Mr. Jonathan P. Berger: Gentle Conflations

Jonathan Patrick Berger
Washington University in St. Louis

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Mr. Jonathan P. Berger:
Gentle Conflations

Jonathan Patrick Berger

A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts of Washington University in St. Louis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

Graduate Committee
Richard Krueger | Thesis Advisor
Jessica Baran | Studio Advisor
Michael Byron | Studio Advisor
Andrea Stanislav | Committee Member
Cynthia Barounis | Committee Member
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Dedicated to all those that made this possible, I could never had made it here without you.

Thank you,
Jonathan Berger
Abstract

Sentimentality is a critical aspect of human existence because it is human-natural, agendered, and provides ground for gentle conflation of the domestic sphere and the roles within it. As an artist, I am able to utilize sentimentality to open possibilities and welcome, instead of molest, viewers into contemplation with the assumed norms of domesticity.

With its origins founded in the Age of Enlightenment, sentimentality was a praiseworthy endeavor, one based on intelligence and contemplation. I define sentimentality as the emotional intellect’s way of encoding or decoding the soft emotions surrounding and within objects, people, times or ideas. Soft emotions are those emotions that when positive warm us and when negative nibble away at us. Because of its foundation in our innate emotional intelligence, sentimentality is a human-natural and agendered phenomenon.

I posit that sentimentality can be strategically used to induce gentle conflation between world-representations, especially those located within the domestic. Essentially, world-representations are bundles of facts that are true in some world, be it fictional or non-fictional. Because of their quietness, soft emotions are able to linger mysteriously around and between their source world-representations, blurring their distinctions.

Within my artistic practice I contemplate concepts of labor, love and the fine line between loneliness and solitude found within the domestic sphere by utilizing sentimentality as a tool of gentle conflation.
A Mr. Berger Welcome

Dearest Reader,

I am delighted that you have decided to read this thesis, it sure is a thrill. My name is Mr. Jonathan P. Berger, and I do not really exist. Well, I suppose I exist, but not in the traditional sense of the word. You see, I am a persona. A persona is a role played or an aspect presented and perceived by others. We all embody various personas from the public to the private that influence our behavior. Public personas express outwards, while private personas are more intimate and internal focused. As a persona I fulfill both public and private, expressing similarly regardless of expression direction. This similarity is due in large part to my existence between the fictional and non-fictional. I, Mr. Jonathan P. Berger (figure 1) am able to conflate with the fictional, while Jonathan P. Berger is grounded in non-fiction. How did this come to be and why?

During my undergraduate education I was often exhausted and fatigued by chronic illness. Instead of letting this define my existence, I took the situation as a tool of enhancement. Having become a fan of sitcoms such as the Dick Van Dyke Show, the Mary Tyler Moore Show, and The Andy Griffith Show I decide to live within my own sitcom and lessen the burdens of my condition into lighthearted situation comedy. This unity is articulated in Nelson N. Foote’s delightful article Family Living as Play as “the contemporary home may be most aptly described as a theater” where “little episodes could be said to furnish the forward motion, while the big episodes account for changes of direction in development.”¹ By embodying what I call a “sitcom lifestyle” I began to embrace the fictional within my life and practice. This was the genesis of Mr.

Jonathan P. Berger. Mr. Berger is the character, while Jonathan P. Berger is the actor. With this new exploration I transform my home into a studio practice, and my life into an ongoing narrative. Far from being unnatural, this change of perception was a natural extension of my interests. As Mr. Jonathan P. Berger I became confident in my preferences and began to hone my artistic goals. An important aspect of my existence is inhabiting a neutral ground, avoiding sensationalism and exoticism. I like to think of the neutral ground as a average position. Mathematically, the average is data informed by all positions. I aim for the Father-Knows-Best-life (figure 2).

“In an average town, Springfield, on an average street, Maple, lives an average American family, the Henderson's. The husband, Jim, is very much in love with his wife, Margaret, and they're both quite fond of their three children, Betty, Bud, and Kathleen. Which, I should say, is an average way for parents to feel. On this particular morning, which is an average sort of day, the Henderson's are ready for an average sort of meal, breakfast.”

Average is not normal or boring, but a position that affords the maximum vantage point. By positioning myself as average I am able to empathize and remain open minded to both sides of a topic. The average position, or neutral ground is a natural part of my being. As an individual who identifies as agender and asexual, for most of my life, my understanding of the world is open, not dictated by gender or sexuality. For many, having a state of mind not guided by gender norms and sexuality is a fiction, but it is my truth. If I am not personally influenced by these things, what am I influenced by?

I am a sentimentalist. My perception is founded on the sentimentality, encoded emotions and feelings, of the world I inhabit. Instead of understanding the world through a libido, my understanding is honed through empathy and emotional needs such as compassion, tenderness,

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and sorrow. I must make it clear that I have no negative opinions of individuals who understand the world as sexual, but that I do not and cannot perceive through such a lens. My sentimental inclination is directly tied to my art practice in that the objects I create and the acts I perform have no intended sexual content, but genuine sentimental content. This being the case, my work often comments on topics of gender roles and expectations, which is separate from sexuality. One’s gender does not dictate ones sexuality. Through sentimentality I am able to gently conflate the fictions and realities within my work instead of forming concrete statements.

I believe that sentimentality is a critical aspect of human existence because it is human-natural, agendered, and provides ground for gentle conflation of the domestic sphere and the roles within it. As an artist, I am able to utilize sentimentality to open possibilities and welcome, instead of molest, viewers into contemplation with the assumed norms of domesticity.

Please enjoy.

Take Care,

Mr. Jonathan P. Berger
Defining Sentimentality

How can something so far gone be reclaimed? When thinking about sentimentality, saccharine images and novels which produce emotional queasiness may come to mind. Manipulation, indulgence, and falseness are its hallmarks. The tastelessness of sentimental art must indicate over simplification and unrefined emotion, at least that is what its critics claim. Sentimentality is a suspected term, but I refused to claim it as lost. Our current understanding of sentimentality is incorrect and dictated by a Patriarchal system that feeds on our uncomfortable inability to communicate the soft emotions which are traditionally considered feminine while encouraging expression of hard masculine emotions. Soft emotions are those emotions that when positive warm us and when negative nibble away at us. Hard emotions burn us with passion or ferociously bite at us with depression. The difference between the two set of emotions is intensity, not conviction. Hard emotions are bursts that require time to cool down, while soft emotions can flow continuously. By the same respect, soft can build into hard and hard can simmer down into soft. As a manic society, we are attracted to the bursts more than the flows. Sentimentality is not to blame for society’s contempt, but society’s learned preferences. I exist within the gentle flows; bursts upset my stomach.

