

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Overlapping Forms in Experience

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8mp4d60c>

Author

Mcgough, Amanda Marie

Publication Date

2015

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Overlapping Forms in Experience

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Art

by

Amanda McGough

Thesis Committee:
Professor Jennifer Pastor, Chair
Professor Kevin Appel
Professor Daniel Joseph Martinez
Assistant Professor Litia Perta
Professor Simon Leung

2015

DEDICATION

To

my parents

in recognition of their work

which has always made my own possible

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|--|------|
| LIST OF FIGURES | iv |
| ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS | v |
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| CHAPTER 1: Visibility and Being Present: <i>Speard Egale (2015)</i> | 3 |
| CHAPTER 2: Visibility | 7 |
| CHAPTER 3: Being Present | 10 |
| CHAPTER 4: Translation: <i>Secretary (2015)</i> | 13 |
| CHAPTER 5: Translation | 15 |
| CHAPTER 6: Missing You: <i>Light Thief (2014)</i> | 18 |
| CHAPTER 7: Missing You | 20 |
| CHAPTER 8: Conclusion | 23 |
| REFERENCES | 25 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| | | Page |
|----------|--|------|
| Figure 1 | <i>Speard Egale</i> . 2015. Detail of floor | 5 |
| Figure 2 | <i>Speard Egale</i> . 2015. Detail of sundial and floor | 6 |
| Figure 3 | <i>Speard Egale</i> . 2015. Detail of sundial, floor, window and light refraction | 6 |
| Figure 4 | <i>Speard Egale</i> . 2015. Detail of artist holding mirror outside studio window | 9 |
| Figure 5 | <i>Secretary</i> . 2015. Cherry wood, brass and lead | 17 |
| Figure 6 | <i>Light Thief</i> . 2014. Cell phone glow on photo- emulsion. Installation view | 22 |

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Overlapping Forms in Experience

By

Amanda McGough

Master of Arts in Art

University of California, Irvine, 2015

Professor Jennifer Pastor, Chair

As suggested in three works made between 2014 and 2015, this document works toward an understanding of art making that indexes the act of its creation, which extends beyond the artists hand. Instead, through overlapping histories, geographies and plural narratives, it is possible to see the break down of hierarchies that exist not only in the physical manifestations of works but also in regimes of visibility, presence and sentimentality.

Introduction

It has always been a comfort to say my work, my art, “comes from writing”. I was in college working on a sculpture when this statement felt right. The sculpture was a proposal to build then fill a coliseum in Los Angeles. After I finished the piece, I revisited the ephemera and research that went into the project and realized all of my sketches were words, and all of the words were more or less instructions for how my materials would take shape. So to come from writing has always been about becoming form not being form. This is still true. My work is indexed in the act of being made, in an engagement with life, with body. It extends to objects and peoples and feelings to whom I have a relationship.

When I teach I have two favorite exercises: the first is asking students to describe a chair, and to describe it again after I have flipped it upside down; the second is a plaster exercise where students are asked to sculpt their teeth using only their tongues to see. Chairs are typically designed to fit a seated body. Therefore, turning a chair upside down denies this relationship and complicates the influence of the body on an object and visa-versa. Eyes are typically privileged with regimes of visibility.¹ How does one taste their tooth and feel it so that it may guide hands in shaping plaster? As Sara Ahmed puts it, “They may even take shape through such

contact or take the shape of that contact. What gets near is both shaped by what bodies do and in turn affects what bodies can do...Orientations are about the directions we take that put some things and not others in our reach.”ⁱⁱ This is to say the way one moves through space orients not only bodies but also the interpretation of objects around them.

