Distraction and Community: The Magic of Playtime

Heather Alfaro
disdania@hotmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/samfox_art_etds

Part of the Art Practice Commons, Book and Paper Commons, and the Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Art at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate School of Art Theses by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.
Distraction and Community: The Magic of Playtime
Thesis

by:

Heather Alfaro

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

Graduate Committee:
Thesis Advisor: Richard Krueger
Studio Advisor: Buzz Spector
Studio Advisor: Jessica Baran
Committee Member: Sarah Colby
Committee Member: Patricia Olynyk

May 4, 2017
Abstract

Experiencing awkward encounters due to an anxious disposition, I create work that fulfills my own needs to fulfill the needs of others. By manipulating environments and providing props and crafted items, I take control of the situation to function within. Using craft, gift-giving and play, I encourage the audience to participate within my work—fostering community by providing an opportunity to play. Being ever fleeting, the encounters with the work and with the other participants distracts to allow the audience to lose themselves. When the work is gone, the memory lives on to comfort, and to inspire.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract...........................................................................................................................................1

It’s Nice to Meet You.......................................................................................................................3

The Importance of Forming Relationships..................................................................................4

Community Through Craft..............................................................................................................8

This is for You.................................................................................................................................12

Playtime..........................................................................................................................................16

Do You Want to Play?.....................................................................................................................21

Time to Clean Your Room.............................................................................................................24

Endnotes.........................................................................................................................................26

Image Citations...............................................................................................................................27

Artifacts..........................................................................................................................................27

Bibliography...................................................................................................................................28
It's Nice to Meet You

Hello, dear reader. I cannot express my gratitude that you have chosen to read my thesis. I welcome you, and hope that you enjoy. In writing it, I have put myself at a disadvantage. I have given you the opportunity to know who I am, while taking away my own joy of getting to know you. This is a very strange circumstance for me, as I am accustomed to the reverse—knowing my audience very well while they know very little, if anything, about me.

My thesis reads similarly to my experience in this graduate program—arriving at an unknown place, awkward, with no secure source of comfort, but ultimately ending in a place of security and faith in myself and my practice. This introduction serves like most in that it is awkward and precarious, making one wonder if this is really the best choice for all involved. However, I ask that you take a chance, like I have, and read through my ramblings and musings. Get to know me. You will find that I ask for little.

You will also soon discover that I have never proceeded on anyone else’s terms but my own, including the writing of this thesis. This stems from my need to create a personal connection, a tie between me and it, so I can act and create. Without this relationship, I would flounder, circling around like a pup to a baby—wanting to interact, but not knowing how, afraid of causing harm, but absolutely needing to play, to care, and to pass on what I know.

I act on my own need to serve the needs of others. It is through my time here that I have learned to work through both needs simultaneously. I fulfill my needs by establishing a relationship, therefore giving the viewer/audience/participants the same opportunity for themselves and with each other. It is primarily through relational aesthetics, empathy, craft, and play that I show the importance of this connection. By creating environments and providing these opportunities, I am able to provide a unique experience that both distracts the participants from their personal problems, and, in the end, fosters a sense of community.
The Importance of Forming Relationships

Nicolas Bourriaud described relational aesthetics as “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space.” Currently, contemporary art favors an object/subject relationship. What this means is that there is a sense of detachment between the viewer and the artwork. When one comes in contact with a piece, they are to analyze and process it without worrying about personal context. This detachment allows a piece to stand on its own, so all views and ideas about the work may to be reviewed independently. Relational aesthetics does not focus on this object/subject relationship, but instead on the relationships created either with the piece or those involved with the piece. Two examples of relational aesthetics practitioners are Rirkrit Tiravanija and Dominique Mazeaud.

In Tiravanija's *Soup/No Soup* (Fig. 1), the artist himself sets up a kitchen in a given location and makes food for those in the area. Sometimes it was for patrons at MoMA, sometimes it was outside a building opening. The food cooked and served varied. With a team, Tiravanija cooked and served his dishes. Surrounding him were long tables lined with chairs. Food was offered freely...
with only two rules: be nice to each other and clean up after yourself. Anyone could participate, from the well-off business woman to the down-on-his-luck homeless man. Everyone was served the same food, and everyone sat family/community style. The joy the audience experienced while participating didn't come from the quality of the food but from the interaction among guests. Because everyone was welcome, participants could interact with anyone, background unknown. In this situation, people were able to truly communicate. They were able to sit and talk, to share, to connect. While they might not have continued that particular connection, for a moment they would witness and participate in this phenomenon. Tiravanija, in his unique way, was able to bring individuals together, and have them “relate.”

