House Arrest: Museological Performance, Animacy, and the Remains of Rural America

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The words “inanimate” and “object” usually trip off the tongue together. But the habit that conjoins them veils both a certain redundancy and a certain anxiety. Is not everything inanimate, by definition, an object? Could we even imagine an animate object? ... Could we? The prospect of living things become objects and dead ones become acting subjects is an ontological scandal, on the one hand ethically disturbing (think: “objectification”), and on the other perversely fascinating (think: zombies). It is also the very stuff of theatre, as a generation of work on dramatic haunting, theatrical props, and feminist performance has made clear. Theatre, we are told, is a place where the dead are nightly resurrected, inert things assume “action force,” and women or minorities are routinely frozen in stereotyped roles that make them the passive objects of dramatic machinations.

These examples tell us something we don’t need theatre to prove: definitively, the quality of being animate—lively, alive, living—is a shifty and elusive one. The line between the living and the dead is porous and well trafficked, historically contested, culturally variable, and politically vexed. New materialists, for their part, are well attuned to the contingency of what linguists call “hierarchies of animacy” that “conceptually arrange human life, disabled life, animal life, plant life, and forms of nonliving material in orders of value and priority” (Chen 13). The proper boundaries between the living and the dead also secure other binaries: subject/object, valued/valueless, that which is endowed with political agency and that which is not, “inert, without futures, and non-effective” (Piekut and Stanyek 18). Where the living or the dead cross, fudge, or otherwise trouble these boundaries, they trouble the logic of the biopolitical enterprise: the governmental edifice devoted to
the care and administration of life and management of vital processes, 
which is premised on the designation of zones of death.

New materialists, in their idealist, visionary mode, transcend this fact 
by reassigning agency by theoretical fiat to every existent: everything 
effective performs (Latour); all matter is vital (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*).
Theatre studies, though, might be a particularly fertile place for digging 
deep into the inherently political dramas that play out on the borders 
of (in)animacy. Performance theory has historically reinscribed rather 
than queried hierarchies of animacy in its fetishization of liveness. 
The antinomy between the live (present, present-in-time, embodied, 
the domain of performance) and the recorded (performance’s other) is 
complexly undergirded by another between the living and the dead, 
as Rebecca Schneider demonstrates in *Performing Remains*. But even as 
theorists have dismantled the first antinomy (liveness, according to 
Philip Auslander, depends on the possibility of mediation, while mediation 
partakes of the defining qualities of the live), they have often shied 
away from the second, retreating safely into the study of the living’s rep-
resentations of the dead. Just as listening to the vitality and recalcitrance 
of things muddies “the line between dull matter (it, things) and vibrant 
life (us, beings),” what would it mean to attend to the performance of 
the dead (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* iv)? Do the dead act, on, like, or with 
the living? And if so, how? In whose interests?

If I seem to shuttle too indiscriminately between the category of the 
object and that of the dead, it is because I am interested precisely in 
forms of matter in which the two are indistinguishable: remains. As in 
human remains: the organic remnants of the once living; those states 
in which the human and nonhuman cohabit, body (part) becomes 
object, object subject to a lifecycle of aging and decay. These catego-
ries of matter have a capacity to queer the whole edifice of animacy, 
making us alive to the presencing of the dead in the material fabric of 
the everyday. In this chapter I take a single, rather peculiar museum 
as what Mieke Bal calls a “theoretical object” (136): not a case study 
intended to typify or a singular work that merits analysis for its unique 
qualities, but a material entity that, brought into dialogue with a 
concept, allows the development of a theory that exceeds both. The 
museum in question, Ed’s Museum of Wykoff, Minnesota, is a memo-
rial to a dead man and his dying town. In its inclusion of remains and 
its (deliberate) failure to museologically stabilize—that is, to arrest— 
them, Ed’s Museum paradoxically accentuates the tenacious vitality of 
all the objects it contains. It seizes on the temporal rhythms of matter 
to stage a way of life that is not fully alive yet refuses to be buried. In
doing so, it throws into relief the biopolitical question of what is let
live and what is made die.

