

## Artist Questionnaire: 21 Responses\*

Edited by George Baker

**The obsolescent, the “outmoded,” the nonsynchronous, discarded forms, marginal mediums: all of these seem to be resources of special interest to many of the most interesting artistic projects today. How does obsolescence figure in your work? Do you mobilize it for critical purposes primarily? What is the critical purchase of obsolescence? Or does it serve constructive purposes in your work—i.e., the making of a new sort of medium or form?**

**Is obsolescence a site of resistance? Why? How?**

**Does it provide a model for accessing dimensions of memory and/or history for you? In what ways?**

**How do you see obsolescence being deployed in artistic projects other than yours? Why is there this interest today?**

\* These questions were sent to a group of artists in the fall of 2001. Invitations were extended to a large number of artists whose projects have emerged in the past decade, and to artists involved in mediums and strategies crucial to both the contemporary relevance of this topic and to the longer history of the concerns of this journal (photography, cinema, sculpture, institutionally critical practice). Artists were invited to respond directly to our questions, or to submit documentation, visual contributions, or other forms of critical writing. The responses follow.

## TACITA DEAN

For me, obsolescence is a state of normality. Everything that excites me no longer functions in its own time. The one thing I have noticed is that so often I am attracted to things conceived in the decade of my birth. I court anachronism—things that were once futuristic but are now out of date—and I wonder if the objects and buildings I seek were ever, in fact, content in their own time, as if obsolescence was invited at their conception.

So obsolescence is about time in the way film is about time: historical time; allegorical time; analog time. I cannot be seduced by the seamlessness of digital time; like digital silence, it has a deadness. I like the time you can hear passing: the prickled silence of mute magnetic tape or the static on a record. So obsolescence has an aura: the aura of redundancy and failure; the aura around what has been improved upon.

And yet obsolescence hounds my working life. Laboratories close down. Shops no longer stock spools. Brown magnetic tape is unavailable and the musician in the Fernsehturm updates his keyboard. And so obsolescence ends in an underworld of people dealing from dark rooms and flea-market stalls, until enough time passes, so that whatever it was that was obsolete, has now become rare. And rare no longer holds my attention.

TACITA DEAN was born in Canterbury, England, in 1965, and studied at Falmouth School of Art and The Slade School of Fine Art, London. Her recent major solo exhibitions have included Tate Britain and Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, both in 2001. She is represented by Frith Street Gallery, London, and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris.

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ZOE LEONARD

*Out of Time*

A friend of mine lives up on the Yukon River. For many years he lived with his family, his wife and their two children, in a remote spot about ninety miles from the nearest village. There was no road, the only access was by river. They built a cabin in the woods by a lake and both kids were raised there. They fished and hunted and gardened. There was no electricity or indoor plumbing, most things in their lives were handmade. They used an outhouse and heated with wood.

When the kids were around seven and nine or so, they went on their first trip to Fairbanks. They stayed with a friend. It was the first time the boys had seen indoor plumbing. When the younger son used the bathroom, he was disgusted. He just couldn't believe that anyone would shit inside their own house.

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It occurs to me that obsolescence is less about time and more about context. About what makes sense in a given circumstance. Our ways of doing things, or making things, reflect the larger direction our society is taking. New technology is usually pitched to us as an improvement. And attachment to old things is often seen as regressive: nostalgic or sentimental. But progress is always an exchange. We gain something, we give something else up. I'm interested in looking at some of what we are losing.

About three years ago, I began taking pictures of storefronts in my neighborhood. I grew up in New York, on the edges of Harlem as a kid, and moved to the Lower East Side when I was sixteen, in 1977. There was a kind of beauty I lived with for years that I had never really noticed as beauty. The dried fruit and nut stores, the pillow makers, Gus's Pickles. The crush of different languages, the bodegas with handwritten signs and "tropical products," the creaking metal signs on Orchard Street with worn-out paintings of men's suits, the corset shops, the dense visual quality of these streets. I loved it. But it was all so familiar, I didn't bother to think of it as beauty. As anything worth photographing.

A few years ago, the slow creeping pattern of gentrification sped up, and as it spread below Houston Street the shops started closing, the pillow man and the quilt-maker, the bodegas, the butcher, the linoleum store. New stores opened up: clothing boutiques, an antique store, a hair salon, a lot of bars.

It was only as these old shops began disappearing that I realized how much I counted on them—that this layered, frayed, and quirky beauty underlined my own life. I felt at home in it. Where I grew up, on the corner of

Claremont and La Salle, there was a typewriter repair store and a Chinese laundry downstairs—on the corner a liquor store with an open counter, and then later with a thick Plexiglas wall and a drawer to pass your money through.

