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Found Object: Meaning into Meaning

Wendy Watt

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Art Education

**Presented in partial fulfillment of the Requirements
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ABSTRACT

Found Object: Meaning into Meaning

Wendy Watt

This essay is a narrative about how I, as an artist, negotiated the history of a particular found object, where my art fits in the art historical continuum, and what I learned in the process. The approach that I have taken to examine my visual documentation and narrative is informed by Martin Heidegger. It concludes with a discussion of how the transformation of a found object into an artwork can be seen as a metaphor for the self.

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Introduction

This is a story about a sail; a sail made from canvas, not Dacron or any other strong synthetic mix they use now, a sail from a former generation and way of life. I rescued it from rotting away in my uncle's boathouse precisely because he himself was disintegrating before our eyes, needing in his own words "minders" and "keepers", as if he were a zoo animal. Perhaps that is how he felt. In the classic fashion of minders, one of them secured a place in his mind and started syphoning family valuables off and away. It was painful to watch and impossible to stop, as he, my uncle, assured the RCMP that he had "given" things and money, and that no one was stealing. It is a long story and only tangentially relevant to the sail.

But it was the catalyst for my action. I began rummaging around in semi-abandoned buildings in order to save other things. The garage, house, barn, gardening shed and boathouse that I explored were all originally part of my grandfather's estate. I was rewarded with the discovery of seven ancient wooden gardening boxes, and one old jib. I knew my uncle was likely to give them to me if I asked, and he did.

Thus began my experience with the sail. But I run ahead. Allow me to introduce myself as an artist. My current work is abstract painting and collage, which for the most part consists of works on paper. Lately I have been working with paper-thin family linens, worn out handkerchiefs, dishtowels, sheets. I like to explore the tension between opposing forces that gives a certain balance in my work, both conceptually and actually. We experience fragility and strength in our own physical bodies and in our mental life; transparency and opacity, both visually and in the way we relate to other living beings.

Between conscious and unconscious, Eros and Thanatos, now and then...we are always seeking an equilibrium.

I usually choose materials whose inherent qualities are part of the meaning of the work. For example, I glued very fine Japanese paper to a found wooden pallet. This simple abstract work references the body, with its fragile skin surface and its strong rib structure. The qualities of fragility in paper and strength in wood are part of the meaning of the work in a way that canvas, for a painting, is not.

At the moment I am very taken with the found object. One of the most interesting things about the object for me is its previous history. This is an aspect with which the artist has to deal, because of the inherent nostalgia involved. By nostalgia I mean a desire to return, in thought or in fact, to family, home, friends or a former time in life. There is a spectrum of possibilities for action: from hardly transforming the object, to completely obliterating it.

My research on the inherent meaning in the found object was rewarded by the discovery of Jean Baudrillard (1968/1990). He has deconstructed the vast locus of psychological angst in the way we perceive what he calls the bygone object. He writes:

the bygone object, however, is purely mythological in its reference to the past. It no longer has any practical importance, but exists solely in order to signify.... The time of the mythological object is the perfect tense: it is that which occurs in the present as having previously occurred, and which by this very fact is based on an 'authentic' self. The bygone object is always, in the full sense of the term, a 'family portrait. (p. 35)

Baudrillard goes on to give a rich and complex psychoanalytic explanation of why the bygone object might resonate at a deeper level. As I am not using a psychoanalytic framework in this essay, I want to emphasize that what I am informed by is the idea that the bygone object exists in the present solely to refer to the past.

I decided to research on two fronts. On one front, I documented my daily studio work with my sail so as to better understand my own practice. On the other front I researched the history of the found object in art, and about the different approaches artists have taken to solve the numerous problems that exist, so as to better understand the precedents in Western, twentieth-century art practice. This essay is a narrative about how I, as an artist, negotiated the particular history of a found object, where my work fits into the art historical continuum, and what I learned in the process.

The Question

The question of how I used the found object is bound up in the many different ways artists have used it before me. I have already introduced you to my choice: the old canvas sail discovered in my uncle's boat house in Martin's Point, Nova Scotia. I have to say that I really loved the material, physical qualities of the sail, the rope carefully sewn onto the leech of the sail, the grommets to take the sheets, the clips to attach it to the forestay, the little painted wooden boom on the foot, the angles of all the seams, the feel of real cotton canvas.

Before I started to work, I asked myself so many questions. What is the connection to the fact that canvas is the traditional support used for painting? Is the reason I like the sail for its formal considerations, or is there only sentimentality for a

family sail? Was it really my grandfather's? Is the bygone aspect more a respect for the past and sailing traditions of Nova Scotia than my own particular family?

After I found it, I immediately cut the sail into five very considered pieces. What was the meaning of fragmenting something? Before I went any further than my first intervention, I wanted to back up and remember all the thoughts I had before starting to cut the sail, (that was quite a big thing to do) and how I thought about it afterwards. I wanted to understand and be much more consciously aware of the beliefs that informed my intuitions. Which thread in the history of art was I really following? Were there a number of like decisions that happen with the found object, no matter if you are a folk artist, a Dadaist, a Pop artist? To start to answer all those questions I researched the work of other artists.

Relevant Literature

The first artist that I considered was Louise Nevelson. She is an important artist to consider because of her approach to her scavenged materials. Nevelson took discarded wooden fragments and parts from buildings, foraged from streets and docks, and incorporated them into architectural reliefs. She titled her art works with words such as "wall", "tower", "cathedral", and "landscape". Nevelson worked to divest familiar objects from their original use. She insisted that the units she used to make her assemblages were "virginal" before she started to work with them. She painted them all the same colour -black, white or gold- and considered their formal qualities and relationship within an entire kinetic surface. Martin Friedman (1973) says that, because her pieces contain neither personal symbols nor specific meaning, "her art is about the

distillation of experience, not description” (p. 11). Her found objects are things that people have made and used, which she transforms into an abstract language for creating sculpture.

Arnold Glimcher (1972) traces Nevelson’s thinking back to Kurt Schwitters: “those qualities that Schwitters loved--traces of human use and forgotten craftsmanship” (p. 115). Glimcher includes a quote from Schwitters, which intrigued me because it shows that Schwitters differs from Nevelson in two ways. The first is the material impermanence of the object, (a tramway ticket as opposed to a wooden baluster, for example) and the second is his love of its history, which she disliked and erased as much as possible. Here is the Schwitters quote:

I did not understand why one could not use in a picture, in the same way one uses colours made in a factory, materials such as old tramway and bus tickets, washed up pieces of wood from the seashore, cloakroom numbers, bits of string, segments of bicycle wheels, in a few words, the whole bric-a-brac to be found lying around in a lumber room or on the top of a dustbin. From any standpoint, it involves a social attitude, and, on the artistic level, a personal pleasure. (p. 110)

Marjorie Perloff (1986) points out that there was a Futurist/Dada thrust to obliterate the distinction between the pictorial field and the real world outside the frame, and that Schwitters was very much part of that way of thinking. For him, using the found object was a way to achieve this objective. Schwitters did not only make collages, he made whole environments, for instance the well-known Merzbau, which might be described as a huge abstract grotto. Merzbau was an architectural construction within his

house in Hanover, Germany. It had many holes where he placed personal things belonging to different individuals.

Perloff quotes Hans Richter: “There was a Mondrian hole, and there were Arp, Gabo, Doesberg, Lissitsky, Malevich, Mies van der Rohe and Richter holes” (p. 79). Apparently it changed constantly. Schwitters did not work to transform his found objects themselves, rather they were incorporated into a much larger whole, and the object referred to a certain individual (usually one of his friends), or to his daily living in general. Basically he used the found object as a trace of human existence. Richard Humphreys (1985) points out that some things Schwitters did were quite macabre: “a bottle of Schwitters’ urine, for example, in which flowers floated, being the object of devotion in one grotto” (p. 19).

Next I wanted to look at collage, a quite different use of the found object. I chose Picasso, one of the first artists to experiment with collage in 1912. Much has been written about his early collages and about how the fragments of newspaper functioned. However, I found two very concise quotes in Perloff (1986). In the first, Picasso himself says very simply: “The sheet of newspaper was never used in order to make a newspaper. It was used to become a bottle or something like that. It was never used literally but always as an element displaced from its habitual meaning into another meaning” (p. 69).

