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Drifting / Mooring: On Home, Travel, and Identity

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Drifting / Mooring: On Home, Travel, and Identity

by

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A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts Washington University in St. Louis

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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Abstract
Travel acts as a disruptor of routine, encouraging meditation and self-reflection. This activity is especially important in my studio practice because I come from an intensely region-bound family. My personal identity is influenced by my geographical and cultural location. In my studio practice I utilize a combination of writing and visual media to explore these fundamental facets of my life. I use Joseph Campbell’s monomyth structure of narrative storytelling as a baseline for constructing my written narratives. The narratives make heavy use of a feminine voice and examines what it is to be a woman in contemporary America. The visual elements of my work riff on motifs commonly found in Abstract Expressionism and other prominent painting movements of the twentieth century.

The work not only explores ideas of personal identity, but also delves into the space/body dynamic which is an important lens for viewing and interacting with the world. The root of this dynamic is the ability to experience and process the world through the filter of the body. I also analyze idea of entropy as a catalyst for events and a motivator of self-memorializing. My work shares theoretical threads with artists such as Robert Smithson, Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, Allan Kaprow, Bernard Tschumi, and Miranda July.
Introduction
My work consists of two major components, the visual and the written. The visual- large monochromatic paintings- act as meditational objects. The written- spoken word essays- act as a conduit for addressing a diverse group of ideas, such as personal identity being heavily influenced by geographical and cultural location. Personally, I come from an intensely region-bound family. Travel acts as a disrupter of my routines, which leads to meditation and self-reflection, two prominent themes in my studio work. When writing my travelogue essays, I manipulate Joseph Campbell’s monomyth structure of storytelling. Through my experimentation with this formula I can create a new mode of storytelling. When it comes to traveling and gathering materials, I prefer outmoded travel, such as traveling by train or car. These forms of travel typically have a longer time investment. They also have the advantage of remaining at ground level, unlike flight, which divorces the physical body from the landscape.

Being able to experience the world through the filter of my physical body has an important influence on my studio work. This viewpoint is particularly useful when observing landscapes. A landscape is not simply a vista to gaze upon: it is a space that is interacted with and interpreted through the senses. In particular, this space/body dynamic is a handy lens when discussing Robert Smithson’s ideas on entropy as a catalyst for events and a motivator of self-memorializing. The space/body dynamic is also necessary when considering the act of witnessing events, particularly in the context of the work of Allan Kaprow’s and Bernard Tschumi’s bodies of work.

I make heavy use of a feminine voice in my artwork. This runs counter to the established artistic and writing conventions that I work within, which have been predominantly created by men. For example, in my paintings I frequently riff on the visual motifs of Abstract Expressionism, an art movement dominated by male artists. I also write and perform travelogues,
another genre populated mostly by the male voice. In doing this sort of work, I began inadvertently building my own everywoman-style character. This character is a young, naïve, yet determined woman beginning to make her way through the world.
Neither Here Nor There: On My Home, Travel, and Identity
August First. The summer started and ended with a miscarriage. None of them were mine, thankfully. In May, a coworker lost her baby, grew despondent and stopped showing up for work. She was fired and I was assigned her hours, bumping me up to working full time. This made the summer a bit of a blur for me. A quiet, seemingly unending expanse of time spent under fluorescents and in recycled mall air.

On the last Monday in July came the second miscarriage. My bleeding coworker stayed very calm throughout the ordeal, only crying when she was being loaded into the ambulance. And I stay calm too. Until after my shift was over and I was sitting out in the parking lot trying to eat my dinner and sobbing into my turkey sandwich.

Five days later, I left my job. I still feel a little sick every time I pass a shopping mall.

August Second. I drove down to southern Illinois today as a surprise for my grandma’s birthday. My suitcase is in the trunk, packed for my second attempt at going to New Orleans. Taking this trip has become less about the destination and more about having the courage to actually follow through. I am nervous, even though I know I will be just fine. My roommate and a friend are the only two in the world who know where I am going this week. It feels weird, secretive even, not to tell everyone where I am going. But I am so sick of being harped at for wanting to travel alone. I am not going to die just by leaving the greater Saint Louis area.

After visiting my family, I drove into Carbondale to kill time until my train left at 1:30 the next morning. I sat in my car listening to old Eddie Izzard standup that I’ve heard countless times. Just enjoying a beautiful summer night and anticipating the trip ahead.

Trying not to obsessively check my phone to see if the train is on schedule or hyperventilate. I hate to admit it, but I am super nervous.

Nicole Fry, script excerpt from Night Train Down. 2015. Audio, RT 3.34 minutes. Text courtesy the artist.
When I was young, I had some difficulties with speaking. Perhaps it was because of some combination of my intense shyness coupled with a mild, undiagnosed speech disorder. Either way, speaking was not a particularly effective form of communication for me. I turned to drawing and writing to work around these difficulties. In doing so, I found that written and visual languages complement each other. Both can be used as explicit statements of fact, or they can convey their information more poetically. Painting and writing have now become fundamental features of my artistic practice.

