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a window the color of her sunburn

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a window the color of her sunburn

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Kinetic Imaging at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Abstract

a window the color of her sunburn

By Joana Stillwell, MFA

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2017

Director: Stephen Vitiello, Graduate Program Director, Professor, Kinetic Imaging

I use video and material fragments to investigate the collapse of virtual and physical spaces as memories, lived environments, and digital interfaces become overlaid and interchangeable. I am interested in the capacity for technology to propose alternative strategies in which to engage with the world as we continue to extend ourselves in new and enduring methods. Seemingly unremarkable fragments offer new potentials in questioning meaning, worth, and care within spaces of downtime, boredom, and play.

This document accompanies my thesis exhibition *a window the color of her sunburn*. It provides background information on selected fragments and residues from my own life alongside philosophical and art historical research, which informs my exhibition.

100 fans, paper napkins, a vent

I missed the division of time, the structure of my day, the pleasant customers. I missed the rush and the adrenaline of handling almost too much, but still managing. Every shift was a time puzzle.

Folding napkins was my favorite side work. I would buff the silverware quickly, still warm from the wash, and wrap them neatly into a triangular pile. It was a satisfactory stack that would be gone by the end of the evening, but would be replenished again and again in different combinations.

The white cotton with the subtly checkered blue stripe.
The other restaurant with its off-white starched rectangles.
The other restaurant with its throwaway soft paper squares.

Sometimes, I think about Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times* when he is on lunch and does not know what to do with his body outside of the factory.

“With Chaplin physically and cognitively consumed by his labor, he faces an existential, yet comic, crisis in its absences as he shifts from machine back to man.”¹

I bought a pack of 100 Home Essentials Everyday Premium Napkins and searched for a new fold to learn. A friend recommended a little book, *The Beauty of the Fold*. The fan caught my eye. I folded all 100 napkins and shaped a sea of them perfectly lined up on a table overflowing onto the floor. I thought about the calming labor of doing something seemingly pointless.

“Too often actors are looking for ‘answers,’ want closure, or simply try to repeat something that seems to ‘work’ and is successful. Rather than closure, answers, or what seems to work, paradoxically acting should always be considered as a ‘question.’ Even though actors ‘know’ as a horizon of possibilities each task/action that constitutes a well-rehearsed performance score, phenomenologically actors should situate themselves in the indeterminate position of being ‘on the edge’ of *not knowing*.”²

“Practice holding a piece of your anxiety in your kind and loving hands and notice what happens when you choose to do that.”³

They were slowly consumed as napkins. A few became undone.



Fig. 1

A relentless vent hovered over me. Down to my underwear one night, I climbed on a chair to see if I could do anything about it. No solution appeared, but the airstream felt directional. I unfolded some of the fans and cut off the edges along their curvy borders...to make them more buoyant? I broke them from 2ply to 1 to lighten the burden of the double stick tape. They created a trail two feet out extending to where the flapping faded. It pointed southeast.

I had created a semblance of weather in my windowless box of a studio. It sounded like rain and wind. The excessive heat became tolerable and even endearing for a bit longer.

The napkins slowly eroded into half-ply barely able to touch without tearing. I think it was the most potent thing I had done in a while. Fifteen months later there are only pieces.



Fig. 2

16 months, 14 inches

I am ruminating on one white hair.
I press it between my thumb and index finger,
and again.
This caress has been continuing for 16 months and 14 inches.
N o t pulling

It fell out shortly after I recorded the caressing video. A daily moment of play extends into an earnest processing.

“With their simple appearance, a pair of hands—extremities of the body’s nervous system—returns us to our fundamental point of contact with the world. We can actually witness more expression within seemingly tedious, monotonous repetition. But what makes these hands so rich in expression is that they are precisely an immediate ‘bare existence....’”⁴

“Sir Richard Paget, who developed a universal sign language in 1939, estimated that by combining various postural movements of the upper arm, forearm, wrist and fingers, it is feasible to produce the staggering number of 700,000 distinct elementary signs; he assessed that 500 to 600 signs would suffice for the vocabulary of his New Sign Language. This estimation makes the human hand overwhelmingly more versatile than the mouth. This surprising realisation seems to open up immense possibilities for gestural communication.”⁵



Fig. 3

Rainer's hand appears larger than my own. I feel her restlessness and the search for some kind of relief as one finger attempts to console the others. Her hand slightly closes into a pause and unfolds believing itself anew. It wavers, finds its strength, stretches to its limits, coils, recites, and plays.

