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FROM THE OUTSIDE TO THE INSIDE

BRIDGING DOCUMENTARY AND COMMUNITY-BASED ART

by

MARY RACHEL FANNING

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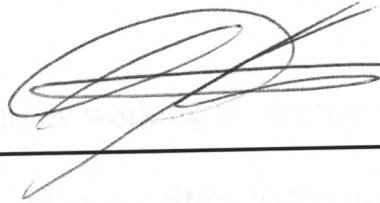
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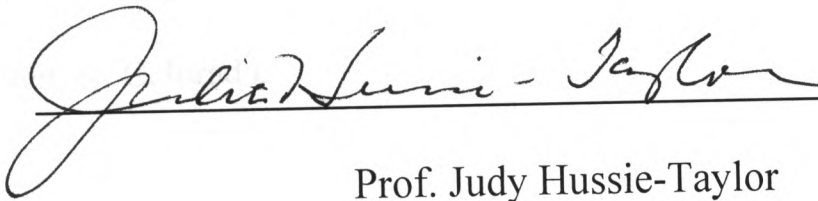


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Fanning, Mary Rachel (M.F.A., Department of Art and Art History)

From the Outside to the Inside: Bridging Documentary and Community-
Based Art

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Alex Sweetman

It is quite a journey working on the outside of cultures as a documentary photographer to getting to the inside as a community-based artist. The complexities of collaboration and art genres are addressed through a personal account of working with the Sun Valley neighborhood in Denver, Colorado.

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I. How I Got to Sun Valley

A year and a half ago my mother sent me an article from the Rocky Mountain News about a neighborhood in Denver called Sun Valley. Titled “Stepchild Area Fights Blight: Sun Valley Residents Turn Up Heat on Crime, Nuisances,” the article addressed Sun Valley having the highest poverty rates, crime rates, most single parents, and being the only place in Colorado where children outnumber adults. The writer of the article also addressed what the schools and community organizations were doing to battle these challenges.

Intrigued, I made phone calls to some of the people mentioned in the article and visited the neighborhood nestled among I-25, Invesco Field, and the Xcel Power Plant. A month later I found myself picking up kids after school at Fairview Elementary and tutoring them at the Sun Valley Youth Center (SVYC). Soon after that I was eating fried chicken at Decatur Market and going to birthday parties, and within a few months Kristen Styf, Diana Flores, and Laura Wilson of the SVYC graciously helped me obtain summer work assisting with their day camp. Thereafter, I swam, worked out at the Rude Center everyday, and visited Terry Flores at her apartment in Decatur Place.

The media has largely overlooked the neighborhood’s diversity: African-American, Latino, Vietnamese, Native American, Caucasian, North African, and others. In Denver Public Housing you don’t have a choice of neighbors. Perhaps this diversity is why I was able to make friends in the area.

When I first came to Sun Valley the residents asked me, "What do you do?"

"I'm a photographer," I said.

"Then where's your camera?"

That is when we started making photographs together.

II. The Partial Truth of Documentary Photography

While at first these photographs appear to be documentary and all that implies—including objectivity, I believe there is a significant difference in what I am trying to do.

The photographer who first gained status for documentary work was Jacob Riis. He was a police reporter for various newspapers in New York¹ and in 1890 published his first book, *How the Other Half Lives*.² Through photography Riis focused on the poor and told their story of the conditions in which they lived. Riis was very sympathetic to his subjects; however, his scientific approach and search for the anthropological record is evident. In his second book, *Children of the Poor*, he writes:

“Yet even from Hell's Kitchen had I not long before been driven forth with my camera by a band of angry women, who pelted me with brickbats and stones on my retreat, shouting at me never to come back.... The children know generally what they want and they go for it by the shortest cut. I found that out, whether I had flowers to give or pictures to take . . . Their determination to be "took" the moment the camera hove into sight, in the most striking pose they could hastily devise, was always the most formidable bar to success I met.”³

¹ The *New York Tribune*, and *New York Evening Sun*

² Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies of the Tenements of New York*. (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1890)

³ Jacob Riis, *Children of the Poor*. (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1892.)

While Riis would let the children pose freely, his approach was still that of an observer. The result of this objective, if at times a formulaic approach, is that so-called subjects often feel patronized, exploited and one-dimensionalized. Leslie Marmon Silko, the acclaimed author of Anglo, Mexican, and Native American heritage has written “the spiritual integrity of the person behind the camera matters most. The people of my great-grandmother’s generation were concerned less with a person’s ancestry than with a person’s integrity.”⁴ A purely objective and unattached view has never worked for me. I choose to embrace the reciprocal relationships between my subjects and myself, and hope the viewer can uncover them in the photographs.