As I grew older, I became a voracious reader. I would frequently beg my mother to take me to the library, to her exasperation. I would gleefully check out mounds of books on all subjects. These texts became my temporary escape from my dull teenage life in a small Midwestern suburb. As an adult, I became fascinated with travelogues. In these books I found a template for how to go about traveling alone, which I was soon began applying to my own life. I am less interested in practical tips than in the headspace authors occupied during their journeys. Travelogues often start with a rejection of self. The journey is sparked by a deep dissatisfaction with the current state of life. The opening scene of Jessa Crispin’s travelogue *The Dead Ladies Project* begins with a visit from the police because her sister had called them, convinced that Crispin had committed suicide after a long period of depression. In an interview on his memoir of canoeing down the Mississippi River, Eddy L. Harris declared that he would have “reached the delta or died trying” because he had little else to live for. In a difficult time, the author picks a destination and begins the journey. The destination is often secondary. The experiences found along the way are what make the narrative.

Joseph Campbell’s monomyth template of narrative storytelling lays out the standard path of the mythological adventure (or “hero’s journey”). This narrative pattern has become a staple
in western film and literature. The monomyth can be broken into three major parts: separation, initiation, and return. The standard travelogue typically covers the categories of separation and initiation but does not always cover the return portion of the journey. Frequently, the tale will end with the author’s triumphant arrival at a destination.

In my own writing practice, I break down the monomyth’s overarching themes into their individual components. I find that this fragmented way of working leads to more poignant results. The typical hero’s journey has now become formulaic to the point that it has become the butt of jokes in popular culture. It is now a trope, a standard fixture in narrative writing. Yet despite this, I believe the monomyth formula is still the most effective way of conveying a narrative, if only when broken down to its components and played with.

Fig. 1. Nicole Fry, still from *Excerpts From A Failed Travelogue*. 2015, digital video, RT 8.32 minutes. Image courtesy the artist.
My Pilgrimage to the Delta series demonstrates the breakdown of the monomyth. The first piece in the series, Excerpts From a Failed Travelogue, is an eight-minute video with a voice over. The video was filmed from the back of a car window at night while it was raining. As the car moves through the city streets, the street lights hit the water droplets clinging to the rear windshield, forming a kaleidoscope of color. In the audio performance of the video, I focus solely on the separation stage of Joseph Campbell’s monomyth cycle. An unidentified narrator prepares for an upcoming road trip to New Orleans. She discusses her plans, hopes and fears for the journey. She also shares the opinions and reactions she receives from others when she tells them about her trip. The narrative ends abruptly on a hopeful note, not acknowledging the failure of narrator to follow through on her plans. Yet the title gives away the fact that the trip is a washout from the beginning, underscoring the futility of her planning from the first word.

Unlike the majority of my body of work, the second and third pieces in the Pilgrimage to the Delta series are typically exhibited without any visual component. In the second piece, Night Train Down, the character starts with a dramatic recounting of a coworker’s miscarriage during a shift. This results in a strained atmosphere for start the narrator’s journey by train to New Orleans. The journey itself is uneventful, and the piece ends with an encounter with a stranger in a French Quarter bar. Excluding the miscarriage scene, Night Train Down is almost banal in its content. The piece treats the high drama of a medical emergency and the triviality of sharing oysters with a stranger in a bar with equal attention. The piece is a meandering take on the initiation stage of the hero’s journey, but it is an apparently aimless quest.

Wandering the Streets, the continuation of Night Train Down and the final piece in the series, recounts the narrator’s wandering through the French Quarter and her small encounters with tourists and locals. Amidst these pleasantries, she encounters the Lalaurie Mansion, a site of
horrific torture and human experimentation during the antebellum era. The narrator meditates on this history, noting how nondescript the building is, without even a historical marker to distinguish it from its nearly identical neighboring buildings. The mundane nature of the building makes it all the more frightening.

Later that evening, the narrator recounts the dinner she had with an older woman in an overcrowded restaurant. The woman is another stranger, enthusiastically giving advice to the narrator on where to travel next. The woman has traveled to over fifty countries by herself and has strong opinions on every major city. Yet when the topic turns to the narrator’s personal life, and the fact of her singleness, the woman declares, “You need to focus on finding a man now while you are young, before all the good ones get married.” To the woman, finding a husband takes priority over pursuing personal interests, even though the woman herself joked about leaving her husband at home during her own travels. The dinner scene ends and the piece meanders on, ending with an encounter with a haunted-looking homeless man with a severely infected leg wound. His image creeps into the narrator’s dreams that night.

As my experimentation with pairing audio and visual components progressed, I made a dramatic shift away from video and began painting. Before changing media, the video component of the artworks was secondary to the audio. The video was a visual afterthought, almost like a computer screensaver. In a fit of frustration in the studio, I returned to painting, which was my original training and is the medium that I know best. This shift in media worked well for me. The paintings I created became objects of meditation rather than visual afterthoughts. They enhanced the audio work, yet maintained some sense of autonomy. As my studio practice progressed, the visual and audio components of the work became less parallel running projects and began to more directly interact with one another. While the paintings do
still remain the subtler of the two mediums, they are extremely important to my studio process and to the final artwork that I create.

