

Between Myself and the Context
Navigating a Site-Specific Art Practice
by
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ABSTRACT

The culminating work of my thesis, “Between a Stone and a Shrine,” presented in April 2014 at the Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon University, is contextualized with two of my prior works, “Between You Me and the Wall,” and “Between Icarus and a Phoenix.” These works are further contextualized with relevant autobiographical information. Inspiration is drawn from Walter De Maria’s ideas of meaningless work, and its contrast with Francis Alÿs and his meaningful gestures in public space. My works are then analyzed and compared to Janine Antoni’s bodily relationship to media through physical labor in site-specific practice. By using storyboarding and editing techniques developed by the film directors Federico Fellini and Yael Bartana, immersive installations are refined to create awareness, acceptance and adaptation to entropy in the built environment.

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INTRODUCTION

My practice is informed by multifaceted actions in engagement, involvement, immersion in neighborhoods, cities and communities. The intensifying conditions of urban redevelopment has heightened the effects of alienation in contemporary life. Our perceptions of these spaces in the urban context are not stable, but rather partial and fragmentary. The task of retrieving lost differences after the flattening of identities, or to attempt to curtail the waning of them is to participate in an invested effort of sustaining *place*. I use my body and its presence as a tool to unlock or and magnify the theatres of everyday actions in public space. This thesis explains how I navigate social and physical contextual challenges through my process.

The reflective act is what creates meaning in the work and this act is always retrospective: only after disengaging with the action do I, through reflection, come to understand each of the subsequent actions as individually meaningful and as a whole symbolic. In the studio and in the public, awareness initiates the exchange. By directly engaging in the experiences of material and spatial specificities, the work becomes an allegory for political and poetic reflections of the urban environment. This process continues to demand the attentiveness of an archeologist, the intent of a poet and the gumption of an artist; to dig, salvage, and retrieve multiple meanings that transform spaces into places of meaning.

CHAPTER 1: My Process

Imagine an art practice that begins with a journey, not as an escape but more a way to shock sensibilities of place. I encounter new spaces for myself and tread lightly or firmly in those sites as a means of testing, subverting or renewing their spatiality and identities. With a visceral approach towards material and site, I attempt to activate transitional spaces into places of meaning through large-scale narrative sculptural installations, public art and site-specific video performance. Through metaphor, I explore issues of revitalization: placing myself in opposition to what is left in the post-industrial. As an urban interventionist, I walk the streets surveying, scrapping and absorbing its distinct qualities. This process is integral to my art practice as I attempt to posture my interactions as centers of felt value. Through sculpture, installation and performative urban intervention, I build allegories that attempt to shore up the waning identities of localities, people and site. The melancholy of the post-industrial overwhelms me, and yet my imagination suggests a sort of conquest to respond and re-present my direct surroundings. When considering the vacancy of the post-industrial I question: what makes a ground hallowed? In these works, I strive to encapsulate an experience of a temporal object that is; as something that endures.

The texture, tactility and storied depth of things is what I want to realize in my work. The sensuous, mossy, crumbly, rusty feel and smell and materiality of memory is what my artwork evokes upon confrontation. It is the very materiality of memory; its presence, and tangibility that remains a touchstone in public space, even if the matter in question is tarnished, disordered, forgotten, hidden, or irreversibly decaying. My physical presence in the work is intrinsic to my process as I am attentive to the empathetic

symbolism that is contained in vacant spaces. I labor to engross the viewer and material with the felt physicality of sites. I turn my attention towards that thing or space to produce curiosity and to generate narratives that transform space into place.

The mantra or proverb handed down from a past mentor, *process saves me from the poverty of my intention*, guides me while navigating in public space. ‘Process’ is a means through which to experiment with the potentials of engagement that could have not been revealed if ‘intentions’ were firm. This proven proverb upholds the space between ‘process’ and ‘intention’ as a means to engage the hesitations, challenges, breakthroughs, frustrations, satisfactions, illuminations, and insecurities that present themselves when working in the public.

The proverb situates itself within the guise of perceptions. It becomes an issue of perception and one’s ability to see, feel and/or believe in the richness or potential of things, people and places that might not show at face value. The word ‘poverty’ in the statement is used as a modifier and reflects what is lacking in our perceptions and intentions towards something. Intention has two definitions: firstly, a thing intended; an aim or plan. "She was full of good intentions", and secondly: in medicine: the healing process of a wound¹. Both refer to how something is approached, and also suggest that there is a process: one means to harm, the other to heal. The word intention emphasizes a determination, but there is hesitance in the word as it is spoken as intention has a double association to good vs. bad actions or thoughts. How we subjectively see value in resources both natural and man-made, physical or immaterial, determines how we act. For example, the difference of action taken towards a forest, between seeing it for its

¹ "Intention." Merriam-Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intention>. 4/2018

biodiversity or as raw material for mass production. My intention is to use my body as a tool to stimulate and process reactions in the urban environment. This felt exchange is the attempt to establish a sentient relationship between body and the architecture. Cities as a whole, communities and neighborhoods are shaped; on the ground, analytically, politically and individually on subsequent interactions. Particular sites possess distinctive resonances that build expectations and shape individual engagements with them. I wonder who decides what counts as culturally “vital” when it comes to revitalization?

Working site specifically refers to the attention put towards the social, political, spatial and temporal conditions of where it’s being placed. How we see objects, places, things and people determines how we act towards them. However, in the public realm intention is always in upheaval when confronted with the realities of the situation. I am conscious, flexible and adapt to the unspeakable, the harrowing and the uncertain interactions that happen in public space, as it often renders my intentions irrelevant. As an artist I am the agent and the public become the catalyst.

1.1 My Approach

The sometimes obscure and unpredictable ethical dilemmas that are presented while working in the public amplifies questions, procedures, and assumptions of not only my role as an artist but as social steward as well. I cannot, as an outsider, penetrate the ‘subterranean scars’ that are only felt by the people living directly in that space. Who am I to come into a neighborhood and point out what is valuable, what should be looked at? Or what should, wants, or can be healed? My actions in the public sphere are often

fleeting and temporary. However, any gesture resonates deeply within specific contexts, and should be approached with the empathy of a preservationist and lyricism of a poet.

In some cases, the emotional and psychological struggle to understand how I can sensitively approach a given space has persisted throughout graduate school. Working in the public restrains me, challenges me, forces me back and back again to find further opportunities to make someone turn their head, to imagine something coming into being. I need and embrace moments of doubt to make my work happen. Ever tried, ever failed, the continuous attempts become the works realization.

My works, “Between You Me and the Wall”, “Between Icarus and a Phoenix” and “Between a Stone and a Shrine” are enacted as site-specific performances and urban interventions that emphasize the exchange and reflection between myself or the audience, and the particularities of sites. I labor to generate interactions with people and site that produces the narratives to transform spaces into a place of value and potential. I have structured the thesis to reflect my approach to sites. First, I discuss how an object or material motivates me to take the action; how that action cultivates interaction with residents that turn into a narrative; and how that acknowledges the social vitalities of *place*. My presence in these places is not an encounter but an immersion. My interactions with others (usually spontaneous on the street) are integral to the creation of the work in terms of construction as well as its meaning. These interactions within the everyday create social interstices, opening up ways of seeing and feeling the world differently allowing for a creative feedback loop between artist, individual spectator and the local.

I explore artists who acknowledge a number of social issues concerning labor, individual will, heritage, ethics, memory and value. Their work shares the idea of ‘significant action’ that relies on artists and spectators participation in creating a communal present. I compare my approach of “futile efforts” with those of labor in the works of Francis Alÿs’, *When Faith Moves Mountains*. In contrast that with Walter De Maria who explores individual will through participation in *The Art Yard*, a Fluxus happening to dig a meaningless hole. Janine Antoni expresses felt presence in her process to create *GNAW*. Director Federico Fellini’s film *La Dolce Vita* explores the loss of presence and need for resurgence of meaning after the fall of Fascism. I use the opening scene of this movie to capture the urgency of that same message in the current plight of the post-industrial. Contemporary filmmaker Yael Bartana deconstructs the politics of memory by rebuilding efforts that evoke and critique Zionist tradition in Israel where the landscapes are in endless upheaval. Her use of jump shots in *Summer Camp* visually illustrates tensions of that state by juxtaposing Zionist propaganda film footage from the 30’s and 40s with that of the contemporary construction.

The presence of these artists, either directly part of the physical making or in the facilitation of the production, relate back to an experience each lived through. Their work is a rejection of that moment in history in order to magnify the urgency for society to grasp the present in effort to amplify future probabilities. For artists to insert themselves into their work means that the artist is no longer just a producer of their work, they are intertwined with it; the viewer experiences the work as inseparable from the artist. The artists felt presence embedded in a work of art can be transformative as the viewer becomes a witness to the work’s creation, participating in its becoming. The work no

longer exists outside of the artist in the past, or a hypothetical future: the work exists as it happens. The work is live: the work takes place in time, or it uses time as a trope to insist on the message that is being communicated.

In my artworks discussed in my thesis, I grapple with the essential element of time and entropy to transcend the divide of perspectives of progress. I divert public attention to storytelling potentials of site that contain a place's vitality. Working as an interventionist in the public pushes me beyond the choices that come easily. My approach can only set forth from what I have experienced. In the same way that my own cultural, experiential and ancestral upbringing has built parts of my identity.

1.2 My Construction

My life has been divided between the American Rust Belt and a farm in Northern Israel. While my mother was pregnant with me, my parents moved from Israel to the U.S. and settled in Rochester, NY. During my childhood, I spent most summers and parts of the school year in Israel, often staying with my mother's family on my Aunt's farm. The family-maintained acres of olive and almond groves, and a sunflower field, as part of their contribution to the Moshav.² Moshav Merhavyah was established in 1911 and comprised of individual farms that raised their own crops, shared their harvests, and marketed their excess collectively.

² A moshav is a type of Israeli settlement, in a cooperative agricultural community of individual farms pioneered by the Labor Zionists during the second wave of Aliyah or migration to Israel. "The Kibbutz & Moshav." *The Moshav*, www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-moshav. 3/2017



Figure 1- Cohen, Oreen. Photograph of my uncles hand built tractor, 2009.

I remember summers running through the groves, lying under canopies of giant sunflowers, and riding on the backhoe of my uncle's tractor. I was always fascinated with the tractors, those big blue, loud and rusty machines that my uncle built by hand (*Figure 1*). In his youth, my uncle served as a tank mechanic in the Israeli Defense Forces. Afterwards, he became a bus mechanic near the Moshav: his service gave him the experience that he needed to build his own tractors out of salvaged materials. I was always curious about his generative progression of skills, always in the labored service of a collective.

Here in the US, I spent my teenage years in Rochester, NY, and in the grit of the city, I had complete freedom to roam. Living in Rochester was a vast contrast from spending time on the Moshav. In Israel, my rampant curiosity took me far from home;

however, given the political environment, my family was always vigilant toward any possible threat. The irony was that my parents were naive to the dangers of a US city, one steeped in drugs and crime. Rochester became familiar to me through my urban excursions, where I developed street smarts and a resourceful perspective in response to my surroundings. I coined the verb “war driving.” Whether I was on foot or in a car, I mapped territory as explorer and a swift graffiti tagger. As I grew older, I retained my guerilla spirit, becoming a resourceful metal scrapper. Scrapping was both a way to pay for my next project, and also a way for me to continue “war driving” the streets. I used the discarded metal to construct sculptural installations (*Figure 2*).