These exercises are poignant because they are so basic in their strategy and exhibit several key characteristics of my work, including visibility, presence and sentiment. It is work positioned with and against systems of visibility, presence, and sentiment. These systems may be created within art, within classification systems, taxonomies, or some other way of organizing or categorizing knowledge in the world to share in a consensual way with others, but that’s different than imagining that there’s a knowledge, that once can have or poses in any final or terminal way. My work comes from an understanding that is embodied within the circumstances of experience, the “process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed.”ⁱⁱⁱ This is not to say I am interested in representing or presenting a coherent and unified subjectivity, though. The living dimensions of my work are rather self-reflective and frankly discontinuous, and they do so in political terms. This is especially clear in three of my works: *Speard Egale* (2015), *Secretary* (2015) and *Light Thief* (2014). The inscription of experience is problematized, though in very different ways. There is no single perspective, but a myriad of voices, often not completely localized in the textual properties of the work.

Visibility and Being Present: *Speard Egale* (2015)

This body of work is the most difficult to describe. The transposed letters of 'spread' and 'eagle' are spelled to look like or suggest the words without being them. I am not even sure how to pronounce my show title, and that might be the first step to understanding the piece.

Two hand made mirrors (using glass and silver nitrate) and three co-opted mirrors from my apartment were used to direct sunlight from my studio window onto the fourth floor edge of the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC), the rooftop edge of the Performance Studios, and Room Gallery. I have either had a class or occupied a workspace at each of these points of incidence where the rays strike mirror. The final light refraction was oriented toward and projected into a thirty by thirty inch window in Room Gallery – the space I was assigned to present my thesis show. The mirror in my studio was always hand adjusted either by me or by an attendant to keep up with the Earth's orbit. Without this hand adjustment, there would be not light refraction. With out the sun, there is no light refraction. However, it was my decision to attend to the mirror rain or shine, as a way of devoting time to the conditions of the weather and environment. This was also a method to acknowledge

my position that this body of work was constantly active and even “working” when the sun was not visible, making the light refraction nearly impossible to see.^{iv}

Although the line of light refraction has a direction, it is never exactly the same. My hands were constantly shaking as I held the mirror. Trying to find the light and aim it at the same time resulted in a flickering effect on the gallery wall. From an aerial view, the line of refraction looks like is a curve, which emanates from a central point, Room Gallery, and gets progressively farther away as it revolves around this point. It is a spiral but the spiral is not flat.^v From the first connecting point (my studio) to the top edge of the CAC, the light is directed upward. From the edge of the CAC to the top edge of the Performance Studios, the light is directed downward. From there, it bounces downward in through the window of Room Gallery and onto a sundial where a mirror finally points the light ray upward onto a wall.

Inside Room Gallery are sheets of inexpensive particleboard that have been painted with cheap matte white water based paint. Each sheet was cut twice diagonally leaving two right triangles and a rhombus in the middle. The cut shapes were then puzzled together to create a chevron pattern throughout the entire gallery. It was my intention to inscribe the literal flow of visitors with footprint residue on the installed floor.



(Figure 1. *Speard Egale*. 2015. Detail of floor)

To the left and near the furthest corner from the entrance of the gallery, a two-foot diameter circle was cut out of the installed floor pattern at the point where the light refraction hit the ground inside the gallery. This is the first element of a sundial that is made from many parts. Meaty chunks of maple burl wood from Colorado sit on top the circular dial and hold in place a broken mirror. The dial is the final refractor in a thread of mirrors and splashes sunlight onto the gallery walls. Over the course of the show, the dial was adjusted rather arbitrarily to concentrate light on various positions of the gallery wall. The adjustment was slight and probably only noticeable to me.



(Figure 2. *Speard Egale*. 2015. Detail of sundial and floor)



(Figure 3. *Speard Egale*. 2015. Detail of sundial, floor, window and light refraction)

Visibility

This body of work is impossible to view all at once. It occupies four locations (not including air space and the in-betweens). One cannot be in the gallery (see Figure 3) to witness the final light refraction while simultaneously being present with the mirror casting sunlight from my studio or the mirror on the rooftops (see Figure 4). With this in mind, it was rather difficult to imagine the outcome of the project before it was finally installed. The assembly of *Speard Egale* was designed to encourage a form of engagement (not only for viewers but for myself) with the organization and development of forms in which one moves through a complex ecosystem of sites, building connections amongst themselves and their sites as one does (sometimes unknowingly). The sites avail themselves of multiple layered communicative platforms: site for learning, site of infrastructure (both as sculptural armature and as building), site of histories, site of art, site of imagination, site of struggle, site of regulation, site of law, site of social engagement. The employment of each site was an effort to build presence by virtue of a viewing subjects rapport with the built environment across many locations. It was an effort to draw out an understanding for plural narratives.

