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Piecing

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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Abstract

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By Ginger Metzger, MFA

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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2012

Major Director: Susan Iverson
Professor, Department of Craft/Material Studies, School of the Arts

My thesis is part story telling, part exploration of research and part narrative of my experience in graduate school that culminated with my thesis work *Piecing*. My work explores how memory and history are connected to objects and the role they play in our ability to feel ‘at home’ at a moment when that is challenged in many ways. I extensively explore recent literature on the topic of nostalgia that is described as a reaction to the fragmentation and dislocation of our current moment, nostalgia as *mal du siecle*.

Introduction

Prior to starting graduate school the work I made, that stayed with me, explored the loss of memory and the inaccessibility of the history embedded in an object. I was interested in the ways memory and history are connected to objects and places. This early work contained the seed of content I am still working through and will likely be interested in for a long time to come. I was looking to objects that are an intimate record of our lives like quilts and journals but making work in which the memory is absent or inaccessible. The fragility of memory coincides with the fragility of identity. Without a story to frame who we are individually and collectively identity becomes light.

Quilts and Objects as Synapses of Memory

I became interested in quilts for the way they acted as an intimate archive of memory and the history of a family or community. As handmade objects they were made with the intimacy and care of the hand. They became an extension of the maker, a surrogate presence and an extension of caregiving. There was care taken to collect all the fragments of clothes that represent the quotidian moments of everyday life and put them together making form out of the fragments that would otherwise be lost. When talking to my great aunt recently she told me a story about a quilt her aunt had. She could identify how every bit of cloth was connected to family and friends. She had a story for every fragment. It was so beautiful that an object can serve as a connection to the past in this way.

There is an intimacy of a quilt as record or archive that is different than a photo album. First, a quilt is meant to care for the body as a blanket. Secondly, when it is composed of cloth that was worn by family and friends it makes them physically present in a way that a photo cannot. When we wear cloth we leave our trace on it. Whether it's a scent or a wear pattern it becomes a small extension of ourselves. I like to think of quilts as a possibility of embrace. I know this is nostalgic but I am so easily romanced by the idea of the quilt because so much of what it represents seems lacking in my own life, a connection to the past, family and place.

I have long thought about the relationship of memory and objects. The idea that objects, like quilts as well as people and places, act like the synapses of our memory. The more often the synapses of our brain are fired the stronger those connections become. Memory works in the same way. Without the triggers of memory it risks being lost. There have been times in the past when I see friends and family I have not seen in a very long time and they remind me of experiences I thought I had completely forgotten. When the memory finally comes back it is as if a chunk of myself that was not there before has been recovered. I see myself in a slightly different light with a recovered part of my history. An object like a quilt, that occupies your everyday experience, gives a constant and persistent presence of memory and history whether it's engaged with actively or stays neatly folded within reach ready to be used. It has the potential to trigger and strengthen the synapses of memory, keeping them alive and present. It is important that the objects in our lives, the supporting actors in our stories, have meaning and can reflect our stories back to us.

Memory through objects is illustrated in stories about quilts and the westward expansion. The consequences of moving west meant that families left behind communities, places and loved ones they would never see again. They took quilts with them knowing they would serve as one of a few precious connections with what was left behind and lost. As an object it kept their connection to a time long gone and a place far away, and spiritually transported what was lost with them. This points to a fundamental need for memory and connection to the past, especially when dislocation means separation from the people and places to which one was connected.

What is lost when something is forgotten? What if they didn't bring quilts with them as a connection to the past? What if that part of their memory faded completely and all they could remember was their life in a new place? When we lose parts of our memory and history we lose parts of our identity, becoming fragmented. Thinking of our current historical moment I wonder what is lost when the value of our objects today depends primarily on how inexpensive they are and, correspondingly, their likelihood to end up in the garbage? What is lost if our objects don't have time to gain history and meaning before being thrown out and traded up for something new that is likely made far away by people we will never meet? Does this lead to a sense of disconnection? I have a longing for meaningful objects, for quilts, for hand-me-downs. If we are a 'throw away culture' are we throwing away our culture, memory, history and identity? Quilts have become a symbol for me, signifying community, connectedness and history. They represent the preservation of precious moments as they pass too quickly.

My Dad, Rootedness and Connection to Place

The theorist Svetlana Boym has described 'home' as a sense of intimacy with the world. I see my dad as someone with a real familiarity and closeness with the place where he lives. His experience recalls the way memory is triggered by objects but expands this idea to ones whole environment. He grew up in Milwaukee and has lived his whole life there. He has traveled very little and has not been abroad. Whenever I go back to visit him we drive around and he points out different places while explaining who he knew who lived or worked there, who they were related to and where they are now. He points out HVAC units or other equipment he worked on and names what year it was when he worked on it and what was happening in his life at the time. His whole environment is like a quilt, constantly reflecting back his life story and triggering the synapses of his memory. He encounters himself in the environment just by moving through a place he is so thoroughly embedded in.

Tamina

The *Book of Laughter and Forgetting* by Milan Kundera is split into two halves, the first is about laughter and the second, forgetting. The second half tells the story of the character Tamina. When you meet her in the story she is living abroad alone working as a waitress. She and her husband left their home in Prague because of the Russian invasion, sadly however, shortly after moving her husband died. She spends the story trying to recover their love letters that remained in Prague. She needs them to fill her slowly failing memory. Each time it seems she is close to recovering them the plans fall through. The end of her story takes a surreal turn and she is transported by a small boat to an island of children. It is a place without memory or history and it is slightly terrifying. Tamina finds herself in the opposite situation as my father. Away from her home in Prague her new home does not reflect back history to her the way my dad's does. She is without the necessary people and objects to maintain and strengthen her memory. The story of Tamina poses the question, what happens if you find yourself without objects of memory, living far away from the people and places that reflect back to you your story.

Patient H.M.

