Letters to Anyone

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LETTERS TO ANYONE

A Thesis Presented
By
MICHELLE DICKSON

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
May 2011

Department of Art, Art History, and Architecture
LETTERS TO ANYONE
A Thesis Presented
By
Michelle Dickson

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I’d like to thank my parents who have continuously been supportive of my choice to pursue art- even though they don't always understand it and are concerned for my financial future.

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Sometimes my fellow grad students felt like the only thing keeping me here. You guys made these years bearable and even enjoyable, thanks for that.

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And thank you to the faculty who have supported me and helped me in developing my work, especially my committee members: Susan Jahoda, Jeanette Cole, Mario Ontiveros, and Jerry Kearns.
ABSTRACT

LETTERS TO ANYONE

MAY 2011

MICHELLE DICKSON, B.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Susan Jahoda

Letters to Anyone is written as a parallel text to the body of work I’ve created during my time in graduate school, culminating in the installation almost------------------------
--------release. This thesis deals with my personal narrative as a way to understand the ideas and concepts that my work is derived from. Specific topics include memory, the body, time, process, space, and change.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Dear Reader,

My work comes from a very personal place; it’s more emotional than logical. This thesis functions as a parallel text to the body of work I’ve generated—making it often more emotional than logical. Unfolding in these pages is a nonlinear narrative discussing specific events in my life, ways of seeing the world, and how those things have impacted the way I make work. In the past I’ve been hesitant to discuss many of these things directly. Elaine Scarry has said, “To have pain is to have certainty; to hear about pain is to have doubt.”¹ I didn’t want to deal with that doubt or have to justify why I’ve been affected the way I have. But these personal insights are important factors in understanding my work. So, “I’ll tell my human tale, tell it against that vaster, that inhuman telling.”² This thesis is an open window into my thought process. It’s a chance for you, and me, to understand my work better. Here we go.

__________________________


² Lee, Li-Young. The city in which I love you (Rochester: BOA Editions, 1990.), 27.
FIGURE 1 - Michelle Dickson, Untitled, 2011
CHAPTER 2

ABOUT COPING STRATEGIES

Sometimes when I’m driving I think about how easy it would be for the person in the opposite lane to lose control of their car and slam into mine, head on. There is so little standing between my living, breathing body and nothingness. In my grandmother’s stomach there is an aneurysm slowly growing a little bit at a time. Because she is afraid she does nothing. The doctors told her that if it were to burst she would feel a painful cramping in her stomach. She would bleed to death before anything could be done. The worst thing to me is that she would know that it was happening, that she was dying. I find that thought to be terrifying. What would I think about in those last few minutes? Would I be too scared to think about anything? Would I try to remember as many happy things as I could? Would I try to reconcile myself with the god that I have denied?

There are moments when I feel totally separate from my body, like it’s something completely disconnected from what I really am. In those moments the body’s fragility is a betrayal. Its limitations are an unforgivable weakness. When I feel this way my body is a machine- systematically plugging along a preprogrammed course... and I am not in control. So the question becomes, how do you reconcile the inevitability of death while your mind can dream much further? Reminders of mortality are all around us. I notice these things and they become integrated into my work. I’m not preoccupied with death but aware of it. I don’t deny its inevitability. I used to worry about death a lot more when I was a Christian. I was a Catholic to be
specific, and one of the main diverging points between Catholicism and
Protestantism is that in Catholicism your salvation is never certain. You have to
worry about hell and the state of your immortal soul. It used to terrify me when I
was a kid. I worried about a lot of things back then. I had no reason to agonize over
the thought of going to hell; no one tried to scare me with it. But I would stay awake
at night afraid that I would make some fatal mistake later in life or grow up to not
believe any more. "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they
who did not see, and yet believed." 3 My mom told me that and I felt better. Like I
had one up on the Apostles or something. But I was always afraid of learning
something that would make me doubt. The funny thing is, that’s exactly what
happened.

