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Research Article

Marking Impermanence: The Life of the Object (and Index) in Sonam Dolma Brauen's Art

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Abstract

This essay explores works by contemporary artist Sonam Dolma Brauen through two lenses: as the result of ongoing and changing functions of an object, and as part of a broader dialogue about indexical imagery in contemporary art. Sonam Dolma's family escaped from Tibet to India when she was young, carrying few possessions on their difficult journey through the Himalayas. One of these items, a small metal *tsa tsa* mold used in Tibetan Buddhist rituals, would later become an instrument of creation in Sonam Dolma's art practice. Comprised of multiple plaster casts made from the original object, the artworks mark the former presence of the object—they are indexical. I examine two works, *My Father's Death* (2010) and *Red Carpet* (2011), exploring this indexical nature and asking, how might new functions emerge from old forms?

Keywords

Sonam Dolma Brauen; Tibetan art; Contemporary art; Indexical; Object; Diaspora

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In 1959, the family of artist Sonam Dolma Brauen (then age six) made the heart-wrenching decision to leave their home in Tibet, walking hundreds of miles through dangerous terrain, while avoiding Chinese armed forces along the way.[1] Throughout that journey, Sonam Dolma's mother, Kunsang Wangmo, carried an object of extreme importance: a small metal mold in the shape of a *stupa*.[2] This mold—a device employed to create images out of clay sometimes mixed with ashes of the deceased—was (and is) used by several generations of Sonam Dolma's family for its traditional function: to make tangible objects related to Tibetan Buddhist practice, those multiple and indexical images serving to "mark" impermanence and accumulate karmic merit.

Decades later, Sonam Dolma uses the same metal mold to create plaster images for her conceptual artworks, including those used in *My Father's Death* (2010) and *Red Carpet* (2011). The mold thus continues its role as a tool "marking" impermanence, the haptic nature of its creations reflecting the otherwise ephemeral status of the people or concepts invoked. But the mold also shifts from its traditional function as a religious object; it breaks from the fate of many of these metal objects now sitting in museum collections (often unethically obtained) as static relics of the past. I propose a conversation regarding Sonam Dolma's artwork through a biography of the object as theorized by Igor Kopytoff, and notions of the "accidental refugee" as framed by Arjun Appadurai (Appadurai 1986, Kopytoff 1986, Appadurai 2017). Particularly, I am interested in the ongoing and changing life of the object, and the promise of innumerable future indexical objects created by the metal mold. How might new functions quite literally *emerge* from old forms? How does the indexical nature of the resulting work fit into a dialogue with other contemporary indexical installations? And, how might materiality in contemporary art be viewed through this changing life of the object?

An installation consisting of used monks' robes and plaster imprints, *My Father's Death* (see Figures 1, 2, and 11) is one of the artist's earliest conceptual works. Prior to her 2008 move to New York, Sonam Dolma worked almost exclusively in paint. Curator Corinne Erni notes: "As an abstract painter, using mostly acrylic and sometimes oil on canvas, [Sonam Dolma] is influenced more by Mark Rothko and Franz Marc than by traditional Tibetan art, which she never learned" (Erni 2010: 3). Thus, the three-dimensionality of *My Father's Death*, its inclusion of "ready-made" materials, and the artist's first use of plaster casts made from a *tsa tsa* mold (see Figures 3 and 4) marked a significant departure for Sonam Dolma as she began employing more conceptual modes of production in her work.[3] The monks' robes she gathered are folded neatly into four rectangular shapes, each forming the side of a square. As the viewer approaches, she notices the nine white plaster objects inside the square, hidden when viewing the work from the side. When viewed from above, these plaster forms fit into the square in a manner reminiscent of traditional Tibetan mandalas, which rely heavily on geometric shapes and symmetrical organization. The rounded forms emerge as haystack-like shapes upon closer inspection. These are *stupas*—an essential component of Tibetan Buddhist visual culture—here evoking both tradition and a conceptual break from traditional usage.

The term *stupa* (Tibetan: *mchod rten* or *chorten*) is often associated with architectural structures housing relics of the historical Buddha and other high ranking Buddhist figures. These sacred constructions—though quite varied in form across Asia—are typically circumambulated by practitioners during acts of veneration. *Stupas* are understood as microcosms of the Buddhist universe, but also as symbolic of the Buddha's enlightened mind, encompassing both the "path to enlightenment and enlightenment itself" (Watt 2005).[4] Smaller, portable versions of *stupas* created from stone or metal are often employed for funerary rituals. The *stupa* shape is commonly used for *tsa tsa* molds, where

Figure 1 and 2: Sonam Dolma Brauen, *My Father's Death* (2010). 49 used monks' robes from Lhasa, 2 vests, and 9 plaster-molded *tsa tsas*. 40 cm height; 100 x 100 cm length/width. Artwork © Sonam Dolma Brauen. Courtesy of the artist.

they join depictions of deities and buddhas and function as image makers.