The 2010 Whitney Biennial featured a two-channel film installation by Kerry Tribe recounting the case of the patient H.M. who underwent experimental surgery in the 1950's to help his extreme epilepsy. The surgery included the removal of part of his brain resulting in extreme amnesia. He couldn't remember anything beyond fifteen minutes. The film is in a documentary style and involves questioning the patient. He is asked how old he thinks he is and responds that he thinks maybe in his forties even though he is in his sixties. Without the ability to remember he is almost completely disassociated from himself. I was struck by the subtle but constant state of confusion H.M. was in. There was an emptiness in his expression. Without the ability to form memory he became an empty shell.

My dad, Tamina and patient H.M. illustrate in different ways the interrelationship between memory, connection to place, objects and identity. They illustrate how memory and history give form to identity.

Ginger

My personal connection to these themes comes in a not uncommon story, the separation of my parents. When I was eight my mother moved from Milwaukee to Orlando, taking my sister with her and leaving my brother and me with my father. My parents have both since remarried. From that point on my life was split between two worlds, Milwaukee during the school year and Orlando during the summer. When I was fifteen I decided to move to Florida to live with my mother, then the division of my time was reversed. Because my time was split between these two places and two families neither has fully felt like home, my connection to them has always felt fragmented and rootless. To be in Milwaukee meant being without my family in Orlando and to be in Orlando meant being without my family in Milwaukee. I was always divided between two places. I've always had the sense that I could never fully be in either. The short once a year visits are never enough time to make up for the everyday experience that is lost. You only really know someone when you share the mundane day-to-day time. My family has very little shared memory or shared history and what we do share is fragmented. My life has been characterized by loss and fragmentation. Each year I had to say goodbye again to people so precious to me. I was left always wanting more time just to be together. This is a shared experience of loss in my family that is often very palpable when we are together.

Inaccessibility, Memory Out of Reach

Working with the theme of the connection of memory to objects and places, and extending the ideas from previous work, I started my graduate work wanting to set up a tension of inaccessibility where the viewer is denied the text or object. I saw this as representing a kind of search or longing for memory where it was always out of reach. The most important part of this work for me was the inaccessibility. The first piece I completed, *Liminal*, was ten feet high by fourteen feet wide. I covered a wall with writing done with a clear transparent medium. When far away from the piece, at least fifteen feet, you could see the overall shape of the writing. Once you started moving closer to the piece the writing would disappear. When directly in front of the piece you could not make out more than a couple of words at a time. I set up a situation where the viewer was intrigued by the visual qualities of the piece and wanted to explore it but wasn't fully able to gain access to it. The viewer would become almost like Tamina searching for a connection to the place. I was thinking how an environment in a rooted experience like my dad's speaks to you. It tells you stories of your history. I was thinking of what happens when you are not rooted in a place, when your experience is very light. There is a searching for meaning to connect you to the place, to give you weight. I wanted to represent a kind-of longing for intimacy with place. What was actually written was not important to me since I only wanted it to seem that there was content that was out of reach from the viewer.

With this piece I wanted to explore making site specific and/or temporary work that was not an object. I came to graduate school questioning the form site specific work could take and I wanted to be open to the possibilities of working outside of making an object. Ultimately however, this piece was unsuccessful. It's location in the hall allowed everyone to witness how it was made destroying. Additionally, it being handwritten was an issue; taking on the connotation that only a crazy person would write so much on a space so big in a way that couldn't easily be seen. It's location in the school's hallway did little to relate to a longing for connection to place.

A similar project, titled *Tamina*, consisted of several images of found handkerchiefs and a doily with inaccessible text embedded in the image. To create these images I scanned the textiles along with transparencies of text and then altered them in Photoshop. All background area of the image was erased including small spaces within lace areas of the textile. What was printed was solely the image of the textile with text embedded in it. I was working again with similar ideas, setting up layers of inaccessibility, a kind of failure to connect. The textile was not present but just an image, there was text but you could not read it. The object embedded with memory which helps reify identity is out of reach. My use of text set up the understanding that there was content but it was inaccessible. Text equals language and communication but it was inaccessible. The viewer remains like the character Tamina.

Craft and Exchange Value

Remember Me consists of the repeated stitched text “When you see this remember me” on a handkerchief. I was looking at the poems on antique cross-stitch samplers that often contain lines about the maker being remembered by the work of their hand. The hand crafted object becomes a surrogate presence in their absence; similar to the quilts given during the westward expansion or the one I made for my niece so I could be near her in the form of something I made. The text accumulated across the surface of the handkerchief speaks of an ongoing longing. It was an expression of separation anxiety. During its critique I mentioned the idea that the piece could be a gift to someone and it would act as connection between us. One of my peers asked the very simple and obvious question, “Is this for someone?” My answer was no, I did not make the piece specifically to gift away but was only thinking of the idea of the gift that acts as a surrogate presence, an extension of the maker.

This led me to start thinking more about the exchange value of craft objects. Not in terms of capital but in an exchange that acts like a bond for a community. I later learned this is called an economy of exchange. I wondered what if our spaces were occupied with things made by people we knew, people within our community? As the supporting actors in our spaces they would have more meaning, more weight.

My husband is from Trinidad and I have traveled there with him many times. As an outsider coming from America, a country that highly values individualism, the

communal aspects of life there impressed me. Here we do things for ourselves, choose things for ourselves and decide what we want as individuals. From my observations there it is expected that everyone provide for each other. Whether it's building each others homes, cooking for an event, giving a ride, sharing food or getting someone a glass of water. It is rare to see people do things for themselves. The motto seems to be: you do for others with the trust that they will do for you. To be individualistic is to be greedy. There is a mutual dependency and community that is created and maintained by the exchange of caregiving.

Now, I don't want to glorify what I perceived as an outsider. It is difficult at times to give up personal space and personal motivations when I am there, but it seems relevant in thinking about the relational exchange value of craft and the relationship of objects and community. What is lost today in terms of culture as a society when value is primarily judged by cheapness so it can easily be replaced? When our things don't have time to collect memory or history before they are quickly thrown out? How can we have any sense of community, place or culture when there is an over abundance of stuff that has very little value? Do we know the price of everything and the value of nothing? How is the value of doing for others or making for others affected by a world where we do so much for ourselves? All our needs are already over met.

