



Elsewhere

Car nous sommes où ne sommes pas

For we are where we are not

--Pierre-Jean Jouve, Lyrique

In January 2021, I found myself sequestered in Oceanside, California, at my brother's home due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Oceanside is not a bad place to be quarantined; it's an unpretentious beach town with rolling hills tempered by native coastal flora. My dog Coco and I spent most days walking the neighborhood. We created a routine out of necessity and walked for 45 minutes every morning and afternoon. This was a good way to pass the time. California was rigidly closed down during COVID-19—I didn't really mind, even though I am a restless person by nature.

I was due to retire from teaching in May, so I spent my days contemplating where I would settle down. I had been a digital nomad for five years, teaching remotely thanks to my college's interest in online education. I had built a repertoire of art history courses that allowed me to live at various times in Armenia, Scotland, Spain, and the Netherlands. Five years of teaching remotely was both wonderful and frustrating. However, I was fortunate to have these online courses when Covid hit. I didn't panic when my college closed and went to remote learning. I saw my colleagues suffer through the pandemic as they struggled to shift their courses from traditional face-to-face classes to online platforms. Not an easy task, especially in an emergency situation where one doesn't have the luxury of time to develop courses organically. My time in Oceanside was fine, but I was anxious to have my own place.

Elsewhere (/ɛlˈswɛːr/):

At some other point; in some other place

To some other point; in another direction

- Oxford English Dictionary

That place turned out to be in Des Moines. I'd never been to Iowa. I wanted to live in a small city where I could enjoy the fruits of city life without the craziness of a megalopolis, such as Los Angeles, the city I'd lived in before I began my nomadic teaching. Moving to Des Moines seemed a good choice; it was quiet, small, and easy to navigate. Soon after settling in, I was fortunate to meet Michaela Mullin. Michaela generously introduced me to several artists. I began exploring local art venues, making studio visits, and expanding my knowledge of the vital and eclectic midwestern art scene. However, like the other places of my life, my time in Des Moines is temporary. This project, *Elsewhere*, represents both a farewell to my Iowa life and an opportunity to curate an exhibit of artists I met during this particular dwelling period.

These artists are making work that I find intellectually and aesthetically engaging. Though technically not a thematic exhibit, *Elsewhere* (imagined or real) can be seen as a metaphor for how I understand the images and objects selected for the show. That could represent a longing to be in another place, exploring other people's lives, marking the end of a line or spatial border, and then moving forward/backward and crossing over from one place to another. Elsewhere is infinite in its possibilities.

Charlie Borowicz

Car Portraits is an installation of small photographs of "glimpses of people" inside cars. Taken by Borowicz during an intense, voyeuristic, 80 mph drive down the interstate. Playing on photography's long engagement with voyeurism, these images capture intimate moments of strangers behind car windows. Caught unawares, the subjects of the photographer's lens are arrested in time, separated from their reality, and transformed into a document of visual evidence. Who are these people? What are they talking about? The installation reinforces how the public and the private collide through the spectator's drive/desire to look.

I Love Earth is a collection of left-behind images from a commercial photo lab located in a "highly affluent suburb of Indianapolis." Placing these forgotten personal images into four small photo albums, the artist transforms the private into the public by curating the images and circulating them in the public sphere. Again, playing on the voyeuristic drive, Borowicz delves into the psychological nature of looking, offering spectators an array of ubiquitous visual delights to consume.

Amee Ellis

These luminous black-and-white pigment prints represent Ellis's interest in land transformed by the presence and absence of the human figure. The melancholic recognition of human activity minus the figure haunts the photos. The coupling of *September Dogbane* and *Window* creates a poetic relationship of light, diffused through the geometric structure of the window on the right and highlighting the delicate organic form of the toxic prairie plant on the left. Both objects are shrouded in darkness. *Wash Tubs* and *Lawn Chairs* are scenes emptied of the human figure. Time is measured in different ways in these two photographs. *Wash Tubs* suggests a recent activity interrupted or paused, while *Lawn Chairs*, with its overgrown grasses and carelessly strewn chairs, seems to mark a longer period of human absence. *Ray* and *Laundry Day* were taken with a pinhole camera. The blurred light of the hanging laundry and the reflecting ray caught and distorted by the pinhole camera capture an accidental explosion of light that links the viewer to an "intense immobility," a detail that Roland Barthes called a punctum. Finally, in *Bison-Solo-Fog* and *Sunset Grass*, Ellis examines what is and what has been: nature unfolding with its bounty seemingly undisturbed except by the photographer's intentional presence.