The Tibetan term *tsa tsa* refers to the imprints made by pressing clay into metal molds, drying the clay, and then often painting the clay.[5] Such molds can vary in size from two to forty centimeters and may contain inscriptions.[6] *Tsa tsa* imprints can be found in temples, circumambulation paths, altar spaces, and tourist markets. They can also be found inside larger metal sculptures—their presence functioning as consecratory. Upon death, the deceased's ashes might be mixed into the clay and pressed into the mold. The repetition of creating the imprints and then offering these imprints is an act of karmic merit. And while the *tsa tsa* clay pieces themselves are sometimes left to the elements—their lives marked by entropy—the metal molds are often passed down through generations, as is the case with the bronze mold now owned and used by Sonam Dolma.

Sonam Dolma knows very little about the origins of her family mold, though she believes it was given to her parents by a high-ranking lama (Sonam Dolma, personal communication, 12 March 2023). Her mother, who referred to the mold as a *tsa par* or "*tsa tsa* maker", had the object in her possession before the artist was born, though a precise date for the object is unknown. Regardless of its origin, the mold's dangerous journey out of Tibet was not an uncommon event. Since *tsa tsa* molds are typically kept within families for generations, we can assume that many molds currently housed in museum collections made their way to those institutions under duress—whether through 20th century looting (the early British "expeditions" were especially egregious) or during the Chinese invasion and subsequent occupation of Tibet. The Chinese invasion saw innumerable Tibetan objects destroyed or secreted out of the region, only to reemerge in museum displays or storage, often in Western institutions.[7]

Returning to *My Father's Death*, we see the imprint of the *stupas* made by the *tsa tsa* mold and understand them as creations of the prized metal object carried from Tibet to India. Sonam Dolma has since carried the mold throughout her own travels, further highlighting its personal significance. It is no surprise, then, that the mold appears many times in the biography of Sonam

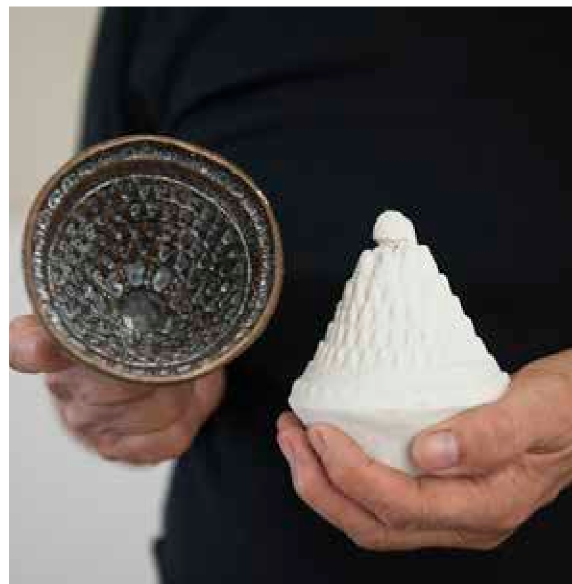

Figure 3 and 4: Bronze *tsa tsa* mold (date unknown). 9.3 cm height; 9 cm diameter. © Sonam Dolma Brauen. Courtesy of the artist.

Dolma written by her daughter, Yangzom Brauen. *Across Many Mountains: A Memoir* relays in detail Sonam Dolma's life from her time as a young girl in Tibet to her harrowing escape to India and her later life in Switzerland. The narrative is punctuated by references to the *tsa tsa* mold, its importance consistently reified and sustained. The biography also highlights the item's use during funerary rites for Sonam's sister, whose ashes were used in a *tsa tsa* that marked her death shortly after reaching the Tibetan refugee camp in India. In this way, the metal *tsa tsa* mold holds within its own story the stories of people lost. Yangzom recounts that Sonam Dolma's parents placed the molded ashes of her sister "on the banks of the river that flowed alongside the camp. For forty-nine days, as their religion prescribed, they prayed for their dead child" (Yangzom Brauen 2011: 109). Sonam Dolma's father also passed away shortly after the journey into India, although the whereabouts of his ashes remain unknown.[8]

The artwork itself, through the presence of forty-nine monks' robes, might be viewed as an offering to the artist's father Tsering Dhondup, who was a Tibetan Buddhist monk. Forty-nine references the number of days before the Buddha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, and the number of days required for the deceased's body to be prepared for the next life. Sonam Dolma acquired monks' robes that were previously worn, as these would retain a sacred aura, akin to the use of relics in Buddhist practice. Corinne Erni notes:

