

Thesis | Betsy Huete

March 1988 It was painting hour at my Montessori school. The teachers supplied us with watercolors, I'm assuming because watercolors do the least amount of damage. I painted something that wasn't even trying to look like anything, but it looked like a man, backlit by a sunset, charging at me.

August 2001 Just about every college sport has their teams report to preseason, which usually consists of a couple of weeks worth of two-a-days—a strategy coaches employ to get their teams physically and mentally fit right before the season starts. It's not a fun experience for anyone, but it's particularly grueling for soccer in the southern region of the United States. Soccer is a fall sport, meaning if one's team is based in Texas, one's preseason will occur in August in Texas, which is probably the hottest month of the year. So as anyone can imagine, the preseason for Rice women's soccer was a fairly accurate depiction of hell.

We spent approximately three hours a day out in 100 degree, 95% humidity doing fitness tests, scrimmages, drills, and other vomitous activities. On about day twelve or so, half of our team scrimmaged the other half. Although we had already started the practice off with a particularly awful fitness test, the stakes for this scrimmage were high: the loser had to run ten more 120's. (A 120 is a fitness test where the players have to run lengthwise across the soccer field a designated number of times at a certain speed.) While I was fortunate enough to be on the winning team, in a wave of charity or delirium or complete stupidity, we decided to join the losing team in their punishment.

It's easy for me to reflect on our idiocy as I sit, writing in my comfortable recliner twelve years later, but it became obvious to us in that moment if we wanted a real shot at winning, we were all going to have to fail together.

September 2001 If the away games were drivable, our team took a charter bus. Players typically spent the drive time engaging in mostly quiet activities like homework, listening to music, or watching whatever movie was emanating from the monitors overhead. They likely did not appreciate Marisa, Lauren, and I cackling obnoxiously in the back. Instead of doing anything productive, the three of us were fervently scrawling alternative lyrics to the kinds of hits no one would readily admit to liking, like Lisa Loeb's "Stay" and Smash Mouth's "All-star." The lyrics were raunchy and puerile—and while each song was unique—they all followed the usual wheelhouse of farts, periods, and boners. And we ended up taking it way, way too far.

We took our songs public, forming a singing group called the Crasy Labias. The three of us adorned ourselves in slutty moo moos, bad makeup, shin guards on our arms, and sung our hearts out. After performing at a small music venue on campus, we acquired a manager, performed at Houston Palooza, and somehow

ended up performing with a Grammy nominee, a band named Bowling for Soup. Jim Pirtle approached us after a performance at Notsuoh, somewhat bewildered and slightly irritated, saying, “well, that wasn’t what I was expecting.” I still sing our songs in the shower.

December 2004 Between the Rothko Chapel and another hefty installation in the Menil, Houston easily has one of the most comprehensive Rothko collections in the country. Yet strangely enough, my introduction to his work occurred in London’s Tate Modern. The entire complex was a revelation—for hours I pored over Bruce Nauman’s sound work in Turbine Hall, Pollock, Beuys, Warhol, deKooning—and I felt like my eyes were open for the first time.

But when I sat down in what I now consider a relatively modest Rothko room, I remember feeling unable to move. The layers, the softness and thickness of paint, the towering blocks of color: it felt immense and collapsing, and it was the first and maybe only time a work of art has made me cry.

July 2008 I dropped out of grad school.

August 2011 I gave it another try.

September 2011 There have been plenty of critiques where a professor has cocked his or her head to the side and asked me, “have you looked at Mike Kelley’s work? You should take a look at Mike Kelley’s work.” But it wasn’t until my foray back into graduate school and a required assignment from my professor that I actually took a real look.

It was then that I discovered his noise band, Destroy All Monsters, his varied and suggestive work with stuffed animals, his vile drawings, and his research into ufology among many other things. The work was loud and evasive, and while it seemed like it was begging to be a spectacle, it also reached far beyond that. Kelley made the kind of work that obliterated itself of cognition, a kind of work fueled off impulse—enveloping me in an experience that, shockingly, didn’t feel so far removed from my first experience of Rothko seven years prior.

October 2011 Donald Barthelme’s “Not Knowing.” Why did Jillian assign this reading? Who knows! But between constant shifts in authorship and narrative, between linearity and nonsense, and between plausibility and possibility, one thing is certain: this piece of writing fundamentally changed both what I thought possible in an artwork and what I wanted to do with my art practice moving forward. So I stopped making boring personal work and put a lot more thought into what I was doing, what the results were actually saying, and how I wanted to connect with the viewer.

I thought a lot about “Not Knowing”—what did it mean, what was it saying? It seemed, at least on some elementary level, to meditate on the attempt, and

perhaps sheer impossibility, of organizing the vast, nebulous something or other that constitutes knowledge. I became deeply enamored with the notion of never quite actually being able to know anything. Thanks largely to memory, time, cognitive biases, and even desire, the acquisition of knowledge is kind of like a wet bar of soap: as we attempt to more firmly grasp it, it precariously slips in our hands. I am absolutely fascinated in our undeterred efforts yet perpetual failures at completely knowing any kind of truth that exists beyond our phenomenological experiences. So I sent myself on a quest to tackle this crucial futility through my artwork.

