Do the objects we own describe or define our personalities in any way? What picture can we paint of someone by just knowing what sort of car she drives or what brand of jeans he wears? Could you sneak into someone’s room and form a reliable impression of that person by noting his or her possessions? Consumer researchers think that in many ways “we are what we own”; as a result, advertising agencies design campaigns that target certain products to certain types of personalities.

For his college thesis, John D. Freyer studied how consumer profiling works: “If you could collect information about how people consume goods and services, you could create a pretty good picture of their personality traits, and might even be able to predict the types of choices that they will make in the future.” Later, as a graduate student, Freyer put some of his ideas into action by setting up a web site and selling all his material possessions on eBay. In “All My Life for Sale,” he describes his spiritual journey into voluntary dispossession. At the same time, however, he supplies us with an amusing catalog of those possessions, with information about their origins, their histories, and their ultimate destinations. Freyer invites us, as we go through his inventory of what he sold at auction, to consider these varied, sometimes curious, but mostly mundane possessions as his own self-portrait. In that sense, they comprise—as Freyer apparently wishes us to see them—a portrait of the artist as a young man.
A graduate of Hamilton College with a degree in political science, John Freyer was born in Syracuse, New York, in 1972. He has worked at nonprofit arts foundations, in cinematography, and in graphic design. He received his MFA from the School of Art and Art History at the University of Iowa in 2003 and is now a lecturer in photography at the University of Iowa. In March 2007, Freyer sold the fiction film rights to All My Life for Sale to Reason Pictures. He is currently at work on a book tentatively titled Second Hand Stories, which chronicles his adventures exploring the secondhand economy from coast to coast. Based on these stories, he co-created with filmmaker Christopher Wilcha a television pilot that was broadcast on PBS. Freyer lives with his wife and three-year-old daughter (with another on the way) in Iowa City.

John Freyer
ALL MY LIFE FOR SALE

Consider before you read. What purpose does Freyer state for beginning to sell off his possessions? How do his motivations evolve as the project continues? How does the nature of the sale change as his understanding of its purpose changes?

John Freyer, All My Life for Sale. In 2000, John Freyer made $6,000 auctioning off all his stuff on eBay. An agent saw an item about his project and invited him to make it into a book. The essay here serves as his introduction to the book and describes his sale and subsequent road trip to visit all his former possessions and their new owners. Freyer has become a minor media celebrity and has inspired numerous similar projects. The essay that follows is taken from Freyer’s book All My Life for Sale (2002).
I have always been the type of person who holds on to things—who saves objects that are obviously broken, with the hope that I will be able to use them in a project or eventually even get them fixed. When I returned from New York City in August of 2000, I found my house overflowing with stuff. More things than I’d left there three months earlier. It was multiplying. My next-door neighbor had moved while I was away and left me with everything that he couldn’t bring himself to throw out.

When I had made the exact same trip a year before—driving to my first day of graduate school—I arrived in Iowa with just the things that would fit in the trunk of my white Honda Civic. Now, after one year, my apartment was full of stuff that I had collected from the streets and garage sales of Iowa City. I began to wonder why I surrounded myself with the things that I did. I realized that if I didn’t have an apartment full of stuff, a lease, and a job in Iowa, I might have stayed in New York City that August. The solution suddenly seemed obvious: I would sell off everything that I didn’t need, and would move back to New York by the following January, with all my necessities packed once again into the tiny trunk of my Honda.

When school started that fall, I told my advisers about my plans and started to make arrangements for my return to New York. I
looked for another student to take over the classes that I was supposed to teach the following semester, talked to my landlord about ending the lease early, and decided that I would sell some of the stuff I no longer needed on the Internet auction site eBay. I owned a lot of things that people in Iowa wouldn't necessarily appreciate, since they could find much of what I planned to sell in their neighborhood thrift stores and even at their curbsides.

I listed a few items a week on eBay, and was amazed when they sold. I started to photograph the objects and write descriptions, and as I did that I couldn't help but think about where each object came from, and why I even had it in the first place. Many of my friends in New York were working for the booming online catalog industry, and spent their days writing copy for the products in their catalogs. This was the summer of 2000, and everyone I went to college with was making money hand over fist in the dot-com boom doing pretty basic Web design. Every week the news reported on the latest twenty-seven-year-old millionaires, art museums were forming for-profit online businesses, anything and everything was going dot-com.

I decided that I needed my own dot-com, that it would be interesting if I built an online catalog like the one my friends were building for Martha Stewart, but this one would have the lost and found objects that cluttered my Midwestern apartment. In early September, I sat down at my computer and started typing in catchy titles to a domain-registry service. Yardsale.com—not available. Garagesale.com—not available. Junkyard, junksale, housesale, lifesale, lifeforsale, allforsale, everythingsale—all not available. This was the era of people buying up domain names and selling them to corporations for millions of dollars. It seemed like every name was already registered. I eventually entered allmylifeforsale.com and the computer replied AVAILABLE.

