

THE UNDOING OF THE SELF:  
AN ARTISTIC EXPLORATION

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at the University of Missouri-Columbia

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Master of Fine Arts

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by  
VALERIE A. WEDEL

James H. Calvin, Thesis Supervisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the  
thesis entitled

THE UNDOING OF THE SELF: AN ARTISTIC EXPLORATION

presented by Valerie A. Wedel,

a candidate for the degree of master of fine art,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance

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Associate Professor James H. Calvin

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Professor Josephine Stealey

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Associate Professor M. Heather Carver

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# THE UNDOING OF THE SELF: AN ARTISTIC EXPLORATION

Valerie A. Wedel

James H. Calvin, Thesis Supervisor

## ABSTRACT

This creative research investigated the nature of interpersonal relationships through the lens of Theravada Buddhism and took the form of interactive video, performance and installation. Tangible materials, video projections and bodily movements were employed in the works to manipulate viewers so they could observe their relationship to the material world, to themselves and to others. The performances were collaborative opportunities for all participants to step outside normal behavior patterns and observe barriers to self-understanding. This research purposely blurred boundaries between artist, viewers and artwork so that viewers became participants and interactors as well as observers. This process allowed the following specific issues to be explored: identity, self vs. other, desire vs. aversion and personal boundaries. The work encouraged participants to mine this content for information about personal psychological states in order that they may better know and accept themselves. They were encouraged to embrace the notion of undoing the self in order to function in this world with a heightened sense of grace.

## Chapter I Introduction

My work in performance, video and installation art deals with the problems inherent in interpersonal interactions. The work explores a range of personal issues, from lust and desire to fear and aversion. I encourage us to mine the content of this work for information about our psychological selves in order that we may better know and accept ourselves. These works are opportunities for both viewers and myself to step outside of our behavior patterns and see where we may construct barriers to self-understanding. When we do, we are able to function in this chaotic world with a heightened sense of grace.

Installation and performance art are appropriate tools for this investigation because they facilitate social experimentation. Performance, video and installation art as media lend themselves to strong viewer participation and interaction, helping to break down the definitions of “viewer,” “artist,” and “artwork,” and revealing aspects of the human condition, much like a microscope inspecting a cell cluster. While I encourage viewer participation, the goal is to investigate the nature of these interactions. As viewers transform into participants and interactors<sup>1</sup> (I will henceforth use as “one who interacts”) within the works, opportunities arise to examine personal dynamics. To this end, this creative research in performance and viewer participation falls into one or more of the following categories: 1) ideas of “self” and “other,” 2) identity, 3) desire and aversion, and 4) personal boundaries. Ultimately, the final piece, *Undoing* (see Figures 9 and 10), exposes the desire for contact and the vulnerability inherent in establishing that contact.



These categories inherent in this work are based on concepts from Theravada Buddhism. In this tradition, the concepts of “self” and “other” are mental constructs, which lead to misunderstanding the true nature that we are all *one*. Identity involves the definitions to which we attach ourselves, in an attempt to establish our “self.” This could be defining oneself as being of a particular personality type, belonging to a particular group, or even being of a particular age or gender. Desire and aversion arise in relation to all objects and people, which we perceive as “other.” We tend to grasp at things we desire and attempt to push away things we hate. However, when we are able to perceive this *oneness*, we realize the futility of grasping and pushing. Nonetheless, we must reconcile a belief in this *oneness* with the practical need for personal boundaries. This creative research navigates the paradoxes inherent in this belief system when engaging in human interaction.

My research reveals the above-mentioned issues when the artist, the depicted and the viewer are one in the same. This work allows us to step back and look at ourselves. When we do, perhaps we can see where we have internal barriers and find ways to integrate ourselves with our world. The distinctions we perceive between ourselves, others and other objects originate merely from our sensory perceptions, which are limited and flawed. At its most extreme, this feeling of separation can lead to despair and unhealthy personal choices such as addictive behaviors and unnecessary violence in dealing with others, ranging from social control to nuclear weaponry. We engage in unhealthy human interactions in order to achieve connection at all costs.

According to these teachings of Theravada Buddhism, many of the difficulties we face in interacting with others and in developing trust are learned. Prior to our first

painful playground traumas, we may have experienced something similar to the following scenario. Picture a little girl with her family, visiting the beach. Within an hour she has a new friend and a collaborative sand structure well underway. By sundown, they part ways, their efforts washed away by the tide. They exchange no addresses and experience no sense of loss over the inundated sandcastle. Nonetheless, they experience an engagement in trust and communication. As an adult, interactions with others are not so simple. Trust has to be earned and communication is often colored with personal agendas, ego-driven issues or simply fear. As we think we have more at stake, such as our reputations, interactions with others can seem stressful and fraught with problems. For example, as an adult, this girl may take years, as opposed to minutes, to develop friendships. My work exposes the fact that, as adults, our thoughts and fears affect interpersonal interaction.

## **Chapter II** **Performed Installation**

This work in performed installation grew out of observations I have made about the power of performance. For ten years I worked as an artist model. Many of these jobs entailed posing for art classes. The instructors typically lectured for a few minutes, and then let the students go to work in silence. As the model, I was silent too. Since I was so still and quiet, I had hours to deeply observe what was going on around me. I soon realized that my mood affected the mood of the class. If I was uncomfortable, the students were more likely to fidget and frown. When I relaxed, they appeared more so as well. While there was, of course, no way I could prove these responses were occurring, this phenomenon intrigued me. I was curious how someone could be so powerful while sitting nude, immobile, and mute.

After entering graduate school, I began to experiment with performances involving repetitive, often meditative actions inspired by the modeling experience. I performed some of these in the nude, being influenced by years of posing nude, but during most performances I was clothed. As I brought my work out into public, nudity became less of an option. When I did perform nude in more private settings, I did so to convey vulnerable humanity and to suppress cultural identity. I also had intended for my body to be read as a human body, outside of gender classification. However, my nude female body read as “female” first and very secondarily “universal human body.” I did experience, as M. Heather Carver (2003) posits, that “an autobiographical performer takes...a literal and figurative space traditionally occupied by men’s voices and bodies” (p. 15). Nevertheless, I also found that “notions of the spectator as male and the spectacle

as woman...[can be] subverted [not only] through challenging the power of language itself” (p. 16) but also through arrangement of installation materials and performed actions.

