The Shoebox Museum: The Aesthetics and Organizational Concepts of Children

Kristiana Willsey

Guests at the Smithsonian, the Louvre, or the Met go to see pieces that have been declared important and valuable repositories of meaning, beauty and culture by trustworthy authorities. Elegantly presented as final, finished objects for cultural consumption, exhibits in glass cases and behind velvet ropes are validated by hushed, reverent, paying audiences. Traditional museums simultaneously recognize importance and create it, through the frame of the museum itself. However, the notion that a particular space can confer significance upon objects, marking and raising them from their quotidian context, is not unique to adults or to fully accredited cultural authorities. If the museum is reserved for fixed, established, mature "high cultural" objects, how then does that often invisible, incompletely cultured class of individuals, children, recognize/create objects that are beautiful and meaningful to them? This paper considers children as intuitive curators, whose ready grasp of collection and containment as processes of sacralization both upsets and reinscribes the values of traditional museums: authority, publicity, permanence and presentation.

The children's museum (meaning not museums designed by adults for children, but children's own eclectic assemblages of treasures kept in shoe boxes, dresser drawers, under a loose floorboard, etc.) is here considered alongside of other (adult) critiques and parodies of traditional museums, specifically Dave Wilson's Museum of Jurassic Technology and Rosamond Casey's Museum of Ambient Disorders.[1] This is not because I believe that children's assemblages are self-conscious, calculated and incisive attacks on the stultifying artificiality of traditional museums. Rather, I want to suggest that the artistic and philosophical projects of adults, which take up questions of permanence, authority, publicity and presentation, are inheritors of and modeled on the assemblages of children. This paper thus develops a novel conceptual framework for approaching children's assemblages, with particular reference to one child's museum: the "treasure chest" of nearly-five-year-old Ben Harding.[2] Drawing on ongoing research, my analysis is intended to be preliminary and suggestive, not argumentative or exhaustive. Most significantly, this is an argument for considering children's material "folk" culture on an equal plane with the artistic, expressive "high" culture of adult intellectuals.

The word "assemblage" is used advisedly, to differentiate the specific and thematic collections children might have of rocks, dolls, baseball cards and so forth from my focus here, which is on those jumbled hodge-podges of rubber bands, vending machine prizes, feathers, pictures, costume jewelry, interesting pebbles, empty perfume bottles, matchbox cars, mysterious bits of machinery, and other unlikely treasures. The personally significant and the visually or tactilely appealing share quarters, not merely coincidentally but productively: "accumulation and layering promote a kind of benevolent contagion; the significance of one image is lent to another … intensification [of meaning] springs

from a process of condensing and miniaturizing" (Turner 1999, 100). Kay Turner offers an adult parallel to the fragmentary and flexible shoebox museum with her research on the aesthetics of women's home altars: places in the home set apart as sacred and containing "Photos, candles, incense, ritual tools, potions, medicine bundles, shells, crystals, coins, momentos, knick-knacks, gifts, offerings, decorative effects, and even seemingly anomalous items, such as a jar of buttons or a door knob. Some of these things may remain fixed for a lifetime, while others may change. The aesthetic of relationship is a dynamic one: expanding, sometimes contracting, then again being replenished over time" (95). Children's assemblages are similarly fluid and subject to revision; the success of the shoebox museum relies upon its accessibility and its mutability, unlike the glassed-off, carded-and-catalogued permanence of traditional museums.

Alternative museums like Dave Wilson's Museum of Jurassic Technology and Rosamond Casey's Museum of Ambient Disorders criticize the stifling and unnecessary "noise," in Goffman's sense, of the museum space: the gilt frames and velvet ropes intended to honor and elevate the art and artifacts are too prone to become themselves the object of reverence. The emphasis on presentation mediates and circumscribes what Wilson, Casey, and others see as the natural role of art: a genuine and reciprocal conversation between guests and exhibit. American artist Robert Smithson said famously, "Museums are tombs" (1996, 58). Best known for "earthworks" sculptures like his 1970 "Spiral Jetty," pieces designed to engage and interact with natural forces rather than resisting them, Smithson's criticism of the artificial abstraction of museums and galleries and the illusion of permanence is taken up as parody by alternative museums and conceptual art.