In the second quotation, Louis Aragon states in another equally succinct way, “La notion de collage est l’introduction [dans la peinture] d’un objet, d’une matière, prise dans le monde réel et par quoi le tableau, c’est à dire le monde imité, se trouve tout entier remise en question” (p. 47).

While Picasso has had many periods and many ideas, I am isolating his early collages, and his use of meaning to demonstrate the double reading of the fragment: in relation to its origin and in relation to its new whole. Perloff explains Picasso's work, *Still Life with Violin and Fruit*:

In Picasso's collage, the image is constantly being read as something else: the "URNAL" of "[J]OURNAL" suggests URINAL, the violin shape looks like a female torso, the wine glass embedded in the newsprint is also a man reading a newspaper. Transformation is central to the process. (p. 66)

The object transforms its new environment at the same time as that environment also transforms it: a mutual transformation. The object takes on a new meaning, but retains its old history. The viewer can go to and fro, between former and current meanings. Picasso used the found object as displaced meaning.

In my search for artists' uses of the bygone object, I wandered back and forth across the twentieth century. The next artist I considered was Joseph Cornell, whose work is described by John Ashbery (1967/2002) as having a surreal quality:

For Cornell's boxes embody the substance of dreams so powerfully that it seems these eminently palpable bits of wood, cloth, glass and metal must vanish the next moment, as when the atmosphere of a dream becomes so intensely realistic that you know you are about to wake up. (p. 254)

I love the idea of a narrative that is not dictated, but is wide open, dreamy, and very much about the personal associations of the viewer. Dreams and poetry are never logical but have great emotional power.

Dawn Ades' (1980) essay, published in conjunction with the exhibition of Joseph Cornell at MOMA, speaks of how his early works were made in the context of Surrealism, but that this relationship was always ambiguous. Ades argues that "Cornell works with whole objects and the object remains emphatically itself, not metamorphosed like certain Surrealist objects" (p. 26). She comments on how it was the margin of poetry that surrounds ordinary objects that interested Cornell, much more than irrationality, psychoanalytic theory or the theoretical aims of Surrealism. It seems to me that Cornell understood the aura, i.e. the potential locus of multiple meanings, that certain objects hold. Basically Cornell used his found objects as poetic dream elements. Diane Waldman (1977) sums up how she feels that his work functions: "Cornell's major innovation was to combine the associative urgency of the estranged object with the impacting formal power of the box" (p. 14). Apparently one artist to whom Cornell felt indebted was Marcel Duchamp, with whom he spent a lot of time in New York during the war.

I moved on to Marcel Duchamp, not for his boites-en-valise, (a natural follow-up from talking about boxes), but because of his ready-mades. The ready-made is such a unique and conceptual use of the found object that I had to explore it. Octavio Paz (1970/2002) explains:

The "ready-made" doesn't postulate a new set of values: it is a spanner [U.S., monkey-wrench] in the works of what we call "valuable." It is active criticism: a contemptuous dismissal of the work of art seated on its pedestal of adjectives. The critical action unfolds in two stages. The first serves the purpose of hygiene,

an intellectual cleanliness: the “ready-made” is a criticism of taste; the second is an attack on the notion of a work of art. (p. 84)

This is a really important thing to understand. A ready-made was not picked for its attractiveness to the artist and left untransformed, as an aesthetic choice. Edward Lucie-Smith (1984) quotes from a letter Marcel Duchamp wrote to Hans Richter in 1962:

This Neo-Dada, which they call New Realism, Pop Art, Assemblage, etc., is the easy way out and lives on what Dada did. When I discovered ready-mades I thought to discourage aesthetics. In Neo-Dada they have taken my ready-mades and found aesthetic beauty in them. I threw the bottle -rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty. (p. 11)

Lucie-Smith also quotes Raoul Hausmann, one of the original Dadaists: “Dada fell like a raindrop from Heaven. The Neo-Dadaists have learned to imitate the fall, but not the raindrop” (p. 11). His analysis is that whereas Dada challenged an existing aesthetic and social order, post war artists took the challenge and made it into an order. It became something else.

At this point I understood that an artist who uses a manufactured object and presents it, with no transformation except the place in which it is contextualized, as an artwork, has not achieved a “ready-made.” A ready-made was more a critique of art, a challenge to art, rather than a piece of art.

From the radical ready-made, I needed to research an artist who exhibits one object, whole and untransformed, and yet it is not in any sense a ready-made. I chose Betty Goodwin and her Baches series. Here, she scarcely changed her found object, yet

managed to enhance the presence of the object to a profound degree. Goodwin saw the possibilities in a number of huge worn tarpaulins which had been used to cover big truckloads. She collected several and made a series of nine works from 1974 to 1976. These tarpaulins are an excellent example of keeping the object almost completely untouched. She never cut them and hardly changed them. Her two interventions were to fold the tarp over a pole, so that it had certain proportions, and to lightly go over the presented surface with a certain colour: (black, red, white, gray.) In *Bache #6*, only conte crayon was used and the colour almost looks like graphite. The approach is similar in all the tarpaulins. The tarps are folded in on themselves, each having its own individual proportions, then coloured. Alain Parent (1976) points out that the treatment of the surface by the colour tends to accentuate the frontality, hence the opacity of the canvas, but that all the marks, reparations and stitching are somehow emphasized as well, which speaks to their transparency. Parent, who was “directeur des expositions” in 1976 when the Musée d’Art Contemporain in Montreal showed all nine pieces, speaks of how things secret (opaque) and revelatory (transparent) are part of the spiritual connotations of the work. Although he feels that such enigmatic symbols come from the individual depth of a person, here the personal myth has become a universal projection and meditation. These works are immense, and Goodwin seems to have really understood the mystery of these particular objects, and how to evoke it. She heightened the presence of the found object.

At the other end of the spectrum is the painter Richard Diebenkorn. With his cigar boxes, (which are part of his *Ocean Park* series), he has almost completely obliterated his found object. Richard Diebenkorn does not change the way he paints when he uses cigar

box lids as support. Rather he chooses the cigar boxes because of their rich potential as ground on which to experiment and overpaint the way he does. Critics confirm this view. George Neubert (1986), in his preface to a publication on all thirteen cigar box lids, writes, “As in the larger paintings the signs of reworking the painted surface, pentimento, remain. Here, the wood, paper, embossed labels and the gold leaf, show from beneath the paint, balancing formal elements and giving light” (n. p.). Robert Hughes (1997), in a review of Diebenkorn’s retrospective at the Whitney, talks of his way of working:

In the *Ocean Parks*, with their pentimenti and layering left exposed to view, one sees the summation of Diebenkorn’s admiration for Matisse’s way of leaving the picture with traces of its own making. This reworking leaves an impression of curiosity, not indecision. (p. 86)

For me this is a very astute observation. The cigar box lids are paintings before they are “found objects”. The found object is wholly integrated as painting surface without being entirely subsumed.

I want to include two other artists who are currently working, in order to examine very recent examples of the bygone object being used. The first is Atom Egoyan, better known as a filmmaker, but who is also an artist in residence at the Musee d’Art Contemporain. He created an installation about memory there in 2002. He used old reel-to-reel tape recorders he found in people’s attics and basements, and these objects became the locus for memories, both real and recorded. He filmed people touching their old, out dated machines as he interviewed them. The interesting thing for me was the flood of recollections that came from touching this discarded, forgotten machine. Touching seemed far more poignant for the participants than hearing the old recordings

themselves. From my own experience of the installation and reading the catalogue, I saw that Egoyan explored several concerns: the gap between our natural process of memory and the recorded one; the connection between personal and collective memory; the gesture of love for an outdated machine, an obsolete technology. This out-of-use tape machine is not displayed at home as a sign of a former time, etched and worn by use, and beautiful because of aging. Rather, it is abandoned, hidden away in attics. Egoyan showed the power that exists in these rediscovered objects, particularly through touch, because you had to touch them to use them. He used the bygone object as a physical link to memory and nostalgia.