*"Hand Movie, was shot by fellow dancer William Davis when Rainer was confined to a hospital bed, recovering from major surgery and unable to dance....performing the kinds of everyday, quotidian movements that characterize her pioneering minimalist choreography."*⁶

During this time she wrote to her brother Ivan,

*"They say the mind is made of grey matter. I think mine has become brown matter."*⁷

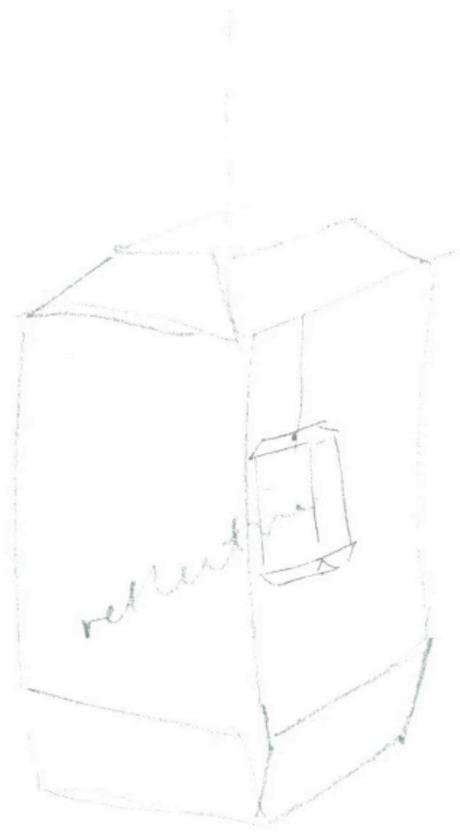
I enter a rhythm. The hair is a perimeter and a parameter with which my hands muse. Turning, I am unfocusing to focus again. My hands begin to touch something not there.

blues, greens, and woods
lights and glass
a pink and a fuzzy green

I needed things I did not have. I think they are at Lowe's. I walk there in ten minutes and comb through every aisle. After two and a half hours, I inspect my grabbings and begin to group them. There is a blue, green, and wood pile – my parents' home. There is a pink and a fuzzy green pile – my friend's apartment. There is a miscellaneous pile – bits of my old homes. I buy what I can and return to the studio wondering if I am bringing back baggage with me.

All the bay windows have the same blue-green tinted glow
In the winter, the dark blue gray light seeps
into the gemlike structured house
enveloping me in warmth.

I imagine myself hugged
in a transparent glass encasement
in the ocean
producing the same quality of light.



this
one

Fig. 4



Fig. 5

a window, a pink rectangle

I had been thinking about it for months – a shade of pink. I envisioned painting a horizon line of it around my studio but could not justify why. When I had finally acquired the pink, it became a 16:9 rectangle. A projection guided its dimensions. The projection was of my hands caressing a single white hair. The video tone was my skin tone – a faint pink. It became related.

“A pause, a rose, something on paper.”⁸

A few years ago, two friends and I created a body of work exploring the boundaries between private and public. It was inspired through a series of exercises using the perimeters of our friendships as testing ground. Artifacts of an exercise included pink bubblegum. A 44 inch-wide photograph of three of our bubblegum pieces remained hanging in my friends’ apartment. I had decided that that was the pink of the ‘pink and fuzzy green’ of my Lowe’s trip. As for the fuzzy green, it was the color of the soft suede couch I frequently slept on during a year I lived between friends and family all over Seattle.

One particular friend filled my thoughts, as she was about to visit me in Richmond. I was right about the couch, but the pink was not the gum – or not entirely the gum. There was another framed image above the bookcase to the right of the couch. I always slept facing it, and when waking up, the first glimpse of the day would be a blurry pink within a shadow as light seeped in through the closed blinds. It was a self-portrait of her bare fair-skinned left shoulder newly sunburned.

“A stick of gum wrapped in silver foil. A shard of glass.”⁹

I do not think the fuzzy green was entirely the couch either. I was craving evergreens too. And shallow waters.