Like Schneider, I am concerned with performance’s entanglement
with time, history, liveliness, and the attempt to touch, embody, or
animate the past. I am interested, however, in performance’s remains
in a more literal and more material sense, a sense that makes of this
literalism a method of sorts—a dwelling in and on the thing, slowing
the rush to representation.¹ My focus here is not on the “re-” (restora-
tion, reenactment, revivification, return, representation), a gesture that
registers a chiasmic break between past and present in the performative
and the invariably human act of overcoming it. Instead, I take remain-
ing to be the brute material persistence of the putatively inanimate. The
“re-,” I propose, does not exhaust the way we can think of performance.
Where Schneider (after Fred Moten) hears performance’s syncopation of
time—the beat, the pause, the re-turn—I listen (to extend the musical
metaphor) for its counter-point: the interwoven trajectories and tem-
poralities of things and people, the vital rhythms of nonhumans and
humans, moving in relation to one another if not always (importantly)
in harmony. In this motion, the dead and the living exert a force on
one another. And sometimes, as in Ed’s Museum, this force becomes a
political problem or a political strategy.

Wykoff, Minnesota is a ghost town. The road into town from Chatfield
(the county seat) is lined with empty silos, cracked pavements, missing
signs. “Welcome to Wykoff, pop. 444,” a sign announces. On your right
a derelict barn-like pile claims to be the town hall. On your left, the
dissected remains of 100 or so trucks, a massive industrial morgue. This
wrecking yard, Thompson’s, I later learn, is the town’s major ongoing
concern: a company that purchases and scraps the big rigs that (ironi-
cally enough) finally put Wykoff out of business some 40 years ago
when they closed the township’s last railway line. In the four hours
I spent on Wykoff’s main drag, Gold Street, one Saturday afternoon in
summer 2012, four vehicles used it. One of them was a tractor. One of
them was mine. A third belonged to the author of the city’s newsletter,
who runs a column reporting on visitors to Ed’s Museum, the object of
my visit, and the only Wykoff building open to the public (aside from
a two-pump service station). Gold Street is a sad procession of empty
storefronts and fading for-sale signs, its too-broad, too-straight expanse
of asphalt a memorial to long-vanished prosperity.

Incorporated in 1876 and situated at the junction of the county’s
three major railroads, Wykoff was once a service center and market
town for German homesteaders. It reached its zenith in the first five
decades of the twentieth century, and has been in decline since. Wykoff is a casualty of textbook rural depopulation spurred by the postwar development of industrial farming, growth in transportation infrastructure, and the urban concentration of economic resources and employment opportunities. The contemporary dominance of agribusiness corporations means that most farms are either too small to be economically viable or too big to afford; neither inheritance nor purchase can secure a farming future for Wykoff’s few remaining young. Meanwhile the consolidation of service and supply chains has put its small businessmen—feed merchants, equipment dealers, grocers, bankers, and so on—out of business. Between 2000 and 2010, the city lost 40 residents, a slow bleed rather than a sudden hemorrhage, and a pattern typical of rural communities in the US, leaving an aging population, a depleted tax base, and ever-more entrenched pockets of poverty.

Towns like Wykoff are a mute, ubiquitous fact of neoliberal America: emptied-out places, infilled with memory, melancholy, matter. As if to announce its own demise, the “downtown” area has been renamed the Wykoff Commercial Historic District. Wykoff’s commerce is, patently, history. The largest civic association, aside from the congregation of St John’s Lutheran Church, is the Wykoff Area Historical Society (membership 66), formerly (and tellingly) the Wykoff Progress Club. If Wykoff’s largest industry is salvage (the truck-wrecking yard), its second biggest industry is memory: the town feeds on refuse, its producers turned rag pickers, recyclers, repurposers. The town’s largest claim to fame and sole “attraction” is Ed’s Museum.