Another artist working today is Chakaia Booker, an African-American New Yorker who uses all sorts of discarded tires to make her sculptures. In an article by Lilly Wei (2002), Booker says that she has used many different discarded materials from the streets and refuse dumps, but at the moment she is working with rubber tires. Wei talks about the political implications of her choice:

For Booker, tires are materials and metaphors, satisfying esthetic, political and economic concerns (she often gets them from bicycle repair shops for no cost). She likens the varying pigments of the tires---blue-black, deep gray and brown, sometimes stamped with red or blue--as well as the textures--to the range of African American skin tones. The tread patterns suggest to her scarification and African face and body painting. Reversing the tires' designation as refuse, she finds symbolic significance in their toughness, linking to the will to survive of the Africans of the diaspora. (p. 88)

Her work is abstract and huge in scale, yet it contains her experience of personal and collective will. Her found object can be read as a politically charged symbol.

I want to summarize the research on these nine artists. The object was used as political symbol (Booker), as poetic dream elements (Cornell), as painting surface (Diebenkorn), as critique of art (Duchamp), as link to memory (Egoyan), as heightened presence (Goodwin), as abstract language (Nevelson), as displaced meaning (Picasso), and as trace of human existence (Schwitters). How artists use found objects and why they choose them is intimately and necessarily bound up with what type of artist they are, what type of work they do, and/or what is going on in the artistic world around them.

Booker is creating art at a time when identity politics and issues of gender, race and class are uppermost for certain women artists, especially those from cultures who oppress women, or who come from a minority which is oppressed, or both. Barbara Pollack (2001), in an article in *Art News*, talks about six women artists who exhibit in New York and globally, who tackle such issues: Neshat from Iran, Sikander from Pakistan, Amer from Egypt, Sooja from Korea, Arahmaiani from Indonesia, and Searle from South Africa. Their work is very different, but their concerns are the same. There is the history of African American women artists in the U.S. as well. (e.g. Carrie Mae Weems, Faith Ringgold, Lorna Simpson, Betye Saar). It would be strange if Booker's object were not politically charged.

Cornell started making his boxes when he first came in contact with Surrealist work in New York City. It seems that he was fascinated with this art, where, as Lucie-Smith explains, "the artist's contribution was to be found more in making the links between objects, putting them together, than in making objects *ab initio*" (p.119). Collage

had extended into assemblage. Cornell became an artist who worked in this way and was part of the current art scene. He was in an important exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1961 titled "The Art of Assemblage". The Art Book (1996) includes a quote of Cornell speaking about his own work, "Shadow boxes become poetic theatres or settings wherein are metamorphosed the elements of a childhood pastime" (p. 107).

Diebenkorn was first and foremost a painter. Robert Hughes (1997) states, "Nobody who cares about painting as art--as distinct from propaganda, complaint or 'cutting edge' ephemera--could be indifferent to Diebenkorn's work or to the long, intense and fascinating dialogue with the modernist past it embodies." (p. 85). It is therefore no surprise that the one time he used a found object it was incorporated into a painting surface and nearly obliterated. It was really not an act of being under the sway of the object itself, but the chance of an interesting support to experiment on.

Duchamp, Picasso and Schwitters worked during an era noted for its experimentation and change. This includes things in the art world, (with all the different movements in Europe at the turn of the century), and also in the real world (e.g. World War 1). Picasso was an artist who continually experimented with different approaches. Billy Kluver (2000) describes many artists as being influenced by the "rare disorder" in Picasso's studio in Montparnasse in 1916.

The floor is covered with paper cut out in patterns which he glues to his canvasses--because Picasso also uses old newspapers, wrapping paper, cinema tickets, which he glues on the paintings where it suits him. At every step I trample on palettes, used-up color tubes, brushes. (p. 46)

Hans Richter (1969/2002) reminisces that Duchamp invented Dada in the U.S.A. in 1915. Duchamp's idea was “Non-Art” as opposed to the “Anti-Art” of the Berlin Dadaists.

(p.148). Harriet and Sidney Janis (1945/2002) speak about Duchamp and Dada:

Whether or not dada had been formulated into an organized program, Duchamp would undoubtedly have gone his way just as he has done. Anti-artisan and anti-artist, he is anarchic in the true sense, in revolt even against himself. He says, “I have forced myself to contradict myself in order to avoid conforming to my own taste.” Like the German, Kurt Schwitters, he may be regarded as a natural dada personality. (p. 31)

It seems that all three men had huge personal presence and influence. They were all trying to change the way people thought about art and the way art was made, whether through Cubism, or different branches of Dada.

Nevelson and Goodwin both created large abstract work with the found object at a time when large abstract painting was a strong co-existent trend. In the already cited catalogue of Betty Goodwin’s show (1976) it was suggested that the monochromatic frontality of her tarpaulins was similar in spirit to current colorfield painting. Nevelson’s use of the object was part of what Lucie-Smith (1984) calls the new sculpture, which emphasized relationship over form. The fact that she has abstracted her object from its history, the fact that her sculptures are reliefs (you do not walk around them; you experience them frontally as one does a painting) and the fact that they are monochromatic, also points to an affinity with the abstract painting being produced in America at that time.

Egoyan, in his installation *Hors d'Usage* explored our relationship with an obsolete technology. Today's art world champions art made with new technologies, and Egoyan has tapped into that obsession with a timely backward glance.

All these artists can be situated in the current art trends of their time, some of them at the very forefront. Yet each used the found object in a very unique way. Hans Hofmann (1951/1968) in observations on creativity, says this very thing:

Everyone should be as different as possible. There is nothing that is common to all of us except the creative urge. It [abstract art] means one thing to me: to discover myself as well as I can. But every one of us has the urge to be creative in relation to our time--the time to which we belong maybe the only thing we have in common. (p. 564)

For me the choosing of an object is very intuitive. Meaning that exists is implicit and potential, and not necessarily rationally understood. It is through working it out that possibilities become explicit and real. How I document the working out, my process, is in the following section.

Process

My procedure was to have a set time in the studio everyday, five days a week. My proposal was to keep a narrative journal and visual document of my process. Before I began, I stated that the minimum will be one hour the maximum four hours; that before I begin work, I will write down all my thoughts about what I want to do, what my approach will be, allowing between five or ten minutes; that at the end of the day's session, I will document what I have accomplished with a Polaroid; that finally I will

reflect on the day and write up the experience for about five to ten minutes. This plan was to continue until the work was finished. The schedule was to yield three sets of data: how problems are approached, worked through, and reflected upon.

What happened in practice? Well, I do have three sets of data. But I am not a word person, so what I ended up with is fairly terse and technical. I finished with four days of work per week, for eight weeks, and no idea of exactly how much time was spent per day, but it was well over the minimum. The whole thing was quite a struggle and some days I said I would do one thing, and then not follow through, i.e. I would subvert my own intention. That was because I was having so much trouble transforming my found object. Let me continue with my story of the sail, and give you my narrative of the process.

I was excited to begin the artwork. It was summer in Nova Scotia and the five pieces beckoned. I laid them out on the deck. I want to reiterate that right after I found the sail, I laid it on the same deck in front of my cabin and considered what to do. To work on the piece as a whole sail would be difficult. It would always be just a sail, and so I deliberately cut it into five pieces. Then it sat for at least a year. Maybe two.

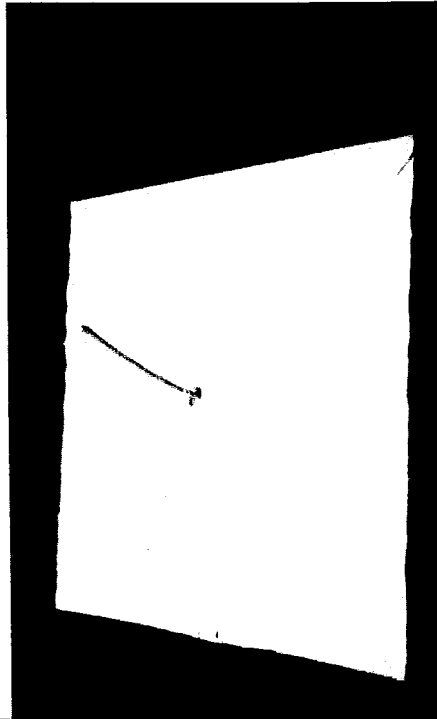
At around this time I came across Jean Baudrillard's analysis of why, in our culture, we are drawn to the bygone object, and what it symbolizes. The discovery of the Baudrillard quote was in conjunction with the writing of two papers on the found object. The quote became a light, an illumination of where I was, and propelled me back to the sail.

