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# Keokuk&keokuk: social structure

Cheryl Ann Robinson  
*University of Iowa*

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KEOKUK&KEOKUK: SOCIAL STRUCTURE

by

Cheryl Ann Robinson

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

May 2013

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Susan White

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Cheryl Ann Robinson

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Art at the May 2013 graduation.

Thesis Committee: \_\_\_\_\_

Susan White, Thesis Supervisor

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David Dunlap

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Rachel Williams

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Anita Jung

To Nana and Papa: cosigners, Facetimers

To John and Beth: revolutionaries

To Travelin' Cat Jeffrey Trueblood: President, Keokuk & Keokuk

To Elizabeth Davenport: Massachusetts sista

To Buffy Quintero, Jen Shook and Jessica Anthony:

To David Dunlap, Susan White and Anita Jung: friends to Simone

To Alena Joy Green: beautiful voice of re-ality

To Tim's School: Kirkwood School for Children

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## INTRODUCTION

### KEOKUK & KEOKUK: SOCIAL SCULPTURE

I am a utilitarian. Art is counted among my necessities. For organization, understanding and survival during these investigative graduate school years, my home contextualized my seemingly disparate efforts and projects. K&K is a community gallery. My sink's plumbing is disconnected to remind of water, of use. I empty the bucket to flush. I listen, I smell. The grey water collection system lives in the drawing for the next house, for now. Laundry awaits a drying, hanging in real time. I'll not let the paper pulp ferment for I practice minding the day. I follow the suns. Always a painter doing the dishes, my work is rooted for this moment deep within the patterns of homemaking, child rearing. Parenting, puppetry, poetry, papermaking, these are my quiet revolt.

My apprenticeship holds hands with the economic evolution my non-commercial craftsmen and is reflected in artwork. My personal is certainly political, clear in Simone's Veteran DaDa and his abandonment of us. Rejecting the norm which I see tied to the United States military industrial complex, we accept a local handmade, individually scaled culture and society. This personally trickles down to my staunch commitment to the 'attachment parenting' philosophy of protecting the early mother-child against separation. When Simone was two years old, her Dentist suggested I wait in the lobby. I held her hand in the professional chair after a small fight with the patriarchy of the moment while he drilled into my daughters face.

The underlying, ongoing goal of my work is to ease discover of my most natural state, honoring all origins and tendencies. This 'natural state' might find



balance between survival (shelter, food, travel) and response (personal expression.) Buddhists call this the “right” as they apply the concept to guiding principles of behavior which they believe lead to truths. I am a bad Buddhist.

To understand what I must do, I prepare and pay attention to the day’s offerings. Attuning my senses I mark the page. Testing my perception prepares me for creation when the opportunity arises. I engage with my surroundings and influences through the traditional act of drawing. The drawings Simone and I create together reveal the multitude of possibilities possible for culture, challenging the commercially dictated market tradition. Mother-child collaboration also speaks to the unity of survival and expression, creating documentation that proves the deconstruction of the market-determined forms. Celebration of the wonders heard, smelled, touched and tasted, this is how I discover our right way. When I operate consciously, aware of my role in the public realm, remembering the senses, I consider myself a cultural agent. I respond to the set of conditions in my path, with the best tools of mind and body I can afford to commit to outward expression. I am only partially in control of the direction of my path. Compromises and conditions of life are doing work for the product.

My right guide in my self-assigned attention to reality is my now sprung offspring, Simone Ali Robinson, age 3. Time’s passing is forever documented in her relentless development, reinforcing the external. Broken is the spell of the best timeless pursuit that is painting. Although, as her independence grows, the lure returns, time lengthens. The second dimension, where time collapses, folds, flips and flops to live, this seems motionless as my best creation bounces through space

with beautiful lines. Time once stood still when I stepped into the 2D. Available no longer for this self to 'object self' relationship, my senses seek meaning in material, a need to see the flipping and the flopping installed in the actual world. The other who has revealed a new path with new necessities is guide with her still-magical sense of time. My contemplative and mostly individualist ideas make more sense now expressed through worldly marks and are beholden to time, and concern for the future I offer to Simone. This MFA pursuit and research expedition system has helped me to transition, clarify and maintain my Artist's identity while committing to a demanding child-rearing period. Ages one through four have been well investigated and shared. We are ready to re-emerge.