Fig. 6

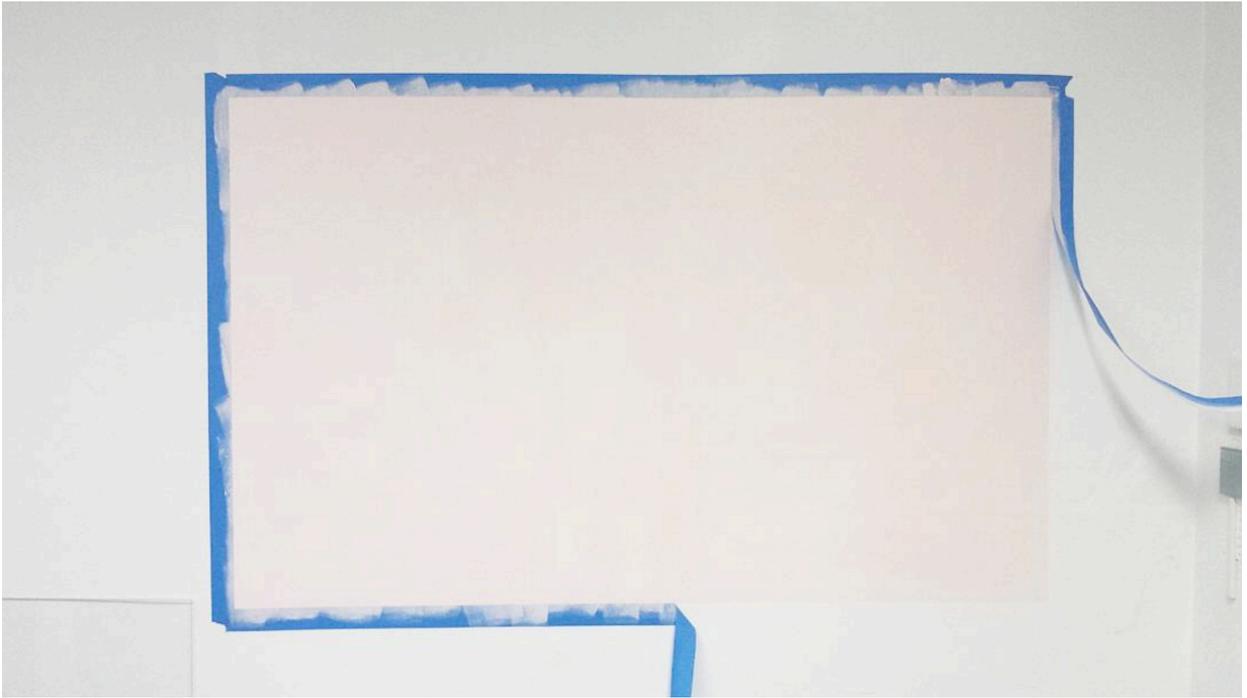


Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Discussing Baudrillard in class 3.1.17

In thinking about the relationship between the simulated and real – and how they share the same signs and gestures...¹⁰

"Found Sound (Lost at Sea) 11.1.11 is the title of a sound installation by the artist Danny McCarthy and has been contracted by the Crawford Art Gallery to sound on January 11 each year for the next five years...The work was created as a result of the artist's interest in acoustic ecology and commemorates the loss of the sound of the foghorn from Irish Lighthouses and the Irish coast on 11 January 2011 on which date they ceased to sound."¹¹

Two speakers are mounted on the façade of the gallery playing the sound of the foghorn intermittently. While the foghorn sound from Danny's speakers do not operate at the capacity that they did – warning ships in the fog of the imminent shore – the sound resonating from the gallery reinforced this longstanding relationship between the sound and the community. It was a part of their collective soundscape tying them together with the sea, the weather, and watercrafts. I find this deeply poetic that the simulated in this case can lead to a real connection.

"So the simulation has meaning – more positive – not necessarily nihilistic," a classmate thinks aloud.

"Yes," I reply.



Fig. 10

a pink light bulb, packing material, snoring

After six hours, my sleep becomes fragile.

Iñaki snores loudly next to me. Sometimes I think about how lucky I am, but most mornings I abruptly roll him on his side so he stops. A slight nudge is all that is needed. We hardly notice or remember these morning exchanges. I collect these too...when I feel generous.

The recorded snoring and the real-time snoring have a distance that is critical for reflection. How are they talking to each other, how is it talking to itself, in what time does it happen? A pendulum is swinging between distance and closeness – between the simulated and real. I aim to make a positive emotional positioning towards it.