When I started working with the sail pieces, I was drawn to the rectangular shape and proportions of one piece in particular. I wanted the others to approximate that shape.

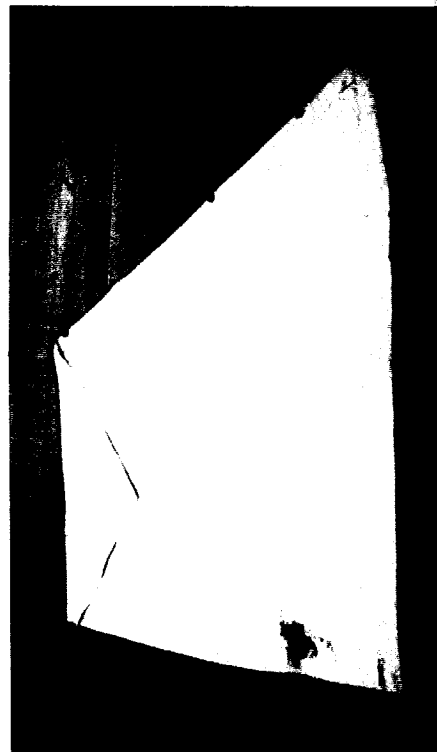
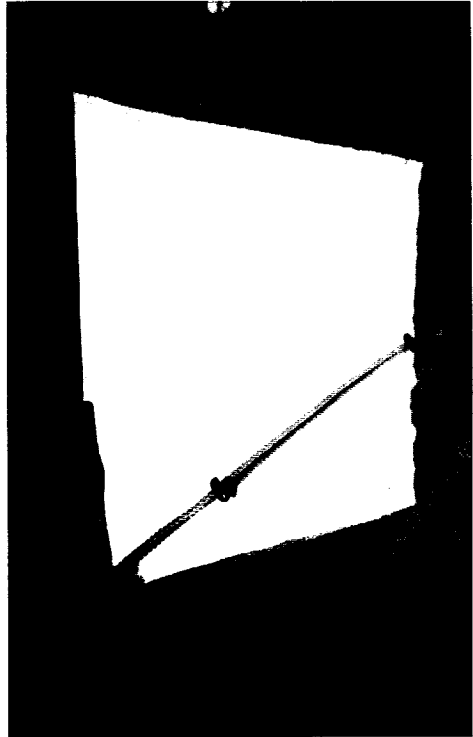
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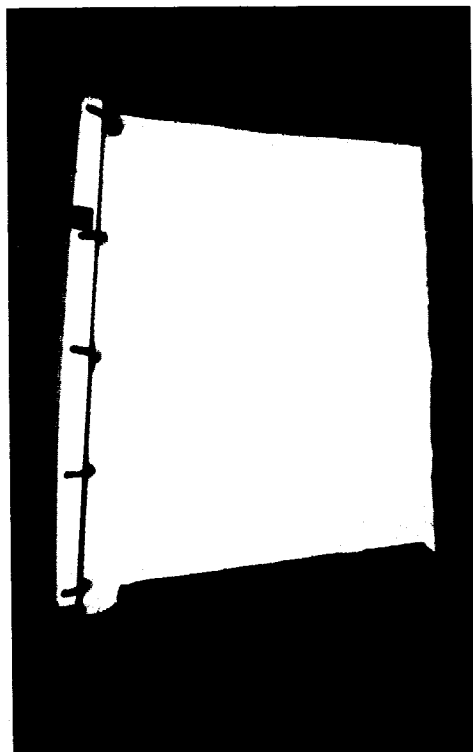
Four of the Squares



2'11" x 2'10" x 2'9 1/2" x 3'



2'10" x 3'3" x 3'2" x 2'10 1/2"



SEWING ROPE EDGES

M

RALPH P. BELL

P. O.

DAY 3.
Reflection

I have
bored +
work -

① Scarf
spoiling

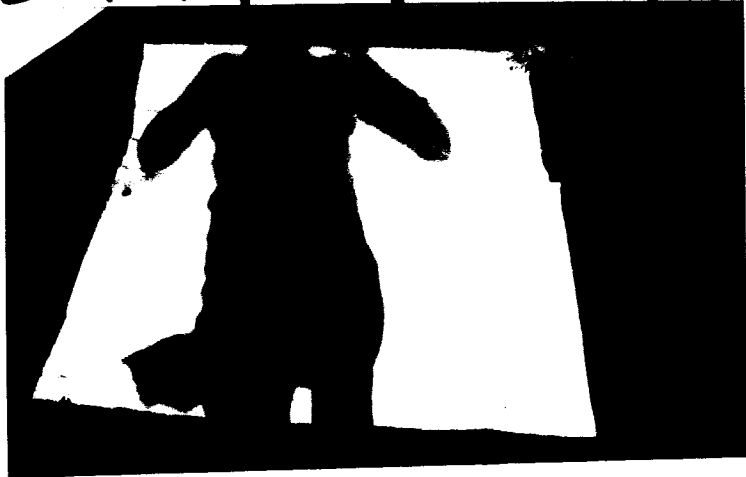
② have
working
know why
go ~~to~~ Please reply

MEMO

RALPH P. BELL

P. O. Bo

③ I rea
am tryin
make ea
fragment
again -
is it a
The dif
And n



MEMO from

RALPH P. BELL

P. O. Box 40

MAHONE BAY

NOVA SCOTIA

for its use. So it
seems terrible to
have unsewn edges
(where I cut them
apart) which
would fray and
tatter in the wind
On the other hand
ignore the sacrilege
and leave beautiful
sewn + rough-edge
in each piece
until ~~the~~ more takes
place.

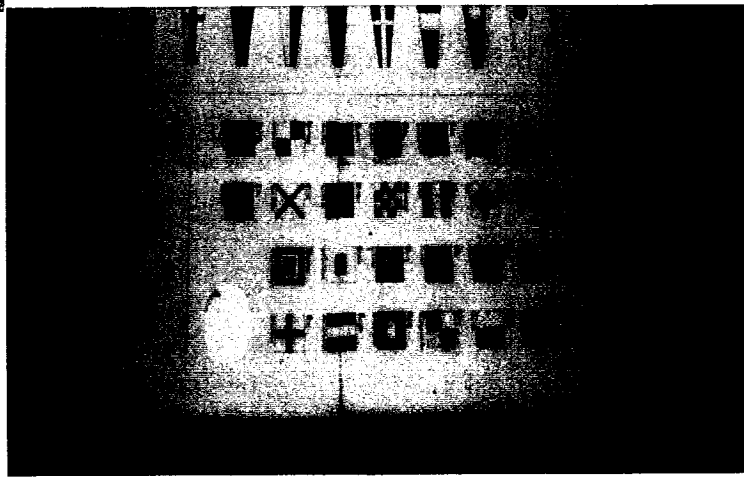
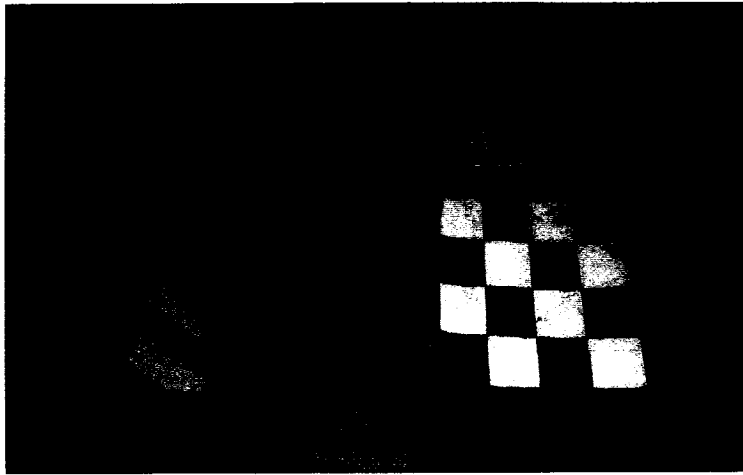
So I folded them in on themselves and was really happy with how they looked. However the next obstacle was that I am not someone who sews. Sails are heavy and need special machines. I managed to sew one by hand because it was rope edge against rope edge, not canvas.