I grew up in Florida and something you’re taught from a very young age is
what to do if you get caught in a riptide. To survive you have to stop struggling and
let the water carry you. If you struggle you’ll use up all your energy and drown.
Survival requires a willingness to accept something you have no control over. This is
a pretty good metaphor for how I see life. You can’t fight the temporality of the
body; you have no control over it. Choosing to deny it makes you unprepared for the
inevitable that strikes every life, every family. So then, how do you learn to live
while acknowledging your own eventual death and the death of those around you?
How do you learn to accept a constantly evolving state of change? These are

questions I’m trying to answer. How to see chaos and uncertainty as something to live with and work around, rather than fight against.
CHAPTER 3
ABOUT MY GRANDMOTHER’S BODY

I’d like to talk about the fragility of my grandmother’s body as the precipitator of my personal metamorphosis. The event of her body breaking down and its many far-reaching consequences was a catalyst violently pushing me into an adulthood I wasn’t prepared for. Where I would become a mother to my mother as she became a mother to hers. Where I would see some of the most ugly and difficult aspects of life. Where I would witness a loved ones’ suffering that I couldn’t relieve. Where I would listen to that person beg to be allowed to die. The more vulnerable her body became the more I realized how vulnerable both my body and mental state truly were. The more pain I witnessed in her body, in her voice, in the loss of herself-the more mental anguish I felt. And as this was happening I could feel that I was losing a part of myself as well, at least the self I used to understand in the world I understood. The event of my grandmother’s body breaking down opened my eyes to a world I had never experienced and didn’t yet have the tools to navigate.

I remember one time in the ICU a day or two after the worst one, a nurse tore her skin while trying to draw blood. The skin on her arms was paper-thin and stretched taut, as her body swelled out from all the liquids they were pumping into her. She had an IV tree on each side of her bed; I remember counting 15 bags of different medicines flowing into those veins. The nurses forgot to take off her wedding rings and they were afraid the rings would have to be cut off since her fingers were so swollen. My mom started crying and asked them to please get the
rings off without cutting them. (My grandfather had just died two years before.) But anyway, that morning at the ICU when the nurse tore her skin I got to the hospital first. I was giving mom a break. This was day two (or maybe three?) after the surgery and she still hadn't woken up yet. And there was so much blood; it just wouldn't stop bleeding, even though it wasn't a huge tear. The nurse asked me to sit by her bed and hold a towel to it. I remember watching the towel slowly turn red. I was terrified. I was terrified she would wake up when I was there alone and I wouldn't know how to comfort her or explain what was happening. I was terrified of the body that didn't even look like hers any more, hooked up to machines and bloated twice her size. Her body, that was leaking onto my hand from a small tear in the skin, so thin that you could see right through it. I was terrified, but I was also furious. And it was the anger that would seep out at the most at unexpected times. As if my body only had so much room for such emotion and once it reached capacity the excess would come spilling out.

One of the most significant aspects of this event was an awareness of the body as a possible threat- as something that cannot always be controlled. After this I couldn't see the body as a benign machine, quietly doing its various jobs. Suddenly I began to see that the body could be a prison. An anchor or vast weight that drags you down, cutting off potential. The more vulnerable and weak she became, the more I hardened in an attempt to defend against the unexpected. The less she could do for herself the more helpless I felt. I had this perfectly healthy body, but all I could do with it was watch and listen. What good is that? There was no action, or prayer, or force of will that could change the situation. It was this sense of
helplessness more than anything else that was responsible for changing how I saw the world.
FIGURE 3 - Between Me and You (Installation Component), 2009
FIGURE 4 - A Loving Detachment (Detail), 2009
CHAPTER 4

ABOUT VISCERAL IMAGES

Now that nearly four years have passed and I’ve had time to gain perspective, the traces that most persistently linger are visceral images.

Tubes going into the body.

-One big tube going down the throat and carrying back bile of various yellows browns and greens. It collected in a container that hung by her bed. There was the time the nurse had to put the tube in again and she cried and cried because it hurt so badly. They couldn’t find a nurse who could do it gently.

-Later there was the tube going down her throat that breathed for her when she couldn’t do it on her own. When she woke up she couldn’t talk of course so she would write to us on a notepad. But because she was so weak you could barely understand what she wrote. And because she was so weak and on so many medications she didn’t make sense all the time. She got so frustrated when we couldn’t understand her and I was so anxious because I couldn’t understand her.

-There was the tube that they surgically put in her throat to breath for her because the other one had been down her throat for so long they were afraid she would never be able to swallow food again.
-There was a tube that went into her stomach to feed her for the months that she couldn’t eat on her own.

-There was a tube to carry away her urine. They had to test it to make sure that her kidneys weren’t failing.

-There was a wire, which is like a tube, connected to a sensor on her finger that kept track of her pulse and various vitals. I had to be careful not to bump it when I held her hand or the machines would go off.

-And of course there were tubes carrying all sorts of medicine into her veins.

-There were bedsores on her body. The nurses had to push her on her side to treat them, and I always dreaded this because she groaned and shouted and cried whenever they did it. There’s something especially horrifying about the flesh decaying because the body is immobile.

