

CRARY GALLAS, AMANDA, M.F.A. Big Quiet. (2016)  
Directed by Chris Cassidy. 27 pp.

This thesis is about the radical transformation of my art practice. From printmaking, to painting, to social practice and sound, I'm slowly but surely finding my way. The way is long and never-ending, and I'm by no means racing to get to the destination; as I grapple with questions that continually shape and steer my ever-changing practice, I'm enjoying the journey.

BIG QUIET

by

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A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro  
2016

Approved by

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis and all of the work I've navigated through wouldn't be possible without the help of my thesis committee, Mariam Stephan, Barbara Campbell Thomas, Lee Walton, Nancy Doll and my very generous committee chair and mentor, Chris Cassidy.

Thank you Derek Toomes and Sebastian Lundquist for your time, effort, and problem solving skills.

Thank you Grandma Marilyn and Fast Eddie for your wisdom, stories, and laughter. Thank you, Tarah and Olivia for supporting me from afar. Thank you Mom and Dad for the unending support and encouragement to do what makes me happy. Thank you Codey for your generous help, love, and support.



## PREFACE

I grew up moving around from house to house. I spent hours and hours outside discovering the new area we inhabited. My sisters and I explored the creek beds; in winter, we raced across the frozen water as fast as we could, the ice crackled and broke underneath our feet, giving way to a new dormant world below. We were so fast and the snowy mid-western landscape was magical. When we walked to the bus, we tip-toed on top of frozen snowdrifts instead of following the plowed gravel road. We walked so carefully and tried to see how long we could stay on top of that solid, yet fragile drift. It was so quiet all you could hear was our breath moving in and out; we concentrated so hard on our feet connecting to the snow and then all of a sudden, one of us would shriek as the drift swallowed our leg. We would laugh and laugh.

When I wasn't with my sisters, I continued exploring. I liked being alone. I ran through the cornfields until I was tired and then I would stop—never knowing exactly where I was. After finding the middle of nowhere, I kicked the stalks over, creating my own secret space. The cornfield was like another world to me, where grasshoppers sprang from the ground and their bodies made strange plastic sounds as they hit my arms while I ran. My body was full of scratches from the leaves and the stalks hitting me as I raced down the rows. I felt free, like I could do anything. I ruled my own world.

Each place we moved, I had a separate, secret place. It was always outside, and I always spent time there. At the blue house on Hwy O, I walked up the huge, exhausting hill toward the very end of our property, outlined by a rusty barbed wire fence; that was

as far as I could go. In that corner of the land, I built a fort out of sticks and twine. I remember sitting in there for what seemed like hours just listening to everything around me. I couldn't hear anyone else, just the birds and the wind. This was about the same time I began writing. Writing began to be my home too. Once I filled up my journal, I dug a hole in the ground and placed the journal inside. I filled the hole with dirt and buried it.

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## CHAPTER I

### BEGINNINGS

“Do you consider yourself a painter?” she asked me as I uncomfortably stood in my clinically white, new studio. It was the second week of graduate school and I already felt two inches tall. I’d honestly never considered that question. I was a printmaker for years but got bored with multiples, clean edges, and a flattened surface. Naturally, I thought painting would give me more freedom. I could handle a brush, stretch my own canvases, make marks and beautify abstraction, but I never considered myself a true painter. It was at this crucial moment that I realized I was after so much more than my painting chops could offer. At first that question seemed to sting, it was actually a wake up call and I’m glad I listened to my own instinctual reaction. I wasn’t a painter. I’m not a painter.

I actually don’t know what I am, but I do know that in my two years of graduate school my art practice has radically morphed into something I never would’ve imagined for myself.

The start was slow, forced, and undeniably confusing. It’s tricky to know where to begin when you want to start all over. Most of my art career has been a series of “starting all over.” I’ve never really, passionately, fit with any particular medium, so starting over seems so vast; there are so many possibilities. Where do I even begin?