Edwin Julius Krueger, the museum’s eponymous benefactor, was a pillar of the Wykoff community: son of the postmaster, a grocer, proprietor of the A-MUZ-U Theatre during the silent film era, city treasurer (for 47 years), volunteer fireman, supervisor of the warming house at the Wykoff skating rink, church interior painter, general handyman, and self-appointed city historian and archivist. When he died in 1989, he left his store and his apartment above it to the town, stipulating that it be used as a museum. Thanks to the loving curatorship of the aging members of the Wykoff Area Historical Society, Ed’s Museum now houses the material remains of Krueger’s 91 years of very ordinary life—ordinary, that is, save for his obsessive drive to preserve everything.

What happens when everyday life is arrested in the process of its disappearance and staged as something between a memorial performance and a historiographic manifesto? When communities in crisis, bereft of political agency and economic purpose, turn to the dead and their remains as spokespeople? Ed accumulated indiscriminately. He
also accumulated passionately, with a commanding sense of mission that grew in direct proportion to Wykoff’s decline. At some point in the late 1940s or 1950s, his grocery business (one of five in the city) failed and he went into general merchandise, without shedding any of the accoutrements of his former trade. By the 1970s and 1980s, he sold only candy and soda to the city’s few kids and had begun to call his store Wykoff’s “museum,” eagerly accepting what other abandoned businesses and homes in the city were throwing out. His collection was less a result of selective acquisition than of a refusal to refuse. “To remember everything is a form of madness,” Brian Friel’s memorable character, Jimmy Jack, opines (67). To retain everything in the service of such memory is not only a kind of insanity, an affront to the social and psychic laws that cleave stuff from refuse, material permitted inside the pale of cultural order from that which must be expelled (in the process shoring up—according to trash theorists—the borders of the symbolic).\(^3\) It is also an insurrection against the temporal logic of capitalist modernity: the twinned cult of the new and the rule of obsolescence that propels the machinery of production and consumption, and the forward motion of time. Ed’s rebels against what Jane Bennett calls the antimaterialism of American capitalism, “the sheer volume of commodities, the hyperconsumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones,” which “conceals the vitality of matter” (Vibrant Matter 5).

Ed’s makes of Wykoff a “space on the side of the road,” a place that stands, in Kathleen Stewart’s words, “as a kind of back talk to ‘America’s’ mythic claims to realism, progress, and order,” a place “incorporated into national imaginary and left out, intensely tactile and as ephemeral as the ghostly traces of forgotten things” (4). But in Ed’s the traces of Wykoff’s forgotten things are neither ephemeral nor ghostly: they are insistently material. It is the resonance, recalcitrance, and vitality of Ed’s things (what Baruch Spinoza called their “conatus” or their active impulsion to persist)—decaying or still shimmering with the age-tarnished newness, commanding our attention—that make them a stubborn, depressive riposte to the progressive arc of modernity.

The product of Ed’s madness is an ineffably hybrid entity. His “museum” is, in part, a record of a moment in America’s history of retail and consumption. The store shelves are a jumble of grocery packaging and promotional materials from the 1940s and 1950s. Arrayed on the shop’s original counters (now doubling as vitrines) and next to its original cash registers lie decades of immaculately kept ledgers and accounts. The mid-century shelving bears many of the original mid-century products in unopened bottles, tins, and boxes, displayed much as they would have
been in Ed’s heyday. This technique resembles what Barbara Kirshenblatt-
Gimblett calls “in situ” (the mimetic recreation of a cultural scene for
the purposes of museal display) except that this mid-century store has
not so much been recreated as arrested in time. In other places, however,
this logic of display fractures: duplicates of the same product, from dif-
ferent decades, are displayed side by side as if to gesture interpretively
toward the progress of time through the brand’s evolution. Random
juxtapositions are made: on one glass shelf, the false moustache Ed wore
as Marshall of the German Day parade (labeled, like most of these items,
in Ed’s own hand) sits next to a bottle of veterinary vermicide. Still other
shelves contain piles of things in which I divine no logic at all.