Performances, events, installations, video installations, conversations and community building are my drawings off the page. My projects strive to give pause and recognition to the ordinary wonder oft missed or dismissed in the haste inherent in modern production and consumption. To celebrate the possible as well as the more commonly elevated "probable" is the balance my work aims to tip in its cultural engagement. Ritualizing daily life through respect for the day and its unfolding, despite the calendar point of view informs my process. I follow the sun and I think the early migrators might have too.

Drawing may take as many forms as breaths in a day. I am not done counting the ways. Marking my small and great daily migrations, of mind and body, I find many layered relationships. Intertwined with global and local patterns of necessity and excess my bouncing philosophy touches down on projects to pursue like my brush taps my paper, tentatively at first, testing my mind against my world. Now

that my drawings are on the canvas of reality I find myself applying my consciousness to the current and how it developed this way, and not that way. Generally, I reject the culturally accepted economic paradigm, the norm. I always think we can consider more, find a less compromising way. Humanity and Environmental integrity are at least equal in worth to our short-term profits and our growing the industrial economy. I say yeah Bhutan and your GNP-Gross National Happiness.

My first year in graduate school was an investigation of my consumption and material use, absorption and waste (see figure 8, Right Energy- a laundry lint installation where once was a laundry dryer.) In search of *my* “right” material, I aimed to recognize the physical materials that were in use (and arrived) at Keokuk & Keokuk, my home and community gallery. After plenty of food paintings and mail envelope drawings I developed a heightened sense of material use. This practice led me to the act and philosophy of salvaging and a study of value (not relative lightness and darkness but quantifiable worth.) Operating from a place of response along my path, my materials are mined from domestic life or pulled back from the scrap piles of my migration. The trash treasures are given new life by my labor, storage (a physical pause affecting pace,) contemplation and reorganizing of form. Again, this process is similar to the operations of painting; with density, order and rhythm shifted (in my interpretation.)

I create. I live just above a flood plain. I present. Defiance of the unsustainable pace and dictated boundaries of our main stream is my boat. It flows

fast. It carries downstream, to fast to play in safely without being swept away. I am heading back to the ocean to revisit.



Figure 1. Honor, *“When I Was Your Age”* gouache and photo collage on panel, 2012

This image was generated by migrating pieces and stories. Mary Laube, curator of The Times Club, Iowa City created and managed this transitive project which invited her peers to bring the minds, hearts and creations of intergenerational family members into the same space through sharing of stories and creating creating visual responses. My mom wrote a story of her life when she was my current age. When she was 38, she wrote, “it was a very good year” recognizing Sinatra in her prose. This reference definitively marks the distance between her formative years and the world I navigate. We experienced the project like a family photo album, learning and inheriting some of a collective history

through printed photos. Cast at a petroleum's distance from my family, Simone was learning her extended family through image. The task at hand it my responsibility.



Figure 2. Right Speech, "*power lines*" 2011-2013.

New ride, in another life's hour at The University of Iowa I would have built one, from design, with the bike building tradition. My bikes can define my eras, so the pennies we save by collecting water and apples we pooled in this precision machine. This Italien-crafted-three-gear cruiser with an internal hub was named by Simone: Whitey. The conservative politics ice cream shop of the same name is now regularly denied for its corn syrup content. "I like corn syrup." The town of Iowa City needs to send their pizza makers east to learn something about dough, and organize for a homemade ice-cream shop. Starbucks is one mile's cruise from our homestead, offering us a \$5 adventure, and an in between home and studio

geographically and psychologically. Its corporate aesthetic worldwide takeover nearly guarantees we won't see anyone we really like. A compromise of health and ethics is justified for the gift of twenty-eight minutes of reading time. Happiness is immersion in a one pump mocha in steamed half and half with extra whipped cream and drizzle, "for here, for here. Please?"



Figure 3. Right View, "home," window installation at K&K, 2013.

*co-sleeping, a poem*

Turning sideways this instant.

right.

after. I open all the windows so I can close them.

again.

I attend the least in taking attendance. what follows and what came before. Sleep.

In closing

remember the windows.



Figure 4. Right Guide, “daily migration” 2011-2013.

Installation of my drawings on utility poles or power lines happens after they have served their first, and probably their second purpose. This piece is installed at the foot of the walkway leading to my work center, a point in space which we come and

go from regularly. This space has influenced my work as it operates as documentation, plan, meditation and technical practice.

