

Empathy and Art

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MFA Thesis Statement

Interpersonal relationships are inherently complicated.

We are layered

And broken

And multifaceted creatures.

We build layered

And broken

And multifaceted systems.

We live every day in a complicated mess of emotions just trying to make it from one event to the next with our sanity intact. We live through different events but feel the same feelings. We may not have been hurt by the same things, but we all feel pain. Empathy, for humanity, is a key element in day-to-day life.

Empathy, ultimately, is the basis for my work.

According to the definition of the word, empathy goes beyond compassion in that it means one does not just understand the feelings of another, but understands on a level where one may feel those same emotions with them. And we are capable of feeling empathy for both positive and negative emotions.

Sadness.

Love.

Fear.

Joy.

Hatred.

So often we think of empathy as something that is connecting and wonderful, but, as with all things, it is more complicated than that. We may have the capacity to love, but we can also hurt each other.

This is important for life and for interaction and communication.

This is also important for art.

Because art *is* communication.

To me, art is the most basic and most universal form of communication. We speak to each other through our actions, music and images when words are not sufficient or cannot be used. The words are not always there. The *language* is not always there. But sight, touch, taste, sound, the senses all allow us to speak to each other beyond the barriers life puts in our way.

So I start by asking questions.

What do I need to say? How do I feel? Why do we disagree? What can we do to find common ground?

How – *HOW* – do we make it through our struggles?

Politics have taken an admittedly unexpected role in my work recently, but part of that is because of this same theme - empathy and communication. At a time when my country, my home, feels so divided and distant and logic seems to be so far removed from our decision making and leadership, I found myself falling into social media traps and arguing with strangers on the internet. I was getting more and more angry and frustrated.

I mean I was *frustrated*.

I found that this new social dynamic of division was affecting me, not just in my personality or demeanor, but in my physical health.

I wasn't hungry.

I wasn't sleeping.

I was constantly clenching my jaw, which was causing me massive muscle pain and headaches.

I couldn't understand these people I had never met, why they believed seemingly ridiculous things about obviously ridiculous people, why they trusted incompetency and outrage over rational thought and facts. So I did the same thing I've always done. I started to make things.



Figure 1. *As Long As You Ever Can* (film still), 2016.

I made videos that allowed me to express my rage and confusion, feelings of futility and hopelessness, a desire to laugh at the absurd and a hope that there would be better days ahead. By crushing dried flowers in my hands repeatedly in video pieces like *As Long As You Ever Can* (figure 1), I was physically working out my frustrations. Over time it calmed me down and helped me adjust. The best way I can describe the process is to describe it as the same one I went through when several members of my family passed away in a short period of time. It was grief.

As I started to relax through the sometimes pointless and mundane actions and weird rituals I began taking on (figure 2), I stopped shouting and started empathizing.



Figure 2. *Porcelain Line Into Lake Superior* (film still), 2016.

Suddenly I could see the why and the how.

Of course it didn't make sense to me, because I wasn't living in the pain of others. I wasn't thinking through the hate of few that somehow secretly rose up under the guise of benefaction and I certainly wasn't trying to see things from another point of view.

I made more.



Figure 3. *Action Videos* series (still photograph), 2017.

I took on a simple tally mark (figure 3). I used it to channel my desire for change and as a reminder to myself, similar to the work of On Kawara (figure 4), that I am still here, that I still have power, however small, that I still have a voice. It's not a countdown, it's just a count, and again, perhaps absurd, perhaps useless, but it keeps me going and gives me something to look forward to.

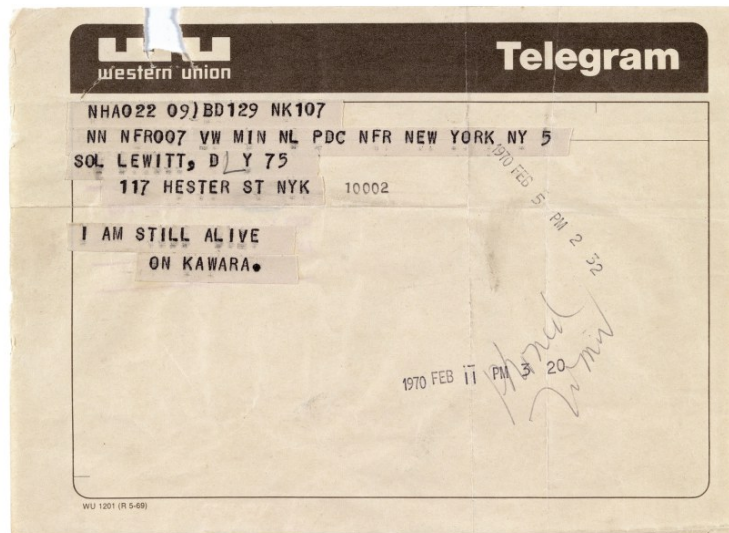


Figure 4. *I Am Still Alive*, On Kawara, 1970.