Figure 2- Cohen, Oreen “One Thread Knots Itself Endlessly in the Wheels of the Infernal Machine” (2010) 24 ft x 20 ft. x 6 ft. Car parts, auto glass, barn wood, 1930’s-disc plow, wheels, bricks, engine, gas tanks bones. Solomon’s Island, MD, Annmarie Garden and Sculpture Park

1.3 Scavenging for Meaning

After completing my undergraduate degree in Fine Art from the University at Buffalo, I applied for an artist residency at the Ann Marie Sculpture Park in Maryland. For that residency I was given full access to the grounds of an early 20th century tobacco farm. There, I proposed to create installations using any materials I could salvage from the area. Exploring that farm brought me back to my childhood experience of being in a rural environment. I remember skidding down the slope on that farm into a ravine wielding a cordless Sawzall, tin snips and a shovel. The ditch I climbed into was heaped with average finds, pipes, planks, entangled wire, and lots of thorns. Through the weeds I thought saw something I could use for an armature, it looked like bars of angle iron. I hacked away at the weeds and dug deep to excavate the earth around each bar. As I dug deeper I could see that all the bars were connected. With great effort I brought that machine out of its concealment. Looking at what I pulled out in the light, I saw that it was a hand forged manual dirt drag. It had belt buckle latches and train spikes that were used as the drag's teeth. Feeling nostalgic for my uncle's hand-built tractor, I held onto that drag for years because I felt that it retained a part of my story.

Before graduate school my sculpture took the forms of farming machinery, military vehicles, and construction equipment. I was interested in how these machines had dual meanings as both instruments to harm (destroy or kill) or to heal (cultivate, harvest) I built machines that looked like they should function, but in fact could only engage the viewer's imagination. Scrap metal, car parts, auto glass, and barn wood and antique tools all contain their own dense and particular histories.

The sculptural installation “Running Drill” connected the sites of Maale Adumim, an Israeli settlement on the West Bank of Israel to the Civil War battlefield parks in Bull Run in Virginia by relating its similarity in the red dirt of those locations (*Figure 3*). Both landscapes share the history of battlefield, except one is a sacred space and the other is in constant upheaval of its identity. The structures and objects we interact with in our surroundings are figures of concealed histories: only through the removal of that which is concealed can we access the truth. Graham Harman suggests “Rather than undermining objects by dissolving them downward into some component element, we can dissolve them upward or “overmine” them.”³ Through the physicality in my artistic process, I exhumed objects and mined them for their essence. By combining these disparate objects, I created my own sculptural narratives.

The title “Running Drill” assumed metaphorical meaning: it spoke of the ongoing and repeated struggle between building and destroying that courses through history, leaving behind future relics that await spiritual excavation. The work is not asking to revive what has past but rather to accept the concealed and bring it forth as reliquaries of a hallowed ground. “Running Drill” attempts to parallel the similarities between a historic battlefield and a vacant urban space in the post-industrial. Completing this work before graduate school propelled my motivations to discover what possible physical actions could psychologically transform spaces into places of meaning.

These past experiences demonstrated a dedication to creating illustrative sculpture that wondered how to not be another gesture in the landscape of public art. My prior work relied on its sheer to create an audience to sculpture relationship by the sheer

³ Harman, Graham. “The Road to Objects.” *Graham Harman, The Road to Objects - Phil Papers*, 1 Jan. 1970, philpapers.org/rec/HARTRT-3.

body and scale ratio. Through graduate school I saw a shift in now my body that activates the sculpture and the sculpture is activated by my presence. With the opportunity to participate in the public arena, I expect challenges while navigating through barriers, contexts and safety concerns. The way my mind thinks is by seeing the multiple ways that something can be approached and changed. I adapt my process for flexibility in methods to bring out opportunity for possible outcomes, especially while agitating spaces to persuade new imagining towards the discarded.



Figure 3 Cohen, Oreen. Running Drill (2011) Agricultural machinery, fire hose, garden hose, drainage pipe, plaster, wax, iron rich dirt, power washer engine, brushes, water, electrical insulator 13'x9'x6'. Transformer Gallery Washington, DC.

CHAPTER 2: “BETWEEN YOU ME AND THE WALL”

Often I am referred to as a verb. ‘Tenacious’, maybe ‘maniacal’ in my approach towards material. I push my body as a tool. I leverage my strength and my weight over the material to impress myself into it physically and spiritually. I rejected my mother’s saying that repeated in my head, “With your mind, not your strength,” and insisted on my physical actions to realize my vision. For the sculptural and Guerilla art intervention *Between You Me and the Wall*, I baked over four thousand loaves of bread from scratch. Each iteration of the work was different based on its context: a Silo inside a raw commercial space at the former Nabisco Factory (now Bakery Square), or the repointing of over forty-five buildings on the “To Be Demolished” list in cities of Pittsburgh, PA, Buffalo and Rochester, NY. My investment of sweat equity encased within these loaded bread bricks eventually melts away as the bricks subside to weather, fermented in the mind of a passerby as a fleeting moment. The material of bread replacing brick acknowledges that everything is built for obsolescence. The action reinforces that physical alterations to the built environment need to consider past and current social structures and how the new additions to it will reflect those systems. With this empathic approach towards revitalization, the change can provide ‘sustenance’ for all.

2.1 Interchangeable Parts

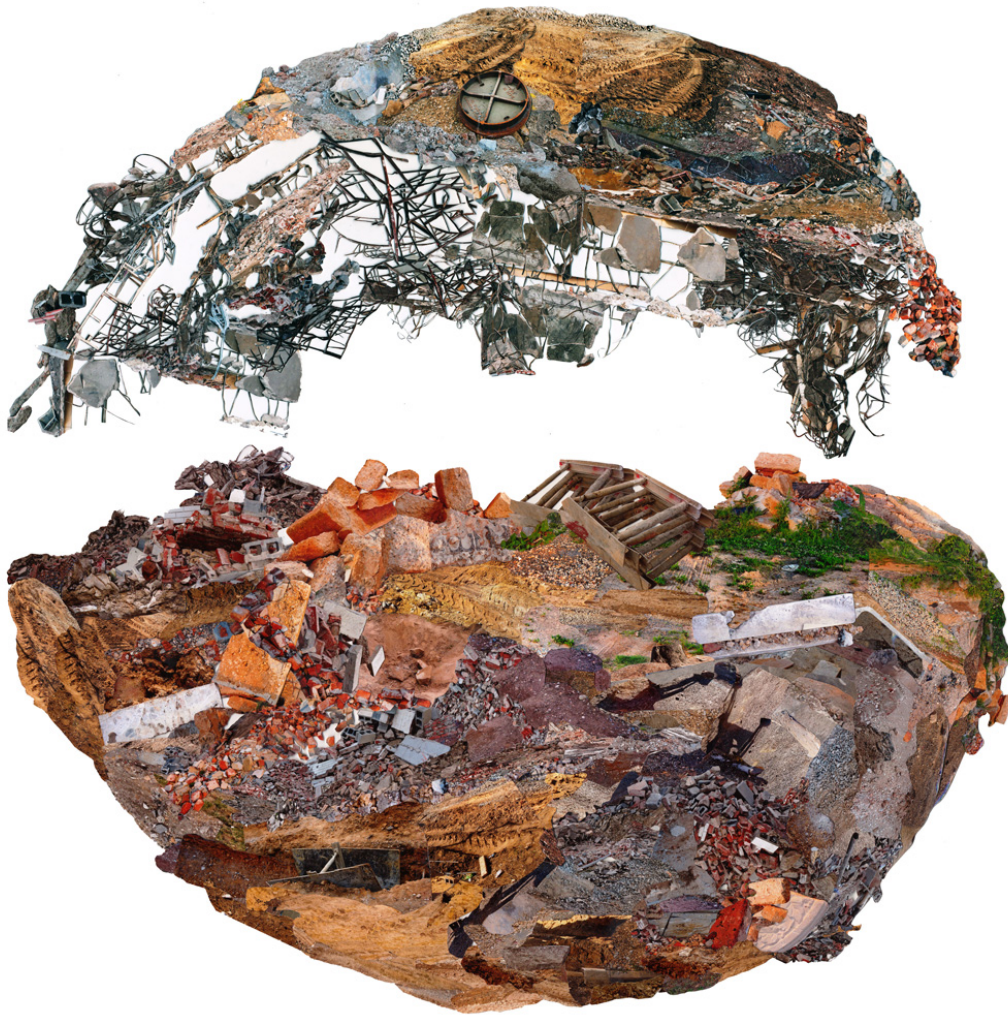


Figure 4- Cohen, Oreen. “Interchangeable Parts Series #23” Hand cut photocollage. 2012.

Mangled steel, hanging wires grasping onto slabs of concrete, the earth inscribed with tire tread, massive heaps of rubble -only a void remains from what was once the foundations of a freshly demolished factory. This scene illustrates a corner building in Pittsburgh; it was in DC, but ultimately could be a set anywhere. As I was photographing it, I asked one of the demolition workers what they do with the rubble from the old building. He replied, 'they crush it up and fill in the foundation with its own rubble. They'll pave over it to construct a new building on top of that.' Coincidentally, I met a

woman who lived nearby ran across the street, she was visually fraught with confusion as the factory that she worked in for thirty years was in shambles. She shared stories with us and then walked away clenching a brick in her hands. I left with photographs of the wreckage and a story to turn into a photo collage.

While scavenging for materials on construction sites I photograph machines, industrial materials and organic textures. I used the photos in a collage series titled: *Interchangeable Parts*. I intricately hand cut the negative space out from around all of the objects, extracting their basic forms. Since materials I like to use are often heavy or inaccessible, the collage series allowed me to realize impossible sculptures or proposals. While constructing the collage, *Interchangeable Parts* #23, the cut shapes of dirt began to have textures and tones of bread (*Figure 4*). I had a good recipe for salt dough that hardens solid enough to be used as a brick. I just needed to figure out how many parts flour to salt I would need to bake enough bricks to build a substantial sized wall.

2.2 Sweat Equity

For two months straight, I mixed four tons of flour, two tons of rock salt and gallons of water to bake over 4,000 loaves of salt dough bread bricks. I endured the repetitive and exhausting labor of mixing, kneading, forming and baking these bricks into individual aluminum bread loaf pans. I used an industrial clay mixer to churn all the ingredients together. I would rip out handfuls of dough from the mound, it felt as if I stuck my hand into lard, each brick was handled at least five times before they were ready for the installation (*figure 5*). The exhausting process of baking loaded the bread with content.



Figure 5 Cohen, Oreen. Documentation of bread brick baking process. 2012.

Each industrial size cup of flour to equal parts gray diluted rock salt water settled into more than its homogenized form. The inconsistency in each mix of dough made each loaf was uniquely personified in color, shape and texture (*figure 6*). Through these qualities I could tell which batch they came from, how I mixed the ingredients that time, the amounts of salt vs. water, and the bricks placement on the kiln shelf as it varied in temperatures. Through the long process I learned to manage myself physically and mentally, keeping track of the variables between myself and the material. As an integral process in the work, I exhaust myself, I sacrifice myself, and I suffer to manipulate raw material. The confrontation with this gooey, crusty wall and its epic proportions allows for a shift between literal and the figurative metaphor. The material use is an exaggeration of the body and bread metaphor for the viewer, as it seems in contemporary society something is only truly felt if it is directly related back to the self.



Figure 6 Cohen, Oreen. “Between You Me and the Wall” Detail view. Flour, Rock Salt, Wheat paste. Various dimensions. 4/2012.

2.3 Gnaw- ing Influence

Artist Janine Antoni’s presence is significant in her work. In the work “Gnaw”, she scraped her teeth on a six-hundred-pound block of chocolate for weeks at a time (figure 7). Engaging in an intimate, somewhat repulsive relationship with this mass of chocolate. Antoni's piece is a transformation of everyday activity (biting), into a repeated gesture that physically manipulated the surface and transformed the chips and shavings into a packaged box of chocolates. What is left of Antoni’s work is a static remnant of effort that vibrates her physical presence. Though I am making objects that have no real functional use, the similarity is illustrated in the distribution of physical energy and personal mark. ⁴

⁴ “Gnaw.” *Janine Antoni*, 1992. www.janineantoni.net/gnaw/.