There are only two components needed to create one of my bleach paintings: bleach and a black bed sheet. First, I tack a bed sheet loosely to the wall so that it forms a loose row of folds at the top of the sheet. Then, I splash the bleach on, making sure to pay special attention to the draped folds. I will typically do batches of these paintings, having six or seven sheets going at one time. Since so much is left to chance in the initial stages, I prefer to have multiple options to choose from for the base layer of a painting. Once finished, I untack the bed sheets and hang them outside to air dry over night. In the morning, I bring the sheets back in and tack them up. This time they are tightly stretched to the wall. The result of the previous night’s work is arrow-shaped bands of cream-colored striations that seem to hover on the picture plane. These bands are loose and amorphous in form, appearing strikingly similar to satellite images of cloud cover over the earth.

For the next step, I project photographs onto the sheets. I use the forms as a stencil to trace the images in bleach. The imagery I typically use is of industrial structures, such as barges and cranes. Over time, these structures have taken on their own symbolism in my work. Cranes are a marker of an aimless attempt at building. They are often flipped upside down, completely impotent and impractical. The barges have become a symbolic embodiment of the act of leaving, drifting through the picture plane on their way to something and someplace else.

Once the image is completed, I take the sheets down one last time to be thoroughly washed in cold water. If the sheets are left unwashed, the bleach will brown the bed sheet and continue to eat away at the cloth, compromising it structurally. By its nature, this type of textile work is not nearly as archival as traditional oil painting, bronze sculptural works, or other
canonized materials. This vulnerability is almost analogous to the human body and its mortality.

In their final form, the paintings are tacked tightly to the wall. They are stretched like a canvas, working very much in the realm of traditional painting display methods. This denies the fabric its loose and billowing nature, turning the fabric into a picture plane rather than sculptural object. The scale of the work is enveloping. The works’ size is a perfect complement to the physical stature of a typical viewer. Frequently, these paintings will bend at a wall’s corner, responding to the architecture of the gallery space. Through this optical enveloping they appear seemingly larger than their physical selves. Initially, the bleach and bed sheet combination was a direct reference to the domestic. However, over time, the materials have come to deny themselves. In their final form, they do not immediately announce what they are but gradually present themselves upon closer inspection. The spoken word pieces are more frank in terms of presentation. They simply exist as they are. When combined, the two mediums become a more complete sensory experience. Imperfect a pairing as they are, through writing and painting I have constructed a new voice for myself, this time made from headphones and cloth.
Filtering The Landscape: On the Space/Body Dynamic and the Landscape
When I was a little kid, I used to roam around the woods behind my family home. There were few kids in my neighborhood, and I spent a tremendous amount of time alone. I used to follow narrow deer paths through the wood, looking for fox dens. I would spend my waking hours outside and come home at dusk, covered in grime. My mother insisted that I take off my shoes and empty my pockets before entering the house. Our front stoop would be littered with pebbles, cicada skins, and whatever odd detritus I had happened across that day.

Summers were the best. I could ride my bike for hours on end, racing laps around the neighborhood. There was a long, steep hill at the end of the street, and it took most of the summer for me to wrack up the courage to coast down it. I road with my heart in my throat and the rapid clicking sounds of the colorful beads threaded on the spokes of my wheels ringing in my ears.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, a black jeep appeared on the narrow road, forcing me to the side. I veered off and wobbled through the grass, crashing into a neighbor’s chain length fence with a deafening rattle. The startled flock of ducks that lived in the yard honked angrily at me as I inspected myself for any injuries. I came out shaking, but unscathed. It wouldn’t be until the end of the summer when I would dare to ride down that hill again.
The sense of place, as the phrase suggests, does indeed emerge from the senses. The land, and even the spirit of the place, can be experienced kinetically, or kinesthetically, as well as visually. If one has been raised in a place, its textures and sensations, its smells and sounds, are recalled as they felt to a child’s, adolescent’s, adult’s body. Even if one’s history there is short, a place can still be felt as an extension of the body, especially the walking body, passing through and becoming part of the landscape.

Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*.

I draw influence from a diverse group of academic fields. Often this research will not overtly present itself in my work. My exploration into cultural landscape studies has helped me to better understand my position within society, particularly in regards to the area I grew up in. A deep connection to my region has had a lasting effect on me. The act of leaving my place of origin has had an equally profound influence. When traveling, I can turn over past events in my mind, reprocessing old episodes for new meaning. Being in a new locale can simultaneously expand my worldview and reinforce old perspectives. New experiences color old memories and in turn shift my attitude on a place I once called home.

For some, the concept of home can be difficult to define, but for me home was almost predetermined. I was born and raised in the Saint Louis area and I have lived my whole life in its 200 square mile radius. My father has lived nearly his entire life in the metro area as well. Raised a few hours to the south of the city, my mother has lived in the area for the past thirty years. None of my aunts, uncles or cousins has moved far from the area. In short, I come from a family with intense regional connections.