Furthermore, I found that the strength of performance rested more on the actions or inactions themselves, rather than on whether I was clothed. I discovered that my role was to invite the viewer into the piece. In *Amalgam* (see Figure 5), to be discussed later, I learned that eye contact and a simple gesture greatly determined viewer participation. Props, such as the two-way mirror in another piece, *There is Only One Face* (see Figures 1 & 2), have given many pieces their substance – playing a more critical role than a theatre prop. In the aforementioned work, the piece would not exist without the prop.

In other cases, the props themselves have played more of a central role, with the performance occurring at intervals during the course of the exhibition. I refer to these pieces as “performed installations” as the materials typically fill an entire gallery space. *Crush* (see Figures 3 & 4), covered in Chapter 4, is one of those pieces, functioning both as an installation and as a performed installation.

One significant aspect of performance installation is that it often facilitates viewer-performer interaction. All art has viewer interaction, to a greater or lesser degree, but in interactive performance, where the viewer is an interactor, response plays a major role in the work. Participant activity may drive the meaning of the work and may even be documented as the work. For example, Valie Export, in *Touch Cinema* (1968-1971), encouraged passers-by to touch her breasts within a cardboard box she had constructed around her torso (Alberro, 2000, ¶ 1). She challenged viewers to participate in an activity normally confined to porn houses or the bedroom. Then, she documented their reactions

to their own participation, noting the level of discomfort expressed when engaged in an activity normally kept private.

In my work, I use viewer and performer interaction to explore specific issues: notions of “self” and “other,” identity, desire/aversion and personal boundaries. Both viewer-participant and performer-participant responses are noted and examined through the above perspectives. Performance is effective for self-examination in that everyone brings these issues to any interaction they have with others. The parameters of the performed installations merely act as a magnifying tool to expose feelings and tendencies already latent within us. I intend for participants, myself included, to analyze the performances in order to examine these tendencies. Thus, in these instances, the performance becomes the content – the meaning of the work. I want us to mine this content for information about our psychological selves in order that we may better know and accept ourselves.

### Chapter III Viewer Participation

Interpersonal exchange, in terms of artworks, requires both artist and viewer input. All artwork needs *viewer participation* to a lesser or greater degree. However, I structure these works so that viewer participation acts as a central component, encouraging self-reflection.

As a critic who opposes viewer participation, Michael Fried (1968) discusses current trends (Minimalism in particular) in art with disdain. He states: “Whereas in previous art ‘what is to be had from the work is located strictly within [it],’ the experience of literalist art is of an object *in a situation* – one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder...*” (p.125). In opposition to Fried, I purposely create spaces for viewers to insert themselves, to assign them a *place*. Fried is missing the point of what happens to the ego when an artist creates space for the viewer. While he criticizes “the entire situation” which includes the “beholder’s body,” it is important to consider that establishing the beholder’s body points to self-awareness, ideas of the self, and awareness of the ego.

By contrast, Michel Foucault (1979) in “What is an Author?” asks, “What difference does it make who is speaking?”(p. 160). He argues against a specific interpretation of a work based on presupposed intentions of an author. I address this concept in the work by blurring the boundaries between artist and viewer, such as in *There is Only One Face* (see Figures 1 & 2). Viewer response and participation are equally integral to the works as my intentions as an “artist.” In my work, as Merleau-Ponty (1974) proposes, “...it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and

what is seen, what paints and what is painted”(p. 288). Though he may have argued this in terms of the relationship of the creator and the work of art, this argument applies to the experience of viewer/participants in these works as well, for the art does not exist without them.

Through this work, I attempt to break down barriers between the viewers and the artwork in order to force viewers into a more active role. Using materials, video and my body within the works, I manipulate viewers so that they may observe how they relate to objects, to others, and to themselves. Boundaries between artist, viewer and artwork are purposely blurred so that viewers become participants and interactors as well as observers. Through this approach, I partially relinquish control over the work, which allows for the wide range of reactions I have observed during these pieces. These reactions will be discussed in the following chapter through *There is Only One Face* (see Figures 1 & 2) and *Crush* (see Figures 3 & 4).

## **Chapter IV** **Buddhist Influence**

### *Self and Other*

One of the themes prevalent in my work is that the notion of “self” as separate from “other” is a mental construct. On one level, we are separate, but not in all ways. It is due to the nature of our senses that we perceive the world as we do. According to our senses we are separate and on those levels, we are. However, in the field of physics, for example, if we examine ourselves on a subatomic level, we learn that our bodies are in continuous flux. On a subatomic level, there is no way to clearly differentiate between our bodies and the air around them. Many spiritual traditions, such as Zen Buddhism, make similar claims. Thich Nhat Hanh (1997), Zen monk and author, addresses this in terms of time:

One day as I was about to step on a dry leaf, I saw the leaf in the ultimate dimension. I saw that it was not really dead, but that it was merging with the moist soil in order to appear on the tree the following spring in another form. I smiled at the leaf and said, 'You are pretending.' Everything is pretending to be born and pretending to die, including that leaf. (p. 151)

According to this teaching, we must recognize that on some levels, such as on the subatomic and metaphysical levels, we are not separate from one another.

Another artist who draws on the metaphysical concepts in Buddhism, among other spiritual teachings, is Marina Abramovic. In *Nightsea Crossing* (C. Carr, 2002), performed with her partner, Ulay, the two of them sat motionless, seven hours a day, across a table, looking at each other. Performing this work 90 times, typically over three day periods, they would neither speak nor eat during the entire course of the performance. While this was an influential and powerful work, the interaction occurred only between



the two of them, the audience members acting merely as witnesses. Even Abramovic herself addressed this limitation in a later work, *The House with the Ocean View*, during which she lived for twelve days in three open, platformed rooms in full view of gallery visitors. In *Ocean View* she periodically locked eyes with a single viewer for extended periods of time. C. Carr (2002) writes about it in the *Village Voice*:

Abramovic has long been interested in the way spiritual practitioners develop themselves through fasting, silence, and ritual. While the content of *Nightsea Crossing* was the artists' inner lives, she wanted to explore whether a piece could include the inner lives of the audience. *Ocean View* was an experiment: "If I purify myself, can I change the energy in the space and the energy in the audience?" (¶ 8)

In my approach to the inner lives of the audience, I examined the idea of "self and other" in *There is Only One Face* (see Figures 1 & 2). I installed a sheet of two-way mirror-pane into a wall like a window. On one side of the wall, viewers could walk up to the mirror-pane in the gallery. On the other side of the wall, hidden from view, I stood several inches away from the glass, just the right distance to match the size of the visitor's face. Through the adjustment of light, I created a situation in which at first glance viewers saw their own image in the glass and after a few seconds, noticed my ghostlike features from the other side of the wall, merging with theirs in the mirror-pane – a synthesized image that was neither entirely mine, nor entirely theirs. At this point, they developed into interactors with the work as I mimicked their movements and facial gestures in an attempt to give them a realistic "reflection." They were looking at themselves and at me simultaneously. And I was doing the same. The artist was the artist, artwork and viewer. The viewer was also the artist, artwork and viewer.