I liked the way my neighborhood grounded me in the world—with physical evidence of the past—of who and when and how. With language. Spanish overlaying Hebrew, Chinatown inching over. . . . And with other kinds of language, an urban vernacular: signs in store windows. “We accept food stamps,” “acceptamos WIC,” pawnshops and check-cashing places. A shop offering: “immigration, divorcios, traducciones.” The wedding stores on Clinton Street, the dairy restaurants, the old kosher Chinese restaurant on Essex Street. The ubiquitous presence of the Lotto man: the poorer a neighborhood, the more you saw of him. I liked the way it was all so visible. I felt located—centered in a migratory pattern of generations of immigrants, centered somehow in history.

And I loved the humor, the personality: “MEATS MEATS MEATS FRESH EVERYDAY.” “Serve yourself and save.” “Fancy Pharmacy.” “Hard to get items.”

I began to realize I would miss all this. So I started taking pictures. I wanted a record.

There is something more here than quaintness, or nostalgia. It is a feeling of connectedness to the rest of the world: to language and economy, to history and struggle—to the endless supply of human solutions to the problem of survival.

A few weeks after I started with those pictures, I went on a trip to France, then Spain, and Morocco. As we traveled, I kept thinking: Why does a book of matches look different there than here? Why do we love these foreign matches, these sugar packets? As souvenirs, yes, to remember our trips, our holidays. But something more. Each detail of a restaurant in a foreign country tells a whole story: the salt is chunky and gray, hand-gathered on a northern island; the candles are soft and burn quickly; the honey is crystallized. What is the story of a book of matches? Who mines the sulfur? Where does the wood come from—or the wax or paper? Who prints the cover, assembles the boxes? Why in some countries does the wood splinter, the sulfur fall off? It takes six matches to get a light.

That’s it, I thought. If I photograph every single product in the world, every item we have extracted, refined, manufactured, every item that is bought and sold, the pictures would contain the story of who we are, what kind of society we have become. All would be revealed in this—the political alliances and trade agreements, the stories of slavery and sweatshops, the stories of rubber plantations and sugar plantations, of coffee and tobacco and cotton plantations—the endless story of human progression from subsistence economies to capitalism. From hunting and gathering to Kmart and Target. From isolation to trade, from imperialism to colonialism to globalization.

I remember thinking: This is going to be a pretty hard project. Photographing every single thing in the world, salt and oil and wood and diamonds, coal and bricks and lime and steel I beams, potatoes and oranges, soap and clothes and

handbags. Everything we mine or extract, or farm or collect, everything we pick or package or sew or assemble.

When I got home from that trip, I saw a connection. I began to see that the urban language I'd been trying to record, this history of my own city, held the key to what I'd been wanting to record globally. I began to see New York as a kind of fulcrum or hub. All these goods and languages and money pass through here. My own neighborhood is filled with signs of a local economy being replaced by a global one: small businesses being replaced by large corporations, multinationals taking over.

The deeper I look, the more I realize that in looking into these shop windows, I am also looking out at the rest of the world—out to the Dominican Republic and China and Poland. I am seeing evidence of specific people, their handwriting, their hand—the way they arrange their window displays—but also of trade agreements, labor conditions, cultural and economic realities in other places. We are connected through coffee and tuna fish, through sugar and cigarettes.

These pictures examine remnants of other eras, hint at other ways of living: typewriter repair shops, flophouses on the Bowery, hand-lettered signs for Mandel Tobacco Co. on East Twelfth street, “suckling pigs sold here” on West 125th. Around the corner from McDonald's, Starbucks, WalMart.

I remember as a kid how excited I was to learn the word anachronism. I thought it amazing that an object could be out of its own time—that it could actually carry another time with it. So these pictures are about place and time. They are pictures of here and now, but also pictures of there and then. They look across place and across time.

I got interested in how signs of the U.S. show up in other countries, and how other countries show up here: a Coca-Cola awning in Meknes, Morocco. In Havana: Bridgestone tires, Marlboro cigarettes, Kodak film. (If it's illegal for U.S. citizens to *spend* money here, why is it legal for them to *make* it?) At an outdoor market in East Jerusalem: an ancient limestone wall hung with purses and bags—Bugs Bunny, Calvin Klein. A table piled high with shoes: Nixe, Phila, Adidos, misspelled rip-off logos.

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Walking down the street in Trinidad, Cuba, we come upon a row of four or five wheelbarrows. One is lined with a large pink pillow. On the pillow, a big television. Why is the television in the wheelbarrow? I realize we are in front of a TV repair shop. This must be how televisions get delivered to and from the repair shop. Something is out of sync here: a place that has television but not a delivery van.