Then I stalled and became completely blocked. I went into avoidance mode. I allowed guests to take up all my time. I took long visits with family I only see once a year. I swam, cooked, played scrabble, kayaked, and walked other people's dogs, anything but going to the sail and figuring out my problem. Finally, after about ten days of this behaviour, I took the pieces to a local sail loft, and explained exactly what I wanted. To maintain the approximated squares, I asked that the folds be stitched down. This way each fragment would become something else, a more whole seeming piece, with no frays, but still all the history of the seams, the rope, the grommets etc. I left the sail loft feeling hopeful.

One of my summer guests teaches creative rug hooking. She told me that one of the exercises to which her students respond really well, is to design a rug using their own name. That intrigued me. I decided to experiment with ideas for the sail, using another found object: an old chart of Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia. This was a marine map of our area that I'd been saving. I would explore ideas while the sail fragments were unavailable. I painted my name in international signal flags on rectangular pieces of the chart. I had so much fun with beautiful primary colours and beautiful transparent images coming through. Then I stenciled the international code meaning for the flag/letter on old canvas from a ditty bag. Together the two pieces for each letter made a great diptych. The

primary colours images coming through

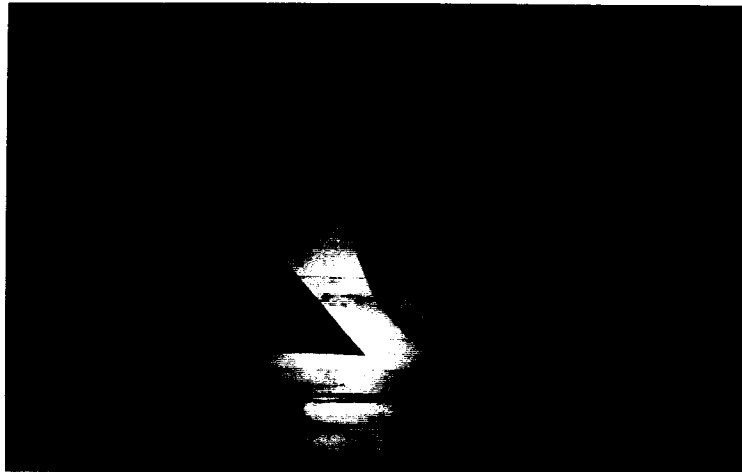
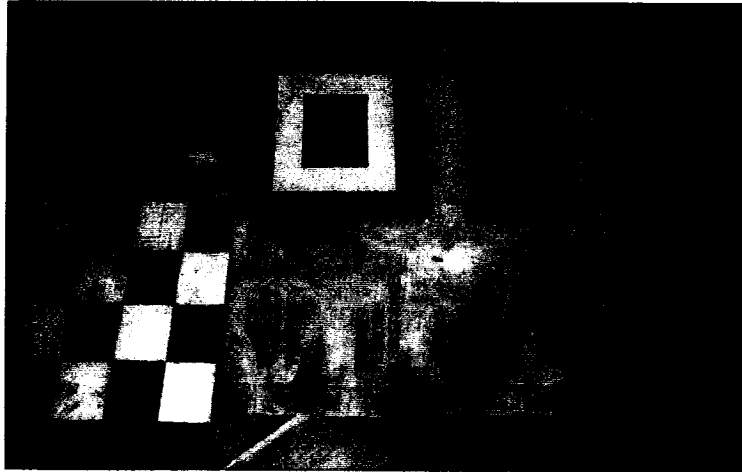
intention - to try and find more



Admiralty charts of

The British
The 1800's.

The first diptychs

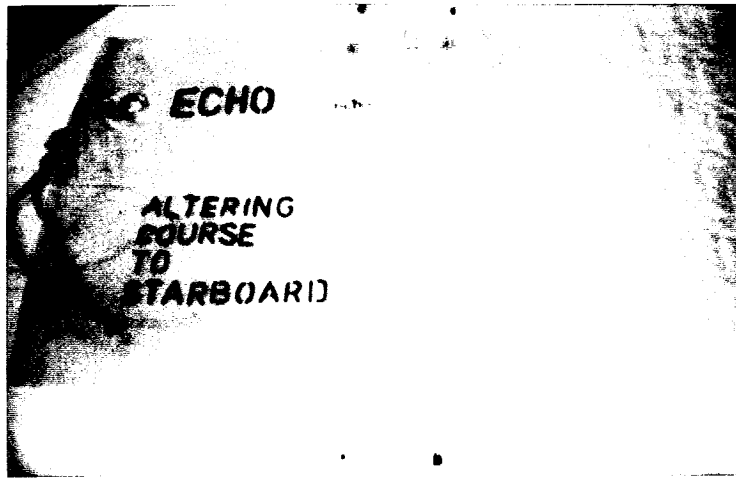


project took off!! The hard part was to find more charts, more canvas that had a certain cachet. I continued to do more letters than just my name.

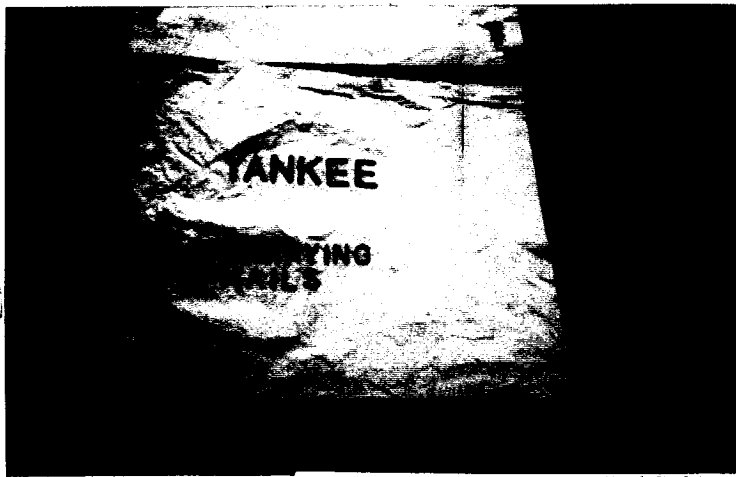
I returned to the sail loft and collected the sails. I experienced this deep disappointment about them, and a sense of panic. They were ruined!! I was really upset. I realized the new stitches and whipping with polyester thread did not give the feel I wanted. The edges should have been left frayed. My folds were fine as temporary folds, but as sewn down folds they seemed WRONG! In hindsight I should have cut them to the shape I wanted. I had made a huge mistake by not being there when someone was going to work on my piece, no matter how many instructions I left. What a lesson to always be there if you have to get some expert skill.

It took a bit of time before I could get up the energy to destroy the work I had ordered from the sail loft. It was so strongly sewn it was not easy to do. I tried to see if there were some parts that could stay. The whole struggle was that when the sails came back from the sail loft -folds stitched down, ends of rope expertly whipped- there were two things that had happened to change how I experienced them. They no longer looked so old. They no longer looked like fragments, pieces from a larger whole. I realized that these things were what I wanted to emphasize, or at least have as an integral part of the artwork, not things I wanted to obliterate. I wrote in my journal that after the sail loft, I was left with this predicament of finding the tension between the feeling of fragment versus whole, and between keeping an interesting shape and eliminating the new looking stitches.