I first began photographing in the southeastern Appalachian Mountains. Working for an emergency home repair non-profit, I immersed myself deep into hollows and small communities. The families and their neighbors had a hard life, yet they always gave me a place to sleep, a warm meal, and a bluegrass music lesson. We were eager to catch up on each other’s lives, local gossip, hopes, and heartbreaks.

I came to the Sun Valley neighborhood in a similar fashion by working for the Sun Valley Youth Center. Through working with people to create social change, the art I produce with them takes the same focus; and our relationships are turned into creative documentation.

However, these collaborative moments are rarely visible in my photographs. These moments in time are still viewed within the genres of photojournalism and documentary photography. I can see something else existing just beneath the surface;

⁴ Leslie Marmon Silko, Preface to *Partial Recall*, ed. Lucy Lippard, exh. cat. (New York: The New Press, 1992), 10.

I see stories, personalities, and connections between the human beings and friends in the image and myself. Yet these still images slip straight into the genre of traditional documentary every time they are viewed. I am placed into the role of a fly on the wall. As the photographer I am supposedly objectifying them...as subjects they are supposedly unaffected by me.



Adolfo
Inkjet Print
2003

View the photograph “Adolfo” for example. In this image of a young man in a uniform first shown in *War*, an exhibition at Gallery Sovereign, Boulder, CO sponsored by the Center for Humanities and Arts War Colloquium at the University of Colorado-Boulder, a context for viewing the photograph was already established since it was selected under the concept of ‘war’. As I moved throughout the opening I observed people’s reactions to the image. I heard the audience say “he’s a soldier about to go fight the War on Terror,” and “he doesn’t want to go.... look at his one hand balled in a fist and the other falling open, the one eye squinted and the other opened wide.” There was also a significant amount of conversation about the military being the only way out of the ghetto.

Personally, I do not mind such broad cultural assessments of these photographs. When my photographs are perceived as a general comment on our society I feel the work is powerful. Yet I also wish that somewhere between such statements the people in the photographs are seen for who they are individually and the reciprocal relationship between subject and photographer is noticed. I wish the public knew that my shoe was in the space between the couch and the kitchen; that the legs and house slippers beneath the couch belonged to Terry, Adolfo’s adoptive mother and one of my closest friends; and that Adolfo got the ROTC uniform at a flea market and wanted to make a proud picture to send to his estranged father.

Viewers interact with photographs by projecting their own life experiences and current politics. The people in documentary photographs become icons and symbols for what is happening in a culture at that moment, not necessarily for what is happening in the subjects’ lives at that moment. Naturally, each viewer interprets

visual images differently, yet that can also become a problem for the artist if she wishes the viewer to come to certain conclusions about a work. It is both an exciting and frightening fact that once a work leaves an artist's hands, it assumes a life of its own.

One way to influence the viewer's interpretation of a photograph is by presenting it with text as in Jim Goldberg's *Raised by Wolves*.⁵ While documenting runaway youth on the streets in Hollywood, Goldberg had the youth write about themselves and much of the time about the photographs he brought back. This device gave insight into the subjects' lives and a sense of control over the photograph's perception, yet the only thing it offered about Goldberg is that the subjects' felt comfortable enough to share their stories with him.

When I attempted to have my subjects in both Appalachia and Sun Valley write about our photographs I had a different experience. First of all, many of them were embarrassed by their handwriting or couldn't write at all. I do not believe this was an ill testament to their intelligence, just their social circumstances. However, there was a tremendous fear of what viewers on the "outside" would think about them.

What about writing captions myself? In my first showing of "Appalachia: Cultural Questions," I wrote a list of captions to be read with each image. Though I felt I was sincere in my statements the viewer would still unearth their own pre-conceived stereotypes. When I write these captions solely I am also still holding most of the power... not sharing it with the subject.

⁵ Jim Goldberg, *Raised by Wolves*, (New York: Scalo Publishers, 1995)

The most success I have encountered in bringing another element into my photography is with storytelling. In giving lectures while showing slides I am able to talk about people's lives and our shared experiences. Storytelling gives me the license to speak about the personal and avoid the general. The strong oral tradition from my Southern upbringing is often shared with the various cultures in which I work. I remain interested in bringing my collaborators to participate in these informative exchanges with the photographs including the use of sound with headphones, objects, or their physical presence to interact with the viewer.