January 2012 People are always sifting in and out of my life, some leaving more of an impact than others. And while there are people whom I've built relationships with, that affect change for better or worse, there are also the people that I have never, and probably will never meet, but nevertheless have profoundly changed me. So when I read her entire anthology of short stories to date, Lydia Davis, for me, became that person. Her deadpan, almost absurdly literal stories are so bereft of meaning that they require the reader's participation to activate the content. It's a way of writing that is commanding, vulnerable, frustrating, and generous—and really brave.

It was after reading this anthology that things started to really hit home. If never explicitly stated, it was certainly implied over and over and over again through critiques discussions lectures readings studio visits—meaning doesn't have to be so readily apparent in the content—that it can float to the surface via formal and material concerns. It was the first time I was ready to relinquish a little control, to not be so obvious, and to stop trying so hard.

May 2012 I received my acceptance letter to an artist's residency called Mildred's Lane the month before and decided to read Mark Dion's *Marvelous Museum* in preparation. In the catalogue is an interview between Dion and Lawrence Weschler. Dion typically creates cabinets of curiosity, taxonomizing the information contained in the archives of the given institution in which he is installing. In the interview Weschler seemed less interested in the categories he made and more interested in the fictions that resulted in Dion's confluences of fact.

December 2012 Like an awkward, pimply-faced adolescent, I was in a rough spot. The hard thing about genuinely wanting to be better and giving it everything one has to get there is that development doesn't come linearly, it isn't predictable, and it certainly isn't easy.

A few months prior I spent three weeks at Mildred's Lane—an amount of time that simultaneously felt like the blink of an eye and an eternity. A lot of stuff happened there, and because I was still digesting it all, I was as of yet unaware of the degree to which it completely altered my artistic sensibility and enforced an ardent commitment to making.

So I came back asking myself tough and confusing questions. What kind of work do I actually want to be making? Where does my focus lie, and how do I carry myself forward, beyond the parameters of this MFA program? Who is my audience? How do I reach them? Better yet, how do I make them care? And most importantly, how do I hold myself accountable and require myself to make better and better work?

At the time I couldn't answer any of these questions. All I knew was that I had a strong impulse to write—more specifically appropriate language and even plagiarize. But I knew that I wanted to write, and that made me question why the hell I was in a sculpture program in the first place. I felt lost and frustrated, and really I just wanted to ball myself up in the fetal position and hide, or drink beer.

But instead I did something equally unproductive: I fiddled around on the internet. One evening, chock full of ennui, I googled “art and plagiarism” and happened upon Kenneth Goldsmith. Previously a sculptor, Goldsmith is now a renowned poet who does things like transcribe the entirety of an issue of *The New York Times*, or writes every thought he has for an entire week. He actually teaches a course entitled “Uncreative Writing” at the University of Pennsylvania, where the final assignment he administers is for students to generate a piece of writing directly from a paper mill. Hardly expecting a response, I emailed him.

I brazenly told him that I had no idea what I was doing, that I'm sort of a sculptor, but I really wanted to write—better yet, I wanted to plagiarize things. Shockingly, he emailed me back right away. He recommended an anthology he and his friend Craig Dworkin had recently assembled called *Against Expression*. I immediately ordered it, absorbed myself in the material, and finished the 500+ page book within the week.

Against Expression gave me comfort. Maybe this form of appropriation wasn't as juvenile and uninspired as I thought. There are quite a few people contemporarily who work this way, and it is deeply rooted art historically in the kind of conceptual writing that comes from people like Vito Acconci in the 1960s. Where I had stumbled and fallen flat so many times before, this gave me the confidence to move forward, knowing that although it needed a lot of work, something felt right about this way of making.

March 2013 And just when I thought I had forged my path as a writer with little interest in anything else, I fell back in love with materials. For pretty much my entire time at UH and arguably my entire artistic career, I've tried to meld text and materials in a forcible manner, desperately wanting my text work to fit within a gallery context. Pressing a square peg into a round hole with all of my might, this forcing of the two culminated in my final project of the previous semester, *Interiorities*. It comprised of an installation built directly out of my studio, and it consisted of objects, arrangements, and juxtapositions of materials directly

inspired by my writings made completely of found language, directly inspired by the library housing the reference material adjacent to the writings.

That's a lot!

However, for all of its complexity and meta-narrative, and with the exception of a few evocative moments, it sucked. The result was a futile attempt at immersion, a stage set, interior design—and it was packed with so much information that the viewer would have to spend an absurd amount of time with it to fully participate with what was going on. It wasn't generous, nor was it effective, and I decided from there on out that my writing and my work with materials needed to be separate.