“...nonbeing and being are strange bedfellows.”¹²

“‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’ except that it is no longer a question. Nor is it, quite, an answer. Rather, it is an experience, a sensation, a silence...It is the experience of being, above and beyond the banality of what is – the experience of being above and beyond the apparent self-evidence of explanations...Being is mystery, not because it is hidden or because it hides something but on the contrary, because self-evidence and mystery are the same thing, because the mystery is being itself.”¹³



Fig. 11

a pause, a pink rectangle, a light fixture, string

"Fragments are the husk of a secret."¹⁴

Everything I was making felt incomplete until I read this line by Mary Ruefle. It gave me permission to move forward with these pieces so I assembled and reassembled them into many wholes.

The light fixture was already broken when I bought it. It was in the miscellaneous grouping. The exact details escape me, but its shape and shine felt right. A sunrise sequence was playing, and the fixture caught the light. The curved shadow against the light created a multidimensional glow. I began to record and the projected sunrise produced pastel video striping of blues, purples, and yellows. The video consumed itself. It started to refract ideas I had been thinking about – the layering of video, memory, light, and time, and so I played.

"Unlike the other visual arts, video is capable of recording and transmitting at the same time – producing instant feedback. The body is therefore as it were centered between two machines that are the opening and closing of a parenthesis. The first of these is the camera; the second is the monitor, which re-projects the performer's image with the immediacy of a mirror...."¹⁵

When I worked with photography, I always wished my images would move, and now I want video to be more corporeal. If I can touch it, maybe I can know it. Maybe I will even remember it. Video becomes a strategy in trying to solve the blind spots of the flesh.

"In the archive, flesh is given to be that which slips away. Accordingly to archive logic, flesh can house no memory of bone. In the archive, only bone speaks memory of flesh. Flesh is blind spot."¹⁶

I try to write everything down so I can further the conversations later. I feel so overwhelmed in the moment that I sometimes do not engage, even with myself. I felt like I had just learned about Anne Carson and when I searched my inbox, I realized that she was mentioned to me a handful of times. It seemed appropriate that I placed her in the fleshy brackets of my memory.

"you burn me,"¹⁷



Fig. 12

Paik sometimes took the place of the Buddha in performances.¹⁸



Fig. 13

a cumulonimbus, 16 sticks of mint gum

My body burns outward pinking my skin. The tears are coming. They cannot witness what I cannot contain. For a while, video was a way to cope. I was truly holding a piece of my anxiety in my hands but was attempting to solve it. I have been learning lately that its best to let it shine. I am drawn to video because it contains an in-between space and embraces the flux within it.



Fig. 14

“[A] collapsed present [is] a present time that is completely severed from a sense of its own past [and] self-encapsulation [is] the body or psyche as its own surround....”¹⁹

Recording an experience heightens its possibilities. It shows a pronounced presence and a special awareness.

“[Kimsooja’s videos] only become ‘finished’ through the psychosomatic interactions engendered between the visuals and the viewer... There must be this psychosomatic interplay with the viewer, a dialogue between the figure of the artist seen from behind and the flux of persons around her in such a way that watching the videos becomes participation in her performance. For although at the original shooting stage she was performing alone, when projected as part of an installation it takes on new life as another viewer-participation performance, the viewers creating their own meanings.”²⁰

A cumulonimbus is a storm cloud. I chewed my way through one once.

Video is an externalization of a thinking and communicating process. It creates that distance in order to fling one's perspective far and bring it close again because memory and attention are elusive. If you focus too much, you lose the peripheral. Video attempts to give you more.

"One of the things you notice as soon as you start working with a video camera on a daily basis...is that when you transcribe actual speech, it's quite extraordinary. I mean, the patterns of looping, self-qualification, unfinished sentences, ideas that flow off in particular directions. Often, now, we are effectively transcribing text off videotapes of rehearsals and using that as the basis for scripts. What I like about this process is that a performer will improvise a particular part of a show and, the first time they do it, it will have a really rich texture of dense qualification, using language in the most amazing, fluid ways. The second time they improvise it, it tends to be this intense oversimplification of what they did before. But when you go to the transcripts of the first one and you look at it as text, you can end up with stuff that sounds like you are really saying it now, for the first time...."²¹

Then I notice my absent-minded decisions and realize I am present. The napkins are an example. The trip to Lowe's is as well.

"I have forgotten everything, even the facts. I can taste the coffee, but its flavor is faint and unremarkable and I have been drinking it all my life."²²

Absent-mindedness is not meditation. It is not even rest. It is not aware or active. It is you physically showing up, even if you are not all there. It still shows you things and sometimes it helps to be loose. I think intuition might be an estranged sibling to absent-mindedness.