Geographical location only comprises part of my definition of home. If I were estranged from my family or if I had an intense dislike of my hometown, I might not have developed the sentimental attachment that I have for the Saint Louis area. Having strong relationships draws me back to the region, tethering me to home. Despite (or perhaps because of) these strong ties to
Saint Louis, I am now restless and ready to move on. I want to experience new things, new modes of living, to see what life is like outside these 200 square miles.

Traveling is a disruptor of my routines. Breaking from routine encourages a certain level of awareness of self and habits, which in turn encourages self-reflection. When traveling and occupying an intermediary space, I cannot rely on old habits. When forced out of my patterns, I must find a new way of functioning. I also need to re-evaluate how I previously performed a task, or even the order or time frame in which those tasks were performed. For example, I feel comfortable when traveling on my own through many of the neighborhoods of St. Louis. However, when I went to New Orleans by myself, I roamed the streets with a knife hidden in my bra for protection. If push came to shove, I was prepared to physically defend myself. In a new and unknown city, I had to keep alert to my surroundings. I could not rely on old patterns and habits for my safety. Nothing happened, thankfully, but I felt much safer knowing that I was armed.

My interests lie with somewhat outmoded methods of long distance travel: by car, bus and train. Extensive travel by any of these ways requires a serious commitment of time and patience. A long journey can be meditative, allowing my mind to wander and reflect. This meditation takes many forms, be it through writing, sketching or simply letting my mind drift. During this time I can take stock of my life and assess what needs to be done to move forward. Some of my sharpest insights into my own life have occurred while gazing out a window and toward the far horizon. I find traveling by airplane to be particularly unsuited for achieving a meditative frame of mind. Traveling in a plane feels like a bizarre form of time-travel, or perhaps teleportation. Distance becomes far less important when travelling by air. The “journey” element of travel is gone. The ability to see the passing landscape is extremely important to me. The view from an
airplane is extremely sterile and alien. Perhaps my feelings stem from the fact that I did not fly by plane until I was eighteen years old and have only done so a handful of times. To travel by plane is to sit in a cramped cabin, with a bizarre, abstracted landscape as my only point of reference to where I am situated in the world. This tends to be extremely disconcerting. I have no idea where I am physically when 30,000 feet in the air. I am in a non-space, governed by bizarre rules and social customs. It is a space where I am discouraged from talking to my neighbor, even when they are nearly sitting on top of me. I must take up as little space and make as little noise as possible. I cannot show strong emotions of any sort. As well as powering down my phone, I power down myself. Then, having done nothing but sit still for a few hours, I arrive at my destination-like teleportation.

I perceive the world through the filter of my body. It provides an important lens through which I can view and interact with physical spaces. To divorce myself from these senses would thoroughly alter my understanding of space, if not fragment it completely. From this space/body dynamic comes my interest in travel. My interests revolve less around a particular destination and more around the events leading up to my arrival at a new location. The interaction between landscape and built environment endlessly fascinates me. Humans and the land co-develop. They build one another up, then occasionally destroy each other, only to rebuild again. In particular, I am interested in regional space. A region is a large enough sphere of study to encompass cultural and geographic influences without becoming too unmanageable. To quote Lucy Lippard’s definition of the term “region”, 
Place is most often examined from the subjective viewpoint of individual or community, while “region” has traditionally been more of an objective geographic term, later kidnapped by folklorists. In the fifties, a region was academically defined as a geographic center surrounded by “an area where nature acts in a roughly uniform manner.” Today a region is generally understood not as a politically or geographically delimited space but one determined by stories, localities, group identity, common experience and histories (often unrecorded), a state of mind rather than a place on a map.

The experiences that I draw on for creating artwork are tied to the location in which they occurred. My physical and cultural environment shapes my experiences. It dictates how I behave, the choices I can and cannot make.

In the fall of 1967, Robert Smithson took a tour through Passaic, New Jersey. The essay he wrote about his journey elevated everyday objects, buildings, and machinery to the status of monuments. He compared the industrial city to the grand ruins of ancient Rome. The final monument on his tour was a sandbox, which he used as a springboard for a discussion on entropy.

