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This paper explores the underlying philosophy and creative context to the artworks *Inbound*, *5:30 going home*, and *Searching Box* included in the MFA thesis exhibition at the Weatherspoon Art Museum, April through June 2013. My work explores concepts of memory, journey, storytelling, place, and family.

JOURNEY THROUGH

by

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Approved by

Committee Chair

DEDICATION

To my wife Bouathong, for her unfailing support.
You believed in me when no one else did.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by CLARK ELLIS WILLIAMSON has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

PREFACE

“Good morning, sir
Will you ring the bell for me when we arrive at the Coliseum Café?”
I am asked by a very elderly woman

Suddenly I am in charge
Of letting this woman off
At a location I’ve never heard of

And I’m not sure if she knows either

“Coliseum Café?”
“Coliseum Café?”

“...Café?”

“Coliseum Café?”

calling on the Gods,
commissioning the whole bus to be on the look out

I’m a little sick that we’ve missed it
as we pass the Greensboro Coliseum grounds

Has anyone heard of this place?

“Hit it!”

I pull the chain

she makes it

thanking the whole bus

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JOURNEY THROUGH

I am an interdisciplinary artist working in the expanded field of sculpture. This has grown to include installation, interactive sculpture, sound, video, poetry, and printmaking. I strive to make work which has deep personal meaning and will simultaneously connect with a viewer on varying levels. My work has a particularly clean aesthetic, influenced by minimalism, which informs formal compositional choices. I always try to eliminate anything messy or distracting from the main focus of the work. I found that I was good at setting up situations or setting parameters around materials to present a message. This often requires that I custom build components specific to a particular piece. Because of my work experience in museum exhibition fabrication, I continue to take particular care in the design and presentation of each of my pieces.

For the past few years I have been making work with strong geometric components. In my senior show for my BFA, I made an installation of large rectangular sheets of paper hung in rows to represent the lives of my grandmother, myself, and my son. In my first year of graduate school, I made many light sculptures about formal properties and geometric shapes like triangles and rectangles. I aimed to harness and direct forms of light within three dimensional spaces. After working for a year in this way, however, I began to feel like I was working in a formulaic way and was losing any representation of myself in the work. Over the summer 2012 I decided to turn back to making artwork with personal themes.

Representing my life in my work has been challenging and rewarding. What I express is more honest when I work autobiographically. My life seems to be the only thing I am an expert in. I work in a similar manner as when I made the light sculptures. I find inspiration from the world around me and make art responding to it. Making art is a way I process and understand my life. This includes the often mundane or repetitious parts of my life. I want to stress how an everyday activity is no less important than the highs or lows in life. I want to draw attention to the parts in life that I once took for granted. I'm also interested in how memory and patterns play a part in our lives. The everyday patterns I have created are what hold me together and give my life foundation. Memory is important to me because it is an important part of my life's reality. Reality is based on an understanding of the present influenced by the past.

Reality TV is saturated with unordinary lives. Big personalities and drama can be fun and entertaining to watch but doesn't represent most of us in our society. I want to show how relevant and important even an ordinary life like my own is to the world. I am making work in response to my life. This is how my work remains relevant.

With each piece I try to focus on one main subject, but often many closely related topics follow. In the three works included in my thesis exhibition I have been responding to the questions: "What has it meant to me to ride the bus every day the past two years?" "How can I hold onto moments in my children's lives that are quickly vanishing as they grow?" "How is my daily returning home from work and school important and what does it represent for me?"

Anne Truitt's diaries have influenced me greatly over the past two years. Reading about her challenges, her successes, and her work over a span of twenty-some years I feel a personal connection to the way she worked. I didn't understand the titles of her works until I understood how closely they related to her life. Writing in April, 1965, Truitt stated: "What is important to me is not geometrical shape per se, or color per se, but to make a relationship between shape and color which feels to me like my experience. To make what feels to me like reality" (annetruitt.org) The first time I saw "First" (1961), I saw a white picket fence. To Anne Truitt this piece marked the beginning of a new direction formally in her work and had connotations to childhood memories in New England. It's debatable how effectively she was able to visually communicate a full understanding of her personal motives to her viewer, but the way she worked, making work in response to her life, is what I am drawn to. Anne Truitt and I have different lives, but we connect through the themes of making autobiographical work. When I hear someone tell a story from their life, I relate it to my life. This is the same kind of connection I hope to find in the audience who views my work.

One component of my work that holds particular significance is multiplicity. I use multiplicity in my work to express repetition and rhythm, to describe different times simultaneously, and as a way to layer meaning and understanding specific to the work. Rectangles and squares still play a large role in some of my work through using a grid-like layout to display multiple videos simultaneously. I feel that working in a grid gives equal importance and comparative qualities to each video. For example, in *5:30 going home* I use this grid format of films, two rows by four across. Using the grid format

gives a sense of a span of time as each video is recorded on a different day. The grid is important because each film length is different. Seeing them all together allows for them to be understood as a whole, at once, and not as disparate parts. Seeing multiple videos of the same action on different days spread out before me begins to give me a feeling of the way I understand memory. I don't remember what it's like to step onto a bus, pay the fair, and sit down with one memory image. My memory of this one simple action is multiplied and varied in so many ways from my experiences that possibly hundreds of films side by side could only begin to describe the feeling of my mental picture.

