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Living and making history in an arts practice

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University of Iowa

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LIVING AND MAKING HISTORY IN AN ARTS PRACTICE

by

Kathryn Frances Hargrave

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

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CHAPTER I. LIVING AND MAKING HISTORY IN AN ARTS PRACTICE

What is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying: the tradition is silent, not least about itself as tradition.

Pierre Bourdieu, *Firing Back*

As an artist, activist, and academic, I use community-oriented research to investigate the creation of mythologies, the historical record, and the landscape. I make my research visible by creating artwork that allows various, sometimes conflicting, perspectives to come into contact. Americans have forged a historical record that continues to live in the quotidian experiences of this country--in landmarks, place names, policy decisions, and museum displays--but American history is also located in the stories we tell and the stories told about us. They are true and fictitious, visible and invisible, made and maintained. They are specific reflections of traditional American patriotic desires and fears, possibilities and impossibilities, failures and successes. These stories are affected by the underbelly, as those who fail to fit within the mold create moments of friction. I work with and investigate these stories to make them known, put them in context, and question their unstated place in our understanding of history.

My methodology is one of juxtaposition. In the interest of creating a material library which viewers can unpack, I present a variety of narratives and sources alongside each other. The outcome of my research varies in every project, including performance, printed matter, installation, sound, and video. My projects create an intensely crowded mental and visual field, where the viewer is asked to unwind a puzzle and realize her place as an actor in complicated national histories and present day systems of control. Rather than simply observing, the viewer is asked to write her part of the story. In my
practice I ask the audience to both participate and to spend time in close reading of the stories of others. In doing so, the viewer reveals other stories, uncovers fictions, and begins to suspect the construction of history through precious fragments might become suspect.

The Case for History

When I think of the way we hear politicians speak about the greatness of the United States of America, I think that their jingoism is a false fervor, rooted in an intense unfulfilled desire to be fully in accordance with everything that makes up American identity: past actions, current decisions, mythology, and the physical land. The greatness of America is only able to be seen by forgetting to see other things: slavery, child labor, discrimination, class warfare. I understand the desire to want to believe in the project of America, but this project is inherently contradictory. I make work rooted in it the deeply fraught space of wishful American thinking. Of course, this is an untenable goal. I disagree with much of the policies and politics that make up current and past realities of the United States, as I imagine do those politicians speaking about the greatness of America. And yet, I feel a magnetic connection to this place, parts of the philosophical history that created this nation, and the legacy I hope was intended by the colonists who radicalized, the founding fathers who codified, and the thinkers that created an intellectual tradition in America. This impossibly, idealized form of American identity is mythological in character, comparable to the impossible industrialist feats of John Henry, the Christian naturalist Johnny Appleseed, or the individualist beloved villain Jesse James. This mythological identity is Americanness. It is the character summoned up when Presidents do bad things, when politicians run for office, when middle class
American take road trips, and whenever a flag is waved with pride. It is impossible, but many employ it and lust after it.

Does that not sound like something the 2012 Republican Presidential candidates would say, albeit less sure of myself? Presently in the United States, the history of this nation belongs to the right. There is power in history, and as such, I intend for my work to create a place for progressive people to find solace, power, and meaning in history.

For me, making work is an act of grief, hopefulness, understanding, and action. Like extreme patriots, I want to be able to come to terms with being an American in America. The final stage of grief is acceptance. “I can’t fight it, I might as well accept.” I am not willing to accept America’s history and present, and so, I am trying to learn as much as I can, present this knowledge through my work, and tweak my and my audience’s viewpoint of past events, present happenings, and possible futures.

I intend for my work to be “thick” and deep” in the way that Anthropologist Clifford Geertz would talk about “thick description.” I am first and foremost a researcher, and I intend to make that research visible. Sometimes the work tells a long story, but through knowing that story, elements of Americanness become visible, understandable, mappable. Like any map, the longer spent with it, the easier it is to read, and like any good cartographer, with every iteration the lay of the land becomes clearer.

There are a number of artists currently working in a historical mode. Artists like the Atlas Group, Jeremy Deller, and Renee Green use historical events to their own purpose, creating a revisionist picture of a particular group of actors and actions. Political in nature, these artists use historical narratives and cultural artifacts to critique contemporary events as well as the lenses through which history is viewed. The Atlas
Group, an imaginary group created by Walid Raad, creates fake history as a way to interpret and investigate the Lebanese civil war and foreign involvement in the conflict. His projects include performative lectures, installations, and videos with invented history.

