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In some ways, it seems like the world is getting smaller. We're surrounded by communications technology that enables us to be in touch with whoever we want, whenever we want, instantly. We can get whatever goods we want—clothes made in Asia, fruit grown in South America—anytime and cheaply at big chain stores. This gives us, I think, a sense of independence. We can live anywhere, on our own, and structure our own lives, make our own choices, without being subject to the whims of nature or relying on other people. We call it “progress.”

But I don't see this as real independence. I see it as a shifting of our inevitable dependence on other people from those around us—neighbors and families, the local economy and farms—to something so big it becomes invisible. When groceries come off the shelf, we don't think of ourselves as *dependent* on the grocery store. Our twenty-first century lifestyle makes it easy to ignore the ways we all rely on and affect each other. But I think, paradoxically, this false sense of independence threatens our autonomy. We can only be independent by recognizing all the ways in which we are *inter*-dependent. That's why I think it's important to deliberately strengthen our local communities. To have a group of tangible relationships in our own geographical area. To know our neighbors—not just to be able to borrow a cup of sugar, but to share on a deeper level that which keeps us going.

In both my fall and spring work, I have been interested in addressing the possibilities of communication and sharing through interactive, community-based projects. I see sharing our own experiences and intimate sentiments as part of connecting in a meaningful way within a community, and I see this connection as a metaphor for our way of existing within the larger world. In this way, my work, with its own modest questions, attempts to bring up the idea of community-building as one step toward a more sustainable world.

In my fall work, entitled the *Jam Project*, I used the metaphor of jam and canning to talk about the sharing of experiences and the preservation of old ways. I solicited objects from my friends, the only stipulation being that the object, in some way, represent a great effort on the part of the contributor. I received a wealth of contributions, varying from academic writings to love letters, from dog hair to children's clothes. I then cut (or ripped, or smashed) up each object, cooked it down with water and sugar and pectin, and canned it in self-sealing jars, just as one would do with ripe fruit. I also collected a short written piece from each contributor, explaining in varying levels of specificity the meanings of the objects they had given. Once the canning process was complete, I “re-released” the objects by redistributing the jars within the community in a casual and unstructured fashion, again as though the jam were simply the result of a seasonal harvest given out to friends and family when they visited. Contributors were not supposed to receive back the preserved version of their own contribution. The idea was to promote an exchange of these goods, which are without any real economic value, in an intimate way, thus enabling the sharing of experiences that might not otherwise be made tangible. The jam was not edible, but I hoped to take its metaphoric potential as a source of nourishment to a level beyond the physical. While my reasons for choosing canning as a method were partially autobiographical, I also saw it in a political context. The idea of

preservation held meaning on the level of physically; congealing the experiences represented in the jars and keeping alive a practice (canning) that may seem archaic in today's context. By doing this I hoped to question accepted definitions of progress, and also challenge the artwork's relationship to time in terms of its own lifespan (issues that I will discuss in greater depth later.)

A viewer's experience of the jam project in the gallery context was also meant to be an intimate one. The jars, which were lined up indiscriminately on a wall shelf, were each labeled with a few words taken from their explanations, in the contributor's own handwriting. Under the shelf, I set up a small kitchen table and two chairs. In the drawer of the table were the written contributions as well as a few artifacts from the canning process—a wooden spoon, jar lids. The viewer was invited to sit down at the table, handle and read and examine the contents of the shelf and drawer, and leave the setup in whatever state she wanted. I hoped that the viewer's experience would feel inclusive and intimate, inviting her to become part of a community of emotional and physical exchange.

In the spring semester, I began a new venture, but wanted to work with a lot of the same ideas. I still wanted to create a community-based project, and I still wanted to maintain a sense of intimacy and a privileging of information or experiences that may not be easy to share in most contexts. The written part of the work, always important to me, became primary, as did my desire for the viewer to be able to interact and contribute within the gallery. I wanted to step even further back as the work's "author," and let the boundary between viewer and artist become blurry.