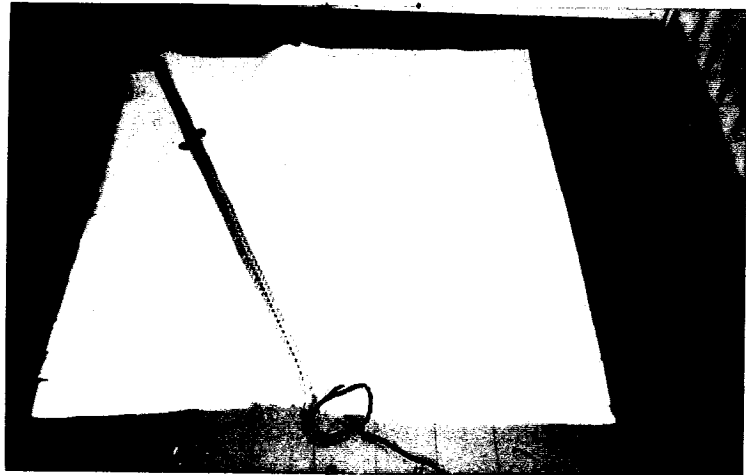
It was an endless and depressing task to take out the stitches that had somehow ruined my precious sail. It took quite a while, because I was working on the signal flag/



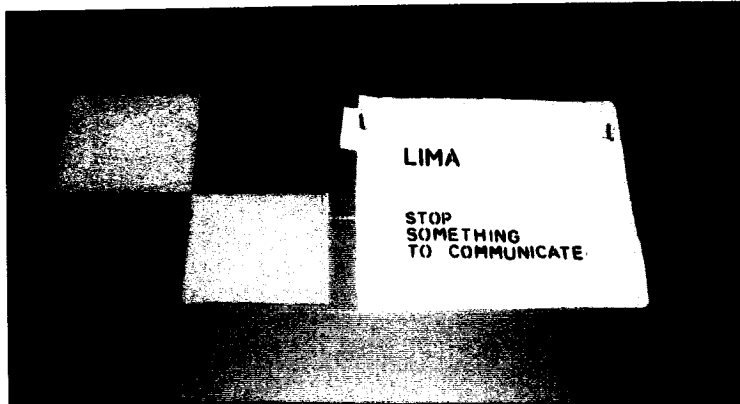
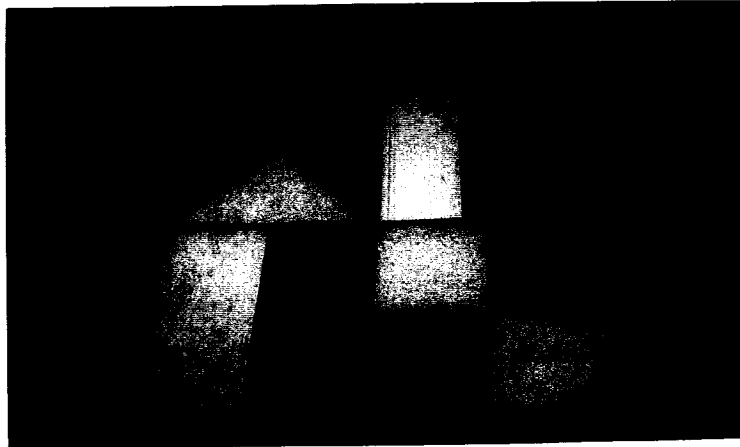
continuing
with
the
alphabet
project



taking
out
stitches



More alphabet/code flag

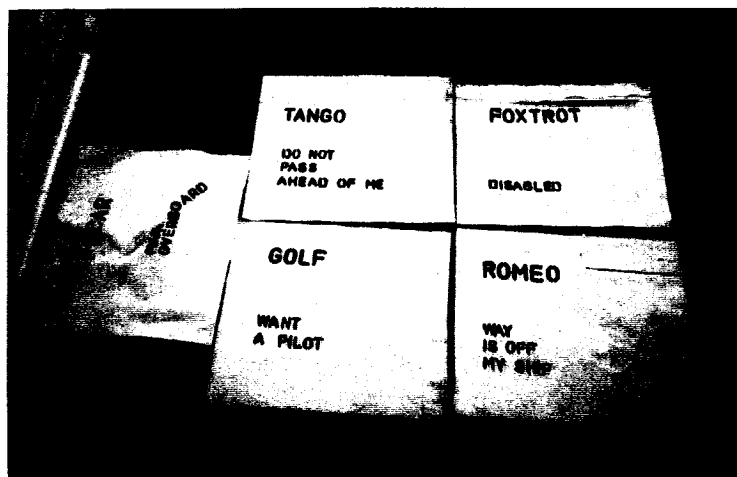


alphabet project at the same time, as well as researching other family documents that I thought I might transfer onto the sail. So attacking the sail was a piecemeal affair. At this point, the signal flag works were definitely art pieces in their own right, not merely an experiment for the sail.

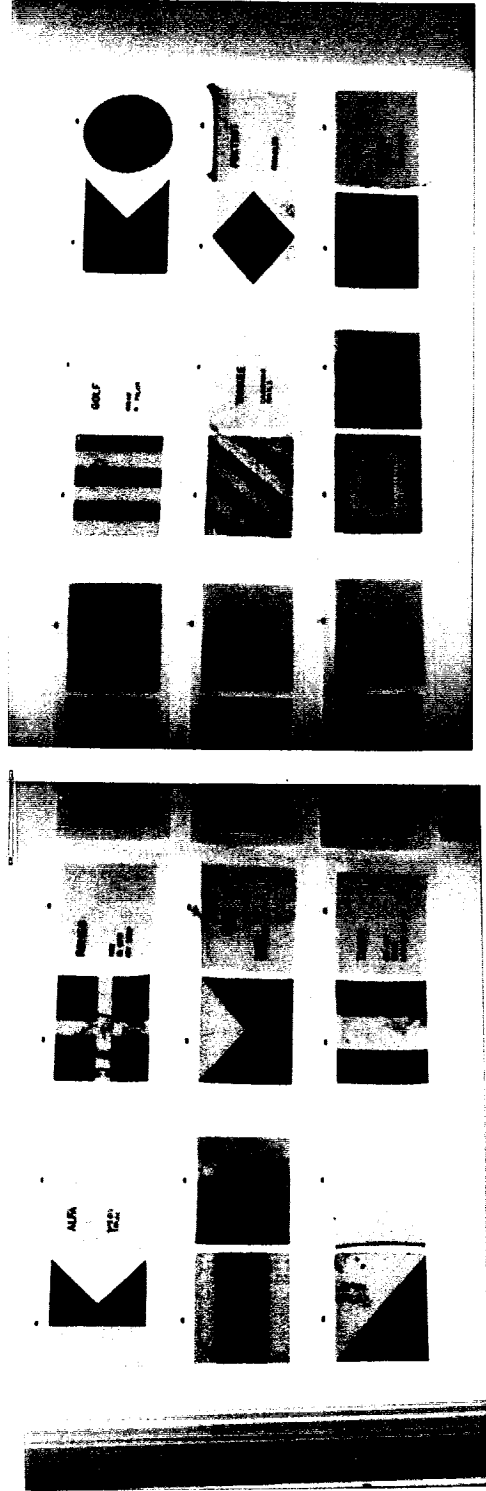
While I was working on one sail piece in particular, I yanked in frustration and impatience to pull out the stitches. The stitches held and the sail ripped. That was it. Even though I thought that it wouldn't work, I cut that sail fragment into five smaller pieces to match five chart pieces that were waiting to find canvas mates. I thought the sail pieces would not be interesting enough when small. Of course, as I had with the ditty bag and subsequently with an old woodsman's tent, I made decisions so that seams and grommets were used to maximum value, and was pleasantly surprised after the stenciling. The sail looked really good with that particular chart. The black in the chart was very strong and the sail took the ink really well. The diptych worked using the sail! What a surprise! The sail became part of the alphabet project. It was subsumed into it.

The experience of making art with this bygone object was a highly frustrating one. I feel that in some way I danced around the object and never actually destroyed it to the point that the phoenix rose from the ashes. I think that is because I expected to paint on it. But from experience, the first marks or colours you put on raw canvas stains it forever. It is not like gessoed canvas. So that made me really hesitant. At one point I had cut one of the five original pieces, after taking out the stitches, so that I could get the shape I had first found by folding. This minimal cutting created small discarded pieces. I painted on one, and then rushed and washed the colour out, just as I had taken the stitches out. It was not right even in this small bit. The raw canvas has something that resists this

the sail is submerged.
Cutting.
stenciling
matching with chart.



