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Lost: 2,938 miles and 42 years away

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LOST: 2,938 miles and 42 years away

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

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2011
The Thesis of Sheryl Ann Oring is approved and is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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University of California, San Diego

2011
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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

LOST: 2,938 miles and 42 years away

by

Sheryl Ann Oring

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2011

Professor Teddy Cruz, Co-Chair
Professor Louis Hock, Co-Chair

The thesis is based on a public art project conducted in San Diego in 2010 and an exhibition of photographs based thereon held at the Visual Arts Facility Gallery in 2011. When bringing these process-based temporal works into the gallery, viewers have a chance to engage with the broader work rather than the small segment of the whole they may have engaged with in a public setting.
Chapter 1:

LOST: 2,938 miles and 42 years away
Lost
—adjective 1. no longer possessed or retained: lost friends. 2. no longer to be found: lost articles. 3. having gone astray or missed the way; bewildered as to place, direction, etc.: lost children. 4. not used to good purpose, as opportunities, time, or labor; wasted: a lost advantage. 5. being something that someone has failed to win: a lost prize. 6. ending in or attended with defeat: a lost battle. 7. destroyed or ruined: lost ships. 8. preoccupied; rapt: He seems lost in thought. 9. distracted; distraught; desperate; hopeless: the lost look of a man trapped and afraid. —verb (used with object), verb (used without object) 10. simple past tense and past participle of lose. —Idioms 11. get lost, Slang . a. to absent oneself: I think I'll get lost before an argument starts. b. to stop being a nuisance: If they call again, tell them to get lost. 12. lost to, a. no longer belonging to. b. no longer possible or open to: The opportunity was lost to him. c. insensible to: lost to all sense of duty.

2,938 miles
The distance between San Diego, California, and Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

42 years
April 7, 1968 to June 20, 2010: one life.

How does one, do we, respond to chaos in the world? In our homes? In our lives? Changes in the media infrastructure over the past decade bring images of death and destruction into our homes on a daily basis and just as fast, the news moves on. But what happens when the images linger? When something in them reaches out and grabs us, won’t let go until we act. For me, that moment came in the aftermath of last year’s devastating earthquake in Haiti.

While San Diego is 2,938 miles away from Port-au-Prince, it is nonetheless connected by a shared geologic risk for earthquakes. The news images of mass destruction, especially the pictures of children searching for a home amid the rubble, compelled me to act. With few tangible resources, but access to a significant network of families, I set out to collect children’s clothing in San Diego and find non-profit partners that would deliver it to Haiti. At first, this was not meant as an art project. But as friends
and neighbors seemed eager to help, I decided to use the framework of distance to set a goal for the clothing collection: We would collect one piece of clothing for each mile separating San Diego from Port-au-Prince.

The collection drive was centered in the UCSD graduate student housing complex and extended to the greater community through contacts at The New Children’s Museum. Collection boxes were located in communal laundry rooms – and they filled up quickly. I emptied the boxes, sorted the clothes and prepared them for shipping. Something about the clothes compelled me, the wrinkles and stains spoke of past use, of history, of memory. And I decided to photograph the clothes before sending them to Haiti.

Walter Benjamin was talking about books when he wrote: “Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories.” As I collected used clothing, the chaos of memories was the very thing that compelled me although the initial purpose was to send aid to Haiti. In photographing each piece, I made an archive of memory and also of loss.

The use of the archive in art is a well-established practice stretching back more than a century and recently gaining attention both in the form of curated shows such as Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art (curated by Okwui Enwezor and presented at the International Center of Photography in New York in 2008) and books such as The Big Archive: Art From Bureaucracy by Sven Spieker and published in 2008 by The MIT Press.

The archives featured in these forums span a variety of strategies, ranging from Andy Warhol’s intriguing “Time Capsule” boxes filled with studio ephemera to
Thomas Demand’s staged photograph of an imaginary archive. Spieker’s premise is that “the use of archives in late-twentieth-century art reacts in a variety of ways to the assault by the early-twentieth-century avant-gardes on the nineteenth-century objectification (and fetishization) of linear time and historical process.”

“Artists from the mid 1960s and 1970s onward...amplify the avant-garde’s critique of nineteenth-century historicism by conceiving of the archive as the rules and protocols that are basic to art’s production, roughly in the vein of Michel Foucault’s historical a priori. The archive Foucault outlines in many of his early works is neither a grammar of abstract rules and paradigms nor an inventory of actual records; it is an archive whose rules constitute themselves together with (at the same time as) that which they help formulate.”

While collage was at the center of Surrealist works referencing the archive, more contemporary works often use photography at the core of their strategy, as indicated both by a chapter in Spieker’s book and by the venue for Enwezor’s show. In the chapter about photography, featuring works by Susan Hiller, Gerhard Richter, Hans-Peter Feldmann, Walid Raad and Boris Mikhailov, Spieker explores “the transition from a model of the archive dominated by the nineteenth century’s concern with registration and contingent time to database-like forms that eschew the nineteenth-century emphasis on chronological arrangement and linear reading.”