Mary Jones and Michaela Mullin

I would argue that *A Space of Poetics (D/N/A)* is a radical feminist gesture that acts as a first step in rehearsing relationality. Jones and Mullin's interactive installation takes as its subject the virgule or forward slash. By playing on the form spatially and linguistically, the artists offer embodied strategies that counter the forces and temporalities of patriarchal force. The slash is a movement that pushes apart as much as it wants to cleave together disparate things. It divides and it bridges. In its formal gesture, the virgule counteracts the slashless force of a command or order. It is inherently feminist in its inclusivity. It is purposefully ambiguous, and Jones and Mullin reinforce this idea by inviting people to reorder the folios. The physical intervention and reordering of the folios/poems is in itself a performance of the slash.

Kathranne Knight

Knight's *Loops* is a selection of drawings made during the COVID-19 pandemic. An asemic gesture moving across the surface of the paper, this form seems essential to Knight's work. It acts as a visual breath, a repetitive action with no discernable beginning or end. Tied back onto itself, this primary mark of an embodied movement appears as a never-ending trace of the artist's presence and absence. The curving line moves across the space of the page only to be stopped by the end of the paper—a fundamental border that is emphatic. Sometimes, this border or end place becomes the loop, scalloped and soft. These drawings mark duration, and within the context of the pandemic, the seemingly never-ending motion of time on eternal repeat. Knight's fascination for the language of loops reiterates Gaston Bachelard's exploration of the phenomenology of a being as a being in roundness. The rounded loop "propagates its roundness, together with the calm of all roundness" (253). This language of marking time is open-ended, allowing the viewer to write themselves into the text. I find the loop inclusive; it is the shape of both a mouth and an eye, a space with language and vision.

Rachel Merrill

Merrill is wildly prolific, unruly, and meticulous. In her performance works, Merrill embodies the hysteric, wherein the body, in its obsessive articulation, becomes theater. She examines the performative demands of womanhood and competition by playing on tropes of femininity in the context of various made-up games. The over-determined expressions of feminine identity using garish, tawdry costumes and props produce a spectacle within a spectacle. I see Merrill's work as inherently Bakhtinian; she plays on the carnivalesque and its grotesque realism to create worlds turned upside down and inside out. She makes use of ambivalent yet mocking laughter to emphasize the dialogic of stark contrasts. *It's Always a Competition: The Leftovers Costume*, is an example of this purposeful excess meant to critique male-dominated competition and the

role of women as objects. Merrill deploys parody and the absurd in both performance and costume to challenge culturally enforced notions of gender.

On the other hand, her meticulous and labor-intensive work, such as *Untitled Stadium Seats*, exemplifies Merrill's ironic performance of traditional feminine practices. The quiet and repetitive nature of embroidery and beading is used here to contrast with the utilitarian function of leisure fan accessories. The precious and the practical are juxtaposed to question the nature of spectacle and fandom. In *Untitled Field Sampler*, Merrill examines the manipulation of nature into something more, a playground for spectacle. The field, like the female body, is reconstructed and manufactured into an idealized space where power and pleasure play out. Merrill's works are not only funny, but deadly serious critiques of spectacle and gender.

Jean-Marie Salem

In *Peace (Papa Legba)*, Salem assembles kinetic sculptures made from "nature's waste." She describes her work as drawings in space constructed from found items, both natural and human-made. The sculpture's components are carefully chosen and composed to suggest an ongoing conversation between shapes/forms and the spectator. They also create an imaginary soundscape as the mobile reacts to air currents produced by passersby. The driftwood forms might represent the bones of ancestors who rest in the peaceful configuration of the mobile's structure, forever present and watchful. On the floor, the cornmeal drawing of Papa Legba acts as the mediator between the human and spirit worlds. The connection between these two places, the space between the drawing and the mobile, is an energy field of presence and absence fueling the mobile. If the viewer chooses to listen, she might hear the ancestors whispering their secrets.

Annick Sjobakken

Sjobakken's documentary photo series are compelling scenes of ordinary people and the environments they inhabit. These images are not about the banal, but here, everydayness reveals the extraordinary in the ordinary. Susan Sontag wrote that "To photograph is to confer importance.... There is no way to suppress the tendency inherent in all photographs to accord value to their subjects (28)." In *I Really Need Some Personal Space*, Sjobakken spent a year photographing her youngest sister during her sophomore year of college in Gambier, Ohio. She wanted to explore the dualities of a young woman coming to terms with her identity as both a girl and an adult. The awkward transition is visible but not objectified. Instead, Sjobakken reveals this period without judgment. She allows the viewer to enter the narrative by creating a disinterested regard.