> It was important for Sonam Dolma to use worn robes, "to smell and feel the lives of these monks", as [the artist] puts it. The clothes were hard to come by, but little by little relatives and friends in Tibet gathered them for her. *My Father's Death* has thus also become a silent monument for all who have died in exile far away from their homeland. (Erni 2010: 4)

Art critic Ellen Pearlman likewise underscores the multiple and memorial aspects of the work in her review of the *Transcending Tibet: Mapping Contemporary Tibetan Art in the Global Context* exhibition:

> Sonam Dolma's folded, stained, and used monks' robes, stacked to make the installation *My Father's Death*, stand out as the simplest, yet most contemporary piece in the show with a meaning far beyond the frayed cotton threads, maroon dye, and washed away stains of butterfat. The folds emulate order, putting something away for burial, and memory retrieved for private solace. (Pearlman 2015)

And so, the work retains a sacred quality; visitors find themselves circumambulating the artwork, perhaps out of instinct, but in doing so, recreate a connection to more traditional Tibetan Buddhist practices.[9] Sonam Dolma's work troubles any implied rigid line between tradition and contemporaneity; her work offers the plaster imprints as the result of a continuous life of an object. It exemplifies Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff's claims that objects can have social lives, and ones that should be included in their biographies—particularly as they relate to museum display or collecting. Appadurai notes:

> The materiality of such objects is tied up with their pedagogical value, for what they can show, teach and illustrate. It is thus no surprise that such objects are not often discussed in terms of their journey from their original homes to museums but rather are made pure tools of representation, icons of other ways of living. What is lost in this erasure is a vital part of the biography of these objects. (Appadurai 2017: 402)

Kopytoff (1986) describes a related idea of the "cultural biography of things".[10] He notes: "We accept that every person has many biographies—psychological, professional, political, familial, economic, and so forth—each of which selects some aspects of the life history and discards others. Biographies of things cannot

but be similarly partial" (1986: 68). We might extend beyond the *tsa tsa* molds and consider Tibetan Buddhist images and objects in Tibetan exile spaces more broadly, particularly as these objects' lives intersect with Tibetans in diaspora.

Tsering Yangzom Lama's 2022 novel, *We Measure the Earth with Our Bodies*, depicts the intersecting and diverging lives of two Tibetan sisters and their relatives who grapple with exile, displacement, and family struggles. At the core of the book's narrative, readers find a character to whom the author continuously returns: a small stone figure of a deity—a *ku* (Tibetan: *sku*, for body, image, or statue) referred to as the "Nameless Saint". The Nameless Saint has been displaced, first unceremoniously from his Tibetan homeland during the Chinese invasion, and then unethically from his Tibetan exile community in Nepal through unscrupulous dealers. The parallels to the human characters' displacement and trauma are obvious, but the great care with which the author emphasizes the life story of the figure—the biography and social life of the object—adheres to Tibetan Buddhist practice and can be understood through Appadurai and Kopytoff's theoretical frames. After discovering the Nameless Saint in a collection belonging to wealthy Canadians, one of the book's narrators, Dolma, considers the possible insight from her former French academic mentor, and states:

> It's possible that he would have seen the statue just as they did—as a cultural artifact that belongs in a museum, where experts can study it. He might have joined the professors in dissecting the Saint's aesthetic qualities. Still, I have a persistent thought that this puny conversation among Tibet scholars does not matter. The world has forgotten us. To the vast majority, we do not matter. How else could they pass around our gods as possessions, display them in the sterile confines of museums and private collections, as though we were already long gone? (Lama 2022: 109)

Later in the novel, a conversation between the character Dawa and another of the narrators, Lhamo, points directly to the Nameless Saint's human qualities and behavior: "'People have been looking high and low for the *ku*. It's like the Saint just… vanished.' 'Maybe he has moved on,' I say" (Lama 2022: 176).

Though fiction, Lama's depiction of the sculpture's life corresponds easily with countless Tibetan works that made their way into private collections and museums through various traumas and disruptions. Thus, the agency of Sonam Dolma's bronze object becomes especially salient—it is an ongoing agency that has not been blunted by the static residency of museum or private collection spaces. The Tibetan *tsa tsa* molds on display (or in storage) in so many museums are not just made impotent because of their placement, but because they are removed from doing their jobs. As Appadurai notes regarding this disjuncture:

> Their status as accidental refugees is rarely voiced, exhibited or interpreted for the general public. In short, these objects are made into testaments of fixity and not of circulation, though complex processes of circulation and displacement are what is most important about them. (Appadurai 2017: 407)