In recent years, I have begun to consider my perception of the world as one based on sentimentality. At first sentimentality simply sounded right and that was all I needed, for I was certain I did not comprehend the world in sexual or cynical ways. I used it as a simple label, not taking the time to analyze its nuances. During my graduate studies and separating from my birth place, I found it vitally important that I begin to critically engage with sentimentality.
Interest blossomed once I realized that sentimentality had a rich past founded in the eighteenth century during the Age of Enlightenment. In its early days, sentimentality was a praise worthy quality of “cultivated fineness and intelligence of feeling.” An intelligence honed through the contemplation of emotions was considered a vital and knowledgable pursuit, something everyone should strive to engage. Emotions were humanity’s instinctual compass and intellectual activity was humanity’s refinement. Sentimentality was not only a personal endeavor, but a communal method to stimulate social and cultural action. During the Age of Enlightenment, the most prominent thinkers of the time, such as Lord Shaftesbury and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “looked to sentiment as a means of transforming the social and political order” through “social affections.” “Social affections” was understood as emotions that bond people together in familial and community cohesion which included, “love, affection, tenderness, pity, gratitude, benevolence, and patriotism.” The notion that “social affections” could bind people together though soft emotions was not a naive fallacy, but an intellectually articulated theory. The implication that soft emotions were a driving force behind our actions is both knowledgable and human. The crux of these concepts was intelligence through emotions, or emotional intelligence. Humans tend to surround themselves with people, objects, and ideas that they find emotionally fulfilling and challenging. We enjoy empathetic living, however with the patriarchal attacks on emotive femininity, sentimentality gradually began to fade from glory.

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5 Ibid.
Something that had once been the cornerstone to intellectualism is now condemned as contemptible gushiness. The close-mindedness of sentimentality’s current position lead me to engage in reevaluation of its role in contemporary life for I knew it was not the uncouth entity it was claimed to be. Taking this engagement as a leading concept in my artistic practice I have developed a repositioned and updated definition by personally embodying, creating, and playing with the process of sentimentalization. I have come to define sentimentality as the emotional intellects method of encoding and decoding the soft emotions onto and into object, memories, people, and ideas. Sentiments are the encoded or decoded soft emotions, sentimentality’s results. The emotional intellect, or EQ, is an individual’s ability to “monitor one’s own and others’ feelings, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and action.” The EQ, much like the IQ, is a measurable ability to “understand the relationship among reported findings and guide directions.” With the EQ, this process of encoding and decoding the soft emotions reveal a human-natural phenomenon which is found instinctively within all human cultures. This human-naturalness points to sentimentality’s agendered position outside of the gender spectrum. Sentimentality is similar to art in that it is natural to humans and fundamentally free from the dictations of gender identification.

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Emotions were humanity’s instinctual compass and intellectual activity was humanity’s refinement. Sentimentality was not only a personal endeavor, but a communal method to stimulate social and cultural action. During the Age of Enlightenment, the most prominent thinkers of the time, such as Lord Shaftesbury and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “looked to sentiment as a means of transforming the social and political order” through “social affections.”9 “Social affections” was understood as emotions that bond people together in familial and community cohesion which included, “love, affection, tenderness, pity, gratitude, benevolence, and patriotism.”10 The notion that “social affections” could bind people together though soft emotions was not a naive fallacy, but an intellectually articulated theory. The implication that soft emotions were a driving force behind our actions is both knowledgable and human. The crux of these concepts was intelligence through emotions, or emotional intelligence. Humans tend to surround themselves with people, objects, and ideas that they find emotionally fulfilling and challenging. We enjoy empathetic living.

After the original usage in the 18th century, sentimentality has flourished in its ambiguity, operating as propositions for contemplation. This is the nature of poetic language. Like poetic language, sentimentality and its derivatives hold compressed meaning that proposes contemplation. When reading a poem or poetic term, the reader is proposed possible meanings compressed within language. Terms can reference a phenomenon, itself, and/or another phenomenon. Context has much to do with how one contemplates such terms. Term $x$ may or may not propose $X$, $x$, or $Y$. For example, the compressed nature of sentimentality can be


10 Ibid.
unpacked as the result of sentimentality, the process of sentimentalizing, and the mentality of sentimentality. When one encounters such terms, a game begins. Like an artwork, these terms open the doors to possible interpretations. Poetic language is open on both ends, in other words, for both the encoder and decoder.

Sentimentality’s open poetic nature has lead to the contemporary fixation on it’s use of soft emotions, often resulting in critiques of supposed excess. By these same actions, its intellectual property began to be disregarded. This was reflected in society at large, as patriarchy rejected poetic exploration while becoming preoccupied with objective scientific logic. For critics, sentimentality provided a scapegoat for the contemptible soft emotions and their dangerous tendency to cloud rational thinking. This move away from sentimentality can be understood as a patriarchal strategy against femininity’s expressive power, a “power that men perceive women having over them.”

As one can observe from the definitions below, sentimentality has been stripped of its intellectual rigor in favor of becoming a warning for emotional excess, sensitivity, and inappropriateness.

“Sentimentality may show itself as pure gushiness or as a kind of hair-trigger emotional sensitiveness.”

“Sentimentality resides in worn-out emotions and conventional thoughts…The sentimental poem often pretends intense feelings without grounds to support them…”

“Sentimentality is the expression of feelings of sadness, sympathy, love, etc. in a way that is inappropriate or obvious.”


When one realizes that sentimentality was established as a term during the Age of Enlightenment, a time of emotional and intellectual union, it is odd that it has been zapped of its complexity. There is however, a bit of truth to these definitions if we understand sentimentality within popular contemporary mentality. Emotion, especially soft emotions are highly suspect today because they indicate intimacy and trust. Popular contemporary mentality’s modus operandi is pessimism.

Although emotions in general are suspect today, we are not devoid of acceptable emotional excesses today. The emotional excesses in vogue today are hard emotions that jar us because contemporary mentality understands these as honest expressions of reality. The intensity of *Breaking Bad* (figure 3) has become honest, while light-hearted programs such as *The Andy Griffith Show* (figure 4) appear to be affected fantasy. Both programs are undoubtedly fictional worlds, but we seemingly relate more effectively with Walter White than Andy Griffith. This disparity between the two programs can be found within *The Andy Griffith Show’s* heavy use of sentimentality and lack of intense emotions. When soft emotions are presented today, they are often tempered with hard emotions, thus resulting in mutual rationalization. For example, wartime propaganda uses the feelings of family to justify war, while also using war to reify the family. Despite its long and rich history, sentimentality’s utilization of soft emotion such as tenderness, compassion, and sorrow are inappropriately excessive by the mentality of today because we no longer are taught and instilled with the ability to appreciate the characteristics of sentiments. In
his article, *On Kitsch and Sentimentality*, Robert C. Solomon states that our contemporary “limited vocabulary and expression indicate a cultivated inability to recognize or publicly express the more gentle emotions.”\(^{15}\) We can see this with the changing definition of some words and phrases from softness to hardness. For example, “the fine old word *intercourse*, which means communication, conversation, or discourse, is now reserved primarily as a synonym for *sex*.\(^{16}\) What this indicates is a shift in mentality. This shift was noticed by Tolstoy over a hundred years ago when he claimed sensuality “forms the chief subject matter of works of art of recent times.”\(^{17}\) For Tolstoy, this sensuality only produced “counterfeit art,” art that fails to transmit the emotion of the artist. One can think of sensuality as sensationalism, as an attempt to stimulate intense, hard, emotional response instead of intimate one. As Dave Hickey puts it, “We refuse to engage the argument of images that deal so intimately with trust, pain, love, and the giving up of the self.”\(^{18}\) Hickey’s “giving up of self” can be understood as allowing oneself to be intimate, trusting, and willing to be affected. Today, we prefer to be dammed from gentle flows of soft emotions around us, while allowing an occasional storm of concentrated hard emotion to pour over the dam. Our mentality is of manic engagement with the hard emotions. Because of this shift in mentality I will accede and agree that sentimentality is an excess of soft emotions. As

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Roland Barthes proclaims, “It is no longer the sexual which is indent, it is the sentimental.”\(^\text{19}\) It is important to note that this excess is not synonymous to indulgent.

