

one man's junk by Adam Lauder

one man's junk materializes the contradictions and unintentional humour of the contemporary digital condition. Meticulously replicating the contours of obsolete hardware in the paradoxically durable medium of stone, artist Laura Moore calls the bluff of a supposedly “dematerialized” society.^[i] In their insistent materiality, her monuments to a wasteful economy of never-ending upgrades are both poignantly tragicomic and pointedly “dumb.”^[ii]

The series was set in motion by a fleeting encounter with the curbside remnants of a once valuable, and presumably valued, personal computing environment.^[iii] Today, *one man's junk* encompasses a richly allusive image bank of monitors and hard drives. Its ten elements are based on discarded equipment gleaned by the artist while cycling through the rapidly changing landscape of Toronto. Stripped of their proprietary logos and other identifying marks, Moore's bantam monoliths are disorientingly generic yet tantalizingly familiar. The objects' chiseled surfaces communicate the tactile functionality of their computational referents, even as their elevated presentation—on a custom-built wooden pallet—tacitly forbids the pleasures of contact. Though emphatically stationary, *one man's junk* summons viewers to join the artist in cognitively mapping the ubiquitous “grid” of our digital and urban environments. In retracing its rational coordinates, we are forcefully reminded that this itinerary can be perplexingly meandering, even irrational.^[iv]

For beholders of a certain generation, Moore's memorials to a bygone era of personal computing may trigger involuntary memories of ergonomic intimacy with outmoded media. For others, the minimalist but retrospectively ponderous morphology commemorated by the artist may retrieve a Modernist imaginary of angular and monochromatic archetypes. With typical irreverence, Moore characterizes the liminal condition negotiated by her objects as “not-quite-garbage.” Like the rag pickers commemorated by the poet Charles Baudelaire or the painter Édouard Manet, Moore invites reflection on the artful potential of dumpster diving.

Like the parallel series *Small Monuments* (2015)—a random sampling of computer mice sculpted in the fittingly pliant medium of soap stone—the stony masses of *one man's junk* recall the technological “prostheses” theorized by the Canadian media analyst Marshall McLuhan.^[v] In their radical de-contextualization, its monitors and hard drives suggest an exquisite corpse of severed body parts: limbs, torsos or, in the case of *Small Monuments*, fingers and toes. These corporeal resonances are further amplified in an ongoing series of drawings and new small-scale sculptures that explore the bodily associations of the allusively named memory stick. Portable devices sprouting fingers and breasts playfully re-appropriate the gendered connotations of the problematically christened *hardware*. The artist proposes new, and suggestively “soft,” understandings of storage capacity.

Moore's intimate analyses of found form can also evoke the techniques of reverse engineering mobilized by hackers to scrutinize protected software systems. But in contrast to the digital ontology mined by tech-savvy pirates, Moore's practice is firmly grounded in the traditional materials and instruments of stone carving. The artist terms her jiu-jitsu-like interface with computing “artisanal design in reverse”: an apt description harkening to the tragicomic meditations of the maverick American Minimalist Robert Smithson on modernity and its discontents. In some respects, her process more closely matches the re-documentation of legacy systems carried out by corporations to recover obsolete production protocols. But rather than intervening within the abstract vocabulary of code, Moore's sculpted replicas suggest analogies instead with the industrial plasticine moulds employed by automotive manufacturers to evaluate virtual designs on a 1:1 scale. Consistent with this seemingly anachronistic procedure of converting intangible

digital prototypes into analogue facsimiles, *one man's junk* transforms that which has already become the stuff of memory into sensuous avatars. Reflecting on this striking reversal of commonsense assumptions about the order of operations mobilized by computational workflows, Moore observes that the manufacturers of her readymade models likely “never put as much thought into them as I do.” The artist’s simulations draw attention to the creativity of re-creation.

This seeming detour through the non-sequitur methodology of automotive design is not tangential. Moore’s 2015 video *curbside* documents castoffs of an economy of accelerated obsolescence that allude to the readymade models for *one man's junk*. *Curbside* restores this unwanted excess to its contexts of appearance—or, rather, impending disappearance: the urban roadways scouted by an itinerant Moore from atop her bicycle. Channeling a seriocomic ambivalence reminiscent of *one man's junk*, the jettisoned monitors screened by *curbside* anchor the work’s ambient abjection even as they elicit the beholder’s nostalgia. In restoring this drama to its proper *mise-en-scène*—one defiantly located beyond the confines and protocols of the white cube—Moore metaphorically launches her subjects within the circulatory infrastructure of the information economy: its human transportation systems no less than its micro-circuitry. In animating her sculptures thus, Moore invokes the kinesis propelling her initial encounters with her models as well as the broader logic of rapid exchange which they embody, even in their ultimate condition of sculptural stasis. In turn, the mobile beholder of Moore’s sculpted objects is plugged into this wider network of information movement. In effect, the artist invites viewers to join her in imaginatively cycling the electronic highways and byways of the contemporary wired city.

