from a \$100-\$15,000, and vintage for \$300-\$4,000.

To decorate a space means to adorn it. A sofa, an object of specified comfort (*hygge*)²⁶, is covered by this lush and heavy velvet tapestry, 12 ft. long and 5 ft. wide, enough length for a sofa and human body. The body remembers the sensation of places, of touch and shelter. For a body in motion, a transient body, *Tapestry* is a map and an entryway into the palace. Sewn and embroidered to embed a code, vivid colored threads are used as topographical signifiers as markers for this place.

“Structures of feeling in the double sense of sensing and signifying, the word and the thread feel our passing. Is the word the conducting thread, or does thread conduct the word making? Both lead to the center of memory, a way of uniting and connecting. A word carries another word as thread searches for thread.”²⁷

²⁴ Watt, “Renaissance Velvet Textiles, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

²⁵ Watt, “Renaissance Velvet Textiles, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

²⁶ Anna Altman, “The Year of Hygge, the Danish Obsession with Getting Cozy,” *The New Yorker* (December 18, 2016), <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-year-of-hygge-the-danish-obsession-with-getting-cozy>)

²⁷ Cecilia Vicuña, “Word & Thread.” Edinburgh, Scotland: Morning Star Publications, 1996.

Place. Movement. Object. Memory. Data.



Topophilia

[My birthplace of Bosnia and Herzegovina]

The name has a nice sound. It is an old place. A very beautiful place. A Neolithic place. The air is particular there, slightly thick, fresh, and sweet. A smell of the color green and blue. I feel very different when I am there. I feel my point of existence validated. It is my marker, my home, regardless of where I physically live. Do our bodies absorb the history of a place? Did I inherit its memory? During the war, my family and I fled from Brcko, to → Zagreb → Samobor → Essen → Frankfurt → Neu-Isenburg → St. Petersburg → Sarajevo → St. Petersburg → New York, NY, USA.

“The land one possesses is always a sign of barbarism and blood, while the land one traverses without taking it reminds us of a book.”²⁸

The value of marking a map and placing hearts on it (i.e., google maps “save” feature), to relive memories, reopen pathways, re-feelings, a photographic place experience. Moving in psycho-space through these markers, they themselves are objects. They contain and translate the language within this imagined space, the marking of a memory, a story, a document. We leave a psycho-geographic trace.

“Geography includes inhabitants and vessels.”²⁹

²⁸ Chantal Akerman, cited in Jill Robbins. *Poetry and Crisis: Cultural Politics and Citizenship in the Wake of the Madrid Bombings*, p. 103.

²⁹ Gertrude Stein, *A Stein Reader* (Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 470

[To make a home]

What does it mean to be idle?

Within this idleness, what is being recorded?

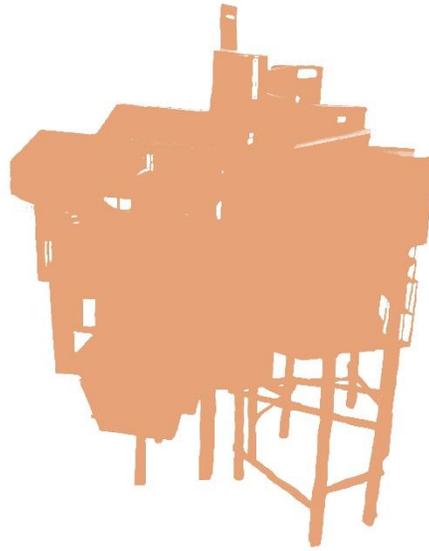
The invisible object in a non-place.

The thing of silence.

A pause in movement.

Is this a journey of the place inside?

If so, how do you enter?



*Model*³⁰

I am constructing a home for myself by responding to an internal urgency.

This is a miniature, a model, a fairytale. It is a projected image onto the future. Standing 2.5 ft. tall, I ask the viewer to imagine themselves inside of it, to visualize collective architecture, to dream and invert their perspective, and cross the threshold of absurdity.³¹ This object is a house with multiple rooms, multiple levels, and multiple entry ways. Each room has two exists, and multiple accessibility pathways. I follow the structure of light coming from entryways, i.e., doors and windows, sensitivity to overhead space, and privacy within each corridor. I image a quiet light filled room where one can spend their day reading, while ceiling-to-floor mosaic type windows project the lush foliage from the outside. To be cocooned.