This time, I started with paper. All my life I've had a love affair with paper. It's malleable, impermanent, strong, delicate, universal, it holds marks, and most of all, it holds text, thoughts, and language. I spent most of my first year exploring handmade paper and natural materials like dirt, mica, tea, salt and beet juice. I also consciously decided to remove my hand from the work: no more fluid, wandering lines, and no more controlled marks. The part of my printmaking background that I do embrace fondly is my love for process, labor, repetition, and keeping my hands busy. After a few weeks I noticed that I started to feel comfortable again, but soon fell into a familiar trap: I'm really good at relying on and repeating processes to get an anticipated result. I wanted what I was doing to embody moments from real life, and these processes were not doing that. I wanted it to be about more: savoring the gestures and rituals of every day life, more specifically, being present during these moments. For instance, walking through the woods alone, sharing tea with a good friend, cooking dinner with my husband, and canning tomatoes with my grandma.

Everything fell short and didn't equate. What am I even doing? What do I want to do?

The leaves are changing color and I'm just sitting here.

## CHAPTER II

### YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE GOOD

I spend more time staring out the window than anything else. Start over.

Whenever I'm stumped in my studio, I go home. I don't do well there past sundown anyway. I usually help with dinner, but Codey does most of the cooking. It feels better to be home and to leave everything else at the door. Occasionally, I'll bake some shortbread cookies or some other sweet. Baking allows me to turn my mind off, move my hands, witness magical alchemy in our tiny oven, and share this consumable kindness with others. I thought, if only art could be this magnificent.

It was during spring break of my first year in grad school that the dramatic shift in my practice began to take root. Or, perhaps the roots were already there before, but I hadn't thought to stand on them. I began to wonder if my art practice and my life could coexist; could they happen together? Of course, looking back now this question seems silly, but at the time it widened my blinders to see what art really was and could be. Although the blinders have widened, and are still there, I can see so much more. I spent the entire spring break writing about daily gestures and activities that ground and balance when I need reprieve from the white walls of my studio. I wanted to share this experience with others, but I didn't know how.

During this time, I fell in love with the poet, Mary Oliver. Her poem, *Wild Geese*, became my own personal mantra and even more so, permission to break my own rules: “you do not have to be good.”<sup>1</sup>

The project *Come to the Table*, came about from these musings (Fig.1). Participants were invited to take a break and enjoy a homemade meal at my dinner table. The guests ate bread, homemade chicken noodle soup, and Scottish shortbread cookies (family recipes). Throughout the dinner, a pre-recorded audio loop played. The pre-recorded sounds were from a dinner I shared with my husband, Codey. The sounds included clinking dishes, ice cubes dancing in our glasses, conversation, laughter, and silence. Eating dinner together is my favorite part of the day and I wanted to share this ritual with others. Before guests arrived, the audio loop played to an empty room, which felt rather ghostly and mysterious; however, the smell of soup and a prepared dinner table felt inviting. Simple directions encouraged guests to help themselves. As guests began to arrive, their own conversations began to create a second layer on top of the recorded one; when the guests grew quiet, the recorded conversation and the clinking dishes were heard. Even if the table-talk fades away, sharing time and space with others makes the silence seem full.

Preoccupied with dinners, tables, and gatherings, the project that followed this was *The Picnic Project* (Fig. 2). I spent a ten-day residency at Greenhill Gallery in Greensboro stitching blankets together by hand. In my own family history, the women are in charge of facilitating get-togethers, reunions, and picnics. In a way, I've taken on

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver, Mary. “Wild Geese.” *Dream Work*. Boston: Atlantic Monthly, 1986. 14. Print.

this role despite the fact that I'm far from home: I created an intimate space for sharing, interaction, and connection--not among my family, but with the community of Greensboro. The blankets were collected at thrift-stores, garage sales, and some were donated. I was most attracted to the hand-made blankets; the care and time necessary to complete one is evident. I felt the need to rescue these blankets and repurpose them in my project. Most of the blankets are from North Carolina; however, a handful are from the Midwest. Throughout the residency, I spent my time stitching these two ideas of home together.

