

## Perpetuities and Accumulations:

Kelly Lycan and Daniel Olson

by JENNIFER MATOTEK

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The works of Kelly Lycan and Daniel Olson, to paraphrase a line from Lycan's artist statement, negotiate and configure what is collected and saved but not abandoned. Lycan and Olson, in their representation and manipulation of everyday images and objects, explore what we accumulate, how we accumulate it, and why we accumulate and retain the physical and the ephemeral. In their use of consumed products, objects and experiences, art objects and environments, Lycan and Olson construct art pieces which in turn are made available for viewers to consume,



KELLY LYCAN, installation photograph of *Junk Drawer*, digital photographs mounted on plywood, 2007

blurring boundaries between production, consumption, and commodity. Lycan and Olson's work may also be interpreted as unconventional portraits—they are objects that imply subjects. Interpreting their works through the frame of consumption, Olson and Lycan's work also suggests, on some level, that within the act of accumulation lies more than comfort or familiarity. To paraphrase a line from Olson's artist statement, Lycan and Olson recombine objects to uncover the latent possibilities hidden within ordinary materials and create ambiguous environments open for individual

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interpretation and discovery, new contexts that make the familiar seem strange, and the strange seem familiar.

The contents of Kelly Lycan's *Junk Drawer* include a roll of green painter's tape, a wine bottle cork, a red balloon, a yellow balloon, a measuring tape, a watch battery, some blue rubber bands, a yellow paper clip, a leather address book, a Wal-Mart receipt, a few pens, a cheque book, and other items you might find in your own junk drawer at home. The work may inspire the viewer to imagine the presumed creation of the piece—Lycan rifling through other people's junk drawers, taking items out one by one to carefully photograph them. Printed four to five times larger than the actual size of the original objects and mounted on plywood, the flattened and distorted representations are scattered on the ground, compelling the viewer to kinesthetically engage with the works in order to view them—wander and weave through them, bending over or crouching. The physical presence of the

works on the floor shifts their medium from photography into sculpture.

Like Lycan's *Junk Drawer*, there is an ambiguity to the medium of Daniel Olson's piece *Miscellaneous Images Galore*—it is part digital image, part sound and light installation. The visual contents of Olson's *Miscellaneous Images Galore* include pictures detached and saved from various sources—from emails, past art works by Olson, family and friends, and pictures collected from the Internet. Altogether, the piece draws from a collection of one hundred thousand pictures, which are, in Olson's words, "anything, anybody, (from) anywhere and almost any time."<sup>1</sup> *Miscellaneous Images Galore* projects these images—mostly photographs, along with some paintings, drawings, and texts—as randomly selected by a Macintosh screensaver function. The screensaver is programmed to show a detail of each selected image with simulated camera motions such as pans, zooms, and tracks for ten seconds before fading into the next image. Statistically, there is almost no chance that one of the images will repeat over the course of the exhibition at Gallery 44 due to the size of the image database.





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This seeming inexhaustibility, made possible through the ephemeral confines of the memory in Olson's computer, is in opposition to the finite quality of Lycan's *Junk Drawer*.

The soundtrack for Olson's *Miscellaneous Images Galore* is drawn from a previous work by Olson (the 2006 installation *Requiem*) and consists of recordings of Olson playing a collection of two hundred and forty-six toy instruments he accumulated over a fifteen-year period. For the soundtrack, Olson played improvised music on each instrument

for approximately one minute, then slowed the resulting sound files down to one-third of their original speed and grouped them in a four-track stereo composition with a duration of three hours and twenty minutes. This "recycling" of work—taking components from past pieces to build future pieces—is a strategy also frequently utilized by Lycan, who reuses doilies, plastic bags, and papers, and other materials scavenged from past bodies of work to create new works.

