

Sarah Sweeney

Associate Professor of Art

Scholarship

Artist Statement

When a photograph is taken, a voice is recorded, or a video is captured, a duplication occurs. One memory is stored internally in the body to be reconstituted later while the other takes a physical form and enters into the archive of memory objects. It is the relationship between the two forms—one living and malleable, the other rigid and enduring—that my work takes as its subject.

The space that exists between these two forms is charged by the politics of identity, the clash of past and present, and the slippage between invention and record. In aggregating personal and institutional memory object archives we have constructed shared narratives of self, family, and community that are marked by a frozen, excerpted sense of completeness. Biological memories, however, as suggested by recent studies in memory science, are far more incomplete and mercurial—subject to revision each time we revisit them. In my work I bring memory objects into the digital environment as a way to introduce aberrations and imperfections that complicate and interrogate the construction of these narratives.

Scholarship Narrative

I work in an area of art that is so new that it does not yet have a codified name: sometimes it is called digital media, sometimes it is referred to as new media art, and in some places it is even called new genres. In addition to this ever-shifting name, my discipline also has constantly shifting methods of creating and exhibiting work, with new tools continually expanding and changing the space of investigation. This is a field without models. Because technologies such as Instagram and the iPhone are fewer than ten years old very few artists have made work specifically designed for these platforms, and thus artists working in these platforms have the opportunity to create new models and redefine traditional roles. What new possibilities emerge, for example, when audience members become followers and artists create visual narratives that unfold on the screens of our smartphones over a year or more? In this field, change is constant and rapid, as coding languages are revised and new operating systems are introduced on an almost yearly basis. With each new iteration new forms are introduced for artists to experiment with; for example, the recent introduction of readily accessible virtual reality and augmented reality means that artists can create work that questions the boundaries between the work and the viewer. The challenge of keeping pace with the tools and questions of my field matches my desire to continually learn as both an artist and a teacher. In this amorphous and emerging discipline I have found a home for my artistic and intellectual curiosity.

Before I was introduced to digital technology, I identified as a photographer. I have always been interested in the historical and social meaning of photographs and how the photographs we capture shape our identity. When I began making art in the digital environment I started to create work that questioned our relationship to photography by digitally manipulating existing collections of photographs. In my work I use archives of photographs from my family's albums, Kodachrome slides of other families bought on eBay, digital photographs posted to the Creative Commons of Flickr, and photographs captured on mobile phones. I have spent the last fifteen years studying the patterns that appear in the snapshot photography of my family and the families of strangers. These patterns shape the questions I pose in my work—what moments are missing from our family albums? Can you see loss? Are there pieces of ourselves that we cede to others in our photographic lives? How do we use photographs to remember, and what happens if we choose to forget?

I pose these questions through many different formats in my work. Each format provides a framework and historical context for the questions in a given piece. I have created work that has taken the form of an iPhone app, an Instagram feed, chromogenic snapshot photographs, large-scale pigment prints, photo albums, and interactive image maps. The choice of large-scale photographs suggest a conversation with both the history of romantic painting and the sublime and the contemporary photographic work of artists such as Gregory Crewdson and Jeff Wall. The choice of an iPhone app positions the conversation within the context of our current vernacular practice of capturing and sharing photographs while also invoking earlier traditions of analog photography. With the support of faculty research grants and summer research at Skidmore the range of formats in my work has grown. Financial support for technology and equipment for my series *Still* led me to travel to Iceland and reintroduce the camera to my practice, a tool I had not used in ten years. Through summer research with my students my work has expanded to include collaboration and a participatory practice through which students and members of the public play a role in authoring new work.

As an integral part of the the art I create for exhibition, I write, research, present, curate, and create other forms of academic scholarship. I believe it is important to be a voice within the emerging conversation around my discipline. I frequently present papers at academic conferences and give artist talks at festivals and exhibitions. I also curate conversations juxtaposing scholars and artists. In one curatorial project I collaborated with other faculty to select artwork for an exhibition at the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, and in another curatorial project I guest edited an issue of the *Media-N* journal for the New Media Caucus of the College Art Association.

Ian Bogost, video game scholar and designer, proposes play as a way to discover the parameters of a game. All of my work, both scholarly and artistic, is a form of play that uncovers and reveals the parameters within the unbounded space of my discipline.

The Forgetting Machine

2013-2017

Collaborator: James Armenta (Skidmore 2017)

The memory is less like a movie, a permanent emulsion of chemicals on celluloid, and more like a play—subtly different each time it's performed. In my brain, a network of cells is constantly being reconsolidated, rewritten, remade. That two-letter prefix changes everything.

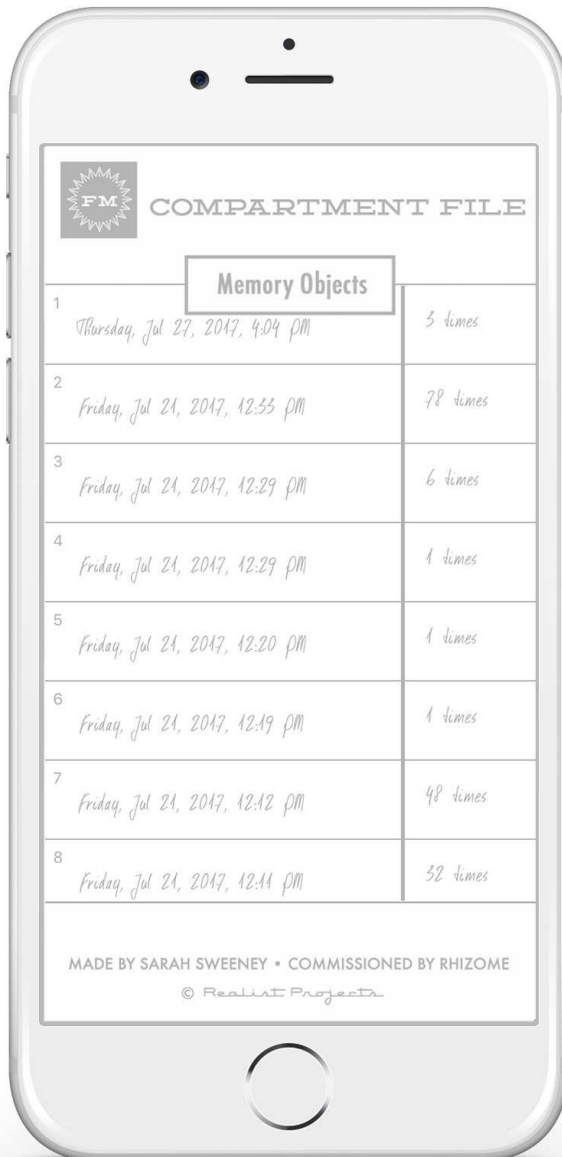
Jonah Lehrer, "The Forgetting Pill" (2012)

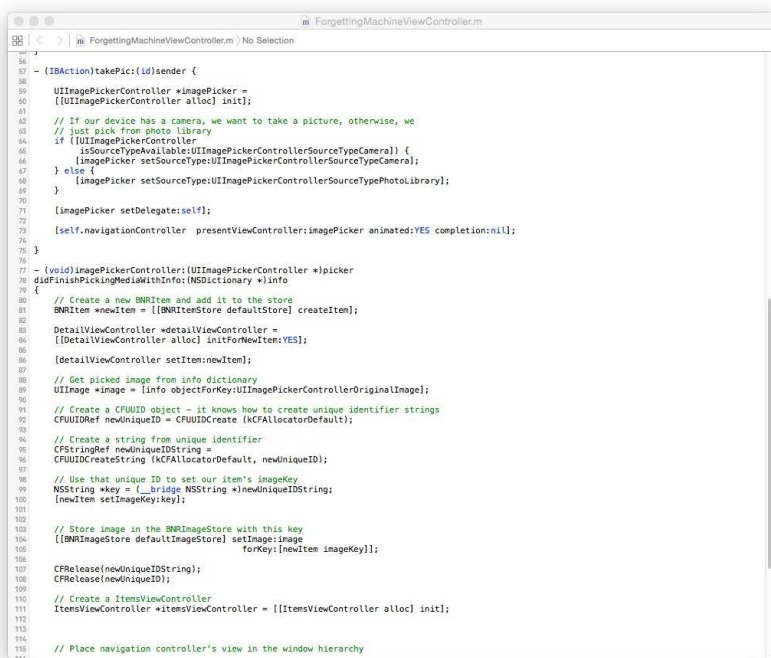
In *The Forgetting Machine*, an iPhone app commissioned by the new media arts organization Rhizome, I imagine a space in which reconsolidation, a theory proposed by scientist Karim Nader, governs not only our biological memories but also the prosthetic memory objects we circulate using social media. The site for this interaction is the mobile phone, the device we use to capture, store, and share our personal digital memory objects. Users download and install the application and take photographs using the phone's camera. Each time they view their photograph or press the refresh button, the photograph displayed becomes slightly obscured or blurred. Through the user's act of use or refresh the original becomes inaccessible and is replaced by a new original. Over time this image becomes unrecognizable.

This project responds to a culture defined by the networks of social media that provide a stage for the global circulation of memory objects. Within this culture forgetting becomes a radical act. Forgetting functions as counterproductive to the infrastructure of memory preservation produced by archives, conservation and restoration experts, databases, and scrapbook artists. By synchronizing public and private memories through their simultaneous decay, *The Forgetting Machine* creates a possibility for forgetting in both the public and private spheres.

The following pages document the application in use on an iPhone, the different elements of its interface, coding and development of the application, several images produced with the application by gallery visitors, and the installation and exhibition of the work in several galleries.



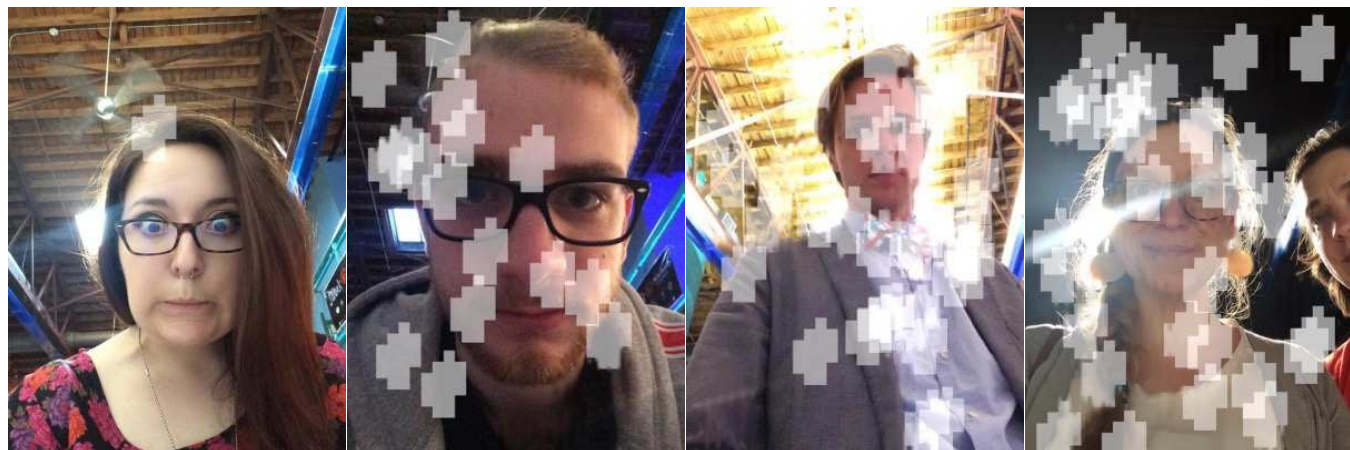


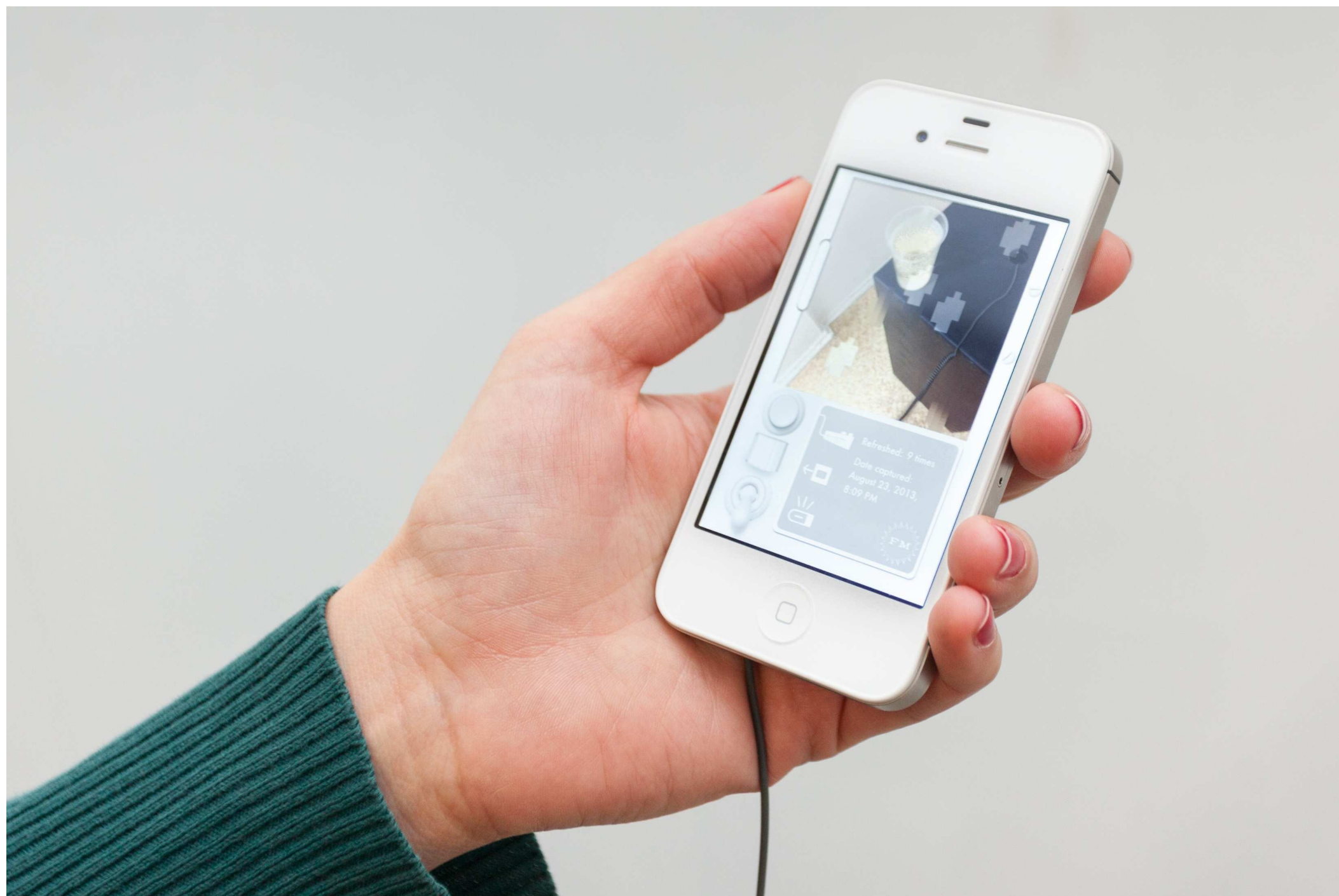


Process

For *The Forgetting Machine* project I spent three months learning to code using Objective-C and xcode from books and online tutorials. To create the app I wrote 1,377 lines of code that included functions for taking pictures, storing pictures locally, blurring and lightening pictures, storing and displaying information about the pictures, and overwriting the original pictures. I designed the interface in Photoshop using typefaces and symbols that referenced old media artifacts such as the slide box and the projector screen. For the buttons I painted old projectors and cameras white with spray paint and then photographed them and refined them in Photoshop. When I finished the app I loaded it on a white iPhone and sent the app and phone to exhibitions around the world. The first version of the app could not be distributed in the app store because it leaked memory, a technical problem with memory allocation.

