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## Preservation of Deborah Luster's *One Big Self*

Theresa Andrews

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This paper will address some of the details of the pre-accession, exhibition and preservation of Deborah Luster's *One Big Self* and the complexities and enthusiasm of collecting this challenging work.

Louisiana artist, Deborah Luster's *One Big Self* was acquired by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) in 2003 and was exhibited in 2004. *One Big Self* consists of 287 individual 4" x 5" black and white portraits of prisoners from the Louisiana prison system. Each portrait is hand-coated with liquid photograph emulsion applied to anodized aluminum plates. The portraits are displayed in three drawers of a custom-made steel desk with an attached light and one hand-made book. Each portrait is inscribed on the reverse with personal information about the inmate; including prison issued ID number, date and place of birth, number of children and their work role at the prison.

*One Big Self* is an interactive work. The visitor is invited to become involved by approaching the desk, opening the heavy steel drawers and removing any number of individual portraits from the drawers. The light on the desk allows the visitor to examine each portrait closely and read the inscriptions on the reverse, gaining further knowledge about the prisoner. The artist did not want the visitors to wear gloves, as this would have detracted from the intimacy involved in the visitor experience.

*One Big Self* reaches beyond accepted formats for the presentation of photography and presents exhibition and preservation challenges. *One Big Self* is unique in SFMOMA's photography holdings because of its important interactive component. Prior to bringing this complex work into the collection, very thorough pre-accession research was undertaken to determine how SFMOMA could successfully and appropriately exhibit this work while honoring the artist's intent that requires the individual photographs to be handled. The research involved conversations and interviews with Deborah Luster and is in keeping with SFMOMA's initiative to actively engage with living artists. An open and on-going dialog with artists allows for a unique understanding of works entering into SFMOMA's collection. This practice is instrumental in keeping with the artist's intent, the integrity, exhibition and preservation of their work. The pre-accession and accession process involved conservation, curatorial, registration and the education departments at SFMOMA.

**Theresa Andrews**

Conservator of Photographs

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art