Figure 1. "Hanging Basket." Courtesy of the Museum of Jurassic Technology.

Figure 2. "Rotten Luck." Courtesy of the Museum of Jurassic Technology.

Dave Wilson's Museum of Jurassic Technology is a dimly lit, labyrinthine set of rooms with an air of genteel neglect, tucked away in a suburb of Los Angeles. The exhibits include a series of intricate dioramas depicting the American lifestyle of the mobile home, microscopic mosaics of flowers and birds composed from the scales on a butterfly's wing, a thick sheet of lead containing a species of bat which uses

sonar to move through solid objects, a collection of antique celluloid dice, and various other beautiful and bizarre images of dubious authenticity (figs. 1-2). As Lawrence Weschler exposes in his Pulitzer-prize finalist for nonfiction, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonders,* the Museum is a tongue-in-cheek piece of conceptual art, a destabilization of authoritative truth. Wilson asks his guests to consider who has the authority to create meaning/significance, what devices (literally) frame it for audience consumption, and whether museum spaces recognize intrinsic value, create it, or both.

In a similar critical project, Rosamond Casey's gallery of sculptures, collectively titled The Museum of Ambient Disorders, questions the values of authority, permanence, publicity and presentation in order to strip away superfluities and argue for a more personal, unencumbered, egalitarian engagement with art. The exhibit "White Noise," a series of stoppered bottles supposedly containing sounds stored up by an old man in the process of losing his hearing, devotes equal measures of humor and sincerity to the question of how meaning might be captured and preserved (fig. 3). Casey subtly satirizes the noble aim of traditional museums, which imagine not only that certain objects (which the curators will know on sight) act as receptacles of culture, beauty, or significance, but that the museum can protect them from the rude passage of time or ugly, inevitable change of episteme. Casey also pointedly takes on the issue of perspective and asks us to reevaluate who has the authority to distinguish between the worthy and the trivial. Putting an old man's reminiscences in a museum exhibit extends to them a weight they would hardly have independently. The personal is practically trivial by default; museums deal in the momentous, the universal, and the substantial. Or do they? Is the Mona Lisa in the Louvre because it's famous, or is the Mona Lisa famous because it's in the Louvre? Casey delights in these tangled relationships of significance and authority.

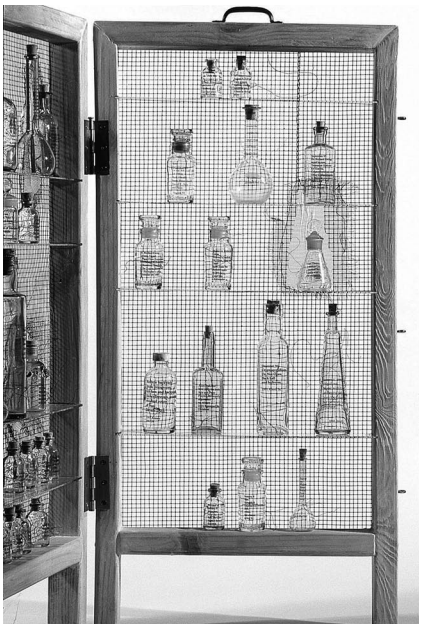

Figure 3. "White Noise." Courtesy of Rosamond Casey and the Virginia Quarterly Review.