Indulgence has a connotation of unearned or untutored enjoyment due to its aim of self-pleasure. The excesses of soft emotions afford by sentimentality are not necessarily enjoyable or unearned. Sentimentality aids us in perceiving the world, good and bad, in gentle ways. Gentleness does not equal enjoyment. It is as Robert Solomon claims, “We are embarrassed by the gentle emotions … these emotions themselves make us uncomfortable, in any ‘amount’ and remind us of our own residual naivety.”\(^\text{20}\) A gentle lifestyle or perspective is not something easily gained. Gentleness is not naivety, but controlled and thoughtful. Buddhistic monks spend the majority of their lives perfecting a gentle interaction with the world around them. One would not describe Buddhism as indulgent. Like Buddhism, sentimentality emphasizes understanding and contemplation with our world by gentle interaction.

Where my definition of sentimentality strongly breaks from the contemporary definition while unifying with the Age of Enlightenment's notion is the the role of intelligence. It is important to remember sentimentality is by no means the soft emotions, but the encoding of those soft emotions in an intellectual manner onto objects, people, times, or ideas. For example, the field of history utilizes sentimentality to establish zeitgeist for times past. As an additive activity, sentiments add something to the things they encode. Because of its intellectual encoding, the resulting sentiments add a poetic complexity that operates as propositions for contemplation and unpacking. With this realization, even artists whose oeuvres critics consider


shallow and unsophisticated due to over sentimentalization reveal themselves to be rich with content. Two such artists are the iconic Thomas Kinkade and Norman Rockwell.

Thomas Kinkade’s work as been ridiculed as cheap, insubstantial and sedative. This understanding of his work stems from its success at commodification of light-hearted and warm imaginings. By taking this stance, however, one neglects to recognize the thoughtfulness of Kinkade’s practice and paintings. “The wide appeal of Kinkade’s art indicates that he has tapped into powerful personal and cultural longings.”21 This type of insight is not gained by idle emotions, but through extensive research and decoding. Kinkade’s has carefully studied particular paintings conventions, artists and movements, “recast[ing] them in his own art.”22 His ability to decode and then encode his own work with the “heartfelt, well-informed, sentimentalized variant” indicates a strong degree of emotional intelligence.23 In his painting The End of a Perfect Day III (figure 5) Kinkade utilizes his knowledge of past work and their sentimental value to intelligently encode. References to such works as Thomas Hill’s Yosemite Valley (figure 6) can easily be recognized, although Kinkade has removed the uncertain darkness and replaced it with warm sun beams. This intelligence is made all the more obvious when you consider the amazing amount of success he has had in distributing his work. Kinkade utilizes sentimentality’s intellectual rigor to enhance his work’s

22 Ibid. p. 83.
23 Ibid.
decimation by displaying his work in domestic, home-like galleries. In this sense, the
sentimentality of Kinkade’s work is found not only in the images, but primarily in the experience
surround the work. Kinkade attempts to “sell an experience as well as a product, the experience
of being transported by the magic of Kinkade’s art.”24 Norman Rockwell, Kinkade’s idol, had a
different method of utilizing sentimentality’s intellectual properties.

Norman Rockwell is perhaps the most recognized American artist to “celebrate the
romantic vision of American life.”25 Like Kinkade, Rockwell utilized sentimentality to create
work that resonated with his audiences. There is however an internal complexity to Rockwell’s
images that Kinkade avoids for “Rockwell wants you to know he has
constructed a picture” and narrative.26 This internal complexity can be
seen within his painting Saying Grace (figure 7). In this painting we
have the dynamism of two young men inquisitively observing the “old
fashioned, domestic observance” shown by the old woman and the
young boy in which the picture thematizes as dislocated within the
modern public space.27 Here we have the sentiments of the young men and observant pair, two
points of view to decode the image. The complexity continues as Rockwell acknowledges “a sly
picture-in-picture reference to abstract expressionism, a visual joke” within the plate-glass

24 Ibid. p. 80.
25 Ibid. p. 86.
26 Ibid. p. 88.
27 Ibid.
window dripping with rain. These references are found throughout his oeuvre. Rockwell’s use of sentimentality creates work that is approachable, internally complex, and referential.

As one can see from Kinkade's and Rockwell’s work, sentimentality has the natural tendency to enrich through both encoding and decoding. The naturalness is due to sentimentality’s human-naturalness.

“At some point in their evolution, humans began deliberately to set out to make things special or extra-ordinary…the reason making special first occurred might have been to persuade oneself and others that what was being done was worthwhile and effective.”

What Dissanayake calls “making special” is directly related to sentimental encoding by adding significance and focus. Without these encodings, we would inhabit a meaningless world, where nothing would be intimate and meaningful. There would be no need to survive, for what would be the point. It is through sentimental encoding that the things around us become relatable, intimate and emotionally weighted. We yearn to feel with someone or something. Tolstoy’s understanding of art and its power aligns with Dissanayake’s concept of “making special” by emphasizing the importance of emotional significance. Tolstoy claims that,

“If people lacked this capacity to receive the thoughts conceived by the men who preceded them and to pass on to others their own thoughts, men would be like wild beasts… And if men lacked this other capacity of being infected by art, people might be almost more savage still, and, above all, more separated from, and more hostile to, one another. And therefore the activity of art is a most important one, as important as the activity of speech itself and as generally diffused.”

Ibid.


Tolstoy’s transferring of thoughts and Dissanayake’s “making special” work in harmony to explain the importance of art and its expression. Transferring is like encoding, and by decoding the decoder uncovers the encoder’s thoughts and emotions. This act of encoding and decoding “makes special,” by adding significance and focus. Sentiments provide choice material for both Tolstoy’s and Dissanayake’s concepts by supplying gentle flows instead of quick passions. Although hard emotion’s intensity is thrilling, its novelty ages badly while soft emotion’s gentleness perpetually flows and adapts.

The sentiments can be understood as the extra-ordinary encoded onto or into the ordinary by way of the emotional intellect. Dissanayake’s believes humans naturally “differentiate between an order, realm, mood, or site of being that is mundane, ordinary, or ‘natural,’ and one that is unusual, extra-ordinary, or ‘super natural.’”31 By “making special,” or through sentimental encoding and decoding, humans are able to open doors between the two realms, thus giving the ordinary extra-ordinary properties. Again Tolstoy’s notion of art parallels Dissanayake’s when he states, “Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them.”32 Both emphasis the consciousness of the differentiation between the thing being encoded and the encoded emotion. Diszsanyake’s extra-ordinary can be likened to Tolstoy’s infectious feelings. Although they are two different entities, this does not indicate separation. Their symbiotic relationship often entails a portmanteau existence of inseparability. For example, a well encoded object such as a class ring (figure 8)

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illicit, and inflects us with emotions that stimulate mental interaction while the physical ring engages concrete sensations, thus together they form the rings actuality. Without the emotions, the class ring would just be a ring. Without the ring the emotions would be rootless and nonexistent. This relationship is responsible for the human tendency of sentimental attachment. A prime example of sentimental attachment’s complexity can be found within Félix González-Torres’ *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* from 1991.

