

Philadelphia Freedoms
Cultural Landscapes
and Civic Ideals

RAIR (RECYCLED ARTIST IN RESIDENCY):
ARCHIVES AND WASTE STREAMS

FEATURING ESSAYS BY

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**ARTISTS AND
WRITERS EXCHANGE**

SPRING 2016

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RAIR (RECYCLED ARTIST IN RESIDENCY):
ARCHIVES AND WASTE STREAMS

SUPPORTED BY THE CENTER FOR
PEACE AND GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP
AT HAVERFORD COLLEGE



In Spring 2016, Haverford College students enrolled in **Philadelphia Freedoms: Cultural Landscapes and Civic Ideals**, a critical writing seminar, conducted a series of dialogues with Philadelphia-based artist collective RAIR (Recycled Artist in Residency). Our goal was to produce a collaborative project about the history and future of Philadelphia through a close study of RAIR.

According to their mission, "RAIR is a nonprofit organization that builds awareness about sustainability issues through art and design." Based at Revolution Recovery in the Tacony area of Northeast Philadelphia, RAIR host artists from around the world who make creative projects and conduct research drawn from the over 350 tons of discarded materials that arrive each day to their facility.

As a class, through a partnership with RAIR, under the guidance of Director of Residencies Billy Dufala and Director of Special Projects Lucia Thomé, students applied critical writing approaches pursued in their semester coursework toward a public presentation that also aimed to serve RAIR with a window into their body of work.

In small groups, students responded to handpicked discarded objects and artifacts shared from RAIR's access to the waste stream, including many jettisoned personal objects. These items have no verifiable origin stories, bear no physical traces of transfer or loss, and float in and out of the context of the waste stream. Together, they configure a fugitive archive of demolition.

In order to consider these objects in the realm of their practice, Dufala and Thomé visited with students at Haverford, met with college librarians at Haverford's Quaker & Special Collections in Magill Library to discuss archival strategies and interventions, and welcomed students to RAIR for a site visit. In their groups, students examined objects and wrote keyword essays to contribute toward a collective class publication. In doing so, they addressed the ethical, historical, environmental, and creative issues raised in working with discarded and recycled materials.

—Paul Farber
Professor, Philadelphia Freedoms

QUESTIONS

TO CONSIDER

How does RAIR fit into your historical understanding of Philadelphia?

What is the relationship between historical artifacts/archives and discarded materials?

How do readings of these objects animate the study of contemporary history in Philadelphia?

Who runs the city?

What challenges arise from "readings" of discarded objects? What can't you see through them?

For future RAIR artists, what are the ethical stances to keep in mind when encountering and incorporating such materials into their works?

RAIR DISCUSSES AND DISPLAYS
THEIR WASTE STREAM
ARCHIVE AT HAVERFORD'S
QUAKER & SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
IN MAGILL LIBRARY





BILLY DUFALA

LUCIA THOMÉ

SITE VISIT TO RAIR
AT REVOLUTION RECOVERY

TACONY

NORTHEAST PHILADELPHIA













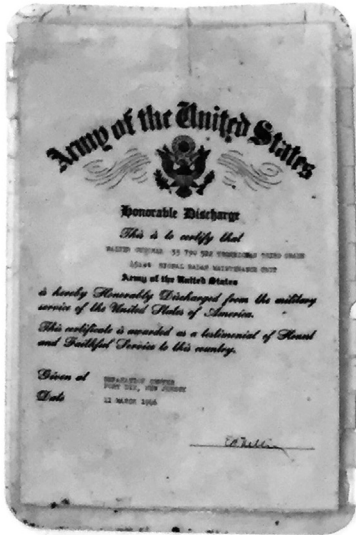



REVOLUTION
RECOVERY









MEANING

Charlie Lynn '19, Kaley Liang '19, and Qwajarik Sims '19

Each day over 350 tons of construction and demolition waste arrives at the Revolution Recovery facility, the majority of which the plant diverts from landfills and repurposes for future use. Recycled Artist in Residency, or RAIR, a non-profit organization housed within the plant's site, partners with artists both local and international to create projects using materials found from in the waste stream and across the facility. Artists sort through the enormous piles of waste in search of items, choosing objects based in part on the meaning they attribute to the items. They create meaning through the projection of different stories and ideals. Meaning, as a concept, refers to the significance and resonance objects either implicitly have, or that viewers create. This process was highlighted for our class through the small trove of objects RAIR took out from the waste stream and brought for students to analyze. The context and meaning of these items depend on a variety of factors, including perceived historical significance.