***Just Me, Simone and Mexico***, a poem. didn't intend Saturday to go the way of the yellow sun painted bunker burrito. smells. memories pulled me in. plastico. bench in the parking shade, cervesas slowing me to a seat. Game day. Go Hawks. A Saturday of just me, Simone and the what-do-we-care-about-that-other-football-anyway. QUIET rushes loud as the jet's scream announce the play battle's arrival. Tides fueled by pride the cheers near and far as the moments of all the season's in a game mark the year. Not enough thrill belonging to the soil. Storm windows begin to keep muffled the cheers near and cold air amplifies the tide. valley fills. Roars, not anything like when I lived near the zoo. Competing in the mind, like my burrito, re-living of when...Emptying the compost can be fun. They all cheer me on.



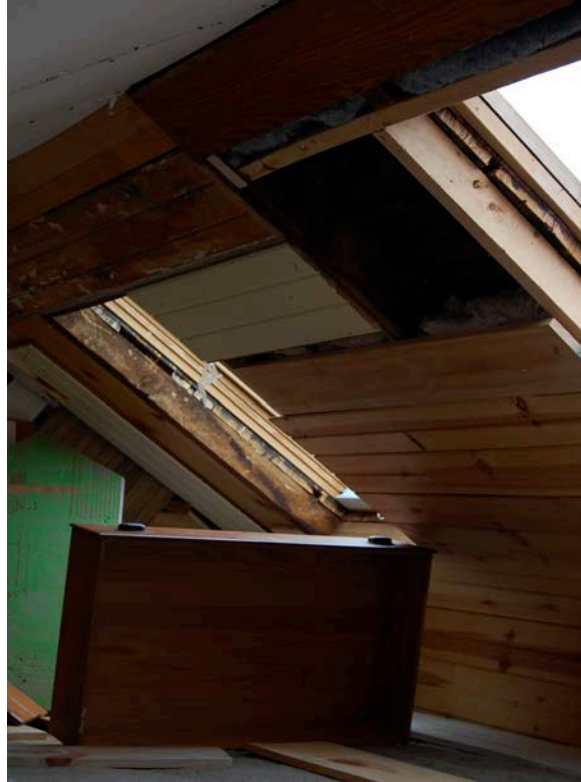


Figure 5. Right Livelihood, *“loft” DIY/salvage attic space*, 2011-2013.

Keokuk & Keokuk, our home and gallery is named for its corner street local, and its subjugated Native American, not rewarded in the end for his efforts of diplomacy. In this place we have the responsibility of 32 squares of sidewalk pavement, to shovel, to re-cement, and slowly we replace the lawn with prairie restoration. It has been the defining, touchstone work of my graduate school moment and it's study of space. It seems an opportunity to quantify the time period in monetary terms. We can only hope not to a negative register. But most certainly it has been a depository for salvageable goods, my found material of choice. It is also a clear physical theatre in the avant-guard invisible theatre practice, in which The City of Iowa City acted as an adversarial proxy for the larger community audience.