-There was the vomiting that went on for a month straight before the second surgery. (I was only there for a week of it.) There was holding the pink square bucket, handing her tissues, and rubbing her back. There was cleaning out the bucket afterwards.

-After the second surgery there was the colostomy bag attached to her stomach that collected her waste, as her colon didn’t work any more. There were times when nurses didn’t come to empty it in time and it would burst.

-There was her pale swollen body after the third surgery and the skin that seemed to barely be able to stretch over it.
- There was blood, and scabs, and bright blue veins under translucent skin.

- There were surgery wounds that wouldn’t heal for the longest time.

I could go on but I won’t. I’m talking about all of this now to explain why bodily processes play such a dominant role in my imagery. When you see what is meant to be on the inside of the body on the outside there is an inherent sense of horror and recoil. Viscera and fluids are something that shouldn’t be seen. Experiencing that kind of image is like peering into your own death- listening to the clock ticking down the seconds of your life. After that encounter you can’t ignore the fragility of life and the imminent failure that’s built into out bodies.
FIGURE 5 - How Could it Ever be Enough, 2010
CHAPTER 5

ABOUT TIME AND FRAGILITY

“I’ll measure time by losses and destructions. Because the world is so rich in detail, all of it so frail; because all I love is imperfect; because my memory’s flaw isn’t in retention but organization; because no one asked.” 4This is a passage from part 6 of Li-young Lee’s poem *Furious Versions*. These lines and others have shown up frequently in my work since I first encountered his poetry. I remember the first time I read this poem. I was completely overcome by the experience of reading someone else’s words that were so accurately describing what I felt in my own heart- and in a way that was full of beauty, hope, and despair. It was a resonation. It’s really hard for me to describe my first encounter with this poem. The best analogy I can come up with is, it was like someone describing yourself to you in a way you had never consciously thought of before but instantly knew was true. Even the things he described that weren’t in my realm of experience I could still connect to through the emotion in them. The events were different but the effects were similar. I began to see this as a model of what I want to achieve with my work.

For me, the heart of those lines comes down to time. Time and the temporary have become an important part of my work, both in the concepts behind it and the process that makes it.

“...all of it so frail.”

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__________________________ (Rochester: BOA Editions, 1990.), 27.
That’s just the thing. Everything is so frail. Even things we never thought of as fragile, tenuous. An indie folk duo, the Ericksons, describe this pretty well in one of their songs: “Time has a way of telling the truth, yes and time has a way of breaking what you thought might always be new.” ⁵ Choosing to acknowledge the fact that time is a constant force working on our bodies and everything around us- and more than just acknowledge but truly accept and make peace with that fact- causes you to look at the world and your life in a different way.

This hyper-awareness of fragility is what led me to start making temporary work- work that has a lifespan of its own and isn’t meant to last. In the second semester of my first year in grad school I spontaneously began drawing directly on the wall. It wasn’t planned; it was something that just happened in the process of developing a certain piece. From that moment my work took a new direction that was entirely different from anywhere I had been before. Although this way of working is hardly new in the span of art history, for me it was a revelation. It opened a new method for conveying the ideas I was beginning to formulate about change, fragility, and impermanence. I was putting intense effort and labor into something that wouldn’t last, something whose existence had a certain duration and then would be gone, or transformed. I want the undertone in this impermanent work to be something comparable to the duration of life, like a memento-mori of sorts. At times I get reactions of dismay from people who exclaim, “but it won’t last!”. My response is nothing lasts forever, why hide from that?

⁵ Erickson, Bethany and Jennifer. “What If”. Middle of the Night. The Ericksons, 2008
“Because the world is so rich in detail, all of it so frail.”
FIGURE 6 - Hold it Up, 2009
CHAPTER 6

ABOUT CHILDHOOD MEMORY

One of the most traumatic things for me while I was watching my grandmother’s body fall apart was an intense fear of forgetting. I saw her as a fundamental part of my childhood memory, and in many ways I couldn’t really separate the two. The fear of her death then became paired with the fear of losing one of the most cherished aspects of my childhood. Even during this painful time when rational thought was often difficult, I was aware of the fact that I saw her as a keeper of these memories. My fear was that if she were to die then my memories would go with her. I would not only begin to forget what her voice sounded like, her mannerisms, and all the other things you mourn with the death of a loved one- but also I would forget what it felt like to be a child around her. What playing in her backyard was like, the delight of the treats she would always bring.

