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Possibilities: No Door or Obvious Point of Entry¹

If I am going to be honest with myself, I have to admit that I have been dreading the idea of having to write this first paper of the semester. Initially I thought it was because of the lingering effects of an early winter sickness, which kept me in bed for days with fever, and that I have been struggling to get over for weeks. But now, upon deeper thought, I surmise that it might be more about pure ambivalence. This is not because I didn't have a positive experience at my second residency this past January. On the contrary, in some ways it was much more pleasant for me than my first residency, because I was less stressed and not as overwhelmed by all of the new information. I had productive critiques with both faculty and graduating MFA students, and there was a mostly positive response to the work that I brought with me.

No, I think that I am feeling ambivalent about where I need to go from here because I don't have a clear feeling about what path to take forward. And this is unsettling and confusing, but I fear is part of the process. I'm still looking for that door or obvious point of entry.

¹ I have been reading *Ninth Street Women, Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler: Five Painters and the Movement That Changed Modern Art* by Mary Gabriel. It is an extremely well researched and written brick of a book, that I am still making my way through, but there has been much that has struck me in it so far (especially around the historical issues of women in the arts), and I am sure I will use it as reference material in many of the papers that I will write going forward. For this one, I borrowed two ideas from the book that I have incorporated into the title. *Possibilities* was the name of a modern arts magazine from 1947 that only produced one publication and was edited by the artist Robert Motherwell, the critic Harold Rosenberg, and the composer John Cage (Gabriel 201). I thought that by using it in the title of my paper that it would lend a positive note to what I hope will come of my art practice this semester—after all, there are so many possibilities! And the subtitle comes from a lyrically beautiful paragraph in the book in which the author describes the unique painting techniques that Jackson Pollock developed and which helped him to break through to what would become the true essence of the American Abstract Expressionism movement. Gabriel ends her description of Pollock's process with this sentence, "Over and over, around and around the canvas he poured and dripped until the layers became dense, until in order to see the painting one had to look deep inside, through its veils, past its multitudinous lines. There was no door, no obvious point of entry, but Pollock beckoned the viewer to come in." (Gabriel 204) I know that I am still looking for this threshold into my own work.

Indeed, these are confusing and unsettling times—for my art and in life in general. This is especially true for an artist living on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC at this moment in time. Because, regardless of one's political leanings, there is no escaping the unrest and confusion of a city, and by default a nation, in government shutdown. Currently, this shutdown of our Federal Government is the longest in history (35 days) and even though it technically does not impact me personally (neither I nor my husband works for a government agency that was shutdown) its effects can still be felt through osmosis, and I fear that there might be some trickle down towards my art practice.

It's times like these that make me truly understand the “archival impulse” and what Hal Foster in his article *An Archival Impulse* calls a need “to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present.” He goes on to explain this type of production, especially that which is produced in the digital age, as a form of “virtual readymade” as “so much data to be reprocessed and sent on” and a way for an artist to “inventory, sample, and share as a way of working.” (Foster 4) And who wouldn't want to try to set the record straight in this era of “fake news”? As a painter though, I struggle to see how I might incorporate the idea of the archive into my own work. Although, I could argue that by adding collaged elements to the layers of my paintings (much of the time this includes ephemera that I collect as I go about my daily life) that I may already be doing this on some sort of level.

Humor is another option that I have already explored (or at least thought about) as a way to incorporate a level of narrative into my work. I think that humor appeals to me because I consider laughter a much smoother and more astute way to make an impression, as well as a beneficial tool that could be used to possibly change a person's mind. I find this much more attractive than the opposite of laughter (an emotional response that connotes happiness) which is anger. And trust me, I understand the anger and the rage over the issues at hand. The politics!

The environment! The inequality! Unfortunately, I also think that anger closes people off and prevents them from truly seeing or hearing the message at hand. But humor can also be tricky to employ. As Peter McGraw and Joel Warner write in *The Humor Code*, “the underpinnings of humor have proven far more vexing than those of other emotional experiences” and that there is “little agreement when it comes to humor.” (McGraw) This is especially true when you look at humor cross culturally² or when you contemplate the fine line between humor that is “benign” and that which crosses over into “violation.” It seems that the sweet spot in between which can be called “benign violation” might be smaller than one thinks. (McGraw) Again, because of this difficulty in knowing what is truly and universally funny, I struggle with a way to cleverly employ humor as an element in my work. And I wouldn’t want to be too obvious about it either, so that would impose another level of effort for me.