While Appadurai was largely speaking to "museums, collections, and curatorship" in his push to reconsider the journey of the object, his lens works well as a point of conversation for contemporary artworks themselves. Taking Appadurai's focus on objects as complex markers of displacement, I turn to a work by Vietnamese-born Danish artist, Danh Vo. In 2009, Vo created a work titled *Oma Totem* (see Figure 5), an honorific monument of sorts dedicated to his maternal grandmother (*Oma* means "grandmother" in German). As an immigrant to Germany in the late 1970s, Vo's grandmother was given certain items by the Immigrant Relief Program and the Catholic Church, including a washing machine,

Figure 5: Danh Vo, *Oma Totem* (2009). Philips television set, Gorenje washing machine, Bomann refrigerator, and wooden crucifix, 220 x 60 x 60cm. Installation view, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 2018. Artwork © Danh Vo. Photo: David Heald. Courtesy of the artist and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.

a mini-refrigerator, and a television (Guggenheim 2018).[11]

Vo stacked these items, the television at the top and washing machine on the bottom, and added a large crucifix—also given to Vo's grandmother upon arrival—to the front of the mini-refrigerator in the middle. The work becomes more than the sum of its parts. It encapsulates ideas of migration, religion, and, I would argue, misunderstanding. While the items may seem comforting from the donor's perspective, they are emblems of a hegemonic consumerism that is not entirely welcoming. Or, as Vo states, these items comprise "what society thinks foreigners need" (Guggenheim 2018). Art historian Anne Ring Peterson further describes the objects as broader markers of an ongoing humanitarian crisis:

> *Oma Totem* is also to be mused on in the context of the twenty-first century's significant increase in the number of people seeking refuge in Europe, and the blend of nationalistic, anti-immigrationist humanitarian and economic anxieties which have surfaced in the conflict-ridden debates on European asylum, immigration, and integration politics. (Peterson 2017: 172)

Like Sonam Dolma's metal mold, household items used by Vo's grandmother—the washing machine, refrigerator, and television—continue their journeys in unexpected ways. Unlike the mold's status as accidental refugee (and, its parallel journey with its owner), the items in Vo's work only became a part of his life after his grandmother's journey away from her home in the late 1970s as Vietnam, still reeling from the painful experiences of the U.S.-Vietnam war, became enmeshed in conflicts with Cambodia and China. The trauma contained within these objects does not lie in the events that happened to them as objects, but rather in their role as markers of absence. They mark the absence of a familiar homeland for Vo's grandmother, and the presence of a new, jarring state of being: the "tiny diasporas of a person's life", to cite the artist (Guggenheim 2018). Like Sonam Dolma's work, the functional objects are employed in new ways as materials in a conceptual work.[12]

Oma Totem itself became a mold for another artwork—the tombstone for Vo's grandmother's gravesite in Copenhagen, Denmark. Vo used casts and carvings of the object fronts to create a horizontal line of the washing machine, refrigerator, and television. Instead of Sonam Dolma's plaster, Vo employed wood, marble, and granite for the artwork's outdoor function. Peterson likens the shift of the vertical to horizontal to that of the body, once a "standing, living body to the horizontal position of the body at rest" (Peterson 2017: 172). Like Sonam Dolma, Vo uses the objects to create an offering to a loved one. Combined, the objects are imbued with sacrality, as they are divorced from their intended and individual purposes. This feature of both works marks an important statement that transcends the contemporary art world. As Appadurai notes,

> If we can see both human and non-human agents as having history, voice, purpose, and force, perhaps we will treat our human migrants with a deeper sense of their humanity just as we will treat our ethnological objects as more than mute representations of far away times and places. It's a win-win perspective. (Appadurai 2017: 408)

But taking Appadurai's claims for the agency of the object and Kopytoff's focus on cultural biography, what then becomes of this agency/biography when the object is itself a maker? How might we discuss the life of the object, and the objects made by the object?

To explore these questions, I look to Sonam Dolma's *Red Carpet* (see Figures 6–8), which similarly includes just two elements: painted wood and roughly 500 plaster casts. A large circle is bisected by a red pathway. *Tsa tsa* plasters are arrayed on each side, creating a dotted pattern from a distance.

Figure 6: Sonam Dolma Brauen, *Red Carpet* (2011). Wood and approx. 500 plaster-molded tsa tsas, 245 cm diameter. Artwork © Sonam Dolma Brauen. Courtesy of the artist.

The individual *stupas* become visible when viewed up close. The title *Red Carpet* implies a space specifically to be walked on, but perhaps it also marks a space of privilege and wealth—the unobtainable "red carpet" of elite events. The placement of this red carpet as a dramatic cut through the center of the circle further marks the red as an imposition (and here, I think, the reading of the color and its connection to Red China is unavoidable). It divides the circle, and we see echoes of a mandala with the artist's use of geometric shapes.[13] The multitude of white *stupas* stands in stark contrast to the single red path.