I came across Dominique Mazeaud's project, *The Great Cleansing of the Rio Grande*, in Suzi Gablik's *The Reenchantment of Art*. In this piece, Mazeaud visits the river on the same day every month to clean pollution out of it. Armed with bags, sometimes friends, and a diary, she cleans as much as she can for a designated length of time. During this project, she keeps a diary, transcribing her adventures with the river. While cleaning, she also interacts with passersby who question what she's doing. She records some of her trash findings, displays some, and proudly talks of her “friend,” the river. Through this process, she learns a secret language with the river and tries to help bridge the gap between it and her audience. She acts as an ambassador, helping others make their own connections to the Rio Grande, see the importance the river plays in their lives, and how they can play an important role in it.

While contemporary art does favor this object/subject relationship, there is a shift happening. More and more artists and art viewers are wanting a deeper connection. This translates into society at large. Currently, society privileges individuality. We are watched to see what we do with what we are given. Like the object/subject relationship we are looked at and
stand alone, to make it on our own. However, I crave something more. I crave a pocket of comfort where I can shift that relationship to something more meaningful. I am not an object to be seen. I am an experience, and so are you.

A recent work I have created which addresses this concept is my studio (Fig. 2). In this program we are assigned a work space. White walls, gray floor—it’s horrible. For a year I suffered in this space, covering the walls with yarn and fabric. Even with this effort, it did not help to make anyone comfortable, especially myself. The beginning of my second year, I moved to a more open plan. Having made arrangements to store my things, I transformed my space. What was once white walls and gray floor became personal and comfortable. I painted my walls a deep turquoise, installed dark brown flooring, and trimmed in off-white base boards. I moved all the steel cabinets and tables out, moving in wooden furniture and cushioned seating. I personalized everything, from my calendar to the toys I kept on my bookshelf. The results were immediate. My conversations with friends, colleagues, and instructors became more personal. People were seeking my space to read and relax. They also contributed, making the space theirs as well. I spent a semester “living” in the space, seeing how others reacted to the changes made. By transforming my studio, I was able to connect with it, and in turn help my peers connect with it and me. Having created such a space, others could finally see why such a space was needed. They could finally see how it furthered my studio practice, instead of inhibiting it.

By taking this step to fulfill a need, I was able to focus on others. Before this studio change, I had tried to create items and gifts to give away. Though my productivity was impressive, I was distracted. Suffering from anxiety, I couldn't get comfortable anywhere. The only thing that calmed me down was crocheting. And while I love crocheting, I quickly ran out
of ideas. The act was calming, but it wasn't driving my practice forward. It was also getting in
the way of how I functioned within graduate school culture. Peers found me to be standoffish

Fig. 2

and felt that I was more interested in crafting than interacting. It was creating a wedge where one
shouldn't have been. The move to the new location and the renovations I undertook were
completely worth the labor. I had my safety blanket.

It's hard not to think about empathy in relational aesthetics. By trying to build
connections, I have to fully understand my own. I have to willingly be vulnerable: to give of
myself, to show others that they can give as well. If I hesitate, unbreachable blocks form. I have
to open myself up to whatever joy or sorrow may be experienced. Each project is not only a task
to complete and overcome, but also a lesson for myself to understand and learn. By making work through empathy, as an artist, I must be willing to share in the feelings of others.

It’s important that I conceive work based on my own needs, and that I produce work for the needs of those around me. By acknowledging the feelings of others, I create work to help make people aware of their capacity to share with those around them. The true importance of relational aesthetics isn’t just that it happened, but that it had an effect, and for that effect to continually spread. By continuing to spread the effect, one feels true gratitude for the experience, and therefore strives to show appreciation.

To continue to explain my practice, I must cover three additional topics: craft, gift-giving, and play. While significant in their own right, I use them together to create moments and experiences which culminate in my approach to relational aesthetics.
Community Through Craft

Craft is usually associated with the domestic: sewing, crocheting, knitting, producing clothes, quilts, scarves, hats, curtains, purses, pom poms, table runners, etc. These items share the characteristic of being made for the home, and for a use. Often, too, the craft of making them is passed down from generation to generation, dependent on a long tradition.

