The Home Project: an Examination of How Home Changed During the COVID-19 Global Pandemic Using Socially Engaged Art

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THE HOME PROJECT: AN EXAMINATION OF HOW HOME CHANGED DURING THE COVID-19 GLOBAL PANDEMIC USING SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART

By
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B.F.A. University of Maine, 2018

A THESIS
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of Master of Fine Arts (in Intermedia)

The Graduate School
The University of Maine
August 2022

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THE HOME PROJECT: AN EXAMINATION OF HOW HOME CHANGED DURING THE COVID-19 GLOBAL PANDEMIC USING SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART

By Rochelle Lawrence

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Susan Smith

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented

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On the table in her bedroom were small glasses of soil, beautiful powders in ochers and reds and even lavender she had gathered in deserts around the world, and it was as though through being uprooted so many times this was all the homeland that was left to her; this collection of earths like the jars of rouge and powder another woman might have on her vanity. -- Rebecca Solnit

By the time I left home at 18, I had lived in 23 dwellings. My upbringing was unconventional and ungrounded. I grew up without many family traditions and as a result I craved knowing about other people’s experiences. I loved to hear people share stories about their heritage and continue to love hearing people talk about where they are from and where they have
been. This is my most natural way of relating to others. I also find great meaning in relating to people through art.

Creating, whether painting in a school building or making sand castles on a beach, is my way of rooting in. Making things is how I ground myself. The author Rudolfo Anaya wrote, “When people ask me where my roots are, I look down at my feet, and I see the roots of my soul grasping the earth” (Cheuse). Anaya was born, lived and schooled in New Mexico, he wrote stories based in New Mexico. His statement has weight. When I think of my roots, they are not attached to any land, that land is in the jars and envelopes of the places I have lived, but my roots are in my art. I don’t view art as just something I make, I view art as the way I live, communicate, root in and make home. For me, art is the tool that I use to engage in work that involves me and other people.

This thesis examines the relationship between art making and connection with community which resolves itself in a socially engaged practice that aims to bring people together through engagement. By realizing that art is an opening for creating meaning beyond making objects, art can create a space where ideas can be explored, stories can be told, conversations can be had, and moments can be shared. Art becomes both function and form, and becomes a crucible whereby others can participate and impact both outcome and process, for themselves and others.

There are a number of ways to describe this collaborative process where art is used as a medium for interaction with others; socially engaged art, socially engaged practice, social practice art, or relational aesthetics. These theories have slightly different ideologies but share the collaborative spirit of moving art out of a studio/gallery/museum to a space of interaction with others; in essence combining life and art. Social practice can be a beneficial tool in
education, as it can reach across disciplines. When art is used as a tool for communication or community building, people can become aware of the historical nature of art and see the ways that art has been used in the past. Socially engaged art creates space for art to move into new places.

This thesis work began just months before the onset of the COVID-19 Global Pandemic and consequent shut down. The work was heavily influenced and informed by the pandemic.
DEDICATION

For Josh,

Thank you for always believing in me and supporting me. You and I are home wherever we are -
you give me a reason to keep making home.

Love, Roe
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Ask a western European or North American child to draw a house, and the odds are good that the result will be a picture of a detached building with some or all of the following: a pitched roof, a chimney belching out a friendly plume of smoke, a front door at the centre or at the house’s gable end, from which a path runs through a garden that is surrounded by a fence. -Judith Flanders

To this day, if I was asked to draw a house, instinctually, this is what I would draw and yet I did not grow up in a house that looked like that. I didn’t live in a house that looked remotely like that archetypal house until I was in my mid-twenties and it was a very tiny version of that typical house. Many people have never lived in a house that looks like that. The first definition of ‘house’ in the Merriam-Webster dictionary is, “a building in which a family lives.” Merriam-Webster defines ‘home’ as 1. the place (such as a house or apartment) where a person lives, 2. a family living together in one building, house, etc., and 3. a place where something normally or naturally lives or is located. The difference between these two definitions is somewhat significant; we tend to use the words differently. We as humans need structures to live in, but I believe that we consciously “make” a home. Whether we make that home in a house, apartment, cottage, condominium, mobile home, tiny house, camper, or a tent - these are all homes.
Houses have changed historically for many reasons; for example, advances in the understanding of building materials and construction methods. Humans have learned to build structures that are able to withstand certain weather conditions and natural disasters and we are able to use these structures to prepare for the future. These structures are often defined by economic status. Sometimes these structures are paid for by our governments. Houses can provide us with protection from the outside world and are generally thought to be the place where we feel safe. All of this to say, the concept of house is a complex idea and it varies from person to person and family to family. The concept of home is one that, for me, feels more active and warm. We make home. Whether we buy or rent a structure to live in, once we move in we make that place into our home and we all do it differently. There are many variables that influence our idea of home and what home means on a personal level, but there are constructs of home that we can all understand.

In the second half of March 2020, for most people in North America and most of the globe, home changed. The COVID-19 Global Pandemic forced the majority of us to stay home for work and school, for safety from a very contagious disease. In the United States, California was the first state to issue a ‘stay at home order’ on March 19, 2020 (Executive Order N-33-20) followed quickly by New York (3/20), Illinois (3/21), and New Jersey (3/21). (States that issued lockdown and stay-at-home orders in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, 2020 - Ballotpedia). As we were made to stay home - our homes changed and suddenly our homes became our whole world.
Being ‘confined’ in our homes changed so many parts of our lives, from what we cooked to how we ate, when and how we slept, what we wore, and who we did or did not spend time with. Some of us had to construct home offices or home classrooms where we would spend our days looking at computer screens, talking to others through Zoom or other video conferencing software. In my home, our bedroom became my husband’s office, our dining room and sometimes living room became my son’s school, and our laundry room became my office. Some of us didn’t have the luxury of a designated space for work or school and had to depend on a virtual background image to mask showing classmates or coworkers too much personal information. Some of us took on new hobbies, started a garden, or learned a musical instrument. We learned new phrases like ‘telehealth’ and started to see our doctors and therapists on our computers.

Some of us were front line or essential workers and didn’t have the luxury of staying in the safety of our homes. The CDC identified ‘essential workers’ as “those who conduct a range
of operations and services in industries that are essential to ensure the continuity of critical functions in the United States” (CDC Website). For many healthcare workers, grocery store workers, pharmacists, truck drivers, postal workers and delivery drivers, janitorial workers, etc., - these people had to leave their homes everyday so that others could stay safely at home. These 55 million essential workers kept the country running.

![Essential workers by industry, 2019](image)

**Figure 1.2 Essential Workers By Industry, 2019**

In our homes we kept track of how many people were getting sick from COVID-19 and how many people were dying. We bought face masks and hand sanitizer online to protect ourselves from the virus when we had to leave our home to go to the grocery store. We watched
and listened to the news of our economy plummeting and the plight of the unemployed. On May 7, 2020 Time Magazine reported,

Since mid-March, more than 30 million people have filed for unemployment—more than three times as many as lost their jobs during the two-year-long Great Recession. Meanwhile, after a steep but brief dip in March, the stock market rallied. The richest and most well-connected are seeing their wealth reaccumulate, as if by magic, while middle- and working-class families drown in debt that deepens with every passing week (Semuels, 2020).

For many, because of this financial crisis, home instability became a dilemma. On March 27, 2020 the CARES Act (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) was signed into law. The CARES Act in short provided assistance to families and workers, small businesses, State, Local, and Tribal governments, and to industry. The CARES Act established a rental eviction moratorium, “which mandated that it was illegal to evict tenants who participate in federal housing assistance programs or who live in properties with a federally backed mortgage loan due to the nonpayment of rent” (Broady, et al., 2020). The Brookings article goes on to report that this moratorium was not necessarily the solution to this issue of housing insecurity. Although these renters were temporarily protected, many of the landlords were in financial calamity as a result of not being able to collect rent or move a renter that could not pay rent. And the renters were not forgiven of their rent, ultimately they still owed rent but had no income to pay it and did lose their housing once the moratorium was lifted. This became one more way that home may have changed during the Pandemic.
In March of 2020, there were an estimated 55 million k-12 students attending public and private schools in the United States. EducationWeek.org tracked and reported on the closure of these schools due to Covid-19. On Feb. 25, 2020 the CDC released its first warning that the schools should prepare for the coronavirus. On March 11th the World Health Organization announced the Covid-19 Global Pandemic. By March 16th, “more than half of all students in the U.S. have been impacted by school closures” (Decker, et al., 2021). School closures for most children meant a transition from physical school to virtual learning in their homes. This was a drastic change for millions of people in the United States. Having children suddenly home all day long meant the need for childcare/supervision, the need for meals that may have been provided by their school, a need for a computer and internet access, a need for learning resources, and for some - a need for heat or other utilities during the day. Homes had to become schools.