The second version of the app was coded by James Armenta, a computer science student who graduated from Skidmore in 2017. James used the design and interactivity of the first app to construct a new app that would work on the most recent iPads and iPhones. The new app was completed in July and will be submitted to the app store in September for an October launch.

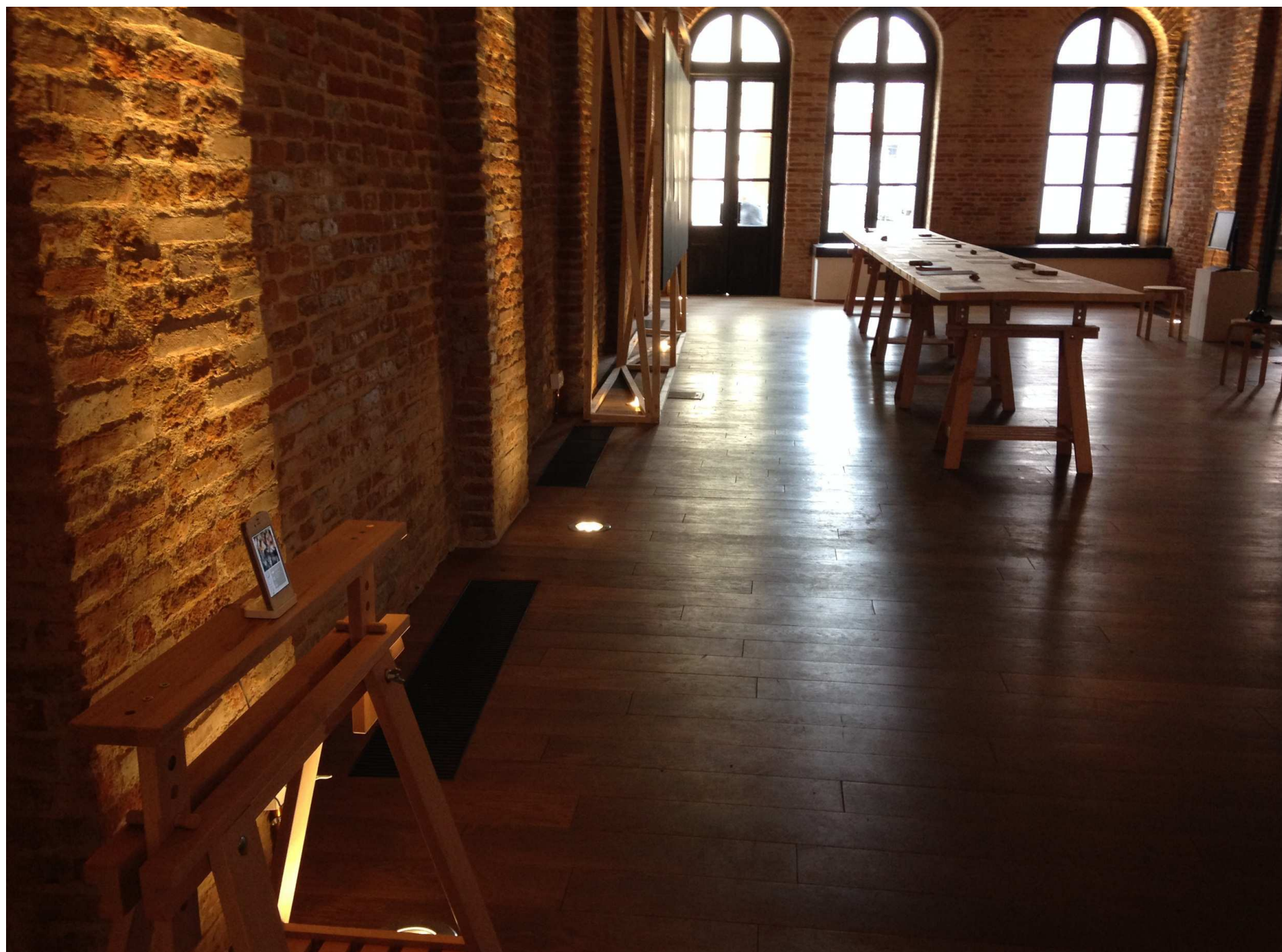




Exhibition

I was extremely fortunate to be chosen for a commission to work on *The Forgetting Machine* with Rhizome, the leading international born-digital art organization and an affiliate in residence at the New Museum in New York. The first iteration of *The Forgetting Machine* was loaded on an iPhone and sent to exhibitions around the world. It has been exhibited at the Meet Factory in Prague, Bucharest Art Week, km temporaer in Berlin, the Gallery at Mercer in New Jersey, the Schick Art Gallery in Saratoga Springs, the Screening Scholarship Media Festival Exhibition in Philadelphia, and the Slingshot Festival of Music, Electronic Art, Tech, Film & Comedy in Athens, Georgia. For several of the exhibitions I had the opportunity to work with the curator and scholar Olga Stefan, the former executive director of the Chicago Artists' Coalition and frequent contributor to *ArtReview*, *Frieze Magazine*, and *Art in America*. I also presented on *The Forgetting Machine* at the MiT8: public media, private media conference in Cambridge, Massachusetts and the International Symposium on Electronic Art in Vancouver.

The second iteration of *The Forgetting Machine* will be available for free download in fall 2017 in the Apple App Store.



Galerie



Meet
Factory

8. 9. – 13. 11.
2016

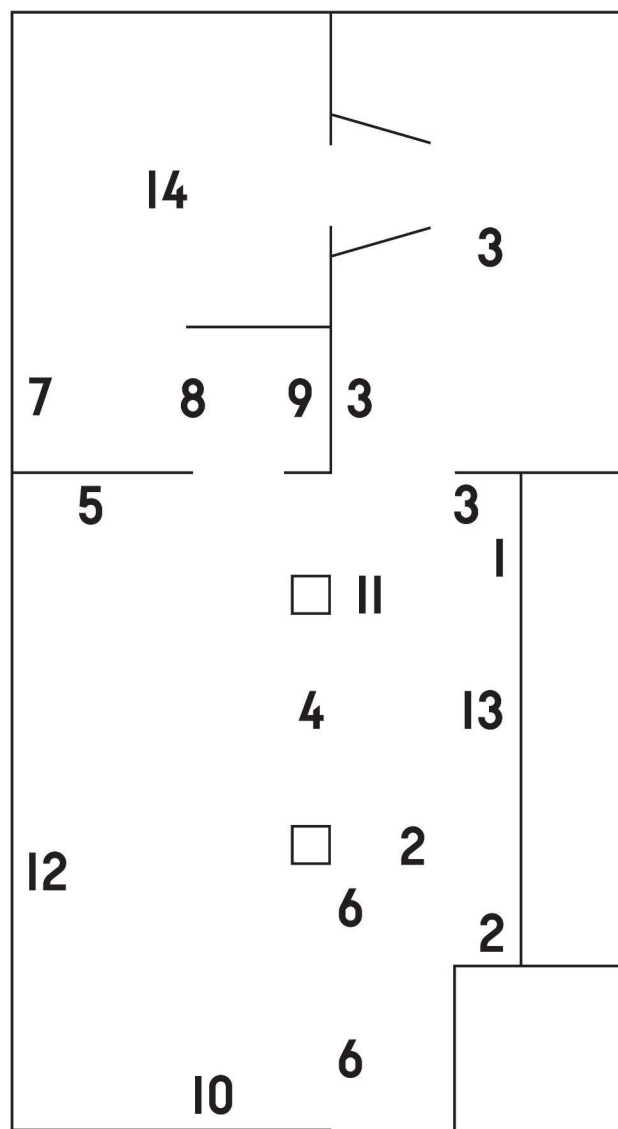
Esther Shalev-Gerz, Dor Guez,
Clemens von Wedemeyer, Agnieszka Polska,
Sarah Sweeney, Nedko Solakov, Himali Singh Soin,
Sophie Calle, Kateřina Šedá, Hito Steyerl, Dorothy Iannone,
Dread Scott, Adam Vačkář, Dan Acostioaei
curator / kurátorka: Olga Stefan

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LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING SMÍCH A ZAPOMNĚNÍ



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8. 9. 2016 — 13. 11. 2016 Galerie MeetFactory

The Aesthetics of Erasure

2015

Editor-in-Chief: Pat Badani

Co-Guest Editor: Paul Benzon

In an era in which state surveillance is capable of capturing, storing, and analyzing all personal communications, and in which even the much-heralded ephemerality of photographic sharing applications such as Snapchat is revealed to be just another instance of deferred, secreted permanence, erasure seems all but impossible. Yet this is precisely what makes erasure a vitally necessary artistic, technological, and social practice. Erasure provides a point of departure from network culture, from the constraints of big data, the archive, and the cloud; through erasure, forgetting and disappearance become radical, profoundly productive acts.

This special issue of *Media-N* seeks to describe the aesthetics of erasure across various media, platforms, and contexts in the digital era. What does it mean to consider erasure as an artist's mark, and how does it reshape the relations between making and unmaking? How do acts of erasure allow artists to harness and resist the possibilities and problems of the archive, of (self-) surveillance, of public and private, and of datafication? What do these practices, and the absences they produce, tell us about the materiality of digital activity? What relations do they reveal among artistry, audience, memory, temporality, and the market?

Process

I collaborated on this special journal issue for *Media-N*, the journal of the New Media Caucus of the College Art Association, with Paul Benzon, a media studies and contemporary literature and culture scholar at Skidmore College. As scholars coming from different fields we believed that the word and image should be represented equally so we introduced a visual essay component authored by artists that was new to this journal. In these sections artists treated the pages like an exhibition and composed visual narratives that functioned with little text. For this journal edition we worked with many incredible artists—the cover art is by Jenny Holzer, and there are contributions from William Basinski, Derek Beaulieu, and Nick Montfort.

Exhibition

This journal is available online and at College Art Association conferences. We also presented a panel with some of the contributors at the International Symposium on Electronic Art in Vancouver in 2015.

The following pages document the table of contents and guest editorial statement for the issue.

the aesthetics of
ERASURE

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GUEST EDITORIAL STATEMENT

Paul Benzon

Temple University

Sarah Sweeney

Skidmore College

Erasure is the black hole at the center of digital culture, the endgame of cultural practice in the moment of network connectivity and cloud-based storage. Erasure has long been an important dimension of both artistic and critical work: Robert Rauschenberg asserted in an interview that his seminal 1953 *Erased de Kooning Drawing* was neither protest, nor destruction, nor vandalism, but rather poetry, the product of a deeply immanent engagement with the materiality and objecthood of preexisting work. [1] Similarly, for Jacques Derrida, the paradoxical status of all textual marks as perpetually under erasure (*sous rature*) is at the crux of the larger paradoxes of memory and forgetting, presence and absence, trace and destruction, that define the status of the archive. [2]

The work of Rauschenberg and Derrida, among others, makes clear that erasure is nothing new, that it is not unique to the moment of the digital, or indeed to any particular period of technology or artistic history – quite the opposite, we might say that as long as the human technology of mark-making has been in play, so has the possibility of erasure, the unmaking of the mark. Yet despite this longstanding possibility, the practice of erasure has taken on new meaning and relevance within a moment in which aesthetic and information materiality is newly at stake in a variety of contexts. In the early twenty-first century, we find ourselves in an era in which state surveillance is capable of capturing, storing, and analyzing all personal communications, and in which even the much-heralded ephemerality of photographic sharing applications such as Snapchat is revealed to be just another instance of deferred, secreted permanence. Within the context of such totalizing archival conditions, erasure seems all but impossible, an unattainable status amidst the constant hum of production, preservation, and sharing that defines contemporary digital knowledge work. Yet this near-impossibility is precisely what makes erasure a vitally necessary artistic, technological, and social practice. Erasure provides a point of departure from network culture, and thus from the constraints of big data, the archive, and the cloud; through erasure, forgetting and disappearance become radical, profoundly productive acts.

This special issue of *Media-N* brings together a diverse collection of visual and critical essays to consider the artistic, social, technological, and theoretical contours of this productivity. While our contributors explore practices of erasure that serve a range of social ends, from critique and liberation to state secrecy and violence, they all understand erasure as profoundly productive and generative, defined not by intangibility or absence but rather by eclectic moments of complexly situated, idiosyncratic materiality. Erasure takes place across a wide range of contexts and sites in these works: the state archive, the corporate server, the found document, the mass-market text. Within these contexts, our contributors reveal a variety of different marks within the larger practice of erasure. In a number of pieces, destruction serves as a governing operation, with authors and artists focusing on the technological eradication of texts by means of both chance and choice. Other contributors concentrate on overwriting as a practice of erasure, from the local context of a singular textual object to the global archive of the web at large. Concealment also emerges as a key strategy in a number of essays: as we learn to see what is covered against what is left uncovered, we learn to see these images as dense palimpsests, layered with history, memory, perception, and secrecy. Still others omit in order to create, raising the question of what is left out through what remains. Populated by traces, aftereffects, remainders, and residues as much as they are by invisibility, void, and blankness, these works collectively ask us to see and read in new ways, and to attend to

the complex dynamics between absence and presence in coming to terms with the media art of the twenty-first century. As we read what has been taken against what is left, an array of larger issues and questions come into view as well, sites of inquiry that are made newly visible through the making-invisible of erasure.

Our issue's first section explores what erasure reveals about institutions of power and secrecy. Joshua Craze considers the *Redaction Paintings* and *Dust Paintings*, two recent series by Jenny Holzer that take redacted government documents from the War on Terror as their source material. Craze shows how Holzer's transformation of these documents draws our attention to what he describes as their "negative equation" between the abstracting effects of state power and the concrete, embodied practices of discipline that sustain that power; as we see these documents with new eyes through Holzer's appropriations, we see a secret history made public in their concealments and coverings. Seth Ellis' visual essay *Version Control* focuses on the public history that becomes visible through a single glitch in Google Street View. While the seemingly perpetual present moment that defines Street View comes from an equally perpetual erasure of the past through the overwriting of the present, this glitch reveals a more complex constellation of space and time that lies remnant within the digital behemoth's archive. Seizing on the stratified, multiple pasts revealed by this glitch as an artistic point of departure, Ellis engages in a speculative reimagining of public space and the social populations and possibilities that might inhabit it.

In our second section, Kaja Marczewska and Justin Berry consider how artistic practices of erasure serve as a means of critique within the excess of late capital culture. Like Ellis, Marczewska focuses on Google, turning her attention to the corporation's practices of data mining and user profiling. Her essay focuses on Mimi Cabell and Jason Huff's conceptual novel *American Psycho*, in which the authors reproduce Bret Easton Ellis' novel of the same name as a nearly blank text, omitting Ellis' prose and instead printing only the Google Ads generated by sending that prose back and forth through Gmail. This practice transforms the infamous violence and material excess of the original text in order to foreground the strategic possibilities of Marczewska's titular "algorithmic extreme," suggesting how in a moment defined by the invisible violence and excess of big data, a text stripped of everything but that data's end product constitutes perhaps both the purest document of digital capitalism and the sharpest critique of that capitalism. Likewise, Justin Berry's series *Untitling Landscapes* digitally paints over the identifying information from the covers of mass-market science fiction and fantasy paperbacks, replacing it with imperceptibly integrated blank space. The resulting landscapes signify in their emptiness for imagined safe zones, silent refuges from the cultural and visual noise of late capital.