Available. I registered it on the spot, thinking that someone else would get it if I didn't snap it up. Who was I kidding? Did I really think that there was someone else out there trying to come up with a domain name to build an online catalog that featured the random objects that occupied his life?

After the name was registered, I wasn't sure what I should do. My original plan was to sell off my unwanted objects and move what I had left to New York, but the domain name that I registered didn't really allow for such maneuvering. It didn't say some-of-my-unwanted-stuff-from-the-curb for sale, it emphatically said all. Having sold a few things on eBay, I started looking around my house, thinking about how long it would take for me to actually go through and auction every single thing I owned. I was overwhelmed, and my reasons for the sale in the first place were obscured by the daunting logistics of the task.
I knew I would need help if I was going to finish the sale by the end of December, so I invited everyone I knew—and even some total strangers—to my house in October for an inventory party. I handed everyone a clipboard and a handful of tags, and instructed them to tag things that they thought were “representative of my life in Iowa City.” The party lasted into the early morning, and in the end more than six hundred items were tagged. This was exactly the structure that I needed. The inventory list included things that were found in boxes under my bed, items from my underwear drawer, things from my bathroom medicine cabinet—objects that I didn’t even know I had. I now had a detailed list of possessions that was pretty representative of the “all” that the newly registered domain name specified.

I started to go through all of the items that were tagged—from my favorite shirts to the canned food in my cabinet. As I photographed each item, I reflected on the role that it played in my life and the stories that almost every object made me remember if I spent just a little bit of time with it.

I was immersed in these objects’ histories, and started to think about what would happen when I no longer owned them. As an undergraduate political science major, I wrote a thesis about the use of consumer profiling in business and government surveillance. Such profiling presumes that if you could collect information about how people consume goods and services, you could create a pretty good picture of their personality traits, and might even be able to predict the types of choices that they will make in the future.

The dot-com culture thrived on the idea that it could use the Internet to gather such information. All catalog-store business models included layer upon layer of customer-tracking technology. Some dot-coms were setting up businesses that operated at a considerable loss on the consumer-sales side, while selling consumer information to anyone who would buy it to make up the difference.

The histories contained in the objects that I owned could never be uncovered by the consumer profiles that were attached to me. What would happen to my customer profiles when I no longer owned these things? Would I have to forward my junk mail to the people who bought my objects on eBay?

In November, I started to sell items on eBay that I had simultaneously posted to the allmylifeforsale site. The first object I sold was my toaster. I sent it to Bill in Illinois. And almost immediately after I sent it, I wondered if Bill even cared about its history. I started to think about the history Bill would attach to my toaster—would it burn his toast, as it did mine? I also realized that the act of selling these objects would start to change my life in subtle ways. After I sold my toaster, I stopped eating toast.
It was also in November that I came to terms with the fact that there was no way I could finish selling everything I owned by the end of the year. I was able to list about ten items during the entire month of November; at that rate it would take me three years to get through all of the tagged items. So the project that grew out of my desire to leave Iowa was now keeping me there. The objects that prevented me from leaving were still doing so, but the other reasons for leaving soon became irrelevant.

The first items I sold ended up all over the country. The simple act of listing an item on eBay had the potential to distribute that item anywhere in the world. I wanted to know more about where all the things I was selling were going, so I started to include a request in the invoice that I sent to high bidders asking them to send me an update on the items they purchased. Some people withdrew from my auctions altogether, but as the sale went on, more and more people were interested in providing information. Over time, I started to receive photographs and stories from the various people who participated in the project, and I posted the updates on the allmylifeforsale site with pictures of the corresponding objects. A genealogy of objects emerged as the project continued, and people who visited the site could get a sense of the histories—old and new—that were attached to my former possessions.

As more people participated, a community seemed to form around allmylifeforsale. I was in almost daily contact with many of the high bidders, and was soon more interested in the people who bought things from me than I was in the objects I was selling. At about this time, I received an invitation to visit my salt shaker in Portland, Maine. I had never been to Maine, and thought about all the other places my stuff had gone that I had never seen, either.

So, halfway through the project, I sent out another message to all the high bidders saying that I was going to get in my car with whatever was left after the sale, and would like to visit all the people who had bought things from me. Within a week, I had received forty invitations to visit my former possessions. As the project continued, I started to include the prospect of my visit directly into the eBay listings, so the new owner would know in advance that their purchase might lead to a visit from me.