Vision is not always optical and the space of not seeing is still a space to be interpreted.^{vi} I am particularly interested in the role of the imagination required to envision *Speard Egale*. An aim of this body of work is to make an argument for mediation as a conceptual tool for studying the fluid interaction between bodies and the 'edges' of visibility. I intentionally used the edges of buildings as armatures to make this clearer. The configuration of *Speard Egale* is fundamentally fractal, and so it makes no sense to try and understand the body of work as a coherent, or autonomous sculpture. It is not limited to a single geographical territory, but instead overlaps many. In his book chapter, "Disjunction and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy", Arjun Appadurai introduces the concept of scapes to provide a framework for analyzing the cultural dimensions of globalization. For Appadurai, scapes suggest an alternative spatial rendering. They are amorphous, they vary in size, and they flow in multiple directions:

Landscapes are thus the building blocks of what I would like to call *imagined words*, that is, the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe...the wrap of these stabilities is everywhere shot through with the woof sets of metaphors by which people live as they help to constitute narratives of the Other and protonarratives of possible lives, fantasies that could become prolegomena to the desire for acquisition and movement. ^{vii}

The orientation and purview of a viewing subject is as much about the position of self or ones identity as it is about the placement of feet and the direction of eyes. In as much as this body of work is about its physicality and its ephemerality, it is largely about the increasing influence viewing subjects have in shaping the phenomena around which they organize. *Speard Egale* takes shape in its perception. The relationship of reading to hearing and seeing may vary in important ways that determine the morphology of sites as they shape themselves in different contexts.



(Figure 4. *Speard Egale*. 2015. Detail of artist holding mirror outside studio window)

Being Present

Over the duration of the show, I spent much of my time in the sun operating *Speard Egale*, to “reflect” and to be present. This of course was not always possible because my show took place during a week and a half of overcast weather, but that is not to say the show was inactive during the cloudy days. Activating the work afforded me time to think and consider what my thesis show was really doing. In hindsight, I realize this layer of production, of being present with the piece, is significant. I am not unconvinced that the entire show was set up just to have some peace and quiet in the sun. This might seem pointedly non-productive, but it wasn't.

As a way of understanding the importance of spending time, of being present, it is helpful to mention the commercial and institutional design of the campus (which I used as armatures for the mirrors). Designed from an ascendant discipline for engineering social control and the techniques employed toward this end, my intention was to be present inside and outside of this apparatus. My intention was to reorient my body toward the sun from the edges of the campus buildings, to shed light on a location that would otherwise have been completely in shadow. In other words, my presence in space did not end with the recontextualization of my

imagination into local knowledge gained from spending time with *Spread Egale*. Instead, my active presence via shining light with mirrors extended to produce a mode of interaction and play that did not overthrow the institution, but instead operated within its shadow, through a participation that both relied and disrupted the dominant mode of being (at school; with art; in the sun).