When faced with a collection of objects, particularly a collection cultivated by a singular person and not a corporation or organization, there is a tendency to perceive the miscellany as having a singular identity, standing in or substituting for the collector in the collector's absence. Walter Benjamin suggested this when he wrote that part of the function of the collection could be to repair or confront the "struggle against dispersion"<sup>2</sup> of the self. As an essential component of his practice, Daniel Olson has developed a distinct persona. He reveals himself in many of his sculptures, videos, performances, and in his artist statement as a man sitting at a desk, tinkering. In public and in performances, Olson's typical

DANIEL OLSON, installation  
photographs of *Miscellaneous Images Galore*, projection with sound, 2008

uniform is a hat, bow tie, dress shirt, and two-piece suit. He frequently uses a walking stick, and in the 1998 multiple, *Citizen Cane*, the walking stick had a bicycle bell on it. In previous works, Olson has also configured himself as Orson Welles (as in the work *Olson-Welles*, 2006) and as the subject of various iconic paintings (as in the work *Love and Reverie*, 2002, where he imitates Ozias Leduc's boy with bread featured in *The Little Musician*). He has also created works where he mirrors or role-plays family members, and has interacted with multiple versions of "himself" using cinematic mirror tricks (as in the work *Take Five*, 2004, inspired by Marcel Duchamp). These works are frequently black and white, visually harkening back to an earlier time, much like Olson's bow-tied persona.

Looking at Lycan through the lens of her objects, the viewer may perceive a portrait of the artist as a hoarder, but in an ironic, self-aware sense, the bodies of work that Lycan creates that extend beyond this exhibition



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suggest an entrepreneurial purveyor of high and low culture. For her 2009 solo exhibition at Gallery TPW, *White Hot*, Lycan featured dozens of art works for sale on flea market Saturdays, as well as showing several works that cleverly referred to the legacies of minimalism, conceptualism, relational art, and post-production: *Tab Flyer*, 2009, features over a dozen tab flyers painted white and configured on the wall in different directions, and *white corner stack*, 2009, is a vertical tower of white objects stacked atop one another, like a long, sculptural checklist.

Lycan and Olson's manipulations of objects and ephemera could be interpreted through a frame of consumption and viewed as a kind of inventory. They could also be interpreted from a museological perspective as a collection, as they engage in activities similar to classification and documentation. The role of photographic reproduction in their works also speaks to a certain museological drive—to widen public access to objects, and in some sense make them portable, without revealing or demystifying the original (with the exception, of course, that Lycan's and Olson's sources were never that original to begin with; digital files to be sent and saved by anyone to anyone, and consumable items available for purchase by anyone). Yet it is arguably more accurate to pinpoint Lycan and Olson's pieces as accumulations, rather than collections. As Susan Stewart writes, "the displayed collection finds unity in memory and narrative."<sup>3</sup> The items pictured in *Junk Drawer* are forgettable, ubiquitous, and defy classification. For Lycan, it is the gathered group of these items that is worth saving and reproducing, as together the items create a narrative about an individual.

Olson's *Miscellaneous Images Galore* are not gathered in any formal sense, as a collection may be, nor shown in any formal sense, as a collection may be exhibited. Instead the hodgepodge of saved images are merely cycled through, and shown according to the random logic of a computer application, random flows of gathered data.

Before the advent of digital photography and imaging, Roland Barthes wrote that the photograph is "a sort of umbilical cord"<sup>4</sup> that links the thing being photographed to the viewer's gaze, suggesting that the photograph is somehow carnal. Lycan's photographs of objects, seen as "links" to original things, could be thought of as displacing and replacing the original objects. But the "photographs" Olson uses—projected digital images—are not really displacing anything. Olson's images simply show themselves to be what they are; that is, as they are when cropped, panned, and zoomed. Geoffrey Batchen, in an essay for *Art Journal*, observes that "visual contiguity" is lost and transformed with the displacement of the photograph by the digital image. He writes that while photography is "inscribed by the things it

represents...digital images have no origin other than their own computer program," and that the referents of digital images "are not the objects they picture but rather... data banks of information."<sup>5</sup> Batchen's argument that photography as a medium compels the viewer because of its contact and relationship to originating surfaces, rather than electronic flows, positions the digital image as "content to be nothing but surface,"<sup>6</sup> meaning that the digital realm potentially has in some sense no import to history.

Where collections reach for the potential of completion, accumulation by nature has no definitive end. Accumulations are arguably less discriminating than collections, and therefore might belie logical or finite conclusions. In this way, accumulation could be seen as having greater potential to defy mortality than a collection, since as Susan Stewart has said, "any collection promises totality."<sup>7</sup> While a certain perversity arguably lies within the desire to gather, configure, and then reveal accumulated personal belongings, Lycan and Olson's intentions are ambiguous but certainly not nefarious. Their sources may not be

treasures to the eyes of the viewer, but in their eyes, the things they gather are worthy of collection, contemplation, configuration, and presentation. Accumulating is both palliative and a stimulant.<sup>8</sup> The decision to accumulate, and to not abandon, is a decision not to finish.