Figure 1.3 The Author’s Son remote learning during the Covid-19 shutdown.
In the town where I live, the school buses would load up on Monday mornings with packaged breakfasts and lunches for students that needed food as well as school supplies and resources - mostly for the elementary aged students that didn’t have school issued laptops. The middle school and high school students already had a practice of issuing laptops to their students at the beginning of the school year, so in a sense, it was an easier transition for the older students to start learning remotely. Many of their teachers already used Google Classroom as a way of organizing their classes and assignments. The elementary school aged students and their parents were at a greater disadvantage as far as learning and classroom management because these students were used to doing all of their learning in-person, in their classrooms. I personally knew a number of families where both parents were essential workers and they had young children at home that needed supervision so that they could go out and do their jobs while their children stayed at home to learn remotely. Some families found grandparents or neighbors that could help while others had to take leave from their jobs to be at home with their children. For some families, it wasn’t even that the parents were essential workers - even parents doing their jobs at home remotely are working, so they can’t necessarily monitor the learning and care of their children throughout the day. In my day, I had some flexibility to check in with my son as he was doing his school work. I could make sure that he stayed on task, I could make him lunch and chat with him for 5 minutes in between my classes or meetings. We would only see my partner, who worked upstairs in a bedroom, at lunch time. He is a clinical psychologist and had to have a noise machine in front of the door to protect his client’s privacy. He would be in back to back sessions from 7am to 12pm and then from 12:30pm to 6pm. If he was the only caretaker it would have been impossible for him to actually care for our child and work remotely.
Many women, whether essential workers or otherwise, found that keeping their jobs and caring for their children during the pandemic was just too difficult. In an article put out by the Pew Charitable Trusts, “mothers of small children have lost work at three times the rate of fathers in the pandemic, a situation that threatens not only progress toward gender equity but middle-class income gains that have become increasingly dependent on working women” (Henderson, 2020). The loss was even worse for single mothers. In another article by the same author at Pew, Henderson (2020) writes about how the pandemic job loss hit low-wage single mothers the hardest. Prior to the pandemic, 58% of service jobs were held by women and by mid-April 2020 almost 5.7 million women had lost those jobs (Henderson, 2020). The only silver lining for these women is that many of them qualified for unemployment and received stimulus money that helped out temporarily. But of course, none of us could predict how long the pandemic would last or the other ways it would affect us.

As we waited for a solution to the disease, we also experienced food shortages and inflations of cost on many food staples. As a result of the shutdown, there were major disturbances in our supply chains. Many folks that were experiencing unemployment and food insecurity found that it was not easy to get supplemental food to feed their families. Many towns and cities had food banks, but folks had to wait in huge lines in order to get their share of food. According to an article from Oct 22, 2020 from CNN.com, “On average, about 22.5% of households were food insecure each week from May 5 to July 21, according to an analysis by Northwestern University's Institute for Policy Research” (Schanzenbach & Tomeh, 2020). This is one of the reasons that our school district was delivering packaged breakfasts and lunches to students every Monday morning, to help keep them fed for the week. When schools first went remote, many students that rely on getting two meals a day at school suddenly were going
hungry. The Brookings Institution released a study in July showing that about 13.9 million children living in the United States are living without enough food to keep them healthy (Bauer, 2020).

The isolated nature of the shut down inflamed situations of domestic abuse. Homes can be prisons for people in abusive relationships and the restrictive nature of the shut down during the pandemic exacerbated these situations. In their article *Sheltering in Place and Domestic Violence: Evidence from Calls for Service During COVID-19* Emily Leslie and Riley Wilson (2020) report that the “pandemic led to a 7.5% increase in calls for service during March, April, and May. The biggest increase came during the first five weeks after widespread social distancing began, when domestic violence calls were up 9.7%.” There was also reporting from health workers treating COVID-19 patients, radiologists reviewing screens were not just seeing lungs infected with COVID, but also evidence of physical abuse such as fractured bones and punctured organs (Healy, 2020).

These are just a handful of ways that our homes changed during the COVID-19 Pandemic. It was a striking realization, that collectively so many people could be going through these extreme changes at the same time and yet that did not make these changes feel normal. Would our idea of home change as a result of all of these pandemic changes? Would home ever feel normal again? These are the questions that I wanted to explore as a project with community engagement.
Intervention

“An artist’s duty, as far as I am concerned, is to reflect the times.” - Nina Simone

It wasn’t just the pandemic and being isolated from my community, the community of artists and academics that I relate with at the University of Maine, that directed my interest to how home had changed for others. My artistic motivation changed a few years ago and my reason for returning to academia was to learn how to turn an object making practice into a practice that connects art and people in a more communal way. I felt a pull to make art that was relevant to the times that we are living in - to use my skills as an artist to bring awareness to problems that need recognition. I felt that it was my responsibility to become more involved in the public sphere and use my art more effectively. There are a number of ways to talk about this type of practice, and even different names for it. Some refer to it as socially engaged art or practice, community engaged art, relational aesthetics, participatory art, activist art, cooperative art, collaborative art, participatory art, or even public art. These are all somewhat different but the common idea behind them is that there is meaningful engagement with others and the art becomes focused on the process and the participation. In most cases, the participation and collaboration become the artwork in and of itself. In the teaching book, Art as a Social Action, the authors describe this type of practice:

its overall objective is not merely to make art that represents instances of socio political injustice (consider Picasso’s Guernica), but to employ the varied forms offered by the expanded field of contemporary art as a collaborative, collective, and participatory social method for bringing about real-world instances of progressive justice, community building, and transformation (Sholette & Bass, 2018, p. xiii).
And in this way, the artwork is something altogether different than an object. This is the kind of art that I want to make. And for the purpose of this paper I will refer to the art I make as socially engaged art or social practice.

My entrance into wanting to work differently with art occurred when I was studying sculpture in 2018. I was also interning at the University of Maine Museum of Art, now known as the Zillman Art Museum, where I would pass a sculpture of the Norse Goddess by Lewis Iselin everyday on my way into work. Not only was I struck by the strength and beauty of this sculpture, this woman, but also her isolation. She was situated by herself, in the courtyard of a contemporary art museum. Something about her didn’t fit and I wanted to intervene with the work. I had recently been studying the work of Cornelia Parker and the intervention piece that she had done, The Distance (A Kiss With Added String) at the Tate Britain in 2003. An art intervention is when an artist designs a work or a project that interacts with an existing artwork, site, or audience (tate.org). Parker received permission to intervene with the famous sculpture, The Kiss, by Auguste Rodin. Parker meticulously wrapped a mile of string around the sculpture, creating a sense of bondage and tension with her intervention. Parker’s intervention was also a nod to the artist Marcel Duchamp who created a piece of work in 1942 called 16 Miles of String where he strung a web of string throughout the gallery exhibition of the First Papers of Surrealism. For the opening, Duchamp instructed some children to play games in the gallery space while visitors meandered through the exhibition. The concept of the artwork having to do with play as well as following closely in Duchamp’s spirit of combining life and art. Neither Duchamp nor Parker’s works would be considered social practice or socially engaged although an argument could be made for the Duchamp piece because the children playing made the piece
interactive as well as giving different meaning to the work, but both pieces would be considered intervention.