Perhaps my art is that of getting to know people, of them getting to know me, of people coming from totally disparate places trying to connect and make something honest and proactive about our differing cultures and the places where they collide.

III. Bridging the Inside and Outside of a Community

Realizing that photographs still have the old stigmas of the documentary genre attached to them despite my relationships with the people in front of the camera, I decided to experiment with more explicit collaborations with the Sun Valley neighborhood. I put down my 35mm camera for a while and picked up a small mini-DV recorder.



Video still taken from
Breaktime, a video in the
The Sun Valley Project
2004

On one of my afternoon visits to Terry Flores's apartment in Decatur Place we had a discussion about food and men. She suggested that she teach me how to make stuffed sopapilla so I could make it for my boyfriend. As we talked we decided to videotape the event. In addition to instructions on how to make sopapilla the video

also became a record of our kitchen relationship. What I mean by “kitchen relationship” is the intimate space women share when they cook and eat together. My kitchen relationships are sacred to me. The kitchen and table are where cultural barriers are broken down over breaking bread, and common ground is achieved through a healthy dose of gossip and story telling on a full stomach.

The video was messy, a home video really, and I love it for that very reason. But how would I make it work in the context of art? It didn’t fit with the slick photographs or leave much room for the general cultural statements tied to documentary photography. I was as much a part of the video as Terry was, somehow meaning I was part of the community; and yet, I was also the outside artist trying to create some sort of expressive art product for the CU Museum.

Miwon Kwon, an art historian who deals with the complexities and conflicts of community-based art in her book *Once Place After Another* writes “Such a situation can leave the artist with a sense of isolation and estrangement in that his/her identity cannot be fixed to either side....But this is not to romanticize the role of the artist as a lonely outcast or to presume that the community and the art world themselves have stable identities.”⁶

While making videos with Terry I was reading *Mapping the Terrain, Culture in Action*, and *One Place After Another*,⁷ anthologies which deal with the social implications of photography, community-based art, and new-genre public art. Suzanne Lacy, an artist and writer who has made community-based pieces such as

⁶ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2004), 136.

⁷ See Bibliography.

*The Crystal Quilt*⁸ and *Full Circle*,⁹ defines “new genre public art” as “what exists in the space between the words public and art is an unknown relationship between artist and audience, a relationship that may *itself* be the artwork.”¹⁰ I decided “new genre public art” would be the realm to explore my relationships within the Sun Valley neighborhood and our collision of ethnic identities.

As I edited Terry’s and my cooking video and began planning for our next one about selling burritos at the Broncos football game, I wondered about my other relationships with the community. I swam and worked out at the Rude Recreation Center in the summer, ordered meals from Mr. and Mrs. Kim at Decatur Market; and, of course, I had very close ties with the Sun Valley Youth Center where this journey began. Even more curious were the relationships these places had with each other. The Sun Valley community is a complex web where what happens in one building affects the other one across the street. Would there be a way to illustrate these connections with videos like the one Terry and I made?

This project had to do more than address my personal ties in the neighborhood. For it to be a community-based project I felt it needed to have a utilitarian function beyond just being about my relationships. I wanted to facilitate

⁸ A three-year project with community organizing, art exhibitions and lectures, and a model leadership seminar for older women, culminating in a performance. Suzanne Lacy, Phyllis Jane Rose, Miriam Schapiro, Nancy Dennis, Susan Stone (Minneapolis, 1985-87), <http://www.suzannelacy.com>

⁹ This two-part public artwork on women’s culture and public life was created for Sculpture Chicago’s *Culture in Action*. The first part involved a rock memorial installation of important women in Chicago’s history. The second part involved a dinner of female international activists. Curated by Mary Jane Jacob (Chicago, 1992-93), <http://www.suzannelacy.com>

¹⁰ Suzanne Lacy, Introduction to *Mapping the Terrain*, ed. Suzanne Lacy, exh. cat. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995). 20.

something that would give a collective portrait of the community, an expression that would benefit all whether it be through aiding funding or just being seen as they want to be seen.

I focused on the five locations I had interacted with the most: Sun Valley Youth Center, Rude Park, Decatur Place, Decatur Market, and Fairview Elementary, asking people what we could include in making a video. Sometimes I would use the camera, but much of the time participants took my camera and shot their own footage. Aside from my editing and building the technology I had to let go of the notion of “the artist being the center of control”. If it was important to someone to have a certain piece of information in, it was in. I was in front of the camera as much as I was behind it and became a facilitator and participant myself.