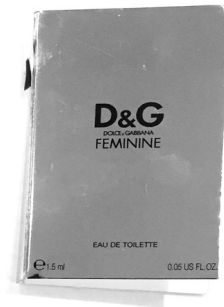
One item with immediate resonance is a 1960s John F. Kennedy presidential campaign button. Today, if found outside of the waste stream the campaign button would hold different meaning. While the campaign button is presumably one of thousands of its kind, individuals project meaning and uniqueness onto each button based on its perceived historical value. Historians could see the button as a representation of America's past. Today's populace could see the button as a representation of a president lost too soon.

Another found object with meaning outside of the waste stream is a miniature military discharge statement. Issued in 1946 to "Walter Gunchak," this "Honorable Discharge" allowed him to return home after World War II. His family most likely kept the statement in their belongings to be reminded of the favorable news. The artifact brought immediate change with its creation and distribution. Now, most of the intended material importance of this discharge statement has disappeared, as those to whom the statement pertain to no longer have access to it. As observers of a now outmoded piece of paper, we do not necessarily have the same emotional response as these original owners might have had.

Other objects in this trove of artifacts, such as a silver pair of surgical scissors, and a Dolce & Gabbana Feminine eau de toilette perfume samples, are less personalized, as they are mass produced. These objects do, however, leave observers to consider how they were intimately used and later discarded. While the campaign button and discharge statement are instantly given meaning due to their historical significance, the everyday nature of the scissors and perfume samples lacks this resonance. To the original owners of these objects, however, they might have been extremely personal and valuable. Because these two objects are not associated with a clear historical narrative, individuals can project a wide variety of meanings onto them.

Meaning is found through the multiple histories that converge up at Revolution Recovery. Not every history is immediately clear

and many of the histories that show up to the artists at RAIR can only be guessed. The future of the objects is also not necessarily apparent. Whether they will be returned to the waste stream or incorporated into an art project, their meaning is not fixed. In the future, the objects may hold new significance. Although we naturally give more meaning initially to items that are old, or instantly recognizable as historically significant, all the objects collected by RAIR can be examined to find meaning.





LANGUAGE

Patrick Adams '19, Stephany Prodromos '19, and Michael Weber '19

At a construction and demolition recycling center in Northeast Philadelphia, a slightly squashed and color-faded paper box of Kent chocolate cigarettes was plucked up by a member of RAIR (Recycled Artist In Residency), a non-profit that repurposes materials and objects for art, design, and education. The cigarette pack's twirling letters read, "*Milk Chocolate Cigarettes*" in English and Dutch on its alternate sides. The writing on the package represents two of several different languages that can be read on this one small object. This pack of cigarettes has a story to tell, and the languages we see printed on it can be a means for interpretation. The multiple languages are not only eye-catching, they insinuate a history that can be found beyond the mere writing, and only fully imagined by the observer.

The languages that can be identified on this object act as a gateway to understanding the object's past and purpose. At the same time, the language we use to interpret and understand the object can starkly alter the way we perceive its story and value. Regardless of the form in which that language appears, it entails understanding the nature of an object and its history. Through language, we can interpret clues regarding the motivation behind the object's initial production, use, abandonment, and retrieval by a member of RAIR. Since we, the observers, must imagine the object's history, the language we use bears just as much significance as the language found on the object itself in deriving its narrative.