Wanting to fill it with stories, to have lively and jovial gatherings, to house my collected objects and give them life, to fill a library, to create a space for others. To celebrate. It is an open invitation and everyone is welcomed.

“Near absurdity can be a source of freedom.”³²

³⁰ “Model,” wood, 2.5ft. x 2ft, 2020.

³¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994) p. 149

³² Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 150

[A meditation]

A place is as grand as the Milky Way and as tiny as some abstract ontological thought imbedded somewhere elsewhere nowhere in the depths of a quantum field inside or outside of a brain. I start off with myself, my present existence, my being.

This place is temporary. It will change after today. After a few short minutes. When I leave, I would have absorbed its information from that moment and will carry it with me to the next, until forgotten, or added on to.

[Turn off the lights]

When I sit in my room, I am bound to 4 walls, a space. I sleep in this space, I dream in this space, I have collected experiences and brought them back to this space. On my right side there is a book shelf—a broken bookshelf unable to hold anything heavy. It has accumulated papers and gallery brochures, tchotchkes, and things waiting to be tended to and re-examined. They linger in this space until the bookshelf breaks. They are in limbo for now. My books are on the floor. Somehow, this feels wrong but I do not have a functioning place to house them. My books are displaced. Waiting.

It is a room around 12ft x 15ft. Just enough to fit a bed, a dresser, a shelf, and have floor space to stretch. There is one window that overlooks unto an alley. Its direction points to a cardinal South. Occasionally, the full moon will shine through my window and the noon sun will shine for about an hour. The sunlight is obscured by other buildings and trees. There are two large plants next to this window and several small ones on the windowsill. Two cacti and two vine plants. The East side of my room has a brick wall. There seems to have been a door in the middle of this wall because you can see misplacement of the bricks in shape of a

doorway. My bed looks at this brick wall. My bed was also carefully curated to face East, a position according to Feng Shui said to make you feel like each day is a new day, bringing out feelings of ambition and growth. As I lay there, I think about what the room looked like when it had this door? Was my room an entry way to another bedroom? Or was my room a hallway? Or did my room belong to another apartment and now belongs to this apartment? How many times did it shape shift? Has it occupied two places at one point? Who shares my wall? Does the person (if there is a person), share the same brick wall? Or is their wall just a plain wall? Is my brick wall just a decorative New York brick aesthetic? Does this brick serve a function?

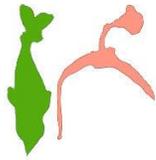
My bed is comfortable. Other people have slept it in. I have 2 pillows. One is stuffed with a small lavender pouch.

My room has a smell. I can only describe this smells as a hamster circus. The smell comes out of the brick wall. I imagine inside of the brick wall is a city of hamsters, living, loving, eating, shitting, sleeping. They have no sense of hygiene. I knock, but no one hears me! Who, other than these “hamsters” share my wall? How will I find this smell? Do they share this odor with me? Or is it just me? Did the previous tenant also smell this smell? If so, why didn't they warn me!

Every day when I enter my room, I burn sage, light incense, burn oil diffusers, or turn on my air purifier. I clean my room obsessively, and the smell always comes back. The hamsters inside my wall want their presence to be heard!

Will this be the memory I recollect in the future of my dwelling place? Ten years from now I will remember living in a place with the awful hamster smell.

Place. Movement. Object. Memory. **Data.**



[Archiving and utopia]



[Disorder of every day]



[Poetry is playful, and
it describes a moment
perfectly.]

Hal Foster said archival art “makes historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present.”³³ Perhaps, the repetitive action of collecting, locating, and acknowledging, illuminates the moment we live in. Exposing public debris and salvaged ruins of late capitalism.



These objects are banal and once belonged to a whole. They range from metal fragments, to unusual hardware, broken ceramic parts, rocks, pieces of wood, gummy silicone stress reducing objects, to plastic toy parts, and so on. They are solely selected based on their aesthetic, locality, placement, tactility, and my curiosity. There is almost a form of communication that happens between me and these objects. They are often times recognizable and other times not. They might appear mysterious to the viewer (the non-collector), but familiar on vast levels (physical, sensorial) to the collector. This relationship of selecting, forges a connection to the archive, and tactility creates a memory.