The history of Buddhism is marked by moments of replication and multiplication. The historical Buddha's relics were multiplied. He himself multiplied in various stories about the miraculous aspects of his life. Buddhist texts have been multiplied in print using woodblock presses for centuries. *Lung ta* (*rlung rta*)—the brightly colored and ubiquitous prayer flags marking Himalayan mountain passes and sacred spaces—are created through a printing process that quickly makes copies. We might also consider the rise of the portrait photograph, particularly those of reincarnated lamas, which are made in multiple and distributed to monasteries, many finding their way onto altar spaces along with paintings and sculptures of buddhas and deities. The resulting multiplicity of texts and images transmits merit widely. And the *tsa tsa* molds themselves are made to create multiples. This Buddhist practice of replication is inherently tied to ideas of the index as a marker of an image or object that was/is there.

In Sonam Dolma's work, then, the mold takes on this familiar Buddhist role, but it points to its own impermanence—its changing function—by creating plaster forms for a conceptual artwork; it is no longer beholden to its religious function. Sonam Dolma's use of a work that is traditionally indexical by nature thus troubles the lines between continuity of function and the "aura" of authenticity, to

Figure 7 and 8: Sonam Dolma Brauen, Red Carpet (detail, 2011). Wood and approx. 500 plaster-molded tsa tsas, 245 cm diameter. Artwork © Sonam Dolma Brauen. Courtesy of the artist.

briefly nod to Benjamin's writings on art and mechanical reproduction (Benjamin 1935). The impermanence of all things is referenced here—and thus, the seemingly contradictory title of this paper: "marking impermanence". How, then, is Sonam Dolma's indexical work in dialogue with the index in contemporary art more broadly?

Two of the better-known artists working in indexicality are Rachel Whiteread and Do Ho Suh. Whiteread's *House* (1993, see Figure 9), a site-specific work in London, presented viewers with a concrete molded index of the interior space of an historic Victorian home. The original house (and in fact, this entire neighborhood in London's East End) was set to be demolished against the wishes of many of its homeowners.[14] Longtime resident and homeowner Sidney Gale refused to uproot his family—even as the city began demolition. Finally, they were evicted. The Gale family's forced departure becomes a biographical component of the house, but also of the ethereal (even if physically quite solid) imprint made by Whiteread. Whiteread's choice of this site, then, while not necessarily personal to her, evoked notions of displacement, both for the former residents of the area, and for her own work which was ultimately destroyed.[15]

Joan Gibbons described Whiteread's work as that which "come(s) as close as can be to pure indexical relation" (Gibbons 2007: 29).[16] She further notes the process of casting *House* as one that

> [...] preserves residual memories that are co-extensive with the life of the object but does so in a way that creates a 'space' for play of the imagination and free association, so that the work functions both to remind (re-mind) the viewer of the past and to liberate his/her thoughts and feelings in the present. (Gibbons 2007: 33-34)

The indexical house does not mimic the original house in form (it is its inverse) or function, but it does contribute to its biography. Lisa Saltzman notes that Whiteread's work "did perform, even if only briefly, a peculiar act of preservation, of commemoration, of remembrance" (Saltzman 2006: 81). In this way, Whiteread's *House* acts much like the *tsa tsa* images created during the life of Sonam Dolma's mold, particularly the ones meant to be left in the elements emphasizing entropy and their own impermanence. Whiteread's *House* was destroyed in 1994, its destruction always part of the plan for its life. Art historian Nora Burnett Abrams proposes viewing *House* and other

Figure 9: Rachel Whiteread, *House* (1993). Concrete. 193 Grove Road, London E3. Artwork © Rachel Whiteread. Photo: Sue Omerod. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian.

of the artist's inverted images through a model that "takes into account the works' great attachment to the real-world objects and spaces from which Whiteread casts", a lens rooted in realism (or, "para-realism" as Abrams coined it), another nod to the importance of the object (and the life of the object) itself, even when viewing the object's indices (Abrams 2015: viii).[17]

In 2022, artist Do Ho Suh continued his ongoing *Rubbing/Loving* series with *Rubbing/Loving Project: Seoul Home* (2013–2022, see Figure 10), an installation of an indexical version of his parent's Korean home created with paper rubbings. An earlier work in the series documented the artist's own New York City residence of twenty years through the same process. Art critic Efi Michelarou notes "Through these spaces, Suh examines how home and identity are ever-evolving concepts in today's global society, and how culture, tradition, migration, and displacement intersect as we construct our ideas of selfhood and origin" (Michalarou 2023). Suh is known for his diaphanous fabric installations that recreate his former living spaces, but it is his more direct indexical references to selfhood and origin—the paper that has been rubbed and pressed and made to mark the contours and intricate spaces of his house—that are comparable to Sonam Dolma's work. Although the details change, the works all comment on displacement, memory, and materiality through the index, that is, through marks of presence.[18] As Suh notes, "the whole process is to remember the space and also somehow to memorialize the space" (Suh 2016).