Picture in your mind’s eye the sand box divided in half with black sand on one side and white sand on the other. We take a child and have him run hundreds of times clockwise in the box until the sand gets mixed and begins to turn grey; after that we have him run anti-clockwise, but the result will not be a restoration of the original division but a greater degree of greyness and an increase of entropy.10

Like the sand mixing and creating a new compound, entropy allows for the integration of individual lives and events into a larger narrative. No single person can exist in a vacuum. The mixing of the life of the author, the lives of others who interact and maintain relationships with the author, and the events that the groups share coalesces into personal narrative. These points of intersection can provide poignant moments and can speak to topics well outside of the author’s life. Yet this life eventually ends and time continues. Entropy continues as well, just with new players. Mortality can be a major motivator in memorializing one’s own story. The artist dies, but the artwork survives. Smithson also makes the claim that entropy cannot be escaped:

Of course, if we filmed such an experiment we could prove the reversibility of eternity by showing the film backwards, but then sooner or later the film itself would crumble or get lost and enter the state of irreversibility. Somehow this suggests that the cinema offers an illusive or temporary escape from physical dissolution. The false immortality of the film gives the viewer an illusion of control over eternity- but the superstars are fading.11

The digital age somewhat complicates Smithson’s thoughts on escaping entropy. Film cannot crumble to dust online, nor can it ever truly be removed. Programs like the Wayback
Machine take billions screenshots of webpages over time. Individual users are also able to document online content for their personal collections. The proverbial film does not physically die but undergoes a death through being forgotten.


(Right) Fig. 4. Nicole Fry, Installation detail of *Eberhart Road*. 2016. Bleached black cotton cloth, Approximately 518 x 274 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

To provide a more concrete point of comparison to my own work, I look to Robert Smithson’s 1969 essay and the accompanying documentation of site-specific installations, *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan*. The essay component of *Mirror-Travel* is a meandering journey between the sites of Smithson’s nine sculptural installations. Each subtopic of the essay begins with a photo and brief description of the artwork. The essay meanders from topic to topic, mulling on the interplay between time and space, the meaning of existence, and the un-replicable vivid colors of the natural world. The narrative is presented in an almost
stream-of-conscious format. Occasionally, anthropomorphic characters of Mayan gods will make cameos, debating with one another and doling out sage advice.13

While Smithson's and my own work overlap in terms of subject matter discussed, our use of space, time and landscape do not quite meet up. In particular when comparing Smithson’s *Incidents of Mirror-Travel In the Yucatan* and my *Eberhart Road*. Both projects examine specific locales and the physical and historical baggage that comes with each place. Smithson roams the Yucatan while I travel along the Mississippi River. Smithson documents his temporary sculptural installations with brightly-colored photographs. My own dealings with location are secondary, manifesting as paintings that reimage half-forgotten locations in a monochromatic pallet. *Mirror-Travel* attempts to negate its own space through the use of mirrors. The mirrors highlight the fleeting, temporal nature of space and time, while the photograph fixes this process into a permanent object. In Smithson’s words, “A scale in terms of ‘time’ rather than ‘space’ took place. The mirror itself is not subject to duration, because it is an ongoing abstraction that is always available and timeless. The reflections, on the other hand, are fleeting instances that evade measure.” 14 My *Eberhart Road* piece does not negate space or time but rather invents it. New landscapes are cobbled together from disparate images. Perspectives are inverted, scales shift, and impossible visual connections are made. Representational imagery emerges and dissipates within the abstracted, amorphous forms that litter the picture plane. The work exists with one foot in the present and another in the past as described in the audio portion of the work, which recalls childhood memories of playing in the woods.
It is important to note that *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan* and *Eberhart Road* are documentation and recreations of past events, respectively. The viewer cannot witness the action directly, but only through the lens of the artist reinterpreting and presenting the event. Witnessing of action is a crucial element in both Allan Kaprow’s *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* and Bernard Tschumi’s *Manhattan Transcripts*. In the case of *18 Happenings*, the event was staged for a crowded gallery full of viewers. In *Manhattan Transcripts*, the book’s reader becomes a witness to a fictional murder and the drama that unfolds across sections of New York City.

Both events present themselves in clustered units. In *18 Happenings*, visitors were led through a gallery divided up into sections. A handful of actions would occur in each room, and then the visitors would move on to the next experience. The performances varied from the mundane (a woman feeling oranges) to the absurd (a musical performance by adults wielding toy instruments). The visitors were guided through the space, not unlike how a reader is guided...
through a book. In *Manhattan Transcripts*, the reader progresses from one page to the next, working through the narrative step by step. Even in the sections of the book where the narrative falls apart into a meandering sequence of images, the forward motion is still there.

In the original performance of Kaprow’s *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, gallery visitors were able to experience the space first hand. They could touch the walls, chairs, and (possibly) the performers. In certain spots they were encouraged to sing along and generally played a role in shaping the events of the evening. It was an unmediated experience, unlike Tschumi’s *Manhattan Transcripts*. The Transcripts are viewed primarily in book form, a wholly different way of experiencing space. In person, a viewer can move about a room, visually and physically taking in the space. However, the viewer is provided a fixed viewpoint in a book. Photographs and drawings provide only a static representation of an actual space. The viewer receives a curated version of a space rather than its raw form.