Figure 1. *There is Only One Face*, Installation View, 2006

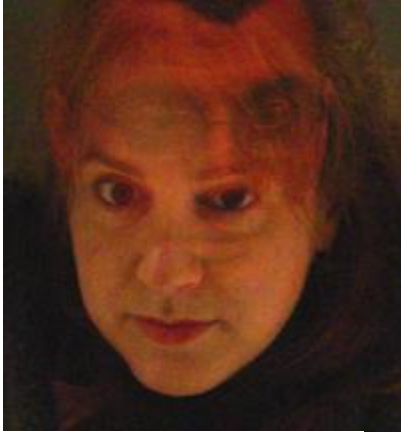


Figure 2. *There Is Only One Face*, Performance View, 2006

In *There is Only One Face* (see Figures 1 & 2), I disrupted what we usually see as “self” and “other.” I based this work on the notion that we are all interconnected even though we often believe we are not. In this piece I explored the challenges encountered when this belief runs up against personal experience and how we respond to that experience. Participants remarked on

their own reactions as much as on the materials in play. Responses ranged from avoidance: “I can’t handle this right now,” to playing with our shared images for an extended period of time. Many people looked behind themselves to see if I was a projection. Some thought I was not a real person in the mirror. Although this work made some people uncomfortable, it was meant to be an exercise in seeing the self as a mental construct. We make assumptions about who we are based on certain physical conditions. Through this piece, I altered those conditions in order to question that mental construct. The intention in this work was to break down the assumptions we have of “self” and “other.” I believe that if we do, we can create greater spaces for letting others in through trust. “Trust” in this sense is not trust in another person and is instead trust that we will not lose the self, but rather gain the world by shedding our self-definitions. If we know that there are no boundaries, then we know in the Buddhist sense, that we are *everything*.

*There is Only One Face* was created out of the desire to show others we are not that which we think we are, that there is “only one face” in the world. However, the work evolved into more than a message to viewers. It revealed how comfortable or disconcerted they were in seeing their image merged with mine. This work has taught me

to attune myself to the actual experience of the works, both of myself and of others.

*There is Only One Face* (see Figures 1 & 2) explored the attachments we may have to our bodies, and our faces in particular, especially when defining our sense of self. Contrasting this work with Abramovic and Ulay's *Nightsea Crossing*, visitors did not "receive" information; rather they interacted and "created" information. We became a social experiment. One aspect of myself that I learned through this experiment is that I see participation as "good" and avoidance as "bad." I was disappointed when some people I knew well did not want to engage with the piece.

Some people have admitted that they chose not to participate in this piece, or to participate minimally due to discomfort with the idea of losing their reflection.

Resistance to the piece is still an important part of the piece. By *not* participating, a person still engages the piece on another level. They have chosen not to look but are still dealing with unease by avoiding the piece. Lack of participation in the piece raises the question of whether visitors have a fear of losing their sense of self. I have discovered that my reaction to others' responses (i.e. that not participating is "bad") means that I am more judgmental than I previously thought. Through this piece, I learned to predict a greater range of responses to my works than I had previously assumed. I have learned to plan that range into the works and to strongly encourage viewers to observe these reactions.

### ***Identity***

In *There is Only One Face*, I observed and reconciled my own intentions with the actual outcomes of the work. While I have an initial intention for the meaning of a work, visitor interaction makes it function. Ultimately the experience "in the field" transmits the

actual significance. Not only do viewers as interactors gain insight from the experience but also I, as the artist, learn from the experience. Sometimes an interactor will go so far as to antagonize, leading me to doubt my self-definition as someone who is open to all responses.

One piece that evoked this type of response was the performed installation, *Crush* (see Figures 3 & 4), which originated as a way to share my raw feelings in the present moment. Through visitor interaction, the work forced me to question my self-concept. This month long piece was inspired by Ann Hamilton's installation, *Tropos* but with a more direct interaction with visitors.

For *Tropos*, Hamilton filled an entire floor of the Dia Center in New York City with 3,000 pounds of horsehair. A sound system emitted a low, recorded voice. At one corner of the space, a person sat, burning text out of a book, line by line, with a wood-etching tool. The performer made no eye contact with visitors nor directly interacted with them (Hunter, Jacobus, & Wheeler, 2000).

In *Crush*, several hundred 4' x 8.5' clear plastic crinkled sheets completely filled the gallery, hanging from the ceiling to several inches above the floor. Only six inches of space separated the sheets in any direction. In the back of the room, I performed by sitting at a small desk, writing thoughts and feelings of the moment on a long scroll of FAX paper. A small desk lamp, emitting a low light, sat on the desk. Along with two small



Figure 3. *Crush*, Installation View, 2005

ceiling lights at opposite corners of the room, this lamp was the only light source.

Typically, people stood at the entrance a few moments before walking into the installation. With only six inches of space between the sheets, participants made noise no matter where they went. Navigating the crinkled plastic sheets, people found me at a small desk in the back of the room, writing, smiling and making eye contact with them. I did not, however, speak to them. They often tried to engage me in conversation and when I did not, they began to read my writing. Some people sat for up to half an hour, reading. Audience response ranged from refusal to enter the space to one young man trying to burn the paper with the desk lamp.

As visitors experienced the piece, I wrote in response to their specific presence. While the altered space impacted the visitor's experience, their presence in the piece influenced me as the performer. Thus, the visitor became an active participant in *Crush* (see Figures 3 & 4). In Ann Hamilton's *Tropos*, visitors could interact with the space, playing in the horsehair. They could not, however, interact with the performer. In *Crush*, visitors could alter the nature of my writing, and therefore impact the piece to a greater degree than in *Tropos*.