For me, archives are a way of accessing or even creating memories -- or possible memories – narratives and possible narratives.
As writer Marita Sturken notes in her book “Tangled Memories,” “Since its invention, the photograph has been associated with memory and loss. ... In its arrest of time, the photograph appears to hold memory in place and to offer a means to retrieve an experience of the past.”

Shortly after the clothes were shipped off to Haiti, my neighbor at the Visual Arts Facility, a fellow graduate student, was hit by a car while bicycling near the University Town Center. This event – and the weeks of intensive care and months of recovery – woke us, in a sense, to the fine line between life and death, the fragility of our existence. We came together as a group to help and respond, all the while life felt caught in limbo as we waited for news and hoped it was good. As I spoke to the student’s mother, and observed her love and suffering as she sat by her daughter’s hospital bed, I thought often of my own daughter, two years old at the time. Of how fear had nearly kept me from experiencing being on the mother side of this relationship. And of how, once skirting those fears and having a child, the child herself brings so many new ones. I want her to ride a bike through Paris at midnight, soaring past the Eifel Tower and along the Champs-Élysées, hair caught in the hot summer breeze. And yet… And yet…

Summer came, and with it, my neighbor’s astonishing recovery. For an instant, time seemed to move at a normal pace once again, not in the warped and distorted ebbs and flows that accompany times of intense emotional trauma. Just then, as a spark of normality seemed to catch hold, my brother died an untimely death by suicide.

This event came with the force of an earthquake, shaking the infrastructure of family in ways I imagined similar to that of geologic shaking and displaced ground.
Pressure had been building along the fault line for years; and last year on Father’s Day, my brother OD’d in a bathtub in a rented room in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

*After I got the call I wanted to go look for the book I bought when grandma died, the one that tells you want to do, or at least what observant Jews do, when someone dies. That’s when religion is useful, I think. In times like this. But the book is buried in a box left unpacked from one move too many and pretty soon it becomes clear I need to do a lot of work between now and the end of the day to get my strewn-about family from where each one is to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, as soon as possible. I was up much of the night. Now we’re in first class. Is it the first time I’ve ever purchased a first-class ticket? Must be. It was the only way to get from the West Coast to Minneapolis the next day.*

My first inclination with the photos of children’s clothing was to print them as life-sized images. As I sat in my studio, surrounded by life-size prints of used children’s clothing, these stark images took on new meaning. The pictures show the clothes but not the people who wore them and so they became stand-ins for the missing people, for lost childhood itself. Once again, the connections to my own daughter were a second avenue of interest. How often we sort through clothes, with the weekly washing and then again with each growth spurt. And as we hold a particular item in our hands -- the dress she wore on her first day of school, the shoes that were handed down from friend to friend now get handed down once again – the images seem like magnets for memories.

Mary Kelly scandalized the art world in the 1970s by presenting her son’s dirty diapers as part of an installation at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. Her “Post-Partum Document,” a work that spans the years 1973 – 1979, documents and
analyzes the mother-child relationship and brings issues commonly in the realm of the “private” into the public realm of the gallery. She, along with artists such as Judy Chicago and Suzanne Lacy, opened up possibilities for women artists to use their everyday experiences as material for making art. I had heard of Kelly’s work before having a baby and didn’t really relate to it. But once I had a child of my own, I gained new insights into Kelly’s work. Infants and young children make such incessant demands that the world around them operates like its own microsystem. Kelly used art to illustrate and narrate this intimate world and my own work is possible in part because of the framework she laid and the legitimacy her work ultimately brought to work that addresses child- and motherhood as its subject matter.

Soon after we returned from the trip, the messages started. They were coming from people still living in my hometown (or whose families were still there), people I hadn’t seen or spoken to in decades. I guess they read the obituary that ran in the local paper. Or word simply spread after mom sent some “sad news” emails around.

“So sorry to hear about your brother. My sympathies to you.”

“Don Anderson just told me about your brother. Was so sorry to hear of his passing. Hope you are doing well. You and your family are in my thoughts and prayers.

“Please know that my heart goes out to you and your family during your time of mourning... I too have lost many family members and every birthday, anniversary, holiday I miss them even more... It is so hard to lose someone at such a tender age in life. I will send prayers your way for an eternity.... Lots of healing ahead for you all. So very sorry for you. Your friend in Christ, Mary Simons (Talbot)
“Sheryl how are you doing? Its been a very long time. I hope things are going well for you. I am so sorry to hear about Daniel. I just found out that he passed away this last month and also that he lived here in Sioux Falls. I have been living in Soiux Falls for the last 18 years. If you get a chance write me back so I can catch up on whats happening in your life. You ever here from Lisa Orowitz?”