Félix González-Torres’ *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (figure 9) from 1991 is much more than a pile of wrapped sugar. Having lost his partner, Ross Laycock, to AIDS 1991, González-Torres manifested this emotions into a work of art. On their own, the wrapped candies are unremarkable, however when encountering the pile one is likely to feel an aura of significance. González-Torres encoded his soft emotions of loss and sadness, but also of hope on the candies. Beginning each morning at 175 pounds it slowly dwindles down as people take and eat the candy. This change in weight reflects the weight loss suffered by Gonzalez-Torres’ partner as AIDS overtook his body. González-Torres’ use of humble materials and actions are highly sentimental and gentle. Encoding the candies with the soft emotions associated with the loss of his lover, we as viewers are able to contemplate loss without corrosion and manipulation. The genuine sentimental attachment González-Torres encodes on the candies welcomes us into empathy.
In the preface to Mythologies, Barthes addresses “a feeling of impatience at the sight of the ‘naturalness’ with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up reality which, even though it is one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history.” If we were to replace “history” with sentimentality, something I believe Barthes would allow, for history is a sentimental recount of the past, Mythologies coordinates well with Dissanayake’s notions of “making special.” Barthes understands that even the everyday objects are signifiers due to their sentimental encoding both personally and collectively. Perhaps Barthes does not articulate the “dressing up” of reality as natural, but it is undoubtedly human-natural. Although we cannot claim that animals sentimentalize, we are certain that humans do so naturally. Like artistic creation and expression, sentimentality is an instinctual human endeavor, thus human-natural. This human-naturalness is agendered because it is not tied an individual’s gender identification.

Although sentimentality has been linked with femininity in the past, I argue that it is truly agendered. The gender spectrum encompasses everything between feminine and masculine. I prefer to use the term “agendered” instead of “gender neutral” because of its separation from the gender spectrum. Agender does not operate within the gender spectrum. Regardless of one’s gender identification, sentimentality can be understood and applied the same. There is no feminine or masculine sentiments as such, only human. What I mean is that although society prescribes gender appropriate sentiments, this does not align with sentimentality natural tendency. Differences in sentimentality is found within an individuals personality, not their gender. This can be likened to personal food preferences where someone’s dislike of broccoli is consider caused by their identification as a man. Sentimentality’s encoding and decoding are

influenced by an individual’s personality, not gender. Unlike sexuality where there is a variety of feminine and masculine roles that one can fill, sentimentality has no such prescription. Even with sensuality, feminine and masculine characteristics are attributed to expression. For example, a sensual woman is different than a sensual man. This is not to say that sexuality or sensuality is bad or good, but only that it is flavored by gender. Sentimentalists need no gender identification.

Patriarchy has used sentimental attributes as qualifiers for oppressing woman and non-men. Throughout the past few decades, men have “discovered that [they] had no language of feeling,” having been “trapped in public, specialized language of work learned in universities or factories, which acted as a shield against deeper emotional solidarities.” With the simple fact that we inhabit a patriarchal system where men are the authority, it is clear the language of emotion is both suspect and disliked. The inability to communicate and understand emotions is something that is actively learned. Humans naturally communicate and empathize, it is only our culture that prescribes expectations of emotional language.

Separating sentimentality from its strong association with “woman’s culture” such as those articulated in The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in 19th-Century America by Shirley Samuels is a big step, however when one keeps in mind the advances in gender and sex politics, the step does not seem as big. I would argue that today sentimentality is more closely tied to notions of domesticity than “woman’s culture.” Historically, “woman’s culture” can be understood to stand parallel to domesticity, which was considered a woman’s domain. Throughout the decades, feminism has thrown open the doors of domesticity, allowing exit and entrance regardless of gender or sex, therefore making domesticity an open space. The

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consequences have been the ungendering of the domestic. With this ungendered domesticity, I find it logical to base my understanding of sentimentality as such. I am defining sentimentality in its twenty-first century condition in which I believe what truly matters is an open mind and a well honed emotional intelligence.

Mr. Rogers is a prime example of sentimentality’s agendered position. Mr. Rogers’ encoding of sentimentality in his show Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood (figure 10) is not based on his identification as a man. Although his attire and honorific “Mr.” indicate the masculine, his activities and personality are ambiguous in their gendering. His targeting strategies are also agendered, for you do not need to identify as a gender to feel as if he is speaking to you. We can all be his neighbor. Mr. Rogers’ ability to engage with people in and out of the show indicate a high EQ. One can imagine little change to the show if the host was a woman. The closing lines of Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood theme tune prove my point.

Let's make the most of this beautiful day
Since we're together, might as well say
Would you be my, could you be my,
Won't you be my neighbor?35

In conclusion, I define sentimentality as the emotional intellect’s way of encoding or decoding the soft emotions surrounding and within objects, people, times or ideas. Soft emotions are those that warm/nibble instead of burn/bite. Because of its foundation in emotional intelligence and EQ, sentimentality is a human-natural and agendered phenomenon.

Gentle Conflation

“The dream world, the true freedom of the imagination, does not open to self-conscious manipulation.”

I gently conflate. I prefer to do it gently, sentimentally. This is nothing new for me, I have been doing it for years. It began before I knew I was doing it. Sometimes I conflate more, sometimes I conflate less. My habitats, habits, and perspectives gently conflate with the other things around me. Mr. Jonathan P. Berger and I are one, but not always the same.

We all live within a state of conflation by inhabiting a plurality of world-representations simultaneously. World-representations range from personal daydreams to our immediate tangible reality, encompass everything from and between science-fiction to domestic life. Essentially, world-representations are bundles of facts that are true in some world, be it fictional or non-fictional. For example, the world-representation of Lord of the Rings has it true that hobbits live in the Shire. Hobbits, hobbit holes, and the Shire exist in the Lord of the Rings’ world-representation without fictional quality. Conflation happens when world-representations collide, but remain individually distinct. Unlike amalgamation, the collision does not result in homogeneity, but a heterogeneous mixer where slippage between world-representation is possible. Conflation is like oil in water. Nelson Goodman, a renowned philosopher of aesthetics and counterfactuals stated thus “the multiple worlds of conflicting true versions are actual worlds...if there is any actual world, there are many.”

36 Sister Wendy Beckett, Nun and art historian

true versions” he is speaking of how individuals perceive the world differently than others. These differences are attributed to the world-representations they currently operate within.

I posit that sentimentality, the encoding and decoding of soft emotions, can be strategically used to induce gentle conflation between these world-representations, especially those located within the domestic. Because of their quietness, soft emotions are able to gently conflate by lingering mysteriously around and between their source world-representations. One may question where the source of the sentimental feeling stems from. Is it the tangible object, it’s history, or a combination? Like the term sentimentality itself, soft emotions obscure such sources as dreams and memories. Gaston Bachelard articulates the gentle conflation of sentimentalizing one’s birthplace. “Centers of boredom, centers of solitude, centers of daydream group together to constitute the oneiric house which is more lasting than the scattered memories of our birthplace.”

As an agendered phenomenon, sentimentality is easily able to gently conflate bodies and their connotations. In The Culture of Sentiment, Shirley Samuels reveals “a celebration of the emancipatory strategies of sentimentality that rescues subjects from the unfortunate essentializing that the fact of having a body entails.” Although this gentle conflation runs the risk of removing bodies from body politics because of its deemphasis of physicality, I see the potential to transcend the biological to emotional. Through sentimentality we can connect through emotions, not bodies, thus leading to complex interaction.