Ed’s museum is also, in part, a memorial to Ed’s life, indistinguish-
ably ordinary and compellingly particular. All lives are at once ordinary
and particular, but Ed’s makes an object lesson of this truism, staging
a tension between his irreducible singularity and the serial anonymity
of the accumulated commodities through which it is expressed. The
domestic accoutrements of the apartment above the shop, abandoned
shortly after Ed’s wife’s death in 1940, are a case in point: drawers full of
games, candles, and greeting cards; his son’s collection of toys; kitchen
appliances and tools, unused since 1940; personal keepsakes such as his
National Guard uniform, his wife’s tiny shoes, and her packaged wed-
ding dress; half empty bottles of toiletry preparations neatly perched
on bathroom ledges. These mass-produced objects marked rites of
American passage or domestic ritual for millions. But, like the famous
boots that Heidegger uses to anchor his theory of object, they bear the
imprint of, and thus recall, a wholly unique body.

Ed’s Museum is, in part, an archive of Wykoff life in the mid-twenti
century: photograph albums and newspaper clippings (some neatly
laminated and displayed, some just piled), records of the weekly town
raffle that Ed oversaw for decades, a rank of postal boxes and record
books salvaged from the town’s decommissioned post office. It is also
an archive of Ed’s part in Wykoff life: the rental skates and signage from
the skating rink warming house he supervised lie rotting on the shelves
in the basement; the cage used to paint the interiors of church steeples
leans on a wall nearby. And it is an archive of Wykoff as a synecdoche
of generic American small-town mid-century life: film memorabilia, a
mechanical piano with hundreds of song drums that your guide will
play for you on request. These are traces of a more conventional kind,
but what order they index is unclear: in the absence of an archon, Ed’s
is a place (to bowdlerize Jacques Derrida) of consignation without com-
mand. The logos of History has left them to the chaos of memory.
Ed's is, in part, a collection of collections: his brother's souvenir rocks from tourist sites he had visited all over America; an array of pipes and another of German-manufactured nail scissors; uninterrupted 40-year runs of *Time* and *TV Guide*; telegram machines, party-line phones, and outmoded technologies of all kinds. Finally, however, and most palpably, Ed's Museum is a dump. The sheer volume of refuse threatens to overwhelm: decaying shells of batteries from the 1950s and 1960s, shelves of half-consumed liquor, boxes of rusting tins, items in such states of decay that I found it difficult to identify them, and handfuls of keys (some labeled, some not) belonging to doors that in all likelihood no longer exist.

In many respects, there is nothing unusual about Ed's Museum. Like thousands of heritage attractions across small-town America it participates in the paradoxical process in which defunct domains of the economy get a second life as heritage (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett). Heritage in a neoliberal age is revaluative: it promises that history’s debris can be repurposed as the raw materials of a leisure economy. The dead (an industry, a town, an environment) are revivified in the form of consumable spectacles, exhibits, or “experiences,” as in, for instance, the resuscitation of coal-mining districts through tourist attractions where visitors can take a trip down a (no longer mined) mine shaft or hear a coal-worker (laid off from his former profession) talk about life in the mines. In some cases, literal deaths (such as Ed’s) make way for heritage’s work of resurrection, pathos-filled metonyms for a broader demise. In this sense, it is fitting that Ed’s Museum takes the form but not the function of a shop: Wykoff has no shops. Agribusiness supply systems and big-box retailing in neighboring towns killed Wykoff’s stores. Severed in this way from the economic present, Ed’s valueless store’s new value lies in its capacity to elicit nostalgia for consumerism’s age of innocence, America’s childhood, when exchange still bore the imprint of social intimacy. You can’t buy anything now at Ed’s, but the roll of brown paper waiting beside what was once the meat counter recalls the long-gone aproned fellow who would briskly wrap your pot roast and hand it to you together with a quip about the weather; the boxes of loose candies under the glass counter evoke the old man who would draw back the glass door, slide out the brightly colored box, and count them out into your waiting hand, six for 5 cents, chiding you not to eat them all at once. As “scriptive things” these items hail Ed’s patrons (who buy their candy from vending machines and their meat, encased in Styrofoam and plastic, from supermarket freezers) in an imagined performance of capitalist *Gemeinschaft* (Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*).
Rural America is riddled with such memory machines. But something about Ed's sticks. This sense of stickiness was for me brought on by the literal remains that the museum houses. To wit: 25 of Ed's gallstones are captioned and lodged in a spice jar on a shelf next to the remains of a tarantula that he apparently discovered in a bunch of bananas delivered in the 1950s. A tower of lollipops sits behind the counter; from the typeface, I would estimate that it dates from the 1960s. On the floor of the three-season porch upstairs, next to a small oil heater, lie two cigarette butts, the remnants, apparently, of Ed's last indulgence. The corpse of Ed's cat Sammy—deceased c. 1985—is still lodged in the basement: not embalmed, not taxidermized, just filed in a white cardboard box next to 35 years' worth of TV Guide. These peculiar, liminal items (these remains)—things once consumed by bodies, things detached from bodies, bodies become things, matter caught between the animate and the inanimate—operate as a punctum to the studium of the museum (Barthes, Camera Lucida 25–27). They rise from the customary museal field to catch, disturb, pierce the visitor with a shock of affect.