Wall of the alphabet project
the sail is used in ROMEO, TANGO
GOLF, FOXTROT + OSCAR (lower left
waiting restenci)



kind of intervention. It's so nice as it is. The most I ended up allowing myself was fragmenting, i.e. cutting into smaller pieces. Then subsequently there was, of course, the stenciling.

So that is the story of the sail so far. I still have not finished three of the original large fragments. But for the purpose of this thesis the process of avoiding the sail and finally subsuming it into my alphabet project will now be further examined in the following inquiry.

Inquiry

The approach that I have taken to examine my visual documentation and narrative is informed by Martin Heidegger (1927/1962). He says, "Our investigation itself will show that the meaning of phenomenological description as a method lies in interpretation" (p. 61).

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), the German philosopher who is Heidegger's immediate predecessor, developed this philosophical method that he called phenomenology. Key terms for Husserl are intentionality and phenomenological reduction. For Husserl the dominant feature of consciousness is consciousness of something. Things are given to us through acts of consciousness; we intend, have intentionality towards things. Husserl claims that by going back to the things themselves, i.e. reducing everything to phenomena, not only would the essence of the things be shown, but the structures of consciousness as well. Terry Eagleton (1983) describes Husserl's method: "Phenomenology, by seizing what we could be experientially sure of, could furnish the basis on which genuinely reliable knowledge could be constructed. It

could be a 'science of sciences', providing a method for the study of anything whatsoever: memory, matchboxes, mathematics" (p. 56).

Heidegger built on the work of Husserl. One place where Heidegger differs from Husserl is in what they believed about phenomena. Husserl believed in the full presence of the phenomena that we set out to describe. Heidegger says that in life-in-the-world phenomena are revealed to us, but at the same time, something is concealed from us. With every presence there is an absence. That is a condition of being-in-the-world. So for Heidegger the phenomena we are seeking is something that doesn't appear.

What is it that by its very essence is necessarily the theme whenever we exhibit something explicitly? Manifestly it is something that proximally and for the most part does not show itself at all: it is something that lies hidden, in contrast to that which proximally and for the most part does show itself; but at the same time it is something that belongs to what thus shows itself, and it belongs to it so essentially as to constitute its meaning and ground. (p. 59)

The horizon, the foundation which allowed that which is in front of us to appear, has disappeared, been forgotten. It is the task of phenomenology to seek out clues that will lead us to unforgetting, recollection, and unconcealment of that foundation. For Heidegger this means destruction, and he devotes a whole section to the task of destroying tradition. He says the following:

When tradition thus becomes master, it does so in such a way that what it 'transmits' is made so inaccessible, proximally and for the most part, that it is concealed. Tradition takes what has come down to us and delivers it over to self-evidence; it blocks our access to those primordial 'sources' from which the

categories and concepts handed down to us have been in part quite genuinely drawn. Indeed it makes us forget that they have had such an origin, and makes us suppose that the necessity of going back to these sources is something that we need not even understand. (p. 43)

Heidegger's destruction is more a taking apart than a wiping out, and this approach may be easier to understand by thinking about the theories of deconstruction that followed his work. Terry Eagleton (1983) talks about the work of Jacques Derrida, and deconstruction:

Deconstruction, that is to say, has grasped the point that the binary oppositions with which classic structuralism tends to work represents a way of seeing typical of ideologies. Ideologies like to draw rigid boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not, between self and non-self, truth and falsity, sense and nonsense, reason and madness, central and marginal, surface and depth. Such metaphysical thinking, as I have said, cannot simply be eluded: we cannot catapult ourselves beyond this binary habit into an ultra-metaphysical realm. But by a certain way of operating upon texts -- whether 'literary or philosophical' --- we may begin to unravel these oppositions a little, demonstrate how one term of an antithesis secretly inheres within the other. (p. 133)

This idea of something that "secretly inheres" within something else, is very akin to, and in fact comes from, Heidegger's idea that that which reveals also conceals. I want to distinguish between the approach taken by Heidegger and the approach taken by Husserl. The latter believed that awareness in consciousness of what is before us, and a

careful description of those phenomena, would yield the essence of things; the former believed that the phenomenon that shows itself holds clues to that which does not show itself. I want to make clear that I am following Heidegger more than Husserl.

The point is to reveal what has been concealed, by looking for clues. To that end I went back and very carefully started going over my intention, production and reflection data. I had stapled the scribbles and Polaroids onto sheets of paper and named the chronology so that it was easy to read or to check on when something happened. But I had not completed the task. In so doing, I discovered two days that I had not properly formalized. One I will call the Lost Day, the other the Meta Day. The Meta Day is about daily behaviour that was not in the studio. These days reveal aspects that are not immediately evident in the mainly technical recording of the work process and progress. For Heidegger recollection and repetition reveal clues that bring us back to the origin, to that which is hidden.

The Lost Day was time I spent looking at previous work before I started working on the chart. The Lost Day was written in a separate notebook and had been misplaced. It was all about remembering where I was in my thinking and my work when I was last absorbed in it; it was about continuing along in a certain way and feeling rooted in a way of thinking; it was about having a direction and not feeling lost; it was about having a continuum. Forgetfulness is a feature of thinking in Heidegger. He believes that part of the way that thought works is to forget. That is why recollection is part of the task of phenomenology. The strangest thing is that I actually spent part of a day getting a lot of previous work out, observing it, looking at it, thinking about it, and then totally forgetting about it, and allowing that whole action to slide into an unconscious or subconscious

state. When I was almost finished this present work, I looked at my transparent painted chart rectangles and thought, “I wonder how alike they are to my last big project?” I compared the new work with the previous and was amazed at how similar they were in size and idea. I still did not remember my Lost Day until I found what I had written. Then it slowly came back to me. I had really written a lot and talked about how Yves Gaucher, a former professor of mine, recommended this kind of submersing yourself in your own work if you had been away from it for a while, just to resituate your thoughts. This day is about the WHAT of working.

The Meta Day was a documentation about something I did everyday. I decided to include it because it was a behaviour of avoidance. It was about ritual, about repeated habits, about the desire to collect things, to discard things, to make sense of things, to make nonsense of things, to arrange things in patterns, to make visually pleasing things. It was the desire to play. This is what was missing when I was blocked in working with the sail, looking for images to transfer onto the sail pieces, avoiding the big project. So everyday I would collect shells and beach fragments, and play with them. This day is about the HOW of working.

Both days are about patterns and habits I carried with me into this project. I cannot erase or change the amount of practice I have had, what kind of work I do and how I go about doing it. From the clue of the Lost Day (my previous body of work) I thought about what I do, and isolated five practices that I have. They all showed up! I often leave something for quite a while after I have made the first intervention (the sail). I always want to produce a series and keep looking at each piece in relation to its mates (the sail fragments, the chart pieces). I am a twin, and I often twin things (ending up with

diptychs). I like to work with rectangles or squares (the sail shape I liked the best was square, and I tried to make the others conform). I love paper and am always ripping, cutting, gluing, stapling, deconstructing, reconstructing (the chart). From the Meta Day I added one more habit, one that was also pointed out to me very recently: that I like to play with pieces as a child plays with blocks. It's true that when I have a big painting that isn't working, I cut it up and reconstitute it by working with the new pieces until it is formally remade. As soon as the sail pieces got small enough, I was able to incorporate them with other things, both in the alphabet project and with previously painted family linens.

Besides these habits there was an assumption of which I was more aware when I started. The most basic assumption to process is that there will be a product. When I set out, I thought I would do something with the sail in the form of painting on it, transferring an image on it, or both, i.e. painting on top of an already transferred image, or even projecting an image on it. I experimented with these ideas on the side and was mentally blocked from carrying them out on the sail because of an awareness of what the sail is in itself. I was afraid that what I valued would be destroyed by those interventions. The rawness would be lost, and the origin of the sail fragment would be subsumed by the image placed on it.

