The Steel Archive

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A steel sculpture that reflects on archiving and embodiment.

Prologue

Hello everyone, welcome, thank you for being here today. I am excited to share the conceptual underpinnings of my thesis project: The Steel Archive. I want to begin by explaining what this work is, at its core.

This is a steel box.
This is a vessel.
This is a metaphor.

The Steel Archive uses the form of a steel box to explore my relationship with memory and time — permanence and impermanence — and has led me through a process of discovery:
building an object that would become a metaphor.

What began as the fabrication of the archive evolved into a meditation on **containment, reflection, and selfhood.**
The project is both a material exploration of steel and a personal inquiry into the idea of the vessel — a container that holds meaning as much as it holds space.

“This box has become a portrait of myself.
An extension of essence, a wish, a spell of protection.
It knows things, just as my own body knows.
It is wise. It is an archive — with systems and ways of understanding time.
It keeps guard of all documents of experience and knowledge.
I am a reflection of history and time.
I have systems, filed memories, quiet compartments.
This box exists as the living does — it is a being, a thing that contains, just as I contain.
This box sees.
And because of this seeing — on its skin — it becomes vast.
Because it is what it becomes witness to.

It is what it knows.
It exists to discover more.

It was tacked together, welded, and refined.
Sanded and polished to a finish that observes its surroundings.
It was made to reflect light.
It is grounded and strong in a way I wish I were — but maybe, I am.

This box is an acceptance, just as it is a wish.
It is a witness to myself.
It is a quiet surrender."

Every part of this box is connected to its existence. When I began writing about *The Steel Archive*, I found that I needed a system to think with — a way to order my thoughts. I began writing about this sculpture in sections, creating my own system of understanding. Through that system, I laid out the nuances of this work in five categories: Form, Material, Time, Ground, and Process and Craft. Today, I will recall my process of discovery and making. I would like to begin by describing what this sculpture is. Its form.

I. FORM

a. the form

The form of *The Steel Archive* was inspired by research into a common storage object—a box.
Throughout my life, boxes have played a meaningful role in holding my own ephemeral objects tied to memory. Their design carries a visual language of containment and preservation—signifying that something valuable is held within. In this way, boxes serve as vessels, much like how I view myself: a vessel that stores memory and experience.

When I use the word *form,* I am thinking not just of shape — not just of geometry — but of presence.
Form is what allows something to exist in space, to announce itself quietly and assuredly.
Form is how an object says, *I am here.*

This steel box is a sculpture.
It is also a container.
It is also an object.
And it is also an idea.

I use these words — *sculpture, container, object, and box* — interchangeably, because they coexist in this work.
It is a sculpture because it belongs to art, to a history of making and seeing.
It is a container because it has a lid.
It is an object because it occupies physical space, with mass and dimension.
And, it is a box, because that is its literal condition — a hollow, rectangular vessel.

But within that hollowness lies its meaning.
The box form carries a long lineage of function — a cultural language that tells us it should contain something.
We see a lid and immediately imagine storage.
We believe the box has interiority, even if it's inaccessible, due to its scale.
The box suggests a function because of its familiar shape.

b. para-functionality

With *The Steel Archive*, I wanted to play with that assumption — to test the boundary between utility and meaning, between function and the metaphor this object slowly reveals.
This is where my thinking intersected with Anthony Dunne's idea of *para-functionality* in *Hertzian Tales.*

Dunne proposes that design can transcend its traditional function — that objects can use the visual language of utility while operating poetically, emotionally, or philosophically.
He describes how ambiguity in form allows for reflection — how a thing that appears useful, but resists use, invites new ways of thinking.

The Steel Archive does exactly that.
It *looks* like it should hold something.
Its scale and weight imply significance.
But its interior is empty.
It offers no practical utility, and yet, it feels purposeful.

That tension between appearance and actuality creates a space for contemplation.
The viewer recognizes the potential for function but cannot enact it.
Instead, the encounter becomes about witnessing, imagining, and feeling.