Jeremy Deller is a British artist who is most well known for his large-scale orchestrated reenactment of the battle of Orgreave. This infamous labor battle occurred from 1984 to 1985 and involved thousands of miners striking against Margaret Thatcher’s labor politics. These working class miners fought against policemen and mercenaries, and they ultimately lost. Approximately twenty years later, Deller invited miners and policemen back to the area to reenact the battle alongside professional reenactors. A documentary
investigating the project highlighted the still gaping wounds the battle caused in the community. For the purposes of the performance, miners who were present at the original battle sometimes found themselves acting as a policeman. The film points to the complicated nature of historical production.

Figure 2: Jeremy Deller, still from *The Battle of Orgreave*


Renee Green describes the experience of viewing her work as one of misrecognition. Viewers piece together disparate elements in order to create a web-like understanding of the work, rather than a complete mastery over it. Viewers must actively participate in the process of knowing and building, rather than being passive vessels in which meaning is banked. *Partially Buried in Three Parts* brings Robert Smithson’s

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obtuse and grandiose earth work into context with the Kent State massacre, racial and radical politics of the 1960s and 70s, and interpretations of other audiences (in this case German expatriates living in the US). She describes the work:

Partially Buried Continued is a meditation on ways in which one’s associations to history, location, and genealogy become caught up in a subjective web which makes it difficult to separate history from fiction. The differences between memory as an active process and remembrance as a memorializing act are played out...while attempting to negotiate the circuitous relationship between the present with the past and the future.²

Figure 3: Renee Green’s installation Partially Buried in Three Parts.


In a different vein, artists like Allison Smith, Sam Durant, and Jeremiah Day use visual tropes from a particularly American history to create meaning. These artists choose to use historical events as a palette rather than a litmus test. Their work is based in the

formal decisions of the historical record. Allison Smith’s exquisitely crafted installations and sculptures use visual tropes from a bygone era. Rather than making a political statement, she uses historical modes of production, such as china dolls, punched tin, and quilting, for their aesthetic quality.

Figure 4: Allison Smith’s *Fancy Work*

Sam Durant’s work is equally interested in visually mimicking spaces traditionally seen as sites of historical production and consumption, such as his *Male Colonist (with Cornstalk)*, which reminds the viewer of dioramas found at Old Surbridge Village or Plymouth Plantation. His work *Proposal for a White and Indian Dead Memorial* takes replicas of monuments that currently exist in the world and brings them into proximity, creating a collective meaning. A primarily formal gesture, the work allows the audience to see the construction of history through artifacts.
Figure 6: Sam Durant’s *Male Colonist (with Cornstalk)*

Figure 7: Sam Durant’s *Proposal for White and Indian dead monument.*
Jeremiah Day’s work bridges the formal and political. His choice of subject matter deals more explicitly with history and resistance. In performance, installation, and writing, Day explores “the intersection of landscape and ideology, local memory and ‘world history’.”

Figure 8: Jeremiah Day, *The Books in Fred Hampton’s Apartment*.

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Reading White Pines

Resistance is something elusive. While a revolution is happening, media focuses its efforts on the events, attempting to understand what is happening and why. However, individual acts of resistance are seen less often. With the exception of objects that make it into the historical record—photographs of protesters, rally posters, and organizations’ archives—the chain of events is sometimes lost, only to be reconstructed by agents viewing objects in the archive. Though a picture might be worth a thousand words, the words are spoken by the viewer rather than the object. Objects in the archive are employed by human agents—historians, politicians, activists. The archive is interpreted and made to speak, thus becoming a part of a collective narrative. In my work, obscure stories and images from the archive are made to speak, but I hope that the conversations they create are more open ended, thoughtful, and multi-faceted. In Reading White Pines, I use small stories and images from the historical record to create space for progressive people to comprehend American history. In a time where American history belongs to the right, what does it mean to give some of that history to like-minded people? In Reading White Pines, we get a glimpse of what might occur.