Taking the relations between information and sensation as a point of departure, the artists in our third section focus on how erasure modulates between signal and noise, and on the roles omission and concealment might play in how we see and read. In *Habits of Experience, Habits of Understanding*, David Gyscek paints over portions of a photographed landscape, concealing different components of each image across this series to create a constant oscillation between figure and ground over multiple images. For Gyscek, this approach juxtaposes the encyclopedic capture of the camera and the selective perceptions of the embodied seer; by "imagining out" the comprehensive data of the photographic image, he transforms the truth claims of the modern era's most crucial visual technology, creating spaces that are subject to the subtraction and selectivity of the human mind. Derek Beaulieu's experimental novel *Local Colour* also operates through visual subtraction: using Paul Auster's novella *Ghosts* as source material, Beaulieu removes all of Auster's text except for color-oriented, chromatic words, and then replaces those words with rectangles corresponding to the colors they denote. Stripped of all alphabetic markers and identifiers, the resulting text hovers between poetry, art, and sound, an ambient artifact that throws into relief the profoundly material modes of filtering that define all of these forms.

While technology and technological change are at stake in all of the work in this special issue, the artists and writers in our fourth section foreground these issues with particular urgency. *The Deletionist*, a JavaScript bookmarklet developed

by Amaranth Borsuk, Jesper Juul, and Nick Montfort, generates erasure poetry from the text of any web page. The deeply spatial texts that result derive not from randomized erasures but rather from highly formalized rules, producing the poetry of emptiness through algorithmic constraint. The Deletionist's creators see it as revealing an alternate World Wide Web—a “Worl,” in their nomenclature – that is as distinctive and different as it is fugitive. Torsa Ghosal's discussion of worlds under erasure in contemporary Hollywood cinema strikes a similar technological resonance along the axes of time and media change. The erasure of imagined storyworlds has been a common strategy of literary experimentation for decades, but in transposing this practice to the visual, Ghosal finds an explanation for this practice rooted in medium specificity rather than narrative practice. Tracing this erasure—a practice she terms “unprojection”—across a series of recent films, she shows how it becomes a testing ground on which filmmakers represent and respond to the change from analog to digital cinema, interrogating the stakes of technological change through their films' aesthetic frameworks. William Basinski's ambient composition *The Disintegration Loops* also self-reflexively documents this change through a similarly haunting, dramatic destruction. Basinski produced *The Disintegration Loops* by digitizing a set of fragile analog tape loops, documenting the sounds of decay produced as the tapes began to fall apart in the process of transcription. Coupled with the composer's video of the World Trade Center towers collapsing – an event that took place as Basinski finished transcribing the tapes – these sounds document change through decay, hauntingly transposing one materiality into another.

Our issue ends with several essays that turn explicitly to the question of the archive, perhaps the largest and most fundamental issue at stake in the aesthetics of erasure. The materiality that runs through erasure in all its forms bears on the archive in complex, accretive ways; if every act of erasure is an act of production, a generative mark, then every erasure thus adds to the archive at the same time that it seems to take away from it. Ella Klik and Diana Kamin discuss Max Dean's 1992-1995 installation *As Yet Untitled*, a predigital work in which a robotic arm presents viewers with found photographs to be saved or shredded, as part of a complex genealogy of the role of erasure within the digital archive. Offering a counterpoint to several critical accounts of digital erasure, Klik and Kamin use Dean's work as the cornerstone of a theory of the lost/found, a third archival gesture beyond the binary of saving and deleting. Beyond these two endpoints, they suggest, the lost/found poses the possibility of a more immanent and incomplete trajectory for archival objects, characterized by moments of “producing, dislocating, finding, and re-purposing that ha[ve] already taken place and [are] yet to come.” In reading the protocols of digital storage alongside Sigmund Freud's archetypal Mystic Writing-Pad, Matthew Schilleman traces a similar liminality between preservation and disposal. Tracing a history of digital reading and writing from Vannevar Bush's prototypical memex to contemporary storage software such as Evernote, Schilleman shows how the tension between remembering and repressing is not only psychological but also technological, with digital technology's perpetual promise of renewal and refreshability inextricable from its need to erase. Schilleman sees in this interdependence a powerful need to introduce forgetting into discussions of digital media – to remember forgetting, as it were.

Taken together, the investigations into the place of erasure in twenty-first-century art, technology, and culture in this special issue reveal a wide topography of locations, processes, aesthetics, and intentionalities. They attest to the ways in which, in its complexities, its materialities, and its mobilities across time, space, and medium, erasure is an urgently present artistic practice, now perhaps more than ever. When we look at an erasure, we see a text that is neither less nor more than its original source, but rather one that is uncannily elsewhere. Indeed, perhaps in looking at erasures such as the ones in this collection, we are compelled to look not at a single site of disappearance, but ultimately at everything and everywhere else—to take the additive, generative, productive aesthetics of erasure as a catalyst for seeing the complex networks, affiliations, appropriations, histories, and futures that exist in ever-changing configurations around the voids of the digital moment.

Bios

Paul Benzon teaches media studies, contemporary literature and culture, and critical writing at Temple University. In his research, he explores how the material and formal extremities of textual artifacts reveal the cultural history of modern and contemporary media technology. He is currently at work on a book project entitled *Deletions: Absence, Obsolescence, and the Ends of Media*. In *Deletions*, he traces a history of textual disappearance across a range of twentieth- and twenty-first-century media, from book burning, redaction, and the spontaneous combustion of celluloid film to the global circulation of electronic waste and the imminent obsolescence of physical storage media amidst the twenty-first-century rhetoric of the digital cloud. His work has appeared in electronic book review, *CLCWeb*, *PMLA* (where it won the William Riley Parker Prize for an Outstanding Article in 2010), and *Narrative* (where it received the James Phelan Prize for the Best Contribution to *Narrative* in 2013), and is forthcoming in *The Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities* (2016) and *Publishing as Artistic Practice* (2016).

Sarah Sweeney received her BA in Studio Art from Williams College and an MFA in Digital Media from Columbia University School of the Arts and is currently an Associate Professor of Art at Skidmore College. Her digital and interactive work interrogates the relationship between photographic memory objects and physical memories, and is informed by both the study of memory science and the history of documentary technologies. In her work, she explores the space between information that is stored corporeally in our memory and the information that is captured and stored in memory objects created by documentary technologies including camera phones, stereoscopic cameras, and home video cameras – each project makes tangible the deletions and accretions produced through our interactions with these technologies. She is the creator of *The Forgetting Machine*, an iPhone app commissioned by the new media organization Rhizome, that systematically destroys digital photographs each time they are viewed or refreshed to simulate the theory of reconsolidation proposed by scientists studying memory. Her work has appeared nationally and internationally in exhibitions at locations including the Orange County Center for Contemporary Art, the Los Angeles Center for Digital Art, the New Jersey State Museum, the Black and White Gallery, and the UCR/California Photography Museum.

References

1. Robert Rauschenberg, interview, “Robert Rauschenberg discusses Erased de Kooning Drawing,” *Artforum*, <http://artforum.com/video/id=19778&mode=large>, accessed March 22, 2015.
2. The questions of erasure, trace, and the archive are pervasive in Derrida’s work; see, for example, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

Still

2015-2017

All of this we get exactly as much in hunting with the camera as in hunting with the rifle; and of the two, the former is the kind of sport which calls for the higher degree of skill, patience, resolution and knowledge of the life history of the animal sought.

Theodore Roosevelt, “The Camera Versus the Rifle” (1901)

Iceland’s tourism board describes their natural landscapes as a contrast between majestic mountains, picturesque lagoons, catastrophic glaciers, and raging torrential rivers. Close to a million tourists overrun Iceland every year hoping to capture and bring home these landscapes in the form of photographs. In the photographic series *Still* I explore the paradox that arises when hundreds of tourist bodies armed with cameras around their necks invade these remote landscapes hoping to capture a sense of wilderness, isolation, and untouched space. In this series I become the hunter following tour buses, shooting tourists, and flattening their bodies into a two-dimensional space as they stream towards the waterfalls, glaciers, and lava fields.

The series *Still* comprises twelve large-scale archival pigment prints created from photographs captured at different sites in Iceland. Each work is constructed from dozens of images of the landscape combined with images of tourists taken at the same location. In each image I move and rotate the bodies, digitally repositioning them like theatrical props or mannequins. In the supine position their bodies become vulnerable and suggestive of the aftermath of a disaster. In *Nine down in Gullfoss* a single shooter stands in the middle of a verdant landscape framing a photograph of a waterfall while nine bodies lie scattered around him. The violent act that precipitated this disaster is unclear—the only weapon visible is the camera, wielded by the tourists and myself. In this moment the camera becomes the gun, imbued with the power of colonialism to immobilize and bring home trophies from a land that is not one’s own. In images that recall the immense landscapes and the frozen bodies of the turn-of-the-century dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History, this series asks what is owned or possessed when we photograph a foreign space.

The following pages document the production of the series, including sites where photographs were taken and examples of images in progress, and details and full images of works in the series.



Conversation with Rachel Seligman

from exhibition text

RS: Could you start by sharing a little about your background as an artist?

SS: I grew up with photography because my grandfather was a serious collector. I was a photographer in high school and I wanted to be one in college. My junior year I went to the Museum School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. There I studied digital photography for the first time and I was introduced to the computer. That was first time I had any type of experience with a computer and I made a piece that was really important to me. My father died when I was 17, right before I went to college. I loved photographs but I felt that in the time after he died photographs let me down. They had been promised to be memories, and I was terribly disappointed because I used the same photographs over and over and they stopped bringing back my father. And I just felt very much like it was photography's fault that I was losing my memories. With the computer, I could do things that reflected the way I was thinking about memories, so my first real piece was called *My Father Died Four Years Ago* and it involved removing him from all the photographs I had of him. And one of the ideas was that you could see the hole that he left, which was a much more present reality than actually seeing his body, which was no longer here. So it was a way to alter the photographs to reflect the present reality, as opposed to something that was in the past.

Since that time, all of my work has been about exploring photography without taking photographs. Instead, I work mainly with found photographs, slides I buy from eBay, things like that. I hadn't taken photographs in 10 years before the *Still* series, and I haven't taken them in any of my projects since.

RS: What do you think about the relationship between the photograph as a perceived document—we like to think they are snapshots of reality—and the fact that your work involves altering or fabricating the photograph?

SS: My work relies upon that perception – of photography as reality – because it allows for a sense of wonder when seeing my work. But I believe that all photography is completely constructed. While we consider photographs to be really near and dear (they're the first thing you grab in a fire, right?) I actually think that photographs are really problematic. I think that they're false and artificial in ways that we don't readily perceive. And I think that's one of the reasons all my work is in photography, and is why I alter them, because I think that when we see photographs, we don't think about all the ways that they don't actually equate to reality or memory...

RS: And do you feel like your personal experience of loss was the moment that you had that realization?

SS: Yes. I think because I love photography so much, and felt so betrayed.

RS: I'm interested that you had such a powerful and emotional feeling of betrayal, but that instead of completely rejecting photography and going in another direction, you ended up diving in deeply, creating your own path into photography.

SS: Every one of my works questions a different aspect of photography and our relationship to it. Not to suggest that people shouldn't love photography, because I think photography is incredible. But to see how strange and awkward photography is, instead of just familiar, and warm, and all those things people generally feel about it.

RS: Tell me about the current series: how did you come to make this work, which is different from all your previous work in that you've actually taken these photographs yourself?

SS: People are not still in reality. We don't see that. We don't know what that looks like. But in photographs, we totally accept that moment. Stillness is weird and strange, but to make people see that, I rotate people 90°, because then the awkwardness seems more obvious. Also, when you're vertical you don't notice how rigid our bodies are, but when you turn them, they're so rigid, almost like rigor mortis. And there are all these postures and gestures that we're not even conscious of, because they're so familiar. So by turning people on their side it becomes unfamiliar, and we start thinking a little bit more about what it is to be still. The other thing that really got me excited was taxidermy, and thinking about photography as visual taxidermy. Because taxidermy has all the same things as rigor mortis, it's unnatural, but very lifelike.

The related artifice with photography is this sense... (and that goes back to my dad) ...that it can bring someone back. I think our culture is very obsessed with this.

RS: Did you go to Iceland with this particular project in mind?

SS: I did. I'd been working with old slides for a long time and I decided I wanted to work with contemporary images. For this project I started looking at Flickr, but none of the photographs were a big enough size for me to use. I decided Iceland was the best place to go to make my own images because I was looking at a lot of Caspar David Friedrich, and thinking about the *Rückenfigur* [a figure placed in a landscape painting, seen from behind, contemplating the view]. I knew that Iceland looked a lot like some Caspar David Friedrich paintings. And one of the best things about Iceland is that it's so compact, with many different kinds of landscape. I had a map that I had planned out with 28 sites that I would visit in 14 days. I would visit a site, and just sit there and wait for tourists to come. And it was a very odd experience of feeling like I was hunting tourists, because I'd get very excited when they would show up *en masse*, armed with cameras around their necks, swarming into these remote landscapes. And then I would "shoot" them. I also took a lot of photographs of the backgrounds, so I could put them together piece by piece, because I wanted some of the work to be really big.

RS: I want to talk a little bit about the role of humor in this work.

SS: My work is not usually funny; I don't intend it to be funny.

RS: Why do you think that people think this work is funny?

SS: I think maybe because it's kind of uncomfortable. If you've ever been to a place and been one of these people, I'm somewhat poking fun at you. If you've ever been a tourist, you're somewhat implicated through these people. I also think there is irony in the images: that masses of tourists descend on these sites to capture a sense of wilderness, isolation, and untouched space.

RS: It seems to me that this is a critique of how we flock to places that have been designated as being special, and we try to capture them in some way, to own them, to possess them.

SS: Yes, and I don't understand that. I guess that's one of the weird parts for me about this series, is that I don't usually do this. If I go to a foreign country, I don't take images. I don't take pictures of my children (my husband does). I don't take pictures of myself, I don't take pictures pretty much at all. So this is very foreign to me.

And there's this sense that because we're taking all these photographs with cameras that we're not taking anything away

from a place.

RS: What do you think about that?

SS: I do think that we are taking something away from a place. I do. And I think it's strange that on a given day in Iceland, hundreds of people have the same exact photograph. It seems incredibly wasteful. It's digital so nobody thinks it's wasteful. And so part of this trip was a lot about me coming to terms with, "Is it Okay? Is it not Okay? What does it mean when all these people travel through this place? What does it mean when you take something? What does it mean to own a digital piece of a place?" And so I guess one of the things that occurred to me about this is that I really think photographs are not necessarily just for memory. I think they're a lot about communicating what it is we're doing at a given time. I guess I'm interrogating the act and the culture of it.

RS: So you think – because you started to allude to this – that it's about both the moment of taking it, but also the moment of sharing it with others? Maybe even more about the sharing?

SS: Yes, I think a lot of it is sharing. And I think the sharing is, on one level, tied to capitalism and colonialism. "I went to this place. You should see it... These are the most amazing things..." People who have enough money go to a country that's not theirs, take photographs (among other things) from that country, and bring them back as a way to show off their wealth and power.

RS: Photography as a mode of conquest...

SS: It is a mode of conquest and that's the part that is very intriguing to me. I've read a lot on tourism and conquest. To be in someone else's country to "experience" it... I'm interested in what that means, and how the camera becomes a tool in service to the impulse for control and possession.

But I also don't take photographs of my life now because I find it to be a really strange practice. You have this very odd moment where everyone is stopping, becoming still, to take the photograph. At least for me, that's very odd. But I love photographs. That's the paradox for me, because I love photography. And in my work, I'm trying to bring to the surface some of the paradoxes that exist for me in photography. We hold photography very close but I feel it needs to be more closely examined.