I am expanding it now, bringing more of myself into the viewer's space than just a finger or a hand, but with my feet, with a video, and yes it's upside down because I feel like I'm falling, and yes I'm digging a hole and it has no purpose, and yes I'm counting to four (figure 5). (*Two, three, four.*)



Figure 5. *Marking Time (I'm Not Sure What For)* (film still), 2017.

I don't have all the answers here. No one artist does. No one *person* does. Still, I feel a weight of responsibility. Artists are the voice of a culture and historically we have done what was possible to speak out for what we believe in. I feel that duty, as if the eyes of other artists like Käthe Kollwitz, Francisco Goya and Otto Dix are all on me, waiting to see what I do.

I feel it now as I watch people I admire speak for their cultures or for human culture.

I feel it when I read essays from Olafur Eliasson about climate change and the environment.

I feel it when I see artists like Theaster Gates building their communities up around them.

I feel it when I see anonymous faces in the work of Boltanski and hear stories from fearless journalists that speak for those who can no longer speak for themselves.

Art has a power to connect, to communicate, to command attention. It goes beyond the artist. It has a life of its own.

This doesn't always mean every piece I make is successful. Instead it means every piece that *is* successful is a piece that has some extra quality that opens it up for a viewer. It changes the standard, so if it doesn't allow interaction,

Conversation,

Some underlying unspoken thing Then for me it isn't a successful piece.

Not every artist needs to live by this standard, and not every viewer will experience some transcendent awakening. The viewer also holds responsibility there. It's like any relationship and it requires those on both sides to put in work. They must be willing to invest the time.

Most recently, aspects of the absurd have entered into my artwork. There was a time I wouldn't have thought that possible, but over the past two years, my life and the world around me have spun out into some kind of crazy alternate universe. Since I generally make work in response to whatever is happening around me, absurdity was absorbed in naturally.

Everything for me also needs to be performative.

That is... I need to make the action of making it part of the work (figure 6).



Figure 6. *Recurring Dream*, 2017.

The human element must be tactile and present if the work is going to be able to tell any kind of story or reach any viewer on a human level. So hands are there. Feet are there. A voice, quite often, is there.

Even in pieces that don't involve video or performance, there is an aspect of performance. A tally drawn with a finger is immediately recognizable. It creates that touch the same way the Lascaux cave paintings in France or the Cueva de las Manos (Cave of Hands) in Argentina (figure 7) make you want to reach out your hand to place it on the marks on the wall.



Figure 7. Cueva de las Manos, Santa Cruz, Argentina.

In his book *Between Man and Man*, Martin Buber talks about a level of human connection and dialogue that occurs on the deepest level. In the first few pages of the book, Buber describes even silence as a form of communication, laying out a situation where two people can be sitting next to each other but not looking at each other, not speaking, not moving at all, and yet they are communicating with each other. (Buber 3-4)

There is a thread that connects humanity, no matter what divides. It is our humanness itself. So much about us is the same. We all touch, sense, connect in some way. There is a story there even when no story is obvious.

The mundane.

The thrilling.

The fragile.

We feel connected to human beings we've never seen, never met, that lived thousands of years ago. We have a desire to understand each other. This is why fields like archaeology, anthropology, sociology and psychology exist. What we really want is to know one another.

I myself still want to know people and understand them.

I am an introvert and I am awkward and I analyze and overthink everything. I am an observer, for whatever that is worth, in a world that is both connected and disconnected through technology. I am a processor. I will tell you what I think days after you ask. I am a maker and an artist and I use that language to share my perspective because of all of these other elements that make up who I am. Words are sometimes hard for me.

Conversation often is.

I discovered an ease with the visual very early on. My babysitter was an artist and she taught me how to speak using images. Over the years, that has become how I deal with the issues that rise between myself and my family, friends or strangers. Difficulties always come out in the work I make. I'm working it out through that visual language before I can understand my own feelings.

So last year, when I lost some family members, that grief came out in drawings, paintings and sculptures. It took me almost an entire year to really understand what was happening in my own mind, and that only happened because of the things I made during that time.

Sure I cried, but sadness is only one part of it. I still had to deal with anger, disappointment, loss, relief, guilt. Nothing is simple. Not even death.

Now these people are gone, but the connection is still there in my work, in my keepsakes, in me and in the rest of my family and really that's the whole point.

So then this year, when I felt that same grief but in a societal context, the world felt completely upside-down and once again I had to make something.