For the framework, I reflected on a community-based piece in which I had participated called *Westside Stories*¹¹ at the University of Alabama-Tuscaloosa. *Westside Stories* was a community-based media project that documented the stories of the Westside, a primarily low-income, African-American community in Tuscaloosa. Perceived by many as a ghetto, this neighborhood had a remarkably rich history in the Civil Rights Movement. The project was conceived though never fully actualized as all of the facilitators moved from the area.

What I did take from my experience with *Westside Stories* was a way to give these “messy” videos a structure. A map of the neighborhood creates a context to link visual stories together with the places they originate. The user interacts with the

¹¹ Community-Based Media Class, University of Alabama-Tuscaloosa, *Westside Stories*, <http://www.tcf.ua.edu/DV/index.html>, (2001)

map, selecting the places they will visit and which pieces of the story and community they will view.

As I was working on the execution of technology for *The Sun Valley Project* I became aware of a piece called *Turning from the Millennium: An Excavation of the Past, Present, and Future of Two Neighborhoods*.¹² Los Angeles high school students collaborated with local writers and artists to create a portrait of the South Central and Echo Park neighborhoods. This web-based work uses digital technologies such as Quicktime VR panoramas, text, and oral history to define these urban spaces. More importantly, the interface was a navigatable map.

What makes *The Sun Valley Project*¹³ different is that it is created in the context of a DVD. It does not need a computer connected to the Internet to be viewed, just a television and a DVD player or video game device. One can sit on a couch in his or her own personal space and view it.

However, as the context for interaction changed at my Master of Fine Arts opening at the CU Art Museum some issues formed that I did not expect. Evidently, sitting on a couch with an entertainment center is much different than standing in front of a 42-inch plasma screen not quite sure where to point the remote control.

As I watched gallery goers interact with the piece, I noticed they were uncomfortable. If they pressed the “enter” button on the remote control a video would begin to play. A visual treat....but in an environment where silence is golden,

¹² OnRamp Arts, *Turning from the Millennium: An Excavation of the Past, Present, and Future of Two Neighborhoods*, <http://time.arts.ucla.edu/onramp/>

¹³ It should be noted that *The Sun Valley Project* is a work-in-progress. More videos are to be made and places visited. The community and facilitator are also examining making a web-based version to be used as publicity and funding endeavors by local non-profits and schools.

the onslaught of sound immediately called attention to the one who pressed the button as if he or she were performing. The observation at the M.F.A. opening was very different from my initial experience of watching it with a group of women laughing and commenting throughout the entire thirty minutes we spent together navigating through the piece.

After viewing the piece, many of my friends and collaborators from Sun Valley said they were definitely coming to the opening; yet they did not attend that Friday night. Perhaps it was the unusually stormy weather, maybe the unreliable church van broke down, or when faced with riding the bus to Boulder, folks just decided it was not worth their time. When the opening ended Kris, the director of the Sun Valley Youth Center, arrived sopping wet with a friend. She ran inside to see what she could, but the gallery was closing. As disappointed as I was in this circumstance it presents is an interesting opportunity to consider access to the contemporary art world in terms of community-based art.

Can community-based art have a relationship with the gallery-museum world? In Michael Brenson's "Healing in Time" essay on *Culture in Action* he addresses the gallery and museum system's relationship with the public. "In this program, the insiders were not members of the gallery and museum worlds but communities whose members tend to feel that museums like The Art Institute of Chicago and the Museum of Contemporary Art have nothing to do with them."¹⁴ Why would my Sun Valley collaborators come to an institution that they quite possibly feel has nothing to do with their lives?

¹⁴ Michael Brenson, "Healing in Time," in *Culture in Action*, Sculpture Chicago, exh. cat., (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995)

If Terry, Diane, Kris, and Sharon came to the M.F.A opening would they have interacted with the piece and crowd with the same enthusiasm they had on their own turf? Would Adolfo feel uncomfortable about people's interpretations of his photograph? And would people have made those general interpretations if he were physically standing in the room?

There are not easy answers to these questions. I feel it is good to challenge the museum and gallery system to show art created by a community with which it has little relationship; and yet, I recognize I made a mistake by having the opening in an institution where my collaborators can not easily access or see little value in visiting.