My MFA project investigates, reenacts, and reacts to the uses of white pine trees in North American history. Over time, white pines have been prized by many, though for different reasons. Native Americans received sustenance from pines and used them in political ceremonies; the Iroquois Nation literally buried the hatchets of their tribe underneath the trees’ roots. Native Americans taught colonists of the trees’ ability to cure scurvy. After the British deforested England, they identified white pine as ideal for
making masts for the growing naval fleet and wrote legislation declaring the King of England owner of all pine over 24 inches in diameter. Independence-seeking colonists resisted and milled trees on their land into the widest floorboards possible, creating a blatant display of their anti-colonial sentiments. Ironically, colonists purportedly dressed as Native Americans while cutting down the trees to avoid harsh punishments.

This period appears in the historical record as twenty colonial flags representing pine trees. In 2008, these flags resurfaced at Tea Party rallies, where Tea Party members claim Colonial American radicalization as their own. This is nothing new. In the media and in constructed rhetoric, the right wing mobilizes selective narratives from American history to reinforce the qualities they believe represent the true nature of Americanness.

Reflecting upon the material qualities and symbolic power of the white pine throughout American history, I have created a series of works that ask questions of the production of history. How is the natural world bound up in the process of nation-building? Why is political resistance open to multiple interpretations? How does mythology reflect history? How is mythology influenced by natural laws? How can a single material cause historic time to collapse and actors separated by hundreds of years to be co-present? Since beginning to work with the material of white pines, I have made four distinct projects: a video installation representing the sewing of a flag, a series of narrative self portraiture in midwestern old-growth pine forests, a reexamination of Sherrie Levine’s “Knot,” and a drawing and ephemera installation representing how folks might live with history.

Upon realizing that the Tea Party was interested in the same pine related stories as I was, I was confused and intrigued. I am one of relatively few young Americans to be
interested in American history, but I am also part of the intellectual left. How could the same events be relevant to both the Tea Party and a young, politically active leftist? One particular flag was appearing at Tea Party rallies. I decided to replicate this flag, record the process in digital video, and present the video alongside the scraps leftover from making the flag and a slowly dying pine bough. As needles fell from the bough, they mingled with the fabric straps. This first investigation, *17 colonial pine flags (resisting a nation, building another, resisting a nation)*, acknowledges the presence of 17 unseen flags, where instead we are given objects and a documented performance. The title’s three parts (resisting, building, resisting) eludes to performance as reinterpretation. The importance of flags to nation building might allow the process of reinscribing identity through narrative and performative repetition.

In this video installation and in all of my white pines works, performance and process are highlighted. Duration, labor, and material choices point to the process of history making, in America as in all nations. As the video loops, as I move from sewing one stripe to another, as the seasons change and pine needles fall, American identity is reinforced through physical means. We perform the constructed identity of America in daily activities, for instance when Americans sign the national anthem at sporting events. The importance of performative reinscribing is the reason that the right, who holds a particular vision of American identity close, is afraid to lose the pledge of allegiance in schools. American identity only remains when we think of our landscape as a palimpsest, in which we continually reinforce a particular identity through physical and symbolic means.
What does reinscribing mean? In my work I perform in order to point to the artificialness of this process. Once the nature of construction becomes apparent, we can perhaps find other ways of being. In performance, we find power to recreate and reinterpret our own history and identity.

Figure 9: *17 colonial pine flags* installation
Figure 10: Installation view of 17 colonial pine flags
Stemming from my first investigation into the historical material of white pines, I came to realize that regardless of whether we lived in New England, we were surrounded with pines—in the building materials of our homes, on our bookshelves, the turns of phrase we choose to use, and even the choices in our pantries. In contemporary America, we are affected by the choices of our colonial forefathers. As New England lumber was being shipped across the ocean for the Royal Navy’s ship masts, as tar was being made from the stumps left behind, and as flags reflected the distrust and frustration at this process, a mark from this period would be left on American forest management and quotidian experience. I choose to travel to Midwestern old growth forests to act out these stories in a series of performative self-portraiture. This series is titled “Communing with White Pines.”