Figure 7 (Janine Antoni *Gnaw* 1992 600 lbs. chocolate cube gnawed by the artist, 27 heart-shaped packages of chocolate made from chewed chocolate removed from chocolate cube and 130 lipsticks made with pigment, beeswax, and chewed lard removed from lard cube Installation dimensions: variable

Longing for a connection, we both see objects as occupying the space between the viewer and ourselves as a confrontation. To be intimate with the object is to touch the viewer. Antoni describes the profound experience of sitting down in the subway... “to feel the warmth of the person who sat there before me on the subway. Some people might be repelled, but for me, it’s really comforting that, on some basic level, we all produce warmth.”⁵ Janine’s relates her body between a material mass and volume while her gesture either adds or removes material. Blurring the distinction between performance and sculpture, our practices are clear in a dedicated attempt to translate personal endurance to the viewer. However, I diverge from this by not investing in trying to

⁵ Swenson, Kirsten, Wendy Vogel, and Douglas Dreishpoon. "Janine Antoni." *Art in America*.
https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/janine-antoni/#slideshow_16081.3.

understand myself as existent in my own body; instead I am interested in representing my experiences that relate entropic natures of body against the textures of the cityscape.

2.4 Encountering the Grain Silo

As I drove south on West fall Rd. in my hometown of Brighton, in Rochester, NY, I caught a glimpse of an arrow that pointed at the sky, like a rocket on its pad, the moon its destination. Nostalgic for the buildings of our past, I quickly pulled over and ran towards the structure as the thickets grasped my clothes, I ripped them away without any remorse. I was a determined artist, wielding my camera to capture a glimpse of this spectacle that captured me, before the sun set. After climbing over heaps of petrified cow dung and rotting hay that was packed against the barn door, I confronted the towering silo. As I stuck my head inside through a small door, it commanded a projected view. The roof was ripped off, creating a skylight that bleached the interior of the structure. The light cast deep shadows underneath the heavy steel doors that rose to the top. I crouched down and weaved myself through the opening. Inside, I stood on cushions of technicolor green moss that seemed laid out intentionally in the center of the silo. My feet planted, gaze cast upwards, I found myself in a state of reverie contemplating my body in relation to the empty container. I translated this experience on the interior of the sculptural installation (*Figure 8*).



Figure 8 Cohen, Oreen. “Between You, Me and the Wall”, (2012) Inside of silo installation view 4,000 handmade salt dough bread bricks, 150 lbs. of screws, florescent lights, steel door, live moss, an army tarp, steel milk jug, rust powder built at the former Nabisco Factory (Bakery Square) in Pittsburgh, PA. 9 ft diameter circle x 12 ft tall

2.5 Reconstructing the Silo

I re-constructed this grain silo for the 2012 1st and 2nd year MFA exhibition “Extra Fancy” held at Bakery Square, a former Nabisco Factory. The location was an empty concrete commercial space. After a dizzying number of trips unloading the bricks to the site, I began to arrange the piece. I loaded fifty-five-gallon drums with the bread and gently dumped them on the ground and I began to lay brick. I arranged the bread by color and texture. Some were more dried out, had more salt content, too hard or too brittle also varying in degrees of crisp browns, I dispersed the weak ones to retain the integrity of the structure. I drilled each brick with two, three-inch drywall screws and eventually had to shore the entire silo up with a wooden armature (*Figure 9*).



Figure 9 Cohen, Oreen. “Between You, Me and the Wall” Installation process documentation. 2012.

Drilling each of those 4,000 bricks manually and rolling on scaffolding around this silo in the center of this space was exhausting. My arms vibrated to numbness, I realized the extend of my physical capacity when the walls reached ten feet, leaving parts of the armature still exposed at the top. The work was a drawn out of a meditative process and compulsion with an urgency to get the work done. My ‘failure’ to complete it left the piece more open to interpretation. I reconstructed my direct experience in the abandoned silo for the public. The work enticed all of the senses: its crusty textural smell of dense bread filled the space; the spectators’ visceral confrontation with the fleshy bricks was reinforced by the lighting, nestled in the concrete ceiling, simulated the bleached the interior of the silo as I had originally encountered it on the farm.

The lighting became a directive force that dragged the viewers sight up along the side of the silo to a projected view (*Figure 10, 11*). There was a small rusted steel door on the side of the silo that I scavenged from a Jewish graveyard in Israel. Viewers stood on their tiptoes to peek in. Sprawled on the interior was vibrant green moss I harvested from the farm silo. This installation stood as an illustration of a structure that stands symbolically towards production, collection and storage of grain, a staple ingredient for humans. Within the construction of this work, I stored my energy in each loaf. Viewers had the ability to walk around the unified circular body left in an uncertain state of construction.

The yeasty, dense and crusty loaves provoked a tension within the material's entropic nature. Through the wall's repetition in construction and form, I created a moment to reflect on service as a way to preserve the memory of site. The production of labor of *Between You Me and the Wall* was heroic in labor, dominant in scale, intrusive in gesture with a nourishing intention. The repetitive labor within my art practice is an insistence to relieve the constant pressure of something hidden but not forgotten. In this work I physically took on the process to incite a bodily relationship and empathy towards the crumbling, built environment.



Figure 10, Figure 11 Between You, Me and the Wall, (2012) Installation view and Detail view. 4,000 handmade salt dough bread bricks, 150 lbs. of screws, wheat paste, florescent lights, steel door, built at the former Nabisco Factory (Bakery Square) in Pittsburgh, PA. 9 ft diameter circle x 12 ft tall



CHAPTER 3: GUERILLA PUBLIC INTERVENTIONS

My desire to produce is an incalculable value of pure gesture to engage with the public as an ‘activist’ attempting to alter perceptions of space and place. With a visceral approach towards material, I create publicly performed actions and sculptural interventions that attempt to transform vacant or abandoned space into a place of meaning. As an observer and explorer, I access how memory is constructed or affected through my engagements with people while working in the public. I draw insight from my surroundings by unpacking the embedded meanings, histories, and identities of site. I do this by retracing textures of the built environment through repetitious labor that is kept open to the consequences to those actions as possible contributors to placemaking.

3.1 Re-Pointing Buildings

I dismantled the silo and packed my hatchback car with as many bricks I could fill to use for an urban intervention. I killed my cars suspension with the amount of weight in the back while I drove around Pittsburgh, PA, Buffalo NY and Rochester, NY repointing buildings on the “To Be Demolished” list. I pulled over to the side of various dilapidated buildings and houses, popped my trunk and mixed a five-gallon bucket of wheat paste on the spot. I filled another bucket with bricks to stack and slather them into place (*Figure 10*). Constantly watching my back in each different context, there was always someone watching me work. I anticipated interactions asking: What is that? Why are you doing this? Sometimes I was surprised to experience people's willingness to engage further.



Figure 12 "Between You Me and the Wall." Guerilla Street Intervention. Flour, rock salt, water, wheat paste. Pittsburgh, PA. 4/2012

3.2 Public Dialogue

On a vacant lot in Braddock, there were piles of old brick. I pulled over and began to stack the bricks in a solid 2 ft x 2 ft chimney form (*figure 13*). I wanted to see how high I could go without using any adhesive. The unevenness of the loaves made it teeter. As I reached for a piece of wooden lathe to buttress the wall, a man walked up and immediately started picking up the bread bricks and struggled the form with me. For at least an hour, we stacked the bread bricks as he told me stories about the four-story building that used to be there and his childhood memories of the area before it was dismantled. The social interactions in this project made me realize how important these moments were to realize a deeper potential of the work. That man didn't have to interact with me, but our shared curiosity and about the activity happening on that lot lured us to remember its compacted history through our futile action in the present.



Figure 13 "Between You Me and the Wall." Guerilla Street Intervention. Flour, rock salt, water, wheat paste. Braddock, PA 4/2012



Figure 14 "Between You Me and the Wall." Guerilla Street Intervention. Flour, rock salt, water, wheat paste. Pittsburgh, PA 4/2012

I thought what I was doing was harmless. I was attempting to heal cracks and voids of the buildings while adding a bit of whimsy to the concrete reality of our surroundings (figure 14). The bricks would melt and crumble away as they weathered, sometimes killing any green grass because of the salt content, but the project was built for obsolescence. However, in Buffalo, I was almost arrested for trespassing on a complex that was doomed for demolition (*Figure 15*). Preserving the site was a pressing concern for the Buffalo Young Preservationist Group (BYPG) at that moment so I partnered with this group as a way to merge our activist intentions. I used the site as a playground for different interventions and was scheduled to give a public artist talk on site (*Figure 16*). The talk didn't happen, and the intervention was left incomplete because I was confronted by a police officer for trespassing and vandalism.

Ironically, just across the street, there was a blatant act of domestic violence happening outside. The officer continued to interrogate me instead of tending to someone in need of dire help. and out of concern, I became irate in their defense. However, I was able to convince the officer to talk to the President of BYPG, while I stood waiting in front of the police car covered head to toe in wheat paste and flour. As he was on the phone, as he spoke the police officer inched the car towards me literally trying to drive me off of the property, I ran out of the way and got in my car leaving a large window unfinished. During an intervention, I must be hastier in my actions. The negative connotations and risks involved in urban art was not what I wanted to pursue. As a legit public artist, it became clear that I needed to request sanction and adapt my approach.



Figure 15 “Between You Me and the Wall.” Guerilla Street Intervention. Flour, rock salt, water, wheat paste. Buffalo, NY 4/2012



Figure 16 “Between You Me and the Wall.” Guerilla Street Intervention. Flour, rock salt, water, wheat paste. Buffalo, NY 4/2012

3.3 Between the Myths of Icarus and a Phoenix

In April 2013, I attempted to get my project approved and sanctioned by East Liberty Development Inc. (ELDI), as a critical investigation of the urban redevelopment taking place in East Liberty, a neighborhood on Pittsburgh's East Side. Like a phoenix built out of the ashes of its predecessor, I built 10 ft x 5 ft wing out of salvaged materials from a building that ELDI was preparing to demolish at the intersection of Highland and Penn avenue (*Figure 17*). I understood this space as an already a citizen defined public gathering space and I wanted to illuminate transitional areas as a place that actually affect people's memory of the everyday. Taking on these social issues as my own cross to bear, as I was going to drag this 250 lb. wing on my back acting as a harbinger towards the future (*Figure 18*).



Figure 17 Cohen, Oreen. "Between the Myth of Icarus and a Phoenix," Photo Collage Proposal, 2012.



Figure 18 Cohen, Oreen. "Between the Myth of Icarus and a Phoenix," Salvaged materials, aluminum flashing, venetian blinds, fiberglass, drop ceiling aluminum rails, spray paint, roofing tar, steel. 2013.



Figure 19 Cohen, Oreen "You were ahead of your time, but you had a vision. Under the sign of unfulfilled Redemption, the arrows of old anxieties sharpen in the heart of expectation." Laser etched metal. 2012

Performing as a modern-day Icarus, I was going to trudge through the streets and interview pedestrians about their expectations were for East Liberty's future. Quotes from the interviews and snippets of statements from old Pittsburgh newspapers were going to be etched into hundreds of metal sheets found on site, linked together and wrapped around the building (Figure 19). Cladding it with contradicting opinions was both a protest and a poetic gesture of protection in the midst of redevelopment.

Being the first project, I tried to get sanction for, I maintained good communication with ELDI. I provided a collage "sketch" of the project and worked with them to request permits to install on the exterior of the building. ELDI requested a list of example statements. After reading them, they realized it was a subversive critique of the developers, ELDI quickly pulled out of the project. I considered still doing the project without permission, however, my identity and the nature of the sculpture was already revealed. I left the project as an experiment and lesson of working in the public. I tried to take on enormous and deeply rooted social issues of dislocation in the neighborhood of East Liberty. However meaningful, poetic or well researched, the gesture was still fraught with complications, beginning with questions of my subjectivity. I wondered to what degree I could respond to a space or communities histories of which I am not a part of.