Lynne Cooke discusses what is termed 'gift labor' in relation to Ann Hamilton's work through the writing of Lewis Hyde. He makes a distinction between work and labor. For Hyde labor is not dictated by financial payment and resists measurement in hourly increments. It has a pace that is difficult to quantify in these terms and therefore belongs to an *economy of exchange* (my emphasis) rather than one of use and is

determined by worth rather than value. Gift economies are based on relationships and activities that are relational in nature and likewise connect individuals to a community. “For Hyde, the destruction of gift exchange by the hegemony of the market is related to the destruction of the esemplastic powers by overvaluation of analytic cognition, and the treatment of art as proprietary works, not as gifts”(71-75).

Cooke discusses this issue of labor in relation to the sitter that is often present in Hamilton’s work. The sitter is usually engaged in a repetitive activity related to the body in some way that has no clear beginning or end. It is an activity that is seemingly ongoing. The sitter is fully absorbed in the action at hand creating what is described as an ‘extended present’ and therefore is a resistance to metered time. The construction of her work also functions within notions of a gift economy since she requires a large team of workers to complete her vision. Most aspects of her work have a handmade quality both in the way components are constructed and the use of materials. These aspects of Hamilton’s work can be seen as a resistance against the destructive and dehumanizing effects of the market. If the market destroys the esemplastic powers of economies of exchange can gift labor also be resistance to it?

Nostalgia

After my first semester I met with my lead professor in my studio for our post-semester conversation. I mentioned that during critiques there had been a lot of comments about nostalgia, mostly because I was using antique textiles that were not from my family. I don't have any so the act of collecting is, I imagine, a symbolic attempt to restore what is missing. My collecting of antique items is I think an attempt to surround myself with a sense of history, giving myself weight where I feel light. In our discussion I said "But, what if it's about nostalgia?" and that started my obsessive research on the topic. I started looking for everything I could find on it and revisiting things I had been watching and reading before starting graduate school. I wanted to bring together the different fragments of interests that had a common thread.

Aside from my own longing for a sense of 'home' because of my fragmented experience, I have always been aware of similar stories where people become unsure of what to call 'home'. When I was a student at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts a classmate told me that after living in Philadelphia for several years and feeling very connected to it she no longer felt connected to the place in Florida where she grew up. She wasn't sure what to call home anymore. On my recent trip to Qatar a fellow graduate student talked about how neither of her parents lived in the place where she grew up and she has a sense of loss of this place. She has no reason to go back there but to some extent wishes she still had a connection to that place. It is as if a piece of her life

is missing. Similarly, after I moved away from Milwaukee my dad moved to a suburb on the other side of the city. When I go back to visit I am never in the places where I actually grew up.

In my reading I have found varying statistics but it seems true that Americans move more in their lives on average than do people in most places in the world. It's safe to assume that the loss of home is a common experience. We move for school, often more than once, then for jobs and more. Our current moment is marked by mobility. I don't see this as necessarily negative but I am interested in how this affects our relationship to place and our ability to feel 'at home' in the world and how it affects or disrupts a sense of continuity.

My investigation of nostalgia brought me back to Kundera's book *Ignorance*. It opens with a lengthy discussion of the various meanings of nostalgia in different languages, each having their own nuance of meanings. The most powerful one comes from the Spanish word *anoranza*. It has connotations to a kind of ignorance; "to be unaware of, not know, not experience; to lack or miss." This nostalgia "seems something like the pain of ignorance, of not knowing. You are far away, and I don't know what has become of you"(6). The story is about separation from ones homeland, return and how ones relationship to that place changes when returning. He also talks about the myth of Odysseus as the first nostalgic story that glorifies the idea of return.

Nostalgia is often associated with the dislocation of the immigrant experience. The book *Ignorance* is one example of this. I have always been drawn to this subject matter and I started revisiting literature and films I discovered before coming to graduate school. I had read through many times the article *The Politics of Re-Homing: Asian*

Diaspora Poetry in Canada by Benzi Zhang, it talked about a longing to feel ‘at home’ in a new place while needing to simultaneously feel connected to the very distant place one is from, through poetry of the immigrants. It describes a feeling of in-between-ness, of never feeling rooted in either place. I returned to the film *Pure Chutney* by Amitava Kumar about Indians in Trinidad, descendent of indentured laborers, managed to maintained their culture and connection to India. In the film Kumar interviews young Indo-Trinidadians who have an obsession with India, a place few of them will ever see. I also returned to the video piece *Squandering Negative Spaces* by Haegue Yang that I saw in 2008 at the New Museum. It is about shifts in perception of place when moving between and being connected to several locations. The way it is shot and what we see and don’t see, hear and don’t hear, fit beautifully with the narration of the artist over the footage.

Finally, there is listening every morning to my husband Rick’s dreams of the night before that always, always take place in Trinidad. They are very ordinary; he is fishing with a nephew, catching crabs with his father, planting rice with his mother or taking the cows out to feed.

My personal history, my connection to my husbands experience living in the US and all of the influences I have just mentioned were a starting point for thinking through a broader common experience of longing and nostalgia that is the result of dislocation and separation. I was interested in how these sources might relate to a nostalgia that has been called an “incurable modern condition” or the *mal du siecle*. A kind of nostalgia that is the result of globalization and the super mobility of our current historical moment.

It is true that nostalgia is born out of some kind of separation but finding a definitive definition for it is not so easy. In the introduction to *The Future of Nostalgia* Svetlana Boym elaborates on the many forms nostalgia takes but then admits that as a phenomenon it is actually quite hard to pin down. To say it is one thing or another is to reduce the experience and miss all its nuances. I think this is what interests me most about the topic. It is like a chameleon taking on many colors depending on the context.

Nostalgia can be both a positive and a negative emotion, destructive and generative. In her book Boym dedicates a chapter to a discussion of two opposing kinds of nostalgia; reflective and restorative. One believes a true and authentic order can and should be restored and the other merely reflects on the passage of time and the impossibility of permanence. My own personal nostalgia is reflective.