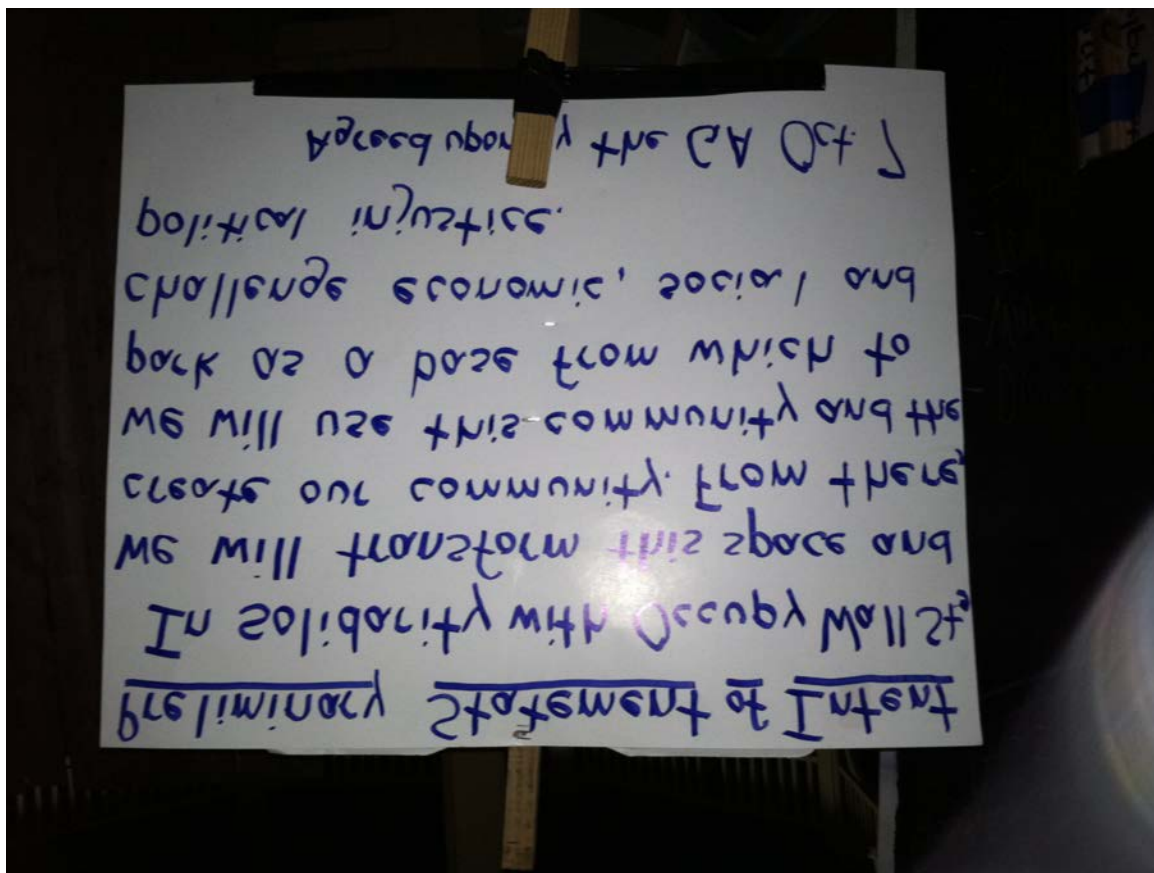


Figure 6. Right Livelihood, *Occupy Iowa City*, 2010-2011.

Much of my work strives for a union of the private and the public. Again, we opened our private home to the public with the gallery, Keokuk & Keokuk. One of our thesis year projects is of civic engagement/celebratory sculpture. Two ancient Oak Trees living on the grounds we be demolished within weeks at our National Historic Registered studio. I am spending grand energies on the knowing how the other force documents and controls, and I am barely satisfying my citizenship duties. Our ongoing practice of marking our migratory/commuting space with drawings on utility poles challenges the notions of ownership. Along our route we transform these corporate utilitarian objects, which exist in the public arena into public display space. My mindset

is aligned with the most democratic and unified of revolutionary movements I have yet experienced in my 40 years. The Occupy movement, I supported and recognized in my piece, *The Carport Café, Open to All* as part of Keokuk & Keokuk's exhibition, 'Reclamation.' <http://keokukandkeokuk.blogspot.com/2011/12/reclamation-december2011.html>

I curated the *Reclamation* exhibition, like all of K&K's shows, and contributed *The Carport...* collaborating with two artists. Beth Erickson Proeller, master carpenter and I constructed a livable, heated shelter at winter's beginning by transforming my home's carport into a café using salvaged materials. Amanda Murphy lit the space by projecting onto the wall of the new space one of her *Occupy Your Senses* videos. The last three years have challenged me to find the place I might best operate as both a responsible mother and agent for social justice.



Figure 7. Right Energy, *dryer demise project*, 2010-2013

'Invisible Theatre' is a concept Katie McGowan's Intermedia teacher, Jon Winet introduced to me. Her tenure as an Intermedia major at the U of IA preceded mine as a minor in the interdisciplinary, heavily theory-based area. Her reputation lives on in the Art Department. Performance practice is central to her work. Her engagement level of "acting" throughout real life surpasses my interest in the genre. But this idea! I interpret it with every public step Simone and I take together. Our presence provides something to be judged or viewed in the public field, not conceptually unlike theatre. Perhaps my young, androgynous, absorbed dreadlocked painter-self once provoked attitudes, but without my taking notice. In that past I operated in Boston, a large enough place to remain anonymous and my Artistic practice was inwardly focused. By contrast, as a single parent of a young child, in a small mid-western town, people involve themselves in my parenting, and I for survival also invite others. My practice has changed as my life dictates to include hyper-physical awareness, which as an athlete and yogi was already keen. Institutionally, children are generally banned from the Academy, this presented a conflict as one of my goals in attending graduate school was to develop an inclusive practice. These two examples provide spaces (conceptually and physically) to investigate figure/ground relationships as they manifest beyond the second dimension. It is only the privileged viewer who has supported my practice and its priority to maintain as strong a mother-child bond as possible in this culture. This practice is related to formal issues of pace and transition. They are addressed with each project and central to my artistic focus on private and public spaces. Generational segregation is prevalent in our culture. It makes our society less safe, less vital, less productive and more emotionally vulnerable. I don't believe that the infrastructure or

behaviors we advocate currently consistently warrant the inclusion of children. The issue is complicated. I will continue my awareness of the systems I operate within. This is unavoidable for an installation artist and a socially engaged artist. But I am most interested in how formal visual language can address and make keenly visible the underlying problems identified in society.