Figure 4. *Crush*, Performance View, 2005

Nevertheless, the limited personal connections that were made were only fleeting and fragile. While the participant saw a glimpse into my sentiments when they read the writings, barriers still existed between us. I claimed to have been

writing my thoughts and feelings but I know in retrospect that I inadvertently censured myself and did not admit to *everything* I felt in my writing. I wrote a range of appropriate responses to the presence of visitors: “I am happy that you are here.” “You smell nice.” “I can’t believe you did that!” However, I did not write some of my thoughts such as: “I want to have sex with you.” and “I’ve secretly liked you for a long time.” These last two statements are significant in their omission, for they were the basis for the work from the beginning. I avoided writing these statements out of fear of shocking the person to whom they would have been directed. Revealing these feelings would have changed my relationship to that person. Thus, while the writing activity originated as a physical manifestation of the desire for intimacy, it revealed the inability of the performer to share beyond a superficial level.

The installation itself elicited a range of responses as well. Some people, who would lie on the floor and spend time looking up at the ceiling through the sheets, reported that the experience was very peaceful to them and visited numerous times. Others nervously maneuvered through the sheets in an attempt to overcome claustrophobia or sonophobia. One elderly woman in a wheelchair did what a lot of the little children would do: crash into the sheets as hard as she could, cutting huge swaths as the sheets cleared out of her way. It was like the vertical equivalent of jumping into piles of leaves. In both *Crush* (see Figures 3 & 4) and *There is Only One Face* (see Figures 1 & 2), the very youngest and oldest visitors were often the most adventuresome. Both of these pieces taught me that the actual results in performance might vary greatly from initial intentions and reinforced the need to plan and prepare for a greater range of outcomes in the work.

*Crush*, like my other performed installations, challenged viewers in that it made them especially aware of the presence of their own bodies through the sounds they created in the room. Viewers have become accustomed to leaving their bodies behind when looking at photographs or watching videos. I interrupted the familiar viewer experience by making viewers a visual and audible part of the artworks. As Jonathan Crary summarized at the end of *Techniques of the Observer* (1999), “The prehistory of the spectacle *and* the ‘pure perception’ of modernism are lodged in the newly discovered territory of a fully embodied viewer, but the eventual triumph of both depends on the denial of the body...as the ground of vision” (p. 136). In my work, the ground of vision has shifted. I am attempting to bring, in part, the viewers’ awareness back to their own bodies, to make them interactors. Through awareness comes self-control and self-control means power - the power to make choices.

Ironically, however, to situate the interactor’s body in a piece also makes him or her vulnerable. “Location is about vulnerability,” claims Donna Haraway (2002, p.683). In this installation, they had nowhere to hide, even when they were not visible to each other. Not only was their location announced to everyone in the room through sound, but also their level of activity – moving quickly with agitation or slowly and calmly. Many interactors found this situation disturbing and creepy. They were given a *space* to be in – no longer enjoying the privilege of being without one, as they would if they were sitting in a movie theatre, for example. In order to gain access to information, the interactors had to risk becoming a target of my writing and risk their heightened presence through the sounds of the sheets. I too had to risk becoming a target. One person who tried to hide in the corner of the room became the source of nearly a half an hour of writing. Like a game

of chicken, the longer he stood silent and hidden, the more apparent his presence was to me. This act impacted me as I was forced to stay at the desk, agitated, for over 15 minutes past the closing of the show.

By my participation in the work as a performance artist, I made myself vulnerable as well. Besides having my installation nearly burned down, I learned that my own beliefs were challenged when one viewer in particular made me extremely uncomfortable. He began a dialogue with me on the paper, motioning to use the pen to write messages to me. When viewers entered the space, I wrote that I was happy to see them - genuinely so. But, I think this person took the message a bit too seriously (or wanted to challenge me) and hovered over me for an extended period of time. He left and returned with a large camera, taking close shots of me. He then tracked my e-mail address and sent them to me, large file format, jamming up my mailbox. In the images, I looked really grumpy. I deleted them.

I was surprised at the level of my response to this person. It was not his behavior that surprised me, but rather my response to it. I did not realize I would be so sensitive to it. My belief in the concept of *oneness* had to extend to him, if it was to extend to all things, and that challenged me. I saw that desire for connections and interactions with others only applied to certain people. I not only lacked control of how viewers responded to the work, but also that I possessed unanticipated personal boundaries. Through the writing, I attempted to share aspects of myself rarely revealed. However, these attempts failed in that I left much undisclosed due to fear. Ideally, I had wanted to bridge a gap between others and myself. However, the performance merely exposed the reality that personal boundaries impact my interactions with other people. It made me think about



how to reconcile a belief in the Buddhist thought that we are all *one* with the practical need for personal boundaries. *Oneness* does not mean bridging a gap between oneself and others. *Oneness* is a condition. Interactions with others exist within that state of *oneness* whether or not we feel it. Nevertheless, personal boundaries are necessary, for example, our time is finite – we cannot possibly develop friendships with everyone we meet. While I had the intention of making connections with every visitor to *Crush* (see Figures 3 & 4), the outcome revealed that socially, this was not possible. But, spiritually, the connections were already a given.

### ***Desire and Aversion***

One may examine the discrepancies between intention and outcome, of ideal versus real, through the lenses of desire and aversion. I believe in the Buddhist concept that desire grows out of the false view that we are separate. When we deny that we exist in a state of *oneness*, we experience desire and aversion. If we truly accept that all things are *one* then there are no connections that need to be made, for they are already there. And, by the same token, there is nothing to run away from. When we feel fear or face challenges to our sense of self, we suffer. Likewise, when we become attached to things we like or are ruled by our wants, we suffer. So, both our aversions and desires are two sides of the same coin. My work originates from a desire to impart this belief to others. But, I too am implicated in the process. The work reveals my own agenda – which is open to investigation. I question how successful I am at making people feel these connections and I wonder why I am often uncomfortable interacting with people in these works. I claim to be open to whatever experiences viewers have, but admittedly I do want viewers to have certain kinds of experiences.

I am interested in the problem of creating works based on my own desires. Desire comes from a perception of lack. But, this is in direct conflict with my belief that in reality, we lack nothing. The circumstance is akin to walking a tightrope – we must develop grace in order to walk on it, navigating our ideals and desires with reality. One may feel tension in walking the tightrope, but by walking it, one may avoid plunging too far one way or another – either by blinding oneself to reality and living in a fantasy world, or by becoming extremely cynical and closed off.