Trinidad has electricity, and it has roads, but traffic is restricted in the old town. To quote the guide book: “Its status as a UNESCO-declared World Heritage Site has ensured that . . . its marvelous architecture has remained unspoiled . . . there is a completeness about central Trinidad's cobbled, traffic-

free streets, its jumble of colonial mansions.” The designation does protect the colonial-era architecture, but it also ensures that Trinidad will be reliant on tourism. And, indeed, it is. From the same guidebook: “One of the island’s foremost tourist attractions . . . Trinidad attracts more tourists than many of Cuba’s larger cities.”

So the TV could be in the wheelbarrow because of the World Heritage designation, or it could be that the owner simply can’t afford a car or a van. Or that this is the quickest, easiest way to get around in a small busy town. The way riding a bike in Manhattan is quicker than driving a car. I didn’t stay in Cuba long enough to know the answers, but I could see that there is a story here—a long and complicated one that involves Castro and the U.S. and the former Soviet Union. Philosophies and economic systems, corporate and political players far from here, all put the TV in the wheelbarrow.

You cannot see all that in the photograph, but the picture does give you some clues. You know you are in a place where things get repaired. And that things get repaired in places where it is cheaper to pull them apart and fix them than it is to buy a new one. Places where things are used, reused, adapted, and then broken down for parts—a final usefulness extracted from the metal, the screws, the wire, the glass. Places where people have time and labor is cheap. Or places where shipping is expensive and factories and goods are far away. So in New York, you throw your TV out. In Trinidad, you repair it.

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I’m interested in the traditions of Eugène Atget and Walker Evans. In their tradition of archiving. Both had such a keen eye for signs of the human hand, a love and respect for the distinct voices of anonymous individuals. Each had a specific view of the time in which they lived, and a clear understanding of the value of their work in history.

Atget’s photographs provide a record of Paris, but they also document the shift from a handmade world to an age of mechanical production. I think he understood that something irrevocable was going on during his time—during his *fin de siècle*. His archive provides us with a view of a world now completely altered.

We are now witnessing such a specific moment in history—the end of the mechanical age, the beginning of the digital era. I think this is a unique moment to document, and an important one to archive.

I have been working with an old Rolleiflex. I like that the camera is a leftover from the mechanical age. I like using this tool, looking at a new world through an old lens.

I’m equally interested in the traditions of Flemish and Dutch still life painting—in the idea that a grouping of objects can be a portrait, or an allegory, that the owner can be described through his objects, that the assembling of

these possessions reveals his or her class, profession, interests, education, religious beliefs, his or her status and place in the world. And that objects can be arranged, symbolically, to relate a story of the fragility of life, the temporal qualities of life.

In both traditions, the archive and the still life, objects and places are employed to tell the stories of their owners and inhabitants. This is a constant thread in my work, this kind of archaeology. I'm interested in what we make and what we leave behind. I want to see the clues and signs, the flaws and beauty. I know the world will never look quite this way again, and I feel that I want to look closely, to hold it near.

In a market in Warsaw, blankets spread with goods: old alarm clocks and radios, crucifixes and porn magazines, dolls and stuffed animals, eyeglasses, hammers, wheels. On a small square of pale-blue plastic, two pairs of brown shoes. One with laces, one without, the imprint of the former owner's feet pressed into the insole.

Certainly, our cultures are recorded through the purposeful and self-conscious mediums of literature and art, but many stories and histories are told simply and clearly by pots and pans, ax handles and foldout couches, glass beads, satellite dishes, and Styrofoam cups.

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I lived on Stanton Street at the corner of Ludlow for twenty-two years. It was an old tenement building. My apartment had five rooms and many doors between rooms, and windows and transoms and airshafts to "borrow" light and air. At just about eye level, every door frame had a crusty, raised outline of a mezuzah. The mezuzahs were gone—removed and taken to other homes, years ago. But decades of painting and repainting had left a distinctive slanted imprint in each doorway.

It's a New York real-estate story. It was a rent-controlled apartment. When I moved, my landlord planned a gut renovation. A capital improvement so the rent could be raised, the apartment deregulated. The bathtub in the kitchen would be pulled out, the walls and doors torn down and replaced. The morning after the move, I went back and took pictures of each door frame.

ZOE LEONARD is an artist living and working in New York City. Her work has been exhibited extensively both in the United States and internationally, and is included in numerous public collections. She is represented by the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York City and Galerie Gisela Capitain in Cologne, Germany.