When she first moved to Des Moines, Sjobakken decided to document Lustron homes and their owners. These iconic post-war prefabricated homes drew her to want to know more about them. *Homes of Steel*, documents her attempt to explore the structures and the homeowners. The homes' unique, but also, uniform, characteristics drew her curiosity. She made portraits of the homeowners and the exteriors and interiors of the homes. The floor plans were identical, but just like the inhabitants, each home reflected something individualized.

Serous Cystadenoma (Work in Progress). While recovering from surgery and needing a way to gently exercise, Sjobakken decided that the best option was to walk a nearby mall. The mall had seriously deteriorated over the years, losing retailers and shoppers, but not the mall walkers. Over the next weeks, she found herself immersed in the community of diligent mall walkers. The contrast between the deserted mall and the mall walkers was fascinating to her. The emptiness, the remnants of what had been, and what was left, the light, the dark, the smells, all in the same repetitive loop. A virtually empty space allowed a community to form and to alter its intended function.

Alyss Vernon

Vernon's *Reflecting on the Sublime* is a series of photographs, unassuming images of spaces and objects, offering the viewer a respite from the realities of daily life. These glimpses of domestic interiors invite the viewer to contemplate the simplicity of another time and place. The viewer is transported into these places where time and space collapse through luminous light shifting through windows seen and unseen. The purposely composed claustral images enable the viewer to contemplate the transcendent by way of the ordinary. Bachelard conducted a phenomenological study of the house. "For the house furnished us dispersed images and a body of images at the same time (25)." These domestic interiors focus on parts of rooms and objects. There are windows with curtains and windows uncovered. There is light spilling through windows, closed and partially open. Light that spills across an old wooden floor. There are glimpses of a door partially opened. Frames on a wall and on a mantle. Chairs and pews where people once sat. Vernon has purposely framed the images in close-up and fragmented parts rather than whole objects. These photographs are small haiku poems of inside spaces.

Alexander Wolfe

Photography was considered a tool for scientific documentation well before it was seen/accepted as art. Wolfe's work is grounded in the Conceptual art of the 1960s, when artists, philosophers, and historians became interested in how knowledge is produced and where ideas and forms of representation that regulate society come from. With this and the immense

circulation of images accumulated throughout the twentieth century, popular memory, history, and the photographic, were becoming inseparable. Wolfe's art examines the archival photograph through meditations on the relation between photography and lived experience filtered through memory and the interplay of the private and public. He does this by walking and documenting sites and people encountered. In this way, Wolfe makes a more direct connection between art and everyday life. Language and photography are the mediums of Conceptualism. Here, the photograph is not about technical skill but content and context, not just fine art but a critical examination of knowledge/experience and representation through records/documents. The three walks Wolfe made in 2023 are shown here as archival collections. Presented on file folders, the images are placed alongside a map and text with the walk date. These folders of photographs and maps are records, shared and preserved, reminding us that "For where we are we are not."

--Patricia Levin, PhD

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ELSEWHERE

November 1-28, 2024

M/A/S/S at Mainframe Studios

Checklist

Charles Borowicz

“Car Portraits” (photo installation)

“I Love Earth” (Four small photo books)

Amee Ellis

Row 1:

- “September Dogbane”
- “Window”

Row 2:

- “Wash Tubs”
- “Lawn Chairs”

Row 3:

- “Bison-Solo-Fog”
- “Sunset Grass”

Row 4:

- “Ray”
- “Laundry Day”

Eight 8” x 10” Pigment prints

Mary Jones and Michaela Mullin

“A Space of Poetics (D/N/A)” book installation with text

Kathranne Knight

“Loops” (graphite on paper drawings)

Jean-Marie Salem

“Peace (Papa Legba)” Mobile (with cornmeal drawing)

Rachel Merrill

“Untitled” Stadium Seats, 2024 (2)

“It’s Always A Competition: the Leftovers Costume,” 2022 (hanging mannequin)

“Untitled” Field Sampler, 2023

Annick Sjobakken

“I Really Need Some Personal Space” (9 photographs)

“Homes of Steel” (9 photographs)

“Serious Cystadenoma” (9 photographs)

Alyss Vernon

“Reflecting on the Sublime” (photo installation)

7) 12x9”

11) 5x7”

3) 6x6”

Alexander Wolfe

“Piece 1”

Artist: Alex Wolfe

Title: March 11, 2023

Year: 2024

Medium: Photographs, pencil, and ink drawing on file folder

“Piece 2”

Artist: Alex Wolfe

Title: December 30, 2023

Year: 2024

Medium: Photographs, pencil, and ink drawing on file folder

“Piece 3”

Artist: Alex Wolfe

Title: November 23, 2023

Year: 2024

Medium: Photographs, pencil, and ink drawing on file folder