And so on...

The one that gets me is Mary’s. Your friend in Christ? Your friend in Christ? Who could she possibly be addressing that to?

I try to let it pass. She means well and so does everyone else. It’s nice, in a way, to get these messages from people I haven’t seen in decades, to think that our lives have some sort of long-term impact with the people we grew up with. But the exchanges are fleeting, made possible by the immediacy of Facebook. I don’t post anything on my wall.

My hard drive failed sometime late last summer and I lost many of the clothing pictures. At the time, I was devastated. Now the loss seems a perfect metaphor for this exhibition, which includes the nearly 1,000 remaining photographs.

The clothing also bridges the gap between Haiti and San Diego, metaphorically connecting two points on the globe as if a clothesline stretched from one place to the next. The photos were displayed in the gallery layered in size and hung on thin steel wires that referenced the clothes-line. Tactical use of color created a compelling display that drew visitors into the space. The smallest prints were closest to the viewer and the largest ones furthest away, which reversed the normal order of vision, and collapsed the distance by magnifying those that were in the distance. Utilizing the upper elevations of the gallery space, the photos hung
above us, inviting us to move among them and through them. The photos within each plane were arranged with gaps between them, affording a glimpse to the rows behind them. The spacing spoke of the spaces between people. As we moved through three layers of photos, we encountered added detail, with the third layer featuring life-sized clothing, referencing absence in an unmistakable way.

Months ago, a friend announced her mother’s death on her Facebook wall. There were three pictures; two of my friend and her mother at Central Park. Springtime pictures, cherry trees in full bloom, grass a vivid green. Children running across a field in the background in one. A bed full of yellow-and-red tulips in another.

The thing is, I missed it. I don’t check Facebook that frequently and evidently her posting came and went before I even realized it. So I unwittingly wrote her about a project we were working on not long after her mother died.

She answered the work question then put this at the bottom of her email reply: Off to my mother’s funeral rites in an hour, will get back to real work tomorrow. And then one more note after I apologized for the untimely intrusion: Oh, sorry I let you know like this – I put it on facebook, thought everyone saw.

My use of photography in this show is focused on documenting the everyday. It is important to note that technological changes that have brought photography into the hands of even children through mobile phones and other devices have also put the photograph and photography into the hands of artists not trained in traditional darkroom photography. The ever-present camera and the Internet together provide a platform for documenting the everyday that simply didn’t exist a decade ago.
The use of photography by artists such as Hasan Elahi, an interdisciplinary media artist and Associate Professor at the University of Maryland, provides an intriguing glimpse at ways the medium is evolving. Elahi holds the rare distinction of also being a suspected terrorist. His run-in with the FBI after a false accusation by a misinformed neighbor suspicious of Elahi’s boxes at a self-storage place, spawned an ongoing project called *Tracking Transience* in which Elahi records his daily life in minute detail and posts the resulting photos (all his meals, the bathrooms he uses etc.) and data (credit card bills, receipts etc.) on his website for all to see. He also uses the photos for massive multichannel installations, featured at venues such as SITE Santa Fe and Sundance. *Tracking Transience*, according to Elahi, serves as an exposé of modern life, particularly in a post-9/11 world of surveillance.

While Elahi’s reason for photographing the everyday is quite different from mine, there are nonetheless affinities in our strategies of using these photographs of otherwise benign objects and adding meaning through context for gallery exhibitions.

A much earlier work, Martha Rosler’s “Semiotics of the Kitchen,” a 1975 video in which she presents an alphabetic breakdown of kitchen tools, has also been influential. Rosler said about the work: "I was concerned with something like the notion of 'language speaking the subject,' and with the transformation of the woman herself into a sign in a system of signs that represent a system of food production, a system of harnessed subjectivity." I have been imagining a future work that pays tribute to Rosler while delving deeper into the mother-child relationship through a video titled “Semiotics of Childhood.”

"Mourning," *Wikipedia* notes atop its entry, is “not to be confused with
morning.”

“Mourning is, in the simplest sense, synonymous with grief over the death of someone. The word is also used to describe a cultural complex of behaviours in which the bereaved participate or are expected to participate. Customs vary between different cultures and evolve over time, though many core behaviors remain constant.

“Wearing dark, sombre clothes is one practice followed in many countries, though other forms of dress are also seen. Those most affected by the loss of a loved one often observe a period of grieving, marked by withdrawal from social events and quiet, respectful behavior. People may also follow certain religious traditions for such occasions.”

What’s interesting is what follows: several paragraphs about mourning traditions in different parts of the world such as continental Europe, the U.K. and Ethiopia. The United States gets just three sentences:

“Mourning generally followed English forms. In the antebellum South, with social mores that imitated those of England, mourning was just as strictly observed by the upper classes.

“Victorian mourning could be quite expensive. At the end of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, Dorothy explains to Glinda that she must return home because her aunt and uncle cannot afford to go into mourning for her because it is too expensive.”