I spent many weeks deliberating about what it meant to be part of a community, and how this could be manifested visually. I wanted to be able to talk about community experience *through* individual experience: to allow people to access their own individual memories and then somehow add them up to become something larger. I decided, then, to simply ask a question of the other members of the St. Mary's community, collect written responses to it, and present these responses in their collective manifestation. "What was it that you wish you had said?" I asked my friends, my classmates, my professors, even people who are strangers to me but members of this community. The question is purposely vague and hopes to access a wide variety of memories. It is offered as an opportunity to attempt connection through written communication, and to metaphorically revise, to let out that which we had forgotten, been afraid, or not had a chance to say. There are no specifications as to whether the participant should include who she was addressing or in what context the words would be, or have been, said. The contributor also has the choice of whether to let her words remain readable to everyone, or to seal the paper into an envelope, obscuring its contents and signaling that the words are to remain private. The paper used is a variety of types and sizes, some found, some purchased, some provided by the participant, and the writing utensils also vary. I wanted to use everyday materials, as well as giving participants the agency to choose their own way of expressing themselves.

In the gallery, the viewer encounters both a large mass of her colleagues' and classmates' words, hanging on the wall and pinned together with straight pins, and a place where she can sit and write her own response to the question and then add it to the wall. This enables a project which is amorphous and unpredictable: I cannot control the answers I receive to the question, or the form that the mass of paper will take on. I see

this as empowering to the participants, and also as a reflection of the reality of working in a community-based mode: attempts to keep tight control on the outcome would result in stifling the participants' creativity. There is no clear end to the project: people can contribute as many times as they like, and the mass of paper can, in theory, grow indefinitely.

The fact that the responses are handwritten is also important to me. As in the jam project, I am interested in the making tangible of what normally remains only in the emotional realm. We communicate in words all the time, but we rely heavily on electronic text, which is ephemeral unless it is printed out, and even then lacks the uniqueness and presence of handwriting. This also brings up questions about technology and time, which will be addressed further later on in the paper. But handwriting is also a way of tracing the identity of its writer, a mark of our individuality. The size, the slant, the angularity or curliness, the force of writing in the page: all these distinguish one handwriting from another. Thus, even as all the written responses come together to be one large form, they all retain their individuality and autonomy.

There are several artists currently working with these same ideas. My current work is most closely inspired by the works of Lee Mingwei, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Frank Warren. All of these artists deal, directly or indirectly, with the primary issues of my work: interactivity and the roles of the viewer and artist; the use of language and words for communication; and relationships with time and memory. And the work of all three artists, like my work, literally could not exist without the active participation of audience members.

Frank Warren is the founder of the ongoing postcard project, *PostSecret*. Warren originally passed out blank postcards in metro stations in the DC area, asking people to anonymously confess a secret and mail it to him. The project caught on and spread quickly, and people began creating and decorating their own postcards (Warren 1). Warren selects several each week and posts them on his blog, *PostSecret* ([www.postsecret.blogspot.com](http://www.postsecret.blogspot.com)).

With his simple process—soliciting contributions and then presenting them in a neutral way—Warren exemplifies the approach of seeing the artist not as author but as facilitator and presenter. Warren, after all, does not participate in the creating of the postcards at all. He has merely created the opportunity for people to share their secrets, just as I hope to give people an opportunity to share something unsaid. In both cases, there is a confessional aspect, but my work is less aimed at therapy and more at connection. Existing within a small community, there is always the chance that someone would see and understand a sentiment that was meant for them, or even one that was not.

Taiwanese-American artist Lee Mingwei sets up a similar situation in his *Letter Writing Project*, first exhibited in 1998. Mingwei, who was raised in a Buddhist background and received his MFA in sculpture from Yale with a concentration in “New Genre Public Art,” told an interviewer that “in all my projects I provide a stage and platform for everyone to tell their story” (Baas 181). All of Mingwei’s work involves the participation of viewers, and much is centered around relationships, intimacy, and trust. In his *Shrine Project*, in which he asked people to bring in something they considered sacred and placed it within a shrine he had built, I found reflections of the *Jam Project*. In *The Letter Writing Project*, Mingwei constructed three glass-and-wood booths with seats in them, corresponding to the three postures of meditation, for seeking atonement,

insight, or gratitude. Audience members were asked to write a letter of forgiveness, insight, or gratitude to anyone, alive or dead. They then had the choice of addressing the letters, to be mailed out by the museum curators, or leaving the letters available for other gallery-goers to read. My current project features this option, as I believe that people should feel safe to write down their thought whether or not they can release it into the public eye.