The dinner and picnic projects allowed me to try something I've never done before; it was the first time I made art that wasn't meant to hang on a wall. It was art that happened in real time; it was generous, brief and made me feel vulnerable. It began to make me question what is and isn't art. Where does the line get drawn between the two? If I want to make art about real life moments, how does the moment become art? Why is it art?

In both of the projects I took on a quiet role. I prepared the food, I set up the space and I waited for people to come. Looking back now, I realize that my presence doesn't need to be loud or attention grabbing, which is what I thought social practice and performance art was. My power is in movement, gesture, and care.



CHAPTER III  
ENVELOPED IN BLUE

A new school year and another “start all over.”

When I really sat down and thought about what stuck with me the most from the Venice class trip, it was several things: a handful of art experiences at the biennale, food, drinks, cobbled streets, sounds of a different life, but most of all, it was a hike I took in the Cinque Terre in Italy.

One morning, the sound of bells and singing woke us. Drawn to the window, we both looked out to see the village church doors open as members of the entire town descended the stairs and walked below us; they carried a loved one in a casket covered with fresh flowers. The sound of the singing was so beautiful as it faded on their journey to the cemetery up the hill. The song, though in Italian, sounded familiar. It was then that I decided to start recording sounds in effort to grasp the intangible. In the crowd, we saw Beppe, the man whose home we were staying in. My heart ached for him. When Beppe met us for breakfast, he told us (in Italian) that it was a very good day for a hike. As I talked with him about my plan, he suggested I walk the sanctuary trail. With bellies full of marmalade and Beppe’s wisdom, we left.

Along the hike from fishing town to fishing town, I scaled steep vineyards and olive groves confronting weathered shrines of the Virgin Mary along the way. What I resonated with most were the tokens of gratitude left behind by others on the pilgrimage:

shells, messages, candles, fresh flowers, dead flowers. Presence. As I turned away from the shrines to see what Mary was looking at, I saw the deep blue of the sea and the sky; they blended together. A big blueness that enveloped everything. It enveloped me.

Once I got back to Greensboro I knew I had to make my own shrines, but had no clue how to decide on my own deity or icon. After chewing on this idea for a while, I decided to make sky shrines. If I could honor something bigger than myself that I believe in, it's the blueness of the sky. At the time, I was reading a book by Rebecca Solnit and in it she referenced the blueness of the sky. It's always in the distance, always receding. The distance is unfathomable and vast yet it's safe and comforting.<sup>2</sup> I've been attached to this connection: being small in relation to the bigness of blue sky and being comforted in the openness of unknowing. In order to get the shade of blue I was after, I used a cyanotype process, using the sun to develop the muslin. I made two shrines (Fig. 3, Fig. 4) wrapped in this cyanotype. I wrapped them with the sky. One shrine was open and empty, the other was closed and it had a shiny, brass mail slot. This *Mantra Mailbox* referenced the function of shrines: holders, keepers, senders. Shrines hold special things that we cannot see, but believe in.

Still so attached to the sky and the sun, I began to make a series of drawings, *Saluting the Sun* (Fig. 5), in which I covered the soles of my feet and hands with charcoal and privately performed sun salutations. The drawing acted as an account of an action that took place. The residues and traces from my hands and feet hinted at the motions my body made, but couldn't capture it in its entirety.

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<sup>2</sup> Solnit, Rebecca. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. New York: Viking, 2000. Print.