As viewers, we are now required to reconcile the remaining imprint(s) with the object or objects that are absent, and by extension, the lives affected by those objects. Where is the childhood home that has been recreated by Do Ho Suh? And in what state of being? What happened to the family in Rachel Whiteread's work? And what happened in Sonam Dolma's journey for this bronze object to have shifted careers from its role as Buddhist image maker to its agency in contemporary conceptual art?

Of course, a house is not meant to be cast. It is not meant to have the interiors preserved—and then destroyed, in the case

Figure 10: Do Ho Suh, *Rubbing/Loving Project: Seoul Home* (2013-2022). Graphite on mulberry paper and aluminum, 534 x 866 x 802.5 cm. Installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney 2022. Artwork © Do Ho Suh. Photo: Jessica Maurer. Courtesy of the artist and the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia.

of Whiteread, or its exteriors rubbed, the details marked in paper and colored pencil. The core function of a house is to shelter; but certainly, it is a space that becomes a home, a more intimate space marked sacred by its everyday happenings.[19] By contrast, the *tsa tsa* mold's life story *always* involved casting, even if the function of those casts changed. Within Suh's notion of memorializing space is the concept of impermanence; how might we use objects to mark that impermanence? In this way, Suh's work has much in common with Vo. Although Vo used actual objects in *Oma Totem* before the memorial indices, we are unable to ascribe a fixed meaning to the objects. The objects ask us to interpret and reinterpret their use, never arriving at a permanent function, as they move through various roles.

Returning to Appadurai's summation of Kopytoff's thesis:

> Objects move through many states and meanings in the course of their lives, and can shift from being icons, to being heirlooms, to being luxuries, to being personal treasures, to becoming junk or trash and perhaps emerging again as icons. (Appadurai 2017: 402).

I propose that the biography of Sonam Dolma's bronze *tsa tsa* mold includes its roles as a Buddhist sacred object used in ceremony; an object otherwise to be marked as a Buddhist tool in museums; a family heirloom carried throughout time and space; a reminder of Tibet's past, a reminder of family members past; and an object used for continued creation.

In November 2019, Sonam Dolma's mother passed away at the age of 100. In March 2023, Sonam Dolma performed a three-day ceremony with the *tsa tsa* mold and her mother's ashes, the object returning once more to its traditional Tibetan Buddhist function for the occasion (Sonam Dolma, personal communication, 12 March 2023). But Sonam Dolma is already envisioning the next job for the object: for use in a conceptual work involving seeds, communal making, and distribution of the *tsa tsa* casts around the world. And she is incorporating other personal objects into her work with a recent painting/installation honoring her mother that includes worn clothing. Much like Danh Vo's use of his grandmother's housewares, the inclusion of Sonam Dolma's mother's clothes in an artwork marks a new journey for the life of the object, its life intertwined with that of the artist.

There is far more to be said about these works, but I envision this essay as a starting point in a larger discussion about biographies of objects and their relationships to their indices. Sonam Dolma's bronze *tsa tsa* mold is not just a traditional tool, or a remnant of the past, burdened with representing all that's been lost in Tibet. Rather, its story continues. To recall the narrator's wonderings about the Nameless Saint's journey: "Maybe he has moved on". Perhaps Sonam Dolma's *tsa tsa* mold also moves on as it joins conversations about materiality and indexicality in contemporary art. And then, maybe, it will decide to do something else.