3.4 To Try

*"...Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."*⁶

The "failures" or questions brought up in the development of both the bread and wing project would not have come to light if I hadn't first tried to add something to the collective memory of the everyday. How can I approach a place and "help" retain something that I am not originally a part of? Am I allowed to provide a new lens, or at least present the issues of race relations and places being swept away as obviously urgent concerns that are hidden because no one wants to confess? The foundational question still stands: who am I laboring for?

The accumulated street smarts and resourcefulness of my youth, have proved useful in dealing with situations presented in the public. Under the conditions of uncertainty, I must be flexible, ready and willing change tactics at short notice and to pursue opportunities in the present. Responding to the surroundings is in each instance a freedom of choice: the choice to forget; the choice to reinvent; the choice to fictionalize; the choice to belong anywhere, everywhere and nowhere.

The process of questioning my subjectivity does not end, and it is what ultimately motivates my work. If there were no questions, challenges or issues to grapple with then the work becomes purely aesthetic. Francis Alÿs titled an exhibition, "Sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can become poetic."⁷ Poetry accomplishes something unique; it opens up the multiplicities of associations by exploding original meanings and structures of language that can reveal it as being meaningful.

⁶ Beckett, Samuel. *Stories and Texts for Nothing*. Grove Press, 1980.

⁷ "Francis Alÿs." Dillon, Brian. Frieze. <https://frieze.com/article/francis-aly-0>. 9/2010

Site specific installations should intelligibly punctuate the urban landscape with imagined possibilities for activation. Art can be used as a tool to promote connections to that fuel the mechanisms of exchange, experience, reflection, and dialogue in public space. I care with materials- that become critical, to translate my work along with civic practices of the everyday. As the poet, Cesare Pavese states, “The poet’s task was larger: to apprehend the miracle of the concrete, to find the spiritual meaning in every fact...”⁸ The poet’s mission is to create culture from scratch or to incarnate its noblest meaning in striving. There can be no agenda when working in between the contexts: all expectations, associations and intentions will be ruptured.

The ritual of going back to a place is to understand its uniqueness. It is a devotion to respectfully awaken the narratives that make it a place. Transforming site into place was not Walter De Maria’s concern. He was interested in task-oriented, game like projects that resulted in viewer-interactive sculptures. For example, his Boxes for Meaningless Work (1961) is inscribed with the instructions, “Transfer things from one box to the next box back and forth, back and forth, etc. Be aware that what you are doing is meaningless.”⁹ De Maria retained a participatory component, but only metaphorically as the effect has no purpose. For me this work is meaningful as I moved bricks from one place to the other or intended to drag this wing on my back; the nonsensical work is an insistence to look and question. My meaningless labor stands in the fact that all of my work is temporary, either disintegrating or dismantled it is constructed by as well as dismantled responding to a specific site, if it were moved it would lose its meaning (*Figure 20*).

⁸ Pavese, Cesare, and William Arrow smith. *Hard Labor*. Ecco Press, 1979.

⁹ Mcfadden, Jane. *Walter De Maria - Meaningless Work*. Reaktion Books, 2016. Pg. 47

Metaphorically I lift the weight of associations and imbue new meanings that uphold the integrity of objects as they provide the essential functional architectures for empathy. Art can show us our sensitivities towards our surroundings and also give light to their contradictions. Restoring or discovering meaning in domain of public spaces that have been discarded is a daunting task which requires profound reorientation. In both works, I tried to translate my intimate and intense studio process through object to the environment. But I realize that the potential of activation actually lies within the activation a rich dialogue with people and site, as long I am present and willing to participate in the experience. In any attempt, as I labor, I will make poetry from the intent and infuse it with meaning in the process.



Figure 20 “Between You Me and the Wall.” Guerilla Street Intervention. Bread bricks disintegrating after four month installation. Flour, rock salt, water, wheat paste. Rochester, NY 4/2012

CHAPTER 4: THESIS PROJECT: *Between a Stone and a Shrine*

Between a Stone and a Shrine begins with the single channel, Part I: The Gilding Workshop, where Master Gilder Youssef Kadri led teens of the Braddock Youth Project through the process of gold leafing the casket. Part II: The Procession is a six-channel installation that builds tension in preparation for the arrival of the casket. Footage opens in the harvest season as the ground is being plowed, the grave is being dug, and house is being demolished. Over the winter, trains are speeding across the landscape to deliver the luminous monument where it is finally walked in procession to its resting place. When spring arrived a plot of sunflowers grew directly from the grave permeating the local history.

This work was spurred by a Hebrew proverb my mother often repeats to me:

“No one will make you a casket made of gold” אף אחד לא עשוי לך קבר זהב

I took the Hebrew proverb to mean that no one will acknowledge you with the respect that you deserve so you must work to leave your own legacy. The development of the thesis project “Between a Stone and a Shrine” was based on a combination of meanings through labor and imagery that can be analyzed from many angles. The following writing describes the production, experiences and confrontations that were integral to the projects development. The film was shot from my experiences of immersion in the town of Braddock. This Hebrew proverb provided me with an object and the intention to transform a space into a place of memory. Walter De Maria’s conviction in the proposal for “The Art Yard” spurred my motivation to dig a grave for a golden casket.

4.1 *The Art Yard*

In the *Anthology of Chance Operations*¹⁰ written in 1960, Walter De Maria proposed to dig a hole in the ground. The proposal for The Art Yard used site as a blank canvas for dynamic hard yet meaningless work. It also provided the vision for my thesis project, *Between a Stone and a Shine*. De Maria's written proposal instructs the movements of bulldozers and steam shovels operated by nonprofessionals to build cacophony of excitement by digging. The audience crowded on bleachers wearing tuxedos; they expected a theatrical show. The anxiety built by the sound of machines and their actions antagonized a climax of possible reactions. The audience overreacts and joins the digging. De Maria wanted to facilitate an atmosphere of urgency in that present moment; he even strategically placed shovels in front of the bleachers. De Maria's proposals are involved with embracing the multiple possibilities of action that can happen now, in any place, with any task. The Art Yard illustrates the idea of providing resources as an entrance for the viewer to muster the will to participate.

De Maria defines "Meaningless Work" that is insistently devoid of any meaning in the labor itself, the meaning lies in the effect of the process.¹¹ "Meaningless work is individual in nature, done in any form and over any span of time, from one second up to the limits of exhaustion. It can be done fast or slow or both. Rhythmically or not. It can be done anywhere in any weather conditions with any tools or materials."¹² *The Art Yard* insisted on not becoming entertainment for others, as the will to participate in the act becomes invasive. In this situation, the spectator is not given symbols, but only the fact of

¹⁰ Brecht, George, and La Monte. Young. *La Monte Young: an Anthology of Chance Operations*. Heiner Friedrich Inc., 1970. Pg. 27.

¹¹ Mcfadden, Jane. *Walter De Maria - Meaningless Work*. Reaktion Books, 2016.pg 45

¹² Ibid. Mcfadden, Jane. Pg. 47

experience and tools that value the intrinsic notions of abrupt action. The actions of the Art Yard distanced themselves from the histories and identities of site: it is the arena where the mere gestures in concert provided the ethics that gained significance as generative action.

Every now and then I come across an artist who embodies alluring paradoxes with a pinch of rebelliousness, and a candor of artistic labor that reveals the vulnerabilities within stringent definitions of what art can and cannot be, or in De Maria's conviction it is not at all even art. His artistic convictions of pure action in performance beyond *The Art Yard* have been reflected throughout my work in graduate school, such as his leapfrogging a stone to the sea in "Beach Crawl", or his definition of "Meaningless Work." What is curious is that none of these actions ever happened, they were just written like an instruction manual. De Maria's wide-ranging artistic career during the 1960s, spanned the movements of Minimalism, Fluxus 'Happenings' and music composition, as well as land art. This provides a crucial context of how to understand my own interdisciplinary and generative approach to making. De Maria was not concerned with any particular style or implication of art movement; only that he could express his unique sensibilities in whatever means necessary. At the end of the proposal, De Maria begged anyone who had access to construction equipment and land to reach out to him immediately.

The Art Yard provided ripe opportunity for uncertainty, potential dangers, tensions and freedoms to explode on a site. The free agency in action that embodies an individual's belief systems and personal influence is exercised towards something.¹³

¹³Mcfadden, Jane. Walter De Maria - Meaningless Work. Reaktion Books, 2016. Pg.131

I have used De Maria's methods as a way to structure my own interdisciplinary actions, but in contrast my acts are filled with meaning (*Figure 21*). My process infuses meaning deeper into the objects, labors and acknowledgment of site location that become the directives. As an interventionist on the street, I mediate between passive observation to agitation; between the site's past and present, use and non-use; meaning and metaphor. As I am absorbed in a site's dynamic locale, the direction of my attention is not in the present needs necessarily, but in the futures of expectations, not on the tools but on the work to be done.



Figure 21 "Between a Stone and a Shrine" Documentation shot. Post- burial using an excavator to fill the hole. Spring 2014

4.2 Original Thesis Proposal

The following email was sent to the Mayor of Braddock, John Fetterman and Maria McCool, Braddock Borough Manager. In the email I requested permission to the use a vacant plot in Braddock, to site and produce the film performance, *Between a Stone and a Shrine* as part of my thesis project:

November 11, 2013

My name is Oreen Cohen and I am a local artist and graduate student in Fine Arts at Carnegie Mellon University. I am currently working on a film project in Braddock. The gist of the film is airlifting a gilded casket sculpture over Pittsburgh to the Carrie Furnace where a crowd of people await its arrival. The helicopter will lower the casket to the crowd which will then parade it down Braddock Avenue to a vacant plot where we will then bury the casket. Symbolically, placing this gilded casket underground will act as a seed and offer the reflection as “death of industry is a transition and not a finality.”

I am contacting you regarding securing the location of 730 Talbot Avenue, Braddock for the burial plot. I am requesting permission to use the vacant lot that is adjacent to this building. I intend to manually dig a grave plot roughly the dimensions of 8 ft long by 4 ft wide and 5-6 ft. deep. When I am not at the plot working I will cover it with a tarp and a fence of caution tape to eliminate any safety issues. I am also covered by Carnegie Mellon University Insurance for my personal safety and health concerns. I have contacted Dominion Corporate to acquire the appropriate permits to dig as well as to have the utility company mark where underground piping infrastructures are, so I dig safely. The cost for the permit is \$100.00 and I will pay out of pocket. Once I complete the project I will ensure that the casket is removed, and the hole is filled back in leaving the plot as I found it.

Attached to the email is a project proposal as well as a map, and a sketch images for the performance....



Figure 22 “Between a Stone and a Shrine” Storyboard photocollage. Found photos and gold leaf. (2013)

I did not receive a response from the Mayor; however, the Borough Manager did reply weeks later after presenting it to the town council. The council president saw it as “so negative” and she didn't want to see anything "negative" associated with Braddock. I sustained my efforts by explaining the details of project assuring them that the work was in fact designed to “bring light to neighborhoods in transition” and supplemented it with further credentials and reference contacts. While waiting for the permits to clear, I produced other parts of the project, including a stop animation story board (Figure 22, Appendix 2). I also tried to contract a helicopter, which didn't happen. I changed the wording of the proposal. Maria presented it again to the council. It was passed, and I was sanctioned to proceed.

CHAPTER 5: “Part I: The Gilding Workshop”

Part I: The Gilding Workshop and Part II: The Procession. Part I was shown on the first floor, where Part II, a six-channel installation was shown on the second floor of the Miller Gallery. With the only channel with its scenes are set on the interior of a building, Part I was shown as a single channel looping video projection that filled a 15 ft x 12 ft wall with surround sound audio. The tone of the film is quiet, focused and controlled. The video itself is comprised of jump cuts of hands quickly working capturing the participants spreading, pouncing, and brushed down the gold leaf as it tugged to conform to the sticky surface.