Figure 1.4 16 Miles of String: Marcel Duchamp 1942
Figure 1.5 *The Kiss*, Auguste Rodin 1901-4
An art intervention adds to or changes the meaning of the existing work, in the case of *The Distance* Cornelia Parker literally added a layer to the existing piece and bound the two figures together with an everyday material. For me, Parker made a piece of high art more accessible by adding something so banal to it. She also changed the meaning of the work. Rodin is a master sculptor that every art student has to study. I have visited his house in Paris twice to see and study his work. When Parker wrapped his marble in everyday kitchen string she made his work feel like it was now ‘touchable’. Parker’s intervention also provoked me to think about sculpture differently, more interactively. The dimensions and materials that artists make sculpture
with often beg to be touched but it is generally forbidden, at least in most museum and gallery settings. I believe that sculpture is very different from paintings in that way, the dimensionality of stone or bronze actively protrudes into the space that we move around in. I wanted to interact with sculpture.

Figure 1.7 Norse Sea Goddess, 1938, Lewis Iselin

For an intervention with the Norse Sea Goddess by Lewis Iselin at the University of Maine Museum of Art, I was interested in creating an additional sculpture that encircled the existing sculpture but I was also concerned to hear what others in my community thought or felt
about this sculpture and her placement in the courtyard. Also, I had permission to create an intervention but that permission did not extend to touching the sculpture. I reached out to 50 people that I knew in the greater Bangor area with a letter that included images of the sculpture and the courtyard. In the letter I asked people to respond with one word - how they thought or felt about the sculpture on her own and/or in relation to her surroundings. While I waited for the responses I created two 12’ long, curved, steel parentheses that would encircled the sculpture and hold the responses that I received back from members of my community. I painted the steel bright red as a way to complement the green patina of the copper sculpture and also because I associate bright red with contemporary art and the UMaine Museum of Art is a contemporary art museum. Once I received the responses, I created red flags with hidden magnets and wrote the responses on the flags. On the day of installation, we placed the curved steel around the Norse Goddess and then placed the flags on the steel so that the sculpture would be encircled in the responses. I felt that this project had connected me to this sculpture that I felt was isolated and out of place while connecting me with my community which is a community of friends, family, and associates. My hope for the project was to introduce this sculpture to more people while also letting them know that this sculpture was connected to an incredible art museum that was right in their backyard. I was hoping that by asking people to have a personal response to a piece of artwork, that they might also become more interested in art. This is when I started to look at art as a potential way to engage with community.
Participation

“All art, inasmuch as it is created to be communicated to or experienced by others, is social” (Helguera, 2011, p. 1). Helguera writes this at the very beginning of his book, Education for Socially Engaged Art, as he is defining socially engaged art. He quickly moves to talk about a term I like to use, “social practice”:

The term “social practice” obscures the discipline from which socially engaged art emerged (i.e., art). In this way it denotes the critical detachment from other forms of art-making (primarily centered and built on the personality of the artist) that is inherent to socially engaged art, which, almost by definition, is dependent on the involvement of
As an object maker, coming into this new practice, I was not fully certain about how to approach projects. My first intervention had been successful, but I didn’t have a pocket full of new ideas. This was not like sitting down at my pottery wheel with twenty lumps of clay that were weighed and ready for making mugs. For one of my first projects as an MFA candidate, I let the seasons guide me. It was impossible to not feel inspiration from the incredible autumn we were having, the leaves were changing in vibrant shades of yellow, orange, and red. As a transplant from California I both enjoy the beauty of autumn but always feel the impending doom of winter. I wanted to create an experience that would bring that beauty and mystery of fall inside. I wanted to share the exploration of the tension between being present and experiencing that beauty with the knowledge that change is coming. The Tension Between Fragility and Strength provided an interactive experience, an experience where a person’s senses would have to be used in order to understand the installation, where viewers could walk through spaces created by hanging leaves. I created this piece as a way to examine the natural tension that exists between fragility and strength in nature as well as in our own lives. By using the concept as a metaphor, and inviting people to immerse themselves in the space, I was hoping to offer a place to reflect on this tension that we experience. To experience the installation, the spectators had to walk through the hanging rows of colorful leaves. As they walked they would hear the rustling of the leaves move with the movement of their body through the path. For art to be interactive, there must be a spectator present, and in the case of this piece, to move through the installation. This was a truly interactive art piece but it was definitely not socially engaged. Because of my position as an MFA candidate I was able to get feedback from classmates but that wasn’t built
into the project. If I had more time I may have been able to create an aspect of this piece where I could have asked participants to reflect on how they felt being in the installation, but honestly the project wasn’t created with that intention so that doesn’t seem authentic to the piece. But I do believe that it was a stepping stone in thinking about work and making different work.

Figure 1.9 *The Tension Between Fragility and Strength*, Rochelle Lawrence, 2018
Practice

In my practice, every project begins with a question or a problem. These questions are often in response to internal or external struggles that are either related to a personal experience or to an external societal issue that affects me. There are a number of reasons that I want to engage with others while exploring these questions and ideas. Art is an exceptional language for communication and using art for engagement can reveal meaningful outcomes. John Dewey declared, “Art is the most effective mode of communication that exists (Dewey, 1910, p. 286).” I believe art has the power to move topics beyond an initial idea and into places of agency or change. John Dewey wrote extensively about art as lived experience. In *My Pedagogic Creed* he wrote, “I believe that the art of thus giving shape to human powers and adapting them to social service, is the supreme art; one calling into its service the best of artists; that no insight, sympathy, tact, executive power, is too great for such service (Dewey, 1910, p. 18)”. Dewey’s belief of art as a lived experience resonates in me and in the way that I want to make art. But for the work to be socially or community engaged, identifying those communities needs to be the focus of the work as well. Part of the research would be to learn about working with communities. I had ideas of course, and had been involved in groups that had identified as ‘communities’. Reading *The Art of Community* by Charles H. Vogl was a starting point. I liked Vogl’s definition of community, “a group of individuals who share mutual concern for each other’s welfare” (Vogl, 2016, p. 97). I think there are differences though, between formal and informal communities. I consider the town that I live in to be a community and I know that not everyone in my town is concerned about my welfare. So sketching out what kind of community you're dealing with for a particular project was going to be very important for what kind of participation would be likely.
Participation or collaboration with the public is paramount for a social practice. Creating a social framework for engagement is essential for working with a community. In Artificial Hells, Claire Bishop theorizes about the need for the encounter to go beyond just encounter and into a place of social change. She argues that “artists devising social situations as a dematerialised, anti-market, politically engaged project to carry on the avant-garde call to make art a more vital part of life (Bishop, 2012, p. 13)”. I don’t know that it is always possible to make change or improve society, but Bishop’s ideas about social practice leading to change is something that I consider when thinking about projects. Art is a way of communicating and can be used to help others see something that they may not have seen before. As an artist, I believe it is my responsibility, as Nina Simone said, to reflect the times and I hope to work with others with awareness towards solutions. Using art to engage others can be an effective approach towards change. The challenge in this approach to art, especially socially engaged art, is finding the community to work with. The community will be different for each project and in some cases the community may already exist. Many of the well known socially engaged artists, Claire Bishop, Theaster Gates, Suzanne Lacy, and Pablo Helguera are and have been educators. The beauty of working as an educator is that you can plan a project that works really well with your curriculum or drum up interest in a project just by presenting the idea to students at your University that know your work. It’s almost like having an instant community. Moving forward after the MFA at the University of Maine, I think I will struggle a bit to find communities to work with but with enough thought and care towards outreach I am hopeful that I will find people that will share an interest in creating projects with me.
Socially Engaged Practice

There are different thoughts and theories about the birth of socially engaged art. Some critics write about it stemming from Minimalism and the Land Art movement of the 1970s (Kwon, 1997). The departure from object making and placing a work in a gallery or museum to the process of making a work for a specific place or space seems to be the root of the conversation. In a more recent essay by art historian Vid Simoniti, Simoniti tackles a dispute about the roots of socially engaged art by looking closely at Miwon Kwon’s seminal essay One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity (Kwon, 1997) and Jason Gaiger’s essay Dismantling the Frame: Site-Specific Art and Aesthetic Autonomy (Gaiger, 2009). In Kwon’s writing, she explores how Minimalist work was created for a particular site (ie: site specific) and Land Art which was created for a distinct space and how these pieces depended on their relationship with their site. This was something different when considering a piece of artwork that was created in an artist’s studio and then brought to a museum or gallery to be hung on a wall or placed on a pedestal. For example, in 1992, the Museum of Modern Art in New York held a retrospective of Henri Matisse’s work. One of Matisse’s most famous works, *Dance II*, 1912 (Fig. 1.10 ), which is owned by the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia was brought to New York. The painting, although in a different site, showed in the same way and had the same meaning in New York as it did in its home in Russia. The painting was part of a comprehensive retrospective and in that way the situation for showing the painting was different, but the actual painting and Matisse’s meaning for the painting was the same. Counter to this, if we think about *Spiral Jetty*, (Fig. 1.11 ) Robert Smithson’s iconic land art work from 1970 - this is a site-specific work. Smithson created the piece to be exactly where it was created and still exists today. The work was inspired by the natural environment and created to exist in union with the environment.
Kwon’s theory goes beyond just the physical nature of the artwork. She is looking at the social implications of site-specificity as well. As in this passage,

In addition, current forms of site-oriented art, which readily take up social issues (often inspired by them), and which routinely engage the collaborative participation of audience groups for the conceptualization and production of the work, are seen as a means to strengthen art’s capacity to penetrate the sociopolitical organization of contemporary life with greater impact and meaning. In this sense the possibilities to conceive the site as something more than a place - as repressed ethnic history, a political cause, a disenfranchised social group - is a crucial conceptual leap in redefining the “public” role of art and artists (Kwon, 1997, p.96).