Thus, it is important to live in the world with healthy psychological boundaries.

For example,

Sharon Salzberg, Buddhist meditation teacher and author of the book *Lovingkindness*, tells how as a young woman she once traveled by rickshaw through the teeming streets of Calcutta. In a winding alley, a huge man suddenly stepped from the darkness, obstructed their passage, and attempted to drag her out of the rickshaw. Images of rape and murder flashed through her mind, but she was helpless until her companion managed to fend off the drunken assailant and the rickshaw driver pressed on. Later, when Sharon told her meditation teacher what had happened, he said gently, ‘Oh, Sharon, with all the loving-kindness in your heart, you should have taken your umbrella and hit that man over the head with it!’ (Small, 2001, ¶ 21)

One may ask how one justifies this experience with the notion that we are all *one*. The situation appears as a conundrum, that the two cannot possibly co-exist. However, this *oneness* encompasses all things, so the scenario with the assailant still falls under the umbrella of *oneness*. I see this situation as being analogous to the Christian belief in a loving god who still allows “bad” things to happen to “good” people. In order to achieve balance, people must find their “tightropes.”

It is inevitable that we will encounter unpleasant and difficult experiences.

Buddhist teachings encourage people to be openhearted without being passive. When we

are, we may not have the residue left behind after experiences like the aggressive man in the *Crush* (see Figures 3 & 4) piece. I could have interacted with him just as I shared, but not have this lingering feeling of aversion. Sharon Salzberg could have simply hit the robber with her umbrella and then not give it another thought. She could have maintained her personal boundaries within her Buddhist stance of lovingkindness.

## Chapter V Personal Boundaries

Personal boundaries involve psychological barriers we construct around ourselves in order to negotiate social interactions. Sometimes these boundaries protect us but they can also prevent us from getting close to other people. Like the previous two works, the next three works, *Amalgam* (see Figure 5), *Projection II* (see Figure 6), and *Convergence II* (see Figures 7 & 8) examine not only desires and aversions, but also personal boundaries.

*Amalgam*, a work in which I examined personal boundaries, encouraged a great degree of viewer-performer interaction. *The Random House Unabridged Dictionary* defines “Amalgam” as alloys of mercury with other metals used in dental fillings and in silvering mirrors. It is also defined as a combination of diverse elements.



Figure 5. *Amalgam*, 2005

*Amalgam*, a studio installation, exposed the ways in which people overcome barriers in order to interact. In this piece, a single visitor entered the studio where a white plaster tile floor confronted them. Within the tile floor, I sat behind a rotting log and inserted pieces of broken mirrored glass into its cavities. When visitors entered the space I offered them a tiny dental tool. In order to reach it, visitors had to walk across the plaster floor. With their first step, they realized that the “floor” was false and raised one

inch. As they broke the floor with their steps, green plant-life was revealed through the cracks.

In the original version of this piece, I did not offer a tool to visitors entering the room. I merely looked at them in silence, smiled, and continued my performance with the log. In this version, viewers did not advance to the plaster platform and did not participate in any activity. For subsequent visitors, I made the gesture of offering a tool and beckoned them to join me. Once I did this, visitors walked onto the plaster and participated in the activity. The one small, yet pivotal action of offering the tool made the difference between visitors merely viewing versus participating in the piece. Through this experience, I learned to provide visitors with a way into the works, when that is where I intend for them to be.

After initial furtive steps, visitors proceeded to sit opposite me, on the plaster, and participated in filling the cavities of the log, mimicking my activity. Within minutes, participants developed individualized behaviors, ranging from gracing my head with a “laurel” of woven ivy to attacking me with plaster chips. One person created snow out of the plaster while another pieced together flower petals, inserting them into the log. Another was too shy to go beyond the first step.

By exposing the tensions concerning intimacy, through the delicate plaster floor and eye contact, this work examines barriers we put up to protect ourselves. These barriers, preventing us from getting close to others, can be clumsy to break down. For example, every participant initially attempted to reach for the offered tool without stepping on the floor. Participants initially hesitated to involve themselves physically in the work but eventually engaged with the piece enthusiastically, some staying for nearly

an hour. Although no dialogue exchanged, intimacy occurred in that we discovered personal modes of behavior through the exchange, even if only to a limited degree.



Figure 6. *Projection II*, 2006

We say we want to touch, to be held, but our desires conflict with personal boundaries. Sometimes we create artificial boundaries in order to follow social mores. Certain kinds of boundaries are good and healthy. I

experiment with what occurs when we encounter boundaries. *Projection II* (see Figure 6) deals with what I see as healthy boundaries. In *Projection II*, viewers entered a dim passageway, at the end of which they found a bowl of popcorn on a pedestal with a sign, saying “Help Yourself.” The space was arranged such that there was only one spot for visitors to stand, once they arrived at the popcorn bowl. When standing in front of the bowl, if they looked to their right, they saw a projection filling the entire wall. On the left side of the image, they saw a projected face talking while on the right they saw themselves projected in real time. The image of the talking head was many times larger than the image of the viewer and appeared to be looming over them. If they looked at the projection, their projected self appeared to be looking toward the large head, which seemed to be talking directly to them. The looming head of the artist continuously uttered judgmental statements: “You worry too much”... “You have a great body!”... “You talk too much!”... “You are sweet”... “You need to pull yourself together” – statements that were both positive and negative.

I chose these words to suggest notions that others literally project onto us – that the things others say about us usually have more to do with them than with us specifically. If we can detach ourselves, through healthy personal boundaries, from judgmental statements, either positive or negative, we see them as projections. If we do so, we are impervious to them and our own well-being will not be so invested in what others say. Through the separation between these projected images and themselves, I wanted viewers to experience this detachment. I wanted them to be aware of themselves *not* entering the drama the “talking head” initiated. In *Projection II* (see Figure 6), viewers could impact the projection of their own image through interaction with the piece. They could not, however, impact the projected talking head as in performed installations with a real human.

Compared to other pieces, *Projection II* did not strongly affect viewers. While the piece worked conceptually and is included in this discussion for that reason, viewers did not engage much with the work. In talking with those who experienced the piece, its strength was diluted because it involved a video talking to them rather than a real person. While this work has been important in my research on personal boundaries, I have abandoned this particular mode of expression.