Antebellum South. Wizard of Oz. Are there two other things farther from our reality today?

Marcel Proust wrote that “People do not die for us immediately, but remain bathed in a sort of aura of life which bears no relation to true immortality but through
which they continue to occupy our thoughts in the same way as when they were alive. It
is as though they were traveling abroad.”

The installation may be seen as a closet filled with the clothing – and memories --
of everyone who is “traveling abroad.”

*We need to select a funeral home so the morgue can release the body.*

*I pick up the Yellow Pages and start flipping to “F” for funeral.*

*Chapel Hill Funeral Home. Their services include cremations; pre-need arrangements; cremation supplies...*

*What are cremation supplies, I wonder?*

*Heritage Funeral Home.*

*Miller Funeral Home.*

*Branch Chapel.*

*Dakota Embalming & Transport Service Inc.*

*Caskets & More.*

*Before we all met in Minneapolis, Mom had asked me to talk to my niece, Jess,
about cremation. But that was the last thing I could imagine bringing up on that sullen flight. Last night, when Jess went outside to make a private call to her boyfriend, I told mom I hadn’t brought it up with her yet.*

*“Just call a couple and get some prices,” she says.*

*I pick up the phone and dial.*

*“Chapel Hills Funeral Home, this is Doug how may I help you?”*
In my thesis exhibition, I created a sculptural “home” created from wood framing and featuring projected images of my brother as a child. It was situated diagonally across from the photographs of children’s clothing. Tall and narrow, the structure was anything but a “normal” home. The framed structure referenced both the fragile make-do structures that pop up after natural disaster but also the fragility of family relationships. This simple gesture invited interaction and reflection and served as a framework for viewing the show.

From this vantage point, visitors looked out onto the overall installation, taking in the vast rows of clothing strung from wires spanning the upper reaches of the gallery. Below, shadows cast from the photos created a visual reference to a fault line. Who is at fault and who is responsible in the aftermath of seismic activity? Who will clean the rubble and rebuild? Where do we go from here?

A few hours later we are sitting in the dining room of what seems to be a turn-of-the-century home. The fine-grained wood trim is polished smoothly, framing sections of a dark pink wall. Jess calls the color Pepto Bismal mixed with ash. No pun intended. She glares at Doug when he sits down at the head of what looks like it should be a dining room table and introduces himself in hushed tones. Jess and mom are sitting on one side, I’m across from them. We all trade glances then our gazes drift one by one to the pink walls.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” says Doug. And then after an interminable pause, he asks where we would like the burial to take place.

“We’ve decided on cremation,” says mom, looking first at Jess an then at me. “We’re leaving town on Sunday. Does that give you enough time?”
Doug looks down at his watch. It’s pushing noon on Friday. He looks back up and asks if we want to view the body. Mom answers first with a decisive “no.” Jess shakes her head and I follow suit. “Then we just need to do a little paperwork and I’ll give the coroner a call. There’s another cremation this afternoon. Depending on how long it takes, we may be able to start yours today. And in that case, yes, the ashes should be ready by the time you leave.”

I am wondering how long it takes to cremate a body. It is a question I’ve never pondered before. Just one of many that I encounter on this day. I finally ask and Doug tells us it’s usually done in a couple hours.

“Will you be checking the ashes or carrying them on?” Doug wants to know.

Unlike many of my past works, which typically start with a big idea and get made with a clear vision in mind, the work that makes up my thesis show has meandered through the creative process, evolving incrementally over time, perhaps mirroring the process of mourning itself.

Psychiatrist Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross developed a theory about five stages of grief people typically go through after a serious loss: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. With the gallery installation done, I do feel freed in some way, as though it helped me reach a new level of acceptance. It was cathartic in that I no longer feel compelled to associate the clothing with my brother, but rather, feel it can return to a more universal – or public -- place. (See Chapter 2.)

Mom clings to the address book as she sits on the front porch waiting. But what she really clings to is the idea that Danny had a job. He hadn’t had many of them in his 43 years. At least not ones that could be printed in the local newspaper. He’d only been
working for a few weeks, but that doesn’t matter to her. What matters is the simple fact that he was employed when he died. Others in their academic circles may look down on construction workers -- but not mom. She came from a family of steamfitters, and work in the construction trades had kept her family going for generations. She wants to be proud of something Danny does and lands on this. “He really was a good carpenter,” she says absent-mindedly (and repeatedly) as we wait a little longer, noontime heat beginning to take a toll.

His boss finally arrives, speaking in hushed tones not unlike Doug’s. Why do we speak quietly about death, I wonder. Jess has retreated again, pulling her hoodie over her head and nearly covering her face despite the heat. Mom chats and nods and thanks the man over and over for giving Danny a job. He clearly wants to leave. She clearly wants to hang onto this moment, this verification that Danny had, in fact, been working. She asks him to write down the name of his company so she can include it in the obituary. He hands her a business card, shakes her hand and says he has to get back to the office for a meeting. She thanks him again, her eyes full of gratitude. She takes a deep breath and stands up. “Let’s go,” she says, tapping Jess on the shoulder. “We’ve still got a lot to do.”