In her book *Women’s Work: The First 20,000 Years*, Elizabeth Wayland Barber discusses how fabric making, sewing, and cooking became women’s labor. She begins by describing the everyday life of women across history. The most common indicator for what labor women could participate in revolved around child care. Their work must be done around children, without potential for harm, easily put aside, and taught. This left fabric-making and cooking as the top two labors for women. While technology improved, the tradition of fabric-making and cooking continued to be passed on until well past the industrial revolution.

Items made were either for the home or the immediate community. Women gathered to work on craft processes. As a community they raised their children, made fabric items, cooked food, and survived. While technology has greatly improved and made wearable and domestic items readily available, therefore diminishing the need for craft, the feeling of community from crafting activities is still craved.

To reflect on a previous example, Rirkrit Tiravanija's food series definitely feeds into this need for community. In his focus on relationships between strangers, he fosters a sense of community. Through food, he brings people together to not only feed and care for others, but also so they can care for one another. For a brief moment, the participants meet new people and
start to care for them. Some may walk away from the experience with new friends, some with just a brief connection.

There are many community and national projects that use craft to help out communities. Some are for the comfort of those in need and some are to sponsor awareness and healing. For instance, there are independent communities and knitting circles who are ‘up-cycling’ plastic bags to make sleeping mats for homeless people. There are also people out there filling old purses with feminine products to pass out or donate to women. These are examples of community projects that comfort those in need. One of the biggest national projects known to foster community and sponsor awareness is the AIDS Memorial Quilt (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3

Started in 1985 by a small group of people in San Francisco who had lost their loved ones, the quilt was created when a gay rights activist asked his fellow marchers to write placards for those who had died of AIDS. Cleve Jones organized a candlelight march honoring gay San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone. When the march ended, he and
others hung these placards on the walls of the federal building. When hung together, they looked like a patchwork quilt. Two years later, in 1987, he created the first quilt panel for his friend. Working with a small team, they created their own panels to show. The response was immediate. Cities wanted to contribute their own panels and individual donors wanted to donate machines and funds to the cause. Now this project travels around the world. The last it was seen in its entirety in the US was in 1996.iii

Even with the stigma surrounding AIDS in the late 80's, it is no surprise that the response was immediate and that others wanted to add their own names of loved ones lost. Grief is a very powerful and sometimes dangerous experience. When in the depths of grief, it truly helps to encounter someone who knows what you are going through. It helps even more when given a purpose, and if the two shall meet, it becomes a healing experience. With the misconceptions and rumors surrounding AIDS, to finally find an understanding community to whom they could express their grief and show the world that their loved one was more than what was expected by a society of AIDS victims was profound. Had Jones called for panels before he began to make his own, there is no doubt in my mind that even just a local call would have rendered an extraordinary outcome.

Our first experience with community is with our families. My earliest memory, for example, is of my parents receiving many packages in the mail. My dad was in the air force, so we lived on a military base. Every six months, usually in the spring and fall, we would receive many packages that together we would open. I remember tearing the brown paper, opening the mismatched boxes, and uncovering a world of care and comfort. The boxes contained quilts, doilies, handmade clothes, jams, canned goods, homemade candies, candles, soaps, and other
handmade goods. Some of the items we would give out to friends, but most we kept and used for ourselves.

This was my family of crafters making sure we were taken care of. In return, my mother would send back boxes of hair bows and quilt squares that she had made. We all contributed to the well being of each other. As a more recent example, when my cousin and best friend Elizabeth died, we were all heartbroken. She was only 26 when she died. She left behind a husband and two small children. For the next two years we, as a family, made soft toys and clothes for the children, and towels, mats, and foodstuffs for the family. We worked through our grief by taking care of Frank and the children, so he could work through his grief.

Craft and community are synonymous to me. When you work in craft, it fosters community. When you participate in a community, you support the best you can, which often leads to craft. Because of this, the relationships between people are important to me. Whether minor or major, the need to care and comfort others is strong. Even if unknown to each other, we can share a common reality which leads to this need for community. When I find myself in a community or needing to help someone, I resort to gift-giving.
This is for You

When Lewis Hyde discusses gift-giving in his book, *The Gift*, he goes into great detail about how a gift functions, travels, and motives for giving. In his first example, he talks about how gift-giving varies in different parts of the world, and how misunderstandings can ensue. From this example, he explains that for one culture, gift-giving is cyclical and should continue on and on, while in another the gift is a commodity.