Figure 7. Participant in *Convergence II*, 2006

To resolve the issue of putting viewers into a video piece, I chose to insert their actual physical bodies in the artwork rather than their projections. *Convergence II* (see Figures 7 & 8) not only explored personal boundaries but also served as a surrogate to touch others.

*Convergence II* (see Figures 7 & 8) was a video installation without performance and completely filled a 17' x 21' gallery. Two projectors at opposite corners of the space projected scrolling text onto a spiral formation of translucent fabric, hung from ceiling to floor. The flowery text read: "I only wanted to bring you together here that you may touch one another." I wrote this phrase to distill my intention for the work. The fabric was hung in a spiral to elicit the sense of being "embraced" and the words cast onto the fabric represented caresses. Visitors were encouraged by the configuration of the space to walk through the spiral, becoming part of the work as the projection merged their bodies with the fabric. Through this arrangement, their bodies immediately became part of the artwork, thus turning the viewers into interactors. These interactors could see how one's movement within a piece impacted the experience. I wanted people to feel not only enveloped by the space but also that they played a role in the experience for each other. For example, due to the intimate nature of the piece, some visitors reported feeling hesitant to enter the space while others were present.

I intended to caress people. I used this work to touch and embrace people who I otherwise may not, due to social restrictions. From a safe distance, I was able to include people such as my secret crush in my embrace without fear of outcome. Protected by using the fabric and video as surrogates for hugs, I felt more comfortable to open up. However, the reverse situation to *Crush* (see Figures 3 & 4) occurred – sharing and openness were attempted, but personal boundaries were still firmly in place through the



Figure 8. *Convergence II*, 2006



withdrawal of my performing body. Even the text itself is safe. I could have fully admitted, “I only wanted to bring you together here that I may touch you,” instead of “...you may touch one another.” As in *Crush* (see Figures 3 & 4), I embedded my deepest desires within ones that were safer to admit.

This piece was about both my psychological reactions and those of viewers. I intended for people to come together and think about the experience of being together in this environment. I wanted interactors to consider their own levels of comfort or discomfort under these conditions. Responses ranged from feeling like one was inside a waterfall to being inside a bottle of Guinness. Some people felt serene while others felt great discomfort.

*Amalgam* (see Figure 5), *Projection II* (see Figure 6) and *Convergence II* (see Figures 7 & 8) experimented with boundaries from a range of perspectives. *Amalgam* explored boundaries as being tricky and difficult to navigate. *Projection II* dealt with boundaries as potentially good and healthy. *Convergence II* examined the fact that we may put up too many barriers to intimacy and thus defined boundaries as potentially bad and alienating.

## Chapter VI Undoing: The Thesis Installation



Figure 9. *Undoing*, 2007

Photo Credit: Kevin Dingman

Exploration of boundaries and desire continued in my research through the piece for the thesis exhibition: *Undoing* (see Figures 9 & 10). This work consisted of video installation and performance installation elements and filled a

darkened 66' x 34' gallery space. For the video installation, as in *Convergence II* (see Figures 7 & 8), I projected a scrolling text from two projectors. Instead of straight fabric, I altered the projection screen to be an object in and of itself, hanging 3,000 individual “poufs” of melted polyester organza and voile fabric by monofilament from 44 ceiling tiles. The poufs ranged from approximately 6” to 3’ in diameter, hung between 7’ and 3’ off the floor in a cloud-like formation.

The projected text read, “This is an undoing..... Undue desire..... I want to be undone, touch the undoing,” and meandered over the fabric like moonlight on nighttime clouds or like sunrays reflecting on jellyfish. On the thousands of lines of monofilament, the video projection appeared as rain or bubbles. Many people likened the sensation to being inside an electrical storm, yet with a sense of tranquility. To accentuate the feeling of calm, I invited visitors to lie down under the video projection on a bed of 1,500 pounds of black oil sunflower seeds. The sensation was like being in a giant soft black sand box. The projected light upon the seeds resembled light shining down to the bottom of the sea.

Periodically, sounds resembling thunder and wind engulfed the space, echoing in the exterior hallways. Although perceived as wind and thunder, the sound was my normal breathing, slowed to 1/3 speed. Both the speed and the rhythm of the sound heightened the serenity of the gallery space.



Figure 10. *Undoing Performance*, 2007 Photo Credit: Kevin Dingman

One corner of the gallery was set up as a performance space, created as an auxiliary for the cloud formation of poufs. In this corner, over 100 pounds of recently dried sunflowers were arranged in a standing, old-fashioned birdcage and two replicated stick and wire-mesh cage structures with several dozen sunflowers scattered on the floor. A low-watt light and small stool were arranged nearby, separated from the pouf installation by a sheet of translucent fabric hanging from ceiling to floor. For two hours daily in the course of the show, I sat on the bench, in a long flowing red sueded-rayon dress, harvesting sunflower seeds. When visitors entered the gallery, I interacted with them in a variety of manners. Sometimes I walked up to them, holding seeds in my soft dress, from which people occasionally scooped out. Other times I dumped the seeds on their feet, smiling up at them, meant as a flirtatious gesture. And, sometimes I simply sat on the bench and emphasized the sounds of falling seeds and snapping of dried petals as a way of sharing the experience with visitors. At times these sounds resembled rain, tying in with the thunderous and windy sounds emanating from the speakers while the sweet, earthy smell of the sunflowers wafted over the entire gallery. I intended for the gallery

space to seem larger than it is in reality through the expansiveness of suggested natural landscape.

Both aspects of video and performed installation operated as elements of one single artwork. While I chose the elements for their calming nature, I also wanted people to experience tension in order to determine whether or not to interact with the work. Much like in *Amalgam* (see Figure 5), I arranged the floor such that participants had to overcome initial fear in destroying or altering the work. The thunderous sounds and the light running over the poufs of fabric were disorienting at first glance – some people reported initial feelings of fear. If anyone tried to follow all the moving lines of text, they became dizzy. Viewers had to relinquish traditional viewer-ship and experience the piece more physically in order to experience calm. A number of people admitted to experiencing the video installation like a sanctuary or meditation space, coming back to it regularly to break away from their hectic schedules. Response to my performance ranged from feelings of joy and connection to perceiving the action of gently tossed seeds at one's feet as an act of hostility and pretension. Others experienced the space differently based on whether I was present or not, being more anxious if I was performing and more calm if I was not.

