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The mom project

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THE MOM PROJECT

by

Emily Almeda Paulos

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of
Arts degree in Art
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 1999

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Steve Thunder-McGuire

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Emily Almeda Paulos

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts
degree in Art at the May 1999 graduation.

Thesis Committee: _____
Steve Thunder-McGuire , Thesis Supervisor

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David Dunlap

To Mom for teaching me
who she is and in turn
helping me learn who I am

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is my hope that this project will be added to with photographs and stories over the years, but for the many people who have already helped with the making of this website I would like to take this time to them. Mom for her constant participation in this work. Her siblings and their spouses Polly and Bob Gibbs, Hattie and Russ Petersen, John and Joann Anderson, Ginny Currey and Dolly Anderson. My cousins for their interest and encouragement, and Rob Gibbs for his geneology information. I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Professor Steve Thunder-McGuire for his unwaivering vision; my committee members, John Achgrazoglou and David Dunlap for their excellent feedback; and my high school students for being willing testing ground for all my ideas concerning the teaching of art and technology that I encountered in my studies. And lastly to my seven older siblings for their inspiration and guidance in this huge task.

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THESIS SUMMARY

After teaching technology art courses and making art with digital technology for 3 years this project has evolved as a meaningful object that meets many of my goals of what technology should do. Technology is so exciting in art education today; it is constantly changing and growing. New ideas are always welcome, the stereotypes and restrictions associated with traditional art media don't exist with technology. To me, technology should be a tool, an enhancement, a method for taking a new look at what we already know about ourselves. Also family is a very interesting topic to me. The unending questions that we have that are both specific to our own families and universal to every human who wonders about how they got where they are in life. By using technology to construct a historical family portrait I am attempting to blend the past with the future; examining what came before and in my own voice reinterpreting the content for myself and others.

The nature of storytelling is about free association, triggering memories, spontaneity, brief moments of beauty, of insight, of understanding what needs to be said or heard at a given time. Storytelling lends itself to being in a format that is unrestrictive, that allows for growth, for change, that is flexible and all encompassing. A format that allows, encourages listeners and teller to enter into freely at any given time, to have a dialogue.

In making this project in the form of a webpage, I have chosen, from conception, a structure that is non-linear. My vision has been to construct an object, designed for the web, that makes sense to the viewer if they step in at any given point. The challenge has been to construct a body of work that is not dependent on a sequential reading, that can stand on its own and offer insight. I have had to organize the written elements in such a way as to make clear what the questions are that I am attempting to address but not be redundant. Also in the written elements of the family history I have had to present stories

in such a way that tell about the people in my family but are not uninteresting to those outside the family or redundant to those within the family.

In the making of this project I am attempting to synthesize science and art. Computers and creative processes. To find a way to use computers in my creation of art that will not be restrictive to my creativity but will help open my mind to new ideas, new approaches. It is not my duty to be the scientist. I am not a slave to the computer. I am the artist and I make the computer listen to me. The beauty of the web is that it is not linear. There are no rules to viewing this page. It is my goal to make this project equally accessible from any point. Ultimately I have no control over the path that the user chooses but that is the spirit of the internet - that it is not linear. The internet lends itself to spot reading, jumping from point to point, click here, now click here, now search here, now skim this, now you're done.

I have kept this in mind when designing material for this project. My users will not sit and view it in its entirety from "beginning" to "end". Nor will they conduct a keyword search for specific information. They will enter, I hope, with a open mind, expecting only to find a story that will interest them or picture they have never seen before. To create their own path through my work as their interests take them. My purpose is clear to me. I have chosen this format over any other so that I have the freedom to create, and my viewers have the freedom to engage.

Because the web is new and different from a book, it is a question of format that concerns us all. From teaching technology art courses and making this project I have learned that the web, and computers in general by their very nature invite experimentation. They are forever changing, and (should) hold no strict stereotypical expectations as perhaps other media do. Ceramics, for example, may not have the untried possibilities in form and content that computers do, merely because it is not a new art form. Because they are new and undefined, computers offer endless creative possibilities. Attempting to use a computer as a glorified typewriter is not taking full advantage of

what the artist can make the computer do. We cannot become slaves to the computer. If we are not asking of it its true experimental nature we will become its slave. Artists must decide what it is they want to make and then push the computer to meet their vision. (And it will meet it).

Ideally a computer can bring people closer together. Through new technologies people can stay connected over great distances in a way that letters and phone calls have helped people in the past. I am hopeful that this website for example, will be a living object that at the very least the fifty or so people in my family will be able to experience a connection with another person. To learn about each other and their own backgrounds, to answer some questions and ask some more. By placing it on the internet I have made it accessible and hope to get responses, stories, photos, questions, requests, corrections, etc that will be added to the work. In this way it is not static. The people who interact with the work through their computer are reading information collected by me from a variety of voices and if they send me a response they will be adding to that collection. They are relating to me, through my use of the computer for disseminating information, but our interactions are not restricted to the realm of the computer. It is one avenue for sharing stories.