I was introduced to the writer W.G. Sebald through painter Catherine Murphy during our studio visit together. Over the past four months, I have read *The Rings of Saturn*, *The Emigrants*, *For Years Now*, *Unrecounted*, and *Across the Land and the Water*. This experience has proved most beneficial in establishing within my mind the validity of a journey; a life comprised of multiple times and places from the past, all influencing the present. Sebald finds himself an alien separated from his nation and people by war and oppression. His journey to find a place to call home is futile, being stripped away from him without choice. He shows us how wounds never really heal after great loss. He was sent to England to save his life, only to realize he still lost it, forever separated from the Germany he once knew that was no more. Sebald is important to me because he writes of his life; a life tragically weighed down by the after effects of a world war.

Sebald writes of a photograph in *The Emigrants* of a class field trip. Depicted in the photograph are some forty fellow students posing for the camera next to an old truck

going on an outing. One of his classmates relates his memories of the image without much description. Another tells a lengthy story surrounding the same image. In an essay critically looking at photography, Sebald wrote, “The decisive difference between the writer’s method and the technique of photography...consists in the fact that describing promotes remembering, while photography promotes forgetting.” (Long 117)

This statement seems a little too absolute to me. I understand how a photograph can be viewed as giving us one limited perspective of visual information. Peripheral information can be lost over time, due to the lack of being described within the confines of the image. But Sebald’s statement seems to be based upon some older definition of writing and photography. Lens-based media as we know it today can be used in ways to promote memory. Intrinsically linked to audio, video, and photographic recordings is a place and time. Their descriptive message will endure. In *Searching Box*, it was the recording through videos that helped me remember details of memories I had begun to forget. For example, watching one of these videos reminded me that my older son Talei used to make unique faces when he was one year old. Similar to winking with one eye, he would distinctly blink both eyes together. He would never do this on cue, and at some point, of which I am unaware, he stopped doing it altogether.

Inbound is an audio and video work about multiplicity and journey. The past two years I have ridden the bus almost daily to and from school. Sometime last year, I began noticing the sounds of the trip in a way I had never paid attention to. Over a four month period I made audio recordings of my bus trips. I didn’t know exactly what shape or form this work would take, but it felt significant and unique to me. Maybe not unique to

everyone in this world, but certainly unique to me and the way I grew up in a two car home.

The first state of *Inbound* began as the audio recordings. Through many hours of editing, I created a new audio experience consisting of the most interesting segments of 30 bus trips layered upon each other. This editing reduced the audio to approximately a five minute piece. Describing a fabricated space and time through layering and editing, *Inbound* still held close ties to reality. Much like previous works where I have taken a material and manipulated it towards a single focus, this original audio piece heightened the interest and attention to bus rides I had previously tuned out on many occasions. Riding the bus is an internal and external experience. In these audio recordings, I was trying to express something more internal, but found they still felt very external. This is when I began writing.

Writing poems each time I rode I could now express my thoughts, observations, and response to my surroundings on the bus. I had been doing a lot of reading from W.G. Sebald and I felt a connection between his walk in the countryside of England, described in *The Rings of Saturn*, and the trips I was taking on the bus. His journey and mine are both filled with familiarity and change. Both journeys are filled with a combination of a complex history and complex present. *Inbound* has been for me a way to process and share my experience with others.

After writing about fifty poems, I started to think about how they could fit together with the audio recordings. While discussing this piece during a studio visit with The Weatherspoon Art Museum's Curator of Contemporary Art, Xandra Eden, I decided

it would be best to listen to the layered bus trips while viewing a video of text. Back in 2008, I helped install the work of Australian based artist Grant Steven at the Brigham Young University Museum of Art. Much of his work at the time included animated text videos in which words would flash onto the screen one at a time with distinct rhythm and timing, telling short stories. Headphones were provided as each word was narrated by an Australian male voice giving the feeling of reading and being read to simultaneously. Interestingly, the narrated words did not always match up with the written text. In fact they switched between identically matching and contradicting each other.

I took my lines of poetry and animated the text to appear on the screen, one line at a time. Doing this gave control over the pace of the poems I could never achieve in print. I wanted to give the feeling of riding on the bus and having thoughts pop into your head. I wanted to capture a space of waiting, a space in between work and home where the mind can easily wander. The pace of seeing each line of text appear gives the feeling of one long complex group of thoughts, a stream of consciousness, rather than individual poems which stand alone. I also took the font of the text into consideration and made it look like the yellow orange marquee lettering found on the bus. *Inbound* has become about so many things to me: routine, response, surroundings, journey, transportation, perception, memory, and life. I feel like our world can use another reminder to slow down and pay attention to our surroundings. This is what I hope to accomplish in this piece.