From this example he goes onto explain how a gift functions, and that for it to be a gift, it must be consumable. Once used the gesture must be passed on, continue on its journey, ever-moving. If it stays it becomes commodity, and if it's sold it is tainted. Hyde also covers the journey. For instance, the gift-giving circle must include three or more people. If it is given between two people, back and forth, it becomes trading, and loses it's meaning over time. With three or more people, there is still mystery behind when one could receive the gift.

With all of these analyses, what the giving of a gift amounts to is gratitude—showing true appreciation for what has been given to you and a need to pass that onto someone else. As Hyde puts it, you cannot truly accept a gift until you fully realize how it's shaped you; then you need to pass it on or reciprocate. He uses the parable of *The Shoemaker and the Elves* to illustrate this point. The shoemaker could have simply continued on, using the elves to continue his profitable business, but instead he became aware of the gift he has received. Conspiring with his wife, they stay up one night, hidden to find out who is doing this for them, and when they see who it is, they instantly want to repay them. They have a need to fully face the nature of the gift, and share it with those who originally bestowed the gift. Though the elves never return, the
shoemaker's business continues to prosper. It's by releasing the gift back to the elves that the shoemaker fully accepts the gift given to him.

As covered thus far, the very nature of a gift is to be passed on. As a child, I thought it was to receive. To be given something on a special occasion such as a holiday, or after a major accomplishment. When I was about 13 years old, it struck me that what I knew of gift-giving was wrong. It wasn't about receiving or about how much money was spent on said gift; the nature of the gift really had nothing to do with the gifter, but everything to do with the giftee. I learned this lesson growing up with my mom.

Due to assorted circumstances, my mother could only afford a trailer, and eventually a ranch house on the outskirts of the county, raising two girls by herself. Trying to make enough much needed money, she would invite her friends to stay with us. These friends were individuals with problems, like drug abuse or alcoholism the would stay with us to get clean. All of our money went to bills and groceries. When special events came around, it was up to our own ingenuity to decorate for and celebrate the occasion. Seeing first-hand the struggles of my mom and her friends, remembering all that they had done, I found myself wanting to express my gratitude or to give them some
joy. We all felt this way, and so we created what we could. It never bothered me to not have jewelry or fancy new clothes because what I did receive meant so much more.

**Fig. 4**

One of my early works at Washington University in St. Louis involved making scarves (Fig. 4). I'm not very good at making new friends; it's more that I fall into friends. Seeing everyone group up, I stuck to those who I knew found me at least tolerable. While sticking around, I noticed they weren't really prepared for cold weather. Sure they had their store-bought items, but they didn't look half as warm as they should be. So I took on the endeavor of making scarves. These forty-odd people were my community, and while they talked me out of my head and soothed my anxieties, I had to show them my gratitude. I crocheted every color combo I could think of, trying to widen the variety. Some I made for the people I knew well. Others I tried to appeal to through colors and textures. To display them, I hung the scarves vertically on my wall, so they trailed on the ground. For a moment, they acted as if warming the wall of my cold studio. I added scarf after scarf to this display, widening the spectacle. When an important advisor meeting concluded, I went around and told everyone I could find to go to my studio and pick out their scarf. Their excitement was palpable and contagious. My advisor group got to experience my work in two ways: as a wall display piece and as a moving performance as my friends and peers walked through the building wearing their new scarves. Seeing the spectacle brought smiles to faces. Whether they did or not, I felt my gratitude to these friends received.
Another similar on-going project is my Vulgar Cross-Stitches. Being in such a stressful environment isn't good for my anxiety; it results in my thinking through everything to the point of being afraid to do anything. To counter this I try to find ways to inject humor into the situation. The idea of language being “bad” has always struck me as silly. Inappropriate, maybe. But for it to be “bad” is ludicrous. Otherwise, why would it exist? With this in mind I look for ways to inject “bad” words into what is otherwise looked at as endearing decorations. I also plan these for specific people. For instance, I gifted Brittany Jas in a cross-stitch that said “KINDA PISSED ABOUT NOT BEING A MERMAID,” (Fig. 5) framed in a wavy 3D frame I had painted light gray to match the softness of her work. I made it with her and her studio space in
mind, so she could display it and laugh at it when needed. While this particular project isn't about showing my gratitude, it is about sharing laughter, which she and others share with me on a regular basis. Thus Continuing the gift giving process.

