



unmonumental

joy garnett

2008-2016

essay by tom mcglynn

2nd edition

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exhibition.

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<http://unmonumental.org>

This small volume presents a selection of images from **unmonumental**, my ongoing social media performance that generates and instantly shares photographs of ephemeral artifacts in the New York City streets. It draws upon a "social turn" in contemporary art that has been transformed through the widespread use of social media and photo-sharing platforms popular among artists and non-artists alike.

unmonumental was born when I visited the 2008 "Unmonumental" exhibition at New York's New Museum, which explored *fragmented forms, torn pictures... crumbling symbols and broken icons*. Later that day, I shot a photograph of a junk-filled shopping cart in the Meat Packing District as a parody, and posted the image online. Soon I was shooting and posting pics of such objects and detritus on a daily basis. I began to think about Robert Smithson's essay "Monuments of Passaic"* and George Brassai's "Involuntary Sculptures."** Before long, my one-off snarky commentary became a personal exploration of photography-as-socially-networked-sculpture.

Five years and 800 photographs later, **unmonumental** has grown into a project of monumental proportions, distributed over online platforms that serve as vehicles for real-time communiqués as well as archival receptacles. Inadvertently referencing Modernist, Minimalist and Postmodernist tropes across several mediums, the found objects of **unmonumental** reflect the ever-shifting formal concerns of art and the rich feedback loop between artist and city.

~ Joy Garnett, Brooklyn, NY 2013

*Smithson, R. "Monuments of Passaic," Artforum, December 1967.

**Brassai, G. "Sculptures involontaires," Minotaure, n° 3-4, déc 1933.

Unmonumental

There is a paradoxical conceit inherent to spontaneous street-level photography. An individual on random ground is often convinced they know just how things may be rightly arranged by chance. The *a priori* to this apparent happenstance can lead to anecdotal, symbolically relational arrangements of "things amongst themselves" that supplant their quiddity.

In Joy Garnett's *unmonumental*, a series of photographs and short videos of street detritus, the abandonment of this shallow conceit serves to re-calibrate the asymmetric dynamic between spontaneous subjectivity and the thing in itself. Here, alchemical glimpsing or hermeneutic wandering, as in Duchamp's readymade world or in Situationist psychogeography, does not enchant objects or places. Rather, Garnett both anticipates and simultaneously discards aesthetic control in the unmonumentals, lending these encounters an uncanny sense of objective animus, as well as a drained sense of the spiritualized object. Interestingly, neither the relational ordering of traditional collage nor the Gestalt simultaneity of the primary object (as in a Minimalist aesthetic) is allowed sway in the artist's process. What remains--what aggregates her archive of the everyday--feels inevitable under its own terms. If one would attempt a generic label for Garnett's unmonumental aesthetic, one might go with something like "sub-realist."

The experience that prompted Garnett's project was viewing the "Unmonumental" exhibition at New York's New Museum in Spring 2008. The show included much bricoleur art that leaned toward the anecdotal, and objects primarily employed in allegorical assemblage. After viewing the show, on a whim and in a critical response to its didactic premise, Garnett began to shoot street "assemblages" with her phone camera, posting them online through various image distribution applications and social media. She took the idea of the unmonumental into the arena of the disembodied, thereby upping the stakes on the extension of the "anti-monument."

For a long time Garnett has rejected the idea of any kind of physical publication of these images. Like Robert Smithson in his epigrammatic photo-essay of 1967, "A Tour of the Monuments of the Passaic," Garnett approaches her close-to-the-ground images of tours of Manhattan and its boroughs as a playful yet serious foil to what she considered the pretense of the institutionalized abject/object. Reconstituting the contingent nature of readymade aesthetics by casting these dematerialized images further into the rift of the technological slipstream, Garnett appropriated the historic form without its anecdotal baggage.

In his aforementioned essay, Smithson writes about his experience of dematerialized reality in a Passaic parking lot: "There was nothing *interesting* or even strange about that flat monument, yet it echoed a

kind of cliché idea of infinity; perhaps the 'secrets of the universe' are just as pedestrian--not to say dreary." Later on, in the same piece, he states "History turns metaphors into *things*..."

The *unmonumental* series draws on what we already know about a spontaneous aesthetic, dissolving it in a solution of myriad virtual archives. Garnett constitutes a "non-historical past" out of the wreckage of the recent future as evidenced by its throwaway present. This work denies a simple allegorical summation by keeping the correlation between viewer and object suspended in virtual (therefore figurative) time. As with a fly in amber, one can examine the specific, interrelated anatomy of unmonumental objects in their natural habitat without any annoying philosophical buzz. Garnett's sub-real projections would be beneath that.

Tom McGlynn
2013