It is also worth noting how the events are reinterpreted now. *Manhattan Transcripts*, being a book, is a fixed event. Little has changed between how the piece was experienced when first published and how it is experienced now. The performances of *18 Happenings*, though they were documented via photographs, are now told second hand. *18 Happenings* has been mediated through the lens of time and repetition of retelling. Details shift with each reiteration, causing the story to take a new shape over time.
My painted environments (as opposed to the corner paintings I have described until now) toe similar conceptual lines as *18 Happenings* and *Manhattan Transcripts* in terms of their treatment of time and space. If anything, my artwork *Penelope* sits squarely between the Kaprow’s and Tschumi’s works. It is a space to be experienced by the viewer in real-time, yet contains a component that directly calls back to past events. My installation has a theatrical quality to it, especially in the approach to the room. The installation is seen from the end of the long corridor leading to the space. The space is constructed from a half-dozen bleach paintings lining the walls. The floors and ceiling are covered in roofing felt, a material commonly used in constructing homes. The bleach forms seem to hover like fog, ethereal in the low light. The space both denies and embraces its architectural framework, acting as a shroud over the walls, yet emphasizing features such as the intersecting planes of the corners. The lighting is low, which highlights the claustrophobic effect the room has on the viewer. The visual forms and
physicality of the materials are soft and amorphous.

Unlike Kaprow’s and Tschumi’s work, which aims to instill discomfort in the viewer, *Penelope* is oddly comforting. Like *18 Happenings*, the space highlights the physicality of the viewer’s form. The space envelops the viewer completely. The low lighting causes the viewer to pause while their eyes to adjust when first entering the room. The roofing felt covering the floor has a visceral quality to it when walked across. It sounds like duct tape being ripped off the roll, punctuating the viewer’s footsteps around the room. The audio portion of the installation, played at a low volume through speakers, is of a woman rhythmically reciting the steps taken to create the room itself. The dialog’s pacing and structure is similar to that of a cooking recipe, poetry, or the rhythm of a weaving loom (the piece is named for Penelope, the heroine of Homer’s *Odyssey*, after all). In *Penelope* there is no overt narrative, no tasks to complete or performances to watch.¹⁹ It simply exists as it is, to be encountered directly and openly. The piece has no unfolding action, but rather invites the passive witnessing of the residue of a past construction event.

I may pass through many spaces in my travels, yet no matter how far I stray from home I will always be connected to the Saint Louis area through my memories. These recollections will inevitably blur as I age, like Smithson’s sandbox, yet the stories will live on through my work. They are events frozen in time, memorialized in an artwork, yet evolving with each new viewing.
Cut a swath of tar paper from the roll.
Bend a crease into it.
Climb the ladder.
Fit the paper into the crevice where wall meets ceiling.
Reach out with the staple gun.
Wince at the noise it makes.
Repeat until the sheet is securely attached.
Climb down the ladder.
Repeat this ritual again until the ceiling is completely covered.

Tack bedsheets to the wall.
Mind the gaps between them.
Be sure they stay hung evenly.

Roll more tarpaper out over the floor in long stretches.
Like stringy carpets.
Bare feet make a strange crinkling, sticking noise while walking.
It hurts.

Swaddle the lights in cotton cloth, until only an eerie glow remains.
Close the door.
Near darkness.
The patterns dyed into the cloth emerge from the dimness.
Floating forms. A mist in the night.
No sound but the hum of the hidden fluorescents.
An expansive nest I have built for myself.

Nicole Fry, script from Penelope. 2016. Installation, Approximately 304 x 304 x 457 cm, Audio RT 1 minute (on loop). Text courtesy the artist.
Constructing Narratives: On Character, Space, and Witnessing
There is something very soothing about preparing materials for a painting session. The rustle of unfolding cloth. The hiss of the steam iron. The rhythmic hum of the projector warming up. The subtle splashing of mixing chemicals. The silent moment when the projected image hits the cloth. I pick my starting point. The brush hits the cloth - and away I go.

As always, my mind drifts while painting. Initially, it cycles through the endless to-do lists. I relive past botched social interactions, and sticking on over-analyzed and useless worries of the future. Eventually, my brain circles back to my fixation on a brief trip I took to New Orleans over the summer. On slower days in my studio, I find myself thumbing through my collection of photos I took there, looking for composition ideas. I re-read my scribbled notes made on hotel stationary for potential essay topics. When the St. Louis weather is gloomy, I bask in fond memories of roaming the sunny, humid streets of the French Quarter at dawn, before the tourist and grifters arrive for the day. The trip had a practical outcome as well, providing materials for a dozen or so solid works of art, plus countless sketches and half-finished pieces. But at five months out, the trip is becoming an increasingly distant memory. It is becoming less of a viable resource with each passing day. Which leaves me with the heavy question, “what next?”

When not in the studio, I spend my days catnapping in the spot of sun that streams through my front window and hits my couch in a perfect square. Ever since my emotionally turbulent roommate moved out, I have been basking in the newfound peace of my apartment. My time is not spent doing anything particularly grand. I drift from room to room, watering plants and moving knicknacks as I go. For the first time in a year and a half, I’ve noticed that I can hear my neighbors going about their lives in the apartment below me. I cook more, take long showers, and refuse to wear pants in my apartment. I am basking in the honeymoon period of living alone.