This was a departure from how art had been considered up until this time. A little over a decade later, Art Historian Jason Gaiger builds on Kwon’s ideas by introducing the relationship of aesthetic autonomy to site-specificity. The idea of aesthetic autonomy is based in Kantian theory and is in and of itself a controversial idea that has been debated in the art world for decades. The Kantian view in the most simplest terms would be that the aesthetic does have a place but is not essential to life. (Gaiger, 1999 & utticken, 2014). Gaiger argues that, “the reorientation of recent art practice toward site-specificity is best understood as a progressive relinquishment of the principle of aesthetic autonomy and thus as a sustained interrogation of one of the core components of the modern concept of art” (Gaiger, 2009, p. 46). Simoniti pushes this idea further by saying that, “[socially engaged artists] dedicate themselves pragmatically to measurable impact, aligning their art with social work, activism, or technology development” (Simoniti, 2018, p.74). This idea of art having social value resonates with the way that I view
socially engaged art and the way I wish to have a social practice. I hope to situate my work in a space that is meaningful to the place and time that I am living.

Figure 1.10 Dance II, Henri Matisse, 1912, photo courtesy of The Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia
One artist that blends art and life beautifully in a socially engaged manner is Theaster Gates. One of the first projects I remember hearing about years ago was his Dorchester Projects. Essentially Gates bought his first home on Dorchester Avenue on the Southside of Chicago, in 2006. This was a neighborhood where many homes were vacant and dilapidated. This neighborhood was also plagued with constant crime and violence. In 2008 he had the opportunity to buy the house next door to his home. He used building materials from this house to finish renovating his home. Then in 2009 he bought a third building and started renovating this and the second building. These buildings were renovated using repurposed materials to create community spaces for art and culture that were literally next door to his home. One building became a repository for a massive record collection and another building became a black cinema house and meeting place. The intention was to engage the community in the process of creation of these spaces that they could use. In an Art 21 episode on Gates, he talks about his reasons for

**Figure 1.11 Spiral Jetty, Robert Smithson, 1970, photo courtesy of Utah Museum of Fine Arts**
the project and the results and how his hope was that by providing a space for art and culture to exist alongside the violence, that would be enough to somehow “slow it down and make it stop” (9/16/2016, Art21). What a radical idea, that art could make violence stop. I think what Gates is saying is that when there is a community to be invested in and engaged with; music, pottery, film, etc., there is a potential for community engagement. And if we are invested, first in our homes and then in our community, there is less chance for violence. This idea can work for communities that are not plagued with violence as well - engagement through art and culture can bring people together in different ways, it can enrich life in different ways. If we are interested in rooting into our homes and communities, art is a meaningful way to do that.
On March 11, 2020, after the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 global pandemic, the University of Maine pivoted to remote learning to protect its students, staff, and faculty. The spring semester was at its midpoint and I had several large projects fall apart within days of the shut down. How can you create socially engaged projects when you and everyone you know are isolated in your homes? We were all in shock and just trying to do the next thing to keep some kind of normalcy happening in our lives. But no one’s lives were normal, especially the people who were getting sick and the people that had to try and heal them.

In Histories and Theories taught by Dr. Owen Smith, we learned about the artist Ray Johnson who used mail as a means of art and communication. Johnson called it Mail Art. He would create multiples, a series of identical works, and sometimes the art would be on the outside of the envelope and sometimes on the inside. To learn about Ray Johnson was incredibly exciting. He had left the New York art scene after being mugged and moved to Long Island, NY where he felt more safe. He used Mail Art to stay connected with the New York City art scene and beyond. He would invite recipients of his mail to add something to the letter or envelope and send it back or send it on to another person. While Johnson’s mail art is not necessarily thought of as socially engaged art, Tim Keane of Hyperallergic writes, “his mail art interrogates and disrupts the notion of authorship and the inevitable commodification and institutionalization of art. The work is simultaneously cerebral and visceral, markedly private while fostering
community” (Keane, 2015). Figure 2.1 shows the original mail art piece that Johnson sent out and Figure 2.2 is one of the pieces that he received back.

Figure 2.1 and 2.2 Please Add & Return To, Ray Johnson, c 1980s and Funky but Chic, T. Hachtman, c 1980s

In this spirit, I created a small project, Be Well and Make Art. I created a block print of a black cat with the message, “Be Well (and make art)”. I created an edition of 25 and sent them out to classmates and other artists - the people that are in my closest working community. I also printed a small cat on the front of each envelope and on the back of each envelope I wrote, “send me a little art”. This was more of an experiment than anything. I wanted to see if people would engage and send me some art after I had sent them some art. Over the next month I received a steady stream of envelopes back. Those threads of community felt just a little bit stronger.
Figure 2.3 and 2.4 Be Well and Make Art Project, Envelopes, Rochelle Lawrence, 2020
The Fire Bread Project

The next project began as a way of engaging eight of my classmates in a ritual that I have shared with my family for years - cooking bread on a stick over a fire. I was curious if food could bring people together, even remotely. Right before the shut down, in one of my classes we were talking about the activist Greta Thunberg and her powerful quote, “I want you to act as if your house is on fire. Because it is.” She said those words in a speech at the World Economic Forum on Jan 25, 2019. In January 2020, while parts of California and Australia were burning -
terrible wildfires like we have never seen before-it felt as if our world was on fire. Then COVID-19 turned into a global pandemic and we were now living in a national shutdown. Greta Thunberg was talking about the Climate Crisis in her speech but the metaphor of our house being on fire seemed very appropriate with everything else that was going on as well. By the middle of May 2020, life as we knew it had been shut down for two months and the loss of life from COVID-19 was nearing 100,000 in the United States. So I chose to name my project Fire Bread for the reasons that our “house” was on fire and also, you cook the bread over a fire. By cooking the bread over a fire you are also more apt to make a fire with the people you live with and create an experience - a coming together. I was hoping that by putting together these packets of dry ingredients for making a bread that I was 1. Sending a gift to people that I cared about, 2. Giving them a gift to share with their families, 3. This gift would bring them together in a positive way - making and eating bread and communing over the experience. I received positive feedback from the recipients. One of the recipients was a high school teacher and she asked if I would be interested in creating this project for her students. This was exactly the kind of project I was hoping for. The high school agreed to pay for the ingredients and supplies if I would make 100 bags. The project consisted of muslin bags that I block printed with a linoleum block. Within each bag was a parchment paper bag with a mixture of flour, vital wheat gluten, sugar, salt, yeast and printed instructions. Recipients needed to just add water and oil to make their bread.
Figure 2.6 Dry Ingredients for Fire Bread Project
Figure 2.7 100 Bags of Bread Mixture
The Fire Bread Project reached nearly a hundred students. The art teacher at Hampden Academy created a website for the students to submit pictures of their bread and themselves with their bread. The students were able to see each other's bread projects by visiting the website. In her essay, Why Socially Art Can’t Be Taught, Jen Delos Reys writes about food based projects. She talks about how they bring people together and says, “these projects are a staple of socially engaged art. For good reason, food can create situations of sharing, community, and literal nourishment” (Sholette, et al., 2018, p.203). The Fire Bread Project was bringing these high school students and their families together with other students and families, even though they were learning remotely. The project was successful. The goal had been to engage this community
and create a meaningful experience for these students where they could relate to their families and their classmates through bread making.