Ben's museum (fig. 4) offers a neat entry point into these intellectual adult projects; his "treasure chest" is both an implicit challenge to the aims of traditional museums and an affirmation of them. Ben's museum is unquestionably personal/trivial; his treasures have only individual and idiosyncratic meaning, nothing (apparently) worthy of glass cases

Figure 4. Ben Harding's museum. Photograph by Kristiana Willsey.

or admission fees. They are physically trivial: small, often broken, frequently cheap and mass-produced. Presentation of artifacts in Ben's museum is nothing more polished or final than a jumble; the box is an open space within which any object can relate to any other. Turner's description of the home altar is equally applicable to children's assemblages: "power flows through the "thingliness" of the altar [or shoebox], its material reality … images and objects that have no immediate affinity are nonetheless yoked together to forge new, interrelated meanings" (1999, 98). Connections and relationships are not tidily bound in programs or catalogues, but are literally up for grabs. Further, they are curated/validated by a child, someone with no cultural authority to declare meaning. But it remains that Ben's "treasure chest" is a space recognized and marked for the collection and containment of valuable and significant objects. It is in fact the ideal answer to Dave Wilson's question of who has the right to determine significance or Rosamond Casey's concern with the personal/trivial. Moreover, Ben's jumbled and evocative assemblage is reminiscent of the sculptures of surrealist artist Joseph Cornell, and an interesting dialogue emerges when we permit ourselves to consider the two on equal footing.

There is in Ben an air of the traditional curator, "discovering" objects worthy of collection and containment.

> K: How do you know to put something in your pirate chest if you get something?
> B: (long pause, seven seconds) I know. Put in my — I just think of doing that.

My question was essentially the critic Juan Suarez' query to Cornell's sculptures: "What makes certain objects laden with surrealist potential?" (2007, 148). The museum space suggests itself for a privileged few; the beauty and value of certain objects is — as the classic curator's task — recognized and exalted, albeit within the limited presentation sphere available to Ben. His explanation invokes the curator's sense of inherent existing value, visible to the sensitive eye of the collector. Ben, likewise, asserts, "Everything that is treasurous, goes in my box." However, the corollary is of course that everything that enters the box becomes treasure. The objects are decontextualized and "framed"; meaning is created through placement and association.

An intrinsic quality of traditional museums is the impression of permanence and fixity of context, not just generally within the bound, framed world of art or history but within the specific museum or gallery: while exhibits travel, the Mona Lisa is practically synonymous with the Louvre. Authoritative adult museums fix significance and tie it to a particular place or time; generally agreed-upon interpretations of a famous painting or excavated artifact are written down in programs or memorized for tours. Children's assemblages, conversely, recognize objects as naturally and readily recontextualizable. The apparent disorder is purposeful and creative; as Lucy Lippard points out, "Fragmentation need not connote explosion, disintegration. It is also a component of networks, stratification, the interweaving of many dissimilar threads, and de-emphasis on

imposed meaning in favor of multiple interpretations" (qtd. in Turner 1999, 100). For instance, although a string of beads or an artificial rose retain the associations with a friend's party or a relative's wedding where Ben received them, these associations aren't solidified or resistant to gathering new kinds of meaning. While showing me his treasures, Ben incorporates them easily into his games. A high-bouncer from a vending machine becomes enormous, an out-of-scale weapon in his lego-world:

> B: (sound of rubber ball bouncing) "Ahhh! Bombs dropping on the ship!"

Later, Ben finds a purple latex snake, about an inch long, which (his mother explained in elided dialogue) came as part of a pirate game.

> B: Oh here's my snake! […]
> K: So this is kind of a pirate thing too?
> B: Nuh-uh. Snakes are not pirates.
> K: (laughter) No, snakes are clearly not pirates, Ben. What kind of a thing is this?
> B: (playing with legos) Propeller — I am a propeller. It's a propeller — snake.
> K: It's a propeller snake?
> B: Yeah, propeller snakes live in propellers. They live, and they never get chopped up.

