



DISCARD DREAMS **ED**

a year of mattresses

by Lisa Dahl



I took my very first mattress photo on July 29, 2004.

I'd been thinking about photographing mattresses for months, but finally gave in when I saw an old mattress (photo left) flaunting itself outside my Brooklyn art studio that warm summer afternoon. It's easy to talk yourself out of taking a photo during your daily rush because you have to stop, rummage through your bag (that is, if you even have your camera on you) and hope no one gives you a hard time for stepping outside of the social norms — in this instance, for photographing *trash*. But this enticing piece of refuse was declaring its ease and proximity to me — all I had to do was go across the street. Besides, no one in New York bats an eye at the unusual. Thus started an open-ended project with no distinct objective in mind.

As a visual artist, I have for several years used the image of the suburban home to stand as an idealistic icon of the "American Dream." In one series, I painted houses onto domestic materials such as bed sheets and wallpaper, and was originally contemplating whether mattress fabric might be a good item to add to my repertoire. But then, the reality of collecting said material (read: crazy lady with razor blade cutting up dirty mattresses on the streets...) made me think twice about that idea. I've also subsequently realized there are other reasons not to get too close to used mattresses (see page 59). So, I instead opted to gather these objects of my interest virtually, using a digital camera. Since actual mattresses aren't collectible in any realistic or fashionable sense, the photos begged to be read as a metaphor for something else, but I still wasn't exactly sure what I was going to do with them. As often happens with my artistic impulses, I followed this indistinct compulsion, hoping it would lead somewhere.

Almost exactly a year into my mattress photography, the *Accumulation Project* serendipitously came to my attention — a project curated to include an array of artists/collectors who would accumulate *something* over the course of a year and document the process. So, I submitted a proposal to pursue officially the collection I had already undertaken. As per the tenants of Murphy's Law, I suspected I might be chosen as a participant when my camera — the only crucial piece of equipment — promptly broke (resolutely stuck in movie mode) after mailing in my proposal. Well, it provided an excuse to buy a nicer camera.

I live in New York City, and walking around town makes you privy to other people's trash and discarded objects in a way that doesn't often happen elsewhere. I will freely admit that a decent percentage of my possessions and furniture has been obtained through this casual, second-hand consumption — plucked off the street or out of dumpsters. Some items are retrieved in complete, usable form. Others are pieces of wood and materials that have been turned into bookcases, desks, and the like. However, the one item that usually isn't salvaged by others is the used mattress.



Duct tape fixes everything.

A mattress is a decidedly intimate object, and about a third of our lives is spent sleeping on a bed. It's a fact that is usually stated as if it were the punch line to a joke. People take pride in the brand of mattresses they own, and bestow a certain amount of love and appreciation upon them: they are dressed up in 300-count sheet sets and joyfully jumped on by kids. I even found one mattress that had been carefully bandaged with duct tape to help extend its life. But what we do in bed is generally private — sleeping, dreaming, making love, being sick — they're all activities that are usually not shared with the world at large. The mattresses I have collected represent an accumulation of thousands of hours of people's private lives.

Some of these mattresses have been taken on temporarily by homeless people in search of sleeping comfort; others have stains from years of use. Some have been rained on or have gotten dirty in their final, ignominious drag to the curbside; others are in immaculate condition and probably getting tossed merely because of a move out of town. The sheer number of mattresses I have encountered also makes me consider our consumption levels in this country, and the amount of trash we produce that we just send "away" — out of sight, out of mind.

Visually, I love the quilting so indicative of a mattress, and the unique fabrics that aren't used for any other household item. Even in close-up photographs, a mattress won't be mistaken for, say, an armchair or curtains. By the pattern alone, you can often infer if it came from a child's room or from a recently deceased octogenarian. Trends in mattress fabrics come and go just like clothing styles in fashion. I've even learned to distinguish the style of a particular brand favored by cheap hotels (see page 21).

At the start of the *Accumulation Project* on September 1, 2005, I had already taken about 100 photos of mattresses over the course of the previous year, but those mattresses were not included in the project. During the 12 months of the project, I gathered 223 mattresses — more than doubling my earlier rate of collecting. Having a distinct goal had made me bolder and more ambitious in my mattress pursuits. But after a fair amount of consideration, at the official end of the project on August 31, 2006, I hopped onto the mattress wagon, so to speak. You may laugh, but it wasn't easy. I had been photographing just about every mattress I had come across for over two years — it had not only become second nature, but also a compulsion. Just like my house keys, I always had a camera with me. It was a critical juncture: I had to decide if I was willing to become "The Mattress Photographer" and forever don a quilted cape, or just call it a good run. I think I made the right choice.

But to this day, I know that many of my friends still think of me whenever they see a mattress out on the street. In fact, I continue to receive phone calls, text messages, and email attachments proving as much.

– Lisa Dahl, 2007



A quintessential trash heap isn't complete without mattresses.





The very first mattress of the project

was from a sleeper sofa. My brain only registered the pattern on it as fancy squiggles because it was lying on its side. It wasn't until I loaded the photo onto the computer that I noticed what was actually in the image. The obvious Goddess of Mattresses therein seemed a propitious sign to start off the year — and I found three mattresses that day, which ain't bad.

The graphic designer in me immediately thought the isolated icon could be a logo for *Discarded Dreams*. But then, after a while, I decided the project didn't need a logo.











At least there was a mattress down the street.



Four mattresses?! No, just one.

Every project must have its rules or at least

some set of parameters to keep it from spinning wildly out of control. While I never actually wrote any down (until now) I did abide by what seemed like common sense practices. Occasionally rules were bent, like the mattress I photographed while still strapped to the roof of a car, but in my defense, most indiscretions resulted from the pure enthusiasm of finding a mattress in public, regardless of whether it was actual trash or not.

So, here's an incomplete list of some of my other guidelines:

I accepted photo donations, though only two people actually did this, and one on only one occasion (thanks Michelle!) — the other got the book dedicated to himself. Many people threatened to contribute, but understandably just never got around to it.*

I didn't "do" futons or boring mattresses (though stains brought some up to the un-boring status worthy of a photo — see right.)

I didn't photograph duplicates — i.e. no matching sets of box springs and mattresses. And, I tried not to have matching fabrics, though I did sometimes take into account wear patterns to push a similar looking mattress into unique status, worthy of a photo.

I decided not to offer up any excuses as to what I was doing to people around me, unless they asked directly.

I tried to take a picture even if I was feeling lazy or in a rush; but didn't take a picture if I felt it could result in a threatening situation (this actually came up a lot.) Also, if someone was already rummaging through the trash, I'd come back later.

I'd climb up the side of a dumpster to get to a mattress inside, but didn't feel compelled to dig around to expose mattresses buried underneath.

I never really touched the mattresses — just occasionally kicked them around with my foot to reposition for a photo. This turns out to have been a very smart rule.

**Though, interestingly enough, friends became more active about forwarding photos or reporting mattress locations after the project had ended.*

