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The Objects of Our Former Affections

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The Museum of Broken Relationships collects tokens and stories of broken hearts and individual loss that, when shared, inspire a universal hope that one day the chance to love will come around again.

What do we do with the tokens of affection we give one another as expressions of our love – if that relationship, if not the affection, ends? That’s the question Olinka Vistica and Drazen Grubisic asked each other when their relationship of four years ended in 2004. Instead of throwing the objects away, or attempting to divvy them up, being artists – Vistica is a film producer and Grubisic is a sculptor – the ex-couple searched for a different solution to address the physical reminders, and remainders, of their love.

“At the time, I wrote down a utopian idea that if you could store all of the emotions and beautiful moments you had with another person, and keep those alive, but at the same time, let it go? That would be the idea for a museum.” Olinka says. She put the idea in a drawer, which is where it remained until 2006 when Grubisic suggested that they turn it into a reality. They submitted an application for an exhibition show in their hometown of Zagreb, Croatia, and the idea was chosen. They had two weeks to launch the show.

“We freaked out! It worked for us on paper, but would other people really respond and give to us their objects?” An email blast for contributions was dispatched that quickly went viral. “In no time I was meeting complete strangers in the main square in Zagreb, under a clock, who were giving me their possessions. It was weird. We were striking a chord. We knew then we were touching something other people felt too.”

The Museum of Broken Relationships was born.

Rather than have the focus be on the items that were part of the day-to-day life that Olinka and Dra-

zen shared, the inclusion of other people's objects and memories was integral to the Museum from the start. "We never wanted to build a monument or a grave to our love, so there's just one piece from our relationship," Olinka says. "It was symbolic. If you want to start something and be sincere, then you have to start with yourself, so there is just **one piece**."

Numerous items were donated to populate their first exhibit. The stipulation of anonymity assured donors that the new curators could be trusted. As the objects were collected, so were the stories behind them. No full names were used, only cities, and dates. The objects and the text were displayed together.

Soon interest in the Museum grew, and the collection started to travel. With each new city, more donations were collected, more stories shared. The Museum of Broken Relationships first stopped in San Francisco in 2009 at Root Division's Mission gallery. The exhibition organizer at the time, Selene Foster, now co-creator and executive director at BAASICS (the Bay Area Art & Science Interdisciplinary Collaborative Sessions), recalls her first exposure to the collection and its mission.

"I heard about the Museum listening to the radio. It was a five-minute NPR piece. I thought, 'This is filling us up in a space that needs to be filled.' It was so not like any other art piece. It wasn't afraid of being emotional, it wasn't afraid of being about people, and it wasn't afraid of trusting real people to create the art."

Now, having brought the exhibit back to the United States several times, Foster calls herself the "self-appointed North American Ambassador of the Museum of Broken Relationships."

Amy Cancelmo, the gallery's exhibitions and events coordinator, orchestrated the return of the exhibit to Root Division so that it would coincide with Valentine's Day. "We present an event the second Saturday of every month, a new opening, and when we figured this particular second Saturday fell on Valentine's Day, we pulled every string we could to make this happen."

The show in Root Division's space on Market Street features older pieces from the collection as well as newly submitted donations. By asking for contributions from residents in the city where the Museum is next scheduled to travel, the exhibit takes on a local feel that is still surprisingly universal.

The objects currently exhibited range from the darkly amusing – a voodoo doll made from the underwear of an ex-boyfriend; to the titillating – a ponytail butt plug; to the cruel and controlling – a book entitled *I Can Make You Thin*; to the achingly beautiful – a wedding dress preserved in a jar. Each item has its own story, printed, in conjunction with its display: "... I don't really like the thought of someone else unknowingly walking around in something so representative of my broken dreams," writes the former bride who once wore the dress now sealed in the jar.

While the items themselves might not resonate with each viewer, the ability to empathize with the emotion of the story that accompanies them is what makes the Museum so powerful.

Amy and Selene recall that the first exhibit of the Museum in Root Division's space was astonishingly quiet. "There were over 500 people through the gallery opening night, and you've never experienced such a quiet first night!" The reverence, and almost spiritual connection with the universality of loss and love of others, is what resonates about the show with Christopher Reiger, Selene's co-founder at BAASICS.

"When you look at the spaces we build for spiritual houses it's about communing, I think it's interest-

ing, and can apply in any space. I like that the Museum is about empathizing. It's easier to empathize with someone when you're in a room with people who are all having an empathetic experience, looking at the objects and reading the stories, and feeling something for people they don't know."

Olinka admits that the formation and continuation of the Museum of Broken Relationships is cathartic for the curators, the donors, and the viewers alike, but draws the line at saying it is like therapy.

"Maybe I don't like the word because it means you are sick, and I don't think we are sick when we are suffering from heart break. But you are very alone. And in the Museum you are surrounded by strangers' stories that seem so close to you, you'll feel like a part of human experience. People leave feeling it has helped them feel better."

And despite what could be interpreted as bitter intent, the exhibition of The Museum of Broken Relationships on Valentine's Day holds for Olinka a message of hope. "There is one thing that's clear when you go through all of these stories. Despite the experience, all of these people want to fall in love again. There is the desire to go through that crazy human experience," she says. "To surrender yourself to another person is very courageous. All these people want to do this again. And that's why it's here on Valentine's Day. It's the Museum of Love, but only upside down. We turned the camera the other way."

– Steven Gdula

Root Division is located at 1059 Market Street, San Francisco, CA, 94103. The Museum of Broken Relationship will be on display until February 28, 2015. For hours of operation, please visit RootDivision.org or call 415-863-7668.

Also of interest is "It's Complicated," a discussion examining the science of relationships and sex, presented by BAASICS, in conjunction with Root Division and The Museum of Broken Relationships on Thursday, February 19, 2015.

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