The simultaneity of the lego game-world and the toy snake creates a new and exciting scenario for Ben; what begins as an experimental linguistic juxtaposition ("I am a propeller. It's a propeller — snake") suggests a cogent and appealing little narrative. And in fact, Ben did offer an answer (of sorts) to my question. The snake is an *available* "kind of thing," an object with unlimited potentially intriguing contexts. This fluidity of significance that Ben takes for granted strikes at a central notion of traditional museums: that meaning can be extracted, distilled, and preserved in the hermetic vault of a circumscribed authoritative space. Rather they are valued for "their capacity to derail automacized perception and trigger unpredictable trains of association" (Suarez 2007, 147). Analyzing the work of surrealist artists, Suarez explicitly connects their treatment of objects to that of children:

> As Walter Benjamin was fond of pointing out, childhood vision has not yet been reduced by purposive rationality and is therefore more alert to the enigmatic quality of objects and to the webs of association in which they exist. It multiplies and transforms the object world instead of freezing it into routine: '[The child's drawers] must become arsenal and zoo; crime museum and crypt. To 'tidy up' would be to demolish an edifice full of prickly chestnuts that are spiky clubs, tin foil that is hoarded silver, bricks that are coffins, cacti that are totem

> poles, and copper pennies that are shields.' To see as a child is to see as a surrealist, fully attentive to the complexity of matter." (2007, 166)

And, it would appear, to see as a surrealist is to see as a child — Suarez goes on to describe Joseph Cornell's "intense fascination with children" in his art (2007, 167), and biographical data offers further interesting angles. Cornell lived with his parents for most of his adult life, and had a "professed distaste for shocking subject matter and overt sexual references" (Suarez 2007, 142). In other words, there was something childlike about him, or at least enamored of the Victorian image of the child. Suarez moreover frames artistic and ideological developments within a model of human maturation: "Hence to see like a child is, in a way, to see with the untutored eye of the new visual technologies at the time. Cornell's, and the surrealist's, early years were a period when the emergent mass media had not yet […] streamlined their grammar and style" (2007, 167). Suarez invokes a unilinear view of culture similar to that of Alice Bertha Gomme and other proponents of cultural evolution. Surrealism is described as the infancy of modernity, and children are asked to stand in for a previous historical period. In this case, though, their vision is romanticized and the adult artist is imagined as channeling or inheriting the child's (productive, positive) understanding of objects.

Underlying these surrealist sculptures, in Suarez' analysis, is a belief in the 'naturalness' of the surrealist perspective; it is self-consciously aligned with an idea of children as *unconscious* artists. We don't need to deal with how deliberate or sophisticated children's awareness of their assemblages actually is, because successful surrealist art is imagined as returning to that "innocent" appreciation of the objects: "rather than create, it recontextualizes and therefore reinterprets the given" (Suarez 2007, 147). This conception of the artist as unconscious, rather than creative, suggests the familiar folkloristic notion of the "passive bearer," evidence of how seamlessly the usually disassociated disciplines of folklore and fine art can converse.

Even the museum shell itself, the box that recognizes and creates the objects within it as significant and valuable, is subject to revision/recontextualization. Initially Ben's "treasure chest" was a Christmas gift containing only pirate-themed goodies: doubloons, fake beads, an activity book and so forth. However, with a child's sensitivity to the richness of language, Ben knew that "treasure" refers to both material and immaterial wealth: what was given to him as a place for gold, he transforms into a vessel for another kind of riches: memories, associations, family ties.

Concerning this openness to recontextualization, it is significant that Ben's museum, unlike most museums designed for adults, is entirely hands-on. His artifacts are sensuously diverse, appreciated for the rich and varied stimuli they provide. The objects' value is described in physical and tactile terms:

> K: What do you like about this, this marble?
> B: Marble? I like to roll it down.

Likewise the aerosol bottle of lavender-scented liquid, which is both viscerally and olfactorily appealing, has a place in the museum. The coins were dumped out and sifted through for the music of metal ringing against metal. Thus the availability of the objects to be made significant in novel ways requires that their presentation be informal (no glass cases) and personal, involving the fullness of sensory awareness particular to children.