This issue of interactivity within the space of art is also addressed by Rirkrit Tiravanija, a Chilean-born Thai artist who works all over the world. Tiravanija's work boldly challenges traditional notions of art, while at the same time avoids being critical or confrontational: he is best known for works in which he cooks for and dines with audience members. He has also done projects in which he recreates full-size, working replicas of his small New York apartment for gallery-goers to hang out or even take up residence in; he also co-founded, with Thai artist Kamin Lertchaiprasert, *The Land*, an experimental community-based project in Thailand, in which artists from all over the world are working to create solutions for sustainable living. In many of his exhibitions, Tiravanija specifies "lots of people" as one of his materials, and a London curator who has worked with him calls the work "fundamentally about bringing people together (Tomkins). Tiravanija also embraces the unpredictability that stems from letting people interact with his work. This seems to be a commonality of interactive art: as Frank Warren told a news reporter, "I've been surprised every step of the way" (Puente).

To resist claiming authorship is also to empower viewers, and to challenge traditional notions about art as transcendent of "regular life" and the artist as somehow separate from the "non-artist." I am interested in avoiding the sense of entitlement and elitism that can be part of the art world, and attempting instead to promote active engagement, empowerment, and personal connection. Carol Lutfy claims that Tiravanija wants to "demystify art," and Warren seems to be showing us, without even having to tell us, that lots of ordinary people are artists (Lutfy 151). I have this same goal for my own work. Whether it is about cooking and canning or simply collecting and presenting, I am working within the idea that I want to create an art completely dependent upon the active sharing—on a material, linguistic, emotional level—of a group of people.

The use of language, too, is common to the work of both Warren and Mingwei, and even if Tiravanija does not work directly with language, he does state that his work is about communicating (Baas 173). For me, language is essential to both my ideas and my process: I have to write my way through any idea, and my "sketchbook" is almost entirely filled with not sketches, but sentences. Conceptually, I am interested in using words and language in a constructive way, seeking meaning and connection, rather than the deconstructivist practices that have popularly used language in the last few decades. Language is, after all, an imprecise man-made system to represent thoughts and objects, not the thoughts and objects themselves. A deconstructivist approach seems logical, especially when looking at the disillusionment that accompanied many of the events of the twentieth century; the growing feeling that there is no universal human experience has made language seem more fallible than ever. However, now that many artists have done work to highlight the absurdity of today's world, I want, in some small way, to pick up some pieces. My feeling is that language's fallibility does not undermine its beauty and power; rather, that there are cases when it can effectively connect two people, and the very rarity of these moments makes them precious. I am interested in attempting to use

words not to point out the absurdity of language and contemporary life but to attempt to communicate in a meaningful sense; to search for common ground without needing to assume the existence of universality. By letting people choose their own words and share them through the venue of an art gallery, I hope to facilitate a process where language can symbolize, if not directly enable, a positive change.

The issues of time, progress, and memory, too, keep coming up. I find memory to be a complex and evocative realm, and it has been the thread that has led me through my college education and to the work I am creating now. In my work, viewers are asked to remember something they wish they had said in the past, or to contribute a material symbol of a time in their past; I also reference the memory-laden realm of domesticity with jam and straight pins, and question the necessity for modern technology by rejecting automation and insisting on handwritten words. I question the duration of a community-based artwork—is there any clear endpoint?—and the lifespan of an artwork itself—should it last forever, and what does this signify? Tiravanija's home-cooked meals may do similar work, and memory-digging is asked of participants in *PostSecret*, the *Letter Writing Project*, and the *Shrine Project*. Art can question and even redefine the notion of progress: what does it mean to move forward, what is our vision for the future? Tiravanija, in his goals, is hoping to “suggest the possibility of another model—the possibility of new forms of exchange” (Birnbaum 355). I hope, through my work, to suggest the importance of communication for community-building, and to question notions of progress as synonymous with technological innovation rather than more effective interpersonal connection and understanding.

I hope, also, to spur viewers to question their own relationship to an artwork and to the gallery space, and to feel more empowered in relation to it. In challenging the roles of the artist and the viewer, I am also trying to call attention to our roles and options as members of a community, that group we both depend on and affect. Finally, I hope to give people an opportunity to create something meaningful and share it with others, and possibly find some common ground.