There is also the fiction that the longing to return creates. In *Imaginary Homelands* the author Salman Rushdie talks about this looking back. Speaking of India he says; “if we do look back, we must do so in the knowledge that our physical alienation...almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands.” The idea that the home longed for is much less about an actual place but a fantasy.

Nostalgia can be a response to change and is expressed as a longing for certainty, fixity and stability in an uncertain and fragmented world. This longing turns into a projection onto the past of what seems missing in the present. The fictionalized past is then longed for. There is a Russian saying that “the past has become more unpredictable than the future.” There is an irony to this, however, because longing for a fiction means

the desire can never be realized. The fictionalized past is also usually sanitized and cleaned up making it beautiful and seductive. This beauty is the kitsch I will discuss later.

Any discussion of nostalgia brings up the idea of home. Etymologically it is made up of the Greek words *nostos* for return or homecoming and *algos* for suffering. “So nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return” home (Kundera, 5). But how we define home, especially today, is not so simple. What is home? What does it mean to feel ‘at home’?

The sociologist Janelle Wilson describes it as the place of stable meaning or stable signification. She talks about this longing for stability as a reaction to postmodern conditions that put identity in a constant state of flux(55). Nostalgia is a way to establish a cohesive identity in times when it is exceedingly hard to do so. Similarly Boym says, “To feel at home is to know that things are in their places and so are you; it is a state of mind that doesn’t depend on actual location. The object of longing, then is not really a place called home but this sense of *intimacy*(my emphasis) with the world”(251). I am particularly interested in this aspect of intimacy. Jan Duyvendak suggests that to ‘feel at home’ is all about familiarity, a kind of intimacy. In *The Politics of Home* he says that the idea of ‘home’ has remained un-interrogated and undertheorized because contemporary social theory is more focused on a kind-of “nomadology”. Our current moment is characterized by a mobility that is “profoundly transforming our apprehension of the world: it is provoking a new experience or orientation and disorientation, new senses of place and placeless identity”(26).

In light of the discourse around mobility it may seem provincial and regressive to talk about home or the need to feel ‘at home’ but it is a necessary counter point to the discussion. In the words of Eagleton, “If men and women need freedom and mobility, they also need a sense of tradition and belonging. There is nothing retrograde about roots. The post-modern cult of the migrant...is a good deal too supercilious in this respect”(21).

The effects of this super mobility and globalization distance us from an *intimate* connection to our world. Making it more difficult to feel ‘at home’. Indeed, when I look for examples that support this I think of ETSY, Community Supported Agriculture, the Slow Food Movement and a general emphasis on the local. To me these examples reflect a desire for a greater intimacy and sense of connection to place. Buying a handmade object by someone you know rather than getting one for a buck at Walmart means the objects that are the supporting actors in your daily space will not be so impersonal. There is a sensuality to the Slow Food Movement that aims to revive a genuine intimacy with one of our most basic instincts that’s been desensitized by prepackaged tasteless meals and fast food. CSA’s that are popping up everywhere come from a desire to be more connected to the food we eat, where it comes from and the people that grow it. Instead of going to the chain grocery store with products shipped in from all over the country a CSA offers an experience of community. These movements are an attempt to regain an intimacy that is missing from our everyday experience. Along the lines of these examples I think it is relevant to mention the work of my fellow graduate student Gian Perotti (VCU, MFA, 2011). His emphasis on craft skills in clay and his hopes for a ‘soft’

apocalypse so we can return to a time when the connections of community were more necessary and valued has more than a touch of nostalgia.¹

¹ In my reading on nostalgia I have been surprised by how often it is associated with eschatology. It is the desire for a change that will restore or return the proper or 'natural' order of things.

Kitsch and Thomas Kinkade

The fictions of nostalgia necessitated an exploration its relationship to kitsch. I know it is often defined as a cheap knock off of high culture for the masses, as Clement Greenburg elaborated on it in his piece *The Avant Garde and Kitsch*, but I was more interested in Milan Kundera's discussion of the topic. In his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* he says that the original meaning of the word is "the absolute denial of shit in both the literal and figurative senses of the word"(248). When there is no shit, there is only beauty. The kitsch of nostalgia is the sanitized fictions it creates. And like nostalgia, "Kitsch is both the longing for satisfaction and the recognition that is can never be obtained." (Boylan, 12)

In Kundera's book the concept of kitsch is explored through the character Sabina. She is a painter living in Prague and eventually the US. She swore all her life to be the enemy of kitsch, however, later in life she finds she is also susceptible to it. "Her kitsch was her image of home, all peace, all quiet and harmony, and ruled by a loving mother and wise father", an image very reminiscent of the nuclear family of the 1950's. It is significant that the character used to explore kitsch is someone who claims to be the enemy of it only to find it is within her as well. We are all susceptible to it one way or another. Kundera says that even though we may scorn kitsch it is an integral part of the human condition, a basic human weakness that no one is strong enough to resist

completely(256). Kitsch comes in many forms and we are all susceptible to it in one way or another. This is partially because there is a seduction and beauty to the fantasy that is kitsch. It is the high pitch in a song that prompts an involuntary tug at your emotions like that of *Adagio for Strings* by Samuel Barber. Our reaction to kitsch in the Kunderan sense is something we cannot control.