A brief note on methodology: because I had never met Ben and I wanted him (and his mother) to be comfortable with what I was doing, I chose to interview Ben in his mother's presence. I don't know in what way this altered the answers he gave me and I will need to do further research with other children to get a more informed sense of how private these assemblages really are. One complication that immediately emerged, though, was that I was a friend of his mother's, manifestly an adult, and therefore was given self-consciously adult-oriented answers. I don't think it was coincidental, for instance, that Ben spoke first about the money in his treasure chest, the piggy-bank component of the collection, as that which he knew adults valued and which I, an adult, would be most impressed by:

> K: Where'd you get the marble?
> B: I don't remember. But this is all my money that I keep in here, I got lots and lots. And I got this [a flattened souvenir penny] from the children's museum, um, (sing-song intonation) it's right heeere, it's a mummy, and this is all my money, that I really like and, (coins falling, indecipherable) this is my money so my mommy can buy stuff for me.

My attempts to turn the discussion towards the more unusual and personal objects were, more often than not, unsuccessful, but Ben was eager to show off his "lots and lots" of money, emphasizing his role as an important and productive member of the household. The money was being elevated for my/adult benefit and recognition, not necessarily according to Ben's own understanding. Not all the things Ben called money were what adults consider legal tender; they also included foreign coins, toy money, or likely-looking pieces of metal. In fact Ben explicitly referred to a flattened, stamped souvenir penny (something which has been transformed from currency into a toy) as "money." Similarly his phonetic approximations of "money" and experimentation with different articles ("it's a mummy") underscore that, for Ben, this was a semi-foreign cultural category.

Knowing that I was there with my audio recorder to talk to him about important things, Ben wanted to represent himself as capable and mature, helping his mother to take care of him (an endearing posturing I imagine his mother encouraged). I am not suggesting that the money was not special to Ben, but rather that he represented it in a way particularly keyed to an adult audience. It's also likely that part of his appreciation for it comes from his sense that this is an adult thing — adulthood seeming as foreign and exotic as his coin from Barbados, as distant and improbable a role as a pirate whose gold doubloons have a place alongside the currency of other grown-ups.

A struggle to translate his sense of relationship into mine manifests itself elsewhere in the interview, when I ask Ben to explain more about why he organized his treasures the way he did:

B: It's a flower.
K: Why is it with your pirate treasure?
B: I put things in that is not apposed to go in there.
K: Why aren't they supposed to go in there?
B: Because I got them some other place and I don't want them to go in there. So I (indecipherable) Legos especially don't go in pirate boxes. (explosing noises) Fuse bomb! Digging in the Fuse! (flying noises) And this is apposed to go.
K: So why does the rose go with the pirate stuff?
B: Because, I wanted it to go, it didn't you know it didn't go with pirate stuff.

Newly conceiving of his treasures from my (adult) perspective, Ben sees that his groupings are not "appropriate;" Ben is aware of his sense of relatedness as deviant or dispreferred: he "put[s] things in that is not apposed to go in there." When I pressed him, he gave an explanation of one kind of adult/appropriate category: "I got them in some other place." Things from the same place are like objects; shared context creates meaning. His diverse assemblage of objects from multiple contexts is difficult for him to explain, as he switches between aesthetics; he "wanted it to go," but *I* know, "it didn't go with the pirate stuff." He is aware of, but resistant to, adult concepts of organization; instead "the accumulation of things, and their ability to resonate against each other, completely overcomes the subject's ability to set them in order" (Suarez 2007, 145).

Though Ben's museum is unconcerned with formal presentation or public display and requires only the authoritative curatorship of Ben himself, there is one crucial level at which his museum is no different than any elegantly presented, culturally validated, and permanently contextualized museum space. Underlying Ben's museum, as it does more polished and authoritative venues, is the troubling sense of inevitable change, transition, and loss. Suarez's description of Cornell's art — "The endless symbolic resonances and flights of association in which he indulges are attempts to bind the primary alterity of the material world" — could equally be applied to the assemblage of the not-quite-five-year-old Ben (2007, 145). Ben repeatedly gives rationales for his treasures in terms of protection and preservation, saying "then I um, put it in there, just to be safe. So it could be safe." He explains that he keeps things in the box "because I don't want it to get lost, all my toys from there get lost. So I wanna keep those in there so they won't get lost." And he becomes actively outraged when his mother proposed mixing his organizational schemas, specifically because it would pose a threat to the fragile order he has managed to sort out for himself:

M: Would you ever put your lego in the pirate chest —
B: NOOOO!