What is public? Is there such an entity as “the public?” What do we mean by “public opinion?” My own engagement with this term began decades ago when I was deciding to become a journalist. As a young journalist, I was concerned with reporting on issues of public concern. I saw journalism as a means to do something for the public good. But after years in the profession, it became clear that my “public” was not the same
“public” portrayed in the newspaper. Certainly not on the front pages and usually not in the newspaper at all. My public didn’t care about the same things the publisher’s public did. We didn’t run in the same crowd, not at all. And so over time, I grew more and more disillusioned by the way the media reported the news, by the decisions that kept some stories out of the news altogether while benign stories made it to the front page time and time again.

Technology has evened the playing field, offering nearly everyone a chance to speak their minds. But as technology becomes more and more pervasive in everyday life, Face to face exchange is becoming a lost art.

I can’t remember the last time I saw him. My milestones are locations and relationships. Did I see him after I moved to Brooklyn? I’m not really sure. I felt safe, or let’s say safer, there. Thousands of miles between us lowered the tension and a surprise visit, a late-night knock on the door, seemed improbable. The thought of him wandering around Brooklyn trying to find me put a smile on my face. He with his small town bravado would be cowed by the city. Like our father, he would never come to New York.

California was different. I felt queasy when I received a letter from him at our new apartment. Mom or dad must have given him the address. Damn them. How many times to I have to tell them I don’t want him to know where I am? With a baby at home, that sentiment was all the stronger, all the more real.

One of my first real jobs was at a smalltown newspaper not far from where we’re living now. One story I will never forget was one about a man who shot and killed his wife and two children before turning the gun on himself. I reported that story
when I was 22 years old. Half a lifetime ago. At the time, I remember thinking that
story could be mine. Or ours. That Danny was capable of such unthinkable acts of
violence. That we could easily end up on the front page of some local newspaper just
like that. Snap.
Chapter 2:

Future of the Work: The Clothes-Line Project
As this work evolves, I am planning installations of public clothes-lines that are located in leftover, abandoned or forgotten spaces. The clothes-lines, together with architectural and seating elements, will redefine such spaces and help make them into places of communal gathering and exchange. Actual clothes-lines will define the space visually, with the clothing itself serving as a vibrant visual feature that will attract passersby. Integral to the idea is that the space will be designed to encourage interaction among people who stop by. It is envisioned as a neighborhood meeting space, a place where strangers may sit down and start a conversation about, among and perhaps because of the clothes. It is also a commentary on the current state of our society, in which a there is a tremendous gap between rich and poor, between haves and have-nots. In one of my past projects, I invited artists to come up with creative solutions to fix the country and “artivist” Ricardo Sandoval proposed creating what he called a “communism of objects.” This free exchange of objects facilitates a redistribution of wealth, so that people who have too many clothes may simply hang them on the clothes lines for people who need them to take.

Perhaps as the project develops and grows, any given city could have a series of public clothes-lines installed to facilitate neighborly communication and the exchange of clothing.

There will be no charge for the clothing, but donors and recipients will be asked to sign a log book that offers a location for them to describe the item they took or received. This strategy of recording the giving and taking of objects is based on a system integral to the game of “geocaching.,” and will be designed in such a way that it takes on an official look, which I have found in the past deters tampering. By asking
people to make official note of the things they bring and take, I am also requesting that people take according to their needs and leave the rest for others. There are, however, no penalties envisioned for the trespasser.

**Ge·o·cach·ing**
(pronounced geo-cashing): a worldwide game of hiding and seeking treasure. A geocacher can place a geocache in the world, pinpoint its location using GPS technology and then share the geocache's existence and location online. Anyone with a GPS device can then try to locate the geocache.²

I will use indigenous marketing methods (likely things such as small posters attached to fences, poles, news boxes etc. in the area) to promote the work and invite neighbors to stop by. Other promotional/informational methods will be advertisements on internet sites such as Craigslist and other local listing services. A well thought-out public relations campaign with notices sent to prominent local media is also part of the promotional strategy.

In addition, the clothes-line locations will be listed geocash sites, ie they will be listed online with GPS coordinates available so that people interested in seeking them out may do so.
Chapter 3:

Additional Strategies: Past, Present, Future
What follows is a discussion about key components of and considerations in my practice: Namely, participation; place; media and objects.