I started to make an inventory of the most important, most iconic, childhood memories connected to my grandmother. I often went over them in my head trying to etch each one in my mind. At times I would frantically flip through them like some kind of mental index file to make sure they were all still there. I did this a lot while sitting in her room at the ICU. I felt like I always had to appear strong and together, so when things became too overwhelming I would stare fixedly at a single object and flip through my memory file until the threat of tears had passed. This frantic recounting led to my interest in memory triggers. In things that would
spontaneously call up these and other memories by some kind of subtle connection they shared.

Another effect of the event was the change in emotion associated with these childhood memories. The event created a dividing line separating everything that came before and everything that would come after. Before, these memories brought a sense of comfort and were looked back on with nostalgia. But because they became associated with the trauma of my grandmother’s illness recalling them only brought pain and a deep longing for a happier, simpler time. What I witnessed during my grandmother’s time in the hospital changed the way I saw both her and myself. She could no longer just be the loving grandmother- an adult figure who was a source of love, comfort, and support. She had reverted back to a child-like state of helplessness and vulnerability. You can't un-see the traumatic. It not only changed how I began to look towards the future but also how I look back at the past. So in mourning everything else that was happening around me I was also mourning the loss of what used to be; the loss of how I used to see things, how I used to see her- and myself.
CHAPTER 7
ABOUT BETWEEN HERE AND NOWHERE

I've been thinking for three years about the concept of “between here and nowhere”. I titled a show with that line after I first read Maurice Blanchot’s *Two Versions of the Imaginary*. At the time I worried that it might sound too glib, but decided to go with it. Gradually I came to realize just how well it applies to the way I think about memory. Blanchot uses the phrase to describe the cadaver as something that is both of this world and not. The cadaver is a physical presence that marks the absence of a living, thinking being. The cadaver is both here, and not here. “The cadaverous presence establishes a relationship between here and nowhere.” 6 I think memory does the same thing.

When you're deep in the process of recalling a memory it requires that you step outside of yourself and back into the past. But it isn't the real past any more; it’s a version that has been altered by your mind. Once an event develops into a memory, and especially if it’s one that you consider important and recall often, it gets warped by other memories, by things that happen to you in the present, by how you feel about it, and countless other things. Memory isn’t stable. Remembering is actually a process of creation. You re-create the moment each time in your head, so actually the more you recall a memory the more potential it has to be distorted and

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________________________ (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982.), 254.
the further it gets from what actually took place. Which makes my desperate checking of the inventory of memories I had built up something more like a process of destruction than preservation. I like to think about this as erosion by wind or water. It gradually shaves off layers until you have a new shape. Or it washes and washes and washes away, emptying it out until all you have left is a repeating audio track of one phrase that helps you remember what your grandfather’s voice sounded like.

   The part about this that truly fascinates me though is the question of where you really are when you step into the space of recollection? Your body remains in the physical world, but your mind goes somewhere else. Even if your eyes are open you don’t really see what’s going on around you- you see the events of your memory. Though your body is in the world, your mind is occupying a different space- a space that doesn’t really exist. You are both here, and not here. Between here and nowhere. This in-between space, this liminal space, can be both dangerous and comforting. I think the difference depends on how much time you spend there and if you can find your way back out. On whether or not you brought string with you to follow out of the labyrinth. Traumatic memory can be a labyrinth and it’s easy to get lost in there- forgetting how to survive in the present. I equate my long period of depression to being stuck “between here and nowhere.”

   But on the flip side, that liminal space is really interesting too. It’s not always bad. To understand yourself and be in touch with your emotions it’s important to know that space. Repression comes from denying it and refusing to enter. A lot of
what I do with my installation work is an attempt to depict this liminal space and find ways to trigger it for the viewer. I want to evoke the experiential side of memory. Create a space where you can step out of your body, step out of the cluttered mind space filled with day-to-day concerns, and into a space of recollection and deeper contemplation.
FIGURE 8 - Between Here and Nowhere, 4 (Detail), 2009
CHAPTER 8

ABOUT PRAYER FLAGS AND CHANGE

A friend mentioned Tibetan Prayer Flags to me the other day. I had vaguely known of their existence before, but nothing specific. My interest roused, I went to Wikipedia for more information. The thing about Tibetan Prayer Flags is that they continually place new flags next to the old decaying ones. The flags fade and fall apart from exposure to the elements. They become a part of the landscape. Wikipedia says, “This act symbolizes a welcoming of life’s changes and an acknowledgement that all beings are part of a greater ongoing cycle.”