Though New England is best known for its relationship with white pines, the lumber industry in the Midwest has also thrived on the tall, straight trees. Throughout the 19th century, large tracts of white pines in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota were sawn and sent down river to develop cities all along the Mississippi. In fact, even some of the building materials used in early Iowa City would have been Wisconsin and Minnesota white pine. There are several small sections of forests that missed the sawmill for one reason or another. I choose to center this series in those locations: White Pine Hollow in Luxembourg, Iowa; Cathedral Pines in the Wisconsin Nicolette National Forest; and the Lost Forty in the Minnesota north woods.

The white pine is a pioneer plant, meaning that it thrives in disturbed soils, such as after a forest fire. Pines grow faster and straighter than their hardwood cousins, taking over forests efficiently and with ease. In a fight for light, their evergreen needles will win
out, eventually shading the ground below. However, white pines, like all pioneer plants, are not intended to last. As such, even in these protected old growth tracts, there are only a few giants left standing. This was most apparent in White Pine Hollow. On my first scouting trip, only one pine was found. It took conferring with a volunteer forest ranger who mapped the remaining pines to find the dozen or so that remain. Though White Pine Hollow is the only old growth white pine forest in Iowa, it will not contain pines for much longer. In this location, I enacted the phrase “bury the hatchet,” which is a common aphorism. In fact, the phrase derives from the beginning of the Iroquois nation, when the original five tribes met in the center of their territory and buried their warring instruments under the largest white pine they could find. This tree was known as the peace tree.

Figure 11: Communing with White Pines: White Pine Hollow
When early explorers arrived in North America, a common complaint was scurvy, caused by a lack of vitamin C. At the Lost Forty I drank pine tea, which is an herbal remedy that Native Americans taught explorers. It is said that a group of French explorers stripped a tree of all its needles and bark in less than a week after being taught the remedy.

Figure 12: *Communing with White Pines: Lost Forty*

The final location for *Communing with White Pines* was at Cathedral Pines in the Nicolette National Forest. White pines are affected by a fungus known as a rust. Many such diseases require two plants in order to survive. In the case of White Pine Blister Rust, the second plant is the currant bush, the fragrant bush that produces red or yellow
tender sweet berries. In order to protect the valuable white pine, teams of men and boys were paid to eradicate the currant bush. In Cathedral Pines I removed, or perhaps planted a currant bush.

Figure 13: Communing with White Pines: Cathedral Pines

The ambiguity of my action in this final photograph allows the act of photographing to become more complicated. Using self-portraiture, I place myself into the historical register of white pines in early North American history. By placing myself in the frame and re-enacting burring the hatchet, drinking pine tea, and eradicating currant bushes, I make a gesture for the power of embodying history. Through working with a material important to at least the last half-millennia of American history, I own this
history. History repeats itself, literally, in these images, but history belongs to the person who claims it.

As the web of white pines continued to unfold, I visited the Walker Art Center and was lucky to see Sherrie Levine’s *Knot* painting. A simple, elegant casein painting on commercially available plywood, Levine’s painting is one of her many projects seen as appropriation works. Levine is well known for her projects addressing ownership and creativity, most notably with her series reexamining Walker Evans’ series of Works Progress Association photographs entitled *Let us now praise famous men*. Seeing Levine’s humorous and simple piece, the inescapable quality of pine was reinforced. The money to build the Walker Art Center was donated by lumber magnates. The studs in the walls are probably pine. In replicating and altering the infamous appropriation artist’s piece, *After Sherrie Levine* points to the ways in which history is continually reinforced. History is everywhere, and we have little power to escape it, similar to our inability to escape the reach of pines. History can, however, be altered to any means. As Walter Benjamin says of the storyteller, “The storyteller takes what he tells from experience--his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.”

In the same way that the white pine flags can be of interest to Tea Party patriots and leftist youths, so too can history be twisted and famous works of art inverted.

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Figure 14: Sherrie Levine, *Knot*.