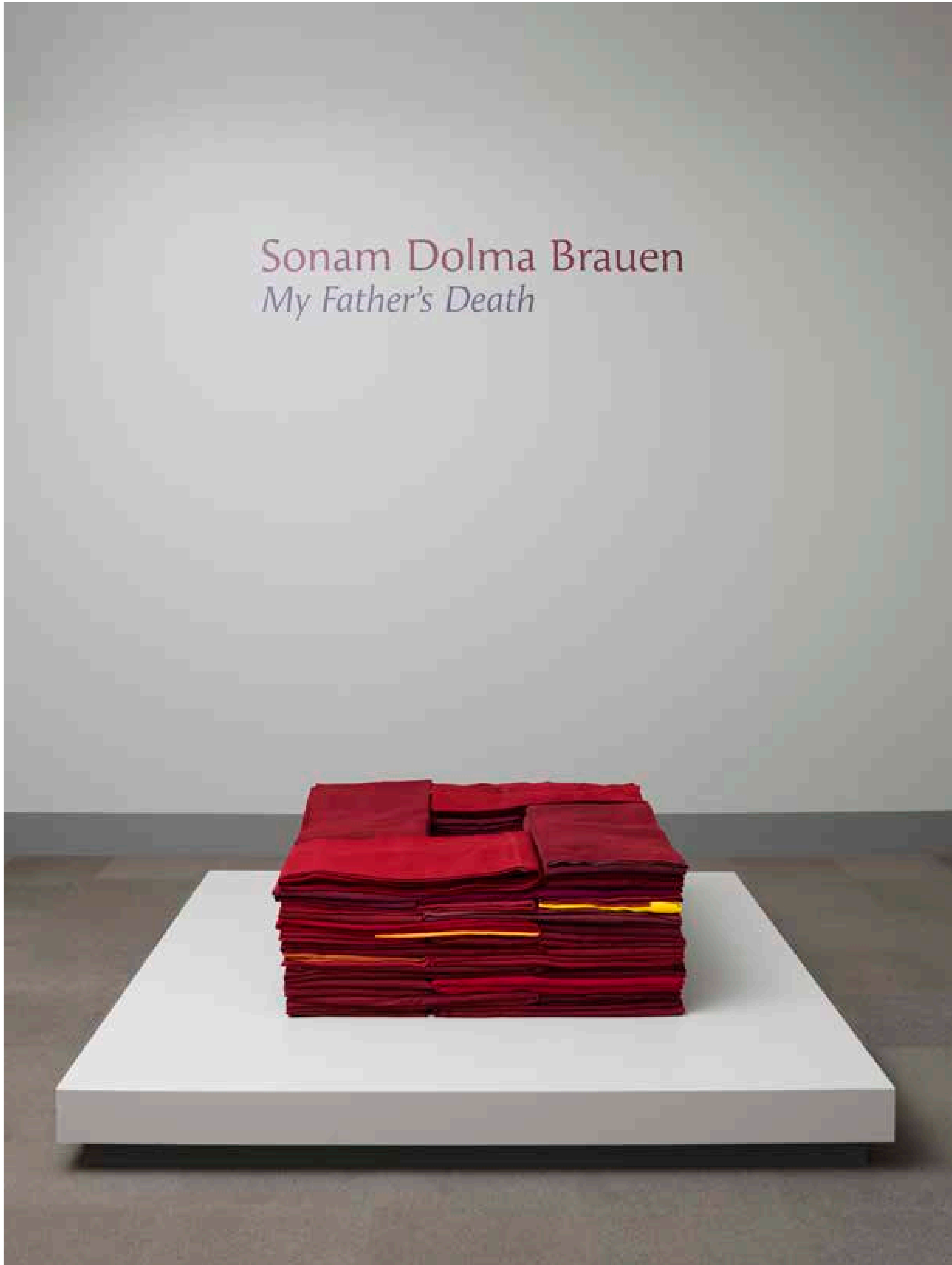

Figure 11: Sonam Dolma Brauen, *My Father's Death* (2010). 49 used monks' robes from Lhasa, 2 vests, and 9 plaster-molded tsa tsas. 40 cm height; 100 x 100 cm length/width. Installation view, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City 2023. Artwork © Sonam Dolma Brauen. Courtesy of Nelson-Atkins Digital Production and Preservation, Dana Anderson.

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Endnotes

1. Sonam Dolma was born in 1953 in Pang, a mountain village in southeastern Tibet. Like many Tibetans of her generation, her family was forced to flee once it recognized the oncoming aggression of Chinese forces. In 1959, the Dalai Lama fled Lhasa, Tibet, to India, where he still resides, unable to return to the Chinese occupied Tibetan city. For more on the modern history of Tibet, see Shakya 1999.

2. I use Sonam Dolma's given Tibetan name throughout this essay rather than Brauen in deference to the artist's preference.

3. For her conceptual work, Sonam Dolma first uses the metal mold to cast a clay *tsa tsa* image. She then creates a plastic mold from that clay image and uses the plastic mold to cast the hundreds of plaster molds used in the artwork.

4. Jeff Watt describes four types of *stupas*: two-dimensional (including paintings), three-dimensional portable images (including votives used for funerary purposes), architectural structures, and iconographic forms (he notes an overlap between the latter and two-dimensional imagery) (Watt 2022).He further notes "Arising historically from the *chaitya* (funerary mounds) of early Buddhism and symbolically from the tope (*ushnisha*), bundle of hair, on the crown of the Buddha's head, the stupa is viewed as a physical representation of the unseen enlightened mind of a Buddha. Later the stupa became a symbol incorporating both the blueprint for the path to enlightenment and enlightenment itself." (Watt 2005). For a brief overview of *stupas* in Buddhist history and practice, see Buswell and Lopez 2013.