5.1 Gilding the Casket



Figure 23 Cohen, Oreen. Wooden casket sculpture. Reclaimed shipping container, moulding, screws. 2013.

I built the casket out of a wooden crate I could find in a dumpster (*figure 23*). I refined it with reclaimed rails, molding and scrap wood. I now had a bare casket and I needed to gild it. I took the opportunity to reach out to Joseph Youssef Kadri, a local master gilder who worked under one of the most prominent Parisian Ateliers for over thirty years in Paris, France.¹⁴ We set up studio visits, so that we could both form a better understanding of how we could collaborate. He introduced me to the tools of his trade and explained the intricacies of the process. I was intrigued by the swiftness of his hand movements and coordination with such a fragile material. I wanted to make sure this airiness was captured in the film.

Drawing from my art teaching background, I developed and filmed a gilding workshop with the Braddock Youth Project.¹⁵ The workshop was planned in collaboration with the gilder, Joseph, at the Braddock Community Center. This was a more conventional means to connect with community as an artist, while also serving as a link, illustrating where the casket is coming from within the overall narrative of the film (*figure 24*). The transformation of the casket from something raw and bland into something sacred spurred excitement in the youth; once the task was finished they started gilding their shoes, phones and notebooks. The workshop was a brief moment with a tactical experience of gold's physical lightness, a break from familiar concrete realities. The workshop resulted in a playful gesture of cooperation that demonstrated how to turn an imagined vision into a reality, as we turned a wooden casket into gold. Continuing the

¹⁴ Batz, Bob. "Gilder Gives Midas Touch to Local Homes and Buildings" Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. 2/2003. <http://old.post-gazette.com/homes/20030215gilder0215fnp3.asp>

¹⁵ Braddock Youth Project is a youth work skills training program that fosters skills in projects, generated and maintained by the youth. <http://braddockyouth.org/>

participation after the workshop, Project leader, Dario, became a pallbearer in the final procession and some youth participated in the final burial of the golden casket.



Figure 24” Cohen, *Oreen Between a Stone and a Shrine Part I: The Gilding Workshop*” Film Still. 2013.

5.2 Production Influence

My approach to the filming of the gilding workshop was influenced by seeing Israeli video artist Yael Bartana showed the film *Summer Camp* during the 2013 Carnegie International Exhibition. *Summer Camp* is a meticulously edited, 12-minute image and sound composition (*figure 25*). Bartana uses stylistic devices and close up shots of orchestrated movements of cooperation in labor to rebuild a Palestinian home. In Bartana’s film, the weight of the concrete building material was distributed through a choreography of movement. The moving image was produced with quick jump cuts of action. My eyes moved with the heavy material moving from hand to hand, making it seem as if I, the viewer, was implicated in the oversight of the work. I decided to use a

similar fast paced editing and directed shots focused on the hands as a way to implicate the viewer in the fastidious process of gilding as the viewer wonders the caskets symbolism.



Figure 25 Yael Bartana. *Summer Camp*, 2007. Video installation. Courtesy Annet Gelink Gallery and Sommer Contemporary Art Gallery, Amsterdam.

In the exhibition, *Part I: The Gilding Workshop* was presented on the first floor of the Miller Gallery as a separate channel from the rest of the story board as it was the only filmed interior event. This sequence also staged the tonal structure of the film and foreshadowed events to come with overlapping sounds of distant trains. The gilding workshop revealed the beginning of the journey, where the casket is coming from, and imbued it with significance. The casket is gilded by the youth, seemingly protected and now sacred. As the wooden casket turned into gold, the raw concreteness of reality turned into a playful gesture that illuminated both the potential of the material and the youth's themselves. Once the casket was complete, they started gilding their phones and shoes. The workshop was a tactical experience of gold's physical lightness (*figure 26*).



Figure 26 Cohen, Oreen Between a Stone and a Shrine Part I: The Gilding Workshop” Film Still. 2013.

Directing the cameras to focus on the handwork presented the action as important. In the editing, the role of teacher and student shifted, and the action was not a lesson, there were no corrections. In the final presentation the projection screen was larger than the viewer’s body; scaling up the image of gold leaf sheets to human proportions and crunching sound of tissue paper caused a slight fiction in the softness of the gesture.

The community center was a renovated church with high arched ceilings, creating an echo in the audio sample. In the final presentation, this echo exaggerated the sense of an interior space while the viewer watched the exterior of the object transform. This forced the viewer to engage different with the casket as the gilding process became a process of much greater concentration, effort and growing commitment. The camera movement captured youth walking around the casket to examine it critically from all angles as they graced the empty spaces with gold (*figure 27*).



Figure 27 “Between a Stone and a Shrine, Part I The Gilding Workshop” Documentation photo. 2013.

CHAPTER 6: PART II: The Procession Exhibition



Figure 28 “Between a Stone and a Shrine, Part II The Gilding Procession” Documentation of installation photo. Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon University. 2014.

I installed *Part II: The Procession*, the six-channel installation, on the second-floor gallery.¹⁶ The space was rectangular with a wide entrance in the center. I didn’t want the viewer to be able to walk straight into the installation room. This was my first time installing only projectors in a space and it uncomfortably lacking in physical materials, so I dragged in piled of stones and concrete slab that I dug out from the grave and piled it in front of that entrance. Wedged between the stones were the tall dried sunflower stalks (figure 28). Standing tall with their dry heads dangling downwards, they represented my need for physical material as well as breaking the egress of the viewers as they entered the space. After experiencing the film, to leave they had to walk out around the stones again. By this time, they understood these flowers in relation to their bodies, and the symbolism of the film (*figure 29*). The physical stones and flowers further articulated the film’s message of holding on to something that is seemingly dead because of our

¹⁶ See Appendix 2 for hyperlink to video

empathetic relationship to a situational context. The reanimation of these flowers through the confrontation transformed their significance from a hollow husk to a hallowed entity.



Figure 29 “Between a Stone and a Shrine, Part II The Gilding Procession” Documentation of installation photo. Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon University. 2014.

6.1. Fragmented Projections

The experience walking into the center back room on the second floor was overwhelming. There, projected video clips jumped from wall to wall in brief flashes, forcing viewers to whirl around at every sudden change. The narrative was pulled apart to create a continuous motion through the space. The viewer has to move themselves, spin and turn their heads to pick up the narrative and thread the visual relationships together. The experience is disorienting, but that was the point. The viewer cannot stand still to capture the narrative; those motions are an attempt to translate my experience of walking

on the street, with my eyes (or camera) focusing on small details to larger scopes. The scale of each of the six screens immersed the viewers.

The poetry of the work exists here between the participation and the image, similar to De Maria's Art Yard- the audience has to interpret the work through themselves, rather than just a passive receiving. I am interested in the capturing the overlooked, presenting things in an obscure manner that poses questions that, in turn create a productive confusion, with the imagery that so visually alluring that viewer stays long enough to untangle the scenes (*figure 30*). New narratives are created out of the spectator's occupation of multiple and dynamic roles. As the viewers perspectives are shaped by my experiential projections they simultaneously negotiating their own spatial sense and the meaning of the work within the encompassing gallery environment.



Figure 30 “Between a Stone and a Shrine, Part II The Gilding Procession” Documentation of installation photo. Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon University. 2014.

The video footage was shot from my point of view as the maker; a contemplative, poetic vision, trying to place the viewer in my perspective. Mine was multifaceted

approach to film that provided a depth to the variable possibilities of associative meanings, and it surpassed my expectations through the production process. The video content is powerful in the subjective view, but the overall intention of the work was to orchestrate a public event. This shift from subjective to a collective purpose tends to be a theme throughout the trajectory of my work. Picking out details that spark curiosity, I played with changes in the images depth of focus to draw relationships to specific textural things between body and space, viewer and material, between myself and the context.

I wanted to take the audience through the same disorienting experience and slowed or stopped scenes that captured reflective moments. As I watched the viewers rotating in the gallery space, the Greek Myth, about the sea nymph, Clytie came to mind. She was in love with the sun god Apollo. She laid herself naked for nine days on the rocks beside the sea staring following the sun, without drinking or eating anything.

“On the ninth day, Apollo transformed Clytie into a sunflower, whose head turns towards to follow the direction of the sun.¹⁷ Stepping into my video installation, the viewer became a sunflower stalking the golden ‘sun.’”

The images were fast, some streamed across projections; they were read individually or grouped together. The images stretched perceptions of space, scale, mirrored and challenged the viewers processed the reception they stood engrossed in awe. The shaky camera footage and textural details represented my movements through the urban environment. Captured shots are arranged as jump cuts and slow-motion pans. I manipulated the footage by using cinematic effects and intense surround sound audio to invoke a sense of urgency to make the audience a participant in the scene (*figure 31*).

¹⁷ “Clytie.” Greek Mythology, www.greekmythology.com/Other_Gods/Minor_Gods/Clytie/clytie.html



Figure 31 “Between a Stone and a Shrine, Part II The Gilding Procession” Documentation of installation photo. Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon University. 2014.

6.2 Spatial Sound

I stripped all of my footage of its audio and mashed it with field recordings. The rectangular semi-enclosed space allowed me to leverage the geometries of the space to amplify the surround sound to create a spatial audio environment. I gathered the sounds to echo across the spacious interior of a box, or casket in this situation. I forged transitions between the sequences using audio as a rhythmic tool for continuity. The volume was on high as sounds of trains swelled in one speaker and pulled away from another; the scratchy hay being sifted around the room was physically abrasive. Sounds of train horns were used at specific moments to announce a shift in the narrative.

I concentrated on how the audio could control the rhythm of events as they moved quickly. The incantatory elements of the audio were responsible for heightening the

urgency of time and the anticipation of an arrival, while being contrasted with moments of quiet waiting. The non-diegetic sounds transitioned the sequences, furthering possible metaphoric associations for the viewer to construct a narrative. Recordings of birds overlapped with the demolition of a building, as the excavator mimics a tenderness of a bird piecing apart materials to use for its nest. In the gallery, all projectors go dark, and one turns on with a singular scene of an excavator arm bearing down on its flooring. In one of the slowest moments in the film, the sound was not of the machine groaning and crushing material, but of a human struggling to labor, rattling chains and sifting hay. The gallery space, a cloud of coal dust that filled the projected frame, became a reverent scene that made viewers gasp. The textural sounds of labored breathing over the visual experience of a truthful historical materiality compounds meaning, to expose the labor identities that settled in the bones of the post-industrial. I tried to capture this within a poem that crafted the tones and message of the film using language.¹⁸

6.3 The Sermon

Ironically, across the street from my burial site was a funeral home. Mr. James Watts approached me while I was digging the grave, and our friendly, humorous interaction spurred into many conversations over tea at his funeral home. We discussed the neighborhood and the changes that were happening. We also of course talked about death and the task of servicing grief. I reflected on the artist as a sort of funeral director: someone in charge of re-presenting the deceased in one last spectacle. Mr. Watts agreed to read the poem during the burial of the casket.

¹⁸ See Appendix 1 for Sermon. Pg. 83 of thesis

In post-production, I was torn about whether to dub the poem over the final burial sequence. However, I realized the visual potency of the film and the narrative qualities in the audio. After successfully placing viewers in a thirteen-minute trance; it would have reduced the overall effect of the piece to hear the recitation of a poem directs the story. I edited out the sermon and provided it only as a text printed on seed paper as the artist statement. This seemingly a small decision impacted the reception of the message, such is the power of editing.



Figure 32 *“Between a Stone and a Shrine: Part II The procession”* Burial documentation. 1/2014.