Sabina's kitsch image of home made me think of Thomas Kinkade and how he has capitalized on a mythology of home, the place of stability and belonging. As I write this he is suddenly no longer with us. His images are pastoral, idyllic and almost prelapsarian.² They are pre- the lapse of modernity, when we were still embedded in nature, community and family. And they embody the mythology of the return that is deeply embedded in our culture; whether it's the prodigal son, Odysseus or Reese Witherspoon in the film *Sweet Home Alabama*. The imagery he uses is not his own, he is only using a myth that already exists. Thrift, antique and craft stores are full of these images on everything from needlepoint kits to puzzles. Most often there is one small house set in a vaguely North American or European landscape. The house is glowing from the warm and welcoming fire in the fireplace that is evidenced by the smoke coming from the chimney. "With it's mixture of vagueness and detail, the image beguiles the mind into believing there is a truth to the fantasy and that this really is what home looked like." What drives the allure of his (Kinkade) work is a brief opportunity to escape from "the fractured and displaced reality of contemporary America." (Rager, 125)

² Prelapsarian is defined as occurring before the Fall of Man and therefore can have religious connotations, however, it can also be used to refer to a time that is "characteristic of or pertaining to an innocent or carefree period" according to *Dictionary.com*. I am interested in how this word punctuates between two different and opposing moments, then and now, authentic and inauthentic. "Kinkade invokes a world before the fall."(126)

When I started working with Kinkade's imagery I was thinking about these connections between nostalgia and kitsch. I bought some calendars even though I was unsure what I would do with them. I started stitching on them at the same time that I started to take them apart. I was thinking of the plasticity of the picture plane and how the illusion that is created invites the viewer into the place depicted. I started disrupting the illusion of the nostalgic fantasy, denying the viewer entry, denying return. Here again is the tension of inaccessibility that was in my earlier works, albeit in a different way. I was wondering how much a longing for home could be a result of images in popular culture like Kinkade.

The stitching that was first an act of longing from the handkerchief piece, *Remember Me*, became the cross-stitching on the Kinkade images. The act of stitching was still an act of longing but in this case for the fantasy. I used cross-stitch for its kitschy connotations. I think everyone has seen or grown up around a piece that has Home Sweet Home in cross-stitch. The mantra of longing from the previous piece *Remember Me* became in this piece the iconic "There's no place like home". It was the combination of the words and the ruby slippers clicked together that brought Dorothy home again. In my piece the mantra fails. It accumulates in a progression over a series of separate images until all access to the fantasy is denied. The act of stitching into the paper image was also literally destroying it. This piece, *Nostalgia*, was one of two pieces for candidacy.

The wall piece, *The More Susceptible She Became To It's Magic*, consisted of fragments cut out by hand of imagery taken from Kinkade calendars that came together to form one image. The fragments consisted of flower bushes, bubbling brooks, quiet paths

and the various elements that make visual nostalgic language. The illusion of the landscape was also disrupted but for this piece the fantasy has grown out of control. One of the best responses to the piece came from one of my professors. She said that when she first saw the piece from across the room she liked it but when she realized what it was she had the feeling that she should not like it. I like this response because where as I could have chosen to subvert the fantasy in the work of Kinkade, that was not my interest and it has been done many times over. I wanted to highlight or amplify the seductive quality of kitsch, the bit that draws us in involuntarily like the high pitch of a piece of music. Even if we know it is a fantasy we are seduced by it.

Summer, Simulation and Inaccessibility

During the summer I was looking to figure out what to do next with this work but I had the nagging feeling that as long as I was using Kinkade, whether I liked it or not, the work would be about him. Still, in an effort to continue with this work I started exploring the program Photoshop with the help of a fellow graduate student. The program was relatively new to me. I started deconstructing images digitally, making hybrid trees, inserting bits of real trees, grass and rocks into Kinkade images. None of it was satisfying, especially in terms of the amount time it took. I think it actually took longer trying to manipulate images in Photoshop than it did to cut them out by hand as I had been doing. It was daunting to think that I would need the time to alter the images in Photoshop and still have to cut them out afterward.

I reconsidered one of my early ideas of making dioramas with the cutouts. I made composite skies printed them out and tried putting trees and other bits in front of them hoping for an ah ha moment. I got my oil paints out and started painting skies, thinking I could use them in a diorama set up. I was tinkering hoping that something would click, start to flow but nothing seemed right. The skills I could draw from seemed limited given the direction the work was headed. The near crippling fear of first semester was back, maybe I was a one trick pony who got lucky once long ago. There was so much I was trying to learn on the fly, and when you're new to something you can't be anything

but mediocre. I mention these struggles only because they are an honest part of my experience here.

I started looking at the dioramas from the natural history museum near the beginning of the second semester. I was fascinated by the sense of reality they were able to create. They are a near perfect simulation, especially the photographs of them. If nostalgia is looking back at a sanitized and idealized version of something that one feels separate from then these dioramas were a great example of that. Indeed, I believe they are the result of our separation from nature that allows us to view nature as ‘other’. In the museum you can experience ‘nature’ away from the elements and ailments (basically the shit, i.e. kitsch). As I said earlier nostalgia has a prelapsarian element to it. The nostalgia of nature is the longing of a harmonious and balanced state before the intervention of humans but that harmonious and balanced state is a nostalgic fantasy.³ Humanity is the lapse of prelapsarian in this case.

I started wondering if I could take cues from the natural history dioramas, especially the photographs of them. If one main aspect of my previous work was a kind of inaccessibility I wondered, could that be achieved with the tactics of simulation? Instead of achieving inaccessibility through scanning a textile, the deconstruction of an image or by stitching over it, could I create a similar tension by creating images that confuse your sense of what is real? What could manipulating the indexicality of a photograph say in terms of my investigation in nostalgia?

³ Zizek talks about what I see as the nostalgia and kitsch of ecology today in the film *The Examined Life* by director Astra Taylor. He frames the nostalgia of ecology in prelapsarian terms saying it is a secular version of the story of the fall.

When I was working with the Kinkadee imagery I was aware of the colorful aura the images had. They all looked like one of the moments I've experienced in Florida after a heavy rain that stops abruptly and immediately the sun comes out reflecting color every which way making everything look heightened in chroma. The world is bathed in a kind of aura. Thinking of this aura reminded me of a favorite quote by Kundera; "In the sunset of dissolution everything is illuminated in an aura of nostalgia". The definition of dissolution is the breaking of a tie or bond so in this sense separation is what creates the aura of nostalgia. Thinking of the sunset and the aura I started setting up small diorama spaces with luminous sunset-like skies and photographing them. Only a few of these images seemed to be going somewhere. I didn't have any developed photography skills so again I found myself butting up against a learning curve.

