



KITCHENER - WATERLOO
ART GALLERY

WE ALL FALL DOWN

WORKS FROM THE PERMANENT COLLECTION



THE AGE OF PREVENTION

by Barbara Hobot

To purge the earth of garbage would be to destroy our own reflection.

- John Knechtel

“How To Prevent Anything and Everything” is the tagline found on the website *howtoprevent.com*. Here, net surfers can find preventative solutions for many of life’s cruel tricks: rust, sneezing, foreclosure, global warming, stress, stretch marks, and spam. The lists are surprisingly short, considering the capacity for all things to fall apart, fail, spoil, or die. The website could stand to be more comprehensive during this era in which North Americans seem hell-bent on keeping that new car smell indefinitely. There are, however, many other players in this game of preservation.

Prevention Magazine, an American healthy lifestyle magazine, and the Prevention Institute, an American training facility specializing in the prevention of violence and health related issues (“About Us”), exemplify institutional attempts at halting the negative effects of contemporary urban living. North American concern for public safety is difficult to ignore, as we are incessantly bombarded with warning signs, barricades, orange spray-painted sidewalk fissures, and emergency alarm strips. The long history of insurance policies brings us now to a moment when safeguarding one’s car, house, life, or legs, is a conditioned necessity more than legal requirement.

Let’s just say that we live in an *Age of Prevention*.

My interest in the topic of prevention began with a recent exhibition of works from the permanent collection of the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery. The exhibition, *We All Fall Down*, curated by my colleague Cindy Wayvon and I, investigates the portrayal of destruction and decay. We brought together photographs, paintings, drawings, and sculptures to examine how and why artists choose to depict moments of frailty, deterioration, or death, rather than potential or vitality. The exhibition presents different artistic strategies that engage the topic of aging or natural decline. Francis Frith’s albumen prints of 1857 depict Egyptian temples in a state of ruin, leaving the viewer to imagine what the architecture looked like in its prime. George Hawken’s *Self Portrait 5* (1984) allows the viewer to pour over the artist’s milliard wrinkles, all carefully etched line by line. Dieter Roth’s *Large Trolley* (1972) cunningly employs transparent tape that has yellowed and aged over time, a topic I will come back to later in this essay.

The Gallery’s permanent collection itself is an example of how we strive to preserve objects in their original state, keeping them in perpetual stasis, away from harmful light, humidity, pests, and other elements. In turn, outside the gallery walls, our personal appearances, fond memories, and national monuments, are all things that escape our pressing attempts to keep things as they are, or as we remember them to be.



I consider the Industrial Revolution the catalyst for our current age of prevention. With it came technological advancements that established medical milestones. A strong workforce would not function successfully if communicable diseases could not be managed. Diseases such as cholera became more of an issue during this period due to close living and working arrangements (Inglis 55-7, 268-9). The improvement of agricultural techniques led to a stronger food supply, which in turn offset malnourishment and vitamin deficiencies. The advancement of urban infrastructure, such as sewage systems, improved sanitary conditions within heavily populated living quarters. The development of antiseptics, vaccines, and a new understanding of hygiene meant that disease could be prevented as opposed to merely treating it (Buer 137).

Fast-forward to the last half century. The ideal of reversing the forward momentum of life is a topic at large in pop-culture. Take the prevalence of cosmetic surgery, for example. Cosmetic surgery is a growing necessity among the upper class of large metropolises, as illustrated by the women on the reality television series *The Real Housewives*. Many of the socialites and business women featured on this TV show have had some form of treatment, whether Botox, eye lifts, or breast augmentation. I refer to these particular high-powered females because their lives are an extreme example of the pressure to look young in order to be successful. Signs of aging can symbolize a decline in business acumen, where a more youthful appearance suggests an elevated social status and an air of success (Heyes 22). In Debra Gimlin's essay, "Cosmetic Surgery: Beauty as Commodity", one of the face-lift patients she interviews attests to the correlation between youth and employment success:

Despite the fact we have laws against age discrimination, employers do find ways of getting around it. I know women my age who do not get jobs or are relieved of jobs because of age. This [the face-lift] will ensure my work ability (Gimlin 84).

Of course, reactionary measures such as plastic surgery are extreme. But one needn't look far to see minor examples of this pervasive urge to maintain youthfulness. The front cover of a magazine I came across in the staff kitchen at work reads "...Guide To Aging Beautifully: The Diet, The Attitude, And, Of Course - The Eye Cream!" (Oprah Magazine).