We went through an election process bombarded with the most absurd and ridiculous video and audio clips, the most topsy-turvy version of reality, and it ended in a complete reversal of all expectations.

And we're still in that alternate reality.

And some of us are still grieving.

And we try to understand the backward or opposite of our own minds and it's hard. It's really, really hard.

We can listen, we can empathize, but honestly it doesn't matter because in the end empathy is really still just an attempt. We are still selfish and empathy is still based on our own experiences. We still may never understand the perspective of someone else. It is NEVER simple.

The important part then, to me, is the trying. However hard, however futile, if we are trying we don't get stuck.

Our relationships with one another, with our culture, with the world, are the same as the relationship between the viewer and the artwork. It takes effort on both sides. It takes communication and hard work and sometimes, frankly, it sucks.

But it's still not simple. It's complicated.

We have to somehow get used to the complicatedness and try, one person at a time, to accept that their reality is different, their experience is different.

If an artwork is capable of expressing everything that goes with that process, the layered ridiculousness of human interaction and relational successes and failures, then maybe, as so many artists working now hope, art really can save the world.

It seems impossible. It probably is.

But again, that doesn't mean we shouldn't try.

In Olafur Eliasson's essay on art and climate change called "Why Art Has the Power to Change the World" he says, "One of the great challenges today is that we often feel

untouched by the problems of others ... This is where art can make a difference. Art does not show people what to do, yet engaging with a good work of art can connect you to your senses, body, and mind. It can make the world felt. And this felt feeling may spur thinking, engagement, and even action.”

I think it does make the world felt. All parts of the world. We can feel our own selves, our deepest fears and desires, our most hidden memories.

We may also feel what is going on with the earth and the environment, with someone in our circle of friends or with a perfect stranger. One work of art for me can be about my grandfather but for another about politics, for another about poverty, another about a new love. Art has the power to span the entire human experience.

While it is difficult to achieve that kind of connection as an artist through the things I make, that will always be my goal. It is part of who I am and how I relate to others. It is how I understand the world.

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As Long As You Ever Can (film still)

Single channel video

3 minutes 32 seconds

2016



Porcelain Line Into Lake Superior (film still)

Single channel video

4 minutes 40 seconds

2016



Action Videos series (still photograph)

Ongoing durational site-specific performance, social media postings, wood, dirt

Dimensions variable

2017



Marking Time (I'm Not Sure What For) (film still)