Fig. 15

"I started to notice that it wasn't that I was getting more balanced but that I was getting more comfortable with being out of balance. I would let the pendulum swing a little bit further and, rather than getting nervous and overcompensating by leaning too much to one side, I could compensate just enough. And I thought, 'I wish I could do that in my life when things are getting out of balance.' ...Some of the things that the tight wire conjures up for us are this ability to float or to go beyond our physical reality. To fight gravity, really, which in a way we're doing with every step...But as we walk, we're losing our balance and gaining it with every step. And the tightrope just makes that show more."²³

I enjoy thinking about how Antoni is touching the horizon only when she is watching the video. Her watching is the complete circuit. She only appears to be touching the horizon to the rest of us. The horizon becomes this impossible yet tangible idea here.

I am also thinking about Kimsooja watching herself stand in eight different cities for eight different hours collapsed into one moment. We participate with her.

thirty sunrises in an hour

I needed a ritual to ground me out of my absent-mindedness. I would approach my alarm with a dazed hostility, but ultimately be glad I watched the day surface. I usually fell back asleep on a gray day. Bright pinks became deep blues as the temperature dropped. Surprisingly oranges were spontaneous and sparse.

Excerpt from activity log "collecting sunrises"

Wed 5:39am camera on
sunrise 6:09am
Wed 6:09am camera off

Thur 5:40am camera on
sunrise 6:10am
Thur 6:10am camera off

Fri 5:41am camera on
sunrise 6:11am
Fri 6:11am camera off

Sat 5:42am camera on
sunrise 6:12 am
Sat 6:12am camera off

Sun 5:43am camera on
sunrise 6:13am
Sun 6:13am camera off

Mon 5:44am camera on
sunrise 6:14am
Mon 6:14am camera off

Tue 5:45am camera on
sunrise 6:15am
Tue 6:15am camera off

"But the day is an upturned cup,
And its sun a junk of red iron
Guttering in sluggish-green water.
Where shall I pour my dream?"²⁴

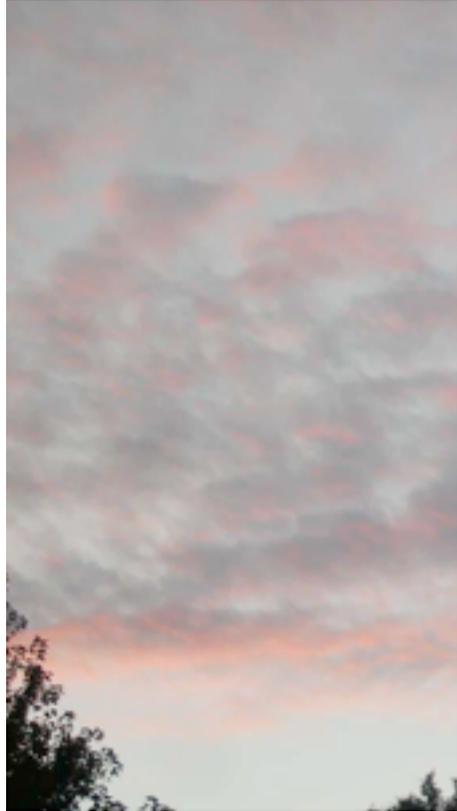


Fig. 16



Fig. 17

Movement class 1.31.17

We were paired off and equipped with a thin wooden dowel – about ruler length. Pointer finger to pointer finger, we moved together with the dowel between us. Feeling nervous about potentially dropping it, we practiced little motions. We graduated to quick spins and twirls and then to a complicated web of six people. After a while, we stopped consciously thinking about it.

“Getting lost is a telling kind of amnesia. It reminds us that we rely on memory all the time for finding our way in the world, for physically navigating the spaces we move through. It shows us that we are not disembodied minds, churning out computations within a space of pure information, but that we are always engaged with a physical world. One of the ways in which we encode information about space is relative to our own bodies.”²⁵

Daylight creeping in
Light bulbs on and off sparingly
Daily gestures cued
Sound of something boiling?
Faint dad music.

My mother says my grandmother used to wear a rose perfume.

My great-grandmother sitting in front of a fan saying it was just blowing around the hot air. It is my only memory of her. I know it is true because it is so small.

“Fragment memories are not worthless, of course; they are cherished by most of us, although it is hard to know what they mean.”²⁶

I am glad I got to know my pinks before reading Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets*. It informed and did not overshadow.

