FANTASIES OF THE JUNK SHOP

HUNTER BRAITHWAITE

It's good for art.
-Boo Boo

One way to organize a library is the law of the good neighbor, wherein books are ordered not numerically or alphabetically, but by theme. The idea is that similarities breed convergences, serendipity. This is the basic principle of the Warburg Library in London, which is structured by orientation/image/thought/action.

Thematic categorization also works when organizing a conventional store with a standardized inventory: shirts on the shelves, tennis rackets in that corner, shoes on the table in the back. But a junk shop is quite different. Everything in a junk shop is fiercely individual, incommunicative, and, once singled out by the shopper, incomparable. Faced with such irascible stock, a junk shop owner could resort to Borges's Chinese encyclopedia; they could organize by shape, color, or price; or they could just say fuck it.

At Argo Electronics on Canal Street, the record jackets cost the same whether there's a record in them or not. You can buy the locking mechanism for a car. You can buy car seat headrests, with or without embedded screens for back-seat entertainment. You can buy lots of different types of tape. Tape is a best seller. You can buy select books, such as *Essential Boat Drinks & Assorted Frozen Concoctions*. That book, which emits an antiquarian aura but was published a handful of years ago exclusively for the gift shop of Jimmy Buffet's

Margaritaville restaurant chain, contains a recipe for a "Memphis Belle," a brandy and SoCo affair named after the first B-17 Flying Fortress to survive 25 missions over occupied Europe.

Damaged on these missions, it was repaired piece by piece, until it practically became a new plane. This recalls a much earlier vessel, the mythological Argo, which similarly underwent continual rejuvenation, retaining its name while becoming a new ship. This tangent leads to Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* and then on to *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, but suffice it to say here that junk, the cast-off, the glued-on, is serious business.

You can buy dog toys. You can buy old electric toothbrushes. Security cameras. Regular cameras. You can buy whatever you want, provided you can find it.

To know Argo is to know Zdislav "David" Lasevski, the store's owner. He careens through the aisles like a freewheeling gear in a clogged machine, bemoaning the global shift towards "iPad," his catch-all term for contemporary electronics, holding up odds and ends asking if "You know what it is, this?" Almost always you don't, sometimes neither does he.

Now, it's tempting to describe the proprietors and staff of a junk shop

with the same distanced interest that you consider the objects for sale. But of course the choice to operate one of these stores, to spend one's life surrounded by objects that are at once garbage and treasure (garbage to most, treasure to a few), is manifest in a *unique* personality.

After a childhood in a Polish orphanage, David, who is Israeli, spent a few years in the army before joining the merchant marines, working in the engine room of a tanker. One time in the Red Sea he helped extinguish a fire on another, sinking ship. There was an official commendation, a medal, and a check. A few faded pictures taken of him below deck show an exhausted yet focused face smeared with soot, his eyes reflecting the camera's flash like LEDs.

After traveling around, he decided that America was the best country, so when the ship docked at Port Elizabeth, New Jersey, he took his suitcase and got off, leaving "the sea for the fish." This and more anecdotes from his early life are contained in his memoir, *No Place Called Home*, which is $1.99 on Amazon. If you come to Argo looking for something, chances are he'll end up selling you his book instead.

One day, David met a man who was selling calculators. The broken ones he tossed in the garbage. "I told him, instead of throwing them to the garbage, sell them to me for a dollar a piece." He did, and David took home a few boxes, fixed them, and then resold them at a profit. In need of a replacement part for one of these calculators, he went to the electronics shop at 391 Canal. The owner said eight dollars. David countered with four. The owner said, "Are you crazy, this store makes no money. If someone comes with four thousand dollars I'd sell them the store."

So, David came with the four thousand dollars. This was in 1978 or 1979, he doesn't remember. *Why* he would buy a failing electronics shop in a failing city is a larger question, and a good one to keep in mind as you sort through Argo's bins. It is both essential and beside the point.