Obviously I’m no expert on the subject and have no claims to Buddhism, but I can’t help but be interested in these prayer flags and how some of the concepts around them are so similar to how I think about acceptance of life’s duration and the cycle of new and old in my work. What I feel is not so much a “welcoming of life’s changes” but more of an acknowledgement and an acceptance of them. It’s reaching a place within myself where I’ve come to peace with not fighting what I can’t change. Having lost my religious faith I needed a new way to make sense of and live with unexplainable tragedy. An “acknowledgement that all beings are part of a greater ongoing cycle” is a way to summarize the conclusion I reached, but not so much in a spiritual sense. Life is constantly moving forward, and movement causes change. I
began to learn that it wasn’t so personal. And as I began to adapt and be flexible in the face of change, so did my work.

It sounds strange when I write it out like this, but change has been a constant in my work since I got to grad school. Constant change. I’ve been using change almost like another media to add to the mix. When I felt using the figure was too easy, I stopped and explored my work without it. When two-dimensional surfaces seemed too comfortable I moved to the wall and then to sculpture. When still images weren’t enough I began working with video. I’m constantly exploring new materials, and then once I feel I know them too well I take them back out. I want an ever-expanding repertoire of materials, surfaces, and techniques. I want the work to constantly move, push forward, fluctuate- never stand still. I can never be content, I can never feel safe in the work, because life is never safe and is always moving and you need to be ready for the possibility of what you never saw coming. No matter where I go with the work or how broad of a range I try to speak to, the underlying current will always be personal and reflect my point of view.

This is where my use of un-archival materials starts to come in. First off, in my exploration I don’t want to limit myself to what materials I’m allowed to use. But that’s only the smallest part of it. I’m drawn toward materials that won’t last, that will fall apart and change over time. Nothing stays the same forever, so why should my work? Having accepted and even embraced this idea has freed me from the sense of preciousness and caution that used to hold me back. It has allowed me to
take risks that lead to important discoveries, and minor disasters. But even the disasters have potential to lead toward other discoveries.
FIGURE 11 - Never Arriving (Installation Detail), 2010
CHAPTER 9

ABOUT PALIMPSESTS

I recently came across the term “palimpsest”. I had never heard of it before and was instantly intrigued. A “palimpsest” refers to “a manuscript or piece of writing material on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing but of which traces remain.”8 I can't help but think what an excellent way of talking about my process of using old work to make new work. My palimpsestic tendencies don't come out of a desire for efficiency or lack of available supplies. I'm not merely being economical. What I'm doing is taking something that I've created and using it as a starting point to make other starting points. Here are some of the things I think that does:

- Takes away the sense of preciousness in the “art object” by eliminating the potential for a final product.

- Fosters a process that is directly dependent on growth and change of existing work.

- Underlines the importance of the work’s history with visible traces.

- Creates a cycle in the work parallel to a “life cycle”.

-The temporality of each stage in the work reflects the temporality of our own lives.

One of my most recent palimpsestic pieces is the sculpture in the forest. That work has been five different pieces now. It began as an installation component in On Dwelling(s). When I took down On Dwelling(s) I kept the parts made of fabric and a small portion of the floor drawing, which was made of masking tape and paint. Everything else went to the dumpster. When I got back to my studio I made a new work from a piece of the piece I brought back.
This is the second incarnation of the work. I cut the original sculpture apart so it would lie flat. I attached another part of the original sculpture to it. I began painting the surface white but let some of its previous coloration come through. I cut away at it, working with the shape. I drew on the surface.

When I felt this piece was complete I decided to make a new work by installing it in the forest for a period of time. I wanted to put the piece in a situation where time and weather would play as big of a role in its development as anything I did. The piece in the forest marks the beginning of a pronounced performative element in my work. The end result of this piece is not the singular object of the sculpture, but the entire duration and the record of its change over time. When the piece is finished, the sculpture will be a remnant of the piece, not the piece itself. The remaining sculpture is inconsequential.
I consider the fourth incarnation of this work to be a series of detail photographs and video taken of the sculpture in the forest and digitally manipulated. These works do not seek to just record the state of the work. They are taken with the intention of being other works and the source for other works. They are, in themselves, suitable to stand alone as independent pieces.

The fifth incarnation is the series of digital print collages that are made from the detail photographs. (See “About these Collages and Process”)

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CHAPTER 10

ABOUT THESE COLLAGES AND PROCESS

I’ve always felt that some things are best left ambiguous, not picked apart and analyzed from every angle. So much of how I work relies on a subconscious intuition- on impulse, urge, drive, push. The reasons behind why I make the decisions I do in the studio aren’t always clear to me at first. Their importance emerges over time. I trust this process. I trust myself to leave what’s important and weed out what never quite gets there.