After a while, I began to wonder how I could do this in other ways, without charcoal, but still hinting at capturing my body in motion. Still thinking about communal picnics and sharing, I wondered how to capture them as a drawing instead of an event. Picnics typically happen outside; so I had a few. My picnic blanket was a piece of white linen dipped in cyanotype chemicals. Throughout the picnic, the gestures of the participants and the movements of the dishes and cups were slowly, and barely captured and developed by the sun as it moved overhead. The slower the movement, the crisper the image; if a plate was removed, the sun deleted its previous shadow and its existence. Only dishes that stayed left white shadows. These cyanotypes, *Setting the Table with the Sun* (Fig. 6), turned a deep, never-ending indigo blue, reflecting the sky. By using the cyanotype process, I used the sun and the sky to make more sky.

I started to realize the things I was after were embedded in real life, real things, real people, myself and the struggle to let that be enough. With one foot in the realm of ephemeral events and social practice, and the other firmly standing in processes like drawing and object making, I began to wrestle with this idea: Can I have both? How can art rub up against real life? How can this happen in a genuine way?

## CHAPTER IV

### LOUDNESS

“Hi, its me, Ann,” she said casually, as if we were already acquainted. I couldn’t believe she was talking to me. Ann Hamilton, humble genius of wondrous art experiences was *talking to me*. Among many things, we talked about poetry, books, writing, the Midwest, art, and intuition. “Listen to yourself,” she advised. “You’re going to hear a lot of other people’s voices; let your voice be louder than all of them. Really, really trust yourself.”<sup>3</sup>

After the Paris terrorist attacks I didn’t feel like making art. How can I make a difference? People all over the world are fearing for their safety and lives, and there I was in my nice apartment stumped about what my art should be. I began writing. I had a stack of blue post-its nearby. In a stream of consciousness style, I punched out my thoughts on my Smith-Corona typewriter. The power that the typewriter grants is self-evident: the immediacy, sound, and permanence of a physical action. It *feels* different on a typewriter. Charged with restlessness, I wrote on hundreds of post-its. After I ran out, I decided to be more specific, intentional and meaningful. I searched for sky-blue colored post-its; it turns out they don’t exist. I bought a stack of perfectly sky blue paper and began making my own post-its. I cut out a 3”x3” template and loosely traced it to make more. I used a scissors to cut each square as

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<sup>3</sup> Hamilton, Ann. Personal Interview. December 4 2015.

carefully as I could, allowing imperfections to become wavering edges. When arranged in a grid, the blue squares resemble the size and expanse of a landscape painting. The grid was also done by hand, without plumb lines or a level (Fig. 7).

With the same gusto as before, I began to type. The function of the post-it is to signify, to briefly give attention to and to remember: *temporary importance*. The form of the post-it gave me permission to let my voice be temporary and important. Prior to being an art student, I studied English and creative writing. I have always struggled with how to combine my love of the written word into visual art. This was the first time I allowed myself to confidently let my writing be the art.

As I placed them on my studio wall, they became larger and consuming; half were affirmations, good things, and the other half were anxieties. Writing is healing. Like myself, the world needs healing, too. I filled my pocket with a handful of the post-it notes and walked my usual route, stopping at coffee shops, bus stops, the post office, telephone poles, and little libraries (Fig. 8). I placed the post-its in these public spaces not to receive a response, but to insert myself into a space that holds much more than me. Maybe people saw them, maybe they didn't; much like my buried journal, I was there. I could be heard.

My voice is louder than everyone else's.

## CHAPTER V

### COMFORT

Every time I visit my home, I'm consumed with sound. My family is very musical. It was a usual thing to hear one sister singing in the shower while another played the clarinet, flute, or piano. Chickens cooed outside, chili simmered on the stove, the floorboards creaked as we all moved about in our own way. Voices overlapped, dogs barked and panted, the doorbell rang. I've grown to miss the chaos of the Crary zoo. Over this past Christmas, I recorded as many sounds as I could. Along with these sounds, I collected voicemails from my phone. How different sound is when it's live, fleeting, and throwing itself out into the universe compared to a message left just for me.