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As where hard emotions seem matter of fact and easily sourced, sentiments linger in intention and source. By encoding the sentiments, decoding is occasionally like attempting to dig a hole in quicksand, multiple world-representations persist as possible sources. The gentleness prevents hierarchies, schisms and ruptures between world-representations, therefor creating an equal value proposition.

Unfortunately, the sentimentality’s ability to gently conflate can lead to such things as propaganda that seem harmless and natural. For example, during WWII Charlie & His Orchestra, a Nazi-sponsored swing band, appropriated the sentiments of swing big band into German propaganda. Irving Berlin’s *Slumming on Park Avenue* became Charlie & His Orchestra’s *Let’s Go Bombing*.  

**Slumming on Park Avenue (1937)**  
*Let's go slumming, take me slumming,*  
*Let's go slumming on Park Avenue.*  
*Let us hide behind a pair of fancy glasses*  
*and make faces when a member of the classes passes.*  
*Let's go smelling where they're dwelling,*  
*sniffing everything the way they do.*  
*Let us go to it, let's do it*  
*why can't we do it too.*  
*Let's go slumming, nose-thumbing on Park Avenue.*

**Let’s Go Bombing (1941)**  
*Here is the latest song of the British airmen:*  
*Let's go bombing, oh, let's go bombing,*  
*just like good old British airmen do.*  
*Let us bomb the Frenchmen who were*  
*once our allies!*  
*England fights for liberty, we make them realize,*  
*from the skies.*  
*Let's go shelling where they're dwelling,*  
*shelling Nanette, Fifi and Lulu.*  
*Let us go to it, let's do it, let's sink*  
*their food-ships too.*  
*Let's go bombing, it's becoming quite the thing to do.*

*Let’s Go Bombing* gently conflates the dangerous world-representations of Nazi Germany with the world-representations of lighthearted swing music. Although *Let’s Go Bombing* reads sarcastically today due to its blunt propaganda, we must understand it to overcome its effects, not just disregard its potential power. Because of this potential, it is imperative that one efficiently

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utilizes their emotional intelligence. Instead of applying a blanket claim of suspect and manipulation on all sentimental artifacts, I propose we contemplate deeply. By doing this we can appreciate consciously and openly. Without this appreciation and understanding we are easily swayed by patriarchy’s dictations, becoming cynical zombies. We have the power of encoding and decoding, our processes are unique to each of us. This uniqueness leads to a wide range of interpretations, each one as valuable as the other. A high emotional intelligence allows for a wider imaginative ability to perceive the nuances of the gentle conflation.

As an artist and sentimentalist, the utilization of gentle conflation within my practice is of prime importance. My materials, methods, and concepts provide rich ground for participants to gently conflate their perceptions of interpersonal relationships, temporality, and art/objecthoods. My artworks provide participants opportunities to envision possibilities without molestation. By layering the types of sentimentality that result in gentle conflation — empathetic, temporal, manufactured and undefined — into and onto my artworks, complex relationships between domestic world-representations welcome contemplation. World-representations waft in mysterious ways about and in my work while sentiments obscure the location of the conceptual weight by softly suggesting possibilities. Each type of sentimentality gently conflates different aspects of our lives, such as empathetic sentimentality’s basis in interpersonal relationships. The types do not require any specific resulting encoded manifestation or form. These types are often layer in overlapping encodement onto and into the things they encode. Let’s look how these types of sentimentality gently conflate, as well as how artists, including myself, utilize them in artworks.
Empathetic Sentimentality

Empathetic sentimentality is associated with encoding soft emotions onto interpersonal or communal relationships between humans or humans and non-humans. The use of these sentiments can forge warm bonds or gnawing annoyance by gently conflating world-representations. The fictions of our social daydreams and recalled dreams, amalgam with the social situations around us. This is a prime tool for artists who confront social and communal concepts because it gently conflates individual perceptions with those around them. Social interactions open up into a web of perceptions as we begin to understand interactions from our point of view, the other peoples’ point of view, an onlookers point of view, and from the standpoint of separate interactions. Artists that utilize empathetic sentimentality fall within Nicolas Bourriaud’s definition of relational art, “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interaction and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space.” Artists take the intersubjectivity of their participants as the substrate, providing a space for gentle conflation through the “collective elaboration of meaning.” The collective elaboration can transform the social situation dramatically. Along these same lines, Ellen Dissanayake in her book Homo Aestheticus mentions how art “originated and thrived for the most of human history as communal activity” which “‘enabled’ ceremonies because they made ceremonies feel good.” This “feel good” is attributed to gentle communal conflation where bonds between living beings are formed. In the 18th century, American artists such as the

43 Ibid. p. 15.
painter John Trumbull believed that “true sociability, true fellow feeling would, according to the values of [sentimentalism], cross traditional boundaries of region, country, class, and race.” In this sense, Trumbull’s paintings of the Revolutionary War were gently conflating the relationships between citizens by “creating a community of feeling among his viewers, arousing in them shared emotions of affection and gratitude” Trumbull and other artists like him aimed to gently conflate world-representations in hopes that their viewers could imagine connections between them. Clearly, empathetic sentimentality is only one strategy utilized by relational artists. Alternatives have been articulated by Claire Bishop as relational antagonism, work that “does not offer an experience of transcendent human empathy that smooths over the award situation before us, but a pointed racial and economic nonidenification.” Even with the alternatives, there are a plethora of contemporary artists who utilize gentle conflation through empathetic sentimentality such as Rirkrit Tiravanija’s conflation of gallery interaction in Untitled (Free/Still) and Diane Borsato’s conflation of artist lecture social dynamics in Artist Talk. I also utilize this form of gentle conflation.

In Golden in Silver (figure 11) I used the sentiments encoded within the historical photographic tintype process to conflate the relationships between citizens of University City. Golden in Silver was a public art project that aimed to bring the citizens of University City together through tintype and story exchange. As the first photographic process inexpensive enough for the general populations, along with its utilitarian durability, the tintype embodies


46 Ibid.

photography’s first democratic manifestation. With the sentiments of the
tintype image and process, *Golden in Silver* documented over one-hundred
citizens. At public photoshoots, Mr. Berger intimately engaged and
conversed with people while capturing their tintype and writing down one of
their memories of living in University City. Capturing a tintype is like
trimming someone’s hair, for with only one shot, time and focus is needed.
During the exhibition at the public library, participants met one another both
physically and through the tintype. The tintype’s image pushed its subjects
into a sentimental existence, influencing the interactions between real world
participants. In its concluding act, the paired tintypes and stories were
randomly exchanged between participants, thus encoding another layer of
empathetic sentimentality onto the tintype.

**Temporal Sentimentality**

The temporal sentiments are found within our relationships
with time, both past and future. These sentiments flavor our
perceptions of times, by encoding soft emotions such as yearning,
sorrow, and tenderness. Due to memories’ and aspirations’ natural
tendencies to amalgam with dreams and emotions, this gentle
conflation is easily recognized to exist. Nostalgia, history, and hope are three forms of gentle
temporal conflation.

Nostalgia is temporal sentiments encoding soft emotions onto personal or collective
memories. The memories need not be significant or clear to be encoded because nostalgia itself
will gently conflate the memory. For example, if I bring to mind memories of the red fire hydrant in my childhood home’s lawn, what I recall is a memory and daydream hybrid. Surrounding the memory of the hydrant is a daydream originating from nostalgia, or encoded soft emotions of that time in my life. In my daydream I perceive the hydrant as a friend and companion to my childhood self. Obviously, the hydrant was not a friend but a hunk of metal in my front yard. This daydream is a fictional world-representation brought on by nostalgia and its soft emotions. These conflicting world-representations, that of my memory and daydream, are gently conflated with nostalgia. “Thus [through nostalgia] the multiple worlds of conflicting true versions [of our memory] are actual worlds, not the merely possible worlds of non worlds of false version.”