The small collages that I’m making from the sculpture in the forest have less to do with where they came from and more to do with what they become. They break away from their origin and transform into a different entity. Individual pieces are rearranged; some parts blend together and others are emphasized until a new sort of creature emerges. The collages are bodies. They are fragments of the self. (Wounded.) They exist in varying states of both healing and decay. Their origin is not the focus but the process that creates them and their transformation. From one thing comes another and then another and then another. This is true in life and this is true in my work (which draws from life.)
said for the role of compulsion in my process—especially in the case of the collages.
At times I have the feeling that the decisions I’m making aren’t entirely in my
control. I’m okay with this; I go with it and see what comes out of it. I don’t think a
lot about why I’m doing what I’m doing while I’m making. My actions derive from
something that came from something. Is there a trace of what they are in what they
came from? Is there a sort of inevitability in their final form? The importance of their
origin has to do with history and traces. A part in a line of pieces—a progression.

Although I don’t deny my origin, I don’t think it’s the most relevant thing in
defining who is this person that I am. The trace is there. You can make connections
from my past to how I got here, but when I look back even five years ago I can barely
relate to that girl I was. I don’t understand the decisions she made. Why she did
some of the things she did. I can’t relate to the way she felt about most things any
more. I feel completely separate from her. Like she was a close sister that I knew
well, but certainly not myself.

I think this search for self-definition is the underlying compulsion that drives
me to make new work from existing work. It is a constant re-enactment of that
search. It is performative as much as production based, maybe even more so. When I
make these collages I’m attempting to put out into the world a visualization of the
fragments that make up my self in the process of transition. It’s also in part about
reclaiming control over a situation that renders you helpless. I can take the pieces I
want, stretch and pull them, reshape them, rearrange them, stitch them back
together into something else. Now it’s something that’s mine—something I did not
something done to me. This compulsion is about repeating an action over and over until there is some kind of resolution, acceptance.
FIGURE 15 - almost----------release (Installation Detail), 2011
CHAPTER 11

ABOUT DWELLING

Last summer I made an installation titled: *On Dwelling(s)*. That title is unlike any other in my body of work. I’ve been having a lot of trouble with titles since I got to grad school. I think it has to do with the way that a title can pin something down and act as a label, which is the opposite of what I want to happen to my work. I have been thinking about my more recent work as a discourse on a certain thought or topic. *On Dwelling(s)* is an installation that comes from a period time spent dwelling on dwelling. Much of the way I process my work is emotive rather than verbal. Do you know how when you are at an extreme of one emotion and it somehow feels like it’s pouring out of you? And you are nothing but sorrow, or all you are is an outpouring of love and goodwill, or the only thing you can feel is despair and it begins in your stomach but soon it’s traveling through you and expanding until there isn’t enough room left in your body to contain it and it comes spilling out any way it can find?

That outpouring of emotion, thought, conscious and unconscious feeling is what drives the decisions that I make when I’m creating a piece. It is also why I have so much trouble verbalizing the reasoning behind my decisions. So much of it is nonverbal. How do I explain that the reason why my work tends to ooze and bleed and deteriorate is because I saw that happen to someone I love and it won’t leave my mind? It’s a compulsion, but it’s more than that. It started as a compulsion in response to an experience, but it opened other doors and windows and now it’s
more than what it started out as. It’s never my goal to say anything outright or necessarily make any logical sense. Even when I begin with the intention of telling a specific story it gets layered and veiled and transformed.

In *On Dwelling(s)*, conceptually I was dealing with the space of the mind and what that mental space could look like translated into physical space. Putting the “s” in “dwellings” in parentheses implies a double meaning of the word- to think about a certain subject at length and a place of residence. For me both meanings come down to the same thing: a concentration on self-definition. We spend our whole lives to greater and lesser degrees attempting to make sense of the things that happen to us, the decisions we make in response, our role or purpose, and how these different things combine to make up what we think of as the essence of our self. Deeply connected to that is a sense of space- safe and unsafe spaces, public and private spaces, and varying definitions of what we think of as home. This sense of space slips back and forth from the physical space that our bodies occupy and the mental space of our thoughts. At times the distinction between the physical and mental space is blurred. The boundaries of our mental space can dictate where we allow our bodies to travel in physical space.