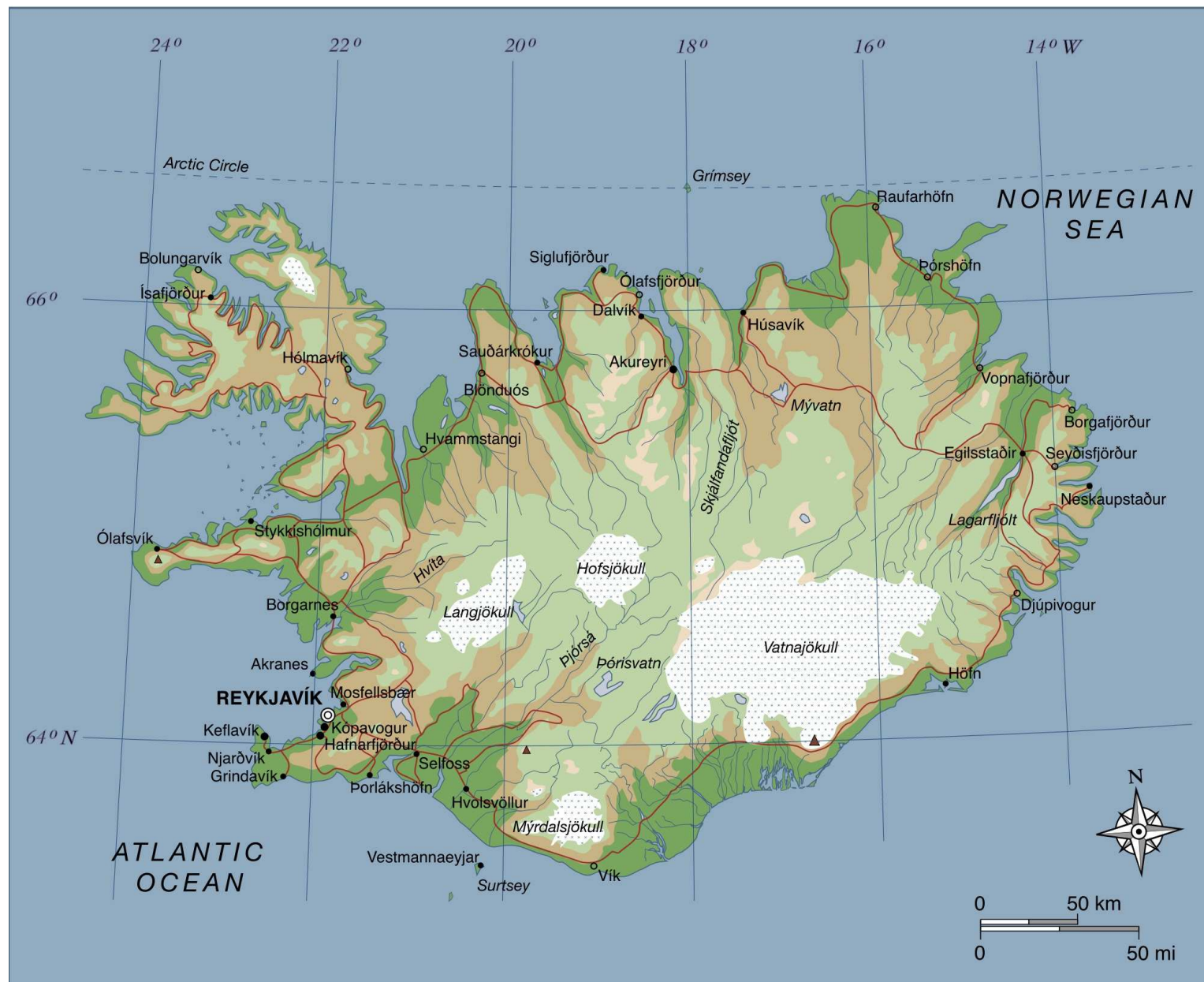


Process

For the series of photographs *Still* I began by researching tourist photography through Flickr. In Flickr I amassed a collection of landscapes captured by tourists on their vacations. Within this collection I was drawn to the photographs of Iceland based on the drama and the variety of different land forms. I knew I wanted to create large images and the Flickr photographs did not have the resolution to support this type of scale, so I planned a trip to Iceland where I could capture my own images. I was in Iceland for fourteen days during which I visited twenty-seven sites, drove 1,481 kilometers and took 13,373 photographs.

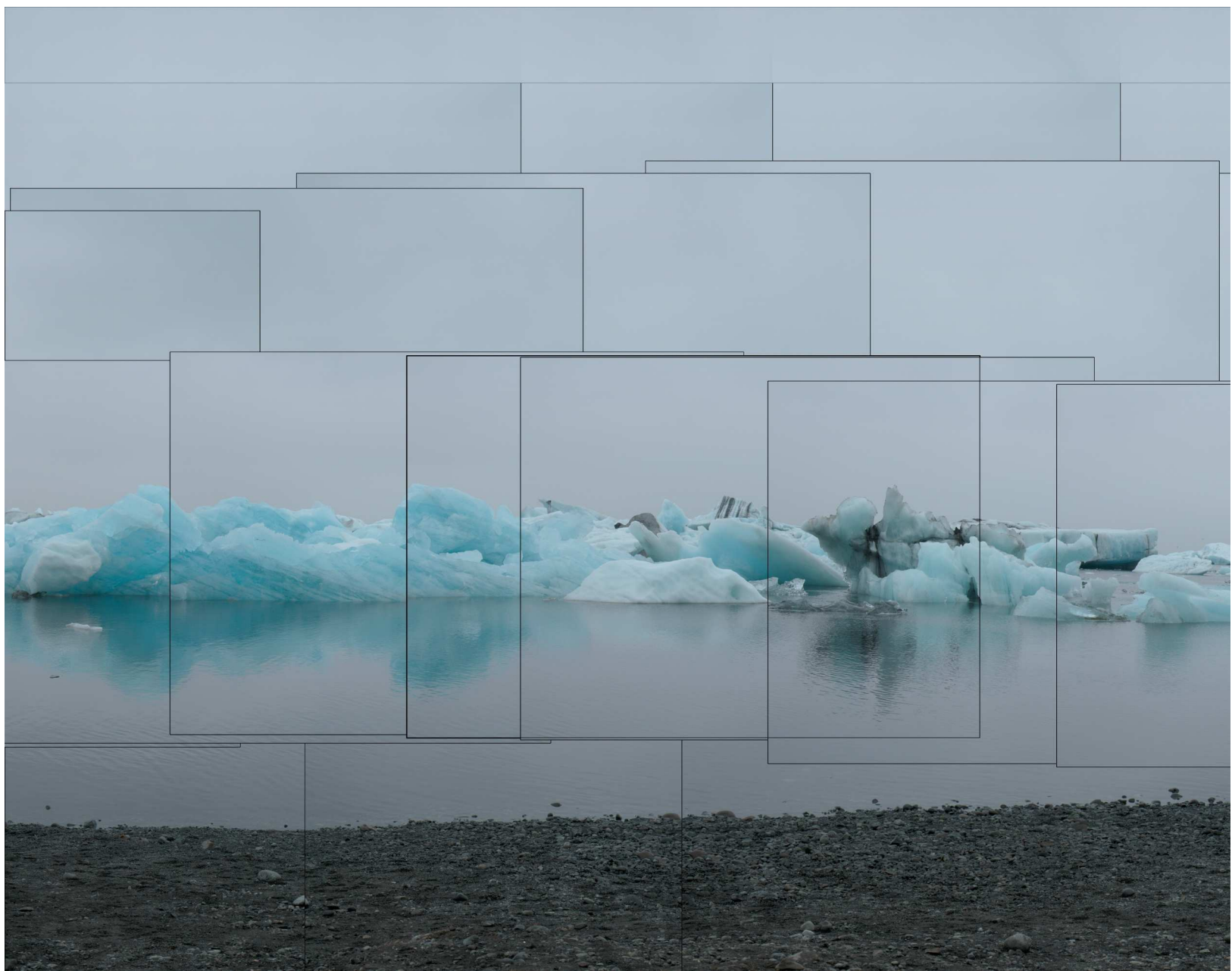
When I returned from Iceland I began assembling the large-scale photographs in Photoshop. I wanted to create photographs that could be printed very large so I had intentionally photographed the backgrounds in many pieces and I had to work to reconstruct the landscape from the pieces. Several of the landscapes were created from more than fifty images and the largest landscape has over one hundred photographs in it. My method for constructing the landscape was more painterly than scientific. I had many pieces but factors like mist, steam, and tourists obscured many of the pieces and made fitting them together an inventive process in which I would search for pieces of land, water, or sky to build a bridge between pieces. The resulting landscape seems to shift and tilt in perspective and repeat itself through identical copies of plants and rocks. It is a constructed landscape that falls apart when you look closely. For the figures in the landscape I looked through several hours of photographs taken at each site and isolated individual tourists. I masked each figure to hide the background, rotated them, and then placed them in the image. I invented shadows and changed the colors of their clothing to connect them to the landscape.

These photographs were the first images I had printed on the Epson Stylus Pro 9880, a wide format inkjet/pigment printer. I experimented with many different papers and selected Canson Infinity Baryta photographic paper. I worked with Andrea Casey in the Cage to develop a system for printing 44-inch prints on heavy photographic paper. Our biggest accomplishment was printing the 172-inch landscape.



Sites

Thingvellir
Geysir
Gullfoss
Stakkholtsgjá Canyon
Skagafoss
Vik
Reynisfjara
Kirkjubfjara Beach
Jökulsárlón
Hverir
Mývatn Nature Baths
Hverfjall
Leirhnjúkur
Krafla
Dettifoss
Rekyjanes
Rauðisandur
Rauðfeldsgjá gorge
Arnarstapi
Hellnar
Lóndrangar
Vatnshellir
Djúpálónssandur
Drivik
Berserkjahraun
Dimmuborgir
Skaftatell







Five down at Jökulsárlón
44" x 66"
2015

Twenty down at Skógafoss
44" x 66"
2017





Sixty-four down at Hverir
44" x 172"
2017









One down at Reynisdrangar
24" x 36"
2016



Three down at Skarðsvík
24" x 36"
2016



Nine down at Gullfoss
24" x 36"
2016



Four down at Svínafellsjökull
24" x 36"
2015



Two down at Reynisfjara
24" x 36"
2015



One down at Ytri Tunga
14" x 21"
2016



One down at Reynisfjara
14" x 21"
2015

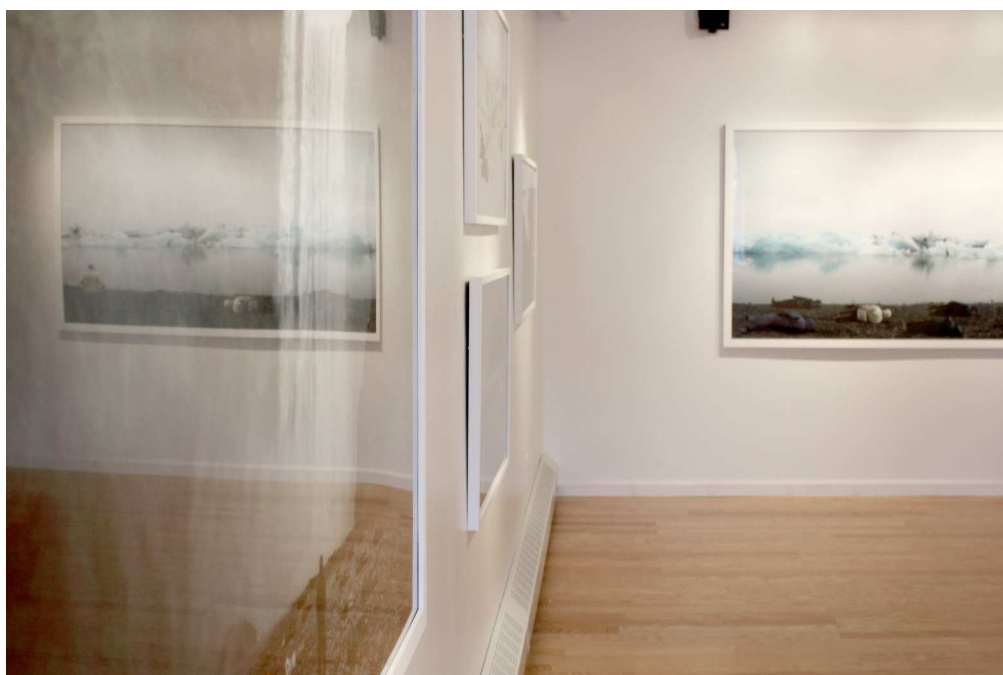


One down at Eldrhuan
14" x 21"
2015



Two down at Geysir
14" x 21"
2015





Exhibition

The photographs in the series *Still* have been exhibited in many different contexts. Photographs from this series have been exhibited in group shows at Catwalk in New York, the Spring Street Gallery in New York, the Gallery at Mercer in New Jersey, Axis Gallery in California, and the CICA Museum in Korea. Photographs from this series have also been printed in a catalogue for an exhibition at the Front Art Space in New York and in posters for the John B. Moore Documentary Studies Collaborative Festosium at Skidmore.

In January 2017 I worked with Rachel Seligman, Assistant Director for Curatorial Affairs at the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, and Laura Von Rosk, Gallery Director at the Lake George Arts Project, on a solo exhibition in the Courthouse Gallery at Lake George. For the show we selected eleven photographs from the series and included a written piece based on an interview with Rachel.



Reimaging Erica

2015 - 2017

Assistant: Paris Baillie (Skidmore 2017)

Photographer: Michael Bentley

This project explores the implications of the internet as new kind of domestic space. Living online, we construct the history of our families through photographs displayed in Flickr photostreams and Facebook walls in much the same way we would use the mantle or the living room wall. Yet this space is profoundly public, shared with strangers as well as friends and family. By making these histories public we open them up to the eyes of voyeurs and anonymous followers. In this project I become a photographic follower. In the same way that Vito Acconci and Sophie Calle documented their following of a stranger through public space, I document my encounter with a stranger found in the digital public commons of Flickr.

For this project I chose to follow a woman who is both a wife and a mother. I wanted to study how her body was captured and represented through her photographic history. Through my searches on Flickr I found Erica Bentley, the wife of Michael and mother of Andrew and Alexander. Her husband posted a collection of 6,619 photographs of their family over ten years to the photostream *Michael Bentley* under a Creative Commons license. In *Reimaging Erica* I make an alternate family history for Erica Bentley that is composed solely of photographs of her. To construct this history I selected images from the photostream that include Erica's body and digitally removed the bodies of her family. By isolating Erica, I reveal the pieces of her body that have been erased by the encroaching bodies of her family and friends. On June 15th, 2017, eleven years after Erica's husband, Michael Bentley, posted his first photograph, I began to post these new images to a photostream on Flickr and an Instagram feed titled *Reimaging Erica*. I chose to return the images to Flickr as a way to make public my act of following and my recasting of Erica's story. While the web is often used as a site for the construction of traditional family narratives, it also has the potential to be a site for the deconstruction and rewriting of those same narratives.