Moore harnesses these tensions to stage a digital materialism that is as insistently physical as it is experiential and ideational. This generative duality also dramatizes the hybrid genealogy of the artist’s practice. Moore’s reiterative syntax of primary structures alludes to the economical vocabulary of first-generation Minimalism, while the first-person address and ironic *détournement* of the documentary strategies mobilized by *curbside* recall the witty but always situated gambits of Conceptual art. In willfully conflating the two tendencies, the multidisciplinary artist unleashes a comic potential that harkens to the puckish maneuvers of Smithson, or the Canadian conceptual company N.E. Thing Co. Ltd. The Co-presidents of the latter art world enterprise, Iain and Ingrid Baxter, scanned their everyday environs in suburban North Vancouver for the effluvium of a then still emergent information society. The “critical company” was notorious for its irreverent citations of the self-important vocabulary of American (especially New York-based) peers to deflate art world pretensions.^[vi] The similarly mock-serious tone of Smithson’s anti-academic photo-essays—above all, his feverish Mexican travelogue “Incidents of Mirror-Travels in the Yucatan” (1969)—equally resounds in the unstable affect of *curbside*.

Tapping into a growing mood of digital discontent, Moore’s ambivalent monuments to the contemporary regime of computation are—like the recent philosophical writings of François Laruelle—defiantly pitted “against the digital.”^[vii] Giving shape to this resistance through the farcically Luddite strategy of arresting a seemingly unstoppable flood of “innovations” through monumentalization in stone, *one man's junk* invites viewers to metaphorically press pause in order to reflect upon this relentless cycle of modernization. In replicating artefacts of an already obsolete media ecology, Moore implicitly casts these musings in a past tense. The artist’s meditations on a relentless technological futurity thereby interpellate, or “hail,”^[viii] viewers’ memory of a future that is already past, even as it continues to pass before our eyes.

In unresolved tension with this *longue durée* of computation and the outmoded, *One man's junk* situates its ambivalent discourse on technology within a memory that is resolutely personal, even autobiographic. Yet, Moore’s mock monumentalization of her found aides-memoires simultaneously anonymizes individual

recollection, inducing a generative condition of estrangement. In rendering the media that are always at our fingertips temporarily remote, *One man's junk* gives new shape to David Robbins's notion of "concrete comedy." In Robbins's words, this genre of prop-based sculptural activity leverages a "disrespectful" relation to time's measure to humorous, but nevertheless deeply philosophical, ends.^[ix] Like the paradoxical "solid-state hilarity" unleashed by the facetious "monuments" documented by Smithson on his suburban peregrinations,^[x] in Moore's dexterous hands everyday objects illuminate the ever-shifting contours of a technological space-time. The improbable comic timing brought into visibility by the artist's witty crystallization of contradictory forces of mobility, obsolescence and memorialization is an absurd stasis.

[i] Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," *Art International*, 12, no. 2 (1968): 31-36.

[ii] All quotes from the artist are taken from an interview with the author, February 8, 2016.

[iii] See A. Will Brown, "Fan Mail: Laura Moore," *Daily Serving*, Nov. 14, 2014, <http://dailyserving.com/2014/11/fan-mail-laura-moore/> (accessed March 18, 2016).

[iv] Sol Lewitt influentially emphasized the irrational aspects of Conceptual art's cognitive procedures. See Sol Lewitt, "Sentences on Conceptual Art," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, 106-08 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

[v] See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

[vi] See Yann Toma and Rose Marie Barrientos, eds., *Les entreprises critiques* (Saint-Etienne, Fr: Cité du design, 2008).

[vii] See Alexander R. Galloway, *Laruelle: Against the Digital* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

[viii] See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays* (London: Verso, 1970).

[ix] David Robbins, *Concrete Comedy: An Alternative History of Twentieth-Century Comedy* (New York: Pork Salad Press, 2011), p. 145.

[x] Robert Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam, 10-23 (1966; repr., Berkeley, CA; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 21