This project consciously began as I reached my early twenties and realized the similarities of the image in the mirror and the photos of my mother at my age. More than anything I just wanted to know what it was like to be her when she was young and so started the mom project. It began as a fascination with old family photographs, seeing the relationships between family members, especially from a time that I didn't experience, before I was born, before I knew them. So many questions.

Once it began I realized that I wanted to provide family information in a collected format for my mother, her siblings, and their children in a way that lent itself to growth, was inexpensive and showed rare family photos with high image quality. This led to

wanting more, wanting to learn as much as possible about mom and her youth and her family. By doing this project I hope to provide a place for stories to collect over time.

Both of my parents are the youngest in their families -- mom is the youngest of 6, dad the youngest of 4. This makes me the youngest of 39 cousins on both sides combined. On my mother's side the oldest is my cousin rob who has been working on our family genealogy. There are, by last count, 35 children of my cousins on my mother's side alone. It is my hope they will use this as a resource in their own path to discovering their history.

Arriving at this stage of completion I will pause for reflection in this ongoing journey. So, what have I learned? Early on Steve Thunder-McGuire very wisely told me that I could not go into this project expecting to change my mom, that I could only be able to change myself, that I would be required to change during this process. From the beginning I understood this, and it was because of this understanding that I was able to change and grow so much, and the funny thing is, mom did change.

She and I are so much the same. That's why I did the mom project. I was led by my fascination with the similarities between her life and mine, between her self and my self. I wanted to know all I could learn about her life. In the beginning of this project I was met with an attitude that was like fingernails on a blackboard to me. Our goals were so different. Her goal was posterity, making the family look good, and a series of run-on factual events that could become exhausting. Then, at Thanksgiving I was met with more run-on events from her siblings but mom heard them this time and she began to understand where I was coming from in my frustration for the search for STORY.

At this point mom joined me on my journey. My sisters were so helpful at this stage giving me the words I needed to hear to guide mom. Slowly, seeing the work I was putting together mom began to understand where I was coming from in my search. Events in my own life further opened our discussion about life choices < education,

marriage, family, duty, money, happiness. Gradually she moved to a place of greater involvement. She was embarking on a treasure hunt of her own.

Since dad's death she's been cleaning her house after 45 years of marriage, taking stock of her life and searching for her own happiness. It's a difficult thing, seeing your mother experience discontentment with her life and not realize it. Waves of critical, judging sarcasm, guilt, a failure to listen, to hear me, came along with wonderful moments of insight, of deep connection. She has always been a mother who allows herself to become empassioned by the interests of her children, and this project was no less than her love of music through Rachel, or of the land through ben, of biking through Rick, of sewing, of gardening, of art. She has a connection with each one of her children. Ours have been so many, hers and mine. I have been her mostly companion, the youngest of eight and always near her side, doing and also fighting. Fighting mostly because of our similarities. My struggle to not be her when she/I does/do something I dislike. Ironically this intense journey has been my separation from her, seeing her as a person. Seeing her not only as my mother, my other self, but as a person of her own. This is a task of acceptance that requires devotion and strength. It requires learning new patterns of behavior. Learning a new dance. Trying a step and adjusting it after she reacts.

And in this journey of finding out who my mother is, I have been finding out who I am. This is very empowering. I have been closer to her now than ever before in my search for the two of us as separate individuals. We are able to respect our differences, to allow one another to make mistakes, to be who we are, to teach each other, to truly hear the ideas.

Rachel read to me from a letter that mom wrote her this month. It was music to my ears. Mom had written, in cohesive thought (non run-on in its structure) so many of the ideas that permeate through this work. She wove together events of her life, with great insights, questions of her self and her reader, and a mood of compassion. Rachel

said it was the best letter she had ever received from mom. She had expressed herself with words, the words that my sisters and I are always hungry for from her.

This letter meant to me that mom had expressed a deeper understanding regarding the search for STORY. Always an eager learner, mom has come so far in her desire to know what I mean by STORY. A STORY would leave the listener hanging if you stopped half way. A STORY would have the ability to touch the lives of people you didn't even know and ignite their own stories to surface. Our search for story started with gloss, followed by many months of "events" and information that everyone in the family already knew, the stuff that gets told over and over and never changes. Then at some point, new facts began to emerge.

With my questions came a deeper level of interest from mom. She began to write. She began revisiting her past in a new light. She discovered things about her mother that she had never known. She rediscovered an appreciation for her mother's life as a young woman, and also as a woman of mom's age now, entering retirement. And then, gradually, suddenly, she was deeply engaged. Everytime she would offer me materials she would say, "well I don't know if this anything you're looking for but" and my reaction was always a definite YES, I want it. She uncovered so much. Everytime I would head home with the purpose of collecting she would have set out the treasures of her search for me to puruse.