Like any divorce, this material split was at once liberating and scary. What do I want to say, and how do I want to communicate it through objects? Armed with Lydia Davis on one side and Kenneth Goldsmith on the other, I decided a couple of things right off the bat: I didn't want to enact an overarching concept onto the work, that I wanted to let the meaning present itself, and I didn't want it to be immersive.

Because I was so used to making work that was about *something*, I wasn't sure how to begin. My solution was to materially translate a piece of appropriated writing I did while at Mildred's Lane called "Lane,s." This allowed me to piece together disparate objects, shifting my focus away from concept to formal concerns like shifts in scale, color, material, and ambient noise.

My newfound distaste for immersion did not extend to all artworks, especially installation art. But I realized it was problematic for me because with installation, I became overly concerned with engaging the viewer in a heavy-handed environment that, if actually immersive, was dishonest and not representative of my actual interests. If I really wanted to engage the viewer in the prospect of the acquisition of information being a simultaneously cumulative and degenerative exercise, my theatrical attempts at immersion were at best a red herring.

So again, my solution was to make tableaux, work that sat somewhere between sculpture and installation. Instead of physically implicating the viewer in the work, he must rely on the fusion and obliteration of symbols as well as where and how they are juxtaposed to create meaning.

And instead of making something that was simply a symbol for something else, I wanted to infuse the work with symbolic cacophony that resulted in a kind of white noise of content, hoping that the formal arrangement would engender fresh associations.

The result was *Harbor*, an object/place that resided somewhere between an implausible fort and a funeral. It was essentially a large pile of dirt, fake flowers

and model trees, and a real steak sewn into itself. It was obnoxious and deeply felt, lush and frustrating, pointed and completely directionless. I kept quiet during the critique because I didn't know what I was doing or how to even talk about it. But I did know that I really, really wanted to keep working this way. So that's what I've been doing: *Harbor* set the stage for *Levee*, made about eight months later.

April 2013 After reading *Against Expression*, I could not shake this nagging feeling of dissatisfaction. It took me a while to figure out why, and the answer was that I wasn't actually interested in plagiarism, and I actually was interested in expression.

While creating *Lane,s*, a chapbook of prose poems comprised entirely of found language from the Mildred's Lane library, it became clear that the "materials list" (which is really just the bibliography) was just as much its own piece as the poems themselves. So it wasn't that I wanted to steal other people's words, it's just that arranging language is the only way of writing that makes any sense to me.

While making nonsensical prose poems of appropriated words may seem devoid of meaning and even nihilistic, I intend it as an optimistic gesture. I sincerely believe that everything beautiful and horrific has already been written, and that anything new I could offer would be, at best, completely unoriginal and probably very stupid. Therefore, I've made it my personal mission to cull existing language, remixing it into pieces of writing that give way to new associations, that perhaps advocate for and immanently present sublimated meanings inherently present in anthologies, texts, libraries, and other bodies of knowledge.

I love working this way and have already made a second chapbook entitled *A Collection of Babysitters* (created November 2013). It contains six prose poems using phrases taken directly from the first four volumes of *The Babysitters Club*.

Additionally, I am currently working on a chapbook for the MFA thesis show using found language taken from Blaffer exhibition catalogues. It will be shown in conjunction with *Harbor*, *Levee*, and another tableau to be created over Christmas break.

June 2013 I became a regular contributor to a local art blog called *The Great God Pan is Dead*. Obviously it isn't Artforum or anything, but since there are people out there that read it, I feel very responsible for writing about other people's work clearly and thoughtfully. It has become an extremely productive and satisfying outlet for thinking through artwork as well as a crucial extension of my studio practice. Robert Boyd (it's his blog) gave me the validation and permission to not only trust in my critical inquiry and discernment of other artists' works, but also my own. That in turn gave me the confidence to trust in what I'm doing and my ability to coach myself through problems, and that maybe I don't need my hand held as much as I thought I did.

August 2013 I went back to Mildred's Lane for a session called The Order of the Third Bird. Through various ritualized activities, it was a workshop dedicated to giving an extended amount of attention to objects made to be looked at, which usually consisted of works of art. I was humbled. It was startling to discover the amount of information an object will impart upon a viewer—that is if he or she is willing to take the time to listen. I left with an immense respect for artworks, knowing full well that an object will always contain vastly more information than the artist intended, or that the viewer can even see.

November 2013 While materially translating my poem "Lane,s" to make *Harbor*, I translated "Salt and Power" from the same book to build *Levee*. Replete with flimsy, easily penetrable walls, baby salt avalanches and dams made of pennies, it's a pathetically resolute work that ardently holds back nothing.

It became clear after critique that it needs some work, but it's mostly there. It requires a few adjustments, namely that it needs to come off the wall, and that—much like a cholesterol-conscious eater pining for the foregone days of more flavorful food—it needs more salt.