The Postal Project

During the summer of 2020, COVID-19 continued to rage through cities and towns of the United States. Americans stayed home, socially distanced, and wore masks when in public. One way that Americans coped with the shutdown was to order the products that they needed through the mail. Our main delivery systems; the United States Postal Service, UPS, and FedEx were pushed beyond capacity with the amount of packages they had to deliver. In addition to the influx of packages, the United States Postal System was dealing with a new Postmaster General, Louis DeJoy. He was brought on by then President Donald Trump to shake up the postal system. DeJoy, one of Trump’s Republican mega-benefactors, had no prior postal experience before being placed in the most powerful and important position with respect to the United States Postal Service (Rappeport, 2020). Trump has been a longtime critic of the USPS and the way it is run. In a May 10, 2020 New York Times article he said, “The Postal Service is a joke,” Mr. Trump declared recently, announcing that he would not support any additional financial support for the agency unless it raised package rates by 400 percent” (Fandos and Epstein, 2020, p. 12). Another critical issue that the Postal Service was facing was the upcoming 2020 election in November. The election was going to need incredible postal power because more voters than ever before would be voting by mail to avoid the health hazards of in-person voting. President Trump had been on a crusade against mail-in ballots for the 2020 election, saying that mail-in ballots would
lead to voter fraud. In his crusade, Trump also implied that without a financial infusion the USPS would not be able to handle the influx in mail from the election yet he was against providing that help. In another New York Times article later in the summer, it was reported, “The Postal Service has said regularly that it can handle any surge in volume from mail balloting this fall. *More than three-quarters of voters* will be able to cast their ballots by mail this year” (Cochrane and Fuchs, 2020, p. 1).

This political situation caused me to feel fear and outrage. Fear that the leader of our country could be trying to manipulate the American public against the USPS during a global pandemic. The dishonesty and corruption swirling around it caused me outrage. Our country was in such a vulnerable state, I needed to do something. Having a national postal system is fundamental to the democracy of the country. The United States Postal Service is the only system that provides mail to every single address in the country. With the upcoming election in November of 2020, Americans would be relying on our postal workers to get each one of those ballots safely to its ballot box or processing center safely. Also, the postal service was made up of just under a half a million employees (https://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/employees-since-1926.pdf) in 2020. During this time with the influx of packages, these people were working overtime, delivering mail and packages on Sundays - it must have been so discouraging to hear the President of the United States making false claims about their organization. I know my mail carrier by name, it’s Kathy. She’s a very sweet woman who works incredibly hard. We used to talk every now and then - we both have daughters named Chloe. Kathy doesn’t have time to talk anymore, so about once a week I leave her a chocolate bar in the mailbox with a thank you note. I decided that I needed to create a project to bring attention to these issues and support the postal workers as well. I started
with a letter. As I wrote, it occurred to me that using mail art for this project would be perfect. Not only could I reach out to many people, I could create art on the envelope that would support the mail carriers that were actually handling the mail. Also, the stamps that I purchased would be supporting the postal system. In the letter I explained my agenda. I included a blank envelope with a stamp affixed to it. I asked the recipient of the letter to adorn, decorate, and/or write supportive slogans on this envelope and mail it to someone that they thought would continue the chain. I also asked that they take a picture of their envelope before they mail it and post the picture to the hashtag that I created, #artistsformail. The envelope for the mailing was created by block printing the image of the iconic mail truck onto royal blue envelopes. Then each envelope was hand decorated with the red and blue stripes on the truck. On the back of each envelope I wrote, “Mail is a public service” and “We ❤️ our Postal Workers”. In the first mailing I sent out 100 letters to friends, family, museums, and local reporters.

Figure 2.9 Block printing Postal Project envelopes
Figure 2.10 Postal Project, First Mailing, 2020

Figure 2.11 Postal Project, #artistsformail, images from Instagram
This project had its own life, sending it out into the country without having a real way to track it other than some images on Instagram changed my relationship with it. I didn’t have the same kind of control over what was happening. I would see a picture now and then on Instagram and I would hear things from friends and family that I had sent the letters to. I received a letter from the Portland Museum of Art saying they were going to archive my letter. This project was engaging people but in a different way. I wasn’t completely satisfied that my message was getting out to enough people and I still felt that our postal workers needed more encouragement. I realized that these gestures that I was making were not necessarily going to change the world or even the postal service, they were just symbolic, but in the moment they were doing a little bit of good and making a few people feel good when a lot of people were feeling bad.

In the second part of the Postal Project I created a vinyl sticker to directly thank mail carriers. The sticker was made to be affixed to the recipient’s mailbox. I had 200 of these stickers.

Figure 2.12 Postal Project Part 2, Second Mailing with vinyl sticker, 2020
made and created another mailing with a block printed envelope, this time using the imagery of the blue mailbox. I sent a letter in this mailer offering the sticker as a way of showing gratitude to our mail carriers. I asked in the letter that once the sticker was affixed to their mailbox that the recipient take a photo of the sticker on the mailbox and send it to me so that I would have documentation of it.

![Sticker Design](image)

**Figure 2.13 Postal Project Part 2, Vinyl Sticker of Gratitude, 2020**

The response from the collaborators was very positive. My mail carrier, Kathy, asked if she could have some stickers because some of her co-workers were seeing them pop up around town on mail boxes and they wanted a sticker too. Many of the recipients of the stickers were writing to me to say that their mail carriers had left them post-it notes on their mail boxes saying “thank you” or that it was nice to be appreciated in such a visual and permanent way. I had
people that I didn’t know email me and ask if they could buy my stickers. One gentleman asked if he could buy 30 stickers so that he could outfit his neighborhood with them. I also received a number of emails and letters sharing stories about friends and relatives that worked for the Postal Service and how they were doing in these challenging times. It was amazing to feel connected to this greater community of people that were all connected because of the United States Postal Service. It was also very encouraging to know that so many people wanted to support their mail carriers.

*Figure 2.14 Postal Project Part 2, Mailboxes across the United States supporting mail carriers, 2020*
The Home Project

As 2021 began and we found ourselves still working and schooling from home. My home office moved from the laundry room to my oldest daughter's bedroom as I realized I needed more space for the work I was doing. Both of my daughters had moved home during the shut down; one from Portland, Maine and the other from Fredericton, New Brunswick. My oldest daughter was able to go back to school in Portland so she moved out. My other daughter was still unable to get back into New Brunswick, Canada because of the closed borders - so she began to plan a cross country bicycle trip. It was becoming more clear that life would not be going back to “normal” any time soon and we shifted other areas of our house to make the space work for our “remote” lives. I was not happy that this is where and how I was spending my time rather than being around my classmates at the University - but being in a bigger, well-lit room at least felt better. I was grateful that I had options. I started to wonder how other people's lives were being affected by this realization. I paid attention to people's rooms and spaces as we met on Zoom and noticed that others were moving around as well.

One of my best friends is a child psychiatrist. By Dec. 15th, 2020 she had decided to permanently close down her physical practice. She had been seeing her patients via telehealth since late March of 2020 and it was really working for her and her clientele. She was saving money on rent and parking and it was much easier for parents to schedule appointments for their children using telehealth rather than making an appointment to physically see her in an office. She had a lovely office in her home that she could use and by setting it up permanently she had a huge tax write off of a portion of her mortgage and her utilities. This was how home changed for her.
As the anniversary of the shutdown approached, I decided to do another mail art project with this question as the prompt; \textit{how has home changed for you?} I composed a letter inviting people to participate in the project. I talked about how home is much more than just the place where we sleep at night or where our families gather. I talked about the collective happening of how our homes had changed because of the pandemic and how we might be interested in sharing that. I sent each person a card that had a simple house block printed on the front. I asked that they write or draw something to convey how home had changed for them during the pandemic. I included an envelope with postage so that they could return the card to me. I sent out 100 of these cards and envelopes. Both the outside and inside envelopes were block printed with different house images. I was trying to create a neighborhood of envelopes.