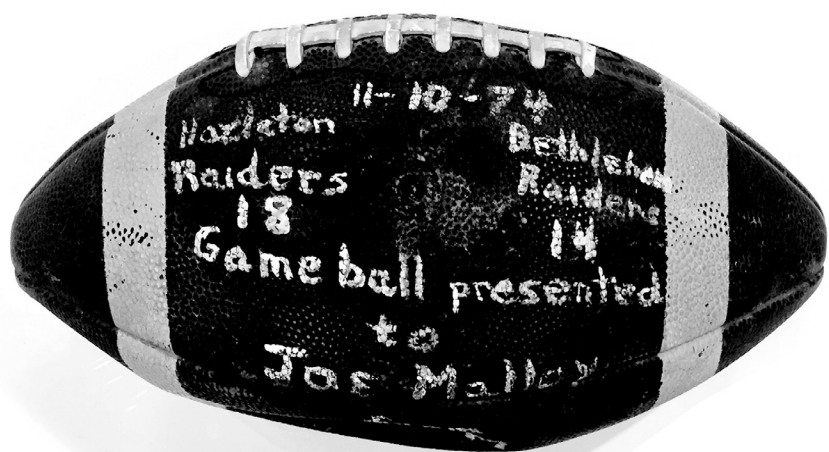
Before we can even interact with the languages printed on the object, the phrasing that we use to categorize and value the object can be the motivating difference between carefully studying it and

throwing it away. An item encountered in an archaeological dig, for instance, could be considered historically important, while an item found at a recycling center could be considered junk. This distinction is rooted in a question of value: Are we willing to consider a dump to be an archive? Certainly, it may be hard to value a pile of what we call "waste," yet we could use words like "treasure" instead of "garbage," or "building materials" instead of "junk." These distinctions in our own language determine how we interpret the narratives of objects. Indeed, we can pick up an old pack of candy cigarettes at a dump and consider it to reflect a loss or a tragedy, or we could pick it up and consider it to be found, thus reinvigorating it with a newfound value.

Variance in language can dictate how we handle and interpret newly discovered objects. Language that has already been given to us (for example, the text on the box of candy cigarettes) can also cause us to make immediate assumptions about the object. The box of candy cigarettes that seemed to have at least four languages on it immediately intrigued us. Not only was the variety of languages on the box fascinating, but there is a particular sticker on the box with an eye-catching array of East Asian symbols, demonstrating another facet of how language can convey information. In this instance, language goes beyond conveying what is on the label; it presents the observer with multiple ways of perceiving the very same message, and also points to details about its former owner or audience. The fact that there is such varied language on the box gives the observer an idea of where it previously belonged. It is left unclear as to

how such a multi-lingual box could have ended up in Philadelphia, other than the broad implications of a global market.

When faced with ambiguities about an object's past, we are left to consider how it ended up in the waste stream at RAIR in the first place. Perhaps the artist that stumbled upon the box of candy cigarettes wondered why an object of such interest just had to be picked up from a dump. Again, this brings about the query of what language we use to consider waste. Although other objects (or, perhaps, artifacts) might not be as peculiar as the candy cigarettes, each can be understood to have its own history of production, use, abandonment, and eventual recovery through entities like RAIR. The language or languages which we may find on each object can tell us something about its past, but first we must use language to qualify its past as important. Whether language is imprinted physically on objects, or drawn out from our conversations about them, language inherently instills meaning onto what we consider to be waste.



11-10-74
Hazleton Raiders 18
Bethlehem Raiders 14
Game ball presented
to
Joe Maller

UNCONVENTIONAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Christopher Bechen '19, Anna Kullnig '19, and Arielle Pinto '19

Archeology often brings to mind romantic ruins and desert sands being delicately brushed away to reveal traces of the past. However, the definition of archeology should force us to broaden what we usually associate with the term. According to the Oxford Dictionary, archeology is “the study of human history and prehistory through the excavation of sites and the analysis of artifacts and other physical remains.” While this definition reinforces a traditional picture of archeology, it also enables a widening of the definition that allows RAIR consideration as practitioners of a kind of unconventional archeology.