6.4 Filming

During the development of the project, 2013-2014, I taught myself how to use a DSLR camera for video and watched endless tutorials on Adobe Premiere and Adobe Audition that facilitated my first ever film production. For the development of the film, I created a photo collage storyboard and animated it using stop-motion.¹⁹ This proved to be helpful to use when I applied for grants to support the project.²⁰ Working in video and performance on this scale led to the discovery of new to construct a narrative. Within the process, I embraced the opportunity to learn how to translate the physicality of my process through an immersive sound and video installation.

As a first-time filmmaker, the only way I could enter the filming and editing for this six-channel video installation was to parallel it to my sculptural approach. While walking through the street I foraged for imagery in the first-person perspective. The sometimes blurry and shaky footage created impressionist paintings of urban textures, and I used them because I intended to portray exactly what I saw, heard and encountered. As I walked aimlessly, I filmed, capturing candid moments and fleeting textures. The dizzying results physically displayed the impact the revitalization has on local residents intellectually, emotionally, physiologically, perhaps even spiritually, on a daily basis. The urban environment became the main character in the film, as the “actors” were only seen as the effectors of physical action. I chased trains for months through the fall and winter, waiting in the freezing cold and trespassing in trainyards. I filmed demolitions and made

¹⁹ See Appendix B.

²⁰ The production of “Between a Stone and a Shrine” was supported by grants from: Carnegie Mellon University Frank-Ratchye Fund for Art @ the Frontier from the Studio for Creative Inquiry, The Carnegie Mellon University Graduate Research Funding. The film was also a finalist in a competitive grant from The Sprout Fund Innovative Community Film and Video Project.

friends with laborers, appreciating their efforts and gaining their permission to film them. I made sure to capture plenty of B-roll, different camera shots and distances, so that I would have a lot of material to manipulate in post-production.

I met two videographers on the main street in Braddock and ended up hiring them as part of my camera crew for the procession. They were ideal as they worked with the same kind of resourceful street tactics as I did. With their cameras they would continue the “maker” and first-person perspective. I created a shot list for my camera crew of five, with very specific compositions that I intended to capture from all sides of the parade. Their street smarts serviced the event when my shot list was rendered by an unpredicted blizzard. One cameraman wasn’t dressed for the weather so in the middle of the shoot he called his friend with a truck and sat in the back facing the camera towards the front of the procession.

I was initially upset that he did this because as I lost a videographer on the ground but when I looked at the reel it provided a wealth of footage at different speeds, feelings and distances providing the perspective of someone who may have stumbled across the scene. I was representing the space through the filming process. Depth, proximity, size and proportions of the objects and architecture were manipulated using only DSLR camera and lenses. The process of filming was a play between the distances of objects through my subjective view; the editing process effectively determined the mood or relationships between the disparate elements.

6.5 Editing Six Channels

Once I started to break down the textures of each piece I was able to make associations and build an experience similarly to how I build sculptural installations. I dragged the footage into my studio, organized the clips by scene to collage them together as separate channels (*figure 33*). Some of these snapshots depict peaceful, wintry scenes: close shots of withering, frost-covered sunflowers and sunflower seeds falling in slow motion onto snowy soil. Others show workers pounding into the earth, lowering a mysterious gold-painted casket into a grave. I was particularly excited about editing films across screens to further exaggerate the distances travelled. I quickly realized that the longer the clip was experienced as a singular visual, the more attuned the meaning became. The prolonged or swift imagery across screens lead to more complex reverberations of symbolism that comes back to the main point of preserving and creating memories. These intended movements and textural audio were to physically affect the viewer of what it feels like to constantly search for an anchor in space. I further manipulated the scenes by slowing them down, mirroring, reordering and constructing the six separate videos. Each final channel was a unique conglomeration of sequences, specifically designed for the flickering screen presentation (*figure 34*). Editing in Premiere I had to set up each screen as it was in the gallery, to create the action of trains moving from screen to screen, or performers moving across the entire space. Each clip was manipulated to exaggerate a sense of urgency, durational time and to make use of the spatial environment that I could create in the gallery space.

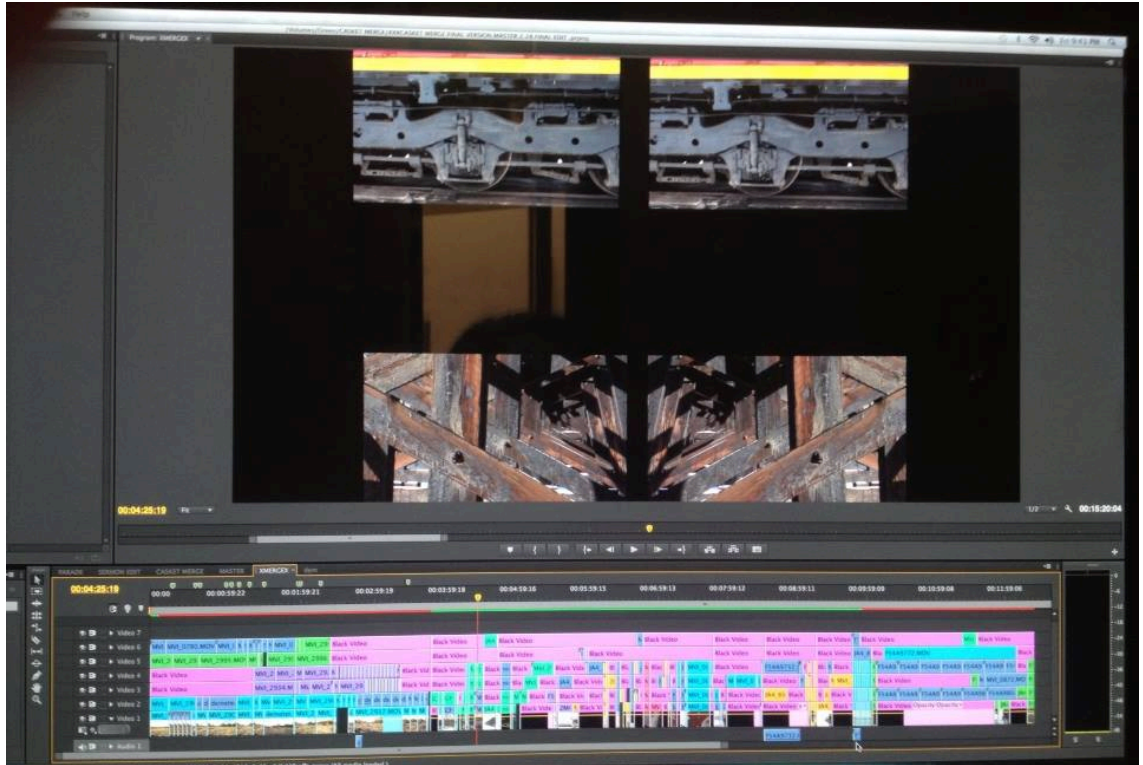


Figure 33 “Between a Stone and a Shrine” Documentation screenshot of Adobe Premiere Pro editing process. 2014



Figure 34 “Between a Stone and a Shrine, Part II The Gilding Procession” Documentation of installation photo. Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon University. 2014.

The Rubik Cube of images contrasted actions between performed and actual labor that flips from personal to the social experiences of the space. I played with the grouping and contrasting of various images: all the six screens could be on at the same time, or only three or two screens. Each had a different perspective of each event, or showed separate events related in actions that could be related metaphorically to a larger story. The shift between the personal to the social considers the use of the site as a continuing narrative, of which I am also a part because I chose to intervene. I attempted to close a gap between the distances of contradictions of actions that happened in space; between the histories of the locations and my subjective truth born out of experience. This was very important aspect in my shift from a laborious studio practice that moves into public.

I found that the empathy I was looking to convey was somewhere in between the narrative and the imagery rather than in the physicality of material in my sculptures. Because film media is much more visceral due to of our reliance on screens. I found that, through an immersion in scale and controlling which elements are in the forefront and background, I can engage both tactics of film and sculpture to manipulate and extend multiple forms of interpretation. While experiencing the film, the audience is not able to "know" or see "everything" that's happening in each scene to build tension for the audience as they become invested as an integral part of translating meaning.

CHAPTER 7: PERFORMED FICTIONS

Part II of *Between a Stone and a Shrine* borrowed the thematic and structural content from the opening scene of the 1960 Federico Fellini film, *La Dolce Vita*. Thrust into the frame is a flying statue of Jesus Christ suspended below a helicopter fuselage (figure 35). As the helicopter flies past ancient ruins, the sound gets physically closer and the tension begins to rise. The first question I wondered as a viewer was, what is the monument? Where is it going? How long has it been travelling? Pedestrians chase after the helicopter, all the while looking up as if to a delivery of hope or some sort of solution. In the role of viewer, I wondered where the idol came from and where it was it going.



Figure 35 “La Dolce Vita.” Fellini, Federico. Film Still. 1960.
<http://www.classicartfilms.com/la-dolce-vita-1960>.



Figure 36 Cohen, Oreen. “Between a Stone and a Shrine” Storyboard. Photocollage and stop motion animation. Video link in Appendix 2

These questions were answered through Fellini's use of camera angles: from the sky looking down, the pedestrians point of view and that of the sunbathers on a roof, he transposes the subjective view with each angle and context. Fellini deconstructed and recomposed relationships to the statue, the city, and the perspectives of the characters that inhabited the seemingly disjointed narrative perspectives. However, sound amplifies the urgency of the delivery. The spectacle used visual tropes and contextual settings to call to coalition, to revise and confront the human need for spirituality in the shift of modernity. The proclamation did not unfold in a linear narrative; rather the desperation of the action was prescribed by how each spectator reacted to the vision. Drawing on this first experience of Fellini's film, in my original proposal I wanted to airlift this casket into Pittsburgh (*figure 36*). Helicopters used in mercy flights, newscasting, war and surveillance create a sense of urgency. Helicopters are a constant presence in Pittsburgh and in my film, I wanted to reference how the service industry took over after steel collapse in the 80's. The tension provided by the sounds of helicopters accelerates time and spans distances and connects two distinct places, the hospital as one of healing and the other of the location of the accident.

Coincidentally, Yael Bartana was also inspired by the opening scene of Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*. During spring 2014, Yael Bartana spoke at the Carnegie Museum as part of the Carnegie International. She introduced her then current project, *Inferno*, which also happened to begin with a Computer-Generated helicopter airlift of golden artifacts to reconstruct King Solomon's temple in São Paulo, Brazil.²¹ The film is entirely cinematically constructed. Bartanas' work primed the theatrical and allegorical spectacle

²¹ Yael Bartana, "Inferno" 2013 One channel video and sound installation, 22 min.
<http://yaelbartana.com/project/trembling-time-2001-1#info>

of the event, the high visual effects and post production seats it within the mind of the viewer as a movie and not as an action that resonates as having a real effect in space (figure 37). Yael's film has all the sensations that I was attempting to convey within the procession; however, it doesn't actually do anything, it is a representation of something that doesn't actually come into being. *Between the Stone and a Shrine* is a documented direct experience of my encounters and attempting to emphasize the effects of taking action in a real space. I realized my process of guerilla filming on the streets captured the tactile directness of places. Using my camera as a tool, I created my own mythology by documenting my personal experience of space to construct social allegories.



Figure 37 Yael Bartana, *Inferno* 2013 One channel video and sound installation, 22 min. Image Source: Sao Paulo Biennial Instagram account. @bienalsaopaulo.

My intention was to use a contemporary instrument that reflect saving mercy flights to carry out an urgent message about the present. However, orchestrating this epic public action and cinematic experience was an almost impossible feat. I tried to convince a helicopter dispatch company to airlift my hand-built casket. I discussed options for using visual effects with a friend in the movie industry and even tried renting a crane to illustrate the scene. Instead, the casket arrives by train; a fiction created with film direction and editing (*figure 38*).



Figure 38 Cohen, Oreen. "Between a Stone and a Shrine Part II: The Procession" Film Still showing the 'arrival' of the casket. 2014.