5. Although museum labels sometimes do not distinguish between the mold itself and the clay imprint with general labels of '*tsa tsa*' or '*tsha tsha*' (variations of Tibetan transliterations), the terminology for the mold is far more complex and often depends on the shape, date, type of text in which they are referenced, and authors. Kunsang Namgyal-Lama notes various terms that differ from *tsa tsa* for this particular *stupa* shape, and I am most thankful to her for clarifying these aspects to me (email to author, 17 January 2022). In this essay, I choose to use the term *tsa tsa* in reference to the casts made by Sonam Dolma's mold since that is the term used by the artist. Sonam Dolma's mother used the term *tsa par* (translated as "the object used to make *tsa tsa*") when speaking about the metal mold.

6. For an in-depth discussion of Tibetan *tsa tsa* imagery, see Namgyal-Lama 2010.

7. For more on traditional Tibetan objects housed in museum collections, see Martin Brauen 2022. Two exceptions to this practice of Western institutions obtaining these objects after their migrations include the Tibet House in New Delhi and the museum in the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, India. These spaces house objects brought out of Tibet by refugees and presented to the Dalai Lama as offerings. Kavita Singh notes the importance of these works, particularly as the dangerous journey is only made more so with the additional physical burden of the objects: "A refugee's desire to salvage objects that he fears will be destroyed or stolen is understandable, particularly in relation to objects that have more than monetary worth because they are the focus of worship or contain revered relics. However, to carry sculptures and paintings on this most dangerous and difficult journey displays commitment of an extraordinary kind" (Singh 2010: 136).

8. Sonam Dolma's father was concerned about the expense for his future cremation; he requested his wife not inform the hospital about their relationship in order to prevent a financial hardship. As a result, it remains unclear what happened with her father's body/ashes. While Sonam Dolma does not incorporate ashes into her conceptual projects, this function of her *tsa tsa* mold remains important to the biography of the object and troubles the line between art and sacred ritual. Taylor Michael writes of artist Julian Stair using ashes of the deceased within his contemporary work following the devastating losses of the COVID-19 pandemic. The artist notes the project as a method of honoring those lost, further stating "This project gave the families a specific aim and, subsequently, agency in the unpredictable and destabilizing nature of grief" (Michael 2023).

9. *My Father's Death* is currently installed at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City (18 October 2023-11 November 2024). As visitors enter the gallery, the small pathway around the artwork encourages viewers to move around in a circumambulatory manner, thus mimicking the Buddhist paths taken around larger architectural *stupas*.

10. Kopytoff's focus is particularly on the role of commodity for objects, namely, that commodification is but one phase in the life of an object. His broader insight into the cultural biography of objects is used here as a framework for discussion.

11. The artist replaced all four items for his grandmother's use.

12. Orit Gat's review of Vo's 2018 Guggenheim exhibition "Take My Breath Away" explains the often-helpful component of conceptual art: the accompanying text, noting: "How to look at Vo's work? A simple answer: read. Read the wall labels and trace the stories he recounts about Vietnam, migration, and the movement of objects away from their intended use and into a personal system of references" (Gat 2018). Gat's instruction differs from Vo's own ideas about viewing his work. Vo states, "I want people to see the show before they have any information" (Tomkins 2018).

13. Thank you to the reviewer of this article for pointing out the visual connection between the red dividing line in the artwork and the typical mark/line created in sand mandalas during the moment of ritual destruction.

14. The house address was 193 Grove Road in East London. Lisa Saltzman notes the prevalence of this type of neighborhood destruction during the 1990s in London's East End (Saltzman 2006).

15. Whiteread's choice of specific house to use for the project seemed largely driven by logistics. See Abrams 2015.

16. Both Gibbons and I are using Charles Sanders Peirce's categorization of index as one of three types of sign—icon, index, and symbol—with the index's connection between signifier and signified recognized as one of an object having been there, a mark of something no longer there. It is the memory of the object that remains. See Hoopes 1991. Rosalind Krauss's definition is also appropriate here: "As distinct from symbols, indexes establish their meaning along

the axis of a physical relationship to their referents. They are the marks or traces of a particular cause, and that cause is the thing to which they refer, the object they signify. Into the category of the index, we would place physical traces (like footprints), medical symptoms, or the actual referents of the shifters. Cast shadows could also serve as the indexical signs of objects” (Krauss 1986: 198).

17. Abrams focuses extensively on the household objects cast by Whiteread early in her career, though she notes that *House* can be viewed through the same proposed “para-realism” lens.

18. Do Ho Suh has also worked in casting; his *Portal* (2015) replicates a Korean gate from his childhood home through the use of acrylic and a complicated casting process; see Suh 2022.

19. Doreen Massey argues that the title *House* rather than “Home” prevents a more sentimental reading of the work: “*House* emphasizes—indeed it throws in our faces—the fact that its meaning always has to be interpreted; that there was never any simple ‘authenticity’; that the meaning(s) of home are always open to contestation” (Massey 2000: 54).

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