Similarly, Robert Smithson's *Mirror Displacements* – his “nonsites,” are fragments taken from a landscape and framed within a gallery. They break down the polarity between inside and outside, leaving open the possibility of a third term that would contain both. For Smithson this third term is the document.^{viii} Time and the phenomenon of entropy were central to his project, and photography was the perfect medium through which to capture the process and effects of duration. Mirrors reflect and refract surrounding environments, displacing the solidity of landscape and shattering forms. The work is part earthwork and part image, it contemplates temporality, while the mirror records the passage of time and the position of bodies moving in space. Where this work aligns with mine is not only in its materials, but also in its multilayered development and an insistence in the advocacy for environmental circumstances to induce form. Where we differ is in an attitude toward documentation. The operations of *Speard Egale* are suspended when light is cast in the gallery, not so dissimilar to the way photography draws with light onto emulsion to capture light. But that would reduce documentation to the laws of photography, rather than to the multiple sites and narratives which *Speard Egale* operates with and under. Where photography seems insufficient as a memory device, I instead am interested in this body of works incarnation through

oral representations, individual experiences, and hearsay. In this way, the piece dwells, as I believe it should, entirely inside and next to the subjectivity of its viewership.

Translation: *Secretary* (2015)

What was also not visible from Room Gallery was a sculpture many steps away, entitled, *Secretary*. It is made of solid cherry wood, brass and lead. *Secretary* is exactly as it describes, a sculpture of a secretary. It is about six feet in height and just under the width of my arm span. There are twenty-seven mail slots, each empty, each a slightly different size but unintentionally this way. Two cabinet doors adorn the mail slots, and when they are open, the sculpture looks naked. Maybe I mean naked in that it is possible to see all of materials that went into it's making. A lead eagle with wings reaching the width of my left hand is perched on the roof of the secretary. It sits in my empty studio.

The *Secretary* is a sculpture based on a description of a desk in the novel The Optimist's Daughter by Eudora Welty. The passage by Welty is brutal in its detail and nuance, and there are many narrative lines that pass through it. In what takes up half of a page, Laurel Hand (the protagonist of the book) thinks of her aging father while listening to children play outside of her window and simultaneously begins to describe a secretary desk. The Optimist's Daughter puts forward a modern woman who internalizes domestic ritual, making it a resource of her art and her

newly invented life. It ends with Laurel having a strong sense of her own “vision, distance, stamina.”^{ix} What is achieved by my sculpture of this single passage is specific but imperfect.

Translation

I think of this engagement with Welty the way I think of kinship. There is an intertextuality that preserves this relationship. By this I mean my intention in this engagement with Welty is as much about my translation of her work into three-dimensions as it is about re-surfacing the discourse that already exists in the reception of Welty and her work. It is a way of allowing for influence. Influence occurs, because I perceive in her work a space or opening. “Influence” and “Intertextuality” of course have a long been entwined. As a conceptual precursor, Julia Kristeva coined the term “intertextualité” in 1966. She writes, “Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations, any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and a poetic language is read as at least double”.^x The process of translation with Welty’s passage into a physical and touchable form is an attempt to re-read her work.

For example, I recently tried to smell my lover’s residue from a soiled shirt by wearing the shirt. As a result, my scent was transferred onto the shirt, re-writing and inscribing my own scent. This was extremely disappointing and possibly obvious but I learned something. The object (whether it be Welty’s work, an event, a story from the past or my lover’s scent) is altered by the very search for it, and by

the time in which the search is complete, what has actually been lost can never be found.^{xi} This is not to say nothing is found, but the objects found are always something else, and a creation of the search. Therefore, translation as a means of preservation is always already imperfect, not matter how earnest and accurate the attempt.



(Figure 5. *Secretary*. 2015. Cherry wood, brass and lead)

Missing you: *Light Thief* (2014)

Light Thief is a performative drawing made from time-exposed photographs of the glow illuminated from my cell phone during a phone call with my now ex-girlfriend. The light source is a recognizable glow you might encounter on the surface of a stranger or loved ones face as they use their device. The imprint of light is used to inscribe the ways technology can produce different registers of being though the lateral extenuation of surface. The text used in the drawing is culled from *Writings of The Luddites* edited by Kevin Binfield. In this book, Binfield assembled a collection of writings by the Luddites organized by region and by chronology. Through this organization of poems, letters, songs and essays, the collection illustrates the plight of Luddism as a multi-regional and inter-generational organization of activists who were lyrical and poetic in their demise, not only insubordinate and uneducated. Their strife for the most part has been poorly represented.