Single channel video and sound

5 minutes 20 seconds

2017

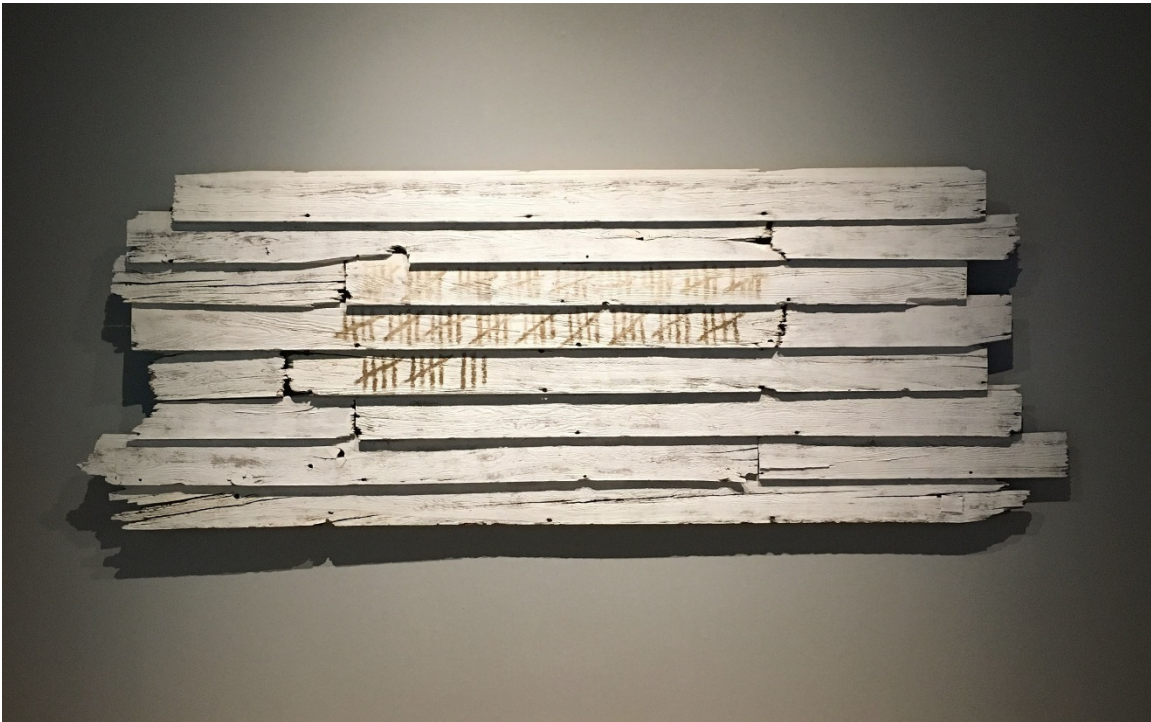


Recurring Dream

Monologue performance, pool, water, coal slag, planter

Dimensions variable

2017

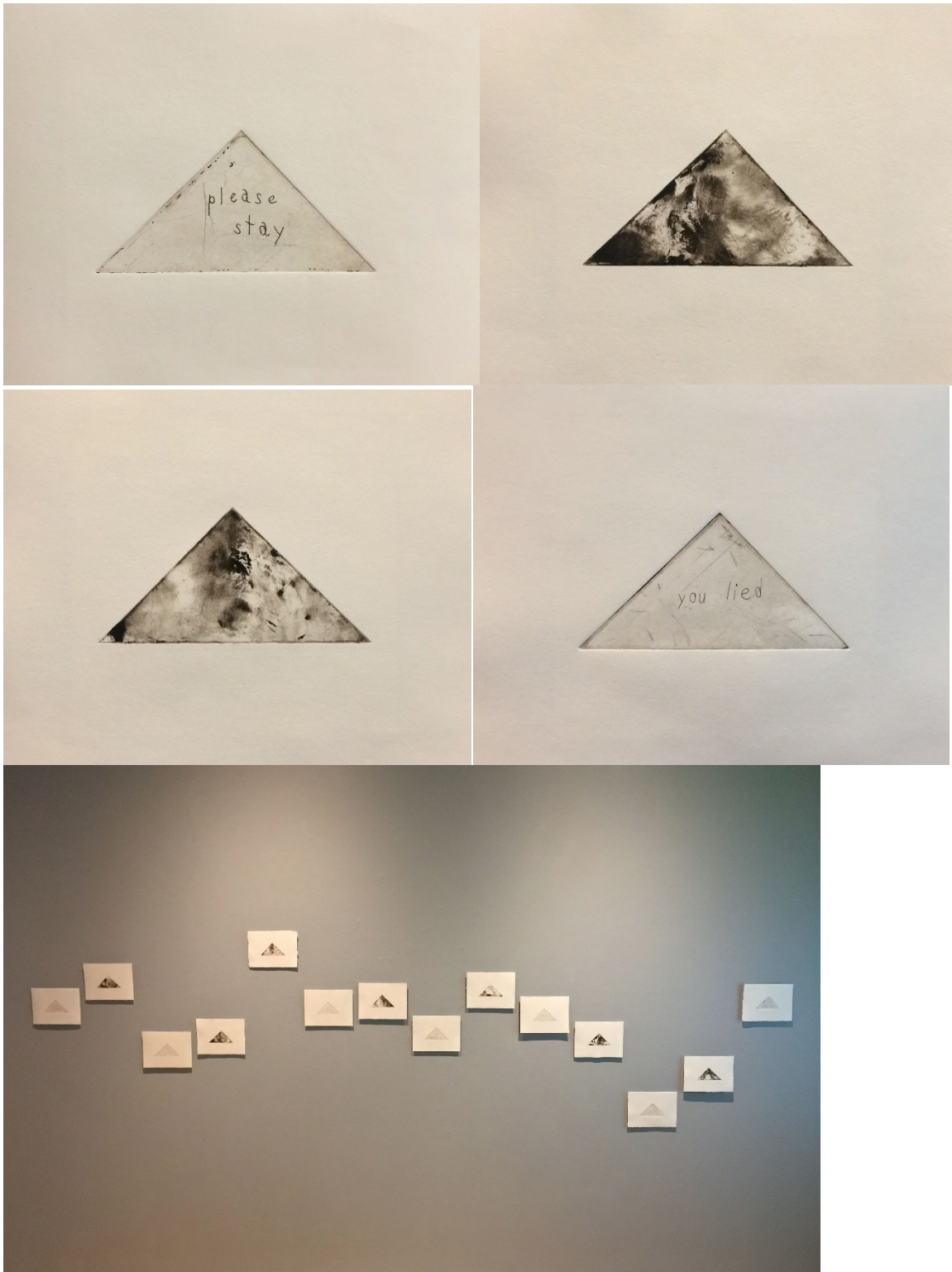


All the Things I Never Say I

Wood slats, paint, dirt

7' x 3'

2017



All the Things I Never Say II

Intaglio and monotype prints on paper, mounted on board

Dimensions variable (8" x 6" each)

2017