M: No?
B: (quietly) Lost.
M: It would get lost —
B: NO, Don't DARE, DARE, W, DARE. Don't even THINK about that!

This sense of his treasures as threatened is not only literal, but also symbolic. These are not only tactilely pleasing objects but, more significantly, *narrative* objects, vessels for memory and association. Turner discusses the dual roles of women's altars as both aesthetically appealing and personally resonant: "if the first authentic goal of an altar is to represent relationship, then the primary artistic move is to set potent images in relation to one another" (1999, 96). By "representing relationship," the objects in Ben's museum also represent the threat of losing the people with whom they are connected. It emerged in our conversation that Ben's objects were disproportionately gifts from family:

K: Do these things go together? Do these pictures [one of a ship his mother sailed on, the other of a smoke column from his firefighter father] go together?
B: No. My dad gave me that one, and my mom gave me that one.
M: Do you remember who gave it to you?
B: (fiercely) UNCLEMICHAEL! He's my uncle definitely.
M: Do you remember where you got those orange beads?
B: From Nanny.
K: Why do you like it [the picture from his father]?
B: Because it reminds me of my dad, he lives in California! (clenched teeth, impatient)
K: Why did you put it in here with your treasure?
B: I didn't even know it was in there. So I didn't, know that it was in there. (fiercely)

This relationship between gift and giver is articulated by Robert Armstrong in his analysis of what he calls "works of affecting presence," specifically museum exhibits and other objects of cultural worship: "Such things are not, at base, symbols of something else … they *are* whatever they are. … [They] own certain characteristics that cause them to be treated more like persons than like things" (1981, 5). In other words, human contact humanizes things. My mother's sweater *is* my mother, and when I eat from my grandmother's china she is serving me. The exhibits in Ben's museum likewise "exist in a state of tension between these two poles: being subject and being object" (Armstrong 1981, 6). They are simultaneously physical things under his control and intermediaries for independent humans whose actions he cannot predict or protect.

This crosses into very personal territory, and several interesting things emerged from these exchanges. In the first place, there's a kind of sympathetic ritual involved in the objects' capture and containment. To keep the objects safe is to keep the people safe, or at least one's own memories and understanding of them. It also becomes clear from Ben's tone of voice and metalinguistic gestures that

these aren't things he is comfortable talking about. In fact the reason that some of these explanations were given to his mother, rather than me (and only grudgingly at that) is because she had the authority to push when Ben was evasive. In the case of the picture from his father, Ben denies the significance. Though I want to respect the statements of my informant, his discomfort, repetition, and general unwillingness to speak about personal and emotional associations make it hard to believe the picture isn't a valued part of his treasure chest. These are obviously things that are not only personal, but also sensitive. There is something simultaneously valuable and upsetting about these reminders of uncertain (and in his father's case, geographically distant) relationships. As Suarez says, "this is why objects combine anxiety and fascination; why, even though they evoke danger, they are also obsessively revisited" (2007, 149). The treasures both offer a kind of security and remind their collector that security is impossible.

Ben's wariness regarding the personal narratives invested in his treasures adds another dimension to our consideration of his assemblage as a museum. "Museum" is a term typically reserved for public display; significance is validated by the collective appreciation of an audience. This is part of the definition of "museum" Rosamond Casey's Museum of Ambient Disorders takes apart, specifically with the exhibit "Bob's Flashback," which sets apart a childhood memory within an internet forward (fig. 5). The exhibit combines all the elements of triviality that typically would label it as unfit for museum-consumption: it is transient, gone the second the window closes. Besides this it is clearly not processed for a presentation; Casey returns to the issue of permanence and preservation by pressing this casual fragment of a conversation — typos, awkward grammar and spelling intact — between blocks of glass, like insects in honey. But above all it is personal, of no real significance to anyone other than Bob. It is this hard line between the personal and the significant that Casey seems particularly interested in; while Bob's revelation is unique to him, the genuineness of his emotion and the thrill of recollection is universally accessible.