**Fig. 5**

**Playtime**
In the introduction of *Time to Play: Action and Interaction in Contemporary Art*, “play” is defined as “orientation towards the process, experimenting, stepping into different 'realities', treating viewers as playmates, and changing identities.” As the book details, while “play” has made its way into the vernacular of art, there isn’t really one definition for the word to be applied. If asked what someone means by applying play to a piece, different views emerge. While the art world tries to apply play only in specific situations, it is a mistake and against the very nature of the word, as well as the artists who utilize play in their artwork.

In *Play Matters*, Miguel Sicart writes, “We play because we are human, and we need to understand what makes us human, not in an evolutionary or cognitive way but in a humanistic way. Play is the force that pulls us together. It is a way of explaining the world, others, and ourselves. Play is expressing ourselves—who we want to be, who we don't want to be. Play is what we do when we are human.” I believe Sicart goes deeper than Zimna in *Time to Play*, as the
book talks about the human need to play, not just how we theorize play. Play is utilized by children to figure life out. They use play to interact, work out problems, and test ideas. To think that one can outgrow this need is ridiculous.

My works #mfahats2016 (Fig. 6) and #mfadressup2017 (Fig. 7) are about the basic need for play and connection. I create over-sized props and clothes that the audience can interact with and use to interact with each other. Making these objects out of various materials, I utilize textures that will draw the audience to the work. I want these textures and shapes to pique the audience's curiosity: making them want to know what they're dealing with. I also use craft to make these items, to remind the audience of personal memories, and to draw from personal experience. The overall idea is to create objects that make the audience remember, and want to share it by recreating it. The props I provide are over-sized versions of objects that everyone is familiar with (i.e. a scarf, a pillow, a hat, etc.) and make them accessible to be manipulated by the audience. Scale is important. The pieces dwarf the audience, so that they feel as children. The pieces should be large enough to provide some obstacle, but still be manageable to climb through, move around, and wear.

My goal isn't to infantilize. I don't want everyone to act childish, but instead to capture that moment when one is so excited, they forget the consequences and just go for what they want. They forget they're an adult who's important and has responsibilities, and instead for a moment wears over-sized clothes and builds forts out of over-sized pillows and blankets with the people around them. That they have a memory and they reenact and recreate, sharing their story with others. I want to provide, for them, the opportunity to create memorable moments. People are too hung up on capturing moments with their phone, on not giving in to fun or play because it's irresponsible. Everyone
works and works, hoping for that break after retirement when they can finally live their life, only their life has passed and they're still working. I want to provide opportunities for people to be able to indulge in silliness. To reground. To hard reset. And then continue on their journey. It's important to have opportunities to refocus.

Like Ernesto Neto, my work comes alive when the audience is present. Hanging from the ceiling, like some kind of crocheted jungle vine system, his piece *Cuddle on the Tightrope: Web of Dreams* (Fig. 8) begs to be climbed on. Using bright colors and something tactile like crochet makes you want to run your hands over the surface of the piece. Seeing a sort of ramp lead into the piece beckons you to climb. Looking at those on the ground, you become some kind of animal stalking those below. And vice versa. Those on the ground become onlookers studying those above. If the room was empty the piece would be interesting, but it doesn’t fully come to life until the audience steps in and interacts. It's the audience that activates the work. While beautiful on it's own, it's not fully finished until the audience steps in. Recognizing that, Ernesto takes care to utilize his audience's senses. Colors, textures, even smells are incorporated and give back to the audience what they put into make his art live.