Mike Kelley exposes these multiple versions of the world in his *Educational Complex*.

Throughout our lives we live and inhabit countless spaces while our memory of previous spaces fade and change. Mike Kelley’s *Educational Complex* (figure 12) reveals his nostalgic tendencies to gently conflate his memories. As a representation of his childhood home and every school he attended depicted in a single complex, it represents the artist’s conflated memories with the visual authority of the architectural model. These structures are the manifestation of nostalgic recall, providing only partially true reconstruction. Far from an optimistic commentary, Kelley’s work presents the return to one’s past as an impossible proposition due to nostalgia’s gentle conflation of memory. Here, sentimentality and nostalgia are not utilized to comfort, but as self-reflective critique. The crux is

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repression through nostalgia, producing memories of the past that obscure truths. This obscuring of the past is also found in my work *Man and Machine Power X-Treme.*

I have never been very masculine. Growing up I was never able to identify with the superheroes of cartoons and comic books. Regardless of this inability to identify, I consistently attempted to personify the characters’ personality and style. I never succeeded. One would think such struggle would produce bad memories, however I only recall that time with nostalgia. *Man and Machine Power X-treme* (figure 13) represents my sentimental relationship with that aspect of my past, my memories of superheroes. The light-hearted display of foolish masculinity is not my surrender to some past ideal, but a softening of a too hard concept. Nostalgia has empowered me to appropriate my past and its influences in present contexts. Superheroes are no longer ideals, but playthings of my imagination.

History is like nostalgia in many ways for it obscures the past with narrative and purpose, however the past being utilized is not our memories. Nostalgia encodes memories, or a personal recollection of the past, while history directly encodes the past. When we speak of the “spirit of an era” or “flow of the past,” we are conflating the actual past with historical perspective. History encodes the perception of the past with soft emotions, increasing our relation to the spirit of that time. For example, the emotions and ideas surrounding our idea of the Renaissance period, is gently conflated with multiple world-representations of the past and present. Although the people of the time did not contextualize themselves within the
Renaissance, we have the advantage of history to appreciate the era’s importance. As a field of academic practice, history can be complex and difficult to grasp, but this does not have to be the case. Sister Wendy Beckett, a nun and art historian, approaches the past with a storyteller appreciation and reveals the soft sentimental effect of history on the past (figure 14).

"The story of painting is one that is immensely rich in meaning, yet its value is all too often hidden from us by the complexities of its historians. We must forget the densities of 'history' and simply surrender to the wonder of the story."

Hope can be conceived as nostalgia of the future or systematic or casting of the future. In struggling to find a term to label this process, I came across Michael Ian Black who claims, “There is no word for feeling nostalgic about the future, but that’s what a parent’s tears often are, a nostalgia for something that has not yet occurred.” I agree with Black’s use of the term “hope” to refer to future focused temporal sentimentality. Hope can be both utopian and dystopian. Parents are both excited and frightened by their children’s exodus out into the world. Artists use hope as a tool to gently conflate the present emotion with the future yearning. By future gazing with rose tinted glasses at one world-representation, others conflate in our peripherals. As our gaze or decoding of hope shifts, the peripheral word-representations conflate when observed directly. A prime example of hope’s gentle conflation abilities can be found in the Disney World’s *Carousel of Progress*.

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Introduced at the 1964 World Fair, Disney’s *Carousel of Progress* (figure 15) explores the joys of living through the advancement of technology while being both nostalgic and hopeful. Using the “typical American family” as our hosts, we carousel through the past decades into the future, thus providing the foundation of tradition to the future, a gentle conflation. The Sherman Brother’s theme song for the ride provides an excellent example of a sentimental perspective.

*There's a great big beautiful tomorrow*  
*Shinin' at the end of ev'ry day*  
*There's a great big beautiful tomorrow*  
*And tomorrow's just a dream away*

*Man has a dream and that's the start*  
*He follows his dream with mind and heart*  
*And when it becomes a reality*  
*It's a dream come true for you and me*  

**Manufactured Sentimentality**

Manufactured sentimentality is the encoding of soft emotions *into* a distinct thing. This notion of manufacture does not denote simulation or falsehood, but the apparent concreteness of the encoded distinct thing. This sentimentality is *about* the distinct thing itself. Distinct things are tangible and intangible objects which include artworks, brands, and media. I would also venture to include fictional distinct things found within fictional worlds. When a distinct thing is encoded through sentimentality, they become props in games of decoding and make-believe. Kendall L. Walton, a leading theorist of fictionalism, developed a theory of make-believe that

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51 Shepherd, Jean. *There’s a Great Big Beautiful Tomorrow*. Walt Disney. The Carousel of Progress. 1964.
aims to understand the nature of representation in the arts by pointing to the importance of props in conflating our world-representations/fictional worlds.

“The role of props in generating fictional truths is enormously important. They give fictional worlds and their contents a kind of objectivity, and independence from cognizers and their experience which contributes much to the excitement of our adventure between fictionality, insofar as it derives from props, and truths.”

For Walton, props generate fictional truths, which provide access to other world-representations. Fictional truths are “true in some fictional world or other,” or “whatever is the case ‘in a fictional world’.” Manufactured sentimentality is the crux of a prop’s ability to generate fictional truths because the encoding of soft emotions into makes it possible to decode other possible world-representations associated with that object. It like the One Ring from J.R.R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Ring trilogy. The One Ring (figure 16) has manufactured sentiments multiple encodings from Middle Earth characters, from variety of media world-presentations such as books and movies, as well as real world encoding from fans, authors, and directs. The One Ring is a smorgasbord of sentiments, providing a deep sources of gentle conflation by an individuals perception. Through manufactured sentimentality the One Ring prop brings them, world-representations, into gentle conflation.

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\text{One Ring to rule them all,} \\
\text{One Ring to find them,} \\
\text{One Ring to bring them all,} \\
\text{And in the darkness bind them.}\]

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53 Ibid. p.35.

Manufactured sentimentality is a powerful tool which has been utilized by artists for countless years. The ability to sentimentalize an artwork, thus leading to gentle conflation between numerous world-representations is a tool utilized by many artists.

Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt’s *Tender Love Among the Junk* (figure 17) transformed the materiality and references it uses by gently conflating or leading “us our of ‘the system’ into a completely unfamiliar place, and the results are revelatory.”55 “The system” can be understood as societal norms which push sentiments into unfamiliar places. By using the “trappings of life” in bright and shiny ways, Lanigan-Schmidt elevates the sentiments for consideration.56 The work sentimentalizes domestic materials such as pipe cleaners, Sun-Maid raisins containers, and holographic tape, gently conflating their actuality into an ponderable aesthetic embrace. Through encoding warm feelings of religion, fantasy, and home present themselves as equal. Viewers are welcomed and encouraged to play with the work’s nuances and conflated world-representations.

**Undefined Sentimentality**

The final type is undefined sentimentality, which breaks the distinction between empathetic, temporal, and manufactured sentimentality by encoding soft emotions onto the process of encoding and decoding. This type of sentimentality is a doubling in of itself by

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56 Ibid.
sentimentalizing the sentimentalization. Undefined sentimentality gently conflates the already conflated systems of world-representations with each other and can be understood as the conflation of sentimentality itself. My persona of Mr. Jonathan P. Berger is a practitioner of this type of sentimentality.