*The Cartography of Objects*³⁴ is an installation of over two hundred collected objects accompanied by miniature books, which recite poetry and fictional stories, text conversations, and looped sound bites of chewing food, black holes, Jupiter, birds, water, whispering, cats’ purring, so on. This embedded data offers an interconnectedness.

³³ Hal Foster. "An Archival Impulse." *October* 110 (2004), p. 4

³⁴ "Cartography of Objects," found objects, 20ft. x 7ft, 2017-2020.

In the middle of a brick road, it stood out by its shear flash of metallic seasoning. This object is plastic and it appears to have belonged to a car. Perhaps there was a car crash and the debris was left behind. It was the only remaining material on the street. It is an object related to the physiology of motion and the happen-stance of accidents. To fulfil the quota of the day, I collected the object.³⁵

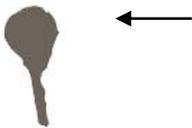
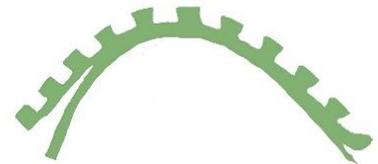


A metal screw, about 4 inches long x 1 ½ in diameter. There is always one missing piece in an Ikea assembly pack.³⁶ →



← A heavy object made of iron, about 4 inches long and 1 inch thick. Purpose remains a mystery. An ancient ship.³⁷

Foam. Canal Rubber Supply Co. Inc., one of the few remaining hardware stores left on Canal Street. A reminder of places in flux. Non places. Eva Hesse always on my mind.³⁸ →



← A tiny key. Did someone lose the key to their diary? If so, I hold the literal key to their secrets.³⁹

³⁵ [40.721859, -74.006423](#)

³⁶ [40.722689, -74.006625](#)

³⁷ [40.717639, -73.999267](#)

³⁸ [40.720394, -74.003071](#)

³⁹ [40.746958, -74.004121](#)



← 6 ft. long by 1-inch-wide by ¼ inch thick, rubber silicone. Someone's folded telling tongue. They speak many languages, tell many stories, and many lies. A library of tongues: to stick one's tongue out mockingly, impossible length, non-human, reptilian, an extension of limbs, jaw dropping, surprised, exhausted, big mouthed, horny.⁴⁰



← Heavy, iron, curvature. About 1 inch in diameter. Part of a lock? A mystery.⁴¹



← There she (this metallic object) stood in a pasture, somewhere in the region of Loire Valley, in central France. A little village, population of 5. We arrived to Chinon on March 6th, 590 years apart. Here, she met Charles and the visionary young woman who revealed the mission to her.⁴² Joan of Arc was 17 years old.⁴³



↑ Within a span of 6 months, I've watched another high-rise appear. Another person's view barricaded, limiting sunlight, limiting growth. New Yorkers are asking for Rent Cancellation; the real-estate market isn't slowing down! Sixteen million+ people have lost their jobs. This piece of insulation foam becomes a high commodity.

⁴⁰ [40.740859, -73.995519](#)

⁴¹ [40.723670, -74.009437](#)

⁴² "Joan of Arc and the Loire," Loire Valley World Heritage, November 16, 2018, <https://loirevalley-worldheritage.org/Know/A-la-carte/Orleans-Blois2/The-town-of-Orleans/Joan-of-Arc-and-the-Loire>

⁴³ [47.057203, 0.186092](#)

When my mother was 7 years old, she spent her days digging in her yard, in a town called of Brezovo Polje, a small town where she grew up in, where her grandparents settled after fleeing a war with the Ottoman Empire. There, she found shards of ceramics. Her favorite finds were the color of turquoise. The soil was fertile with ancient artifacts.⁴⁴



← Cut storage container locks. Unable to pay, the company cuts off the locks and auctions off their goods. The floor is littered with fragments of locks. Someone's material possessions are another's profit. These profiteers are called pirates.⁴⁵

An ode to New York slumlords and bedbugs. May you live together in peace. Mattress foam circa 2017.⁴⁶ →



↑
537 Broadway #3, New York. Simone Forte referred to Broadway as the river.⁴⁷ —



⁴⁴ [44.844056, 18.956368](#)

⁴⁵ [40.751865, -74.006038](#)

⁴⁶ [40.695893, -73.944766](#)

⁴⁷ [40.723328, -73.998584](#)

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