*On Dwelling(s)* was essentially about the process of letting go. About what it means to dwell on something until it starts eating you from the inside out, until you become someone you don’t recognize any more, and then finally reach a point of acceptance. For me this piece was a manifestation of the personal realization that I had come to that place of acceptance. In many ways I see it as the conclusion to the
body of work that I began when I got to grad school. It marks a turning point in how I look at the work and where the emotion that drives it is coming from. Everything isn’t so raw any more. I don’t even really know if this matters to any one but me. But even if that change isn’t yet perceivable in the work, I can tell. I can see it there; I can feel it in how the process of making and reflecting on the work affects me. I’m fairly certain that how I was working before was not a sustainable practice- in that it was negatively affecting my mental health. (There’s so much stigma in that phrase “mental health” when it’s such a natural thing.) Reaching a place of acceptance is a release from the baggage of traumatic memory. It means that I can step back and look with more perspective, and even expand my view to include things that reach beyond the closed room of my trauma. This new place, this new view- this is where I go from here.
FIGURE 17 - On Dwelling(s) (Installation view), 2010
CHAPTER 12
ABOUT “ALMOST----------------RELEASE”

almost----------------release is my thesis exhibition. It is a site-responsive installation at Paper City Studios- a repurposed paper mill in Holyoke, MA. I want to take you on a tour. A tour that reveals both what the installation looks like and what I hope it feels like, or achieves. Since many of you reading this will never see it in person and it will soon be long gone, I’ll describe it as if you yourself are walking through. Play along.

You walk up the stairs of the old warehouse all the way to the fourth floor. The final flight is dimly lit. As you ascend into the installation you find yourself in a dark room- it’s long and narrow. The walls are made of old crumbling brick in grays, browns, and reds. The wooden floor is uneven and cracked. Six rusted metal poles run down the middle of the room lengthwise from floor to ceiling. All of the windows are boarded up, their glass long since shattered. The lighting in the installation is very specific. It creates paths to follow- bringing some things to attention and pushing others into shadow. Walking forward from the staircase you come upon a delicate shaped paper about as long as your hand hanging horizontally at waist height by dark, thin sewing thread. The thread disappears into the space, making the paper seem to float on its own. As you look closely you see that it is tissue thin and skin-like. There is an image its wrinkled and veined surface. The image is visceral and reminiscent of the body. It is not immediately recognizable but seems familiar, like something from a dream that you can’t quite recall. It feels like a
fragment, a part of a greater whole. Colors bleed off the image onto the white of the paper. There are sewn lines and traces of stains. The edges are torn. It is both incredibly delicate and heavy, like the residue of undoing. These subtle details are not apparent from a distance, but reveal themselves gradually as you bend down and scrutinize- they draw you in.

Looking up you see more and more of these hanging fragments- some clustered together, some alone. The light hits each, making its surface just barely readable and casting the shadow of its shape on the floor. As you walk toward the back of the room the clusters become denser and they create paths that control where you can walk in the space. Some are just barely big enough for you to fit through. This makes you more aware of your body as you navigate- careful to not disturb these hanging pieces. They seem still, but sway slightly in the movement of air as you walk past.

On the floor among the cast shadows are piles of the same translucent white paper, though without images. They are scraps of varying size. Some have straight edges and others are torn. Some lay flat and others are contorted. The surfaces are creased and waxy. These piles collect around the metal poles, along the edges of the room, and spread across the middle of the floor. It’s unclear whether they are expanding or contracting. The color varies slightly in the piles. A slight undertone of red appears from underneath like a masked stain. The pure white is tinged with dingy browns and off-whites.
Standing among the dense clusters of hanging fragments and piles of waxy paper you turn and look towards the opposite end of the room. There are two large video projections. They are projected directly onto the brick walls of the building. One takes up the entire 14’x30’ back wall. The second is on the left adjacent wall, it covers the wall from floor to ceiling but its width stops at the edge of the staircase. It overlaps slightly with the larger video. As you walk toward the projections the density of the hanging pieces thins out. There are fewer and fewer the closer you get. The piles on the floor continue to swell leading forward to a pile that becomes larger and larger until it is a vast expansion covering the width of the floor, creating a barrier that can’t be crossed. The light from the video projection hits this river-like accumulation, illuminating it and casting shadows against the bottom edge of the walls.