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Olson's artist statement for *Miscellaneous Images Galore*.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *Arcades Project*, Rolf Tiedemann, ed. (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1999), p. 211.

<sup>3</sup> Stewart, Susan. "Death and Life, in that Order, in the Works of Charles Willson Peale," from *The Cultures of Collecting*, John Elsner, Roger Cardinal, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 204.

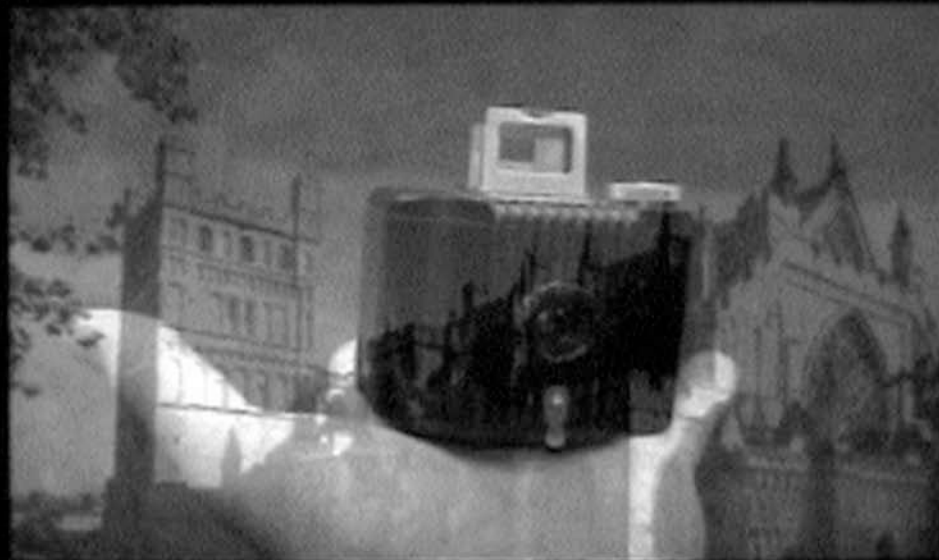
<sup>4</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 80-81.

<sup>5</sup> Batchen, Geoffrey. "Carnal Knowledge," *Art Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Spring, 2001), p. 21-22.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Stewart, Susan. "Death and Life, in that Order, in the Works of Charles Willson Peale," p. 204.

<sup>8</sup> Kelly Lycan's artist statement for *Junk Drawer*.



#### **DANIEL OLSON**

Daniel Olson (b. 1955) completed degrees in mathematics and architecture before obtaining a BFA in 1986 from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (Halifax) and an MFA in 1995 from York University (Toronto). Olson's work – which includes sculpture, multiples, installation, photography, performance, audio, video and artist's books – has been exhibited widely since 1986 and is documented in several catalogues. He is unhappy with the world, but continues to live there for personal reasons. Olson has been seen recently in Montreal, where he is rumoured to be working on his famous disappearing act.

#### **KELLY LYCAN**

Kelly Lycan received her BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and her MFA from the University of California, Santa Barbara and Los Angeles. She has exhibited in solo and group shows in Canada and the United States, most recently at Gallery TPW in Toronto. She is also a member of Instant Coffee, a service oriented artist collective that builds social structures, where ideas, materials and actions are explored. Instant Coffee has exhibited in Canada, South America, Europe, and the United States.

DANIEL OLSON, installation photograph of *Miscellaneous Images Galore*, projection with sound, 2008

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DANIEL OLSON, installation photograph of *Miscellaneous Images Galore*, projection with sound, 2008

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Jennifer Matotek is an independent curator and videomaker based in Toronto. She holds an MA in Art History from York University. She has worked in the programming and curatorial departments of several art institutions, including The Power Plant, the Art Gallery of Hamilton, and Oakville Galleries. She is currently pursuing an MBA degree at the Schulich School of Business.