As I shuffle about, I will occasionally jot down ideas for future artworks on bits of paper. A thumbnail for a painting on the bottom of the gas bill. A catchy phrase in the margins of a grocery receipt. Bits and bobs that have yet to come together in a cohesive whole. But that seems to be the only way I can figure things out - by working through ideas. Through false starts, failed projects, and pages of scrawled notes.

Nicole Fry, script from Woolgathering. 2015. Installation, Approximately 259 x 274 cm, Audio RT 2.40 minutes. Text courtesy the artist.
I have not always been a particularly open or vulnerable person. A friend once told me that I was like a cat, friendly enough with those I know well but distant when amongst strangers. I initially fumbled while trying to figure out the best way to share my experiences through my artwork. In my initial drafts I was aloof, using stilted language and making pointless statements. It took some practice to find the proper balance in my level of openness with viewers. Thankfully, I was able to find other women artists who make use of the feminine voice in their work to act as guides. For example, on its surface, Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller’s *Road Trip* appears to be an artwork about making artwork. The room-sized installation contains a slide projector, a screen on a stand, and hidden speakers for binaural sound. The display method and the chairs scattered about the room appear to be circa 1960, while the hidden binaural speaker installation highlights Cardiff and Miller’s contemporary audio work. The slides projected are from a collection of photographs taken by Miller’s late grandfather, Anton Bures, during a mid-
century road trip across Canada to New York City. The trip was undertaken to meet with a specialist about the cancer Bures was dying from.20

The audio component of the work provides the content of the piece. It is of a conversation between artists Miller and Cardiff about the composition of the artwork itself. The slides flip forward and backward, as if the two were in the room with the viewer, having the conversation in real-time. The dialog starts off with formal considerations for the proposed artwork. The artists then debate over the order of the slides and even have a small argument about whether or not they should have any control over the speed at which the slides are changed. The conversation eventually shifts into speculations on what Miller’s grandfather was like. Anton Bures died long before Miller was born, so any information Miller has on the man is second-hand. Over the course of the installation’s fifteen minute run-time, the two try to puzzle out the life of a man who left nothing but photographs behind.21 In attempting to construct a narrative for a dead man, the two artists’ working relationship is exposed. Miller is fussy and demanding, while Cardiff is more levelheaded, yet exasperated at times. Their interactions give the impression of a long and intimate working career together. Their twenty-plus years of collaborating together artistically supports this dynamic. Though it is not addressed in the video itself, the two artists are married as well. Road Trip provides an intimate (though curated) glimpse into the marriage and working dynamic of the pair of artists.

I encountered this work at a pivotal point in my studio practice, before I had paired my essays with a visual component. It sparked the idea in my mind that the audio and visual components of a work do not have to pair up perfectly, but rather can complement and run parallel to each other. The work also made me conscious of display methods for my audio work. Unlike Road Trip, my audio sounds almost muffled when projected through speakers. When
using headphones, I can speak directly into the viewer’s ear as if having an intimate conversation with them. This method also complements the soft, lulling quality of my performance and highlights the vulnerability of the work.

Akin to Cardiff and Miller’s Road Trip is an artwork of mine entitled Woolgathering. The spoken word portion of the piece touches lightly on ideas of escapism, the dynamic of working in the studio, and the relationship between place and self-identity. It is an artwork about creating artwork, exposing the framework of choices that lead to the certain aesthetic of a finished piece. It also begins to explore the idea of constructing a character in relation to the authentic self.

“I’m always trying to get my friends to forward me emails they’ve sent to other people — to their mom, their boyfriend, their agent- the more mundane the better. How they comport themselves in email is so intimate, almost obscene- a glimpse of them from their own point of view. *We Think Alone* has given me the excuse to read my friends’ emails and the emails of some people I wish I was friends with and for better or worse it’s changed the way I see all of them. I think I really know them now.” Miranda July, on *We Think Alone*22

Over the course of twenty weeks, nine public figures shared their intimate personal correspondences with Miranda July, who then passed the correspondence on, newsletter-style to over 100,000 subscribers. Each week had a theme, such as “an email that gives advice” or “an email to your mom.” The only requirement was that the email be written before the project’s start date. In terms of the participants’ self-portraiture, July summed it up best in a 2013 Huffington Post interview with Priscilla Frank: “It is interesting because not everyone has the same goals for their self-portrait. I think some people's goals were to share as little as possible and in a way *that* is a portrait. It's like, *Oh, that's a private person.* With other people you could see they were sharing things that they were proud of- *of all the emails they chose this one.*”23

The substance of the work consists less of *We Think Alone*’s physical content and more in the collapsing of personal and public persona. The nine participants ranged from artists, actors, physicists and athletes. All participants have highly visible careers and public personas. The work has not been formally cataloged, existing only in the inboxes of subscribers, recalling to Smithson’s ideas on entropy. However, bits and pieces of the project have surfaced online. Emails range from the vulnerable, the inspirational, the intellectual and everything in between. And in the true spirit of the internet, there are photos of cats as well.