The object is activated not through use, but through **perception and imagination**.
The perception of material, form, and time. The imagination **of what it could be**, what it could do, **or rather, what it could physically hold.**

The Steel Archive also engages with the perception of its objecthood through its connection to Minimalism, the art movement of the 60s and 70s.

c. Minimalism

The scholar and critic Michael Fried once wrote, in *Art and Objecthood,* that the experience of Minimalist or literalist art "is of an object in a situation — one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder."
Fried was skeptical of this relationship; he thought it risked turning art into theater, into something dependent on the viewer's presence.
But I find something beautiful in that dependency.
To me, it acknowledges art as relational — as something that requires both maker and witness, object and viewer.

When you encounter *The Steel Archive,* you become part of its situation.
Your body, your movement, and your reflection complete the work.
The sculpture, in this sense, is alive in relation to its surroundings.

Minimalism, as an art movement, has had a profound influence on this form.
I was drawn to its emphasis on clarity and material presence — the way it demands that you experience an object directly, to discover its truth.

Minimalism taught me the power of simplicity.
To trust it.
To let form speak quietly and directly.
That discipline shaped *The Steel Archive's* geometry — its deliberate proportions, its sharp edges, its stillness.

Minimalist works by artists Donald Judd, Richard Serra, and Anne Truitt occupy space in a way that asks nothing but attention.
They do not pretend to be anything other than what they are — and in that honesty, they become philosophical.

Judd spoke of *specific objects* — works that existed somewhere between painting and sculpture, between art and architecture.
He believed that form could be a thought–and I, too, believe that form can think.

The Steel Archive carries that lineage of Minimalism, but it also resists it.
While Minimalist sculpture often used highly skilled fabricators and intentionally distanced the mark of the hand or the object's maker … my work reclaims those elements. I am preserving the mark of the maker, rather than sanding to erase the marks of my hand.
Each weld, each sanded edge, carries evidence of the body that built it.
For me, the evidence of touch is part of the archive — the part of what makes the object alive.
You can see the marks of labor on its surface, subtle but persistent.
They are the fingerprints of my process; *I was here.*

d. scale/vessel

The scale of the box — three feet by four feet by ten inches — is intentional.
It sits low, its weight asserting presence, while its polish invites connection.
When you approach it, you become aware of your own body — your reflection moving across its surface.
The box slows you down; it asks for patience.

There's something deeply bodily about this encounter that creates an exchange of energy through the awareness of form.
This is what I mean when I describe the object as a *vessel.*
It is not only a **container** of space; it is a container of experience.
It holds the echo of your presence.
It becomes a mirror of embodiment.

I often think of the box as a body itself.
It has skin — the polished steel.
It has bones — the welded seams and steel structure.
It has breath — the air enclosed within.

It has memory — the labor and time that shaped it.
And like the human body, it carries both strength and vulnerability.
Its surface can be scarred, its shine can fade, its form can rust.
It lives.

In this way, the form of *The Steel Archive* is inseparable from its metaphor.
It represents the self as a vessel — the self as a container of memory and time.
It asks: what do we hold, and what do we let go?
What remains after we close the lid?

Its rectangular simplicity becomes a container for thought.
I find that profoundly human.

Because to be human is to be aware of being — to know that we exist, and to question how we take shape in the world.
I hope that this work resonates with anyone who has considered how it is they hold time and how they reflect on their own embodiment.
This sculpture is an attempt to make that awareness tangible.
It is an object that holds many questions—
Truly, more questions than I have answers for–but that is a lovely place to be in this work, and a place I find comfort in.
The unknown gives me a lot of space to surrender control and to dig deeper.

e. thesis evolution

This Spring, I started my thesis work and ideation. I had a lot of questions, and first I asked myself what I wanted to make. I thought about making multiple sculptures, sharing my photographs and drawings along with the three-dimensional work. I wanted to share every part of my process before I remembered what my work is.