Video and the loop

I started working with video in the summer as well. I had a desire to explore video prior to starting graduate school so summer gave me the time and space to do so. I wanted to revisit the early wall piece, *Liminal*. In that piece I wanted the viewer to search in the hope that the text would be revealed in places. Unfortunately it failed to prompt this reaction. The emotion of longing I was exploring is active so it made sense to use a medium that allowed for activity. In the video piece, *Breath*, I replaced the viewer with myself. Rather than expecting the viewer to have a certain engagement with the work I used the subtlety of my breath to reveal bits of text on glass that would quickly fade again. When watching the piece you know there is more text there but the breath is not sufficient to reveal it in a way that it can be comprehended. The text was literally right in front of my face, however, for the viewer of the piece there was a failure of access in terms of the text. A subtle tension of inaccessibility is a reoccurring theme of my work. What is longed for, memory or meaning, is just out of reach. The piece is played on a continuous loop so that there is no beginning or end, only a continuous action. The loop here became like the repetition of my stitching in previous pieces.

The following piece, *Undone*, showed knitting being stitched and unstitched at the same time. This piece had been in my head for sometime. I only knew I wanted knitting, and making and unmaking. Originally I had been thinking of this as a performance but I couldn't figure out where it would be, for what duration and if I would be the one doing

the undoing. It was an idea that wouldn't go away and that I didn't know how to talk about yet. You could call it intuition. Video seemed like the logical answer to my problem. The viewer wouldn't see how the undoing was happening and the cropping of the image would put the emphasis on the activity of stitching and unstitching so it wouldn't get lost among other details.

For me this piece is connected to *Remember Me* from the first semester where the idea was about the work of the hand having the possibility of being a link between people as surrogate presence for the maker. I think when people see knitting they most often think of things they've made for others or received themselves. The act of making is about an extension of caregiving and bonding, a longing for connection through the work of the hand. This relates to the ideas of gift labor and the relational quality of an economy of exchange. In *Undone* the effort or longing to connect is unfulfilled.

The yarn I was using to knit came from a blanket my grandmother made. The act of knitting became a way of tracing her movements, working the same yarn she worked. It was a long distance dance of symbiosis. The work of my hand was a conduit for connecting with her. Like most of my family she lives far away and I have seen her very little in my life. The subtle tension of the knitting coming undone speaks to my personal sense of longing for connection that is out of reach.

Undone is also about time. One aspect of nostalgia is a response to the rapid pace of time. In the words of Carrie Fisher, these days even "instant gratification takes too long"(from her website www.carriefisher.com). There is a desire today to slow down, to stop time as it passes too quickly. Slow movements are catching on in relation to food, cities and more. In this piece the stitching is giving physical form to time as it passes but

the undoing relates to an anxiety of not being able to stop it. So much of our experience today is mediated by digital technology taking us out of a more physical experience of time. The tactile and analog act of making restores a physically present experience, what artist Ann Wilson calls “body time”. The effort to give form to time also gives confirmation of ones presence in the world. This piece is an expression of anxiety about time.

On a very basic level the act of stitching is taking something formless, string, and giving it form. Creating something where there was nothing. Creating an extension of yourself in the world that is a confirmation of your presence. This piece then can be seen as an anxiety of our own finitude.

(Un)stitching consisted of two video’s projected simultaneously on floor to ceiling lengths of silk. One video was of my hands stitching two pieces of cloth together and the other of that stitching coming undone. The silk was just slightly transparent allowing the images to be subtly projected in one another. The video was filmed so the place of the stitching would correspond to the place of unstitching. This piece is very similar to *Undone* except here I am thinking about quilting as a metaphor. Specifically, when they were made of old worn cloths and became an intimate archive, a way of giving form to the quotidian moments that make up our lives. But, also more generally the act of piecing in the quilt making process is literally taking fragments and giving them form. If an aspect of nostalgia is a response to fragmentation I see the act of piecing as an expression of the longing for form or wholeness. Again, in this piece there is a failure and futility to the action suggesting that the wholeness or form is impossible.

Both of these previous works have an affinity I think with Oscar Munoz's work. His work was recently shown at the Visual Arts Center here in Richmond, however, the first time I encountered his work was at the Philadelphia Museum of Art as part of *Philagrafika 2010*. His work explores the impermanence of memory by employing processes that destroy and distort a portrait until it is no longer recognizable. He uses portraits, often from obituaries, because he sees them as an attempt to leave behind a trace of your self. They are an attempt at permanence when we are indeed impermanent. For both *Undone* and *(Un)Stitching* I have talked about the work of the hand being an extension of the maker into the world as a surrogate presence. This is a kind of an abstract portrait of the maker. The made object says 'I was here' in the same way that a photograph does. The futility of the making in my pieces corresponds to the destruction of the image in his work.

My two following video pieces *Inhale* and *Reading* both deal with a longing for what is lost or out of reach. *Inhale* shows the repetitive action of slowing breathing in the scent left on a garment. The video is cropped showing my face from my forehead to chin thereby putting the focus just on the repetitive action. I was interested in how a scent can create such a vividly beautiful image in the mind, a virtual presence that dissipates just as quickly as it came. My eyes are closed for the entirety of the piece emphasizing the interiority of the experience. In much of my work there is an element of something being nearly present but just out of reach, almost frustratingly out of reach. The act of inhaling in this piece is very much akin to the effect of my breath on the glass in *Breath*. The continuous inhaling is an attempt to maintain the fleeting presence created in the mind.