For a brief while, I attempted to shift my own work into the realm of public practice. For a project entitled *Meditations on Leaving Home*, I solicited participants to call in with their stories and thoughts on the first time they left home. The end goal was to assemble the voicemails into an audio work, akin to the format of podcasts like *Risk* or *This American Life*. Like *We Think*
Alone, it was to be a curated look into the vulnerable moments of others’ lives. The project was a spectacular failure, with no one calling in. I fell through on creating a proper advertising campaign for the project to generate interest and participation. Instead, I shifted my focus to self-generated studio work. However, this failed project sparked my interest in the viability of having a primarily online studio practice. Until encountering We Think Alone, I had been a devout object-maker. I created paintings, sculptures, and other objects that were tangible to the human hand. Now, I have shifted my thinking a bit. I have created an online platform in which viewers can encounter a series of audio works completely on their own terms, using their own devices in whatever spaces they choose. If a viewer wishes to listen to the work during their morning bus commute, while folding laundry, or during a leisurely stroll, the choice is theirs. Creating an online audio gallery has been an interesting exercise for me. For the first time, I have produced a work completely devoid of a physical form, unable to easily be commoditized, and not particularly well-suited to traditional gallery operating formats. The work exists in its own space, a quasi-gallery to be encountered at anytime anywhere in the world for as long as I care to host it.

A defining feature of Miranda July’s artistic practice is the public character she has cultivated. Though I did not originally intend to do so, I am developing a character in my artwork as well. When I initially began this work, I was striving for authenticity in presenting myself. This was a naïve goal. I cannot, nor would I want to be, completely honest and vulnerable with my audience. There are aspects of my life that I do not wish to make public, particularly when discussing subjects that involve my family and friends. I have zero interest in compromising my loved ones’ privacy. The language I use when describing myself helps to begin to establish a separate stage identity. This new character is very similar to my authentic
self. It is the representation of a young woman coming of age in Midwestern America. The events she experiences are far from extraordinary, but rather are everyday happenings that highlight facets of the culture she inhabits. This everywoman character is still in the infancy of her development. I find the naïveté of the character to be somewhat problematic. The character tends to stumble into events and conversations with wide eyes and disbelief, as if experiencing the world for the first time. This is less representative of the current version of myself, but rather of my personality two to three years ago. As I have grown, I have lost a good bit of my childlike, trusting nature. While initially I wrote this outmoded version of myself in service of the essays’ plots, the character has now become a way to grapple with elements of my personality that I have an uneasy relationship with. Though it is unlikely that I will ever be completely comfortable in my own skin, by making personal and vulnerable work I have found myself in good company. I am no longer a “lone cat,” but rather a voice in a rising chorus of stories created by women.
Conclusion
Through creating this body of work, I am beginning to triangulate my own position in the world. Through traveling (geographical and cerebral) I have gathered the raw materials to construct my own narrative. These stories have manifested in videos, paintings, installations, sound works, and performed essays. My work is a form of storytelling, with several forms of expression interacting to create the end result.

Over the past year or so, I have begun to find my artistic voice by bending writing tropes to my own devices. My studio practice has been inspired by the women who have traveled before me. These women have also dealt with the actual and symbolic spaces between the gendered self and the world. My practice is also heavily influenced by my geographical region. The phenomenology of the St. Louis area, my home, helps shape the content and aesthetics of my visual work.

I have been a spatially-oriented person for as long as I can remember, viewing my surroundings through my physical senses. Initially, I encountered difficulties in articulating this viewpoint, and it was a relief to find others who could better explain this way of seeing the world. Through the space/body lens, the landscape becomes not simply a static vista but rather an ever-changing participant in an unfolding history. Entropy may ebb and flow, but characters and their narratives live on, if only in memories.

The diary-like essays I write are intimate and vulnerable in their presentation. The paintings remain more aloof, physically enveloping in their scale yet providing few footholds into their spatial layout. The two forms of representation perform well separately, but when combined together in my work, they function like an optometrist’s examination tool. My imperfect lenses layer one atop another to form a clearer view.
Notes


6 A typical bleach painting is 9ft tall and as wide as 18ft, if not more.


8 For example, both St. Louis and New Orleans have high homeless populations. In my neighborhood, I know who is harmless and who I have to avoid for my own safety. In New Orleans, everyone on the street was an unknown element.


11 Ibid.

12 The Wayback Machine is an online digital library of screenshots of over 400 billion websites. The images have been taken over the course of fourteen years and cover most publicly accessible sites. It is a subset of the Internet Archive, the largest digital non-profit library on the web (*Internet Archive*, 2016).


18 Ibid.

19 This is a playful counterpoint to artworks like Robert Morris’s *Box With The Sound of Its Own Making*, a sculptural object that mimics the sound of its creation through an internal speaker.


21 Ibid.


23 Ibid.

24 See *Pilgrimage to the Delta* series, 2015.
Bibliography


Figures

Fig. 1. Nicole Fry, still from *Excerpts From A Failed Travelogue*. 2015, digital video, RT 8.32 minutes. Image courtesy the artist.


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