The deceleration of naturally occurring transitions is not limited to the human body. Wildlife conservation techniques aim to keep ecosystems in an unaltered state through the control of natural processes to avoid change and degradation. As William M. Adams points out in his essay, "When nature won't stay still", certain nature reserves, like the chalk grasslands in the UK, have been so carefully manipulated, pruned, and cleared, that the process of succession has been halted:

Left alone, this grassy paradise would slowly turn into a dull, species-poor scrubland and, eventually, woodland. The only way to keep the diversity of the grassland species was to stop vegetation succession. Conservation management was needed in order to hold back the tendency of nature to restore the natural balance (Adams 221).

Adams argues that contemporary conservation techniques, as they are applied to nature, focus on keeping ecosystems in an immutable, frozen state. While these efforts maintain an ecosystem for the purposes of research, they also prevent natural succession from occurring, in turn preventing the development of new growth and the continuation of an ongoing cycle of death and rebirth.

UNESCO is also in the field of preservation. One of their many objectives is the conservation of World Heritage sites. These sites, such as the Rideau Canal, Auschwitz Birkenau, and the Angkor Temples, are protected under international legislation from urbanization, poaching, heavy tourist traffic, detrimental environmental conditions, and other agents. These sites are trapped in a moment in time, supposedly



impervious to external influences of transition. In his book, *The Heritagescape: UNESCO, World Heritage, and Tourism*, author Michael Di Giovine sees World Heritage sites as existing beyond our mortal realm:

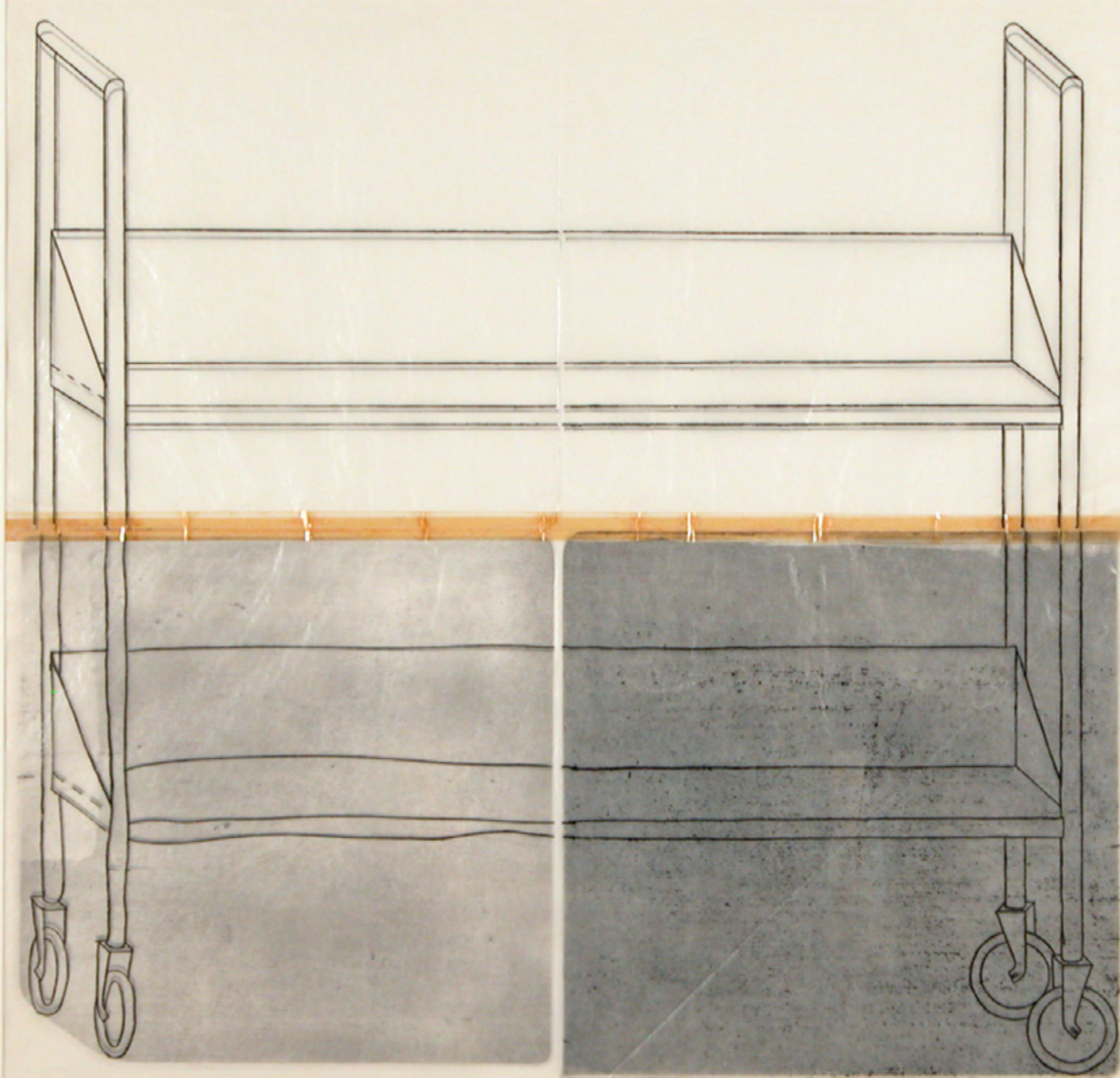
Precisely because of their durability—their resistance to the destructive flow of time – World Heritage sites are often comprehended not as objects with life stories but as vestiges, authentic remnants calcified in a particular time and space despite the ceaseless evolution of the world surrounding it (Di Giovine 301).