There is an ongoing debate among art historians and critics about the role of the aesthetic within art practices that incorporate participation or relational exchange. “The emergence of criteria by which to judge social practices is not assisted by the present-day standoff between the nonbelievers (aesthetes who reject this work as marginal, misguided, and lacking artistic interest of any kind) and the believers (activists who reject aesthetic questions as synonymous with cultural hierarchy and the market),” noted Claire Bishop in a 2006 article in ArtForum. “The former, at their most extreme, would condemn us to a world of irrelevant painting and sculpture, while the latter have a tendency to self-marginalize to the point of inadvertently reinforcing art’s autonomy, thereby preventing any productive rapprochement between art and life. Is there ground on which the two sides can meet? vii”

“ … In other words, artists are increasingly judged by their working process—the degree to which they supply good or bad models of collaboration—and criticized for any hint of potential exploitation that fails to “fully” represent their subjects, as if such a thing were possible. This emphasis on process over product (i.e., means over ends) is justified as oppositional to capitalism’s predilection for the contrary. … The best examples of socially collaborative art give rise to these—and many other—effects, which must be read alongside more legible intentions, such as the recovery of a phantasmic social bond or the sacrifice of authorship in the name of a “true” and respectful collaboration. Some of these projects are well known: Hirschhorn’s Musée Précaire Albinet and 24h Foucault (both 2004); Aleksandra Mir’s Cinema for the Unemployed, 1998; Alýs’s When Faith
Moves Mountains, 2002. Rather than positioning themselves within an activist lineage, in
which art is marshaled to effect social change, these artists have a closer relationship to
avant-garde theater, performance, or architectural theory. As a consequence, perhaps,
they attempt to think the aesthetic and the social/political together, rather than subsuming
both within the ethical. viii

In the introduction to “Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in
Modern Art,” Grant Kester notes that “there are…a number of contemporary artists and
art collectives that have defined their practice around the facilitation of dialogue among
diverse communities. Parting from the traditions of object making, these artists have
adopted a performative, process-based approach.” ix He goes on to say: “The object-based
artwork (with some exceptions) is produced entirely by the artist and only subsequently
offered to the viewer. As a result, the viewer’s response has no immediate reciprocal
effect on the constitution of the work. Further, the physical object remains essentially
static. Dialogical projects, in contract, unfold through a process of performative
interaction.” x Kester goes on to discuss ethical considerations of “dialogical” art. And
while in his conclusion he notes that “Dialogical practices may expand our understanding
of what at can be, but that does not have to come at the expense of works and traditions
that currently exist,” xi he nonetheless characterizes the us vs. them mentality that seems
everpresent in most discussions of community-based or dialogical art.

Lucy Lippard, meanwhile, concludes her 1997 book “The Lure of the Local:
Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society,” with a call new modes of thinking.
“Feminism and activism have created models, but we’ve barely begun to touch the depth
of complexity with which art could interact with society. Alternatives to the currently
limited notions of public art will have to emerge organically from the artists’ diversely lived experiences – but they won’t unless a broader set of options is laid out by those who are exploring these “new” territories. The element of place is literally basic. Lippard goes on to spell out a “place ethic” – guidelines for artists working on the local level.

My own work does explore these “new” territories, perhaps most clearly with my thesis project, which spans the spectrum of community-based public art work and gallery exhibition. When bringing these process-based temporal works into the gallery, I seek to create displays that encourage reflection and contemplation of the works as a whole, allowing viewers a chance to engage with the broader work rather than the small segment of the whole they may have engaged with in a public setting. My work typically follows a circular creative process that begins in the civic realm with a singular and very temporal exchange with an audience comprised primarily of participants, moves to the gallery where the full spectrum of the work may be viewed and considered, then returns to the broader world for dissemination through conversation among those who visited the show as well as through books and online presentations. So contrary to embodying a diametric tension between the gallery and public space, my work moves fluidly in and between both worlds. I see this model of production, in which various audiences and venues are incorporated into large-scale works to be a compelling model for future projects as well.

While this understanding of the role of the aesthetic within alternate forms of public art is not so common in the United States, Danish curator Lars Bang Larsen has created a term for work that falls within this realm: he calls it “social aesthetics.” Larsen believes “it would be wrong to say that the opposite of social aesthetics is a
painting or a sculpture, or any other traditional form of artistic expression. Social aesthetics can’t be observed alone and in this sense the term is double bound. It says that the social probably can’t operate in a meaningful way without the aesthetic and vice versa, hence both the social and the sphere of art and aesthetics inform it.\textsuperscript{xiii}

This is not to diminish the power of the dialogic: in fact, I am certain that some of the conversations that happened during the course of my graduate studies at UCSD will become key components of my practice and/or lead to new works. In particular, conversations with fellow MFA student David White about these tensions and our mutual desire to work against and either:or mentality will most certainly lead to future collaborations and common projects. We join a long line of artists trained at UCSD who stand at the vanguard of contemporary art practice; namely, Martha Rosler, Lorna Simpson, Mark Tribe and The Yes Men, among others.