Beyond running Argo, David keeps himself busy writing memoirs and improving the lives of others through suggestion and invention. He sent a handwritten proposal to the DOT to alleviate congestion on the BQE by rerouting the HOV lane, which they implemented. Comparative before and after videos are available on Argo's YouTube page. He invented a do-it-yourself kidney stone removal kit.

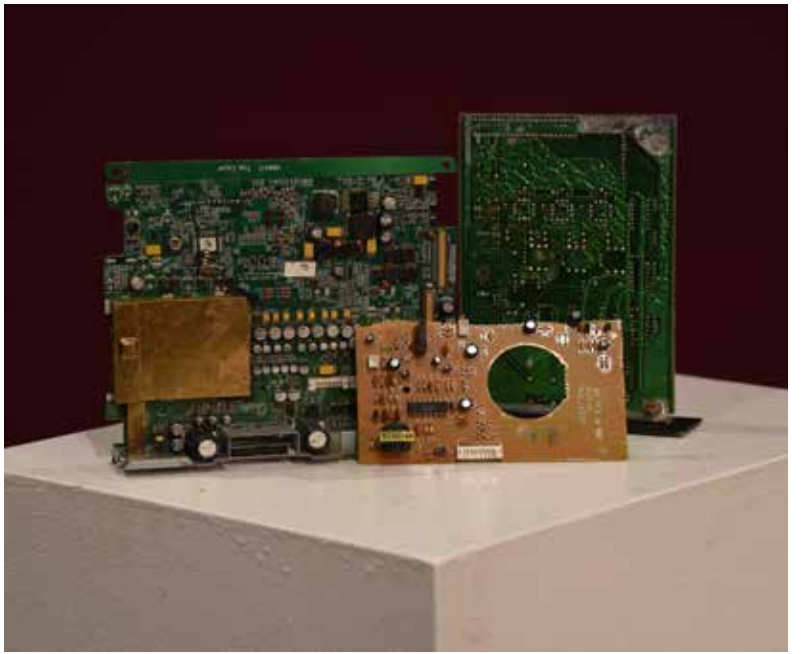
He invented a tiny tube that connects a bottle of lotion to a lubricant cartridge for your electric shaver. This is fortuitous: the bulk of Argo's income is due to the huge amount of used

Remington electric shavers David bought years ago, and now sells on eBay. He reportedly moves $6,000 of Remingtons a week.

There are more anecdotes, enough to compile some semblance of a biography. Again, this is fitting, because what is junk if not a material anecdote—something passed down, entertaining but somehow insufficient.

Hold a circuit board in your hand. Spin it between your fingers like a green cracker. The globs of solder set like bits of salt on a saltine. It's almost a cliché to see this cartographically, but we are conditioned to see the reflection of our surroundings in mundane objects. For those who live in cities, this means transposing the flow and energy of a metropolis onto whatever is at hand—Craigslist furniture churning through a neighborhood over the course of a decade, used (or stolen) bicycles, legal tender, or, in this case, a junked circuit board.

Starting in the 1920s, if you wanted to buy a radio or get yours repaired, you went to Cortland Street, 17 blocks south of where Argo is today. This was Radio Row. Radio's star was on the rise, as the expansion of the consumer class set the pace for the advent of broadcast culture. World War II put a damper on the businesses selling and repairing radios, as did



the medium's eclipse by television, but the small stores (there were over 300 at the height of it) rolled with the punches for as long as they could. The erection of the World Trade Center led to protests (one in July, 1962 featured a black-draped coffin containing the dummy labeled *Mr. Small Businessman*) but, ultimately, the demise of Radio Row.

