



## Smithsonian American Art Museum

### **The Everyday in American Art, 1958–71**

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My book project on *The 'Almost Nothing': Dematerialization and the Politics of Precariousness* examines the ways in which artists, from the 1960s to today, have challenged the traditional status of the artwork by questioning its existence as a stable, material entity. While this tendency toward dematerialization is often discussed as a challenge to museums and the art market, I would like to focus instead on the artistic, social, and philosophical concerns that have driven artists to explore innovative types of practices and new conceptions of the art object. One such concern, I argue, has been an in-depth engagement with the field of everyday objects and experiences, which is widely acknowledged to be a recurring theme throughout twentieth- and twenty-first-century art, but is often reduced to a generic desire to overcome the opposition between art and life. My research project at the Smithsonian will seek to articulate the exact nature of the everyday experiences that have interested artists, the range of means that they developed to capture such experiences, and the issues at stake in negotiating this elusive boundary between art and life.

After having been repressed by abstract expressionism during the late 1940s and 1950s, the everyday re-emerged at the beginning of the 1960s through experiments with new media such as assemblage, events, and happenings. My research into the works of Bruce Conner, Robert Rauschenberg, George Brecht, Allan Kaprow, and Ray Johnson aims to retrieve this crucial moment in the history of American art, and focus on the twinned concerns with obsolescence and disappearance, often related to an interest in Zen Buddhism. The second axis of my research involves mapping out connections between the early and the late 1960s, and between East and West Coast forms of dematerialization. Bruce Nauman's early work, produced in late 1960s California, will serve as the starting point for a wider investigation of a later West Coast assemblage aesthetic, exemplified by "funk" artists Robert Arneson, Roy de Forest, and William T. Wiley, and characterized by an irreverent, Zen-inflected spirit of experimentation with everyday materials and experiences. In addition to these influential figures, I wish to compare Nauman's work to the contemporary films of Terry Fox, thus outlining the emerging role of the photographic medium as a means to capture the elusive everyday. Finally, I will address the critical discourse of dematerialization, developed by critic Lucy Lippard to define conceptual practices at the end of the decade, in order to highlight their often-overlooked lineages to the early 1960s. More specifically, I will focus on the 1969 series of *Street Works*, organized in Manhattan over a number of months, as an example of dematerialized practices that actively sought to infiltrate the everyday life of artists and passersby alike.

Engaging with many of the artworks firsthand will allow me to articulate their inherent material instability, and their tendency towards self-effacement and disappearance into the fabric of everyday life—key features that have led me to define such dematerialized works as "precarious," and to coin the term "almost nothing" to describe their mode of self-display. Artistic concerns with the accelerated obsolescence of consumer societies raise crucial socio-political issues surrounding the commodity value of objects, and, by extension, existential reflections on human subjectivity itself as a disposable commodity. Zen Buddhism recurrently emerges throughout the decade as an alternative to both the Judeo-Christian conception of mortality and nihilist scenarios of meaningless finitude, while encouraging artists to turn to everyday life as the repository of authentic experience and potential illumination.