Mr. Jonathan P. Berger’s “sitcom lifestyle” conflates the acts of sentimentalization with one another while uniting their world-representations into groups. I understand the role of fiction as a tool in self-improvement. “Fictions can help by inviting us to imagine ourselves more committed than we really are to our values and then to see ourselves, in imagination, flourishing as a result.” Mr. Berger extends the imagination into actuality. For example, his attire (figure 18) is based on the manufactured sentimentality encoded into nostalgic memory. By dressing as he does, he displays the manufactured sentiments of nostalgic recall, not the nostalgic recall itself. Nostalgia here is a prop for the game of sentimental play. This sentimentalization of sentimentality is also present in his actions and domestic spaces (figure 19).

As one can see for the four types of sentimentality above, gentle conflation is a complex and layered process. Sentimentality allows encoders and decoders to play with world-representations by the nature of the soft

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emotion’s ability to linger around references and sources. Gentle conflation welcomes us, all we need do is be open and mindful of its countless configurations.
Home is Where the Heart [of my practice] is

I gently conflate and my work gently conflates with me. Sentimentality’s ability to gently conflate world-representations is a core process of my artistic practice. With this process in mind, my work focuses on the world-representations of the domestic sphere. The domestic sphere encompasses not just the home, but the other spaces of domestic living, such as office desks, diners, and other semi-public spaces. These spaces break into the fictional universe with such sources as Leave it to Beaver, The Dick Van Dyke Show, and The Mary Tyler Moore Show. I understand the domestic not as one based on privacy as privacy, but on privacy as intimacy. Privacy as privacy pushes out as conscious ignorance, while privacy as intimacy draws in as internal contemplation.

My understanding aligns with Lynn Spigel's idea that “the ideology of privacy was not experienced simply as a retreat from the public sphere; it also gave people a sense of belonging to the community…privacy was something which could be enjoyed only in the company of others.”58 With this understanding of intimacy instead of privacy, the sentimentalization of the domestic avoids “represent[ing] a repudiation of larger social and political obligations and accelerat[ing] the social atomization that has produced modern extremes of individualism.”59 Instead of separating us from the outside world, domestic spaces provide grounds for intimacy and contemplation. Objects such as radios, televisions, and computers are “the ultimate communication experience, delivering a dream of spatial transport,” which indicate that the


domestic is closed to the obligations of the broader world. It is within the domestic that we are able to have intimate dialogue with ourselves and other over the deepest of topics, for “the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.”

Along with my interest in the spaces themselves, I am drawn to the actions performed and ideas generated in such locations. Through my practice, I propose questions and gentle conflations — multiple layers of sentiments manifest in tightly encoded objects and performances — that allows for equal weight among components. My use of materials, references, and actions are extensively considered, for my goal is a welcoming embrace of those who wonder. I am a sentimentalist not a dictator. Three pinnacle facets compose the conceptual underpinnings of my work — labor, love, and the fine line between loneliness and solitude.

Throughout my life, I have labored. Labor is not a struggle or conflict, but an act of dedication, determination, and daydream. Within my life, I have labored with enjoyment towards a dream. Labor is art making’s allure. Daydreams are acts of labor, for they take mental energy to sustain. Mr. Jonathan P. Berger was born out of my need to labor. Dyslexia provided the ground for a laborious and highly rewarding relationship with literature, theory, and academia. Through labor I have overcome the reality of chronic illness and utilized its effects to enhance my everyday existence. Although these elements of my life have been challenging many times, the opportunity of self-reflectivity is highly empowering.

As Mr. Jonathan P. Berger I have appropriated my own dyslexia and chronic illness was a means to narrative and alternative perspective. They operate as “the big episodes [that] account

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60 Ibid. p. 109.

for changes of direction in development.” Instead of viewing these as disabilities, I utilize them as tools of laborious sentimentalization. Through laborious sentimentalization deep and meaningful relationships are formed. Having found the domestic to be my natural habitat and studio, I have often performed acts of labor within those spaces. Sentimentality’s gentle conflation has lead domestic spaces to become a factory of sorts, a place of intimate labor and production of meaning.

*Mr. Berger’s Hook Rugs* (figure 20) are the products of home done laborious craft, creating manufactured sentimentality within the work. Gently conflating the world-representations of fine art and craft, these hook rugs appropriate high modernest color field paintings by way of a traditional feminine craft. The manufactured sentiments provided in the work create equality between art/craft and masculine/feminine, regardless of art historical authority. Hook rugs are soft to touch and view. Their depictions lack authoritative edges, concreteness, and certainty, but embody the soft emotions of looking. A hook rug hanging on a wall is a sentimental and playful adaptation of tapestries. Their soft and warm qualities are sentimentality manifest. Since hook rugging has been viewed as a feminine craft performed within the domestic space, the process and products have been doubly criticized as kitsch and devoid of art historical content. As an art form that welcomes individuals into engagement, they are prime sites of gentle conflation. The act of hook rugging is laborious, yet

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meditative, lending itself to a collaborative function with television, radio, or conversation. While hook rugging between eighty to one-hundred and five hours per rug, I sit at the kitchen table listening such radio shows as Father Knows Best\(^6^3\), experiencing gentle conflation within the double domestic of my home and the radio home. Like the Father in Father Knows Best, the hegemonic art historical machine is often flawed. With their manufactured sentimentality, the hook rugs translate images and artworks in domestic and democratic terms, gently conflating the world-representations of home and art museum. Difficult to confront works such as Rothko’s *White in Center*, Newman’s *Abraham*, and Frankenthaler’s *Indian Summer* now embrace interaction from the artistic layperson. As sentimentalized hook rugs, they no longer hold up to the elitist and masculine notions of art world fame, Frankenthaler has always been on par with Rothko.

Sentimentality’s agendered position disregards the gender of the sourced artist and myself. Within these works I laboriously display my sentiments for artistic heritage, art history’s authority, and craft. This use of manufactured sentimentality as a means of art world commentary can also be observed in Elaine Sturtevant’s practice.

Sturtevant replicates art world objects, replacing their art historical authenticity with manufactured sentimentality. By imperfectly replicating works from art’s western canon artists, such as Andy Warhol with her piece *Warhol Marilyn* (figure 21), she is able to gently conflate notions of significance, worth, and quality. Her practice reveals the labors behind art

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production for she kept up with the art trends of the time and produced a diverse body of work. By replacing historical authenticity’s authoritarian status with the gentle conflation of manufactured sentimentality encoded into a replicant, she is able to welcome viewers into a space of contemplation. This manufactured sentimentality can be understood as her genuine soft emotions for the works she replicates. The quietness of her hand within the works reveals elements of love and care to their source materials and art world. This love of materials and histories is also prevalent within my own practice.

As a sentimentalist, love is a concept I contemplate often. Love is not sentimentality, but they are closely tied. Love is also not sexuality or physical attraction, but more related to romantic attraction, attraction based on emotional response. Love can lead to sentimentalization because of the soft emotions associated with the act of love. One can love the people around them, the past, and ideologies. Throughout my practice I explore the role of love in our lives and sentiments. The artifacts of our past and present oftentimes reveal the things we unconsciously loved. The process of sentimentalization also has the tendency to gently conflate our perception of the things we love, leading to fictional attributes.