One of the main ways that RAIR practices archeology is through it's exploration of and reflection on history. RAIR receives discarded materials mainly from demolition and new construction sites. However, a small portion of this material includes memorabilia, most often from home clean outs. These objects are material incarnations of the past. For instance, a commemorative signed football from a 1974 Hazleton High School team victory and *E.T.* movie memorabilia are parts of Philadelphians' personal and cultural history. We are then left with dated fragments that we must piece together. RAIR therefore allows us to get a glimpse of a greater history by aggregating a collection of personal histories through objects.

In contrast, the path the objects travel through RAIR goes against the grain of most archaeological narratives. Traditional archeology often involves working at a site to reveal objects connected to its proximate locale. Their environment gives them context that is often essential in the interpretation of the history. However, in

RAIR's case, the only context we have for these objects is the other objects around them. For instance, the football may have once been displayed on a mantel piece, a bookshelf, or in a teenager's room. The only context for its interpretation now are the objects found around it: the deck of cards, the photographs, and other objects that were likely pulled out of the same home demolition or clean out. In this case we fail to gain the context necessary for more traditional forms of archaeological analysis.

Nevertheless, archaeologists face many ethical dilemmas, as do artists at RAIR. Do they have a right to be going through the discarded remnants of someone's life, even if the objects were found in a waste stream? In a way, it's easy to see RAIR's actions as a sort of invasion of privacy. This is especially true for photographs and film, as they allow us to form stories around faces. Where do we draw the line for what's acceptable to be used and what's not? Many of these personal objects can be of use in artistic projects. For some people this use actually establishes a certain legitimacy and sense of respect toward the objects, rather than simply disrespecting them by engaging in a type of reuse. But is this enough? Why engage with these objects if we're going to be faced with such a complicated dilemma? From looking at the select artifacts presented to our class, it's clear that there is an immense amount to learn, and it seems this gained information is worth the minor invasion of privacy.

RAIR's unconventional archeology provides a medium for discarded objects of history to be saved. Its practitioners piece history from the mundane. Whether this history is personal or cultural, the

collection of objects and their repurposing into art provides the onlookers with food for thought. By looking at these objects as they are incorporated into art and installation pieces, we are reminded of the value of an individual's history and the later attempt to preserve it.



VALUE

Emily O'Sullivan '19, Tom Phillips '19, and Daobo Wang '19

The Oxford English Dictionary defines value as “the material or monetary worth of something; the amount at which something may be estimated in terms of a medium of exchange, as money or goods, or some other similar standard.” But is that all value really is? If that is the case what makes one object more valuable than another? Is it the history and story behind it? Is it the emotional and sentimental ties it would hurt to break? Is it a sense that you just need it? Does it come down to money? Value is more than a word. It is an entity for which everyone has their own criteria, and that is what makes it so important.

There are many different kinds of value associated with artifacts found by RAIR. The artists who work out of the Revolution Recovery site are able to pull objects out of the waste or recycle stream and give them a new life as works of art. By repurposing this “trash” they are giving new value to the objects. One type of value that exists but is normally hard to legitimize is historic value. One of the reasons it can be hard to determine the historic value of objects is because the point at which history merges with the current moment is blurred. It can also be hard to determine historic value due to the fact that just because an object is old does not mean it is valuable. However, the longer something has been around the more a chance there is that it has historic value. When looking at the boxes of objects brought in by Billy Dufala and Lucia Thomé, and thinking about RAIR as a whole, it is easy to feel a sense of history. It may not be our history but there is history within the objects and how they made their way to RAIR. Thomé told us that this is a reason many artists enjoy working with

older objects: they like imagining and connecting histories that come with the objects, and they like being able to find their own ways to fill out these stories. Another interesting idea brought to our attention while visiting the minds behind RAIR is the notion that most of the older objects have spent most of their time not as trash, but have only recently become trash. If most of these objects were at one time or another purposely left out of the trash stream, what does it mean that this is no longer the case?