\textbf{Figures 2.15, 2.16, 2.17} \textit{The Home Project, Block printing and preparation for mailing}, 2021

Looking at the research aspect of the project, it was interesting to see that the first cards to come back were positive notes or images about how home had changed. The statements were about how being home had given them more time with their families, home projects that they
had really enjoyed, weekly Zoom events with loved ones that they hadn’t been in consistent contact with before the pandemic, new hobbies or projects that felt good, and stories of new pets that had been adopted. The cards that took longer to trickle in had sadder stories and images. There were several stories about how the concentrated time at home had turned relationships sour, one had even become abusive and now the person was in counseling and trying to heal from the abuse. One of the cards told a story of how their marriage had ended and how difficult it had been to secure new housing during the pandemic. Many cards were never returned at all.

One friend told me that, “friends don’t ask friend’s to do homework” and refused to return the card. Some of the cards were incredibly creative. One person sent a crocheted version of the card back because she had learned to crochet during her time at home and loved it. One person that I received a card back from is an illustrator of children’s books and used both of the cards that I sent to her and her husband to illustrate what their lives looked like during the shutdown with their pets. The drawings were detailed and beautiful. I also received gifts, seeds from flowers that people had grown, and artwork that their children had made. I even received a few recipes. Many of the cards came with post-it notes attached thanking me for the opportunity to share their story.

Sometimes the act of sitting and writing your own narrative can place you in a different space in respect to your own story. Several of the collaborators mentioned that they had been feeling very isolated in their homes, away from their community but when they sat down to think about how home had changed since the shut down, they began to feel more grateful for the security that their home gave them. The goal with socially engaged art is often to work towards some kind of change but with this project it felt like participants just needed to be heard. The shutdown had put us on a collective “mute” - and life had changed significantly and yet how were people able to share their experiences in isolation? The stories from these cards were important
documentation from the COVID-19 shutdown. I began to think that they needed to be seen and heard as part of my thesis project.

Figure 2.18 *The Home Project*, Works from Collaborators, 2021
Figure 2.19 The Home Project, Close Up of works from collaborators, 2021
Fragments of Repair

As we approached the summer of 2021, things were changing again. The United States had a robust vaccine campaign underway. According to USAFacts.org, by June 1, 2021 51% of Americans had been given their first shot and 41% were fully vaccinated. Some people were getting back to normal, and some were still apprehensive. The weather was warming up so it was safe to see people outside again and not wear masks. Many people stopped wearing masks indoors as well, but not everyone. As we moved into July the Delta variant was picking up speed and spreading across the country. Things still didn’t feel like they were going to be normal. In my town we have a farmer’s market every Friday afternoon. In normal times it is a vibrant market with stalls selling fresh produce, meat and eggs, and baked goods from the area. Many of the farmers sell potted plants and flowers as well. There is often someone playing some kind of music at one end and at the other end is one of our town librarians sitting under an umbrella reading children’s books to the kids. I love my farmers market and try to go every Friday. It’s also a great place to gauge the tone of the community. What I was seeing at the farmers market was about half of the shoppers wearing masks and the other half not. People were socially distanced, lining up outside the stalls rather than mingling in the stalls. It felt like they were being respectful but it also felt fractured. The librarian was back but there wasn’t any music.

There was so much in the news about how divided our country was on issues of politics, the pandemic, and the vaccine. This made me think that the farmers market would be a great place to have a conversation with folks about how they were doing coming back into daily life after the shutdown. I was interested in starting a dialogue as a way to open things up and maybe create a space for healing as the community collectively started to come back to life.
Figure 2.20  Tea bowl, Satsuma ware, White Satsuma type, Kagoshima prefecture, Japan, 17th century, Edo period, Stoneware with clear, crackled glaze, stained by ink; gold lacquer repairs - Courtesy of The Smithsonian Institution

In thinking about the concept of repair, I was reminded of the art of *kintsugi*. *Kintsugi* is the ancient Japanese art of repairing broken ceramics that dates back to the 13th century. This method of restoration celebrates the imperfections of the broken pot. The process uses a special lacquer made from tree sap and then once the pieces were in place the pottery would be dusted with gold or silver powder. This highlights the cracks rather than trying to make them blend in or disappear. The pandemic had taken and was still taking a toll on us as a society. The scars were
showing up in how people were treating each other and how issues were being dealt with, but the actual injuries and losses that people were carrying were invisible. I found an article in the BMJ, a British medical journal, where the writer, Amy Price, discusses negative side effects of social alienation and also introduces the idea of radical empathy in relation to grief (Price, 2021, p. 374). In her article she quotes journalist Isabel Wilkerson's description of radical empathy.

“Putting in the work to educate oneself and to listen with a humble heart to understand another’s experience from their perspective, not as we imagine we would feel. Radical empathy is not about you and what you think you would do in a situation you have never been in and perhaps never will. It is the kindred connection from a place of deep knowing that opens your spirit to the pain of another as they perceive it.”

Price then presents the potential of kintsugi as a metaphor for healing and repair and also resilience. To really move forward, we must recognize what we have gone through and work to not only heal the cracks, but strengthen them (Price, 2021, p.374).

My foundation as an artist is in pottery and ceramics so it seemed appropriate to have this project be a ceramic piece. I decided to make three large stoneware bowls and bisque-fire them. My intention was to break the bowls before the farmers market and then put them back together. I made three not knowing how they would break - if they would break into small or large pieces - and I wanted to be sure I had enough in case there were lots of people. The bowls were less important - what I really was after was the engagement with the community but the bowls could be the catalyst for the engagement. If people would sit down and paint a shard of the pottery with me, might they also engage in a conversation about how they were doing in respect to the shut down of the pandemic and then the reopening?
The first step in the project was to find out if any of this was even possible. The town that I live in is small and our farmers market, although organized, is organized at a relatively low-tech level. I was able to speak to the managing director of the market and secure a guest spot.
at the market for a small fee. On the day of the market I showed up with a tent stand, a table and three chairs, my bowls, watered down iron oxide for painting, and lots of brushes. I also brought my nineteen-year old daughter, Chloe, who has worked at the farmers market for the last few years and knows many of the regulars. As people started to walk by I would try to engage them and share with them my intention for the project. People were not stopping. After the sixth or seventh person quickly walked away from me, my brilliant daughter said, “Mom, too many words! Just ask them if they would like to come paint a piece of pottery.” That’s what I tried next- and it worked. For the next two hours we had a steady stream of folks sit down and paint a piece of pottery. They were curious. Why was I here doing this? Why was the pottery broken? Was I really a graduate student at UMaine? Then I could tell them about my project. The adults were generally very talkative. Many shared their experiences of the shut down. Some talked about how they had lost loved ones. Some had lost jobs. Quite a few talked about the loneliness they had experienced. Many were unhappy with how little their kids were learning with remote schooling. The kids that joined us mostly wanted to paint. They talked about how they wanted to go back to school full time and be able to play on the playground. Quite a few tears were shed. My town may be politically divided but the people for the most part are really good folks. At the end of the market I had enough painted pieces to put one of the bowls back together.