I remembered some of the power in how I choose to express myself, which is succinctly; brief and clear, literal and abstract. I want to get to the point, or more importantly, to the heart of the matter. I knew that focusing on one sculpture would allow me to do just that. I kept it simple, one thing, one box to hold my ideas. I wanted to make an object that was para-functional and proposes an alternative way of holding.

Little did I know that the object I would make would become a mirror of myself–a reflection of my psyche. In hindsight, I can see how my previous work, Light Shields from last year, is the seed of this Archive. Both using steel to protect myself, psychologically and metaphorically.

At the beginning of this year, I didn't know what I wanted to make.
What I did know was that I had formed a connection to a material that I wanted to explore further and show people how it could be used to express delicate and personal feelings. I wanted to talk to people about steel.

II. MATERIAL

a. introduction

Last year, I formed a deep connection to steel — to its paradox of strength and vulnerability. This is a material that is both strong and malleable, permanent yet fragile. As it is rolled through a furnace, steel develops a thick, protective skin of carbon and oxygen called mill scale. When the mill scale is removed, it reflects light and makes the surface vulnerable. This surface fascinated me; the act of transforming it became a meditation on material, process, and metaphor.

b. history: cosmic and industrial

Like any material, steel has an essence shaped by time. Its origins stretch back to the Iron Age, thousands of years ago, when humans first melted down iron ore to produce tools and weapons. Iron ore itself is older, some of it arriving on Earth from meteorites, a gift from stars that collapsed billions of years ago.

Steel, a human refinement of iron, has since been chemically engineered and industrialized, a material with stars as its ancestors.
So when I work with it, I'm working with something cosmic — born from fire, collapse, and time.

Steel's essence is also built upon its history of protection and strength. Once, its parent property, Iron, was armor for the body. Then, steel became the skeleton and structure of architecture — the framework that holds the spaces we inhabit.

This, too, connects back to steel's longer history — its role as protector, and as structure.

Armor and architecture share a language of holding and shielding.
The difference is scale: one guards the body, the other the body's space.
In both cases, steel is what allows the form to stand, to resist collapse.

Architects like Jean Prouvé, Mies van der Rohe, and Lina Bo Bardi have understood steel as a modern skeleton — a material of exposure and strength.
Steel is what holds up our buildings, our bridges, and our monuments.
But it is also what we rarely see.
It is hidden behind facades, and within walls — silent but essential.

In *The Steel Archive*, I bring that skeleton out from within the walls, into the open, and expose its structure, strength, and ability to hold and protect.

Steel taught me something about the relationship between making and becoming: that transformation often requires exposure.

c. steel's surface reflection: invisibility

The polished surface of *The Steel Archive* reflects both light and the viewer. I drew influence from Isamu Noguchi, who explored "invisibility" through the reflection of metal. He was intrigued by how the reflective quality of metal made the material invisible until it came into contact with its surroundings.

The steel box I constructed is intentionally reflective, forming a diffused mirror that witnesses the box, which witnesses us. This reciprocal reflection establishes an ongoing dialogue between material, object, and viewer.
Each encounter adds another layer to its chronology.
It records, invisibly, the temporality of experience.

The Steel Archive is an object made to be seen.
In seeing, we fulfill its function.

To me, that act of seeing is a kind of participation.
The box, in its stillness, becomes aware through its reflection.
The viewer, in turn, becomes aware of themselves through that reflection.

And so, as I stand before it, I am reminded that time is not only something that happens to us — it is something we participate in.

This steel archive waits, in stillness, before it is visually activated by the one who witnesses it. It holds light, and in that holding, it holds us.

A guiding principle in designing *The Steel Archive* was the human act of holding. To “hold” means to remain secure, intact, without breaking or giving way.
The Steel Archive holds. So do we.
This definition of holding, to me, is both functional and emotional
and does what we try to do when facing the passage of time–hold on– to life. In this way, a box is like a body, holding on and safeguarding its interior as time passes.