The thing about material culture is that you have to try really hard to get it to go away. Especially in this city, even with space at a premium, objects enter a perpetual shuffle. In "My Lost City," Luc Sante writes about walking the streets of the Lower East Side finding objects—old furniture, etc. that had been hauled to the curb.[1] He reconstructed a sense of place from these derelict things. This junk. So, how does this work now, when the history of Lower Manhattan is trotted out to justify its expensive restaurants, boutiques, loft apartments with original beams and new fixtures? How does a storefront on Canal disrupt this linked accumulation of place and wealth, especially by selling used items at a discount?

Perhaps subversion lies in bargain pricing. This is not Shaker furniture, or Mid-century Danish. It's not Dieter Rams, it's not Ettore Sottsass, Charles and Ray Eames. It's not Northern Soul 45s or Pre-War Blues

1 Luc Sante, "My Lost City," in *Kill All Your Darlings: Pieces, 1990 – 2005*. New York: Yeti, 2007.

78s. It's not even vintage Casio (ok, maybe it's vintage Casio). Every item has a backstory, sure, but the provenance of this stock is noteworthy because it's so unspecific. In these boxes is the vast chaff of globalism, the gravel of a place, the loam of a place. Dusty electronics had to accumulate dust from somewhere, even if it's just the shipping container or the storage unit. So, backstory is a dead end. It is where junk goes after it leaves the shop that has made the biggest cultural impact on this city.

The hardware shops, junk shops, and electronics shops on Canal inadvertently became a destination for new types of consumers: the artists of Soho. A book on the downtown art scene published in 1979 said that "for the artists of SoHo, [Canal Street] has become a vast, luxurious, tangled garden of the real."[2] Nam Jun Paik had a studio on Canal; it is no leap to imagine him sorting through the electronics of Argo in search for materials. Donald Judd's tidy aesthetic might have led him elsewhere, but the restaurant-supply sink you can still find at his loft at 101 Spring Street likely came from Canal or its environs. And then, of course, there's Rauschenberg.

Since the Ashcan School, life in Lower Manhattan has been territory for artmaking. Since Rauschenberg, the

2 Alexandra Anderson-Spivy and B.J. Archer, *Anderson & Archer's SoHo: The Essential Guide to Art and Life in Lower Manhattan*. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1979.

city itself has been fair game. Tales abound of the artist wandering the streets of the neighborhood, collecting debris for his combines. Though Argo lacks a merino sheep, or an eagle, or bedding, for that matter, there's more than enough raw materials for artmaking.

As the economy boomed in the 1980s, so did the appeal of Canal Street junk shops. According to a *Times* article from 1987, "Shopping Canal St., New York's Attic," artists still came, but so did yuppies out to furnish their Tribeca lofts, looking to capture the increasingly rare allure of an "older, grittier New York."[3] The city had gotten much less gritty, for sure. Sante described the Lower East Side in terms usually reserved for the dark side of the moon. However, a line from that essay gets to the relationship between junk and junk shop: "Before the early 1980s you never saw people selling old books or miscellaneous refuse from flattened boxes on the sidewalk. If you truly wanted to sell things you could rent a storefront for next to nothing, assuming you weren't choosy about location."

What to make of Argo, which still remains, a generation later, a storefront for junk, a vestige of a freer, more forgiving New York, and, during operating hours, when cardboard boxes filled with discount goods spill out onto the sidewalk, an omen of desperate, transient times to come?

Before and after. Site, and frozen moment of transit. This is integral to the identity of junk. As objects prized both for their relationship to the past and their potential for future reinvention, junk exists midway between antiques and construction materials. It is this tension between past and future, nostalgia and invention that makes junk such an intriguing typology of object. It is too mongrel to be an antique and yet commands too much attention to be seamlessly inserted into a piece of art. Art made with junk will always be that; it will be tainted, for better or for worse.