My place in the physical universe plays a strong determining factor in the work I develop. Architecture, history and other aspects of the social construction of a place all interest me and an examination thereof ultimately leads to new work. When living in Berlin, for instance, I was interested in German history and in how some aspects of history were materialized in the local flea markets. At the time I lived there, 1997 to 2003, the city was also undergoing tremendous architectural change with construction sites on nearly every corner. This, too, influenced my work, as issues such as scale and materials were always relevant. Through this engagement with the local landscape and its history, I conceived of a public sculptural installation called “Writer’s Block” that consisted of sculptural “cages” made from construction rebar and filled with antique typewriters. The work was first shown on the site of the 1933 Nazi book burning in
Berlin and later traveled to the Jewish Museum Berlin, to Budapest and ultimately to Boston and New York.

In German, the word “Geschichte” means both “history” and “story.” These are key elements of my work over the past decade. In fact, my collective body of work can also be read like a story, as one moves from one chapter to the next as represented by projects. The experience of creating “Writer’s Block” and engaging issues of censorship and free speech certainly led to my next project, the public performance “I Wish to Say.” For this, I took a typewriter out of its metaphorical cage and put it at the center of a performance in which I set up a public “office” and invite passersby to dictate postcards to the President. This work was started in 2004, upon my return to the U.S. after living in Berlin for six years. It began in part as a response to what I felt was inadequate media coverage of the 2004 presidential election and also as a way for me to re-engage with this country after a long absence. The work has taken on a life of its own over the past few years, and now the “I Wish to Say” archive totals more than 2,000 cards. One other aspect of my work at UCSD has been to conceptualize and create an interactive digital archive of this work, which will go live later this year.

Perhaps it is no surprise that California is the place I began working with film and video. With media such an ever-present part of the Southern California mythos, it does seem like a natural place to begin an exploration of these mediums. My first foray into video began as an outgrowth of the “I Wish to Say” project. In 2008, the electorate was calling for change. But I began to wonder it might not be possible to integrate artists into the political process, to bring more creativity to issues on the national agenda. With “Creative Fix,” I asked artists to offer a creative solution to fix the country, videotaped
short responses and posted the videos on YouTube. The videos were also integrated into a multichannel installation at The New Children’s Museum in San Diego. One other key element of the work with the children’s museum was that I held a series of workshops with local teens, asking them to offer up creative fixes for their city or neighborhood. This proved an effective methodology for engaging teens and I would like to do more workshops of this nature in other locations.

A biographical note seems called for here as well: One of my first newspaper jobs was at The Press-Enterprise, in Riverside, Calif., not far from San Diego, and I spent about a decade working for various California papers after graduating from the University of Colorado with a degree in journalism. While I did not work in television, my experience as a newspaper journalist has certainly informed my artistic work in many ways. “I Wish to Say” is essentially a series of people-on-the-street interviews – with a creative twist. And the use of the interview, as well as the document, are other strategies important to many of my works.

Objects have played and continue to play a key role in the aesthetic component in my work. In the case of my ongoing public performance “I Wish to Say,” in which I dress in vintage clothing, set up a public “office” and invite passersby to dictate postcards to the President, a manual typewriter plays a crucial part in the overall work. It serves as a conversation piece, a curious thing from the past that evokes questions, comments and often glee from the people who encounter it. The typewriter breaks down barriers and invites people to begin a conversation. Below is a short passage drawn from writing done in Haim Steinbach’s graduate seminar on The Object in winter 2009. From today’s vantage point, it now seems prescient.
“My Theory of Objects. The packing of boxes, the what by now are nearly ritualistic aspects of a move – the sifting and sorting through objects, the competing impulses: to save and to discard, were different this time. And yet, here I am, we are. Back in a place – or near to it – where I was some 20 years ago. The ebb and flow of time is paralleled by the ebb and flow of objects. Unpacking one of these boxes, packed in the move from Brooklyn to San Diego, I find a menorah acquired in the Berlin years. And in another, an advent calendar embroidered by my mother in a Scandinavian design, crinkled pieces of colored foil still taped to each day from the last time it was used. (When could that have been?) I unpacked the boxes on a long wooden table also acquired in Berlin. The tabletop stains contain memories of late-night dinners, gatherings which have become blurred in place and time. The table was fairly new when a dozen or so of us gathered in the living room of my top-floor apartment on Kastanienallee to bring in the millennium. We ate and drank and read poetry between courses, our words and laughter matching the din of the fireworks outside, One guest was a friend’s sister, in town for a visit. She laughed with us, I remember that, as we sat around the table for hours on end. Yesterday I received an email from her father – forwarded from someone else who shared the table with us that night – informing us that this woman I barely knew stepped in front of a train on New Year’s Day. This table tied us together for one night and it’s here with me now in a place that feels so removed from this and other histories. It’s made even more surreal by the wooden, missile-shaped carrot toy sitting on top.”