By the end, I had received more than one hundred invitations from all over the world. London, Melbourne, Tokyo, and New York—I didn't know how I would even go about it. On August 1, 2001, my apartment was completely empty; I had sold about six hundred items on eBay, another six hundred or so at a yard sale the week before, and I still had a few boxes of things left. I brought what I could to the local dump and put the remaining items into storage in various friends' basements.
I decided to start my trip in the Midwest and head east from there. The first visits seemed to go pretty well. I really liked the new owners of my things, and was happy to see that my objects were usually more prominently displayed and appreciated than they were when they were in my cluttered apartment. In the first leg of the trip, I tended to stay a few days in each place, trying to meet up with as many people as possible.

As I met more people, the awkwardness of meeting strangers started to wear off. I got comfortable staying in strangers' homes, meeting new people every day. Some might say too comfortable. By the end of the trip, I would help myself to food in the high bidder's refrigerator without a second thought. As I traveled, I posted daily updates on an online travelogue I created at temporama.com.

I was in the Northeast on September 11; in fact, I was in New York City. I had woken up at seven A.M. without an alarm at my friend Maya's house on Canal Street, and had decided to get an early start on my drive to Boston. At eight-forty-five I was sitting in traffic listening to WNYC somewhere just inside the Bronx on I-95. I listened to news radio during the entire four-hour drive to Boston, and by the time I arrived I was whipped up into the same panic that most of the country was in.

My last posting to Temporama was on September 10 from New York City, and I started to receive messages from random readers of Temporama—complete strangers—asking me if I was OK. Although I had been posting regularly to the travelogue, I guess I never really thought that people were reading what I wrote.
I suddenly realized that I wasn't alone on this journey, that many people were traveling along with me. I posted an update so that readers would know that I was OK, and then I tried to figure out what to do next.

I paused the trip for a few days, and eventually canceled my southern itinerary, heading back to Iowa to figure out whether I should continue. I contacted all the people who had invited me to visit and asked them if I was still invited under the current circumstances. Within a day or two, nearly everyone who had invited me to visit sent a new invitation.

I began my tour again, but the nature of my visits changed considerably as I continued. In the beginning, I would spend half my time trying to compose the right photograph of my former object. After September 11, I stopped caring so much about the objects that I was visiting and started caring more about the people who invited me. By the time I made it to Austin, Texas, I had been on the road for nearly three months and had slept on floors, couches, and lawns from coast to coast. The six thousand dollars that I'd made from selling nearly everything I owned had been spent on gas, car repairs, and heart-stopping food. After September 11, I always had a few hundred dollars with me in cash for emergency gas and lodging. While in Austin I started to spend that reserve, and I decided it was time to go home.

Although I hadn't made it to everyone who had invited me to visit, I knew
COMMENT

"John Freyer personifies an American paradox. . . He feels the need to collect, consume, and accumulate, and yet also desires a sense of unburdened freedom and the ability to travel at will."
D&D Auto Body Nylon Winter Jacket: Green nylon jacket with D&D AUTO BODY, UTICA NY in golden embroidery. Front snap closures and zip-down hood, yellow fuzz insulation, looks great. I purchased this jacket in Utica at the world's best Salvation Army. I once wore this jacket in an ice storm in Saratoga Springs, New York. The nylon was so slippery that I was able to slide down the entire length of Caroline Street on my stomach.

Tag # 000005  
Final price: $15.77  
Auction ended: Dec-24-00  
Total bids: 15  
Bellingham, Washington

Update: Ralph bought my only winter jacket in January of 2001. In one of the last e-mails that I received from him, he said that every time he watched the Weather Channel he felt a little guilty about buying my winter coat. That winter was one of the coldest on record in Iowa, with wind-chill factors averaging about twenty below zero for most of the month of January. Ralph was enrolled in auto-body-repair school last winter. I wonder if my jacket helped him pass his exams.
**My Hamilton College Thesis**: Information Technologies and Their Role in Surveillance Societies. This paper is a little out of date terminology-wise, but many of the predictions that I made in 1994 have been pretty right on. Back then I still called the Internet "the information superhighway," and most of my interactions with the Net came through the Gopher system and then Mosaic. The paper talks about how information technology is used to gather personal information in an effort to control people. I reviewed literature by Foucault and also looked at Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. My current project, allmylifeforsale, is informed by my research into information technologies. Part of this project is to see what happens when all of the information collected about my spending patterns and the like is radically changed. If I no longer own the things that supposedly define the type of consumer that I am, will I still consume the same goods and services? Or should the telemarketers start to call the people who have bought my life? It's not a bad read if you can deal with the "information super-highway" language. I still have to thank Trey and Lanethea for proofreading this document.