“Why blue? People ask me this question often. I never know how to respond. We don’t get to choose what or whom we love, I want to say. We just don’t get to choose.”²⁷

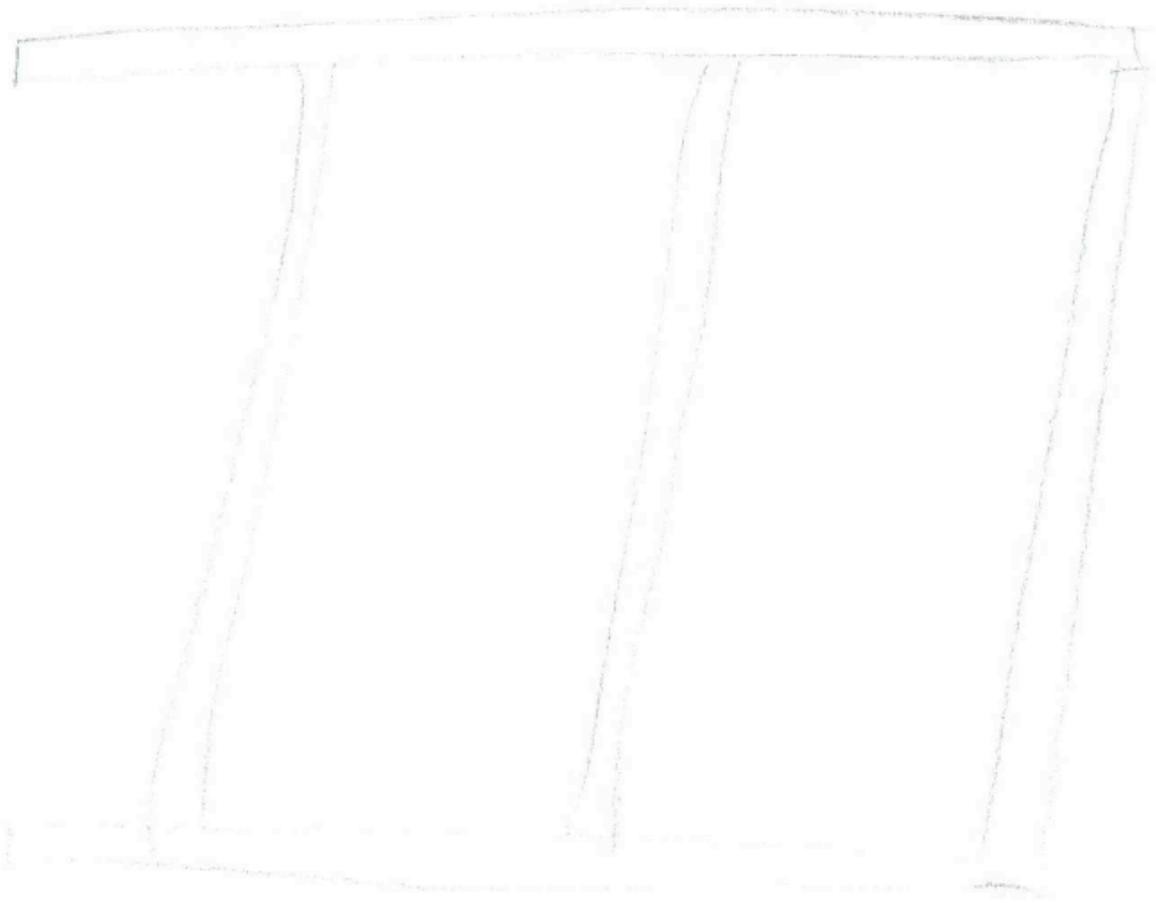
crown molding, blue fabrics, hotel room art

Dad made an installation in the garage. He would call it decorating or reinforcing. His materials were remnants of a decommissioned ship – all destined for the trash. He brought home many things including a four-slice toaster, an extra microwave, tables, cabinets, etc.

He hung the long swathes of blue fabric in the empty spaces between the exposed beams. Crown molding was collaged along certain edges of fabric. Framed hotel room art punctuated the middle of the fabrics and were rotated out. The extra, leaned against the wall next to a pile of car cleaning accessories.