The piece *Reading* shows the slow movement of my index finger following the stitched line of a quilt. In my past work there was an inaccessibility of actual text, however, for this piece I am thinking metaphorically of the textile like a text and the movement of my finger like reading. Thinking of the stitching as a trace left behind by the maker this action becomes a way of connecting with the past, of reconnecting with the histories that are lost. The quilt I used was not handed down to me from my family and I do not have a personal connection to it. I mentioned earlier that my collecting of antique and vintage items is a way of giving myself a sense of history and connection to the past that seems lacking in my life. As I have already mentioned an aspect of nostalgia is a longing for intimacy or familiarity with the world. I have heard this described similarly as a desire for historicity. Hand-me-downs of all kinds provide a link with the past, they give a sense of history and rootedness. In a very basic way I wish I had hand-me-downs that could be my conduit to the past and people I am separated from. Even though I do not have a personal connection to the quilt I used in the video I see it as reflective of this longing.

The Hands and Tactility

Touch is one of the most intimate senses. The experience of making is an intimate engagement with the material and it is this intimacy that makes handmade objects all the more special. Touch is solid and real. Our bodies are our interface with the world. When you touch something you know it is real, you engage with it directly, it is an *exchange*. In the words of Denis Hollier, "...it is possible to see without being seen but it is impossible to touch without at the same time being touched. One never emerges intact from any contact" (59). Making involves touch and an engagement with materials but what is made also touches. The hand made is a way of creating contact, it is an extension of touch in an increasingly digital and virtual world where we are less and less engaged with making. Is there nostalgia for the intimacy of touch, for an authentic engagement and exchange with the real world?

Pure Chutney, Ritual and Connection to the Past

Pure Chutney is a film documentary that follows the narrator Amitava Kumar, an Indian living in the US. In the film he explores the relationship between Hindus and Muslims of the Indian population in Trinidad and aims to understand what sense of Indian identity has been preserved. He meets with groups whose desire it is to strengthen and preserve Hindu culture. One of the men he talks to is associated with the radio station Radio Jaagriti, which means literally revival. He talks about how they regained a sense of connection to their culture through the performing of rituals. During one of the scenes you see a religious ritual, or puja, being performed for the Hindu ritual Kartic. It was originally performed at the river Ganges in India. In Trinidad they are separate from this sacred river so the ritual has changed. They go to the beach and put ocean water in a small brass vessel used in puja called a lota then invoke the Ganges in the water. The place they are separate from is spiritually transported to them. He says that they had to keep performing the rituals whether they felt the spirit of it within themselves or not and eventually... the Ganga started to flow. Their culture was back through continuously performing rituals. It was a generative action of resuscitating what was nearly lost. I mention this because since the first time I saw the film this scene made a lasting impression on me. I haven't been able to forget it. I get a bit misty-eyed just writing about it. It is incredibly beautiful to me how what was lost or nearly lost because of separation was regained through the repetition of ritual.

I must be clear that I don't take lightly this diaspora experience. I don't mean to diminish the depth or complexity of it. Neither am I ignorant of the traumatic colonial history it is a part of. I am aware of the problems of someone like myself drawing from it or relating my experience, which is rather trivial by comparison, to it. I can't help, however, the very powerful response I have to this scene. It should be clear by now why such a scene would have such an impact on me. I am tempted to think of stitching and quilting as a ritual action that aims to resuscitate a sense of connection to the past, to think of these actions as a search for rootedness.

The Angel of History and Nostalgia as Historical Emotion

Through out my time here I've been devouring every bit of reading I could get on the topic of nostalgia and anything related to it. It took me from a personal longing to a historical emotion that is a response to globalization, modernization and an increasingly digital world. It is tied to separation and dislocation, the loss of memory, history and therefore identity (personal and collective). It is even discussed as a response to a post-modern world (i.e. everything's been deconstructed, there is no metanarrative) that makes it difficult to form a coherent and stable identity. Nostalgia is also a response to fragmentation and is expressed as the longing to find wholeness or form.

The article *Walter Benjamin, or Nostalgia* by Fredrick Jameson talks about Benjamin's writing being characterized by a sense of nostalgia or "a painful straining towards wholeness or unity of experience which the historical situation threatens to shatter at every turn. He has "a vision of a world in ruins and *fragments...*"(my emphasis)(53). If nostalgia is the *mal du siecle*, a response to the fragmented nature of our current historical moment as Boym proposes, then I believe Benjamin's description of *The Angel of History* creates a striking picture relevant to an understanding of nostalgia. I offer this quote from Benjamin's *Ninth Thesis on the Philosophy of History* about the Paul Klee painting *The Angel of History*; "The storm irresistibly propels him (the angel) into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward (note the image created). This storm is what we call progress." The

“angel of history exemplifies a reflective and awe-inspiring modern longing”(29), or in other words this angel exemplifies nostalgia a-la *mal du siecle*. The angel is watching the destruction and subsequent loss of history or collective memory, our connection to the past. This loss is brought on by progress.

Piecing

My thesis project consists of a table covered with thousands of squares of fabric that have been cut from clothes piled in a mound so the top of them reaches nearly five and a half feet tall. Whole clothes will complete the mound that continues onto the floor and surrounds the back half of the table. I will be a participant in the piece, sitting on a stool facing the mound. I will be continuously stitching together the squares of cloth in front of me.

Piecing is my attempt to give expression to my exploration of nostalgia as *mal du siècle* and expand on my work leading up to this point. It is a way of dealing with much of the content I have discussed thus far. The act of stitching is the longing to make form out of the fragmentation that is the result of a globalized and modernized world. These two processes have a distancing effect making it increasingly more difficult to feel 'at home' in the world. They destroy and devalue an economy of exchange and its relational ensemplastic powers.

The act of piecing is a reference to quilting. This activity was traditionally an activity associated with homemaking so it is in a sense a homing device. I am domesticating the distancing and alienating effects of our current moment through this

interaction with the clothes that are thrown away at an alarming rate.⁴ Through the tenderness of touch I create a sense of intimacy with the material.

The image that is created by the mound of clothes is reminiscent to that of the Angel of History where the rubble is created by progress and what is lost is history and memory. If we take Tamina as an indication, this loss is also the loss identity. The heaps of clothes that are thrown away constantly around the U.S. seem a perfect metaphor for the rubble of progress.