*Mr. Berger’s Box of Bizarre Belongings* (figure 22) is a collection of sentimental treasures given to me by the people I love. Concepts of nostalgia, hope, manufactured and undefined sentimentality are present. Each item is displayed as a precious piece of heirloom jewelry. The 115 photographs depict each of my unique ties, which have been given to me by family and friends. Having not worn every tie, the photographs present the hope of the future. The small
compartments hold Saint metals given to me by my childhood tutor, my dog’s tag when I adopted him, and my first communion metal. My eagle scout badge is displayed as remembrance of hard work and communal membership. Each artifact is a sentimentality charge object encoded with layers of nostalgic memories and manufactured sentimentality. For example, the Eagle Scout badge has nostalgic memories of my Boy Scout days, manufactured sentimentality as an award of merit and ideals of Boy Scouts. The box itself is charged because of its history as my grandfather’s jewelry box, which went through World War II in Germany. Mr. Berger’s Box of Bizarre Belongings aims to fill a role as container to the past that I love. Bachelard articulates my box’s contents in The Poetics of Space.

“The [box] contains the things that are unforgettable, unforgettable for us, but also unforgettable for those to whom we are going to give our treasures. Here the past, the present and future are condensed. Thus the [box] is memoir of what is immemorial.”

Love and nostalgia is also evident in the practice of McDermott & McGough. As two self proclaimed time traveling dandies, McDermott & McGough inhabit a world that is founded in their sentimental attraction to the past (figure 23). This sentimental attraction is based on the love of a fictional past and “a flat refusal to embrace the historical present.” Like Mr. Jonathan P. Berger, McDermott & McGough extend their artistic practice into their lifestyle though undefined sentimentality. For example, their cyanotype series, Sandymount Avenue (figure 24) exhibits their real life home while

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deliberately sentimentalizing the manufactured sentimentality of the object they live with. This double sentimen
tality is due to their “obsession with the past” which is “reflected in the subjects and styles they bring back to life, and in the prices fictional dates they give to their works.” They live and work within the gentle conflation of sentimentality, inhabiting world-representations that they love.

As reoccurring themes, labor and love guide my practice’s engagement with sentimentality’s gentle conflation. This guidance often leads to generally warm and positive conceptualization. There is however an element that denies pure positivity. The fine line between loneliness and solitude is a quietly reoccurring feature of my work that is often overlooked. Being alone mentally and/or physically can have dramatically different results. When one is lonely, they feel the doom of separation, lack of contact and hopelessness of the future. When one is in solitude that are honing minds and bodies, delving into deep contemplation, and reading for the future. The line between loneliness and solitude is left to the viewer. The sentimentality of my work allows for either interpretations. With this option of loneliness (negative) or solitude (positive), my work has multiple readings. For example, Mr. Berger’s Hook Rugs are produced at home alone, one can understand them as objects of a bored lonely individual or the works of solitude and deep engagement. The former decodes soft emotions as sympathy, while the latter decodes soft emotions of comfort. The dynamic read is present throughout my oeuvre.

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66 Ibid.
One of my works that directly aims to gently conflate the line between loneliness and solitude is *Mr. Berger Sweats to the Oldies* (figure 25). This thirty-five minute long video presents Mr. Berger working out to Richard Simmon’s Sweatin’ to the Oldies (figure 26)\(^67\). Alone in his living room he dances with excitement and energy. Within the video, my living room acts as a set, such as those in sitcoms, locating the activity within the fictional and actual home. This gentle conflation of fictional and actual home, increases the ambiguity of how a viewer should interpret the work. At this point two interpretations are possible, one of loneliness and another of solitude. As loneliness, Mr. Berger’s attire can be understood as the costume one wears to a dance, but in this case he is dancing with himself alone in his living room. Mr. Berger is alone in his home, with only his television and its characters as support. With solitude, the read changes dramatically. This ritual is an everyday labor, utilizing his chronic illness as a means to enhance his day by overcoming discomfort and received Mr. Simmon’s enthusiastic praise. Like any morning ritual, this act of solitude starts the day right. This dynamic potential of different reads is also present in William Leavitt’s performance *A Proof of Infinity*.

*A Proof of Infinity* (figure 27) presents us will an ambitious situation. A young woman sits alone on a bench in a dark park. This is one of Leavitt’s “performance tableaus” which

“combines sculpture, image, and performance together to produce a fragmented ‘theater of the ordinary’.” The location is obviously a set, gently conflating world-representations found in film, television, and reality. Without any information, the emotions behind the scene are left up to us to decode and interpret. Ann Goldstein describes the work as “Ambiguous but not absurd, surprising but not sensational; it is a scene that is at one theatrical and ordinary, melodramatic and uncertain.” Like Mr. Berger Sweats to the Oldies, all that is given is an unidentified narrative that extends beyond the work which can be understood as loneliness or solitude.

A work that clearly combines labor, love and loneliness/solitude is Mr. Berger’s Original Shell (figure 28). Labor can be observed through the traditional masculine and feminine use of craft. The feminine craft is found in the hook rugged home, a laborious and time consuming process. The masculine craft is found within the Popular Mechanics aesthetic of the table. With both types of craft, the work emphasizes sentimentality’s agendered position by disregarding a dynamic duality of feminine and masculine and instead presenting a unified whole. Love can be found in the work’s use of materials and ideas. This hook rugged home is presented as the dream home. Bachelard states, “This home is a sort of airy structure that moves about

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69 Ibid.
on the breath of time…as through it could greet us every day of our lives in order to give us confidence in life."70 Like a Kinkade painting, this love is also found in the glowing windows. “Glowing windows say welcome. They say all is well. They say that someone’s waiting, someone cares enough to turn a light on.”71 With these glowing windows the question of loneliness and solitude is asked. Are the glowing windows a beacon of loneliness, such as the case of Gatsby in The Great Gatsby, who turned on each light in his mansion as a way to draw Daisy’s eye from across the bay?72 Or are the glowing windows a sign of enlightened contemplation, indicating a place of imagination and personal growth?

With labor, love, and loneliness/solitude I am able to utilize sentimentality’s gently conflation to critique our contemporary ideologies of the domestic sphere. Within my practice I point to a domestic that is based not on privacy, but intimacy.


A Warm Farewell

Dearest Reader,

What a joy it has been having you read my thesis. With the garnered knowledge I have supplied, I sincerely hope you can now understand my stance on sentimentality and its power of gentle conflation. Knowing that sentimentality is a critical aspect of human existence due to its human-naturalness, agendered position, and ability to conflate world-representations, such as those found in the domestic sphere, reveals its vitality. As an artist, I am able to utilize sentimentality to open possibilities and welcome, instead of molest, viewers into contemplations with the assume norms of domesticity. The nuisances of encoded soft emotions are to be analyzed and understood, not disregarded. Sentimentality allows us to soften the hard judgements and conclusions of our lives, providing ground for mental self-manipulation and reconsideration. Soft and hard emotions are a necessity of life, for by acknowledging the entirety of our emotional landscape, soft and hard, we can better contemplate the interrelations around us.

Best Wishes,

Mr. Jonathan P. Berger

PS - Please remember Charles Dickens’ words of wisdom:

“Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears, for they are rain upon the blinding dust of earth, overlying our hard hearts. I was better after I had cried than before, — more sorry, more aware of my own ingratitude, more gentle.”

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