These remains admit Ed's Museum into a more rarefied niche in the heritage economy: museums devoted to the weird, icky, ghoulish, or abject, the shamelessly eccentric, latter-day freak shows that offer parables about the contours of the normative imaginatively transgressed, here the proper place of the living and the dead, the perishable and the perished. (Indeed, I first learned of Ed's from a student with a fascination for such institutions; she, meanwhile, had learned of it from one of the short articles about Ed's that appear every few years in the Twin Cities' free weeklies, articles detailing the strange sensations to be discovered in rural Minnesota by the adventurous excursionist.) Such attractions are often museums of museums, the heritage of heritage, revalued displays of since outmoded genres of exhibition.

What I want to suggest, however, is that the inclusion of these items in Ed's Museum does something much more complicated: it gestures to the fact that despite the serial display of categories and variants of objects, despite the hand-penned captions noting dates and provenance, despite the vitrines and docents, despite its game performance of museunness, Ed's is an establishment where the technologies that museums deploy to make things mean and render them stable have no sway. It is a failure with consequences.

One of the revaluative tasks of heritage archeology (indeed, of the writing of history) is the transmogrification of refuse into remains; the transformation of that purposely rejected as valueless (trash, bio-waste, ephemera) into latent historical sources, artifacts, evidence of
the time-place past. Things must be decontextualized from the present and recontextualized in the past, rescued from trashly abjection and reentered into the symbolic order. Museums likewise are not content with raw things: they are laboratories of sorts (as Tony Bennett has argued) that fabricate object entities through procedures of abstraction, purification, classification, and mediation; they reconfigure the relations between objects and ultimately between objects and persons. Thus made pliable, “no longer limited by their anchorage within an originating social milieu or immanent tradition,” museums assign objects credible human interpreters, enlisting them in civic experiments and social programs (Bennett, “Civic Laboratories” 527). This is the biopolitical work of the museum. It is the alchemy by which a nineteenth-century ethnological museum could turn a triangular shard of stone into a Neolithic arrowhead, into an argument about evolution, into corporeal training in imperial prerogative for Britain’s working-class sons: sit, look, know your place; serve. And it is the mechanism by which the heritage nostalgia industry might turn a shelf full of 60-year-old groceries into a call to accede to the inevitability of neoliberal life, by consuming its demised precursors: pay, spectate, mourn, go back to the mall.