In *Murmuring Keepsakes* (Fig. 9), I placed these sounds of my family within handmade wooden boxes of walnut and Spanish cedar. My grandfather and his father were both Norwegian artisan cabinet and box makers; thinking of their laborious and well-crafted work, I made my own. These boxes sit on a tall, slender pine table at a perfect height to serve sounds to the head. The boxes murmur with a slight vibration; they're alive. When opened, the sounds become more clear and comprehensible. The boxes appear empty, but they are far from it for they hold the biggest things: the transformative power of sound and memories.

Constantly thinking about these things: sharing experiences and lessons, sending messages, listening to passed down stories, the preservation of these things led me to write letters.

My grandfather was a letter carrier. He carried actual hand written letters to people's mailboxes. In today's world of emails and paper mail that consists of bills and ads, what a romantic notion it would be to receive a hand written message.

I have been writing letters to people who have passed away. They say things I didn't say, but should've. I've also been writing letters to those who are still here; they say things that I cannot bring myself to say out loud, and things I don't say often enough. Since these letters did not have a destination or a successful act of communication, I ripped them up and turned them into new handmade paper. I then formed these sheets of paper into envelopes: new vessels that can carry a new message. Embedded on the flap is a hidden text: a fragment from the initial letter. This can only be seen when opened and held to the light. For the show, I will be sitting at a small, handmade poplar table writing new letters to people I care about and placing them inside these envelopes to be sent out into the world; in one gesture, both the new letter and the former (the things I cannot say), will leave me. Throughout the duration of the show, I will rotate a new envelope to the top of the stack, revealing a new fragment (Fig. 10).

After the thesis show, I'll be doing another version of this project, but on a larger scale. I'll be making handmade envelopes and setting up a letter writing station for those who have lost loved ones to AIDS, and for those who are affected by the disease whether they have it themselves, or they know someone who does. Throughout the event, the

letters, sealed shut, will pile up and accumulate on the table speaking to the sheer mass of people who have been affected. Over 700 people in the Greensboro community alone have lost their lives to AIDS; these names will be recited softly from a hidden speaker in a wooden keepsake box placed on the table. (The Dining For Friends of the Triad Health Project of Greensboro, NC are sponsoring this installation at the Weatherspoon Art Museum).



## CHAPTER VI

### BEGINNINGS

Over the last two years my practice and my thoughts about art and life have dramatically unfolded. What started small, like a tiny piece of crumpled paper, is unfolding. Each week, each month, a new flap is folded back revealing a hidden gem or seed that was there all along, but I hadn't noticed it before. It took time for the gem to become polished; it took time for the seed to grow.

During my first year of graduate school I felt like I was running in circles, chasing my tail; now, I finally feel like I know what I want and I'm chasing it down. The unfolding will continue, as that small piece of crumpled paper becomes an expanse. I call this unfolding growth "big quiet." I'm often told that the work I do is too small, intimate, and quiet. But that's what I think the world needs; that's my honest reaction to being alive and witnessing this world.

Everyone is yelling; politicians, neighbors, powerful people, downtrodden people, nice people, mean people, all sorts of people. Maybe if people could relearn or take time to actually listen, there would be less yelling. The world needs some big quiet. Gandhi said, "in a gentle way you can shake the world," and I wholeheartedly believe in that.

In my own gentle way, I'm going to continue to grasp at the intangible, stitch pieces of home together, rescue and repurpose broken things to create new life, and

preserve knowledge and voices that might otherwise be lost; I'm going to continue to explore the ephemeral, the tension between the public and private realm, tokens of gratitude and healing. My work acts as a balm for whatever needs it; maybe it doesn't cure or heal, but it is applied with utmost care and good intentions. Most of all, I'm using my practice as a way to pay attention; as the poet Mark Strand said, "I think being alive is responding."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. "Interview with Mark Strand." *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996. Print.

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## CATALOGUE OF IMAGES

Figure 1. *Come to the Table*, table, chairs, food, audio loop, dimensions variable, 2015.