Figure 15: *After Sherrie Levine*
In the final white pines project, *Reading White Pines*, I hand-sewed replicas of all twenty flags that represented pine trees in the American historical record. These flags were distributed to like-minded people--primarily young, progressive Americans--throughout the United States. In return, I asked the recipients to reflect upon the flag in some way and provide me with documentation of that reflection. I gave participants as much information about the larger project as they asked for. Each participant choose their own flag, according to visual interest or the story of the flag. As such, some participants were only told, “This is the flag of the state of Vermont that was in use until 1837.” Or they received a much larger description of the entire project, detailing the importance of White Pines in New England, to the Mother Country, and to Native Americans. Leaving the form, content, and depth of their reflection open, participants brought their own interests to the work. Responses took the form of free-writing, student surveys, a single photograph of a flag hung in their apartment, staged performative photography, and wearing the flag often as a cape to local events. The breadth of responses, from the mundane to the extraordinary, reflects the ways in which people experience history. Some people see history as a material that can be manipulated (see Figure 17, 18, and 19 for Aaron Strong and Josh Dumas’ responses to their flags), while others see history as something that we live with every day (see Figure 20 for Andy Sturdevant’s response, the flag hung on his wall with some research into the function of flags). Both responses are
valid and telling to understanding how history can be employed and the effect history has on our experience.

Figure 17: Participant’s response to the Governors’ Council of New England States flag.
Figure 18: One response to the George Rex III flag.

Figure 19: Another response to the George Rex III flag.
Figure 20: Participant’s response to the pine tree flag in John Trumbull’s painting “Battle of Bunker Hill.”
The participant responses were presented alongside colored pencil and ink drawing of the flags, mounted on plywood with a short description of their original use. Together, the photograph and participant responses might create a window into a flag’s function, addressing how historical moments are transposed into the current political milieu. Through the time it takes to read each short description and view the participant responses, a collective narrative of white pines is developed. At the opening, I prepared white pine tea for the audience while telling the complicated story of pines. In this informal performance, I hope to reenforce that narrative and allow it to be consumed by the viewers. As in much of my work, the power of an individual story pulled from the archive is acted upon by the viewer, myself as the artist, and other participants. History is consumed. History becomes lived.

Figure 21: Panorama of Reading White Pines installation.
Figure 22: *Reading White Pines* opening.

Figure 23: Image of the entryway to *Reading White Pines*, with one of the last flags to be distributed. The flag was blown by a house fan across the entryway.
Figure 24: Waiting for the performance storytelling to begin at the *Reading White Pines* opening.

Figure 25: Tea making setup, including a campfire burner, mortar and pestle, a teapot, cup and strainer.
Figure 26: Shelves of the teacups and thermoses set up and ready for a white pine tea drinking ceremony.
The Power of Looking

I am interested in the tactics used to make a nation, through history and symbols, digestible to the public. The nation relies on symbols, which are made real through a mixture of origin myths, the historical record, and a continual reinforcement of the power of these symbols through media and orality. The American flag, for instance, is continually reasserted through the pledge of allegiance (which throughout my childhood was said daily in schools), flag day, figures like Betsy Ross, and its use in lapel pins, bunting, stickers, magnets, and license plates. The process by which symbols are made real is intriguing, fraught, and never-ending. This process is inherently performative in nature. Cultural theorist Diana Taylor speaks of this in her text, *The Archive and the*
*Repertoire.* She explains the difference between the archive, which is constructed out of real objects that are supposedly resistant to change, and the repertoire, which is built from lived experiences:

The repertoire enacts embodied memory-performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing...all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral. The repertoire requires presence. People participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by 'being there.' As opposed to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning. Dances change over time, even though generations of dancers (or even individual dancers) swear they're always the same. But even though the embodiment changes, the meaning might very well remain the same.5

As citizens we perform citizenship, whether that be constructing national symbols, protesting, or voting. These are highly ritualistic modes of being American. Whether we like it or not, the national anthem is sung around us at every sporting event. We take off our hats, stand, and place our hands over our hearts. Or we don’t.

National symbols are one of the most visual ways that a perceived collective historical narrative is constructed and reinforced. While some symbols continue to live, others, like the pine flags, ebb and flow. They find their moments hundreds of years apart; through time and space, their meaning becomes flexible. Individuals have power to gather, understand, and construct their own meaning.

Like everyone and everything, there are flaws running down to the core of Americanness, but acknowledging these flaws, accepting them, and working to remedy them when possible, is a challenge. In my work, I follow the cracks down to their origin, allowing me to recognize the beginning of the flaw and begin to, in a minute way, mend it in the company of others. After all, as Keith Basso, cultural anthropologist studying the

conceptions of place to the Western Apache noted, "relationships to place are lived most often in the company of other people."^6

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