While creating *Inbound*, I began to dwell on this idea of patterns in life and daily routines. *5:30. going home* is a video piece that grew out of this thinking. Often I think

about the daily repetitive patterns my life is made up of and how significant they really are to me. At approximately 5:30pm every evening I find myself in a space between two worlds: the world I have just spent all day in at school and then the world of my family life. This time is usually filled with complex emotions. Winding down from my day at school and anticipating another full evening ahead of me, I feel guilt for not being home all day.

The visual display of these ideas is understood through viewing multiple videos simultaneously in a grid format of two rows, four across. Each cell tells the story of one of my trips going home. I leave my studio, head down the stairs, wait at the bus stop, board the bus, ride the bus, exit the bus, walk home, check my mail, climb my stairs, turn my key to open my door, and am greeted by my children. To really emphasize the moment of reentrance into my family life, the layered sounds of my children greeting me is the only audio in the whole piece. I have also done all the filming using my cell phone, which gives an intimacy and physicality to the films. I wanted to really express my presence in these films. The bounciness of the films also helps to express the anxiety I often feel realizing the weight of my responsibilities is shifting. My wife and I take turns with our boys. When I get home from work, she leaves immediately for work and it's my responsibility to feed, bathe, and put them to bed before she gets home.

5:30 going home is also important to me because it addresses the act of walking. Walking has been important to me for a long time. My life has been made up of significant walks since kindergarten, when I would run a mile home from school, for fear that the larger boys would bully me. My relationship with my wife began ten years ago

when I invited her on a walk with me around campus. And even more recently walking all over Berlin has had a great influence on me. For me, walking is associated with solving problems. It gives me a thinking space in which to process my life. *Inbound* and *5:30 going home* address how life is understood through the perceived outside and the mental inside simultaneously. An action like riding the bus or walking home is more than a mechanical movement. This is important to me for my viewer to feel.

Searching Box is the third work included in my thesis exhibition and emerged in its infancy over Christmas break 2012. I was thinking about how quickly time goes by and how quickly my kids were growing up. I wanted to hold on to them somehow in the way I remembered them. Going back and viewing home videos from the past four years, I was surprised by how much I had already forgotten. Instantly these home videos began replacing and filling the gaps of memories I had lost. I quickly felt the need to hold on to and come up with a way to preserve these memories. I wanted the notion of lost memories recalled to relate a larger audience, but for me, making this work actually helps me remember these specific times. If I had not made this, these home videos would still be stored somewhere, lost in old folders of my computer. And my memories of these moments would be slowly sinking further and further from the forefront of my mind.

The first state of *Searching Box* consisted of 24 films, which played simultaneously across a grid-like screen, creating a clamor of sound and image. Slowly each film fades away from a screen full of videos to one lingering film. I was trying to give the feeling of being overwhelmed in the beginning and wishing the films would

linger a bit longer at the end. Though an effective start, it was more of a sketch, lasting only two minutes, and lacked the depth and layering I was seeking. So I started planning an extensive installation that would allow the viewers to immerse themselves physically within the projected films. Quickly this piece became a large production exploring so many themes that I felt it was diluting the power of any one particular meaning or message.

I chose to focus on my search for ways to hold onto my slipping memories. I was searching for truth in what I remembered and how that memory was changing by viewing film I had not seen in years. It was at this point I decided to create a cabinet, 16” by 22”. In this cabinet are 24 small boxes, all crafted to hold one memory film. Each box has a lid, which must be removed to view the film inside. Not every film plays at the same rate. Sometimes you can find a film when the lid is opened and sometimes only an empty screen is seen. By reducing the scale and increasing the interactivity of the *Searching Box*, I have created an intimate experience of both searching for and holding onto fading memories.

Searching Box speaks to an audience who doesn't know me or my children because it's dealing with the notion of lost memories recalled. The contents within the films include childhood activities like playing at the park, playing at the mall, playing in the snow, playing in cardboard boxes, taking a bath, and swinging on a swing set. These are shared childhood experiences for many of us in our culture. I want people to recall their own memories from their childhood. In the same way I found these films, I want the viewer to search through the metaphorical old folders of their computer-like-brain to

recall their lives when they were young and full of energy. These home videos are personal and specific to my life, but at the same time, I am striving for them to serve as metaphors for the specific memories each one of us have of our own childhoods.

The three artworks *Inbound*, *5:30. going home*, and *Searching Box* will be included in the MFA Thesis exhibition held at the Weatherspoon Art Museum from late April to early June 2013. This show for me is the culmination of a great amount of growth and learning over the past two years. I have been greatly influenced by many artist-professor-mentors while studying at UNC Greensboro, and completing my MFA in Studio Art has given me the direction I've been seeking for the past twelve years. I feel very grateful for the support and generosity of this MFA program, as prepare to enter the world with my work.

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