“From the age of 17 I have been returning to that house, to that bedroom, my childhood bedroom, listening to the sounds, inhaling the aromas, taking in the scenes outside the window: the maple trees in blossom or leaf, stripped bare or carrying snow, the streetlamps, the rain, the smell of greenery after the rain ... That place, maybe 250sq feet, and the world my senses attend to in range of that place, the river not far, is as close to the center of my being that I get - still. On this visit, probably late spring, I am separate enough as a formed adult to distance myself, while at the same time very much caught up in the gravitational fields of memory and sensation, the eerily persistent emotions of long ago. Out of that mix, or conflict, come the lines of the poem.”²⁸

After many beers, a friend and I fondly reminisce about some childhood favorites – bologna and spam. It is difficult to explain the love and comfort they provide us. We conclude it is an embedded emotional response. Proust had madeleines. We have questionable lunch meats. This is a total stretch, but I would like to note that the lunch meats are also pink.



the suggestion of a
wall

Fig. 18

a sunbeam, a light at 6500K

Journal Entry 1.13.17

When I'm lying in bed and I can't cope, I wait. The hours sometimes pass and the sun might travel over my building. I'll notice its rays pass over my floor, my sheets, my elbow, and my cheek.

The sun is nearly 93 million miles away.

As Lea says, "The trees don't care."

"There isn't a person alive today who knew Emily Dickinson," a tour guide at her house will say. The writer, who I have misplaced in my memory, responds something like, "but the trees are still here!" before going outside to feel the bark.

Meaning is a human-driven term.

Mary Oliver writes,

"I go down to the shore in the morning
and depending on the hour the waves
are rolling in or moving out,
and I say, oh, I am miserable,
what shall—
what should I do? And the sea says
in its lovely voice:
Excuse me, I have work to do."²⁹

Jason Dodge asked a house sitter at the edge of a forest to remove all sources of light in the house. Everything from fluorescent bulbs to matches was collected.³⁰



Fig. 19



Fig. 20

The lights on the floor.
The image of the lights on the floor.
The book of the images of the lights on the floor.

Is the work Dodge's prompt? The act of the house sitter removing the lights? The act of Dodge's arranging of the lights? The display of the lights? The documentation of the lights? Is it completed by the viewer thinking about the lights, or the lack of them somewhere else? Not being able to locate the exact work seems to add a comical lightness. Simply, the work exists in the simultaneous all and none of the everyday.

I think about these objects thinking with me.

Currently I am thinking about:
a fan blowing hot air, tree bark, blue fabrics



Fig. 21

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 - ²³ Janine Antoni, Art21 Interview: "Touch" and "Moor", 2003 accessed 9-26-16
 - ²⁴ Lola Ridge, *The Dream*, from *Sun-Up and Other Poems*, 1920 pg. 43
 - ²⁵ Charles Fernyhough, *Pieces of Light*, 2014 pg. 28
 - ²⁶ Charles Fernyhough, *Pieces of Light*, 2014 pg. 96
 - ²⁷ Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*, 2009 pg. 5
 - ²⁸ James Campbell, *Interview: August Kleinzahler*, 4-17-2009 accessed 9-19-16
 - ²⁹ Mary Oliver, *A Thousand Mornings*, 2012 pg. 1
 - ³⁰ Friederike Scholnhuth, *Jason Dodge: I woke up. There was a note in my pocket explaining what had happened.* 2010 pg. 57