Tag # 000880  
Final price: $20.50  
Auction ended: Jan-25-01  
Total bids: 14  
New York, New York

**Update**: After I sold this on eBay I sent the auctions listing to my thesis adviser and to the president of Hamilton College. They both sent rather puzzled responses to my sale. I'm not sure they understood what I was up to, but neither did I at the time. The new owner, Skye, promised to read it. He must have, because I haven't heard from him since. Maybe he wrote the president of my college too, asking how they could have let me graduate.
Fly-Fishing Patch: When I was a kid my family used to spend a week each summer on the St. Lawrence River. Each year my father would try to entertain his four rambunctious boys by attempting to get them all to sit still long enough to fish. I never really liked to fish; it seemed a little pointless to me as a ten-year-old to stand still at the end of a dock and slowly reel in the line over and over and over again. I guess now I’d think it was meditative. My dad used to have his own “Bait of Champions.” I’m not sure they will ever sell it in any championship bait shop, but you might be able to get it at your local market in the canned-vegetable section. He used canned corn, and it used to lure the smallest of mini-perch, bony rock bass, and if we were lucky a trout or two.

Update: I sent this to the same guy who bought my Spa City Rockers shirt. He said that even though he was disappointed with the shirt, he might hold on to the patch for a while before he throws it out.
Iranian Bowling Shirt: This is my most coveted bowling shirt. When I go bowling, I always bring my collection of bowling shirts, and this shirt is always the first to go. Only the closest of the close have ever worn this shirt. Trey found it for me in some thrift store in San Francisco, and it is from "New Show Pizza" in Tehran, Iran. I wonder if there is still a pizza joint in Tehran. I wore this shirt when I invented "The Butt Dance" at some Skidmore College art opening. The dance includes a slow hip gyration with your butt out to the right side a little for two beats and then to the left side for one beat. Something may tell you that I'm sort of a dork.

Update: I talked to Trey today to see if he would read through the new text I have been working on for this book. He reminded me that about halfway through this project he really started to hate it. For a few months, talking to me was like having to read every page of my project twice: all my life, all the time. Also, as the project went on I started selling the things that I didn't really want to sell—the gifts that I received from friends and family, my cameras, and my books and catalogs. I guess I would hate a project where Trey sold off all the things that I ever gave him. I was wearing this shirt on the day that I went to the post office and received the English money order for the sixty-six-dollar bid.
Discuss. Freyer admits at the beginning of this essay that he has pack-rat tendencies, and as readers we learn that his possessions, such as the Iranian bowling shirt, often have complicated histories even before they come into his hands. Would his project have worked if, instead of accumulating things from garage sales and thrift shops, he had bought them at retail stores? Would the stories of his objects have been less compelling? Would he have found a different "audience" for his site?

Write. If you had purchased something on Freyer's site, how do you think you would have responded to a request for a visit? Would you have invited him to your home, or would you have declined? In a few paragraphs, write a commentary on Freyer's project that would help explain your decision.
CONSIDER THE CLUSTER
Our Stuff, Ourselves

■ Message
What would you say is the meaning of John Freyer’s project? Economic? Spiritual? Artistic? Why does he call his project “all my life for sale” and not “all my things for sale”? What connections does he make between his life and his things? How did his undergraduate thesis provide him with the underlying concept for this project? What connections can you see between the point of his thesis (as he summarizes it in his essay) and the goal of his eBay project?

■ Method
The catalog format gives Freyer a methodology to follow: a clear picture of each object, with a description to the side and pertinent information prominently displayed. In an essay, closely examine Freyer’s objects and his account of them and show how they provide you with a portrait of Freyer himself. In what ways do they project his identity and personality?

■ Medium
Why is eBay so important to Freyer’s project? What does it enable him to do? What connections do you see between Freyer’s project and a work of art? What connections does he suggest? Do you think that Freyer discovered his project as he proceeded to sell his stuff or that he began the project with the clear idea that it would become both a book and a kind of art exhibit? Why do you think allmylifeforsale.com was purchased by an art museum and not by a retailer?

eBay. Since its start in 1995, eBay has become the most profitable site for web commerce. According to the site, “The eBay Community is made up of more than 100 million people around the world who buy and sell in the eBay marketplace. Users include individual buyers and sellers, small businesses, and even enterprises. From the buyer who shops on eBay for practical needs or for fun, to the seller who relies on eBay as a primary source of income, eBay becomes a part of members’ lives.” As John Freyer showed, people buy and sell almost everything on the site: collectibles, clothing, kitchen sinks. University of Iowa professor Kendrew McLeod even sold his soul in a four-ounce glass jar for $1,300. (These materials have been reproduced with the permission of eBay Inc. © 2008 eBay Inc. All Rights Reserved.)