I created a mixture using clay from my land, as a way of making the piece site-specific to my land and the town of Hampden. I mixed the clay with water and PVA (glue) to repair the bowl. It wasn’t easy to get the pieces back together because there were so many. The end result was very elementary looking but lovely all the same. The bowl was a symbol of the people in my community coming together to talk about their feelings. They were vulnerable in their sharing and I hope it provided a tiny bit of healing for them. It did for me.
Figure 2.22 *Fragments of Repair*, Community Repaired Ceramic Bowl, 2021
CHAPTER THREE

Artifacts from a Year

The beginnings of *How Home Changed For You* began in the early part of 2021 as we entered our second year of the COVID-19 Global Pandemic with the *Home Project*. Even with the Delta variant virulently infecting people across the United States, k-12 schools and higher ed institutions were resolved to reopen. The thought was that with vaccines, testing pools, and masking, students and teachers would most likely be safe to go back to school. We as a nation of students had been isolated at home, remote learning, for seventeen months. There were many signs that this isolation was putting a strain on the learning of students as well as the mental health of students and teachers. It was exciting and stressful to be heading back to school. I was moving my work back into a studio on campus and considering the work that I would be doing in the upcoming year. In moving I realized that I now had stacks upon stacks of new materials - I had been saving stories of the pandemic that I had read or heard and then printed. This was precious and historic documentation of this strange seventeen months spent in a very strange manner. I wanted to memorialize it and at the same time create something where others could memorialize their stories as well. We all had stories, everyone that had survived the pandemic had been affected. Similarly to Sophie Calle’s project, *Here Lie the Secrets of the Visitors of Green-Wood Cemetery*, where Calle asked participants to leave notes with secrets in a slot of a marble obelisk at the Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, NY, I wanted to created something where collaborators could leave a note behind with a significant story or moment that they wanted to write down and share about their time - an artifact from their year. In contrast to Calle’s project though, I very much wanted to give these stories or artifacts a voice, a moment to
be heard, or a platform. In the Green-Wood Cemetery Project, which is ongoing (beginning in 2017 and will continue for 25 years), the secrets that are collected in the marble obelisk are burned by the cemetery facilities when the obelisk fills up with notes. The project is about the participant engaging in the process and not the outcome. The artist is not interested in the outcome. Calle was interviewed by the New York Times at the beginning of the project and explained, “my purpose is the poetry, the work of art, but not the therapy. There may be a therapeutic effect, but that is not my intent. My intent is art” (Maslin Nir, 2017, p. 19). Perhaps the process of the participants writing out secrets and getting something off their chest is therapeutic for a minute, but I don’t believe that the process can come full circle without the engagement with another human being. And in this way I must question if my form of socially engaged art lines up with the academic definition of a socially engaged practice. In order to be a community, collaborators need to work together, I believe they need to share their stories.

Figure 3.1 Here Lie the Secrets of the Visitors of Green-Wood Cemetery, Sophie Calle and Creative Time, 2017 (Photo Credit Pamela Wong/Bklyner)
Figure 3.2 *Here Lie the Secrets of the Visitors of Green-Wood Cemetery*, Sophie Calle and Creative Time, 2017 (Photo Credit: Leandor Justen)

For the artifact project, I decided that using textiles would be a good way to encompass all of the artifacts that I wanted to enshrine. To make them special I chose silk. I was inspired actually by a silk dress that I had purchased before the shutdown to wear to one of my best friend’s 50th birthday party. The party did not happen because of the quarantine and shutdown. I knew that I would never wear that dress, there were too many other factors associated with the dress now. I decided to shred the dress and use the shreds as the cohesive design, albeit somewhat random, throughout the tapestry. I placed headlines and segments from the pandemic stories that I had saved, journal tid-bits, pieces of projects that I had worked on, and images in between muslin and the silk and quilted it together. I created three separate panels to be hung together. On the sides of the panels were pockets, sewn into the quilting, where participants
could roll up a piece of paper and leave behind their story or artifact. The paper I left for
contributors to write on were skinny strips of paper, approximately 1.5” by 7”. These strips
would be the evidence of the piece. I hung the tapestries in the hallway of the IMRC building at
the University of Maine where there would be a lot of foot traffic. In the artist statement there
was an explanation of the project and an invitation for participants to share a story or an artifact
from their year away from physically attending school. On a table to the right there was paper
and pencils for collaborators to use.

Figure 3.3 Artifacts from a Year, 2021, Tapestries created from silk, muslin, paper, copper tape,
and other mixed media.
There was a good turn out of responses, mostly participants used the paper that I had left for them. A few contributors left artifacts, such as a child’s face mask, a disposable face mask with a story, and a sticker. When I created the project I didn’t have a plan for what I would do with the results, I just knew I wanted other people’s stories to be part of my thesis project. With the piece, Artifacts from a Year, the stories or secrets were left in the tapestries but I hadn’t created a platform for them to be shared even though this was a public piece. Spectators were welcome to pull the notes out of their pockets and read them - but I wasn’t witnessing that and

Figure 3.4 Artifacts from a Year, 2021, Close up, Tapestries created from silk, muslin, paper, copper tape, and other mixed media.
honestly, I didn’t feel comfortable doing it myself. The notes felt so private, folded and hiding amongst the folds of the fabric.

The Thesis Project: *The Home Project*

The idea to use the symbolism of a simple house has been part of the body of work that I have created for years. As someone who grew up uprooted and ungrounded in any one house, I make home wherever I am. I spent many years painting houses and barns on canvas as a way of “making real” an imagined house/home that my mind and body wanted and needed. Then with the pandemic, to have life so centered and situated at home, the value and the extreme privilege of my home was so prominent in my consciousness. With the *Home Project* mailing, the simplicity of the house block print resonated with me and I wanted to replicate this image for the thesis project. I had stories of how the pandemic had affected people’s lives from others to share as well as documentation of how home had changed for people during the pandemic. What if I used a simple house to show this documentation? I built a simple wood frame of a one story house, the bottom being a 2’x2’x2’ cube with rafters to make the roof. I sewed a white muslin cover to mimic the white house from the mailing but without windows. I first tried using this house as a screen for projection of the images of “home had changed” that people had shared with me and it was successful. To fill the area of Lord Hall Gallery for the Thesis Presentation, the houses would need to be larger. I decided 3’x3’x3’ cubes would offer a larger, more effective presence. I was trying to figure out how to display all of the things that I wanted to show. In one iteration my idea was that one house would have the projections of how contributor’s homes had changed and one house would have video and sound of the stories that people had shared in the
tapestry. I had planned to create a video of myself taking the notes that were placed in the
tapestry pockets, unwinding them and reading them aloud. The third house would be to balance
the installation aesthetically.

![Prototype of Thesis Project House Frame and with Fabric and Projection](image)

**Figure 3.5 and 3.6** Prototype of Thesis Project House Frame and with Fabric and Projection

As I built the larger houses and sewed the covers I became increasingly concerned with
how much light is in the Lord Hall Gallery at UMaine. I worried that the projections would be
drowned out by the light in the gallery as well as the light from my classmate’s installations. The
projections are very dependent on darkness but the video is less important than the audio of the
documentation of the stories read. The video can be more gestural and ethereal. For the audio, a
bluetooth speaker will be placed in the middle house to provide sound to spectators as they walk
through the installation. Hearing the stories is an essential part of this project.

Making the video was emotionally powerful for me as I had not read the notes that
contributors had left in the pockets before making the video. I installed the tapestries in my study, set up the camera on a tripod and a Zoom audio recorder on a table near me that was not visible to the camera. I positioned myself with my back to the camera so that I could appear neutral in the event I became emotional. I did not want the camera to pick that up because I don’t feel comfortable showing that kind of emotion and know that I cry easily. It took 15 minutes and 7 seconds to read each note. Even though I positioned myself with my back to the camera, I ended up turning around and reading many of the notes to the camera. It must have been instinctual to end up reading to the camera. Some notes were very sad, they were notes about loved ones lost to COVID-19. Some notes were inspiring, they were about appreciating time with family or friends or being grateful for the chance to be back on the campus of the University after the lock down. Some of the notes were illegible and I struggled to read them - I stumbled over words. It is not a graceful reading but it is real. The notes were focused more on relationships than on home or house but a few of the notes shared stories of home.

After the video was done, one of my colleagues, Luke McKinney, helped me with the projection part of the project. Luke and I had taken a course on projection mapping the previous semester and because of our mutual interest in house and home, we created a project together where we simultaneously projected the ridiculous number of houses that we had both lived in. We used the software Milumin to map the video to the front and side of the three houses. As we were mapping the video to one house, the installation looked awkward and unbalanced. We tried mapping the video to the three houses so that the video would be running simultaneously on all three houses at the same time. The look was clean and balanced and it really worked in the gallery space. Then we were met with the challenge of mounting the projector in the space at Lord Hall. The projector had to be high enough to capture the three houses and be safely above
the heads of folks visiting the gallery. The Milumin software ran off of a Mac Mini, also mounted on the wall, and into the projector which worked very well. The bluetooth speaker was able to be connected to the Mac Mini and then placed in the middle house for the best sound. The first image below was captured by Jim Winters when we were able to have the lights off in the gallery. This would have been the optimal way to view the installation.