What is achieved by keeping historical and culturally significant monuments in a perpetual stasis? This impetus relates back to our bodies and an overarching fear of death. As sociologist, Henri Lefebvre states:

By building in monumental terms, we attempt the physical embodiment of an eternal and imperishable social order, denying change and transmuting the fear of the passage of time, and anxiety about death, into splendor (Di Giovine 302).

If we allow our monuments to crumble, we are allowing our bodies to ipso-facto give in to time. Conserving natural habitats and cultural heritage sites is a fountain-of-youth-bounty-hunt.

But what does it look like when death is embraced and concern for an immortal image turns to dust? Visual art can be a tool for imagining destruction, death, and decay and it can often be a sobering counter to our desire for eternal youth. Let me draw your attention to the work of Swiss German artist, Dieter Roth. His work, although heavily collected by art institutions, purposely evades art conservation efforts. His use of non-archival materials is evident in *Large Trolley*, a delicate work on paper in the public collection of the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery. For this work, Roth used acidic adhesive tape which has, over the years, yellowed and turned brittle. Given the artist's intentional use of non-archival materials in other works, we can infer that Roth chose this unstable tape on purpose. Restoring this work by removing the yellowed tape and replacing it with archival adhesive could in fact compromise Roth's intentions. Artists are encouraged to invest in stable materials, increasing the work's longevity, its chance at acquisition, and conceivably its market value. This pressure, apparently, did not deter Roth's interest in all matters of decay.



Roth's sculptures, installations and two-dimensional works would often make use of organic substances, such as plants and food. An epic example of this unusual use of material is the artist's piece titled *Staple Cheese (A Race)*, exhibited only once at Eugenia Butler Gallery, Los Angeles, in 1970. Here, Roth filled over thirty suitcases with cheese and arranged them on the gallery floor. Over the days, the cheese melted and began to ooze and mold, the smell almost unbearable. Complaints of the odour brought the L.A. health department over with threats of closing the exhibition. None of the works were purchased, and their final whereabouts are contested, although most likely they were disposed of (Dobke 114-118).

Dieter Roth created art under the assumption that it be "... a temporal phenomenon that has a life of its own ...", and he believed that some of his work "...only came into being through the process of disintegration" (Dobke 10). Rendering popular conservation methods powerless, Roth's work transcends the age of prevention and reflects to the viewer his or her own death. His food and plant based works will continue to pose problems for the institutions that collect them, regardless of technological advancements in conservation methodologies.

Antithetical to Roth's work is the conceptual practice of Sol LeWitt. His is a practice that I characterize as the ultimate archival art, also transcending the age of prevention in its sheer capacity to warrant little to no conservation management. LeWitt's *Wall Drawings*, which began in 1968, consist of a set of instructions to be executed by individuals other than the artist himself. With a guide prescribed by the artist, gallery staff can produce large wall-based drawings in graphite, crayon, coloured pencil, and paint. Conceivably, these drawings are both temporary and permanent: they can be painted over once the exhibition closes (entombing them in paint), but can be "installed" indefinitely providing the gallery has the guidelines, the permission, and the budget for the required staff time.