In addition to historical value, economics play a role. However, value extends beyond just cost. Some objects hold a certain level of sentimental value. Unfortunately, the reality is that at a place like Revolution Recovery where most trash is from demolitions, new construction, or complete house cleanouts, we cannot discern which items once held sentimental value to their original owners, nor to which degree. This means that the items recovered by RAIR were most likely forgotten or left behind rather than purposefully discarded by their owners. Some of the objects may have once held a very personal connection to the owner, but we may never know. However, there is a new level of sentimental value possible as soon as it reaches the facility. We were interested to see if the artists of RAIR choose what to take out based off of their own nostalgic value. Even when we had the objects in our classroom, the items we were most drawn to were the ones with which we had a personal connection. We immediately took out the *E.T.* trading cards because as children we had a similar set from *Star Wars*. These cards that could have seemed small and insignificant, that could have been easily forgotten, took on a great meaning for

us. It was not even these cards that truly encapsulated the value for us, it was the feeling of nostalgia brought back by looking at the cards that truly held the value. If we immediately gravitated toward the items that held nostalgic value for us, we can only imagine that the artists at RAIR do the same in the yard. It is interesting to try and understand why some of the objects brought into class were specifically chosen.

RAIR artists can pick up any compelling objects they find on site and scrutinize them. However, they may offer their own values and in effect persuade artists to keep a certain object instead of discarding it. If the artists come across objects that remind them of their childhoods, that feeling of familiarity may be enough of a reason for them to choose to hold onto the object. Sentimental value, or emotional ties, can be an important driving force of keeping something. There can also be a sense of value that is on a deeper, almost spiritual level that can be another reason for keeping certain objects. Many people tend to give significant importance to non-material aspects in their lives, too, allowing them to feel fulfilled not by things. RAIR artists can certainly collect items of paramount importance by determining what they find important enough to hold on to. When they find such an object, they may decide to keep it based on the fact that it adds meaning to their lives.

ABOUT PHILADELPHIA
FREEDOMS: CULTURAL
LANDSCAPES AND
CIVIC IDEALS

Philadelphia, founded by William Penn in 1682, was originally envisioned as a concept city for freedom, tolerance, and justice. Since then, the city has exemplified revolutionary thought, cultural ideals, and nation building. However, the dualities of freedom and repression, social ideals and harsh realities, have also shaped the city throughout its history to the present day. Currently, Philadelphia's identity as a 21st century cultural destination has been marked by recent regrowth and economic revival, alongside long standing crises in education, urban violence, and economic injustice. How do Philadelphians balance the deep imprint of venerated core ideals with such ongoing challenges? What is the relationship between Philadelphia's founding ethos and its layered built environment? How can the city embody the ethical dilemmas and conceptual possibilities for broader debates about contemporary civic ideals? Who runs the city?

Philadelphia Freedoms spans the history of the city, in order to trace how the city's founding principles have manifested in the lived experiences of its residents over many generations. Each week, students read works – including historical accounts, cultural critiques, and artistic representations – in order to produce weekly writing assignments, several essays, a final project about one street or intersection in the city, and a group project with a local arts organization in order to reveal and read the city's complex layers.

Professor Paul Farber

Haverford College, Spring 2016

ABOUT RAIR

RAIR is a nonprofit organization that builds awareness about sustainability issues through art and design. Situated inside a construction and demolition waste recycling company in Northeast Philadelphia, RAIR offers artists studio space and access to more than 350 tons of materials per day. Since 2010, RAIR has provided a unique platform for artists to work at the intersection of art, industry and sustainability, while producing content that challenges perceptions of waste culture.

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR PEACE AND GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP AT HAVERFORD COLLEGE

The Center for Peace and Global Citizenship advances Haverford's long-standing commitment to peace and social justice through research, education and action. The Center integrates innovative scholarship and responsible civic engagement around contemporary issues of global significance. With its commitment to knowledge as the foundation for effective action, the Center embodies Haverford's scholarly and ethical mission as a premier liberal arts college.

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DESIGN

DOCUMENTATION

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FREDA COREN, AND SARAH GREEN

<http://rairphilly.org>

<https://www.haverford.edu/peace-and-global-citizenship>

#PhiladelphiaFreedoms