One participant made a great impact on this piece, causing me to alter my performance on that day. Halfway through one of my performing sessions, this young man entered the space as he had perhaps a dozen times before – quickly tossing off his coat and delving right into the seeds, immediately settling into a spot under the poufs. Since I had interacted more directly with him on past occasions, tossing seeds on him, I decided that this time I would remain in the performance area, maintaining my action of

seed harvest. After about 15 minutes, I realized that he was continuously running his fingers through the seeds in a slow rhythmic motion, which was a very soothing sound. For the first time in a week and a half of performing, I ceased my own activity to listen to his. He continued the rhythmic rain-like sound of the seeds for another 15 minutes, which I found incredibly soothing and remained still and silent to enjoy. At the end of the session, I resumed my activity and he exited the space with no other interaction.

This experience related to my original premise of overcoming boundaries as well as tied in with the words of the projected text. Through a visitor's actions, I felt a connection even though I could not identify him. I saw this as an interaction with a participant on a very subtle level (perhaps so subtle that he did not even intend or notice my enjoyment in his sound-making). His activity touched me in that I felt pleasant bodily sensations through hearing the rain sounds made by the seeds. As stated above, the scrolling, projected text read: "This is an undoing..... Undue desire..... I want to be undone, touch the undoing." On one level, I used the word "undoing" to mean *not doing* and just *being*, which was the state in which his action put me. Unexpectedly, his simple action, intended or not, undid me.

Once again, as in *Crush* (see Figures 3 & 4) and *Amalgam* (see Figure 5), this experience has reminded me that these performance artworks operate in a highly collaborative environment. Even the subtlest of visitor participation can make a significant impact. What may seem imperceptible to one person may appear powerfully obvious to another. Understated actions may elicit strong but silent results. I plan to research these subtleties further in future video and performance installation work.

## Chapter VII Conclusion

In talking with participants and reading written reviews, there is a huge range of response to this body of work. As stated in the introduction, I wanted a range of responses from viewers. This work deals with personal boundaries and we each respond to those boundaries in a variety of ways. Some viewers feel comfort and peace, while others feel disoriented and dizzy. Some feel claustrophobic. Some feel that it is too overwhelming, challenging their boundaries. I create spaces for viewers to insert themselves physically, psychologically and spiritually into these works and become interactors. Due to the range of responses to these pieces, interactors do make connections with each other, such as the young man in *Undoing* (see Figures 9 & 10) who influenced me to stop and listen.

While my primary goal was for participants to examine their own responses to the works, I also made my own conclusions about their psychological states, and mine as well. When someone chose not to participate in *There is Only One Face* (see Figures 1 & 2), I concluded that that person had an attachment to their self-image, that they were not comfortable challenging their notion of self and other. As the actions of a participant in *Crush* (see Figures 3 & 4) disturbed me, challenges were made to my own identity, of someone who was completely open-minded. Aversion arose when people chose not to participate in works, but they were still involved if they had to make an effort to exit the scene. Alternatively, some people came back to the works in order to relax and I found that that fulfilled my desire to touch others, even if I could not be with them.

When viewers physically and psychologically interacted with the works, I wanted them to think about who they thought they were and challenged their notions of desire and self-image, just as I do in dealing with my own. I agree with the Buddhist teaching that recognition of simple responses within ourselves without judgment can lead us to greater contentment. Up to this point and as I continue this series, the goal is for us to see how we struggle based on our assumptions and our resistance to the fact that we are “all things” – *one*. When we can negotiate this *oneness* with the paradoxical need for personal boundaries, we are able to function in this chaotic world with a heightened sense of grace. When we realize and accept who we truly are, we are less likely to harm others and ourselves. This realization is how I understand what Jacques Lacan referred to in the final paragraph of his essay, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function” (2002) - that psychoanalysis can only take us “to the ecstatic limit of the ‘*Thou art that*’ (p. 9). The rest of the journey, the undoing of the “I,” one must pursue on one’s own.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>From De Oliveira, Oxley, & Petry (2003) “In the seventies and eighties, we lived in a society of spectacle, in the nineties in the society of participants, and we are now developing a ‘society of interactors’.” (p. 106). Depending on the level of viewer involvement, the terms in this paper progress as follows: viewer → visitor → participant → interactor.

# Valerie A. Wedel

## EDUCATION

- 2004-Present      **Studies toward M.F.A.**, Sculpture, *University of Missouri, Columbia*  
Performance and Video Installation (*Anticipated graduation: December 2007*)
- May 2002          **B.F.A.**, Painting, Magna Cum Laude, *Columbia College, Columbia, MO*  
Thesis: *Scratching the Surface, BFA Solo Exhibition*
- May 1991          **B.A.**, French and Peace Studies, *Washington University, St. Louis, MO*  
Junior year at *Université de Caen, Caen, France*

## EXHIBITIONS

### 2007

- Remnants**, Invitational Solo Installation, University of Washington, Tacoma, WA
- The Edge of Excess**, National Juried Exhibition, Foundry Art Centre, St. Louis, MO, Cash Award of \$250, Juror: Jenny K. Dowd
- Material Attitudes**, Regional Invitational Exhibition, Regional Arts Commission, St. Louis, MO, Curator: Jane Birdsall Lander
- Art Inside the Park**, International Invitational Show, Memorial Park, Jefferson City, MO
- Undoing**, Thesis Exhibition, Bingham Gallery, University of Missouri, Columbia
- Residual Matter**, Invitational Two-person Exhibition, Columbia College, Columbia, MO
- Strata**, Solo Video Installation, Brady Gallery, University of Missouri, Columbia
- Represent: Graduate Showcase 2007**, Bingham Gallery, University of Missouri, Columbia
- Student Success Center Invitational Sculpture Show**, Student Success Center, University of Missouri, Columbia
- End: Show**, Local Group Exhibition, Brady Gallery, University of Missouri, Columbia
- Eternal Happiness**, Local Group Exhibition, Brady Gallery, University of Missouri, Columbia