Throughout my life, I have taken up many forms of play to distract and interact with people around me. Through video games, Dungeon and Dragons, live-action role-playing, and writing TERRIBLE fan-fiction, I’m able to work through my problems, or distract myself from
them enough to work through them. I’ve created friendships, fought through my demons, created demons and destroyed heroes. I’ve made forts to hide away from the world and create comfort spaces for my friends. I’ve gone to LARPing events to be a completely different person, because sometimes you just have to be someone else. Knowing the importance of needing to be someone else, or being able to work through things as someone else, is valuable knowledge. It’s helped me to not only work through my own issues, but to help others work through theirs. I’m able to occupy a different head-space when confronted with problems to better understand them, or help others to do so to share and work through. It’s an important opportunity that many don’t feel they can access. I make it my mission to show them otherwise.
Being an anxious person, I have difficulty functioning and interacting. I think about what I would need to do to get through and what I would ideally be doing instead of working. For weeks I’ve been reading, writing, analyzing, and making work. I’ve been meeting my advisors and talking from every angle to get this right. As the weeks pass, I feel more and more exposed. I can’t sleep, I’m not eating well, and there’s not much comfort found while I’m traveling in my car, commuting back and forth. What I’d rather be doing is hiding in a blanket fort, taking naps and reading fan-fiction. I’d rather be creating a space that I can escape to and feel like I have time to breath. I know if I feel this way, the other 24 people doing this exact same thing must also feel this way: feeling raw, overexposed, and needing a place to escape. So I built a blanket fort (Fig. 9) in my studio. While it’s a piece of artwork, it’s for those ‘trapped’ in the studio. It’s a space that, while created for myself, is intended to be used by everyone. It’s for them that I went through the labor. As they come in and investigate, they make plans to bring in their little touches to help them make the fort theirs too. It’s our hidey-hole. Where we can heal and recuperate and then take on our challenges.

It's important to note that I built this piece in my studio; not in an empty white
studio designated public space or install space. I built

Fig 9

this playful structure in my domestic space. It's important to note this because of how the fort would have been seen in other spaces. In an install or otherwise public space, it would have been an installation, an art piece. While people would have interacted with it, they wouldn't have slept in it. They wouldn't have spent long nights drinking beer in it. It's because of it's placement in my domestic space that gives others comfort to do what they will in the fort. It's hidden, a secret. Where they can go to hide and play. Where they don't feel like they're breaking rules; where they feel safe.
Do You Want to Play?

My studio practice revolves around what I’ve learned through my life. It’s dependent on my knowledge and experience with gift and craft communities. Through all of this, my practice is to show others that someone is paying attention, that they are watching and mindful of your needs even if you aren’t. My favorite quote in regard to this is from Bioware’s computer/console game Dragon Age Series. A character named Cole (Fig. 10) said it best when he states, “It doesn’t matter that they won’t remember me, what matters is I helped.” In the game, when idle at Skyhold (the home base), he spends his time doing strange things around the castle that end up helping the non player characters. For example, in one scenario, Cole steals cheese and mint. The cheese draws the mice, the mice draw the cats, the mint makes the cats play, which in turn makes the cook laugh. This puts her in a good mood, so she won’t take her anger out on the elves who work in the kitchen. He goes around trying to ease the burdens of those around him, which in turn makes everyone more focused on helping to defeat the big baddie at the end. And while as the player, it’s strategic, he as a character is only interested in helping those around him, by making them happy.
Whether this work or future projects are acknowledged as high art doesn’t interest me. The most important aspect of the work is that it was done. That someone did it, that it brought people together, and it gave them an opportunity for play. My practice is important because it’s about people and their experiences. I try to create an environment or an opportunity for people to interact or engage with one another. I try to provide opportunities not usually given for people to indulge in because the experience is important. Not everyone will participate, but that’s okay. They don’t need what I have to offer at that time. But someone does. And it’s that someone who I’m trying to reach.
While Beverly Semmes has influenced my work, I still think of our work as different. For instance, her over-sized clothing creates environments (Fig. 11). The lighting and color of her dresses transform the space into something new. The forms are easily recognizable, but their size is cumbersome. Anyone can wear these pieces but no one does. It would take four or more people to wear one garment. The pooling skirts of these gowns overtake the floor, sometimes supporting ceramics or even trailing behind the garment like a giant cloud. These skirts have loaded meanings, like baggage being dragged behind the individual, waiting to be discovered and unpacked. The items which I will be making won't be quite that cumbersome because they are meant to be worn and interacted with. My work is based around the concept of conversation rather than one of display. This concept is from a book called *What We Want is Free: Generosity and Exchange in Recent Art,* which talks about gift-giving within art as a means to creating art.