What I have learned from working on the outside of communities in documentary photography by trying to reach from the inside with community-based art is that I must accept all of the gray in between. There is no avoiding the demographics of power and race. I am a white woman of a middle-class background who makes art with people who are usually of a lower economic class and often minorities.

Some might criticize my work saying I am only seeking community myself or trying to find comfort in political correctness. The major critique is, of course, that the artist (myself, in this case) is exploiting marginalized communities by using people's hardships as part of the artist's personal vision. Perhaps that is an unavoidable part of it, but I am comfortable working where society tells me I should be least comfortable. My place is not in a studio escaping the world and the hard, incomprehensible things happening in the world around me, but smack in the middle of it. In the words of my father "we are all just people." My belief is that people can

connect on the basis of simply being human; whether it is in the kitchen, out on the street, at a funeral, or on a porch. The socialized complexities of these connections between artist, subject, and collaborator are what make it interesting...and are what I embrace.

IV. Selected Journal Entries

These unedited journal entries provide another approach to presenting my experiences of working in Sun Valley.

February 3, 2004

“I walk into the little store on the corner with the laptop on my back. Mrs. Kim says, “Hey Lady!” I go to the back and order a club sandwich from the cook and ask them about that Steve Martin movie he took his daughter to see last week. He makes a joke about him being a cop.

I go back to the counter to pay for my food and pull out my laptop. I open it and load up the movie about her and her husband’s store, Decatur Market. Mr. Kim watches it and Mrs. Kim keeps sneaking glances as she helps customers by snacks and cigarettes. When it is done I ask Mr. Kim what he thinks. He says his voice needs to be louder.

A little girl asks, “What’s that?” I say it’s the movie we made about the store and her voice is in it. So I load it up again. The cook walks up to give me my food. He has cut my sandwich into four squares and rolled the turkey and ham elaborately. He tells me to watch out for the toothpicks. The little girl says, “That’s me! I remember that.” Mrs. Kim critiques an animation, “You need to put “South” Korea and the dot should be lower.” I elbow the cook who didn’t want to be on camera for legal reasons and joke, “I bet you want to be in it now.” He says, “Just let me get a haircut and shave.”

As I sit across the street in the youth center and eat my lunch. The custodian, Jaime, introduces me to his wife, Sonia, and their son, Cedrick. Jaime advises me about moving to Chicago and Cedrick sits in my lap. They are moving into Decatur Place on the 10th. I ask Jaime how his cousin, Rodney, is doing since he moved back to the Southside. I think about his teeth. Just a few months ago I took him to the hospital to get most of them pulled.”

Tuesday afternoon, March 30

MY SHOW, THEIR SHOW, OR OUR SHOW?

“I am exhausted. I don’t want to go down to Denver. I have just finished installing my part of the MFA Show. The past two weeks I have been consumed by my computer...putting together the DVD and Photoshopping the photographs that will now have to be printed digitally. The Carpal Tunnel is nastily setting in. The piece hasn’t been viewed in its totality in Sun Valley yet. What if they don’t like it? If they don’t like it would I ethically be able to show it in the museum? Now that the cut of the photographs has been made....will everyone be happy? Will they come to the opening? I’ll go and do it anyway. Sometimes it is really difficult for me to jump from my graduate school life in Boulder to my art in Denver. They never seem to meet in the middle. This opening is an issue.....the CU Museum phrases it as MY opening.....however I don’t feel like it is just MY work. Would it have been a better solution to have the opening in a different place outside of school or one down

in Sun Valley? The school wouldn't have been happy...but is this work about school in the first place?"

Tuesday night, March 30

"I passed out invitations to Mr. Diehl, Ms. Anderson, and Principal Giron at Fairview Elementary. Mr. Diehl sounds like he is coming. He was asking for directions. Then I passed out invitations in KIPP, the Rude Center, and the youth center. Kris, Diane, Terry, and Sharon huddle around my computer and watch the DVD piece in the kitchen. They love it and say they are coming. Kris wants to bring all of the kids, especially those who are in the photographs. I give her and Terry the 8 x 10's Randy printed out for me. Kris says she'll frame them immediately and asks for directions to the opening. Terry and Sharon quote the sopapilla videos and what happens next in them. I am relieved that they are happy with and excited about them. I'm even happier that many of the participants are coming for the first opening of our piece and the photographs of them. I have decided to bring my digital camera to document the interaction of my collaborators and the CU art community. They are coming!!!!!"

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