Figure 8. Right Mindfulness, *the bed*, performance still, 2010

This performance was the most traditional, proscenium-staged piece I composed and performed. This piece was inspired by my daily poetry writing practice, which I consider explicit documentation. I quickly moved away from theatrical sensibility involving intentional audiences, scheduled events and scripted



narratives. I believe these formal theatrical elements, although effective, contradict my leanings toward relational aesthetics. Freedom of transition and the sensory moment in the body, experienced to encourage understanding the concept.

Focusing my resources on the development of a new type of space encourages freedom of creative investigation for the audience and I. Social sculpture excites me because I cannot quite recognize what it might be. In life as in art, I am interested in changing the rules. I've learned that this may be possible, but not rewarded.



Figure 9. Right Meditation, "the brown palace" 2011-

## PERSONAL STATEMENT

As a young Painter, I would say of my craft, “It gets me down on my knees.” The cultural myth (and reality) of poverty for Artists in America had me working on the floor in my attic room. The kneeling from my Irish Catholic upbringing connected the intensity of painting’s humbling nature to prayer. Today it is the concentration necessary to create which illuminates the intensity of the physical, mental and spiritual nature of art-making. My work now lives off the canvas, responding to dimensionality and time, in sculpture, video and performance. My historic tradition traces to formalist painting. The arm of my discipline which champions the spiritual function of art is where I find my teachers. They also love music. Ryder, Homer, Johnson Heade, , Picasso and Rodin, the painter and the sculptor are among my guides. French Landscape painting; Courbet, Seraut, Raphael, Delecroix, Monet, beckon me to Paris. Now it is the socially engaged practitioners, the land ethic genre which engages me.

I attended Massachusetts College of Art & Design (MassArt) and earned a BFA. My first BS was funded through a basketball scholarship at Northeastern University. The rigors of athletics prepared me for the physical commitment required of painting, and I still use sport and its mastery of technique as metaphor when teaching observational drawing. A spiritual sense provides me conceptual navigational tools. I continue to strive for union and balance between craft and content, within life. My process considers a mind/body dialectic, informed from experience, philosophy and yoga. Recently a third all-encompassing factor; context has joined this back and forth dialog.

A series of woodblock prints through which I illuminated the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path won me a scholarship to attend a printmaking workshop/tour in China. The otherworldly experience of a Ming garden walled inside the “small” town of one million, Suzou ignited my ability to see drawings everywhere, in all manners of space.

As I began my professional career my chosen community (context) was the oldest (and poorest) neighborhood of Boston, a place from which my Parents’ generation had taken flight. I taught Fine Art as an action of empowerment and development for 7 years. I was now saying, “Painting is like sweeping the floor.” This statement reflected the Buddhist texts I was studying in my attic studio home, but also my professional position. My mentor and founder extended me the education she gave her graduate Masters of Education students. When we brought our students to Paris one summer I learned the value in proposing, planning, and traveling for purpose, it is like drawing and redrawing, persevering until finding what you need. After centering much of my attention and self-directed work of graduate school on labor, domestic and physical, I am finally coming to value intellectual capital.

My preferred personal transition I proposed a Buddhist Landscape Painting Trip to a colleague’s Gap Year travel firm and found myself mid-country with a bag full of baht, cellphone, driver and three sunscreen-lathered kids. Thailand’s cultural integration of Buddhist gesture and principled behavior struck me as something right, the attitude of the people seemed steadier than the first world Christian based one I knew, but I know that one intimately, and therefor for better or worse.

Upon return from Thailand I began to seek the wider road, the broader brushes, getting off my knees and laying down my broom. I found a rewarding community



working with a project out of Harvard College that was building community with a global perspective, using Art as a means to achieve literacy, competence and connections. The theory I discovered led me to work on my own grants and targeting some of my own projects. I taught one session a day with my infant strapped to my body. Saving the \$16,000 down payment to enter the property class, we soon headed to graduate school and the farm industrial space of Iowa, to grow, experiment and most importantly stay “attached.” Again, things are never quite as I try to imagine they might be. It will take some reflection, some distance to summarize these past three years and the specific ways our goals were achieved. If I can sell Keokuk&Keokuk, the building, not the concept, there will be time to see from the Brown Palace.