### 2006

- Graduate Showcase 2006**, Bingham Gallery, University of Missouri, Columbia
- If It So Pleases You**, Local Group Video Show, Ragtag Cinema, Columbia, MO
- Missouri 50 Exhibition**, Statewide Juried All-Media Exhibition, Missouri State Fair, Sedalia, MO  
Juror: Keith Jacobshagen
- Art Inside the Park**, International Invitational Show, Memorial Park, Jefferson City, MO
- The Search**, Solo Show, Westminster College, Fulton, MO
- Convergence**, Solo Video Installation, Brady Gallery, University of Missouri, Columbia

***Postcards from the Edge, A Visual AIDS Benefit***, Open Entry International Mail Art Exhibition  
Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York, NY

***Plurality***, Graduate Student Group Show, Bingham Gallery, University of Missouri, Columbia

### **2005**

***Crush***, Solo Performed Installation, Brady Gallery, University of Missouri, Columbia

***Our Broken Flowers***, Performance, Ragtag Cinema Cafe, Columbia, MO

***Life and Literature***, Performed Installation, Rhynsburger Theatre, University of Missouri, Columbia

**24/7 – MFA Candidates Exhibition**, George Caleb Bingham Gallery, University of Missouri, Columbia

***Art Benefiting Animals***, Invitational Benefit Group Show, The Guitar Mansion, Columbia, MO

***The New Face of Art: IN TRANSIT, Graduate Student Exhibition***, University of Missouri, Columbia

### **2004**

***The University of Missouri Graduate Student Art Exhibition***, Moberly Area Community  
College, Moberly, MO

***Skyscapes***, A Two-Person Show, Legacy Art and Bookworks, Columbia, MO

### **2003**

***Words: Art Inspired by Literature***, Group Invitational, Legacy Art and Bookworks, Columbia, MO

***Boone County Art Show***, Boone County Bank, Columbia, MO

### **2002**

***Postcards from the Edge, A Visual AIDS Benefit***, Sperone Westwater Gallery, New York, NY

***Paper in Particular, National Show of Works on Paper***, Columbia College, Columbia, MO  
Juror: Jerry Schulte

***Scratching the Surface***, BFA Solo Exhibition, Columbia College, Columbia, MO

## **RESIDENCIES**

**Vermont Studio Center**, February, 2008

## **CITATIONS**

Annie Nelson. "Valerie Wedel. Niche: A Weekly Peek at an Emerging Artist." The Columbia Daily Tribune (2007): 6C

Sean Church. "MU Showcases Artwork." The Maneater (2007): 9

Jamie Forsythe. "Video Exhibit Makes a Statement at UWT Gallery." Tacoma Weekly (2007): 3

Lynn Israel. "Columbia Artists Make Mark at Missouri State Fair." Columbia Daily Tribune (2006): 14

Transcript Staff. "Norman Artist Installs 'Fragility'." The Norman Transcript Vol. (2006): E7

Shannon Jewitt. "Mastering Their Art." The Columbia Missourian Vol. (2006): 11.7-11.8

Drew Deubner. "Plurality Takes on Art Definition." The Maneater (2006): 25

Jedd Rosche. "A Day in the Art of a Graduate Student." The Maneater Vol. (2005): 1-2

James Downey. "Downey's Fine Line." Columbia Daily Tribune (2005): 8C

Andy Anderson. "The Art of Teaching." The Columbia Missourian (2004): 1C-3C

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- Fall 2006, Fall 2007                    **Beginning Sculpture** – University of Missouri, Columbia  
**Instructor of Record:** Taught portrait, figure, plaster and found-object sculpture, evaluated student works
- Winter 2007                                **Art Appreciation (Writing Intensive)** – University of Missouri, Columbia  
**Teaching Assistant:** Evaluated student writing, taught writing in the arts
- Fall 2004 - Winter 2006                **Introduction to Art** – University of Missouri, Columbia  
**Instructor of Record:** Taught the basics of studio art, emphasizing the principles of design

## AWARDS, GRANTS AND FELLOWSHIPS

- June 2007                                    **Foundry Art Centre Cash Award - \$250** - For "*The Search Installation I*" shown in "*The Edge of Excess*" exhibition
- May 2007                                    **Graduate Student Association Travel Grant** - For the solo video installation work "*Remnants*" presented at the University of Washington, Tacoma, WA
- February 2007                                **Honorarium and Travel funds for visiting Artist** – Adam Brown  
Awarded by The Organization Resource Group
- February 2007                                **Center for Arts and Humanities Grant** - Awarded by the Center for Arts and Humanities. For solo video installation work, "*Remnants*," presented at the University of Washington, Tacoma, WA
- April 2006                                    **Donald Bartlett Memorial Scholarship** - Awarded by the Department of Art, University of Missouri, Columbia, for creative work in performance art and installation
- April 2006                                    **Honorarium and Travel funds for visiting Artist** - Tyler Budge  
Awarded by The Organization Resource Group
- October 2005                                **Center for Arts and Humanities Grant** - Awarded by the Center for Arts and Humanities. For performed installation artwork: "*Crush*"

## INVITED LECTURES

November 2007	Visiting Lecturer – Art Appreciation, <i>Undoing – a Video and Performance Installation</i> , University of Missouri, Columbia, MO
October 2007	Visiting Lecturer – Senior Seminar Class, <i>The Graduate School Experience</i> , University of Missouri, Columbia, MO
February 2007	Visiting Lecturer – Class talk in conjunction with solo show, <i>Remnants</i> , University of Washington, Tacoma, WA
October 2006	Visiting Lecturer – Public talk in conjunction with solo show, <i>The Search</i> , Westminster College, Fulton, MO
September 2006	Visiting Lecturer – Senior Seminar Class, <i>Convergence – a Video Installation</i> , University of Missouri, Columbia, MO
February 2006	Visiting Lecturer – Senior Seminar Class, <i>How to Apply to Graduate School</i> , University of Missouri, Columbia
October 2005	Visiting Lecturer – Performance Studies, Columbia College <i>Presentation of Crush – a Performed Installation</i>
September 2005	Visiting Lecturer – Writing Performance Class, <i>Presentation of Crush – a Performed Installation</i> , University of Missouri, Columbia

## STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

August 2007 – present	Student Representative to Faculty Meetings
August 2006 – July 2007	<b>Association of Graduate Art Students</b> , <i>President</i>
January - August 2006	<b>Graduate Professional Council</b> , <i>Representative</i>
August 2004 - May 2005	<b>Association of Graduate Art Students</b> , <i>Treasurer</i>