I suppose that leaves me with social justice and art activism. There are many worthy causes. Although, an artist today needs to be leery of the *appropriation* of imagery or language that is not theirs to take on, and as a white, middleclass women, I wonder if that leaves me a whole lot of room to work with. Nevertheless, I am absolutely starting to understand some of the many ways in which today’s art world has moved so far away from its original avant-garde roots. Andrea Fraser talks about this dilemma in her article *There’s No Place Like Home*. At the beginning of the article she discusses:

[M]y alienation from the art world and its hypocrisies, which I have made a career of attempting to expose. I have ascribed to institutional critique the role of judging

² Gregory H. Williams discusses this issue at length in his article *Global Comedy: Humor, Irony, Biennials*. In it he states that “it is a favorable moment to examine the work of artists who employ comedy in order to critique a facile notion of globalization that aims for universal comprehension and inclusivity...Nowhere is this more visible than in the large-scale international exhibitions of contemporary art...that take place at regular intervals and that can be found today in approximately two hundred locations worldwide.” (Williams 93) He goes on to state that “the presence of jokes or irony in works of art is often lost on an audience trained to take paintings or sculpture seriously, or perhaps more commonly, one that is not fluent in the language and customs of the culture in question.” (Williams 93) This cultural disconnect can be one of the pitfalls of employing humor in your work.

the institution of art against the critical claims of its legitimizing discourses, its self-representation as a site of contestation and its narratives of radicality and revolution. The glaring, persistent, and seemingly ever-growing disjunction between those legitimizing discourses—above all in their critical and political claims—and the social conditions of art generally, as well as of my own work specifically, has appeared to me as profoundly and painfully contradictory, even as fraudulent. (Fraser 28)

Still, Fraser makes it clear that she is dependent on this very system for her livelihood, which can make for some very uncomfortable personal and professional connections (Fraser 28). She also points out the hypocrisies of an “inequality-fueled art world” whose expansion over the past decade into one that has “seen a growing number of artists, curators, and critics take up the cause of social justice—often with organizations funded by corporate sponsorship and private wealth.” As well as the “proliferation of degree programs focusing on social, political, critical, and community-based art practices—based mostly in private nonprofit and even for-profit art schools that charge among the highest tuitions of any masters-level degree programs.” (Fraser 29) Considering all of this, when I start to think about it, I wonder if it is worth the effort at all. Would finding a cause to wrap my art around just fall flat and sound hollow? And really, aren't politics what I am trying to get *away* from when I turn to my art practice? Living here on Capitol Hill literally steps from our Nation's Capitol (and yes, the Capitol of the United States of America is spelled with an “o” not an “a”) there are almost too many causes to take on and participate in, and it can become overwhelming.

I guess that this still leaves me looking for that *threshold* into any new body of work I might create in the studio. But luckily, there is a somewhat more positive conclusion to all of this. As can be the case when you are writing about history as it is happening, unlike when I

started writing this paper late last week, the government shutdown is now over. Or at least it is temporarily, as the current stop-gap deal that is in place will only keep them open for three weeks. This also means that all of the Smithsonian museums are now back open for business as well, so I guess I better rush out to see all the exhibits that I want to get in before we approach another possible shut down. Maybe I will find some inspiration there?

Works Cited:

Fraser, Andrea. *There's No Place Like Home*, March 2011,

www.monoskop.org/images/c/c4/Fraser_Andrea_2012_Theres_No_Place_Like_Home.pdf. Accessed 6 November 2018.

(Stuart—the Fraser article above was one that Peter had us read for Crit. Theory II. He gave us the link to the article, but it was not clear to me exactly where it was originally published, either from the link above or in writing in the article itself. I have put all of the information that I could find in the reference above, but I fear it still may not be formatted correctly.)

Foster, Hal. “An Archival Impulse,” *October*, Vol. 110, The MIT Press (Fall 2004), pp. 3–22.

Gabriel, Mary. *Ninth Street Women, Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler: Five Painters and the Movement That Changed Modern Art*. Little Brown and Company, 2018.

McGraw, Peter and Joel Warner. “The Humor Code, Entry 1: What, exactly, makes something funny? A bold new attempt at a unified theory of comedy,” *Slate.com*, 23 March 2014, slate.com/culture/2014/03/what-makes-something-funny-a-bold-new-attempt-at-a-unified-theory-of-comedy.html. Accessed 6 November 2018.

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