You could say that all museums host a complicated dance between the thingness and the objectness of the material they house (one reason for my use of both terms in this chapter). On one level, in a museum there are no “objects” in the Heideggerian sense, only “things.” Removed from the domain of utility and embedded in that of display, everyday matter is elevated, shimmers with aura. Everything asserts itself: announces its qualities, its past, present, and future capacities for action and attachment. But like the prop in theatre, the thing in the interpretive museum is embedded in a semiotic contract that renders it object: we are encouraged to “look through it” toward the thing that it stands in for (this painted plywood chair is really Lear’s throne). Museum codes invoke a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use things as facts (Brown, “Thing Theory” 4). Yet, as in theatre, thingness remains as a kind of excess, never completely encompassed or subsumed by objectness. Thingness is in great part what we go to the museum to encounter: the sheer force of materiality. (This is why the virtual museum is an oxymoron.)

Unlike a standard hegemonic heritage attraction, however, Ed’s Museum exhibits bad object management. This is the thrust of its dramaturgy. Ed’s does not abstract, purify, classify, nor mediate. Instead, Ed’s stages refuse—outmoded, obsolete, discarded, decrepit, or decaying things—either incompletely, incompetently, or parodically recuperated, objectified. It is not simply that Ed’s lacks appropriate categories;
it is that the selection and arrangement of things upsets hierarchies of animacy, and with them binaries of ephemerality and endurance, subject and object, that which matters and that which does not. In admitting the obviously perishable and obviously perished—that which actively resists full objectification—into the domain of the putatively timeless past, it actively thwarts the object ventriloquism of the museum. In refusing to refuse, Ed’s reminds us of the temporal instability of matter and of its vital autonomy: Ed’s things, with Sammy the cat leading the charge, announce their independence from human dramas and human subjects. In the absence of an authoritative museal voice (Ed’s or anyone else’s), these objects assert themselves as subjects—“quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own”—to decay, to persist, to transform, to perplex, to recall, to provoke (Bennett, Vibrant Matter viii). The thing about Ed’s, the thing that sticks, is how noisy its things are, how insistently a material cacophony presses in on you. Neither appropriately past nor entirely present, these arrested objects won’t stand still; they move with their own silent rhythms, stubbornly remaining in place. In a potent allegory for Wykoff itself, they continue to die but refuse to be buried, making a certain kind of nostalgia impossible.

The promise of the museum is the promise of endurance: that the past, insofar as it can be instantiated in matter, might never cease to matter. The promise of performance, by contrast, lies in its presence, its liveness, its ephemerality (as the customary, unsubtle reading of Peggy Phelan’s Unmarked has it). But objects, space—the materials of the museum as of the stage—are supremely temporal. It is only the processes of thingification, of reification, that argue otherwise. Henri Lefebvre once claimed: “Thingness, in a twist on Marx’s theory of the commodity, is not simply a mystification of the relations of production, but of the production of time itself. That is, the appearance of the thing conceals the innumerable repetitions, each of them dissimilar to the last, that we experience as rhythms, and that, in turn, constitute the everyday (and if this is beginning to sound a little like an uncanny echo of Judith Butler’s performativity, it might help to recall that her early work on the subject owed more to phenomenology than linguistics).” Lefebvre argues:

The everyday establishes itself, creating hourly demands, systems of transport, in short, its repetitive organization. Things matter little; the thing is only a metaphor, divulged by discourse, divulging representations that conceal the production of repetitive time and space.
The thing has no more existence than pure identity (which the thing symbolizes materially). (7, emphasis in original)

The thing (like identity, in Butler’s formulation) is not an ontological fact; it is instead an effect of repetition. Thus, the thing is neither finished nor stable; it is a dynamic and ongoing performance. There is nothing inert in the world,” he wrote elsewhere, “no things [only] very diverse rhythms, slow or lively” (17, emphasis in original). It is rhythm that matters.

Matter and space, then, are polyrhythmic. This claim reframes the present and presence as a simultaneity of movements, perceptible and describable only through the rhythmanalyst’s reflexive focus on sensation. The aim is to defy the reifying impress of that which seeks the effect of presence, an effect that, according to Lefebvre, creates “a sort of social, also known as aesthetic (not moral) obligation that gives rise to abuse” (23). The museum is a machine dedicated to the production of the effect of object presence, and the effacement of their temporal presences: it is only the regular injection of capital that allows the museum object to conceal and stay its rhythms. To achieve the impression of permanent significance, an object must be isolated from patron traffic, from the pressure of climate and season, hours, years, millennia. Interpretive materials must be updated lest they allow the object to betray the slipping rhythm of the present-becoming-past.