III. TIME

a. surface/material–permanence/impermanence

Steel has given me a new awareness of time.
Its permanence feels solid — but corrosion reminds me that permanence is an illusion, change is happening right now, in every second.

In every application, steel’s dialogue with time has been visible.
Its value is not in resisting change, but in revealing it beautifully.

To me, the Steel Archive captures a suspended moment.
It is still, yet in a state of alchemical change.
Its stillness is deceptive; beneath its polished skin, reactions are constant.
Atoms exchange, oxidation creeps in when I am not looking, developing its own record of experience, and the work ages quietly.

Time is not represented — it is embodied.

Removing the mill scale made the steel vulnerable to corrosion, allowing time to write itself onto its surface.
The accelerated corrosion makes this box mortal.

Steel remembers differently than flesh, but it still remembers.
Its surface tells time through color — bright silver dulling to ochre, the shimmer of polish surrendering to rust.

Each blemish is a trace, each spot of oxidation an inscription of air meeting metal.
In this way, time writes itself upon the object; the marks of sanding, the weld seams, and my fingerprints, these are all traces; evidence of becoming.

b. mortality: tombs & monuments–objects for memory

I see myself in its form. Enduring as my ideas evolve and take shape. The Steel Archive engages with the idea of the monument —
its weight, its stillness, its role as a witness to time and change.
both a vessel and a monument: existing to hold material and time.

The philosopher Aron Vinegar and the preservation theorist Jorge Otero-Pailos once wrote that
“memory is never spontaneous … it can never be cleaved apart from its external materialization.”
I return to that line often.
It reminds me that memory requires form — that remembrance needs a body.
The Steel Archive becomes evidence of that body.

When I researched monuments and tombs, I thought about how humans have always enclosed memory inside form.

Historical monuments have guided my reflections on time and mortality. For example, ancient tombs and excavation sites reveal how humans have used form to honor both life and death. Within rectangular stone boxes, the dead were enclosed and protected, their vessels enduring beyond the body.
This steel box continues that lineage.
It isn’t about death, but about *endurance.*
My steel box is a meditation on impermanence, and an acceptance of mortality. It will corrode and weaken — as I will — but that too is a form of remembering.
It’s about how memory persists through material, even as the body — or the container — changes.

IV. GROUND

a. welding ground

The lower half of this sculpture is what I refer to as *the ground.*
The *ground* of this work is conceptual and physical — a reflective plane of steel that both situates and mirrors the object.
In welding, the steel ground is the connection that completes the circuit — the point where current flows, and where energy transfers.
To complete the electrical circuit between the metal and the machine, one must attach a *ground clamp* to the work itself.

Without that connection, nothing fuses.
Nothing connects.
No spark, no bond, no joining.
The current needs a path — a way home.
Because the ground is made of steel, the circle is complete.

That technical detail became a metaphor that stayed with me: the idea that grounding is what allows energy to flow, that attachment enables transformation.
The sculpture, like the act of welding, depends on its connection to the world.
It must touch the ground — electrically, materially, and spiritually.

b. theoretical ground

From the beginning, I asked myself, *Where does this box belong?*
In a gallery? In an open field?
Each answer changed the meaning of the work.

Inside the white walls of an exhibition, the box felt suspended, distant from the pulse and the mundane of daily life.
Brian O'Doherty, in the seminal text *Inside the White Cube,* wrote that artwork may be freed by the open space of the gallery, but also cut off from time. *The Steel Archive* lives in time, and to be cut off from that factor of life, would make it dead. So, after that dramatic impulse, I searched for other spaces for this box to live.

Placing this work outside, in open air, I saw that its reflection became the environment, which brought a closeness to the box and the natural world; however, I don't currently have any land that truly meant something to me, or that I could reach easily.

I realized that no single site could contain its essence.

