

# FrameWork 11/15

## Anne Low on Liz Magor

Not long ago, by coincidence I had three retail experiences in less than 24 hours. They varied from the lowest end of value in the form of a church basement sale, to a midrange department store slowly going out of business, to a new luxury department store. The categorical principles of organization were consistent in all three places, though more importantly they all had things on sale, marked down. At the church sale people pawed through old plastic bags filled with used Christmas decorations. At the luxury end of the scale it was designer handbags, removed from their hallowed shelves and jumbled together in a bin. The desire driving the shoppers in both places was unabashed; there was no genteel allowance to politeness or a self-consciousness of the pathology of consumer behaviour. If there was any consistent custom to this kind of activity, it would be mania. Sales produce a compression of time for shoppers and a subsequent relative form of panic by the imagined possibility of *not* getting something. There is also a marked shift that occurs in retail presentation once something's been put on sale, there's no longer a false concession to its specialness. The tags of sale items get dog eared and bulky with layers of red stickers and dethroned with every markdown. In the mid-range department store, it seemed as though *everything* was on sale, in a final attempt to keep bankruptcy at the gates. It was like stepping into an alternate dimension in the form of a store. There were so many goods on offer yet so few people. Employees floated around, diffident to customers. Everything was new, but somehow because of the sheer amount of it all the goods seemed leached of the usual retail sparkle that awakens yearning.

The atmosphere reminded me of the big second hand department stores, places where I have a very limited amount of personal fortitude, but which I often find myself within. Time is as infinite as the cavernous spaces they are housed within, open 7 days a week to shoppers and to the vast waves of discarded human effects that shore up endlessly at its back door. There is always a steady stream of clientele that are slow, borderline somnambulist. People navigate amongst the aisles fingering this and that, gleaning items based on their own cryptic appetites. There are no collective criteria of value here. In any of these stores, large or small, one experiences a feebly organized encyclopaedia of object lust and rejection. The quality of the stuff is decreasing while the amount of it is increasing. Where one used to find wool trousers and cashmere sweaters in the women's clothing aisle, one now finds stretchy jeans, 'business casual' and every manner of jersey top that will pill after a handful of wears.

Mood can determine value in such settings. On a bad day one might imagine bedbugs amongst the quilted bedcovers, diseased feet that have soaked in the numerous electric footbaths or meth having been cooked in an empty stockpot. Nausea can set in because of the sheer chest-compressing weight of thrown out stuff. On a good day one feels empowered by one's own refined taste and ability to gracefully walk amongst the racks and shelves and pull out a designer coat or stoneware pottery. This feeling is the one that plants the seed of ever returning, the remembrance of that one time when that one rare object was plucked from the gradually shifting river swell of otherwise items of negligible worth.

Simone Weil wrote 'A squirrel turning in its cage and the rotation of the celestial sphere—extreme misery and extreme grandeur'.<sup>1</sup> Her comparison articulates the vertigo-inducing swinging of perception that can occur amongst the shelves of used goods. Attempts at categorization are where the intangible charge of objects in relation to one another is most acute. One example is the bagged section at Value Village. Items are repackaged into new plastic bags, a practical way to amalgamate the most minor of things for sale. The new packaging also

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subtly increases their value by separating them out from the bog of the rest of the store. Being put with like things preserves the integrity of the category. A bag of polyester yarn or a half used packet of fancy paper napkins; kept together, one can imagine their use being revived. Then there are the bags that arrive as donations at the back door *already* bagged. These are the most penurious forms—miscellany that defies all accepted notions of value and use. An old bread bag filled with used batteries and soap ends or a plastic shopping bag with a wig and some cutlery inside. At the sight of these bags, I experience a piercing form of interruption that is much larger than the objects that I am looking at. My fortitude bottoms out.

This interruption causes a fissure in the categorical integrity of things. The feeling provoked isn't dependent on mood; it's beyond the temperament of any given day. It is also not exclusive to thrift stores. I've gotten it looking at art. Robert Gober's *Long Haired Cheese* (1992-93), where long, black human hairs are combed back over the hump of an anaemic wedge of Swiss cheese. I've also had it looking at Rosemarie Trockel's *Replave Me*, (2011), where the vagina of Courbet's *The Origin of the World* (1866) is replaced with a velvet black tarantula.



Liz once showed me a box that she had been given decades ago. Lying delicately inside were more than a dozen resplendent birds that had not yet been mounted; stuffed with cotton, they were soft and pliant as they lay against each other. They were of course beautiful, but having been organised with others of their ilk they were merely beautiful, like a relic. These are the same birds that have since been annexed from their elementary allure and come to rest in her new sculptures. Value is perpetually deflating and inflating in equal measure in these works. This barometric activity is produced by the sculptural logic of the armature of categorizations applied across each work in varying combinations of box, sheaf, glove and object. The birds of *Gold Box*, *Speckled Veil*, and *Pink Shimmer* are now shrouded in the decorative bags that are typically used to raise the value of retail goods. Here those same bags deplete the fine-grained complexity of the surface of feathers that make such birds inexplicably captivating. Amongst *Pearl Pet* and *Glow Pet* the birds have become just another thing from the world, as drained as the second-hand soft toys that hold their same position. As the birds go down in value, the soft toys rise. The grimy creature of *Glow Pet* has become a reclining golden sphinx, while the lumpy dachshund of *Pearl Pet* is elevated to an opalescent Bernini. This ascension is only momentary, as their beds of bubble and sponge wrapping draw them again downwards. The boxes push up in their newly found grandeur, only to slump back down, exhausted. These exertions produced by the rub of categorization are ceaseless, none can hold fast to either their misery or their grandeur. They are both the squirrel and the celestial sphere.

<sup>1</sup> Simon Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 180.