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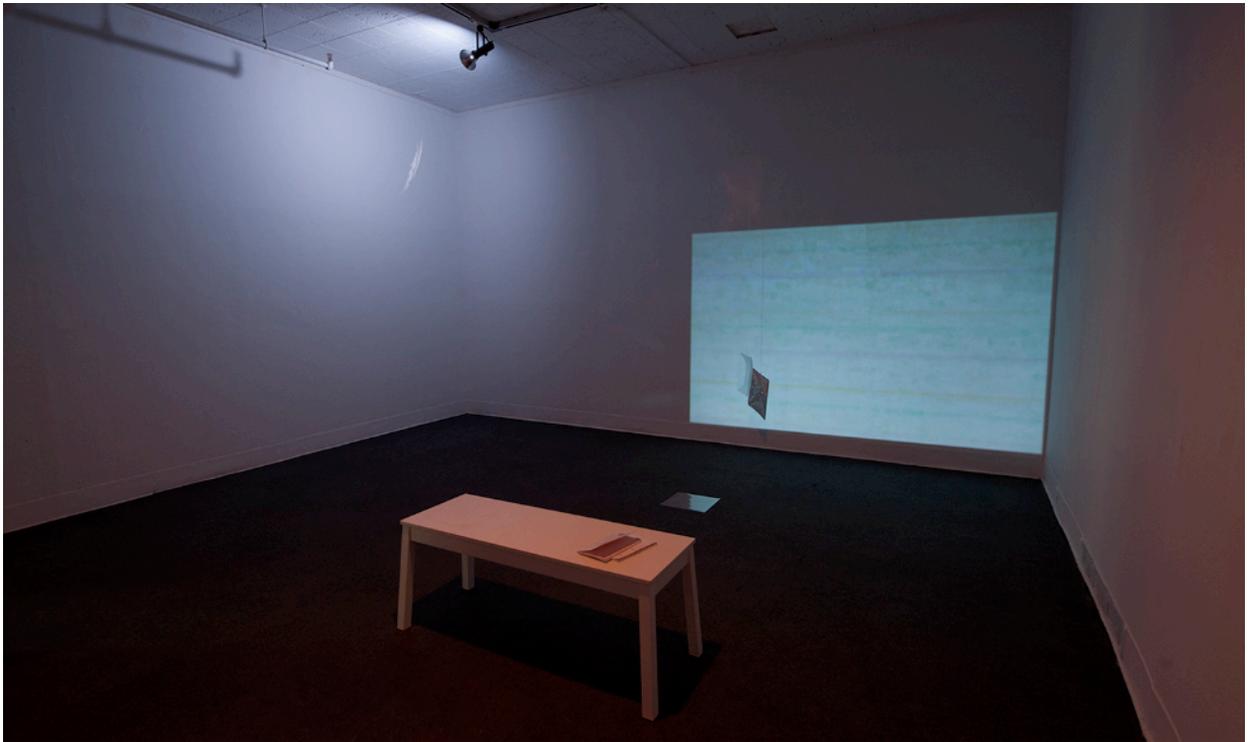
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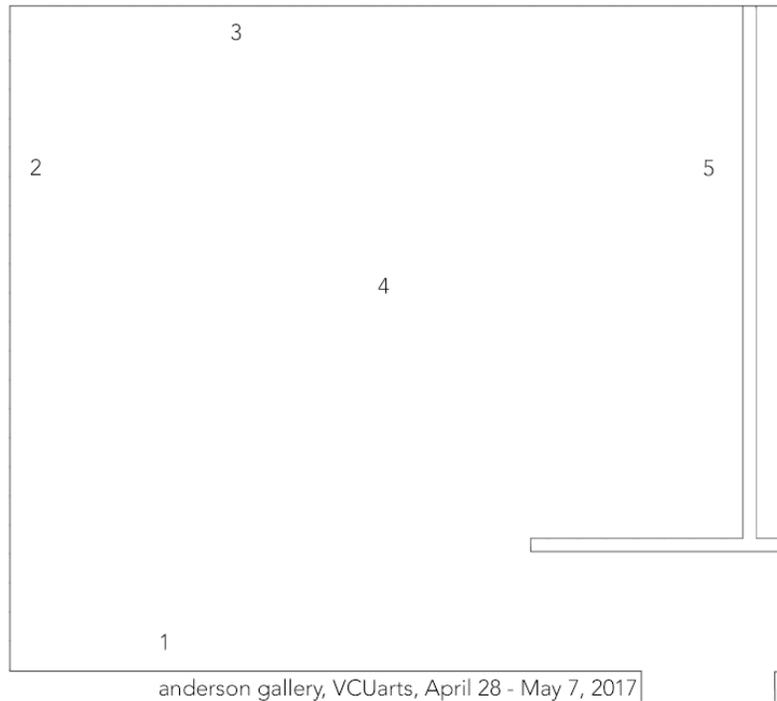
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Documentation: *a window the color of her sunburn*



Map: *a window the color of her sunburn*



- 1 *a sunbeam, a light at 6500K*
looping video projection, programmable
color light bulb
- 2 *a pause, a pink rectangle, a light fixture, string*
looping video projection, white
rectangle, light fixture, string,
mirror window film square
- 3 *the airstream pointed southeast (coping)*
vent, air, altered paper napkins
- 4 *a window the color of her sunburn*
book, tissue paper
- 5 *i like a slumpy object (sunrise)*
speaker color light bulb, packing
material, white plexiglass, looping snoring
(of partner, mother, friend, friends of friends,
partners of friends, cat of friend, dog of friend)