The struggle in my process is clearer as I investigate the preconditions. One of these is my fascination with the Baudrillard quote:

the bygone object, however, is purely mythological in its reference to the past. It no longer has any practical importance, but exists solely in order to signify.... The time of the mythological object is the perfect tense: it is that which occurs in the

present as having previously occurred, and which by this very fact is based on an 'authentic' self. The bygone object is always, in the fullest sense of the term, a 'family portrait'. (p. 35)

When I went back and reread it, I thought: the struggle was between keeping the parts of the sail present in the fragment that give the feeling of being from "another time" (all the little details I loved and mentioned in the beginning), and losing the feeling within the fragment of being just a sail (i.e. not transformed at all). To put it in the language of Jean Baudrillard: it was about keeping the bygone characteristics of the sail present in the fragment, while at the same time losing the functional characteristics. Because when objects are functional, according to Baudrillard, they belong to a different order of things, which refer to the now and not to the bygone. Functional objects are everyday useful objects that have a particular purpose or use in our lives.

My resistance to going further than my original intervention of cutting up the sail involved an attachment to the familial and the bygone. My frustration in not being able to go further involved my aesthetic judgment, where my found object had not, in my view, become an art object. It was only when I started combining the raw sail with other things that I began to feel I was creating something that was beyond the sail itself and yet retained the nostalgia I wanted.

This understanding of my process with Baudrillard's explanation of the bygone object as existing in the present only to refer to the past has an interesting connection to Heidegger. For Heidegger, the past can always be reinterpreted as opening up new possibilities for the future. If the past is always interpreted the same way, which tradition tends to do, then the possibilities of how to go into the future are reduced as opposed to

opened up. That is why he talks about destroying tradition. Destruction loosens tradition for new interpretation and understanding. Nostalgia could either historicize the past in a way that opens up future possibilities, or suggest the impossibility of change.

Within the literature review, I would say that Betty Goodwin, Joseph Cornell and Atom Egoyan are all artists whose work has a nostalgic quality. As I previously said, how artists use found objects and why they choose them is intimately and necessarily bound up with what type of artist they are, what type of work they do and/or what is going on in the artistic world around them. I have just gone through my own personal how and what in an attempt to reveal the horizon that allowed my process to be what it was.

My interpretation is the uncovering of two ordering principles, one psychoanalytic and the other artistic. The psychoanalytic is about attachment and my particular emotional connection was twofold: to the familial, (but it could be political, religious, sexual, etc.), and also to the bygone. The artistic is about where an artist is in his/her work process, and skill level. I feel now, in hindsight, that I had a bit of a tortuous route in creating my final art pieces because my choice of object was not immediately amenable to my current work habits and process, (e.g. size and material). Also my attachment to certain qualities, particularly the workmanship and rawness, made the object too precious to touch.

The preciousness of the object, as I discovered, is about attachment. If you are attached to your object, you may have trouble transforming it. The tension between keeping what you like and changing, discarding or obliterating what you don't is part of the experience. As I found out, it is not always obvious. For me, the most important

thing is to be able to start to experiment. One possibility for exploration is the combining of the object with other things. Basically that is what happened in my own process, with my raw sail. I experimented with objects in the same context (marine paraphernalia), and ended up integrating and combining.

I was not alone in the combining of objects that come from the same context. Nevelson did just that with discarded pieces from buildings and docks. Booker used tires from bikes, trucks and cars. Cornell took objects from childhood. Schwitters looked for ephemeral everyday objects. Before I started researching I had not at all considered this phenomenon of combining found objects. Perhaps you could say that this is an answer to the question about whether I am following a thread in art history, but it certainly was not a conscious decision.

One conscious decision, though, was the original fragmenting of the sail. I wanted to discover the meaning of that. I said early on that to work on the piece as a whole sail would be difficult, it would always remain just a sail, therefore I would cut it up. What I did not verbalize is that the shape of a sail is very distinctive and so my instinct was to destroy that shape. The next thing I realized is that my use of the square or rectangle is in itself a formalizing gesture that creates a certain tension. In the diptych the viewer is asked to relate two rectangles, two objects, two fragments.

I had asked was whether artists using the found object make like decisions, even if their art is very different. I would say that they are all looking for a certain tension within the work that embodies a particular meaning. Throughout the description of my researched artists' work there has been such a tension described: le monde reel/le monde imite, pictorial world/real world, social attitude/personal pleasure, associative urgency of

the estranged object/impacting formal power of the box, habitual meaning/another meaning, personal myth/political symbol. The found object was a way to achieve this tension, a way to have embodied meanings within the work.

As far as the tension goes in my present project, I have started to discover the embodied meanings. These meanings were not present in consciousness for me until the work was completed. I have already mentioned 'the back-and-forth' in the diptych between the sail and the chart, but there are also the meanings of the coded alphabet. These have many possible interpretations for the viewer. I have not even begun to contemplate these texts, they are a whole other layer. For myself it is these beautiful ancient symbols (St. Andrew's cross for one), which evoke national flags, and my imagination can go from exploration in these specific charts, to the whole history of exploration and exploitation that sailing ships made possible.

At this point I had an epiphany about my process. The sail became something beyond itself when I started combining it with other things. This is when I felt it was an artwork. This transcendence of itself also involves something of which I was not aware until the work was completed and I was able to look at it for possible meanings. What I had not articulated was that I didn't start out with a particular meaning that I wanted to convey. The meaning of the sail had to emerge in the making. In the original fragmenting I was extracting something from its habitual meaning (being a sail) into another meaning, and yet I was completely unsure as to what that meaning was to be. What I was actually doing in my experimenting was building a context of meaning into which my sail could fit. Interestingly this was completely unknown to me; it was an unconscious working out of possibility. Now I can see that the seeds of meaning existed in some of my original

questions, viz. “Is my attraction to the sail to do with the history of my family, or more to do with the sailing traditions of Nova Scotia?” In the end my sail fragments sit amongst charts of Nova Scotia, signal flags and international codes. These can evoke my personal life, my small boat sailing to an island for a picnic, the commercial life, Nova Scotia sailing vessels trading with the Caribbean Islands, the exploratory life, sailing ships discovering North America, the military life, naval convoys assembling in Bedford basin, behind Halifax harbour, in World War II, before crossing the Atlantic, etc.

This interpretation reveals another perspective on the reason for fragmenting the sail to start with (I was extracting the fragments from their habitual meaning), the reason for having trouble transforming the sail pieces (I was hovering over pieces with no known meaning) and the reason behind experimenting with the chart (I was creating a place of new meaning). This understanding of meaning in no way negates the two ordering principles that I discovered. To use the language of Heidegger, they are the foundational horizon of possibilities that allowed meaning to be created. It is in the doing, the creating that meaning comes into being. Meaning is implicit in both principles and becomes actualized in the artwork.

I said at the end of the literature research, “For me the choosing of the object is very intuitive. Meaning that exists is implicit and potential, and not necessarily rationally understood. It is through working it out that possibilities become explicit and real.” I wrote that before I had read any Heidegger. I also wrote that before I started working with the sail, and so I have come full circle. I had an understanding of the process that was about to happen. This essay is an interpretation, a disclosure of my process. What is disclosed is not something new, it is something that was understood in its wholeness, and

has now been laid out in interpretation to reveal the ordering principles. This is how Heidegger believed understanding works:

The projecting of understanding has its own possibility--that of developing itself [sich auszubilden]. This development of the understanding we call "interpretation". In it the understanding appropriates understandingly that which is understood by it. In interpretation, understanding does not become something different. It becomes itself. Such interpretation is grounded existentially in understanding; the latter does not arise from the former. Nor is interpretation the acquiring of information about what is understood; it is rather the working-out of possibilities projected in understanding. (p. 188)

The artwork produced for this thesis is a working out of some of the possible meanings of the sail for me, the artist. At the core of the meaning of a found object is the transcendence of itself from one meaning into another meaning, gaining a new self while not losing the old self. The artist plays with the tension between the new and the old within the creation. As human beings we are constantly renewing ourselves and becoming something else. We do so in the reality of changing from birth to death. In that way, the reality of constantly transcending ourselves, the transformation of a found object into an artwork can be seen as a metaphor for the self.

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