Junk sucks up the specific. It contaminates. It is the memento mori ignored on the shelf. This, too, shall pass, it says. Except it won't. Argo is filled with objects that ring in specific chimes of nostalgia, or else are so undefined, so excremental, that it is a wonder they were ever new—that anyone ever figured out how to package them. Empty DVD cases, two for a dollar. Massage wands. Headphones. Technic Dual Cassette Decks. VHS movies, two dollars each. *Music cd* → *99cents*. Camcorders. Extension cords. The physicality of these objects—their shitty ergonomics and dusty turrets, the sheen of touch. Everything an alien relic of a

3 Giovannini, Joseph. "Shopping Canal St., New York's Attic." *The New York Times*, October 29, 1987.


4.99

time when consumer goods came in bigger boxes. JC Penny's catalogue, Hammacher Schlemmer, *SkyMall*, and then what? Nothing. iPad.

Though junk is inert, a testament to life's flow washed ashore by an errant current, this is all about movement. From David's peripatetic upbringing to the circuit boards repaired in the back, all is in motion. Even the name of the store, Argo, refers back to that mythological ship that was repaired piece by piece so that, over time, it was remained the same ship but was, simultaneously, entirely different. As tedious as this maintenance can become, surely it is better for the soul (and for those cadmium-polluted recycling towns in China) than ripping everything up and starting over.

Around the margins of this flow one finds the tide pool of a secondary economy. Ragpickers of yore, bootleggers, counterfeiters. Secondhand dealers, aficionados, antiquers. Artists. Canal street. That a thoroughfare named for drainage, utilitarian intervention, could come to support so many such micro-economies is wonderful. That is evident in the junk shop.

This movement needs a locale. As such, the junk shop quarantines earlier failures. It also incubates new ideas. It's a sort of banal cabinet of curiosities, a magnet for tin-foil-hatted conspiracy theorists. It's also a

rebellion against real estate's bottom line. An alternative to the tyranny of the new.

Despite the transient nature of their merchandise, and their clientele, junk shops have a permanence that new stores, perpetually reinventing themselves, do not. And yet, the merchandise is aging. So are the customers. So is the staff. David has started talking about renting out the space. He'd make more money renting it, that's for certain. It doesn't turn a profit. He likens it to an unfaithful wife. What can he do, though? He loves her.

When you make a business out of selling broken, neglected, cast-off goods, and don't do much selling, one way to describe it is a failure. However, this failure seems more metaphysical than commercial and, as such, less of a personal shortcoming than of the general way of things.

If the antique seals off the past and brings it to the present, Pine-Soled and price-tagged, the junk shop refuses distinction between then and now, waste and potential. A junk shop is beguiling, baffling. It tempts the bargain hunter, the weekend anthropologist. Any attempt to categorize its contents will be laughably incomplete. All paths lead back to Borges, his Chinese encyclopedia, his Library of Babel.

Lately, David and Argo's manager Boo Boo (né Edward Lawson)—whose main contribution to the store's sonic atmosphere is a muffled "fuck it" from time to time—have realized that many of the store's shoppers are artists. There is a certain romance to this, sure, but it mainly meant that they could sell more broken things, knowing that they were just going to be painted over, collaged, or mulched into some sculptural assemblage.

In a homemade commercial that is available on Argo's YouTube channel, next to David's BQE video, the tag line "You Never Know What Idea You Might Have" sounds over an image of this vast array of different worldly traces, plastic residue, relics of contemporary effort and cultural nonchalance. Argo is reinvented yet again. Not as a storing house for detritus, or a loading dock for second-hand consumer products, but as that tangled garden of the real.

HUNTER BRAITHWAITE IS A BROOKLYN-BASED WRITER AND EDITOR. HE IS EDITORIAL DIRECTOR OF **AFFIDAVIT** AND HAS CONTRIBUTED WRITING TO NUMEROUS ART PUBLICATIONS. HE IS THE AUTHOR OF **FLOODED PENTHOUSE** WITH THE PAINTER MARGAUX OGDEN.

WRITTEN IN PARALLEL WITH MOTOKO FUKUYAMA: ***YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT IDEA YOU MIGHT HAVE***
FEBRUARY 2017


recess