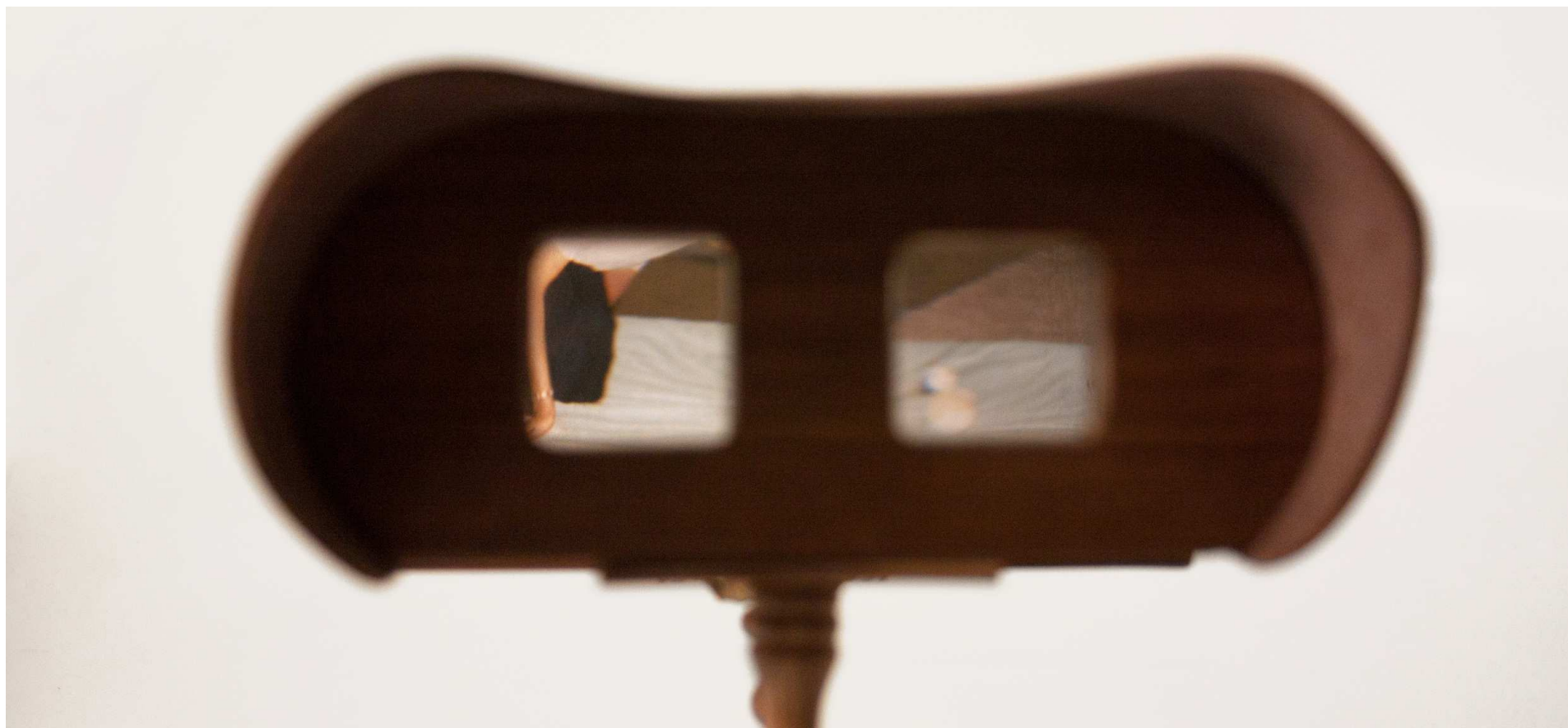
The following pages document early working materials from the series, the production of a single sample image, parameters for the project, and selected images in the series. The full ongoing project is available online at the following locations:

www.instagram.com/reimagingERICA

www.flickr.com/photos/reimagingERICA

reimagingERICA.tumblr.com





Process

The *Reimaging Erica* project began as another project that I was working on titled *Piece by Piece I Disappear*. For this project I bought stereoscopic slides of families from eBay and altered them by erasing one of the figures from each side of the slide. I was interested in how the developmental theory of object permanence becomes suspended in photography—each time you overlap a family member or friend you erase a piece of them from the photograph. For each image I rebuilt the background and pieces of the figure's missing body so that when the stereoscopic images were viewed through a stereoscope, the invented parts in these portraits became visible through a Venn-diagram-like overlap.

While I was working on this project I became interested in the shape of the holes I was covering up. I began searching for contemporary family portraits in the Creative Commons area of Flickr where I came across images of the Bentley family. I was drawn to their family because their photostream presented a very complete and continuous archive of ten years of their lives and it was generously posted under the Creative Commons copyright that allows for modification and redistribution.

I downloaded the entire archive and with my assistant inventoried and catalogued each of the photographs that contained Erica. We identified 1,141 images of Erica, 942 of which have other people in them. For each of the 942 images we work in Photoshop to erase the other figures from the photograph. We use a variety of tools including the clone stamp, the healing brush, masks, and copy/paste to take pieces from the background and build new pieces to cover the bodies of the figures. Each image presents a new challenge: in some of the images there are patterns in the carpet or wall paper that are difficult to replicate and in other images there is a large number of figures making it difficult to find enough pieces of the background to cover them. We have completed all of the images for the months of June, July, August, September, October, and part of November.



Project Parameters

1

Michael Bentley posted 6,619 photographs to Flickr from June 6, 2006 to December 13, 2014.

2

All of the images were posted under the Creative Commons Attribution license and can be reused and modified.

3

1,141 photographs in this archive include Erica Bentley.

4

To isolate Erica's body we digitally remove all the other people by constructing new backgrounds to cover each person in Photoshop.

5

On June 15th, 2017, eleven years after Michael Bentley posted his first photograph of Erica we began reposting the images to Flickr, Instagram, and Tumblr.

6

Every day for a year we will repost all the images that were posted on that day between 2006 and 2014; for example on October 25th, 2017 we will post photographs that were posted on October 25th in 2007, 2010, and 2011.

7

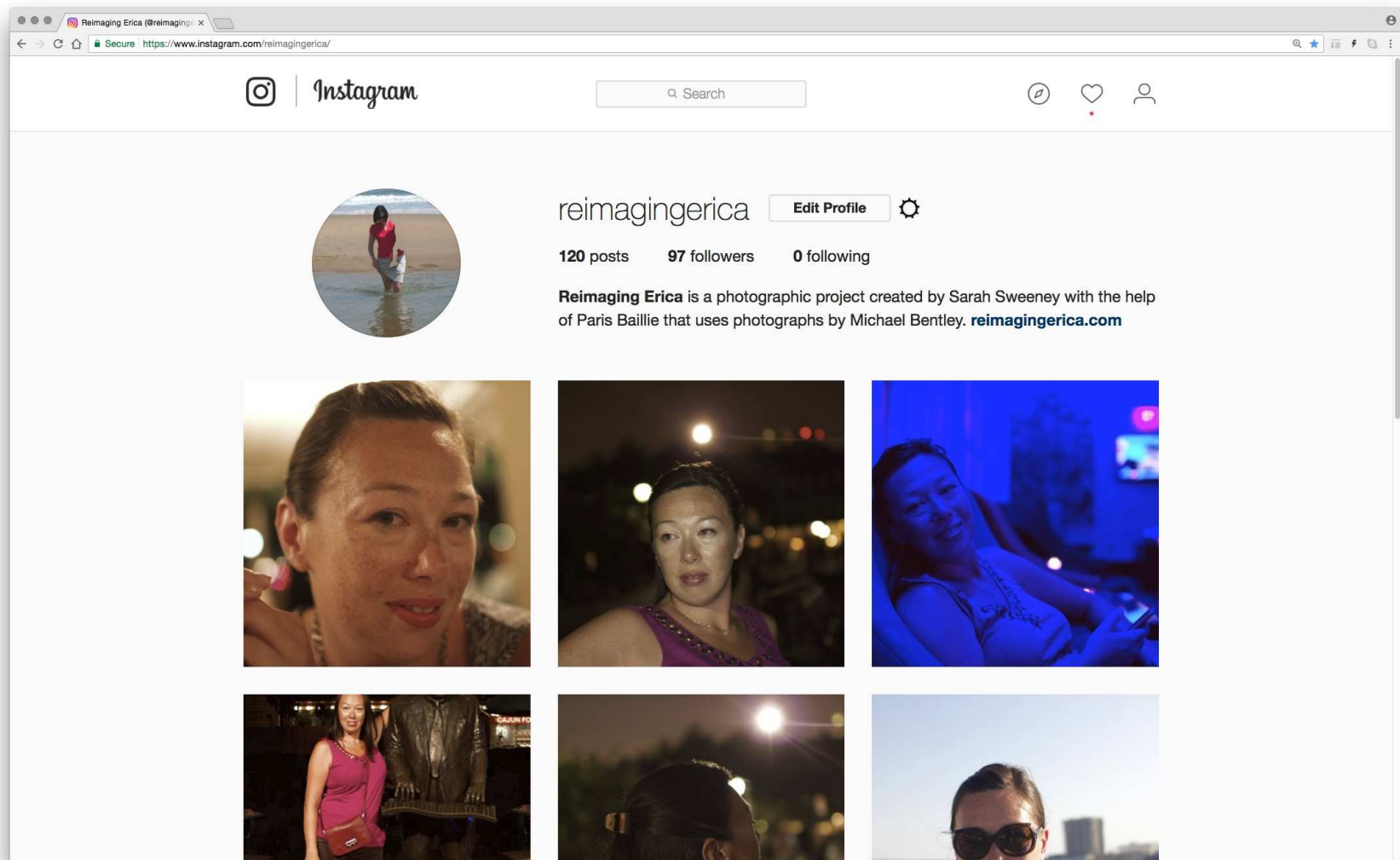
Each image is captioned with the original title, description, and the date it originally appeared.

8

All of the modified images are posted under the Creative Commons Attribution license and can be reused and modified.

9

We do not know Erica Bentley or her family and have not contacted her.



Exhibition

The primary exhibition space for this project is the internet. I have been posting the new images to Instagram, Tumblr, and Flickr daily since June 15th, 2017. There have been almost one hundred followers following the Instagram feed. The photographs from the project will also appear in publications. I am currently making artist books for an artist book fair this September at the Sweeney/Kaye gallery in California. Images from this project will also be published in the new *Accelerate* publication from the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery in October.

I have included selected images in this document from the end of June, July, and the beginning of August and arranged them chronologically by the day they were posted. You can visit the live project at the sites below to view the titles.

www.instagram.com/reimagingnerica
www.flickr.com/photos/reimagingnerica
reimagingnerica.tumblr.com







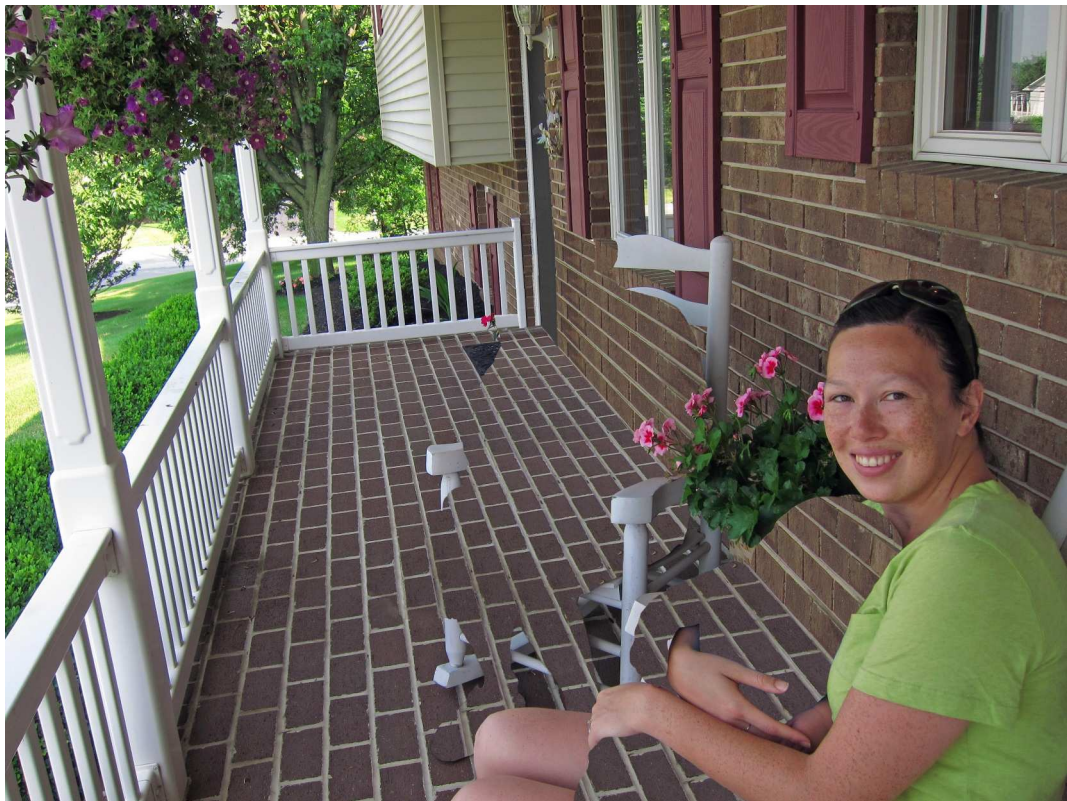


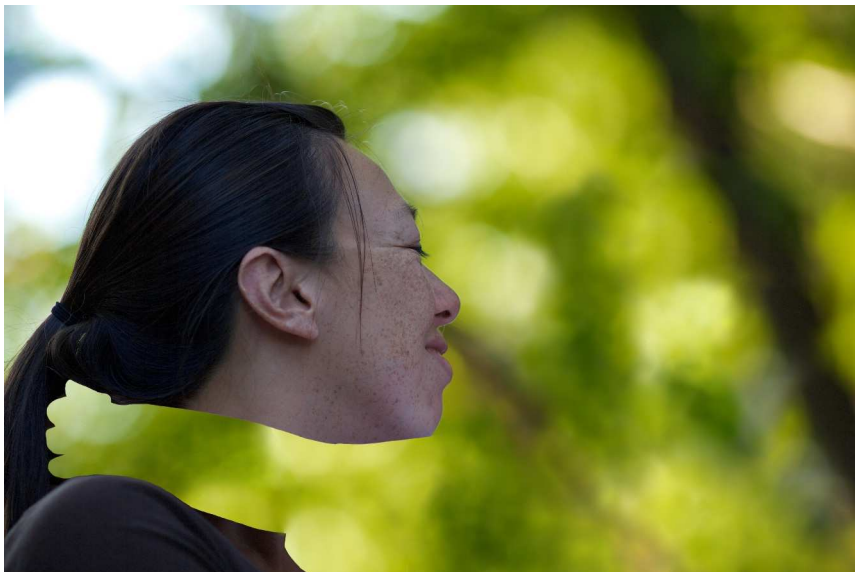
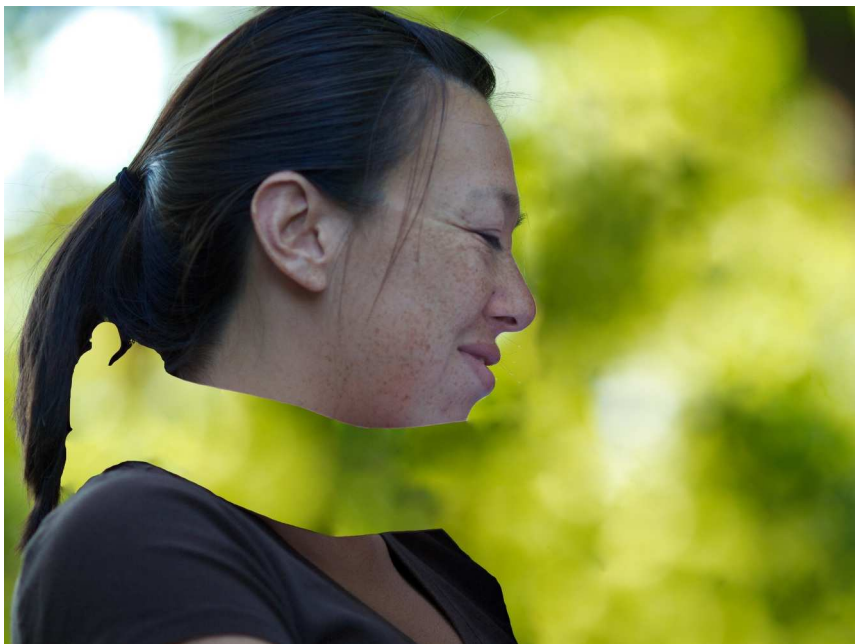