7.1 Arrival by Train

All of the audio in my footage had distant sounds of trains, so it seemed contextually appropriate and realistic, in terms of production, to depart from my original intention to airlift the casket and, instead it arrived by train. I contacted CSX freight transportation services to discuss actually having it delivered and scheduling the filming it, but they have their own pressing time schedules. I revised my storyboard to create the

same urgency of a helicopter using expressions of time in editing and the anxious visual and audio demands of trains reverberating through the landscape. I replicated Fellini's tension with the build-up of trains delivering the casket to the Carrie Furnace. I waited by the train tracks in any and all-weather conditions, and I ran around trainyards, collecting sounds and images. The footage of the trains was chopped together in a fast paced, loud and forceful manner (*figure 39*).



Figure 39 “Between a Stone and a Shrine, Part II The Gilding Procession” Documentation of installation photo. Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon University. 2014.

When I dragged this footage into the studio, I realized if I scavenged the shots that I needed or performed them, then I didn't need permissions. I could fabricate an imagined action through the filming and editing, that far surpassed the poetic weight of sculpture. Once I began to grasp the sequencing process, I had to produce the fiction of the caskets arrival of by train. I snuck into a train car whose door was slightly open and filmed the movements of the slow approach. I meditated with the camera rolling on the interior of the box (*figure 40*). In the gallery space, the opening of the train car was spread across two projection screens as the space opened up hesitantly welcoming its inspection



Figure 40 “Between a Stone and a Shrine, Part II The Gilding Procession” Documentation of installation photo. Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon University. 2014.

In editing I slowed these scenes as the sound of a braking train was funneled through loudly in the surround-sound, rolling into a softer more distant sound. In places the sound of the train was overrode by the sound of walking, chafing pants. Pallbearers walked forward on snow covered train tracks with the golden casket was balanced on their shoulders. The constant forward movement of the trains produced by an optical flow of images, contains a cue for the viewer to estimate the relative distances and map the visual terrain. I immersed myself in the environment, capturing distinguishing moments that would not have been filmed if I had not been there. In the studio, I treated the footage as a tool to convey a sense of vast spatial understanding and time.

7.2 Labor as Performance

The performances I direct in the film are labor intensive. They elaborate on a confusion between the actual and performed actions that suggest a servicing of site. The production of these scenes constructed the series of events that led to preparing for caskets arrival and burial. Some of the labor was captured by stumbling upon actual laborers on the street and asking permission to film them. Others were facilitated performances, involving thinking about time-frames; daytime and night-time; duration, continuities and discontinuities; evolution and fleeting of poetic moments, genuine effort and exasperation; simultaneity and timelessness. As I walk through the streets, observing and gathering moments and textures that comprises the identity of a place, I begin to recognize the ensemble of labors and individuals and their labors that are already practiced across a site. I work to reenact the movements, usually disregarding the conventional use of the tools to emphasize an exhausted attempt to service to site.



Figure 41 Cohen, Oreen. "Between a Stone and a Shrine Part II: The Procession: "Demeter" Film Still 2014

7.3 Preparing the Ground

I staged a performance using the drag that I held onto all these years. *Part II: The procession* opens with a performance based on the Greek goddess of the harvest. My portrayal of “Demeter” was a display of her attempt to gather dry grass from an overgrown lot while pulling the clumsy and heavy drag behind her (figure 43). In the exhibition installation, she reaps the hay across two adjacent screens, expanding the vastness of the lot. Awkwardly grasping a rusty chain, she struggles to pull the weight of the drag as its teeth get stuck on the hay. Her long blonde hair swayed and contrasted the dry grass as she worked across the lot. Overhead were sounds of airplanes that droned across the blue sky into the distance, passing through the surround sound of the gallery, as she came closer and closer to the camera.

It’s important to note that this particular lot is not in Braddock, this scene takes place in Larimer, a neighborhood on the East End of Pittsburgh. My film predominantly focuses on the lot in Braddock; however, I use this different location to show that urban vacancy is not contained, it’s effect sprawls through the post-industrial landscape. The opening scene with Demeter are reminiscent of the scene in *La Dolce Vita* that communicates to the viewer where the idol is going (*figures 42, 43*). The lot sits diagonally across from one of my favorite abandoned churches, and it has the same sort of dome like the architecture of St. Peter’s Square in Rome. Fellini was critiquing a disconnection from spirituality and meaning in the contemporary as the helicopter’s shadow graces over the buildings with pedestrians running along behind it, the dome of a church stands in the background marking a destination. In my video, Demeter is using a similar visual allegory as she moves across the landscape her shadow alludes to the time

of day and points to the abandoned church stood in the distance. Demeter pulls forward with all of her might, and she gains traction the looming airplane acts as a sort of siren, alerting us a change is coming. The domed building in the scene is also a back shadowing of the gilding workshop that took place in a church, also alluding to where the casket might be going and helping to connect Part I to Part II of *Between a Stone and a Shrine*.



Figure 42 Cohen, Oreen. “Between a Stone and a Shrine Part II: The Procession” Demeter Film Still 2014



Figure 43 “La Dolce Vita.” Fellini, Federico. Film Still. 1960. <http://www.classicartfilms.com/la-dolce-vita-1960>.

7.4 Sifting Through Metaphor

In the exhibition, the Demeter channel is shown across a double screen and is paired with footage of actual laborers working to remediate the soil after a demolition. A small crew had just finished demolishing the front half of a house that was just down the street from the “Demeter” lot. For some reason they left a large brick wall that still had the tracings of the houses layout, it was the perfect frame for a theatrical performance. I watch the three men sift hay across a lot, I filmed them and curiously asked them what their actions did. The foreman replied, “to keep the grass seed down so the birds don’t eat ‘em” (*figure 44*). In my sequences of “Demeter” and “The Hay Sifters”, sounds of anxious birds illustrating the primal movements characterized in all beings to nest,²² are superimposed over their efforts. My direct experience filming on the street opened up a new metaphor in the film, associating the hay with the labor of creating a home. Later in the film, the material of the hay is transmuted into gold as home relates back to individuals created a sacred place.



Figure 44 “Between a Stone and a Shrine, Part II The Gilding Procession” Documentation of installation photo. Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon University. 2014.

²² Bachelard, Gaston, and M. Jolas. *The Poetics of Space*. Penguin Books, 2014. Pg 91.

The shimmering presence of a straw-crossed surface revealed the hay's essence. Its unsettling delicacy and beauty roughed up the viewers senses with abrasive sound (*figure 45*). The uninformed gestures of labor throughout the film, playing between “actual” and “performed” actions, reflect how I operate as an amateur to discover from the process my own capacities and deficiencies. Karl Marx differentiates between two kinds of human activity: “purposeful activity” and “free activity” or “self-activity”.²³ The activity aims to achieve a purpose outside of itself; it is a means to an end, a tool, an instrument. This activity with the material reduces the human body (its physicality as well as its mental processes) to a mere tool. Thus, a person is committed to self-estrangement, or self-alienation, such that purposeful or instrumental production becomes alienated production.



Figure 45 “Between a Stone and a Shrine, Part II The Gilding Procession” Documentation of installation photo. Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon University. 2014.

²³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. Christopher J. Arthur (New York: 21 International Publishers Co., 1981), 94.

The labors that I perform and subvert the notion of alienation from process. Taken on by individual will, the performed labor injects meaning into that activity through the genuine expression of care. At this point of caring towards something, does it matter if the action was done with the right postures, or if the tools are used the right way? Or is it good enough that the (personal) action was taken that in turn affects *social*? Reflecting back to Walter De Maria's definition of "meaningless work", what I seek to demonstrate here is a will to participate in the creation of a home or a place negates the boundaries of the actions are taken and how they function. However, my labors are also a self-activity, performed for the sake of doing as all possible actions become a tool to activate of meaning.

7.5 Digging, Demolition and Walter De Maria

Walter De Maria's definition of meaningless work will make you sweat if you do it long enough, actions like: moving bricks from one area to another and digging holes. The hole dug in the "Art Yard" and his other 'meaningless work' have no expectations for an outcome of that action. He insists that there is no symbolic value and no sense of accomplishment can be produced. The work is done in any way possible to expose the unpredictability's of an action.²⁴ Back in Braddock, shovels in hand, my friend Melissa and I dug out dry loads of dirt and exhumed brick after brick from the compacted ground to dig a six-foot-deep grave. In this futile mission, we were determined to keep digging without thinking about the consequence of our actions. Working around tall dead sunflower stalks, we had to chop them down. With the broad edge of my garden hoe, I swiftly uprooted a stalk (*figure 46*).

²⁴ Mcfadden, Jane. Walter De Maria - Meaningless Work. Reaktion Books, 2016.



Figure 46 Cohen, Oreen. “Between a Stone and a Shrine Part II: The Procession” Digging Film Still 2014



Figure 47 Cohen, Oreen. “Between a Stone and a Shrine Part II: The Procession” Demolition Film Still 2014

In the presentation of the film the digging was juxtaposed with footage of the top floor of a house being ripped down (*figure 49*). I caught the demolition on video while taking a break from digging. I projected the footage from the digging of the grave and the demolition of the house facing each other, on either side of the room, allowing space in between for the viewer to reflect back and forth to establish relationships to each act. Shots of uprooting of a sunflower stalk was synched with documentation of the last window of a house snatched by an excavator's grip. Metaphorically, the machine tore down an opening or window of imagination as I uprooted what I would later find out was a resident's attempt to redeem the space with flowers.

De Maria's work facilitates reactions through a negation. As the hole gets deeper, the significance of the action does not grow; it is the *attempt* towards that object, that hole, that makes the experience. For De Maria almost, everything the public associated with or expected from works of beautiful art, including a sense of moral or spiritual uplift was excised. Female critic Lucy Lippard accused De Maria's act of negating meaning as a refusal of the humanist vision of art, she dubbed it: "a negative art of denial and renunciation."²⁵ The sort of action that De Maria is associated with is an act of Modernist perspective that makes more empty spaces; however, my actions are intended to awaken the existent legacies of place.

²⁵ Day, Holliday T., and Brian Wallis. *Power Its Myths and Mores in American Art 1961-1991*. The Museum, 1991. Pg. 131

CHAPTER 8: LEGACIES OF PLACE

My grave digging led to the consequential introduction to “The Lot Man,” otherwise known as Harold, who became a catalyst for saturating my action with deeper with meaning and who provided the overarching sunflower seed symbol in the film.

A man pulls up in a car along the side of the lot, watching us dig. It turns out this is Harold. He lived next door to the vacant lot and over the years he has been dubbed “The Lot Man.” I transcribed our conversation from the film footage:

“What are you doing?”

Thinking with wit rather than consideration of my response I reply

“Digging a grave!”

The man sounded concerned:

“A grave?”

“We are burying a golden casket”

He’s confused and inquired,

“You’re putting it here? Who’s going to take care of this lot?”

I find myself stumbling to answer and go directly to legalities,

“I have a permit to work here from the Borough office —are you the owner of the property, do you live here? I’ve been looking to contact the owner about digging this grave”

He continues,

“I don’t care what you are going to put in there, I care about who is going to come and mow this lot, there is a whole area near the house that needs to get taken care of from the

construction company that just dumped all their brush back there. No, I am not the owner I just take care of the lots, I live next door with my sister.”

I try to shift the mood to friendly neighbor rather than conflict, I introduce myself, and told him about my project further. I ask about him taking care of the lots. He begins to talk about how the owners of the house went to jail and the borough is supposed to maintain the vacant lot but hasn’t and that he has been taking care of the lot for twelve years. I smile and say,

“You must have planted these sunflowers here too?”

He proudly replied,

“Yes, I just throw seeds on every corner around here and they just grow, when they die you just mow them over them deeper into the ground, so they come back more the next year.”

I say,

“They are beautiful, even dried”

He replies, “But you’ve torn them down.”