The artist Constantin Brancusi influenced my understanding of a sculpture's base — that it is not merely a pedestal, but an integral part of the sculpture's being. The base defines perception. It determines how the object exists.
Here, the steel box and the steel ground form a relationship of object and place.

I think of this ground as both literal and metaphorical.
If we think of the archive as a system of preservation, then the *ground* holds *the archive*.
No archive can exist without infrastructure — without shelves, files, networks, and foundations.

My steel box acknowledges that dependency on infrastructure.
It does not float; it insists on contact with the ground.

In this way, *The Steel Archive* is a grounded thought — an idea that insists on its own materiality.

This is a quiet act of anchoring, connecting electricity to weld, object to space, and idea to place.

V. PROCESS AND CRAFT

This process is slow and deliberate, beginning with graphite drawings that communicate form, scale, and function. I use these drawings as blueprints and also as a form of imagining beyond the physical object. To depict steel in graphite is to grant it an ephemeral quality, a delicate feeling that mirrors my own tactile experience with this material.

I know steel is strong and sharp, but I also know it is ethereal, light-reflecting, and skeletal. When I work with steel, I think about how it can protect me; it feels like a guardian and the armor that can carry me through moments of vulnerability.

This is why working with steel and acknowledging my process in the realm of craft is important.

Throughout my making process, I am continually in dialogue with craft. Through methods and materials, craft allows me to tap into embodied understanding. Engaging with a specific way of embodied making unfolds into an intimate understanding of how an object comes into being; through hands-on fabrication, I form a relationship with the work.

My involvement in every stage of creation is both a practical necessity and a personal commitment. I have learned to build the objects I wish to encounter, shaping them through my own labor and curiosity.

In this lineage of making, I am guided by those who know the material: my stepfather, steel distributors, and mentors who answer questions only experience can teach. I learn what steel can do, how it bends, how it welds, how it becomes form. My approach aligns with prototyping and one-off design; it privileges the hand-made process over the industrial process.
Drawing, prototyping, and planning become essential acts, translating understanding of the material's constraints into forms that can exist in space. I weld, shape, and sand, always in dialogue with what steel can become, always attentive to the nuance of craft.

To engage with craft is to engage with intimacy. Every stage—ideation, fabrication, and refinement—requires me to have patience.

I try, I fail, I try again—pushing to understand how material transforms, how it becomes a presence in space. This process is a part of who I am as a maker – someone who is deeply curious and will always have questions. As my practice develops, I aim to deepen my understanding of craft traditions and to engage with both the handmade and the machine-made languages of making.

Presenting *The Steel Archive* in this institutional setting separates the viewer from the act of its making. The gestures, decisions, and labor—all of those actions are unseen. Yet this separation is not a limitation.

To encounter the work in person, to exist alongside its form, to trace its presence with attention—this allows the ideas, the questions, and the curiosity embedded in its making, to emerge.

VI. A METAPHORICAL CLOSE

Ultimately, *The Steel Archive* is about holding and connection—about how we hold time, memory, and the self.
It's about honoring our vessels—our bodies, our materials, our stories—and accepting that change, corrosion, and impermanence are not flaws, but truths.

Ultimately, the steel box stands as a mirror.
It invites us to pause, to see ourselves in its surface, and maybe to wonder:
What do *we* hold?
What do *we* keep?

What is a reflection of who we are?
So, what is *The Steel Archive*, really?

It is a vessel.
A monument.
A witness.

A meditation on reflection and selfhood.
It is a box that holds space rather than things.
It holds memory,
It contains time, the residue of making, and the reflection of those who come near.
It exists in the act of becoming and in the passing of time.

Through reflection**, *The Steel Archive*** asks us to honor ourselves as vessels that hold the essence of life — to see corrosion not as decay, but as evidence of having lived.

The steel box, in its quiet endurance, becomes a reminder that we, too, are archives.
That our bodies, our memories, our hands — all hold the residue of experience.

The archive, like the self, is never finished.

It reflects on how we hold time — and how time, in turn, holds us.

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