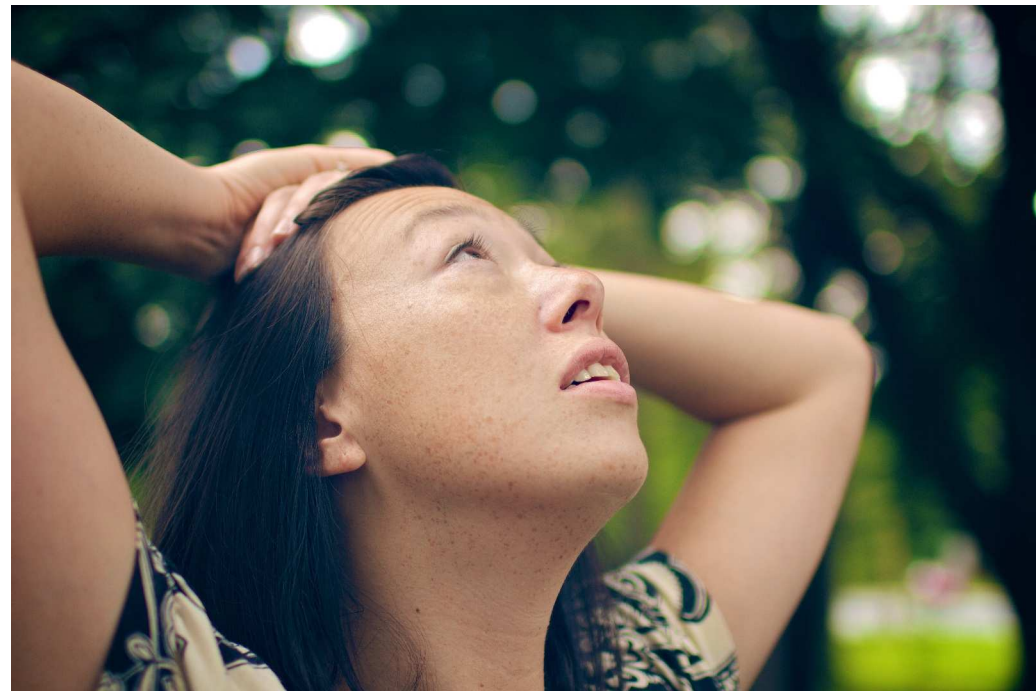


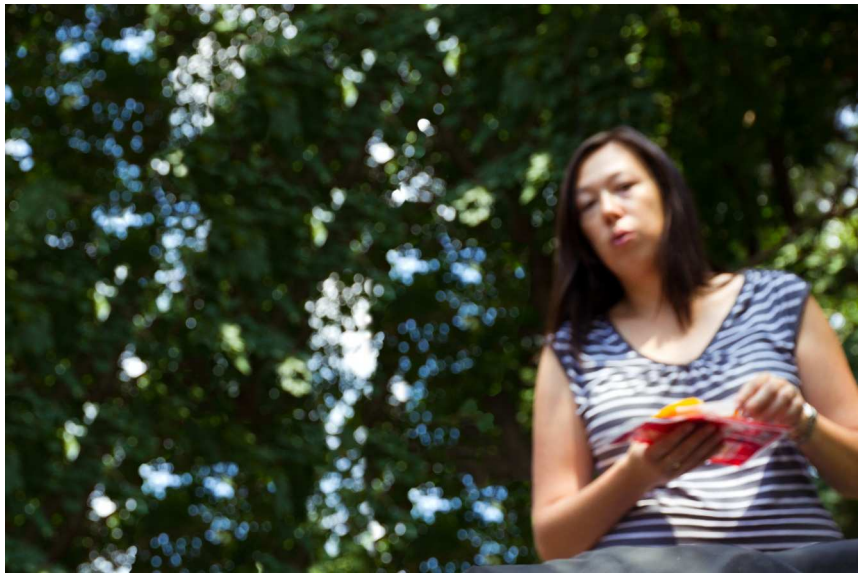
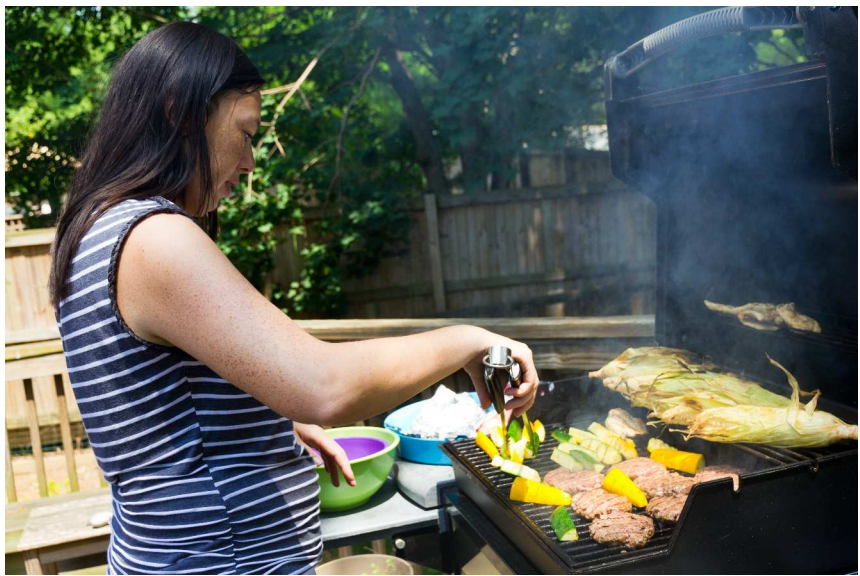




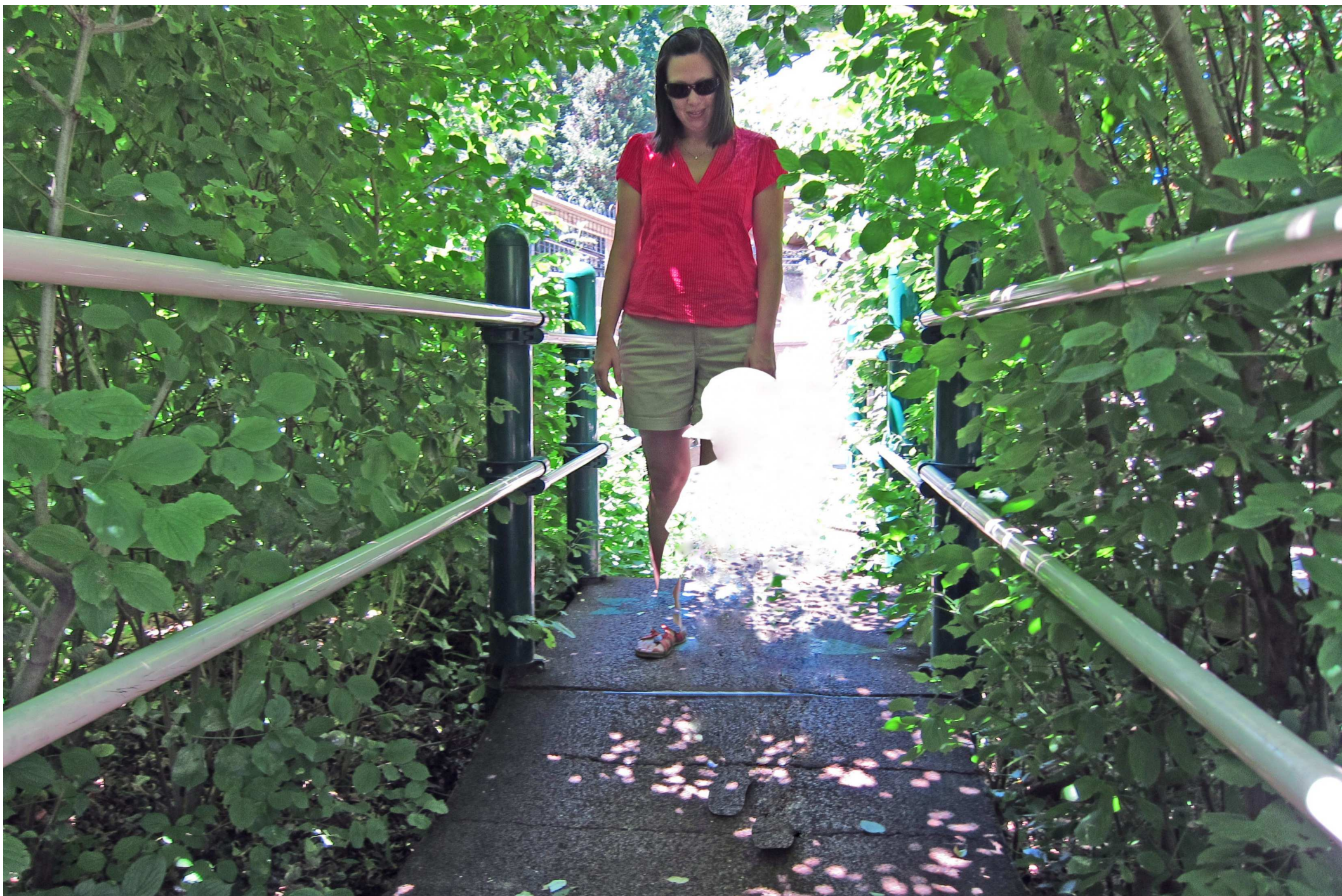


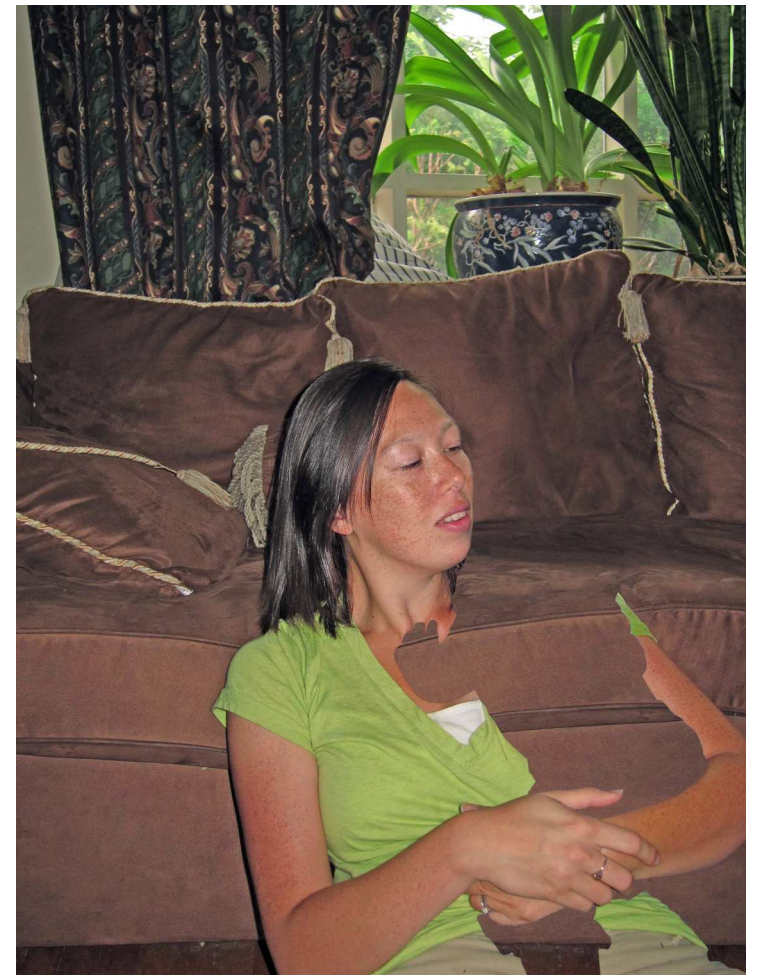








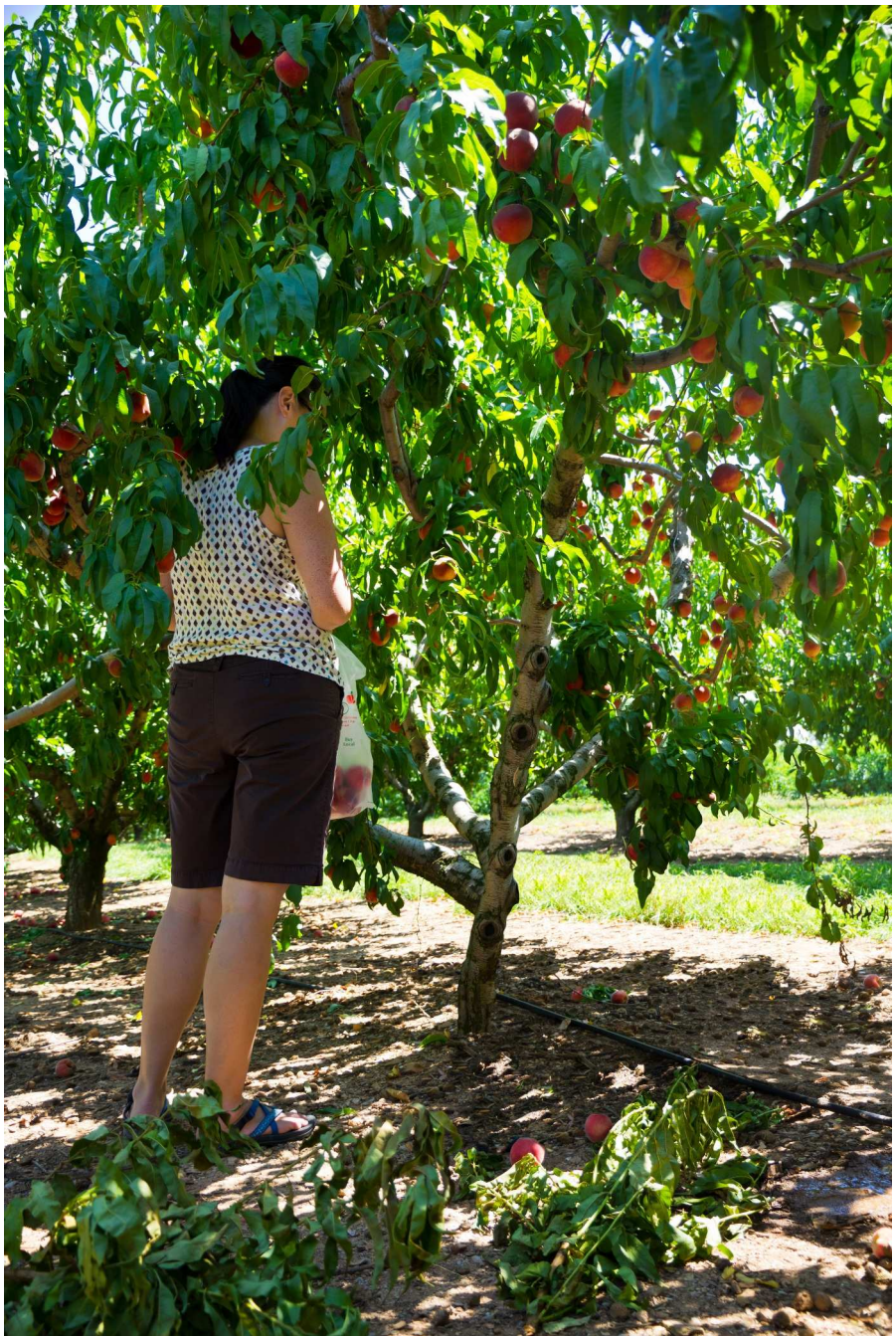
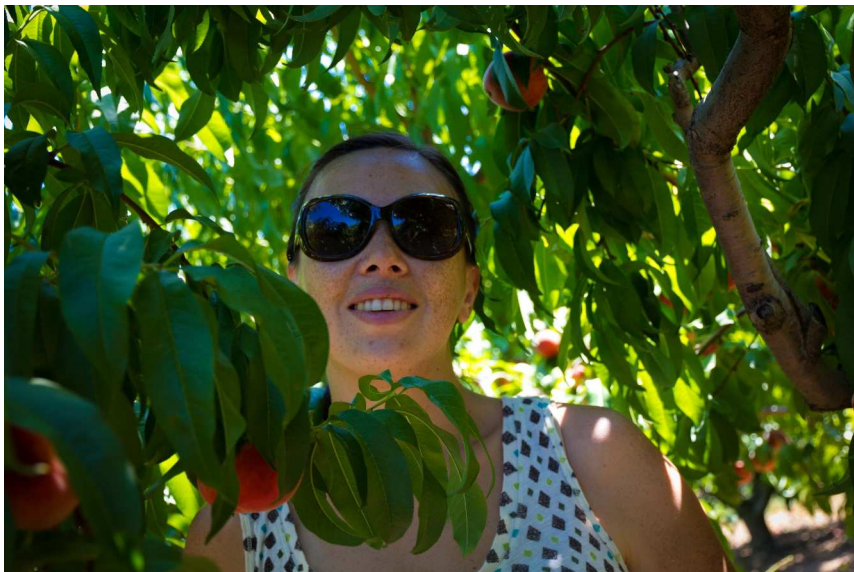