The video projection transforms the walls. The architectural elements that serve as a surface for the projection now become another layer of the piece. When the video is white, it’s the wall that is emphasized. The size of the projection and the integration of the architecture create an environment that is enveloping. The larger projection begins entirely white. Slowly a stain of deep red spreads from the top right corner of the wall. It spills forward, over taking the wall- and then recedes. It spills forward again and recedes. This back and forth continues until slowly the entire wall is turning red. The smaller projection involves a similar back and forth movement, but introduces a bodily rhythm that recalls the movement of the chest from breathing or an internal pulsation. The smaller projection partially overlaps with the larger, merging the two movements.
One way I think of the installation is as being inside of a memory-an imagined depiction of the mental landscape. What it would be like to navigate the mental space of memory and thought, as it was physical space with your living body. *almost---------------release* swings back and forth between the space of the mind and the space of the body; the physical and the intangible. Space as a room that you can walk through, a room with its own history-and the fragmented, layered space of memory. All of the elements that make up *almost---------------release* are fragile and tenuous. It is a fleeting experience- one of the billions that make up a life. I hope it makes a memory though, or reopens a forgotten one. I hope it means something.
FIGURE 18 - almost-------------release (Installation view), 2011
FIGURE 19 - almost----------------release (Installation view), 2011
CHAPTER 13

ABOUT CONCLUSIONS

This isn’t a conclusion. I’d rather leave things open to multiple possibilities and transformation over time. I’m not interested in answering questions, either. I’d rather dwell on the question itself- come to understand it and the reasons behind why we react the way we do to the uncertainty questions bring. I don’t trust answers or conclusions. They’re often too well packaged and too relied upon; too easily stretched and shoved into situations where they don’t belong. When time proves them wrong or obsolete it’s too easy to keep clinging to them and their familiarity.

So where this story stops isn’t an ending but a pause. The space between an exhale of breath before the next is drawn. *almost--------------release* is that pause. It is an installation that focuses on the internal. It dwells on both the interior of the body and the inner-workings of memory and thought. The title *almost-----------------release* is about rising and falling, swelling and receding, holding your breath without realizing it until you feel your nails digging into your palms and you hear blood throbbing in your ears- then breathing again. Almost breaking down, almost reaching the end, almost exceeding your limit, almost losing it, and then it recedes just enough for you to continue on. The release is never complete. You pulsate back and forth countless times between the two extremes and all manner of varying degrees in between. Simultaneously a parallel pulsation occurs internally. Organs expand and contract- sucking air in and pushing it out, pumping blood in steady
beats through veins. The chest rises and falls. Everything does its job until it doesn’t any more. Eventually there comes an exhalation that never ends. The chest rises and falls until it doesn’t any more. It just falls

*almost*--------*release* is my thesis exhibition; though it marks the conclusion of my time in graduate school, its much more of a beginning than an ending. This is the beginning of my career, where I take off on my own without the protective environment of the university. My work will continue to grow and expand from this point. The thesis exhibition is one show in a line of shows. I don’t see myself as transforming from student to artist. I’ve been a practicing artist for a while now. After this I’ll pick up where I left off and begin again. Expect to see more from me.

Sincerely,
Michelle
AFTERWORD

Although not always mentioned directly in this text, there are several visual artists, writers, and musicians who have influenced and inspired my work. A common question posed during critiques and studio visits is: “what artists are you looking at?” My response usually begins with a pause and then a faltering, “well, I’m not really seeking them out.” Of course I think it is important to understand where you fall in the line of art history- who came before you, what they did, and what you’re doing differently. But, I don’t look at other artist’s work to make my work or to understand my work. I understand why some people do, but I don’t.

That being said there are many artists, both past and present, working with the ideas, processes, and materials that I also deal with. Just today I came across an article about the work of Jason de Caires Taylor. The pieces in question are life-size cement sculptures of people that he submerges in bodies of water. Over time they become transformed by the sea-life and are integrated into their surroundings. There is an interesting parallel between this and what I’m doing with my sculpture in the forest. I feel it’s important to be aware of the artists whose work shares a dialogue with your own. The prevalence of artist websites, art blogs, and social media websites makes this information easily accessible and hard to avoid.

Some of the “big name” artists whose work I feel connected to are Kiki Smith, Anne Hamilton, Jessica Stockholder, and Janine Antoni. I love Eva Hesse for her tireless exploration of material, although I hope mine doesn’t kill me. The theoretical writings of Elaine Scarry, Maurice Blanchot, Paul Ricoeur, and Gaston Bachelard (to
name a few) have been essential in developing my concepts dealing with the body, time, place, and memory. Apart from visual artists and philosophers/writers of theory- fiction writers, poets, and musicians have been just as important inspirations and influences. Li-Young Lee’s book of poetry The City in Which I Love You was one of the most significant discoveries I made in graduate school. I see the guttural, emotive music of Regina Spektor as a parallel version of what I’m trying to do with my work, only in song. The writing of Jonathan Safron Foer, David Grossman, and Sylvia Plath tremendously influenced how I chose to write this thesis. The emotional connection I made with their narratives helped me to better understand the significance of the personal in my own work.
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FIGURE 21 - PHOTOGRAPH OF THE ARTIST AT WORK