In Ed’s Museum, however, the rhythms of the place surge up and impose themselves on the patron. Commodities frozen in the process of circulation, bodies arrested in the process of decay are perversions—arrhythmias or polyrhythms out of sync—that make visible this rhythmic character of the everyday, strangely altered. The actants of this object theatre vibrate with rhythm at a (near) stand-still, the effect of which is neither permanence nor preservation but hesitation before the inevitable: death and disappearance.

We might begin with the larger rhythms, what Dorita Hannah has called the “slow performance” of architecture: built form shapes human performance in now-time, dictating the speed and flow of human motion, for example (16). But it also acts over a longer duration, at odds with the cycle of human generations, registering the pull of the past on the present: hailing since outmoded kinds of subjects, constraining processes of institutional change, making demands for maintenance or threatening decay and danger. A roof in Minnesota has a life of 20 years; no one seems to remember when Ed’s was last replaced. All down Gold Street, the empty windows of stores call out decade after decade to
customers no longer passing day after day. These brick facades were once the straight lines drawn through the great indestructible rhythms of agricultural life: exhaustion and renewal, drought and plenty. Now, the buildings’ obdurate rhythms stay their replacement with what? Another soy field mortgaged to Archer Daniels Midland, the high-tide mark of another massive cycle of economic change. History has a rhythm, too: here the rhythmic slow-down of social time, a looking backward, sets off the dominant speed-up and forward tilt of the neoliberal (for change to occur, “a social group, a class or a caste must intervene by imprinting a rhythm on an era” (14, emphasis in original). Meanwhile the musty smell in the basement registers the slow crumbling of brick and stone and plaster, the damp that comes and goes with the seasons, leather hardening and mildewing, newsprint yellowing, flaking slowly to dust.

The rhythm of the commodity is the source of the most powerful arrhythmia at play in Ed’s Museum: the temporalities of shelf life and planned obsolescence, of fashion and utility, production, consumption, destruction, so dramatically at odds with those of the museum. Take this shelf of candy bars from the mid-1980s: produced in a day, delivered every month, intended to sit on a shelf for no more than a few weeks, and in the warm hand of a person for no more than a few minutes—here, 25 years later, the deliveries long since stopped, the warm hands long since grown up, died, or left, the candy still waits. They seem inert (this wooden table, this pencil, etc.) and nonetheless, they move, albeit only within the movements of the earth: they contain movements and energies: they change. The same goes for social relations as for physical reality: this immobile object before me is the product of labour; the whole chain of the commodity conceals itself inside this material and social object. (Lefebvre 82)

Arrested here, in place, the candy bar makes of itself a memorial reminder of that commodity chain, those ceased deliveries, those absent hands, that stilled rhythm; but it has not stilled its other vital rhythm, that of organic disintegration. At some indefinable point in its 25-year journey from comestible to exhibit, the candy bar has become an impossible object. It can’t be consumed (it is, presumably, decayed) nor can it be thrown away (it is “heritage”). It can only remain. And so, it seems to declare, will Wykoff.

The microrhythms of everyday life echo within and vibrate through the contents of the museum. Ninety-one years of Ed’s days and nights, his meals and cigarettes, his washing and feeding the cat are inscribed
on every chair, every stair-rail—rhythms not entirely stilled by his departure. His supposed departure, that is, for Ed still very materially remains. When I entered Ed’s for the first time, there he sat in front of the heating stove, between Ruth and Norman Eichoff (my docents), holding a helpful sign lest I doubt whom I was meeting. Ruth tells me that ten years ago they held a scarecrow competition in town, and this was one of the submissions. Fittingly, they just never threw it out.