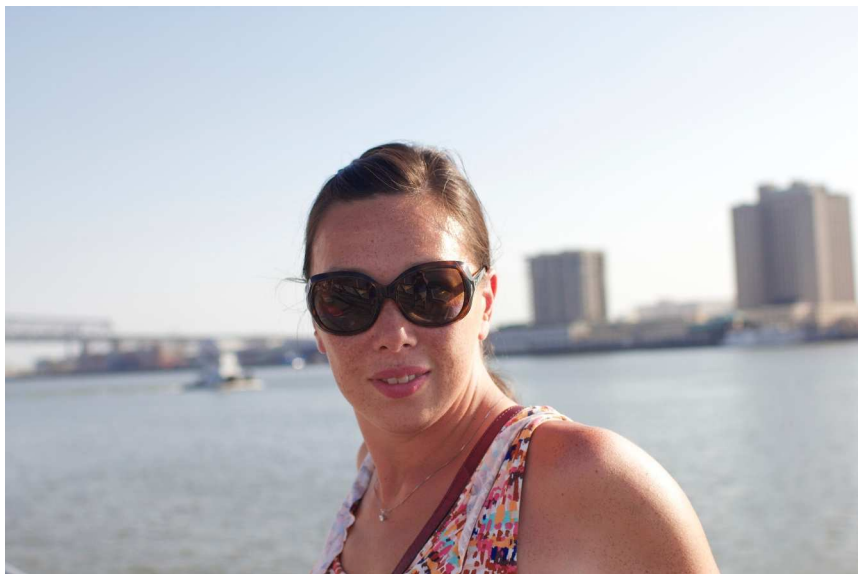


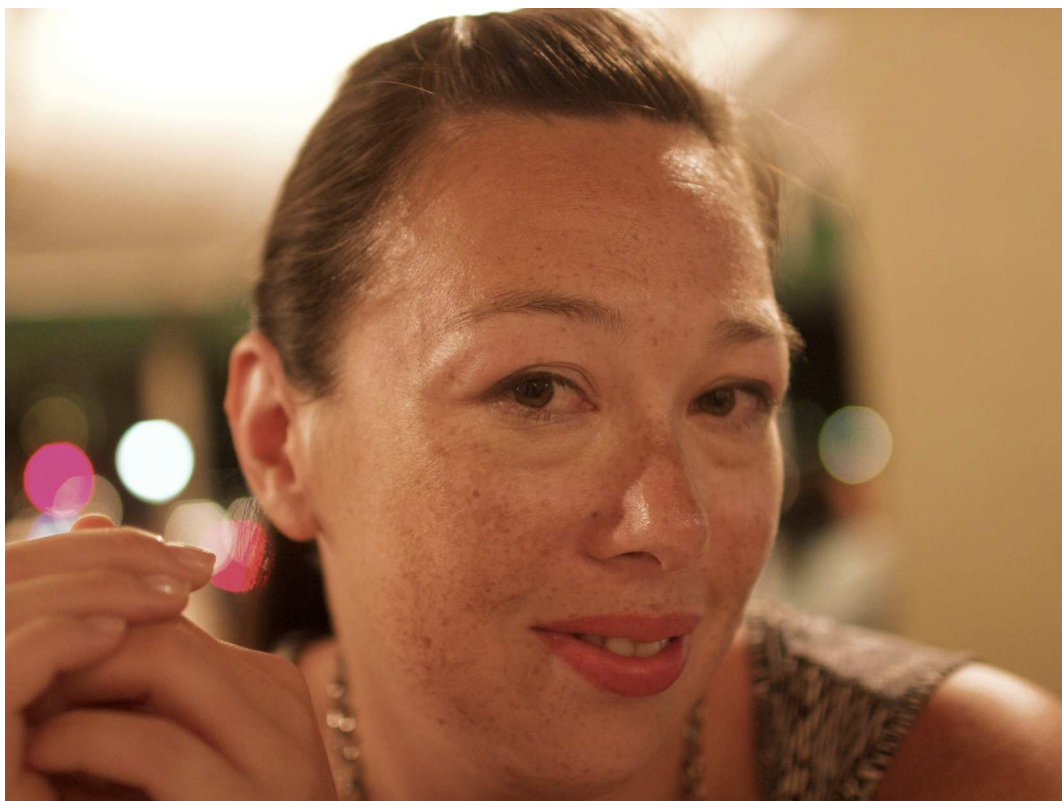












The Cloud Project

2017

Collaborator: Emily Moreton (Skidmore 2018)

I wanted to photograph clouds to find out what I had learned in 40 years about photography. Through clouds to put down my philosophy of life—to show that my photographs were not due to subject matter—not to special trees, or faces or interiors, to special privileges, clouds were there for everyone—no tax as yet on them—free.

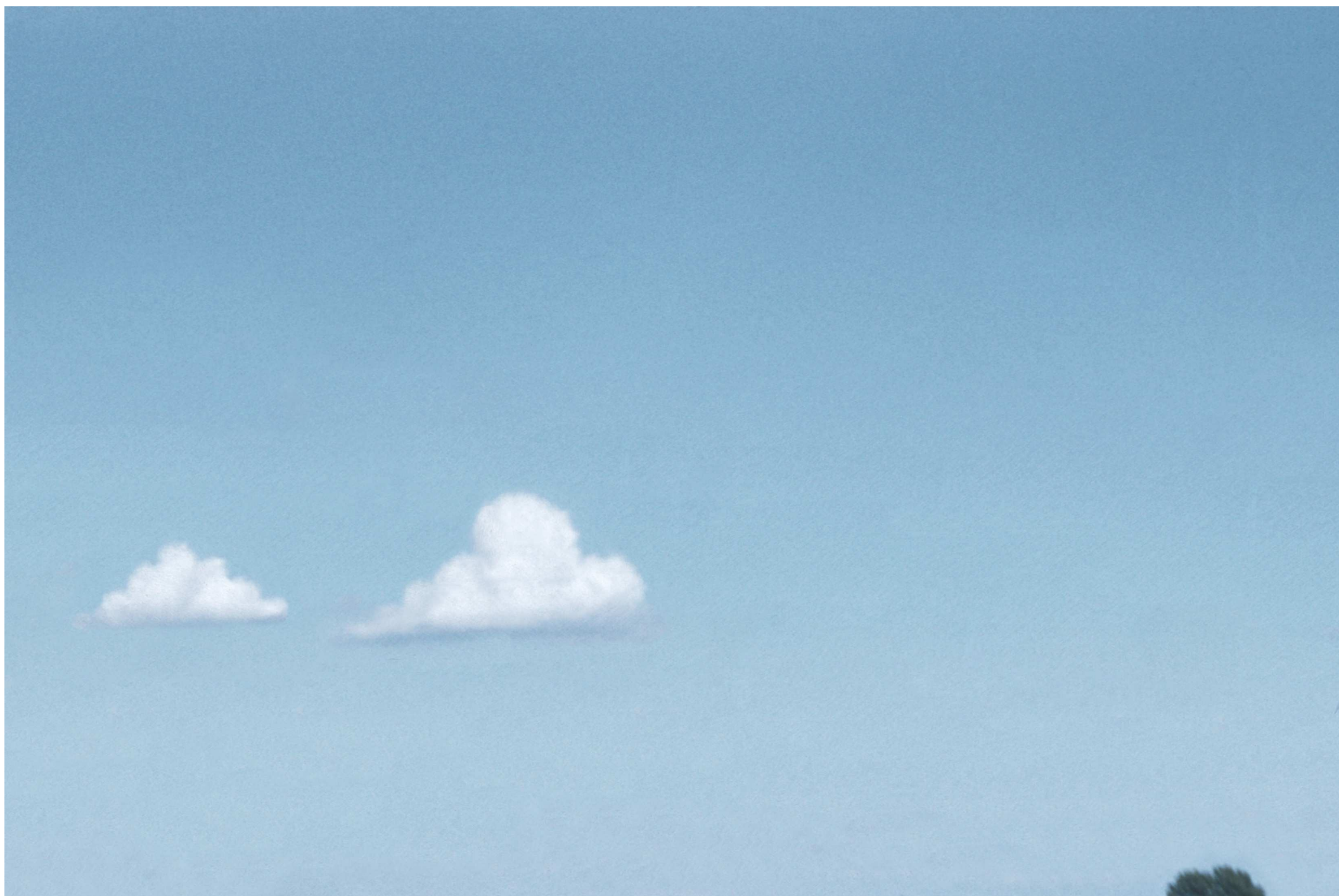
Alfred Stieglitz, “How I Came to Photograph Clouds” (1923)

In *The Cloud Project* we construct clouds that defy the binaries of photography. Each image is part recorded, part imagined, complicating the categories of fact and fiction, reality and fantasy. The photographs are unremarkable on the surface, snapshots of clouds passing in the sky. Yet like the confabulations that exist in our memory, these images are hybrid, comprised of a recorded photograph shaped by a drawing. Each image begins as a sketch of an imagined cloud and a photograph of a cloudy sky, donated by friends, family, and strangers. The clouds are digitally shaped and sculpted until they look like the sketch, creating a kind of false documentation, the photographic evidence of a memory that never actually existed.

At the heart of this project is a simple exchange. There are two sets of creators: the artists—myself and Emily Moreton, a summer research student—and our collaborators, a group of people we have asked to participate in the project. Collaborators give us drawings and photographs that are embedded with information about where they live and how they see. As the artists, we take their information and create an image that is as individual as a fingerprint. From the finished image we print two identical photographs: one is mailed to the collaborator and the other becomes part of *The Cloud Project*. I often imagine the moment when a collaborator opens the brown envelope and sees their image. Is there a deep recognition of themselves in that moment? A sense of awe at the object conjured as if by magic?

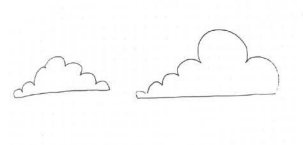
The Cloud Project is an archive of these objects. It expands with each new contribution and has as many authors as images. As a collection it can be read as a visual taxonomy of the clouds we see in our minds. I chose clouds as my subject as an homage to an earlier taxonomy of clouds created by Alfred Stieglitz in 1925. Over nine years Stieglitz captured more than 350 photographs of clouds and grouped them into a project titled *Equivalents*. When I was a child I was mesmerized by *Equivalents* and spent hours looking at each photograph and comparing them to each other. I believe *The Cloud Project* functions in a similar way—meaning is found in the comparisons and juxtapositions of the individually authored images. There are subtle similarities such as the very particular shade of blue that draws some of them together and points to the proximity of their origin. In two images collected from a mother and daughter there is a sameness in their massive lurking clouds that suggests the passing down of a drawing style from one generation to the next. Taken together, the images of *The Cloud Project* constitute an alternate record of the sky: through the simple forms of these clouds, a kaleidoscope of experience and memory emerges, woven together by shared spaces, traditions, and creations.

The following pages document publicity materials for the project and images in the series to date, including collaborators’ sketches and finished photographic images.





The Cloud Project



Draw a cloud, provide your address, and if your cloud is featured in "The Cloud Project" you will be sent a free photographic print. The print, produced by either Emily or Sarah, will depict a digitally constructed photo of your cloud sketch.

Date:

Current Location:

Shipping address:

Whereas, _____ (Assigner), hereby irrevocably transfers and assigns to Sarah Sweeney and her successors and assigns, in perpetuity, all rights (whether now known or hereinafter invented), title, and interest, throughout the world, including any copyrights and renewals or extensions thereto, for cloud drawing and photograph created by _____ (Assigner).

In witness thereof, Assignor has duly executed this Agreement.

(Assigner's Name)

(Date)

(Witness's Name)

(Date)

The Cloud Project

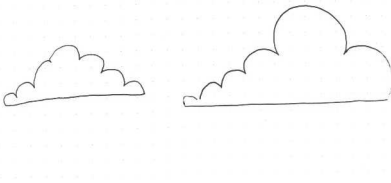
Project by Sarah Sweeney and Emily Moreton

