LIFE'S LAYERING

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Life seems to be a sedimentation process, the present constantly laying itself upon the past. I am a well organized person and try to be in control of my life and spaces, but the flood of new events and inter-ests steadily buries past strata, and a kind of entropy, an inevitable disorder, takes over, especially as I live longer and my memory cannot deal with everything.

I can't remember noticing this process when I was young, although I always took on more tasks than I could possibly find time for. The busier I got throughout my career at Oberlin, trying to be an active artist during many years of demanding teaching, the more this accumulation became a haunting experience. Books that I wanted to read kept gathering on my shelf of "books for future reading" (they still do!). Files on various activities and subjects that interested me continued to multiply and pile up. Notes for art works "to do" increased by the month and year. Half-finished or abandoned projects filled my studio. I remember in the late '60s, when we moved to our Oberlin house, I had a huge 4 x 8 ft. working table,

as well as a 3 x 6 ft. second table with nine large drawers for materials. Not to mention three more cabinets of various sizes with shelves, drawers and vertical partitions, and additional small tables and wall shelves. During the '70s, both of the large tables, as well as all other surfaces and spaces, got covered with unfinished works as my art kept changing or other things took priority – writing, organizing exhibitions, lecturing, public art competitions and commissions, traveling, caring for parents, etc. More layers of things "in progress" got deposited over the plastic sheets that covered earlier pieces. I started feeling anguished about it all.

Somehow the situation did not improve much with my getting more space for my art – our basement, our third floor, a College faculty studio and later two storage areas, as well as a rented garage-size storage – simply because I kept producing more and more work (and selling less, as I stopped making saleable objects after the '60s). I did try to get rid of lots of minor or cumbersome works by having local benefit auctions of my art at least

twice (for Zero Population Growth and NARAL), but that seemed to be a drop in the bucket of accretion. Inheriting and salvaging stuff of sentimental importance from my friend Ellen's estate after her death exacerbated this situation. Perhaps layers get built up more in my life because, like Ellen, I am a saving person: I hate throwing out anything!

When I retired from teaching and we decided to move to Washington, I thought that this was a perfect time to get rid of some of the stacks. I gave to the American Archives of Art all of my art historical research, to the Oberlin College archives most of my teaching files, and to the Balch Institute in Philadelphia all my Greek correspondence and notes. I donated to Oberlin's Art Library all my feminist art catalogues and related material. We gave, sold and threw out a lot of our books, and I had another local sale of my art. Generally, we decided to get rid of many of our belongings in order for the two of us to fit comfortably into a one-storey house and half basement, with my work in a separate studio/storage building of 1500 sq. feet. We took almost a year to find and fix those two places, move everything, and re-arrange our new home and life in excellent order. It was so liberating!

We promised ourselves that we wouldn't allow things to collect and hem us in: we would get rid of a book any time we bought a new one (which we don't really do, even though we try to buy the minimum possible); we would discard clothes whenever we bought new ones, to keep our closets uncrowded (also hard to achieve, even when you can donate to the poor – I become attached to my old clothes!); and I would make as little art as possible, or as flat and small as possible. Well, even drawings, which I started producing faster than I predicted, take space, and however much I limit the size of my models or sculptures, I cannot stop making art. My studio and storage space is again over-flowing, and my inventories (and digital pictures files) are hard to keep up to date. Let alone that the fast pace of computer technology increases the strata: my hundreds of high-density diskettes are useless, my Zip disks are becoming unwieldy, and now documentary CDs and DVDs are piling up. Even our software CDs and manuals are becoming cumber-some.

Wherever I look around me, I see already congested or outdated stuff. Our electric typewriter and carbon sheets have been sitting in a closet for years. I had to give away my movie camera and my camcorder because they stopped functioning from lack of use – and some of our still cameras are on the verge of getting gummed up. I've not used my underwater movie camera for decades, not to mention that its Super8 format is almost obsolete: I could hardly buy even a used Super8 projector for viewing my early films. Or, take our slide collection of past trips – nature and art of so many countries and continents we have visited. Dozens of boxes with hundreds of slides each (filed in pretty good order), but when is there ever time to look at them? Let alone that slides are becoming superseded too, and we already started accumulating hundreds of digital images on our computers or CDs. (They occupy less space, it is true, but they do not give as fine-grain and permanent images as

slides.) We now take as few photos as possible during our trips (even digital), partly because we have hardly any friends who care to see them. But still they amass because we still travel so much. Can one stop living because life keeps changing or things continue to accrue?

Speaking of traveling: I have three main suitcases (and two flight bags, small and large) for different kinds of trips. A small rolling carry-on for New York and other short trips; a large hard-side on wheels for longish trips abroad, like vacations in Greece; and a larger hard-side case for still longer trips to more "exotic" countries, where we need special items (for roaches, rats, etc.) or snorkeling equipment. When we used to go away for a semester or a year, I naturally used all of them, plus others. From my past traveling, I have put together a batch of things that are necessary for each kind of journey, such as a fly swatter, mosquito Vape gadget and con-verter plugs for trips abroad, and of course a full toilet kit and emergency medicines bag for all travel. But aside from such essentials, other items keep

gathering (a small clothes-brush, shoe cleaners, disposable heating pad and galoshes, extra luggage labels, etc.), so that each suitcase is now nearly full with "useful" bits and pieces of considerable weight, which I take out every time before going away and select what I need for the occasion. The same happens with my flight bags.