Berlin is the starting point for my own creative development and I’ll conclude this paper with a short discussion about what aspects of Germany history compelled me to work in a certain direction.

When the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933, one of the first things they did was exert power over various forms of popular culture – banning and destroying work by Jewish, Communist or gay artists, and those deemed critical of the regime - and conversely, embracing the work of Aryan artists and integrating the work of filmmakers, artists and architects into their arsenal of propaganda.

Literature was one of the first art forms to come under attack. Just months after Hitler came to power, books were burned in festive public events in dozens of German
cities. Soon afterwards, writers such as Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, and hundreds of others fled the country, seeking exile anywhere they could find safety.

After the writers came the visual artists: With the 1937 “Entartete Kunst” (Degenerate Art) exhibition in Munich, Hitler made a spectacle of modern art -- including Dadaists, surrealists and the Bauhaus school -- in this exhibition of art that was banned by the Nazi regime.

These extreme reactions followed on the heels of the free and open atmosphere of the Weimar Republic, in which a number of artists and writers – from John Heartfield to Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill – focused on political works that functioned as societal critiques and as a means of activating the public.

In 1934, just a year after the notorious book burnings, Walter Benjamin addressed the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris with a lecture called “The Author as Producer.” In this speech (published in translation in the New Left Review, 1970xv), Benjamin exhorts writers and artists to engage with politics as “producers” rather than simply as observers. As an example, he points to Brecht, who, he says, “seizes in a new way the old and great opportunity of the theatre – calling into question all that exists. … What results is this: the course of events cannot be changed at its peaks, not by heroic virtue and resolution, but only through strictly ordinary habitual actions, through reason and practice.”

A year later, Brecht published “Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties” (published in translation in 1966xvi) in which he says: "Nowadays, anyone who wishes to combat lies and ignorance and to write the truth must overcome at least five difficulties. He must have the courage to write the truth when truth is everywhere opposed; the keenness to
recognize it, although it is everywhere concealed; the skill to manipulate it as a weapon; the judgment to select those in whose hands it will be effective; and the cunning to spread the truth among such persons. These are formidable problems for writers living under Fascism, but they exist also for those writers who have fled or been exiled; they exist even for writers working in countries where civil liberty prevails.”

(Brecht, at the end of his time in American exile, was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947 to testify about his connections to Communism. Other artists in the United States feared being called before this committee and this put a significant damper on art that dealt with politics for some time.\textsuperscript{xvii})

The methodologies and tactics deployed by European artists a century ago have a long legacy both among subsequent generations of their students in Europe and among American artists who developed their own brand of political – and feminist -- art in the 1960s and 70s. From Allan Kaprow and Martha Rosler to Adrian Piper and Barbara Kruger, there is a sizeable group of American artists whose work presented commentary on the politics and culture of the day. The New York collective Group Material (whose members included Doug Ashford, Julie Ault, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Mundy McLaughlin, and Tim Rollins) wrote in 1990, “The subject that no one in the art world wants to talk about is usually politics.”\textsuperscript{xviii} Using creative methodologies drawn in part from my professional experience in the field of journalism, I believe I can do my own small part in getting artists and the population at large to engage with key political issues of the day. One notable outcome of my thesis exhibition was the conversation it engendered among people who had donated clothing and who then came to the exhibition. Many of them told me they found that the exhibition provided a learning
opportunity for their children, in that the older ones (age 5 and up) were able to remember having donated the clothing and that then seeing it in the exhibition provided an opportunity for discussion within the family about the idea of sharing resources and contributing the well-being of others. I found this response encouraging and will certainly continue working on related projects for years to come.
Illustrations
Illustration 1: LOST: 2,938 miles and 42 years away at the University of California, San Diego, Visual Arts Facility Gallery, February 2011.
Illustration 2: LOST: 2,938 miles and 42 years away at the University of California, San Diego, Visual Arts Facility Gallery, February 2011.
Illustration 3: LOST: 2,938 miles and 42 years away at the University of California, San Diego, Visual Arts Facility Gallery, February 2011.
My dear one,

With nothing can one approach a work of art so little as with critical words: they always come down to more or less happy misunderstandings. Things are not all so comprehensible and expressible as one would mostly have us believe; most events are inexpressible, taking place in a realm which no word has ever entered, and more inexpressible than all else are works of art, mysterious existences, the life of which, while ours passes away, endures.

Yours,

Rilke

Illustration 6: I Wish to Say, 01SJ Biennial, San Jose, Calif., 2010.
Illustration 8: On the Continuum of Fear, 16mm film. 2009.
Citations


iii Ibid. P. 12.

iv Ibid. P. 15.

v [http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A6832&page_number=1&template_id=1&sort_order=1](http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A6832&page_number=1&template_id=1&sort_order=1)

vi geocaching.com


viii Ibid.


x Ibid. P. 10.

xi Ibid. P. 188.


xiv Ibid. P. 173.


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