I have talked before about the supporting actors in our lives, our objects, and how important it is for them to have meaning so they can reflect back to you your story and act as a connection to place. I've said that when people seek out handmade objects they are looking for an intimacy that is lacking in mass produced goods. I have asked what is lost when our objects lack value beyond their cheapness? When they are thrown away before they can gather memory and have a relevant presence in our lives? My continuous stitching in this piece is a symbolic act of giving the materials meaning.

If Benjamin's writing was characterized by a striving for wholeness out of the fragmentation of his historical moment and his Angel of History exemplified a 'modern longing' then *Piecing* is my modern longing, my attempt to give form to the fragmentation I feel. It is my homing device and attempt at intimacy that I feel lacking in my own life.

⁴ For this idea of domesticating I am reminded of the article *Visions of Modernity in Ghana: Mami Wata shrines, photo studios and horror films*. The shrines are described as a reaction to the effects of modernity. "It is a strange "modernity" not to be lived-but felt as an affliction and thus to be domesticated by means of ritual practice."

I have talked about our current moment being characterized by mobility, that it challenges a sense of connectedness to people and places. Again, I think of making as a means of connection, of extending yourself into the world through the work of your hand. The making in this piece is symbolically about my attempt to extend myself into the world.

In my previous work there was an element of futility, that what was longed for was and always would be just out of reach. During my time thinking about and developing this project I tried to impose this same futility on this piece. My very first thoughts included a video of unstitching to contrast with the action I would be engaged in. I tried to find a way for the stitching to come undone as I was doing it. But it occurred to me that I was trying too hard. The sheer size of the mound of cloth and the implication that there will always be more where that came from might be enough. Still, through discussions with other graduate students and friends I became aware of just how hopeless the piece was. I started to believe the stitching needed to be a generative action. The act of stitching the square pieces of cloth together became the element of hope. It is trying in spite of the odds.

About half way into this project I became aware of *The Mending Project* performed by Beili Liu in 2011 at the Women And Their Work Gallery in Austin, Texas. During the performance she sits at a small table in the center of the gallery and slowly stitches pieces of cloth together that have been cut by the visitors of the gallery. She chose the word mending for her project for its connotations of healing. Suspended above her in a circular formation are hundreds of small silver scissors held open and pointing downward. They create an ominous presence that functions in juxtaposition with the

quiet tenderness of the stitching she is engaged in. She talks about the work being a response to the uncertainty and chaotic nature of our current moment. She was not making a specific object during the performance and the cloth she used was a large simple white cloth. What was most important was the simple act she was engaged in. I was quite surprised to find someone doing work that is so closely connected to what I am doing, however, it is affirming to know that others make similar connections between their experience today and the tenderness in the act of stitching.

Conclusion

There will always be a personal dimension to my work. I cannot escape my personal history that is the lens of how I experience the world but I am using it as a jumping off point to explore a collective experience of dislocation and alienation that are reflected in nostalgia and its many forms. My work and research have broadened and deepened my understanding of the ideas of nostalgia, memory, home, mobility, longing and gift labor. It is especially rewarding to find ways of understanding my experience in a broader social context. Though the form of my work has changed greatly it is likely that I will be obsessed with these themes for a long time to come. Indeed, they were what occupied my thoughts before starting my graduate experience.

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EDUCATION

- 2012 MFA
Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), School of the Arts,
Department of Craft/Material Studies, Fiber Area, Richmond, VA
- 2009 BFA
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA,
Major Fine Art, Minor Art History, Summa Cum Laude
- 2007 Four-year studio certificate
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA), Philadelphia, PA

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2012 *New Waves*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Virginia Beach, VA
- 2012 *Outside/Inside the Box*, International Biennial, *Fiber Philadelphia*, Crane Arts, Philadelphia, PA
- 2012 *New Waves*, Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, Virginia Beach, VA
- 2011 *Day One: The Early Protagonist*, Art6, Richmond, VA
- 2011 *Identify Yourself*, Craft Alliance, St. Louis, MO
- 2011 *New Waves*, Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, Virginia Beach, VA
- 2011 *Paper Machete*, Gallery 5, Richmond, VA
- 2007 *Annual Student Exhibition*, PAFA, Philadelphia, PA
- 2006 *Annual Student Exhibition*, PAFA, Philadelphia, PA

SCHOLARSHIPS/ AWARDS

- 2012 School of the Arts Travel Grant, VCU, Richmond, VA
Attended Global Art Forum in Doha, Qatar and presented my work to fellow MFA students at VCU sister campus in Qatar.
- 2012 School of the Arts Travel Grant, VCU, Richmond, VA
Attended opening of *Fiber Philadelphia* including lecture by keynote speaker Eliza Auther
- 2012 Graduate Thesis/Dissertation Assistantship, VCU, Richmond, VA
- 2011 Graduate Teaching Assistantship, VCU, Richmond, VA
Beginning Textiles 261, Fabric Design 363
- 2011 School of the Arts Travel Grant, VCU, Richmond, VA
Attended *Craft Forward* conference, organized by California College of the Arts in San Francisco, CA
- 2010-11 Graduate Fellowship/ Teaching Assistantship, VCU, Richmond, VA
Beginning Textiles CRAF 262, Beginning Textiles 261
- 2007 Edna Pennypacker Stauffer Memorial Prize, PAFA
- 2007 Janet Fleisher Prize, Special Mention, PAFA
- 2006 Lampert Prize, PAFA
- 2006 James P. Bonelli Jr. Memorial Prize, PAFA
- 2006 Lucille Sorgenti Scholarship, PAFA

TEACHING

- 2011 Virginia Commonwealth University
Spring semester; Studio: ARTF 139 Project: Craft/Material Studies (Fibers), team-taught.

OTHER PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

- 2011 Ceramics Search Committee, student member, Department of Craft/Material Studies, Virginia Commonwealth University
- 2006 Fleisher Art Memorial and School, Philadelphia, PA
Assisted in organizing applications to the *Challenge* Exhibit as well as the

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Freeman's Auction House, Philadelphia, PA
Assisted in organizing auctions, worked live auctions and photography for catalogues.