Actually, my New York files present a comparable situation: I used to have a file with necessary information from the '70s or even earlier (city maps, subway and bus maps, gallery guides, hotel and restaurant references, batches of slips with telephone numbers of artists, former students and other acquaintances), when I used to go to New York a lot with Ellen. It got larger during the year we lived in New York in the early '80s, so I created a lighter New York file for traveling, and I retired much of the "practical" information into the first file. In later decades, most of that material became nearly obsolete (but not enough to throw out!), so I started a NY #3 file that now is getting bulky too. I keep adding things I want to see (some of which I never have time to go to, since my

New York trips are shorter and rarer), and I hardly meet any more artists or friends that I used to visit, partly because I frequently go with my husband and some of his friends or interests have replaced mine. Yet, I am unwilling to sort and throw out past information, not only because I am too busy to bother, but mainly because I hate parting with my past.

The same thing has happened with some of my other files of timely interests: Useful "personal health" clippings file; "pending" public art applications (1985-96 and 1996-present) from which I never got an answer or my material back; DOS and Nota Bene software notes (I finally am throwing those out!); Pagemill, Sculpt-3D, and other visual software notes (1980s); Oberlin Internet course & e-mail info (1994 on); HTML info (1997); Javascript info (1997); Eyebeam listserv printouts (1998) – bulky yet most interesting; ISEA, Ars Electronica, ASCI (1998 – from when I thought I'd become a digital artist); worthwhile Netscape addresses (1995-1997 and 1997 on – probably all out of date!); my Web site and Web accounts (Oberlin and

UMD); etc. I simply cannot make myself go through some of these files and decide what to discard.

Worst of all are the proliferating websites and listservs that I want to look up and never have time to (unlike Richard who looks up anything he thinks of interest every day and updates himself without saving much). On the "current" shelf of my computer desk are stacked: the 1998 guide for Netscape that I never got around to reading (I AM throwing it out now!); printouts of my complex Javascript entries for Chaos/Fluid and Chaos/Solid on my website, which are "in progress" since 1998 (and I have no courage to go back to); a file of recent interesting websites "to look at" (including blogs and NASA etc. sites of photos of the Earth from space); info on Microsoft's Firefox, on new Nanotech, on Inkjet printers and on quaternions (I even forget what they are!); and notes on my computer folders of completed public commissions that need cleaning up and copying on the laptop. The flood of new computer files and folders, particularly with TIFFs of my works, is another source of continuing anguish, because it never ends (and I constantly need to copy them onto Zip disks or CDs and update their records).

The most comic-tragic cases are my files of miscellaneous "pending" categories or lists of "things to do". I just found one from 1997 – with listings half defunct and half still-to-be-done, e.g., "study Photoshop manual". I also found the other day, inside a larger album, a smaller folder where I kept (from Oberlin years) a variety of current (!) or practical information, such as crate dimensions for UPS, the name of a mildew remover, advice on "unsticking sticky tags", the "most fuel efficient cars in America" (1990), as well as the list of people invited to our latest party, and some letters from people who were supposed to send me something or other (most of whom I can't even recall). In a more serious category are my two files with ideas for my art and miscellaneous information on steps and ramps, which were very important for my work from the '70s through the '90s, but which – sadly – I have not consulted in the past six years. Have I been busier with public commissions (even though I don't teach)? Have these files turned obsolete for my present art? Or is my mind now unwilling to get new ideas from older ones?

What I hate most in this whole layering process is that items set aside "temporarily" often become permanent fixtures. New interests supersede others (e.g., my intense preoccupation with skateparks last year became passé pretty quickly, leaving behind a huge file of information and correspondence); or new people I meet take priority over past involvements (e.g., Joe D. or Don F., whom I liked a lot and corresponded with intensely a couple of years ago, have become inactive files on my "current" computer folder). In my art, I sometimes come back to previous concerns, but frequently I put things aside and never return to them, which pains me a lot. Just a look inside the closets of my home studio is telling: boxes of materials I collected in Greece, Florida or as far back as at Lake Erie, which I hope to use sometime but forget about (urchin and abalone shells, transparent baby oysters, giant cockles, sand dollars, fish vertebrae, flattened dry leaves, mosses, feathers); some incomplete col-

laborative art-booklets with other artists; and the box with the little folded aluminum sculptures that I started years ago in Florida and never advanced much (I don't know why, and it bugs me).

My Hyattsville studio shelves are even fuller of materials that I have from the past and may never return to again, but I guess most artists are in this state of ongoing suspension of projects. Indeed, some works are waiting for possible venues to be executed. Yet those that depend on me make me feel guilty, such as my films that need to be selected and converted into DVD, and my airbrush drawings that I have stopped doing for over two years. I am not even mentioning unfinished serial works like the mushroom spore-print drawings, or my feathers book. I guess it could be worse!

Identifying and describing most of the sites of physical layering and stacking has relieved a bit of the pressure. But what about the accretion in my mind? There is so much of it, because I have done so much in my life (and still want to do a lot), that I don't even dare to enter that domain.

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