Photos, documents from the farm or of her parents lives, old newspaper clippings, her baby book, my baby book, her mother's wedding book, her mother's wedding blouse, prized jewelrey, her father's watch, my father's watch, certificates, grade reports, books her father owned, letters, postcards, handkerchiefs, yearbooks. Even a lid from my baby formula mix decorated by her with my name in label letters. All nuggets of information - in every object there is a story.

On a recent visit at my cousin's house looking at the quilts mom's mother had made which my cousin had, mom learned that her mother had done applicay quilting,

which she never knew. Mom also found a piece of fabric in one of the quilts that was from a dress she wore as a young woman. A dress her mother had made for her. She had not seen it the fabric in several years and had never known she used the fabric in her quilt. Quilts are so much a part of mom's life. For her to discover a piece of fabric in a quilt she'd not seen of her mother's in years, if ever, although it seems a minor piece of information holds great significance. So much of mom's quilting has to do with including the fabric of her children's lives, and of her own life. Her quilts come alive when viewed by her family, excitedly finding the bits of their past lovingly saved and stitched in with those of their siblings, parents, and children.

Mom is learning about her mother, and in turn, herself. I am learning about my mother and myself. My search, my questions have started her on a search of her own. Mostly I think my valuing the objects and stories of her life has made her do the same. The shift from non-story to story is occuring. The conversation is open to continue.

In writing her mother story mom wrote about her absolute admiration and fascination of her mother. She wrote of the life her mother led, her experiences, from the mundane tasks of everyday life to the historical events that she lived through as a young woman. My project started because of a similar fascination with my mom's life. The times she lived through as a young woman, what was happening in her world and how she lived her life. The transition she made from her youth on the farm to moving away from her family, entering her marriage, having both a large family and managing a teaching career. Questions I have been dealing with in my life. My sisters share with me an utter amazement that mom did it all. And do you know what mom says in response to our appreciation? She says, "honey, you are the ones who amaze me. You have all made choices, taken opportunities in your life that have let you follow your desires, you've all found happiness and fulfillment. I admire your choices.'

The following is excerpted from "Notes from mom about her mother Mabel.' "Mabel amazed me, more as I get older. She was born in 1894, grew up in a large farm

home, with 2 sisters and 3 brothers, a father we never heard much about and a petite pretty mother Hattie we only knew as a gentle senile elder. Mabel went to country school, graduated and went on to Tobin college in fort dodge - that was the step out of the rural community, and broadened one's education. She studied Latin, philosophy, history, was an eager reader. A pretty, lively young woman she played basketball on the first women's team in Iowa. As a friend, Mabel was a winner - she had her group of friends she kept all her life - one of the advantages of living in the same area all your life. The pictures show how the girls clowned around - even as young women dressing up, posing, picnicking, traveling to visit cousins all the way to davenport, rock island, Colorado and Minnesota - by train since there were no planes and roads weren't very good. How much effort was involved - the clothing which needed care - no drip dry permanent press fabrics, hairdos for the long hair - no short cut "bobs" until the 1920's. Mabel was so glad to cut her long heavy hear because it gave her headaches from its weight - what freedom for women in the 20's when fashions lightened up - shorter dresses, simpler styles, smaller hats - and the freedom that insued. Issues - the right to vote, prohibition, birth control campaign, real careers for women. The 20's were exciting times - electricity, cars, post war excitement, Darwin vs. Religious fundamentalists - no wonder Paul and Mabel became intellectuals - radio reached out to the country. They had electricity by 1920 - as well as plumbing in their remodeled, rebuilt home on the farm. Paul and Mabel got the farm and John S. and Emma moved to Gowrie, to a house right west of the Lutheran church."

The following passage is excerpted from 'My Grandparents' by Pauline Anderson Gibbs about her aunt Ellen. "Ellen was the prettiest of girls. She was rather slender with light blond hair and blue eyes. She had a great deal of artistic talent and could paint anything. Many times she wished her folks would let her go away and study art. She fell in love with her cousin, which was not unusual in those days, and planned to marry him. On Saturday at a church meeting she saw him with another girl. The next day when everybody had gone to church, she first went out and picked all the ripe raspberries, and

then went in the house and took poison. None of the family knew that she was pregnant until it was too late. Big Charlie came home from school that day and withheld comment as long as he could. Finally he cut loose and criticized his parents for not being more understanding. The Lutheran church would not allow her to be buried from the church so the services were held on the lawn. Paul was young then, but it affected him greatly. When he was old enough to have a voice in the matter he left the church for good."

To view the website entitled "The Mom Project," go to the University of Iowa Art Education Department Website at http://www.uiowa.edu/~arted and choose Emily Paulos under the "Portfolios" link.