I still had all of the images that contributors had sent me of how their homes had changed during their time at home. I had thought that these images would be projected in succession on one of the houses but the aesthetic was not right. I printed all of the images on large matte paper at the IMRC Center with the idea of pinning the images to the wall behind the houses in the gallery. I placed the images in different locations on the wall but they were distracting from the simplicity and balance created by the houses and the projection. I made the decision to omit them from the thesis show entirely.
Figure 3.7 *The Home Project*, 2022, Projection and Audio (Photo Credit: Jim Winters 2022)
The night of the Thesis show opening was very festive. It was the first IMFA thesis show since the class of 2020. There was a constant flow of visitors and the work by all of the artists was well received.

Figure 3.8 *The Home Project*, 2022, Projection, Audio, Mixed Media Tapestries (Photo Credit Jim Winters 2022)
Figure 3.9 The Home Project, 2022, Tapestry Close Up (Photo Credit: Jim Winters 2022)
CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

*A house is first and foremost a geometrical object, one which we are tempted to analyze rationally. Its prime reality is visible and tangible, made of well hewn solids and well fitted framework. It is dominated by straight lines, the plumb line having marked it with its discipline and balance. A geometrical object of this kind ought to resist metaphors that welcome the human body and the human soul. But transposition to the human plane takes place immediately whenever a house is considered a space for cheer and intimacy, space that is supposed to condense and defend intimacy.* – Gaston Bachelard

The COVID-19 Global Pandemic has forever changed our relationship with our houses and how we interact with our house as home. These relationships are intimate - if we are fortunate, our houses are more than a geometrical object, they are the place we can truly be ourselves and make home. Our homes should be the place that we go for shelter and warmth, for rest and rejuvenation, and to connect with our loved ones. The pandemic forced us to live in our houses differently and see the value of our homes as something other than they were before.

*The Home Project* has been going on for over a year now. Its many facets make it a difficult project to measure its impact on its contributors and community. During the thesis show there was an opportunity to watch visitors and try to listen to their response to the project. I saw people pull out notes from the tapestries and read them. My hope is that by creating a platform for stories to be heard - not only was an archive created and left behind for others, but the
process of telling the story is cathartic for the teller. It is still too soon to know how the COVID-19 Global Pandemic has affected us as a culture. Of course, the loss of one million people and counting is enormously significant and the grief of that loss will be studied and researched. But we are living differently as a result of this virus - we are living differently with this virus now that it has mutated so many times. As a culture it will be important to share what we learn and to lean on each other in our communities. I think about how the COVID-19 Global Pandemic shaped my socially engaged artistic practice and how it will continue to do so.

_The Home Project_ did indeed bring people together interactively with objects that were created by an artist to talk about a memorable event from the COVID-19 Pandemic. The interaction was not ideal because of social-distancing and I don’t believe that this project created a sense of community the way that would be traditionally thought of as social practice, but it was the way it needed to be to be safe during a global pandemic. I relied heavily on the artistic community of the University of Maine for this project and moving forward I would like to investigate other ways of finding communities to work with. One of the questions that I was exploring was “how did home change?” and with this project I was able to see images and hear stories of how people’s homes changed. The images varied from home offices to home renovations, bedrooms that were turned into recording studios, new pets and new furniture, also letting go of old furniture and why. I heard stories about lost loved ones, lost cats and dogs, cross-country moves, and mended relationships. One of the most exciting parts was hearing about how many people got outside and got to know their yards. People planted gardens and flowers and used their yards for exercise and exploration. _The Home Project_ created meaning beyond making objects - by creating the tapestries where stories could be left and shared between artist and contributors as well as contributors and contributors. Art was form and
function, it was the space where folks could participate and impact both outcome and process by sharing a story and reading someone else’s story. The work existed both outside the gallery as well as in the gallery for exhibition at the end for others to see as documentation. As a result of *The Home Project*, I believe that many people in the UMaine community were able to connect to other people’s stories and experiences within the community creating a greater sense of engagement and solidarity. These are the qualities that I see as being fruitful in a community and the outcome that I want from socially engaged art.
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CONTEXTUAL READINGS (not cited)


APPENDIX

Audio Transcription

Artifacts from a Year - Audio Transcript

These are in the order that of being read in recording:

Very tired of seeing COVID art.

One of the biggest takeaways for me was learning that I am more of an extrovert than I had realized. Being isolated and away from people was very hard for me. I used to believe that I didn’t really need people and now I know that I do.

I nearly lost my older brother to COVID. He was the only person in our family who wasn’t vaccinated. It’s disturbing how many times this exact scenario or worse has happened.

I tried to follow the rules as much as possible and I tried to offer as much support as I could but that pool of energy dried up and I fear that I let a lot of people down.

I tested positive for COVID in January of 2021. I lost a family member to COVID. She passed on January 25th. I got better, she didn’t. How do I mourn?

Someone left a sanitizing hand wipe.

I don’t know how real life works anymore.

The pandemic made me have time to truly see who I am as a person. It’s crazy to have such clarity in such a devastating time.

So lonely.

While locked in my house, sitting at my dining room table, I watched my neighbor get shot and ran over with his own truck. It was mid-afternoon and nice out. That was my tipping point.

I have a newfound appreciation for being on campus and with my friends. I wasn’t able to live in Maine for the 2020/2021 school year and while I wasn’t here it seemed like all I could think of was coming back. Now that I’m here I make sure to cherish every second that I have.
My dad died, I fell in love, I moved out of a toxic household, I have a furbaby named Quinn.
-Mary

I met my best friend about a year ago now, October of 2020. We just finally got to meet in person two weeks ago. We live on opposite coasts so it’s really hard. I miss her more than anything. I cannot wait to see her again.

My mom passed away right before COVID hit. I have been grieving my mother in isolation. It has taken its toll on me and my emotional health. I’m back in therapy to help me work through this and other issues.

The irony of it all - the pandemic has brought meaning back into my life.

I became an uncle! It feels so weird saying my niece.

A COVID test with positives and negatives

This obscene division of people from one and other is the greatest tragedy and sorrow of my lifetime. Only time will show whether humanity gathers itself together to go on or will forever be enslaved by corporate agenda. God bless and keep us all - Amen.

I honestly miss the independence and lack of expectation that was throughout this quarantine/isolation period. The aftermath is exhaustion and constant overwhelming stress. I hope that feeling lessens.

The one thing I valued about the pandemic was the time I had together with my family. At least we shared our isolation together.

The same year I got into grad school I lost my grandma. She was the reason I got into the Arts and my biggest fan.

A child’s face mask - it’s pink with rainbows
This mask has held many smiles, tears, and wishes for a happy day. Most importantly this mask has kept my child safe.

With covid during school, undergrad, I found I had to put more trust in my friends than before. I had to trust them to make the right decisions last year and when they didn’t and they went to a bar, I was torn. Could I be mad at them for exposing me? I felt bad and concerned that they got covid. I was mad at myself for not being more cautious. I know they just wanted their senior year
to be fun. I found out that I am not cut out for quarantine in a hotel room, isolation is one thing but being forcibly contained by the school is another. I would stick my head out the window for fresh air. I watched my teammates walk by on the weekends. I felt forgotten. I was missing my senior season. On the weekend the air in the room was so dry and it caused a stuffy nose. I became paranoid. Other friends said I probably had it. I couldn’t handle the negativity or the waiting. This was the first time I spoke with a school therapist. I needed that. I learned a lot about myself.

I moved to a new city. Almost no one here knows what I face. What kind of home to make for myself. Or how important they are to me. Even days. A new kind of struggle. Candles burn at both ends. (This one was very hard to read the handwriting.)

The isolated world became a world of access.
BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Rochelle Lawrence was born on a Navy base in Oak Harbor, Washington during the Vietnam War. A year later, when her father was discharged from the Navy - the family moved to San Diego, CA. As a child, Lawrence moved all over San Diego County, 23 times by the time she left home at 18 to move to Los Angeles. Lawrence studied Art History and Studio Art at Santa Monica College before moving to Manhattan for a brief spell and then to Seattle. Lawrence resumed her studies in Seattle and then again in Connecticut where she studied ceramics with two master potters for six years. After moving to Maine she decided to re-enter academia and finish her bachelor’s degree in Art Education at the University of Maine in 2018. Lawrence is a candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Intermedia from the University of Maine in August of 2022.