What is commonly known about the Luddites was their volatile and often dangerous rage, which spread across the British cloth industries in the early nineteenth century. As mechanization grew, so did the Luddites growing suspicion

that the laboring body of the textile worker was becoming obsolete. Unlike neo Luddite or street interpretations of Luddism, the original Luddites did not hate technology- they were fighting for their eroding employment. After failed efforts to block the introduction of machinery through legislation, the Luddites began demolishing machinery and killing their superiors and opposing political and social players.^{xii}

What drew me to this collection of writings was its demonstration of the operations of state power. The majority of writings only existed in private archives, available only to a specialized community of scholars and researchers.^{xiii} Perhaps it is complete speculation, but I do not believe it is a stretch to say the absence of these historical documents from the general public (until the publication of this book) has in some ways tarnished the reputation of the Luttides. In the absence of historical content from which one commonly locates memory, potential moral disturbances are deflected. Therefore, it is possible to take notice of the ways representation, in this case through written word, can put into crisis a position for understanding the ways diasporic subjects might fail to come into symbolic order, thus falling outside of language. Closely connected to this is the operation of thinking with objects absent from direct sense of perception. The activity of thinking, the performance itself, is exemplary of the ways in which we have to trace experiences and histories rather than observing doctrines. With this in mind, I began realizing *Light Thief*.

Missing You

In his account of the ways history usurped the functions of memory, Jacques Le Goff suggests that history in its modern mode is just one more technology of remembering, with its development to be understood rather as we understand the device and use writing systems in difference societies: as technique of memory, as social practice and as individual cognitive process.^{xiv} By this account then, to understand *Light Thief*, it is necessary to examine the ways the pairing of cell-phone glow with the writings of the Luddites has for me functioned as a tool of memory to think by, imagine by, remember with and produce from.

The installation of text stretched diagonally, bisecting the back of the University Art Gallery in two, similar to the way Fred Standback's yarn sculptures cut through space. A line of division also connects spaces through the articulation of their distance to each other. This two-fold read of space is also true for the legibility of the text written onto photo emulsion with cell phone glow. It reads as text, but it is very difficult to read the text.

The cell phone glow that splashed on my ex-girlfriend's face was a reminder of the mark of the Luddites. I can't say that I was at war with the technology that is

her cell phone or the networks that make its transmission possible, but the glow that stained her face was a reminder that the time I spent enduring feelings of pain, desire, and jealousy. The glow was a reminder of that her humanity was becoming indistinguishable from her gadget, and yet, it brought me closer to my own. I wonder how technology has produced different registers of being, or how it is reflective of different registers of being, or even how the rhetoric of desire has been technologized. I say I am “turned off” when her phone is “turned on.”

One property of light originates from the idea that photons are massless particles, which only take shape in contrast to other surfaces – that is, they take the form of their container. It was an attempt to illustrate feelings, which illuminated the contours of my heart as I contended for her affection. It was a desperate plea to gain her attention and reorient her body toward me and away from my messages relayed on her phone. During the making of *Light Thief*, I positioned the cell-phone away from my face as it normally rests during phone calls. Instead, it was turned toward a photo emulsion, and excerpts from the Luddites were drawn quickly.

The obvious paradox of this piece is that the very gadget I was making a case against was the gadget I needed the most to communicate through *Light Thief*. In their struggle to regain their rights as workers and to have jobs, the Luddites obliterated machinery. The connection between my former girlfriends use of her cell phone and the writings of the Luddites, even now, is not entirely clear to me. I now understand that self-expression in the space of something, embodied in the paradoxical relationship between a capacity to recall memory and a drive to record it is at the heart of this project. More than jealousy or contempt, the performance of

drawing out experience, and leaving evidence of something to be interpreted and negotiated was more or less the point.



(Figure 6. *Light Thief*. 2014. Cell phone glow on photo-emulsion. Installation view. “Wl dn Ned Lud That it time to speak the prime men gron mchnical in head hart hand”)

Conclusion

My approach to an engaged praxis comes from the arenas of logic and emotion. This makes it possible to draw together complex relations between form and content. My earlier work, as in the example of *Light Thief*, is heavily concerned with an ability to capture a regularly occurring passing moment (cell phone glow splashing on my former girlfriends face), while simultaneously trying to understand another long passed history (that of the Luddites and their relationship to labor and technologies). This work disturbs and disperses the notion of an individual and coherent subject and its relation to history, while oddly enough taking the shape of a continuous line. Moreover, *Light Thief* did not resolve but further problematized many of the issues it raised: such as the legibility of labor and the recording of experience.

Later, still interested in the phenomena of light, my piece *Speard Egale* took a different approach. I turned to the ultimate light source, the Sun. Using a spiraled constellation of mirrors to refract the sunlight into Room Gallery, this body of work is neither stable nor single but constantly being rewritten and recompiled according to environmental changes, the earth's orbit around the sun, the steadiness of the

hand bouncing light with a mirror, and by individual viewing subjects rapport and ability to imagine the built environment.

In *Secretary*, by way of Eudora Welty's book, The Optimist's Daughter, my sculpture uses transcription as it's material in addition to cherry wood, brass and lead. Welty's description of the desk is thick with detail and process through which I came to imagine the technical configuration, which made it possible to arrive at a form. In this way, *Secretary* comes from the limits of Welty's words, but its conjured into being through an imagined space that can never take the exact shape of Welty's words. This piece is a celebration of these shortcomings.

My work investigates structure as systems that underlie regimes of visibility, communication, and sentiment. Through the critique and implementation of this triangulation, my attempt is to show how discourses can be made to reveal resistances to or contradictions within all systems of experience.

ⁱ Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1990. 45-47. Print.

ⁱⁱ Ahmed, Sara. "Orientations." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (2006): 552. Web. 20 March 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum de l'autre femme*. Paris: Minuit. 1974. Print.

^{iv} Ephemeral works such as *Speard Egale* make this more visible and palatable to understand, however I believe all art, even those pieces deemed static, are constantly moving and so do their meanings and interpretations.

^v Israel, Nico. "Yeats, Tatlin, and the Performance of Internationalism." *Spirals: The Whirled Image in Twentieth-Century Literature and Art*. Columbia UP, 2015. 86-90. Print.

After William Butler Yeats published "The Second Coming", he used the cycles of the Moon phases to extrapolate the geometry of gyres. For Yeats, according to Israel, "the mind, whether expressed in history or in the individual life, has a precise movement, which can be quickened or slackened but cannot be fundamentally altered, and this movement can be expressed by a mathematical form and this form is the gyre." The movements of spirals have always been of interest, as they have been with many artists before my time such as Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt, Walter De Maria, Yeats, Duchamp, etc.

^{vi} Holbein the Younger, Hans. *The Ambassadors*. 1553. Oil on oak. National Museum, London.

When viewing the painting from it's front, the two figures of the Ambassadors are visible. From another vantage point, the Ambassadors are eschewed and only an anamorphic skull is visible. In this way, it is possible to speculate that Holbein was making commentary on the Ambassadors inability to see their mortality.

^{vii} Appadurai, Arjun. "Chapter Two: Disjunction and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, Minn.: U of Minnesota, 1996. 33. Print.

^{viii} Kastner, Jeffery. *Land and Environmental Art*. London: Phaidon, 1998. 215-217. Print.

^{ix} Welty, Eudora. *The Optimist's Daughter*. New York: Random House, 1972. 87. Print.

^x Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia UP, 1980. 66. Print.

^{xi} Goff, Jacques Le. *History and Memory*. New York: Columbia UP, 1992. Print.

^{xii} Binfield, Kevin. *Writings of the Luddites*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2004. 10-42. Print.

^{xiii} *Ibid*.

^{xiv} Goff, Jacques Le. *History and Memory*. New York: Columbia UP, 1992. 24. Print.