Figure 5. "Bob's Flashback." Courtesy of Rosamond Casey and the Virginia Quarterly Review.

Casey asserts that the personal is not antithetical to a museum exhibit; rather it is a prerequisite to that connection which is the appropriate work of museums. Just as "White Noise" privileges the personal by reminding us that meaning and history are individually created, Bob's conversation

is museum-worthy not in spite of its personal/trivial nature, but because of it. Similarly, the privacy of Ben's assemblage is a mark of its sincerity. Its very personalness is what elevates it from the everyday; if it were not personally important, it would not be in his box of treasures, a bounded space outside of the ordinary.

K: Do you like talking about your box?
B: (pause) No. I don't know.
K: How come?
B: Because it's too — treasured-ous! (shooting noises)
M: Are you saying it's because it's treasure — and it's special? (To me: I know sometimes he doesn't like to talk about things that are special to him.)
B: Yes I do. I do['nt.]
K: [You] like to talk to things that are special to you [Ben?]
B:
[No.]

Though I can't really know whether Ben's problematic explanation is a function of emotional discomfort, mere boredom, frustration at my inability to understand or his inability to express it effectively, this is clearly a difficult subject for him. Ben's reticence regarding the personal significance of his objects in fact resonates with Joseph Cornell's surrealist structures:

> a body of work that is as meticulously crafted as it is mystifyingly opaque, they consistently bypass that on the other side of art, the personal and the symbolic, Cornell merely gives us things — bits of obtrusively unreadable matter in odd combination. His constructions infuse quotidian things with cultural density and human circumstance and therefore lift them from their immediate materiality; yet at the same time, they simultaneously reassert them as matter — blunt remains that symbol and sense can never exhaust (Suarez 143).

Though Ben's museum is perhaps not "meticulously crafted," and probably not intentionally mystifyingly, it's worth considering that Suarez's critical analyses are only possible because Cornell was not much more forthcoming about the intention of his art than Ben is about the motivations for his collection. There's a surprising and appealing symmetry between Ben Harding's treasure chest and Cornell's surrealist sculptures — the latter suggests an inheritance of and refinement on the intuitive curatorship of children.

Moreover, as many questions and complications as Ben's assemblage raises for the typical museum, it also demonstrates a canny grasp of how to establish and defend the significance of things adults would not recognize by adopting a very 'adult' method: put it all together in a safe, closed, box. As Candice Gouchard says in Turner, "the process of acquiring objects that begin to have meaning both in and of themselves and in relation to events or people or places or ideas … begins

to have a power of its own that exceeds the power of the individual object … *accumulation describes the process of empowerment both for the individual and for the space that [the] altar [or shoebox] … occupies*" (1999, 100, my emphasis). It is not only the objects in a museum that assemblage throws into conversation; the curator and the museum space are wrapped up in the process as well. If putting an ordinary object in a frame lends it significance, then it also creates significance for the framer — something children, among the least powerful members of society, are quick to appreciate. Underlying Ben's treasure chest is an alignment with that most integral conceit of museum work — that to possess anything is to possess importance, that collection itself is an act of empowerment.

NOTES

1. Discussions of Rosamond Casey draw on an unpublished 2006 paper.
2. Names of participants have been changed.

WORKS CITED

Armstrong, Robert Plant. 1981. *The Powers of Presence: Consciousness, Myth, and Affecting Presence*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Casey, Rosamond. 2006. A Museum of Ambient Disorders. ***Virginia Quarterly Review*** 82: 202-227.

Smithson, Robert. 1996. Some Void Thoughts on Museums. In ***Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings***, ed. Jack Flam, 58. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Suarez, Juan A. 2007. *Pop Modernism: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday*. Illinois: Urbana and Chicago.

Turner, Kay. 1999. *Beautiful Necessity: The Art and Meaning of Women's Altars*. New York: Thames and Hudson.

Weschler, Lawrence. 1995. *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*. New York: Vintage.