The drawings, when not concretized, require only enough storage space to hold a small set of instructions. The wall drawings require no shipping and no conservation. Their physical matter cannot age. There is no paper to disintegrate, and no pigment to fade. The only item subject to decay in LeWitt's drawings is the concept, for which there is no method of conservation. Regardless of our efforts to prevent degeneration, the novelty and value of our ideas is in constant flux – a volatility that keeps us searching for the next new thing.

Barbara Hobot is Curatorial Assistant at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery. Before joining KW|AG, she was Curator-in-Residence at RENDER, University of Waterloo (2009), and has also held positions at Blackwood Gallery, U of T Mississauga, and Cambridge Galleries. Barbara is an artist and holds a BA in Fine Arts from the University of Waterloo (2005). Recent exhibitions include *Goodie 3 Shoes*, Galerie Kurt im Hirsch, Berlin/Chiellerie Gallery, Amsterdam (2011), and *CAFKA survive.resist* (2011), Waterloo Region's biennial. She has participated in residencies at Ross Creek Centre for the Arts, Canning, Nova Scotia; School of the Art Institute of Chicago's summer residency in Saugatuck, Michigan; and Art Factory, Bialystok, Poland.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Crystal Mowry, Curator at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, for encouraging me to experiment with the direction of this text. Thank you to Matt Dupuis for designing this brochure with care. Thank you also to Patrick Cull for his keen editing. I would also like to acknowledge the co-curator of *We All Fall Down*, Cindy Wayvon, who was instrumental in the development of the exhibition thesis.

We All Fall Down

Curated by Barbara Hobot and Cindy Wayvon
September 3, 2011 - March 7, 2012

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101 Queen Street North
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Publication © 2012 KW|AG

Cover image: Artist unknown, *Untitled*, n.d. ceramic.

Design by Matt Dupuis, KW|AG
ISBN 978-1-897543-14-6

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We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council for our publishing program.

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LIST OF WORKS

Charles Baxter (English, 1809 – 1879)

Melancholy Lady, 1847

oil on canvas

Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery

Gift of W.H. Kaufman in memory of Alvin R. and Jean H. Kaufman, 1979.

Edward Burtynsky (Canadian, b. 1955)

Chicken Packing Plant, Spadina Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, 1978

B.C. Packers, British Columbia, 1983

photographs

Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery

Gift of the artist, 2000.

Paul Fournier (Canadian, b. 1939)

Dead Crow #1, 1968

etching

Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery

Gift of Mr. Paul Duval, 1991.

Francis Frith (English, 1822 – 1898)

Interior Court of Medinet Haboo, Thebes, 1857

Cleopatra's Temple at Erment, near Thebes, 1857

albumen prints

Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery

Gift of Dr. I.H. and Mrs. Dorothy Horn, 1990.

George Hawken (Canadian, b. 1946)

My Father, 1975, serigraph

Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery purchase, 1979.

Self Portrait 5, 1984, etching

Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery

Gift of Mr. J.B.L. MacArthur, 1994.

George Jeanclous (French, 1933 – 1997)

Stele, 1985

terra cotta

Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery

Gift of Paul Duval, 1992.

Gordon Rayner (Canadian, 1935 – 2010)

The Burning Bush, 1988

acrylic on canvas

Tinned Squash, 1984

oil on metal and wood

Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery

Gifts of Irving Zucker, 2003.

William Ronald (Canadian, 1926 – 1998)

End Game, 1986

acrylic on canvas

Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery

Gift of Mr. Roger Pruneau, 1991.

Dieter Roth (Swiss, b. Germany 1930 – 1998)

Large Trolley, 1972

mixed media

Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery

Anonymous gift, 1985.

Michael Snow

Canadian, b. 1929

Smoke and Mirrors, 1994

photograph

Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery

Gallery purchase, 1997.

Tony Urquhart (Canadian, b. 1934)

The Allegory of the Animals, 1980

Three Skulls, 1992

etchings

Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery

Gifts of the artist, 1992.

Artist unknown

Untitled, n.d.

ceramic

Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery