

A Thesis Presented to

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Out of Context: A Visual Artist's Relationship with Books

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I began the process of collecting books with the hope that by transforming them into visual art I would better understand why I loved them so much. The way they smell, the colors, small black letters on white pages helping me understand the world better: I still do not know precisely what it is about them that is so lovely. But I am beginning to understand why they are important to me.

Both my parents are high school English teachers by profession. My father is also a poet, my mother a novelist. Hundreds of golden printed titles stand vertically on the shelves in my parents' house; I did not grow up with matching furniture and designer window treatments, or even my own room for that matter, but we always had more than enough to read. In an old home video my family and I watched often, my mother asks my oldest sister, "Who wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, Rachel?" and she clearly says, at age five, "Chaucer." It was because of this family lore that I grew up understanding the value of books. My emotional connection to books inspired me to use them as material for the exhibition *Out of Context*. By choosing to create a body of work for a senior thesis exhibition, I was faced with the challenge of finding my voice as an artist. I am buoyed by my past.

I began making work with merely a strong intuitive sense as my motivation. I could not point exactly to a cause other than my own emotions. In his essay "Expressing Emotion," the philosopher and historian Robin G. Collingwood states that unexpressed emotion manifests itself in a person, making him or her aware of its presence. Initially a person is incapable of naming the emotion specifically. Collingwood theorizes that as we

express emotion physically, we become conscious of it as a singular feeling rather than a general perturbed emotional state.

However, there is a difference between expressing an emotion and describing an emotion. This distinction is determined, according to Collingwood, by the audience. If I were to articulate to someone “I love books,” my hope is that my audience will understand my emotion. I am merely describing how I feel. Collingwood asserts that

A person expressing emotion on the contrary is treating himself and his audience in the same kind of way. He is making his emotions clear to his audience and that is what he is doing to himself.

(Collingwood 372)

By expressing emotion, I am clarifying the nature of my feelings in my own mind. I disagree with Collingwood on the point that art cannot act as catharsis for an artist. He states this because he does not believe true expression can have any particular “technique.” I argue that expression can be emotionally cathartic, expressive, and explicating. Also, that it can incorporate techniques. I assert further that it is through the *repetition* of physical action that I personally attempt to elucidate and alleviate emotions. As I am creating, I better understand my emotions, and I am releasing them through the physical act of making.

The process of repetition allows for an emotional catharsis through meditation. As I created a multitude of multiples, my affection for the book as material matured. Initially I was unsure of why I chose to work with books, but it became clearer to me as I created the work. I was able to locate the source of my fondness; my connection with books is rooted in a sense of family pride and personal history. I wanted to remain connected to my family, but

also figure out who I am as a visual artist. My previous artistic work leans towards being very expressive and gestural, with almost a messy quality. *Out of Context* is a body of work that attempts to reconcile both the cerebral and the expressive aspects of myself as a person. I wanted to discover whether or not my analytic self, represented by books, and my emotional self, the way in which I creatively manipulate them, could coexist in my artwork. After installing all my work in the gallery, I saw that all my pieces were smaller than I had intended them to be. The profundity of the revelations I am beginning to have as an artist and writer are not reflected in the scale of the work. Developing “Suspended Thoughts” on a much larger scale would have reflected the emphasis I place on my own cathartic artistic process and would have been more clearly conveyed to my viewers.

Sculptural artist Eva Hesse credited her process driven art work with helping her work through her painful past. Hesse was an influential and unique artist who produced sculptural work through the 1950s and 60s. She is also known for her innovative use of ephemeral materials. Her method of creating work sometimes involved tedious or time consuming processes (“Eva Hesse”). It is in that way I feel connected with her creative methods. I am, like Hesse, naturally attracted to making work small step by small step, repeated movements and actions progressing toward a larger work. Eva Hesse claimed that it was “compulsive work which [she] enjoyed. ...It might work its way to something special” (Lippard). I find that her description of creating work parallels my own tendencies as an artist. The materials and processes she chooses lead her to a final product.

Hesse wrote a letter to Roise Goldman attempting to explain a piece she was working on at the time:

...I have all these months looked over and at much of the junk. I finally took a screen, heavy mesh which is stretched on a frame like so and taken cord which I cut into smaller pieces. I soak them in plaster and knot each piece through a hole and around wire. (Lippard)

She was not driven to create the work based on her ideas about a finished piece; rather the material was itself inspirational. This was the way in which I approached much of the work in the exhibition. The work felt unsatisfying when I tried to force it into an intelligible form, and neglected to trust my own emotional responses to the work as it progressed.

As I was experimenting with the material I was forced to react intuitively based on how the books were responding to my manipulation of them. I would recognize the instances where the book or the pages would take on a form that I responded to emotionally, and explore that moment or replicate the form many times. The final pieces in my exhibition are based on beautiful small moments that I wanted to explore further.

Art critic and theorist Lucy Lippard asserts that repetition can function as a safe process on which an artist may fall back when he or she does not know how to move forward. Repetition functioned this way for me while making “Suspended Thoughts” (Figure 1). It protected me when I could not confront the idea that at some point my fragmentations would have to eventually coalesce into a completed piece. I could not, in the midst of making the individual units, see “Suspended Thoughts” in its entirety. I was moving forward without a clear plan of installation.

Lucy Lippard comments on Hesse's use of repetition stating that "The wrapping and binding and layering process is [also] repetitive and makes the viewer relive the intensity of the making" (Lippard). This assertion connects to Collingwood's opinion about whether or not it is possible for an artist to arouse a specific emotion in a viewer. He believes that in order for an artist to arouse a specific feeling, the artist would have to anticipate what Collingwood calls the "stimulus" that his audience would react to. The artist must already know her audience in order to arouse a specific emotion. Collingwood believes an "artist proper" is not concerned with arousing emotion in the viewer. The artist is concerned with a clarity of understanding and expression that is intelligible to herself. An artist cannot adapt her visual language to accommodate everyone's peculiarities in understanding (Collingwood 372).

Lippard says a viewer will feel the general "intensity" of a piece, which I believe, and in accordance with Collingwood's theory, is definitely a more feasible achievement. Even if the viewer were correct in reading a certain work as "sad" it could not be the same type of sadness, or experience the precise depth of the artist's emotion.

I was disappointed and struggled to make decisions regarding the piece "Visual Consciousness" (Figure 2). One of the first experiments I performed with a book was the act of cutting perfect circles out of its pages. I enjoyed the forms, but was not yet sure where to go with them. So I continued to play, taking off the binding and folding the entire book in half. I rebound it with a rubber band. I mounted it in this state on the wall. I then taped the

previously cut circles directly above the mounted and bound book. The circles looked as though they were emanating from the bound book: thought bubbles quietly erupting from its pages. By arranging the work in this way, I had created an over-simplified visual narrative that I could understand. The analytical and cerebral part of my mind forced itself to immediately find meaning in the piece and it was commandeering my work.

“Visual Consciousness” went through another over-worked phase where I had bunched the circles in a corner in my studio and organized them according to color. Not only was the circle form lost, which I loved initially, but the piece also had shrunk to half its original size. It looked small, and felt insignificant. The piece and each unit needed room to breathe, and creatively so did I. I needed to re-incorporate from my original process the expressive act of taping the circles on the wall without analyzing the conscious placing of every single one. I decided then to make “Visual Consciousness” an ephemeral installation.

Because of this choice, I installed the piece in the gallery, without a definite predetermined form, only a vague idea of an over- all shape which required that I rely on my creative instincts and dialogue with the material during the installation. The way in which I installed this piece spoke to my tendency to be gestural when drawing. Unlike “Pedestal,” the piece “Visual Consciousness” does place emphasis on specific texts. The words are legible to the viewer. However, the way in which I placed them on the floor keeps the viewer at a distance, unable to read every word. This fragmentation specific material simultaneously draws the viewer in and pushes him or her away. This tension is a reflection

of my own inner tension. I am concerned with specificity that leads to over-all meaning, like in a literary analysis. But I am also concerned with the aesthetic of the piece as a whole. I want my audience to experience both perspectives. This piece like “Suspended Thoughts,” did not reach the scale I originally desired, but is a stepping stone toward a larger work to be fully developed in the future.

My fear of losing control of a piece still exists, though less intensely than before I created the body of work for *Out of Context*. I was working with the fear that when all was said and done, as viewers stood in front of my work, they would feel nothing. If that were to happen, it would mean that I had nothing to say as an artist. I believe in addition to working with my love of books, I was working in spite of my fear of failure. Lippard finds in Hesse’s work

... that certain pleasure in proving oneself against perfection, or subverting the order that runs the outside world by action in one's inside world, in despoiling neat edges and angles with home-made or natural procedures that relate back to one's own body, one's own personal experience. Thus outwardly rational work can be saturated with a poetic and condensatory intensity that eventually amounts to the utmost in irrationality. Repetition and repetition of moveable units in particular, leads to fragmentation, the disintegration of one order in favor of a new one. (Lippard)

Lippard contends that Hesse embraced the imperfections, or lack of “neat edges,” in her work. She accepts being able to see her own artist’s hand in her work, and therefore shares her personal making experiences visually with the viewer. The imperfections make the act of creation visible to the viewer. Lippard further claims that over-calculated, over-thought

artwork leaves nothing to chance, and therefore makes the work illogical. This is an artistic truth I was forced to discover through my own process of making, and have yet to completely come to terms with.

While making a book shelf to display “Material Studies,” I did have to face a failure of sorts. As I began to cut the books on the band saw, insurmountable engineering issues got in the way of my projected aesthetic for the shelves. It was an unsuccessful project. However, the cuts that I did make produced beautiful little strips of books. I decided to cut the rest of the encyclopedias exactly like the lovely pieces I reacted to emotionally. In “Encyclopedic Waves,” I have altered the way in which people usually experience encyclopedias. Rather than the book functioning as an informative and referential text, I am highlighting the aesthetic of certain parts of the text and photos. The pages displayed still inform the viewer that it is an encyclopedia by noticing half of Theodore Roosevelt’s face, a row of Ellis Island immigrants shoes, a line graph of stock market trends severed in the middle leading to who knows where; the fragments act as context clues. However I am changing the way in which the text is read. I present an abstracted view of the book’s contents. “Encyclopedic Waves” was a result of my failed shelf project (Figure 3). My tenderness towards the little books inspired me to produce as many of them as I could.

I began my work this semester altering the texts very tentatively. The “Material Studies” are the result of my careful working with the book in its original form (Figure 4 and 5). These works were a way for me to build enough confidence to take the books apart and

transform them further. I needed to work with the book in its original form to better understand how the pages would move and what type of aesthetic resulted from simple actions like folding and bending.

The work “Pedestal” and “Book Shelf” are both capped with one of the “Material Studies” works (Figure 6 and 7). Juxtaposed with the seemingly unstable “Pedestal” and “Book Shelf” works, both “Material Studies” sustain the forms into which I have manipulated them without glue or any type of adhesive. “Material Study No. 1” and “Material Study No. 2” are, by themselves, very stable forms, although they have a delicate look about them. I folded and rolled the pages, in “Material Study No. 1” and Material Study No. 2” inwards towards the center of the book to create a design. By placing them on top of “Pedestal” and “Book Shelf” they create the feeling of potentiality. It looks as though each one of the books beneath has the ability to be spontaneously metamorphic, that each will eventually or has the ability to transform into a “Material Studies” piece. The one on top is merely the first to bloom.

As I became more comfortable altering the books, I felt self-assured enough to take on more difficult ways of altering the material. Sometimes the process was very physically demanding. Making “Pedestal” was physically draining as I drilled a hole through each book so the core rod could stabilize the stack of books. Physically, emotionally, and mentally this piece was difficult. I was literally and mentally wrestling with the material in order to achieve my desired aesthetic; I intended “Pedestal” to be a free standing sculptural piece. Until less

than a week before the show, it seemed an unfeasible task. But the look of books stacked impossibly high on top of each other was important to the work. The “Pedestal” refers to the way in which we learn to talk about the object placed on top of a white, rectangular pedestal usually found in a gallery setting. The conversations surrounding the pieces placed on top of pedestals are based on what we have learned from books, on what we have read. Sanding off the titles of the books generalizes them which leads the viewer to believe that they could be a collection of any type of book.

After finally getting the piece to stand on its own, I experienced such a feeling of elation that I knew the arduous process of drilling, sanding off the titles on the spines, welding the core metal pieces together, and stacking the books in the perfect careless-looking way was worth it. It leans, and looks unsure of its own capability to stand, but it stands none the less.

As I began to separate myself from my work and consider it critically, I noticed an overall aesthetic of destruction. Pieces of books were scattered on the floor of my studio, torn pages covered my work tables, and books I had rendered unusable because I tortured them with glue, sand paper or utility knives were everywhere. I felt uneasy about my treatment of the material. My fear of having been mishandling the books was affirmed as I sat on my couch, home with my family, and proceeded to tear apart a book in order to cut circles for “Visual Consciousness.” My sister looked at me incredulously and said “What are you doing?” Her facial expression and reaction made me feel as though I was doing

something obviously and atrociously malevolent. I felt indignant, but at that particular moment I was unable to rationalize my treatment of the books.

My inability to articulate why I felt justified in repurposing books as an artistic medium stemmed from the tension between my loving emotional attachment to them and the processes I was choosing to go through in order to express that emotion. My connection to books was a loving one, so why was it appropriate for me to destroy them? I began to reconsider my work as transformative rather than destructive. A writer releases his or her written work into the world in the form of a book, allowing readers to interpret it as is their prerogative. When a reader interprets a text there is always an element of destruction. A piece of the author's message or idea gets lost or altered within his or her mind. For example, in order to write an analytical essay about a written work, I must take the words out of the context of that larger work and explicate the connotations of the specific word choice. The specific pieces of the text inform the bigger picture of how I read the work as a whole. My "destruction" of the books is an effort on my part to understand the book as object in a larger context, and build it back up in the form of visual art. Therefore, I came to the conclusion that my choice to physically alter the books was my interpretation of them. They merely inspired me in an unconventional way.

By taking the books out of libraries, off shelves and out of the hands of readers, I am forcing the viewer to consider the books as physical objects. Inevitable questions arise such as: What does it mean when the text is hidden or altered? What do books mean when they

exist in a gallery setting? They are no longer books as I experienced them in my house. But how have they really changed? These are questions I explore in this exhibited body of work, and continue even now to try and answer. After analyzing each individual piece I have come to different conclusions, but threads of common truths connect them. The truths I unearthed are mostly in relationship to myself as an artist. I am attempting to remain true to my family's articulateness and cerebral approach to literature, while discovering what is important for me to discuss in my own artwork. I chose to work with books before I understood that books symbolize to me the deep rooted connection to my family. The making of each piece allowed for my emotional realization and catharsis. Also, this body of work represents small stepping stones for larger pieces I would later like to explore further. *Out of Context* is a body of work that glorifies a taste of the artistic possibilities the printed book can inspire.

Work Cited

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(Figure 1)

"Suspended Thoughts"



(Figure 2)

“Visual Consciousness”



(Figure 3)

“Encyclopedic Waves”



(Figure 4)

“Material Study No. 1”



(Figure 5)

“Material Study No. 2”



(Figure 6)

“Book Shelves”



(Figure 7)

"Pedestal"