My work has always been about creating to help others. A gift. I want nothing more than to create something that others can take pleasure in. In this world were so much goes wrong, where all of us suffer in some way, to be able to lose yourself in something so genuine as play is a gift. Both in giving by providing the opportunity, and then receiving as I watch the audience interact with one another. In this small way I'm fulfilling my family's legacy. I am giving back both to my family and my community.
Time to Clean Up Your Room!

For my final project in this program, as a last rebellion against convention, I have designed my thesis to be a small, hand-stitch book (Art. 1). This book is all that is left of my studio here. As my time comes to an end, my studio must be reverted back to white walls/gray floor. The comfortable furniture must leave, the floorboards must be pried up and the walls repainted—like I was never here. A memory. This final project uses the colors of my studio, made with softer textures. It's diary-sized, so when read, it's like a secret. A happy, personal secret.

Like all good things, my time here must come an end. Like my work, I will leave knowing that I left an impression. If and when I am talked about, it will be with care. My memory will guide some other awkward lost soul to their greatness and to show them that they can become who they want to be. My hope is that people will look fondly back on the ridiculousness of my studio and smile. That they will share stories of hanging out in over-sized clothes or in a blanket fort. And when disbelief is rampant, that they can pull out this little turquoise book and remember the reality of kindness.

I take great pains to either stay anonymous or play off that it was no big deal. And it really isn't, I'm happy to help. However this program has made that impossible. It has kept me accountable for my actions. And while it reduced me to a ball of anxiety, I am also grateful. To
have *individuals who saw me*, who understood my feelings and needs as much as I understood theirs. All I can leave is this little book. This last attempt to thank you; an artifact to show that I was here; that the dream did happen; that while I touched lives, mine was equally touched.

My need to make that personal connection spills over, even to the end. Because if I learned anything while here, it's that I know who I am and I know I can and can't do. And with that knowledge, I do all I can to show others who I am, what can be done. I can only do so much and so I do it with everything I have. To show my gratitude for everything I have received and learned. I pass it on in the form of gifts and play. That lesson has led to this little book.

As I stated in my introduction, I've never done anything on anyone's terms but my own. Anytime I have tried to do otherwise, I have failed. This thesis may show my practice, but it also shows the journey I took. It shows the guides given to show me that what I wanted was valid. What I needed to do was valid. And that was given to me by those who understood that the art world isn't limited to galleries and museums. I just hope that these individuals know that they have played a huge role in my success, I am truly and utterly grateful. With this last gift, given at the end of my graduate career at Washington University in St. Louis, all I utter in a sobbing mess is—Thank You. Truly, and Absolutely—Thank You.
Endnotes:


Figures

Fig. 1 Tiravanija, Rirkrit. *Soup/ No Soup*. Social Sculpture, Large Scale, 2012.

Fig. 2 Alfaro, Heather. *Parlour*. Domestics, 11 ft. x 14 ft., Aug 2016.

Fig. 3 Names Project. *Aids Memorial Quilt*. Fabric, Large Scale, 2012.

Fig. 4 Alfaro, Heather. *Scarf*. Yarn, 4in. x 6ft.- 10in. x 9 ft., Mar 2016.

Fig. 5 Alfaro, Heather. *Mermaid*. Vulgar Cross-stitches, 4 in. x 6 in., Feb 2017.

Fig. 6 Alfaro, Heather. *#mfahats2016*. Felt and yarn, 11 in. x 18 ft./ 2 ½ ft. diameter, May 2016.

Fig. 7 Alfaro, Heather. *#mfadressup2017*. Found objects, yarn, felt, fleece, various cloth, 40 in. x 3 ft. x 5 ft., May 2017.

Fig. 8 Neto, Ernesto. *Cuddle on the Tightrope: Web of Dreams*. Crochet, Large Scale, 2012.

Fig. 9 Alfaro, Heather. *Fort*. Blankets and pillow, 11 ft. x 5 ft., Mar 2017.

Fig. 10 Bioware, *Meet Cole*. Console video game, 2014.

Fig. 11 Semmes, Beverly. *Petunia*. Nylon polyester and attendant, 4 ft. x 30 ft. x 90 ft., 2001.
Artifacts

Art. 1 Alfaro, Heather. Thesis. Tissue, paper, linen tapes and thread, book board. 5 ½ in. x 4 ¼ in. x 1 in. May 2017

Bibliography