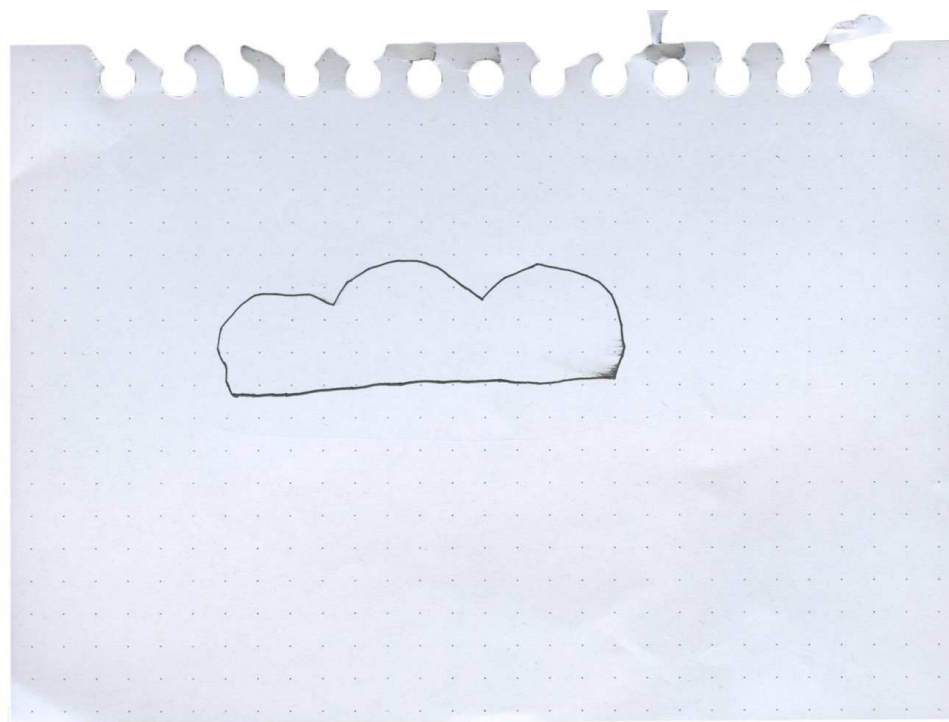
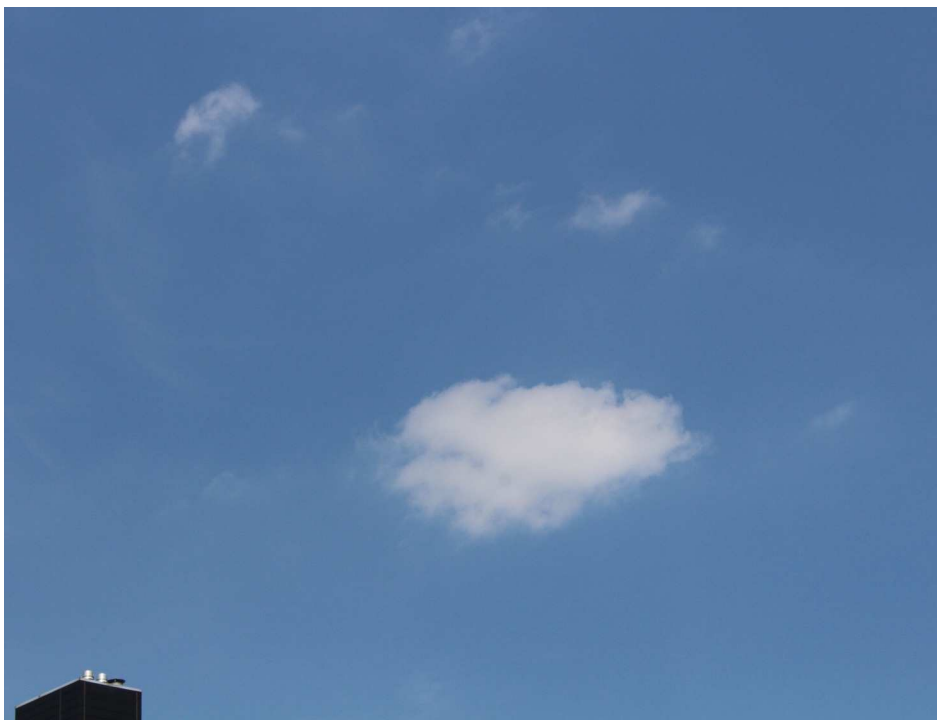


thecloudproject.org / thecloudproject01@gmail.com

Draw a cloud, provide your address, and if your cloud is featured in "The Cloud Project" you will be sent a free photographic print. The print, produced by either Emily or Sarah, will depict a digitally constructed photo of your cloud sketch.

"The Cloud Project" consists of a series of image pairs. The first is drawn from the participant's mental image of a cloud. The second image is a digitally constructed photograph, informed by the hand-drawn cloud sketch. These digitally created clouds are confabulations, memories derived from imagination. Each image presents a false documentation, the photographic evidence of a memory that never actually existed.







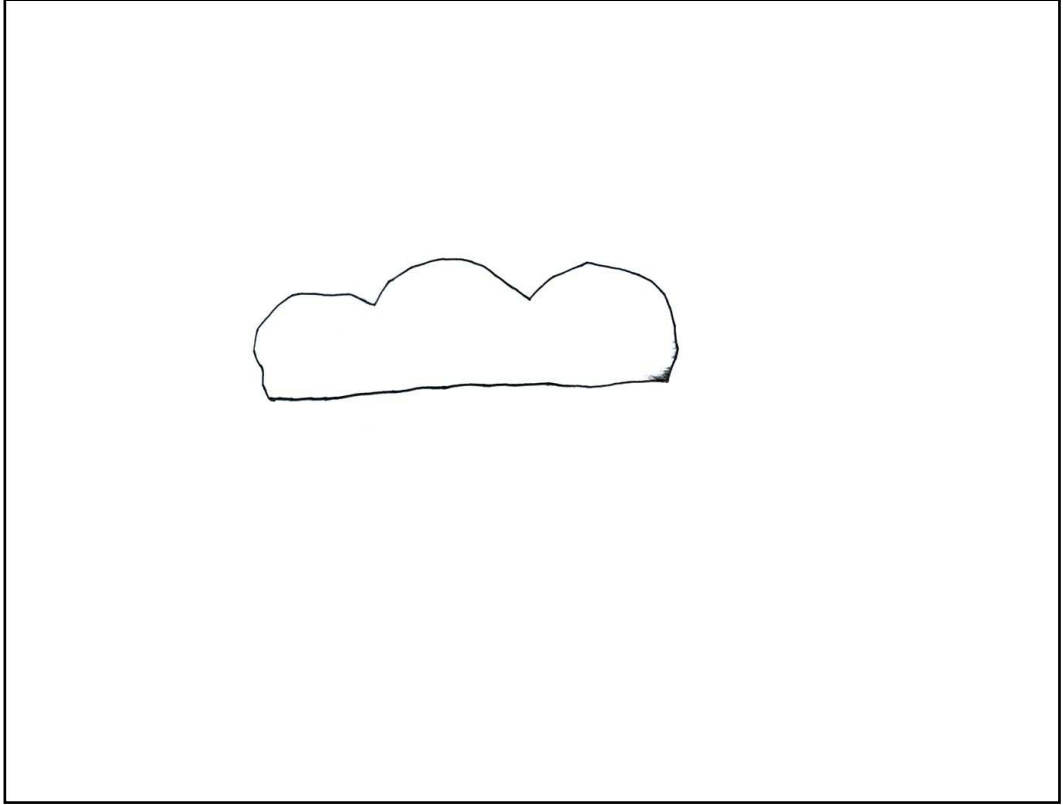
Process

This iteration of the *The Cloud Project* was a Summer Research collaboration with my student Emily Moreton. Emily began by designing the placard, copyright forms, and postcards to give to our collaborators. We thought a lot about how to convey the idea for the project quickly through language and image. The design of the postcard and placard reflected the duality of the project with the sketch on one side and the photograph on the other. We chose the High Line in New York as our first location to find people to contribute to the project. Emily and I set up our placard for *The Cloud Project* and waited until we were approached by curious people passing by. During our afternoon on the High Line we collected photographs and drawings from twelve collaborators.

At Skidmore we scanned the drawings and worked in Photoshop to change the shape of the clouds in the photograph. When each cloud photograph was finished we made a pigment print and mailed it to the collaborator. We have finished six cloud photographs and are working on another fifteen.

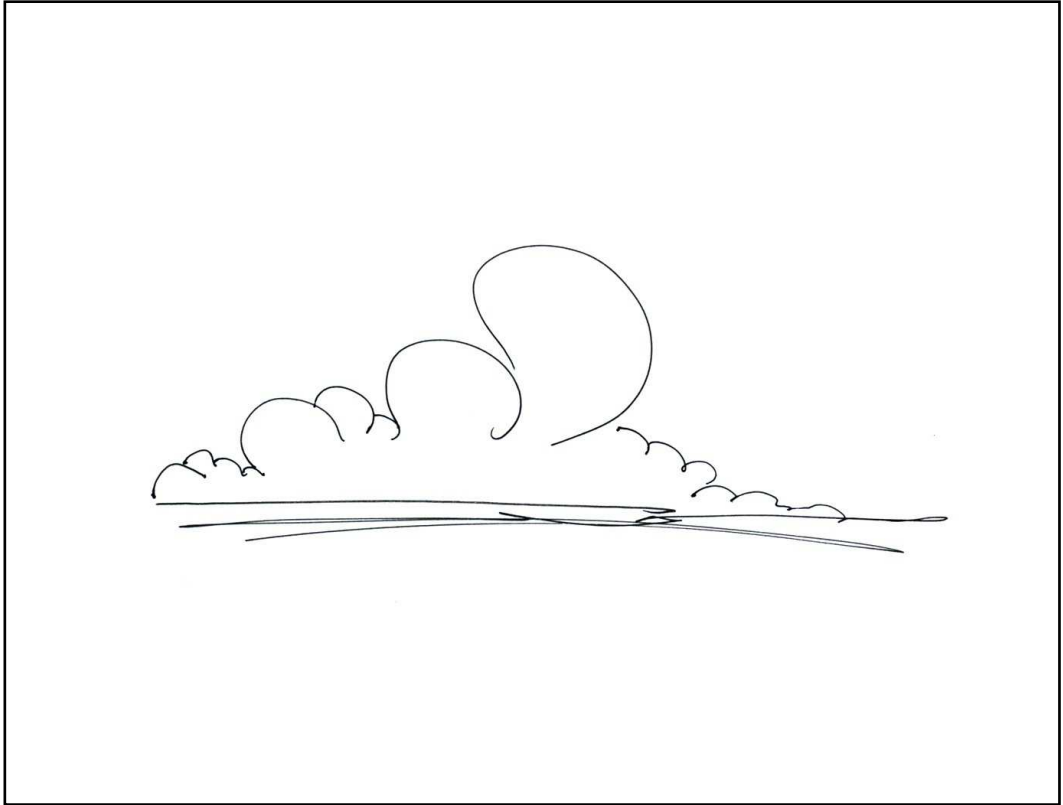
Exhibition

This project started this past summer. It is a currently a work in progress.



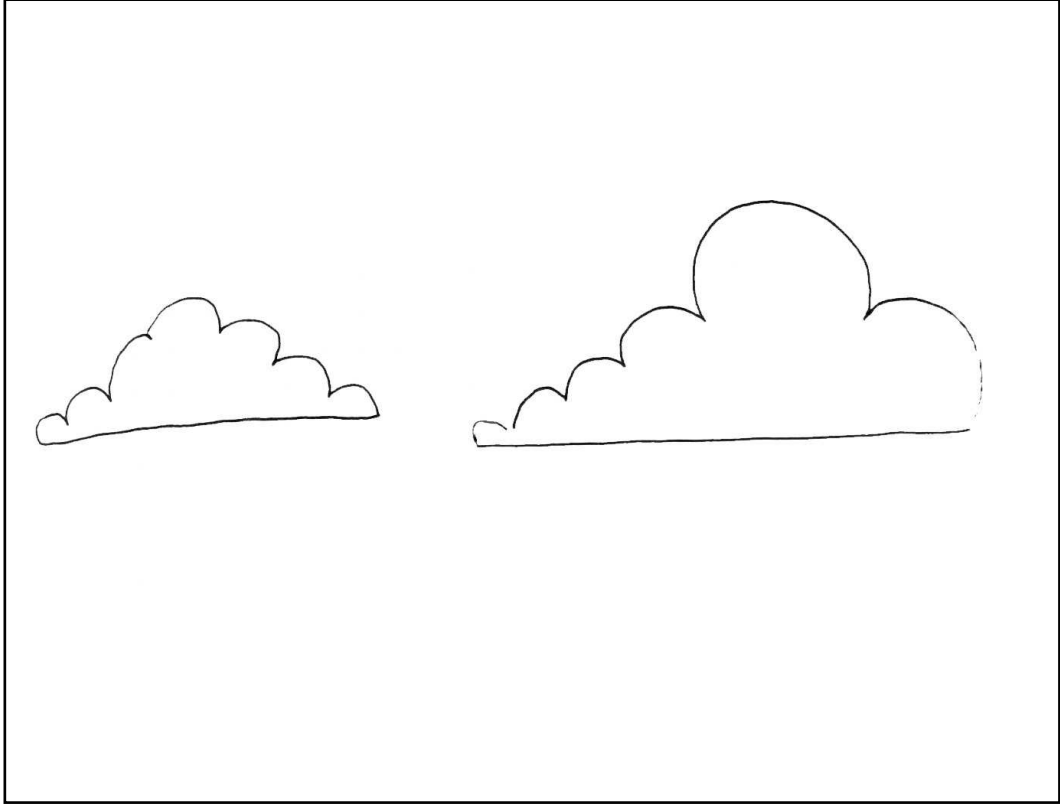


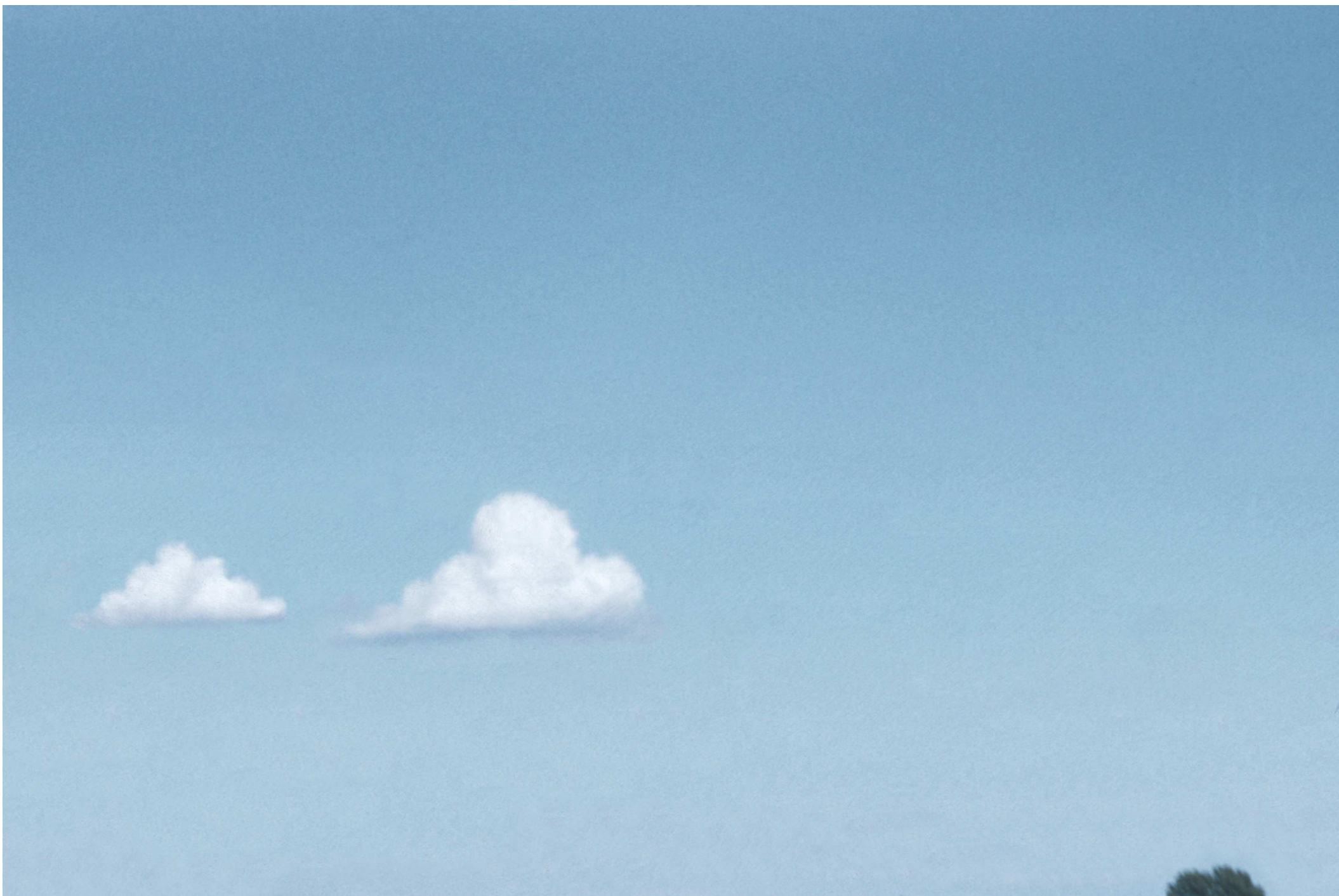
Equivalent (after a drawing by Clara F.), 12" x 18", pigment print, 2017





Equivalent (after a drawing by Lars T.), 12" x 18", pigment print, 2017





Equivalent (after a drawing by Kate S.), 12" x 18", pigment print, 2013