

# The Heaving Floor: From Form and Function to the Felt-Experience of Sentience

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[An installation for the collection entitled *cultureWARE: Implements of Desire; or, EAT THIS!*]

“The transition and exchange between subject and object, however, are not just fanciful experiments in the artistic process. To put oneself into the position of the objects, to derive subjective meaning from inanimate objects, to ascribe vivid power and new significance to the material: these are central moments of creative work, especially when artists collect objects as traces, memories, or documents. The individual object does not have to be damaged or destroyed in order to be documented in the collection. Instead, it only comes into being by virtue of being collected. This artistic procedure becomes all the more obvious when ephemera are collected and sorted by way of intuitions and associations.”

Ingrid Schaffner and Matthias Winzen, Eds.  
*Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art*. Munich and New York: Prestel-Verlag, 1998, 24)

## INTRODUCTION

Sentience is the human capacity for feeling or perceiving. Said differently, it is our awareness of aliveness. The idea that there is a seat or locus for human sentience somewhere internal to our bod-



*Image 1. Iowa Corncrib: Westbrook Artists' Site, Winterset, IA, site of The Heaving Floor installation.*

ies, wherein creation resides and out of which it arises in the form of work and objects, is an important one to consider by a discipline that hopes to provide an education in the matters of making.

One such theory identifies this seat as the intentional relation between physical pain and imagined objects. It suggests that all created forms, in one way or another, address a basic level of sen-



Image 2. The collection cultureWARE: *Implement of Desire*; or, *EAT THIS!* with index of artifacts.

tient discomfort that humanity experiences by living in a non-sentient world. Whether it is the chill of a winter season that yields a coat; the plague of labor a chair; or fleeting memory any number of recording devices: we make in order to relieve the problems of sentience. Therefore, the theory holds that all objects contain within their interior a record of the nature of human sentience. Argued by Elaine Scarry, in her text *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, this theory of human-sentience-as-object-interiority serves as a framework for a two-phased, experimental design project that intends to access that ‘invisible’ record through the vehicle of a collection.

**THE HEAVING FLOOR: RE-CREATING UTILITY FOR THE EMERGENCE OF A UNIQUE ARCHITECTURAL EXPERIENCES.**

The collection *cultureWARE: Implement of Desire; or, EAT THIS!* features objects that are either implements by which a culture is made or forms representative of the ideals, desires or aspirations of a culture. In its architectural installation, it is rendered as a reliquary emerging through the heaving floor of an Iowa corncrib. Located at the Westbrook Artists’ Site in Winterset, Iowa (in the county famous for its covered bridges), the installation attempts to seamlessly join the collection to

an antiquated architecture whose use-value had also expired, as had that of the objects. By this installation, the architecture is made to contribute to the knowledge being revealed by the collection itself. That is, the architecture expands both the material and perceptual notions of the spatialization of bodies, offering itself a container for the collection and a container for bodies viewing the collection. It is transformed into a kind of rural cathedral within which ancient remains harvested from a particular agrarian culture have been entombed.

**THE COLLECTION: A DIFFERENT CREATIVE ACT TO ENHANCE A DIFFERENT MODE OF KNOWLEDGE**

The act of making a collection is more critical than the act of acquiring souvenirs. Souvenirs help us remember past experiences, but collecting, storing and archiving as artistic processes neutralize the use-value of objects, setting them free from their intended utility and context of origin. Within the space of a collection, one has opportunity to explore the character of material objects, as opposed to merely their form and function. Through methods of organization and containment, the collection makes visible what is imagined to be an



Image 3. Installation views.

object's otherwise invisible qualities. As the above quotation states, the effort is largely one of intuition and association. When one approaches poetry or a montage, for instance, they cannot escape invitation into a space beyond the words on the page or the clippings used to construct the image. Likewise, the collection is a vehicle that demands an interdependent engagement that yields access to spaces, ideas and experiences beyond the matter out of which it is made.

In *cultureWARE*, objects are grouped according to ways they relate culturally to each other and sentimentally to the 'body' from which they were projected. The organization provides a chiaroscuro to a set of tendencies—*marking, managing, arranging,* and *measuring*—and a set of perceptions—*exterior form, interior capacity, available resource,* and *cultural standard*. These tendencies/perceptions—or sentient characteristics—are but four parallels of an endless amount being projected into the world in the form of material objects. Accordingly, these parallels may also be understood to be at work in any form of architectural production. As such, the collection is a representative history of a relationship between agriculture and slavery. Yet, in another, it is a study of architecture as a cultural *practice*, a rendering of a selection of disciplinary processes

### EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS

One finds in this project an ambitious form of making. As the objects facilitate certain acts that sustain or in some way enhance the culture into which they are projected, they are in turn altering the

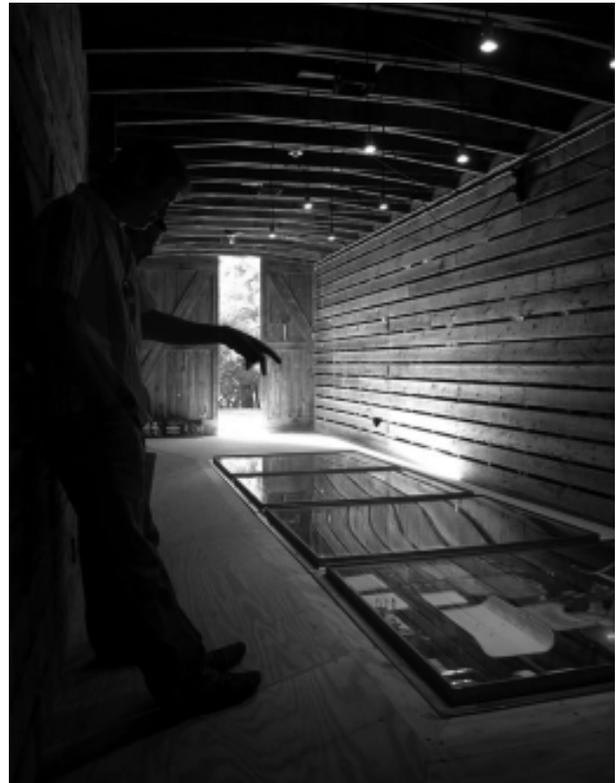


Image 4. Installation view.

felt-experience from which they have originated. Because the projection/reciprocation cycle is being examined, one is challenged to engage in an act of making with greater care: for the other side of Scarry's theory suggests that if making is conducted without knowledge of a reciprocal effect, the result can be antithetical to one's intentions.

By extending perception beyond what is directly seen when viewing a rather benign object, one gains a better understanding of the human condition and its relationship to the material world, and begins to engage an area of study concerned with knowledge about the character of creating and created objects. The question, perhaps, is of what importance to architects is the act of creating a collection. First, aside from the obvious skills resulting from exercises in methods of organization and containment, *the collection, is a creative vehicle that enables and enhances ones conceptualization ability*. It challenges one to contemplate the invisible dimension possessed by material objects and from which they emerge. Secondly, as a work of research and conservation, *the collection gives substantial meaning to objects whose use-value is expired*. This broadens the boundary of what must be maintained and valued in a culture of consumption. Designers can find alternatives to the dominant discourses that tend to stress the primacy of new form. Lastly, as architects explore how culturally defined bodies in-

habit space, *there exists in the collection a reflective and self-constitutional aspect allowing the human body to be understood as the original site of all projected artifacts*. As such, a project like *cultureWARE* can be understood on many levels and by many bodies.

## REFERENCES

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