Figure 2. *The Picnic Project*, food, hand-woven blankets, 30' x 25', 2015.

Figure 3. *Sky Shrine*, cyanotype on linen, 14" x 3" x 15", 2015.

Figure 4. *Mantra Mailbox*, cyanotype on linen, brass, 14" x 3" x 15", 2015.

Figure 5. *Saluting the Sun*, charcoal on paper, 8' x 6', 2015.

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Figure 7. *Temporary Importance*, construction paper and typewriter ink, dimensions variable, 2016.

Figure 8. *Temporary Importance*, construction paper and typewriter ink, 3" x 3", 2016.

Figure 9. *Murmuring Keepsakes*, walnut, Spanish cedar, brass, pine, audio loop, speakers, 4' x 1' x 4', 2016.

Figure 10. *The Things I Cannot Say*, poplar, yellow legal pad paper, writing pen, handmade envelopes from previous letters, 36" x 14" x 30", 2016.



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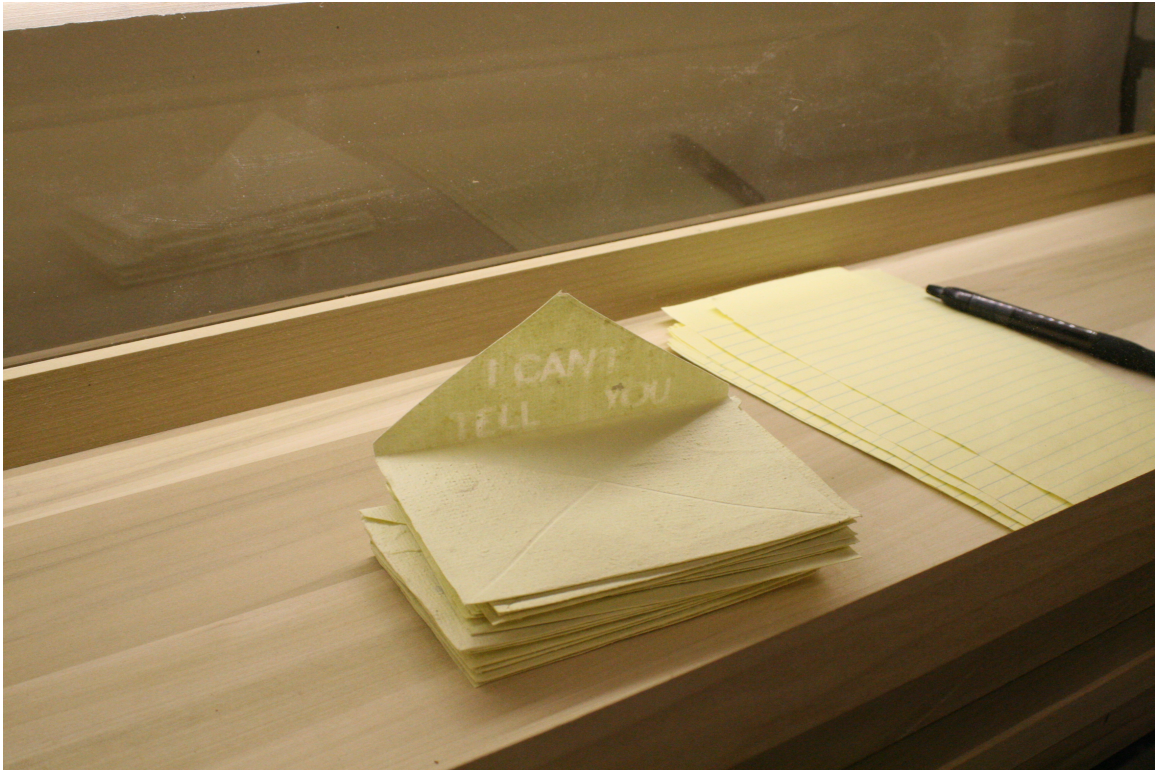


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