Over the barreling sounds of trains and construction equipment in the background, I promise him that I will bring sunflowers back to this site. I re-introduced myself and briefly explained my project to him and he agreed to the action. I ask him again, what his name is.

“My name is Harold —they actually call me ‘The Lot Man’.

He went back home, and we continued to dig the grave.



Figure 48 Cohen, Oreen. Documentation photo in Spring 2014. Sunflowers grew from the cracks in the street from the seeds thrown in the winter procession. This stalk in right in front of the grave site reminded me of Harold as he stood watching us dig the grave.

Littered in our conversation with “The Lot Man” are hidden vitalities that informed a richer narrative that could not have been produced if I hadn’t dug in the ground. The moment I begin to act, the gesture is ruptured by the realities inherent to site. This interaction with Harold made me think about the significance for me of sunflowers and his labors. I have a cultural connection to sunflowers because they were one of the main crops on the Moshav; Harold and I connected through our relationship to sunflowers. On this vacant lot, what to me was just a background for a film, Harold has already left the fodder for narrative through his care with sunflower seeds that he continuously plants, as the legacy of “The Lot Man.” By paying attention to site, I exceeded the poverty of my intention by bringing the cultivation of sunflower seeds in as a main symbol and character in the work (*figure 48*).

8.1 Procession and Burial

The procession was held on January 24, 2014, the worst blizzard of the year. In the morning, the trumpet player I hired called and cancelled. Then, I started receiving messages from more people, apologizing for not being able to attend. The conditions were bad, but we had to persist. The procession was to begin on the railroad tracks at the front entrance of the Carrie Furnace. My hired camera crew finally showed up, and though late, I ran over my intended shot list with the camera crew. They laughed at me because the wetness of the snow changed how they could use their equipment and access the different shots locations I was hoping to get. So, I abandoned the shot list and put all my faith in the crew, with the only direction that I wanted to touch and feel the environment with their footage.

As procession participants started to arrive, I handed out bags filled with sunflower seeds, mixed with crumbled gold leaf and flags embellished with a gilded sunflower seed screen printed on plantable seed paper. I didn't give them any further direction because I wanted participants to react to the experience. When the casket was received by the procession participants, it was filled with two hundred pounds of sunflower seeds. Melissa²⁶, myself, Ishmael²⁷ and Dario²⁸ were the pallbearers, and the casket was immensely heavy as we awkwardly carried it on our shoulders. As a poetic reflection of the event, the casket fell from the hollow head of a dead sunflower or ruin of the Carrie Furnace. Our walking procession represented a "wind current" that carried the casket or seed to its resting place (*figure 49*).

²⁶ Melissa was an undergraduate student who helped dig the grave.

²⁷ Dario Soto was raised in Braddock and was a leader of the Braddock Youth Project.

²⁸ Ishmael is a resident of East Liberty, whom I met and befriended during the bread brick intervention.



Figure 49 Cohen, Oreen. “Between a Stone and a Shrine Part II: The Procession” Parade Film Still 2014

Positioned on top of our shoulders, myself and three other pallbearers carried the weight of the casket for the one-and-a-half-mile walk from the Carrie Furnace to the vacant plot on Talbot Avenue. However, the procession, trudging through a mile and a half of snow and slush however was not short of enthusiasm. The event was playful as participants threw sunflower seeds all over the streets, waved flags and hollered in excitement. Residents stared out of their windows and stepped out onto their porches to watch with curiosity as the passing golden casket gleamed in contrast to the white snow.

The event became a confrontation to participants lacking an understanding of Braddock’s urban environment. The storied action was fictional, but the experience of it was real. The event took on a double characteristic in production and in presentation that resulted in a dizzying mental effect of displacement. That distance travelled brings the historical weight of the Carrie Furnace and the site of the fallow vacant lot closer to each other, providing the lot with the significance that is felt on hallowed ground.

Participants were frozen to the core; fortunately, I had catered coffee service catered for the event. We hadn't expected to wait for Mr. James Watts to conduct the sermon, he was servicing an actual funeral and was, what seemed in the cold, a few hours late. In the interim, I took the opportunity to direct the camera crew to film B-roll footage of the various interactions on the lot as we waited: Melissa and I cushioned the grave with hay, while participants threw sunflower seeds all over the lot. Mr. Watts finally arrived, the atmosphere shifted back, from celebratory to serious as he read the sermon while the "golden seed was planted."²⁹

During the burial, the gold surface was slick and cumbersome to strap into the lowering system. Participants came together to lower the casket, three people stood in the grave while three people stood above to support its weight. A genuine effort in the freezing cold snow to affect the seemingly meaningless work ultimately epitomizes a collective embodiment through individual will to take part in the task at hand. Near the end of the sequence, imagery focuses on the abstracting details of the environment, asserting poetic associations connecting the separate parts to form a whole, harmonious language. A metaphor for the seasons of the soul is created; through the seasons of development (cultivation), warm and cold (nurturing), want and need (harvest) and death (remediation). The very last scene in the film engulfs the viewer in a moment of green ground and sprouting sunflower seeds, completing the agricultural cycle and reinforcing that death is a transition and not a finality.

Though the hole that Walter De Maria's dug was deprived of all meaning, he does mention that as the hole gets deeper and its significance grows as "people will run into

²⁹ See Appendix A: "Sermon"

the yard, grab shovels, do their part.”³⁰ The uncertainties of the procession allowed space for chance, moments were left open and accessible for more unknowingly poetic gestures to occur and be captured on film. As De Maria explains “happenings can occur anywhere, in any condition.”³¹ If the event occurred in good weather, the intention would have been more controlled, and the event would’ve failed to fully accumulate the rawness of experience. Between a Stone and a Shine was a translation of a fictional story into a concrete poetic action that had an effect on participants, audience, the local and myself. Playing between levity and weight of real material and imagined fictions, there is a balance that is needed that can only be found within the process as personal intention is purged to generate deeper affectual meaning between myself and the context.



Figure 50 Cohen, Oreen. “Between a Stone and a Shrine Part II: The Procession” Burial Film Still 2014

³⁰ Mcfadden, Jane. Walter De Maria - Meaningless Work. Reaktion Books, 2016. Pp 75

³¹ Ibid. Mcfadden, Jane. pg 75

8.2: Continuing Place

*“Here one could live and go on living, for we are tough folk and will not be uprooted in the night.”*³²

- Nietzsche

In my original proposal I was requesting a blank space from the Braddock Borough, and Braddock has a lot of open space. The community is aware of its vulnerability and of individuals that want to take advantage of it. I chose this particular vacant lot, at the corner of Eighth Street and Talbot Ave, because I realized I already had a connection to this space from my previous project with the bread bricks. I remembered that my previous experience revealed that my social interactions with pedestrians are crucial to my process.

“No one will make you a casket made of gold, ” This Hebrew proverb provides a context for my motivations not only in my thesis project, but also in my strivings as an artist. To me it means that, “No one will acknowledge you with the respect that you deserve so you must work to leave your own legacy.” This pithy proverb retains a certain strangeness in the object’s presence and function. Who am I working to leave this legacy for? Can I direct the statement towards the objective perspectives of the residents of post-industrial neighborhoods? How can I as an artist represent the vacancy and vulnerabilities of these neighborhoods as motives in which to take action? The repetition and insistence of my mother’s statement urged me to invest myself in making my proposal a reality. The object of the casket informed the direction of the narrative, while my interactions with the public resuscitated a fallow story contained within ground.

³² Ferrarotti, Franco, and E. Doyle. McCarthy. *Social Theory for Old and New Modernities: Essays on Society and Culture, 1976-2005*. Lexington Books, 2007. Pg. 234

My obligation as an artist extends to a social responsibility where I need to consider my role as artist and outsider. By soliciting a permit, I was attempting to begin as a sanctioned project, following the protocol of public practice. In reality, the need to create this artwork was not to solve or give any answers on how to reduce vacancy but acknowledge the truth of experience and communicate the empathy and adaptation necessary as a response to the demoralization of the post-industrial.

“The Lot Man’s” story about casting sunflower seeds over the vacant lots of Braddock motivated me to incorporate the seeds in the film. The casket needed to be filled with something that had a relationship to Braddock to have meaning. It became a question of how to reconcile a foreign identity with a local one; how to connect old and new; the relationship between outward facade and inner space. Harold’s story already orchestrated this site as a place of memory. I considered the architectural ruin and the architecture of a seed as tenuous container as it holds and conserves strength. Inside the seed, a small sprout is anxiously waiting to crack open and burst into its awaiting future. Once germinated, it pushes through a rough exterior erupting into a new narrative.

In the project, *When Faith Moves Mountains*, Francis Alÿs provokes a revival of belief through intention. The work is a simple gesture that illustrates the power of the collective engaged in one task: to move a mountain by shoveling one load of sand from one side to the other. This work can be seen in De Maria’s terms as meaningless; for Alÿs the principle was “maximum effort, minimum result.”³³ The action was completely transitory as the wind blew there was no recognizing the actual work that was undertaken; the artwork was that the event was positioned as part of the participating

³³When Faith Moves Mountains." Francis Alÿs. December 31, 2015
<http://francisalys.com/when-faith-moves-mountains/>.

community's lore. This type of artistic practice strikes a harmonious balance between actual and allegorical, personal vs. social engagement, and presents ways to efficiently affect the culture without an imposition, only an invitation to participate. The true consequence lies in faith that is perceived within the resulting story and documented image of the event. The sheer willingness of individuals to participate a menial task turned it into weighty poetry.

I went back to the vacant lot a few times to help maintain it. The first time in the winter a few weeks after the procession, I met an older resident who told me about how she stood on the sidewalk with her granddaughter to watch crows' gather to eat the seeds that were lying on the snow. In the spring, the center of the lot right above the grave was transformed into a patch of vibrant tall sunflowers. I remember the sky was so clear and blue that day and the swaying heads of sunflowers were gleaming in contrast (*figure 51*). I had my camera with me, so I went out around the lot taking footage. A resident I remember talking to before walked by, I don't think he remembered me, but he shouted to me from the sidewalk: "Hey! You know there is gold down there!" The gilded casket seated in that lot became a protector of precious seeds, turning Harold's story into a vital part of Braddock's legacy.



Figure 51 Cohen, Oreen. Documentation photo of the grave site overgrown with sunflowers in the Fall 2014 after my procession event on January 24, 2014.

8.3 Gestating Questions

*“Out beyond the ideas of wrongdoing and right doing there is a field.
I’ll meet you there.”*

- Rumi³⁴

My confrontation with Harold recalls situations that have, throughout my practice, called to into question the role of spaces that fall to disuse and their effect on the community. Does local authority or private ownership of the land supersede the community’s investment in the site as a repository for memory? Terms such as ‘Urban Renewal’ or ‘Urban redevelopment’ possess an objective aura that negates the subjective, highly emotional experiences of those directly affected. Not only do these terms obscure the details of particular sites and events, they avoid the actual experiences of those who

³⁴ Rumi, Jalal al-Din, and Coleman Barks. *The Essential Rumi*. Harper, 2004.

are subject to the neglect. How can I as an artist contribute to a sense of local identity in the flux of urban renewal? These questions are urgent in the context of most neighborhoods in Pittsburgh and beyond that are feeling a sharp shift of accelerated redevelopment. It seems obvious that a new kind of “vitality” is taking over; I wonder what other vitalities might be overlooked or driven out in the process.

Within the works, *Between You me and the Wall*, *Between the Myth of Icarus and a Phoenix*, and *Between a Stone and a Shine*, my labored actions were attempts to deconstruct the parallels between lived experience and imagined possibilities. Each approach in these works was generative I that as public interactions posed questions about the ethical, moral values of community engagement. Can artistic intervention translate social tensions into narratives that in turn intervene in the imaginary landscape of a place?

The negotiations, risks, opportunities and challenges of working on site continue to propel my practice. My works are grafted experiential sequences, direct representation representations of what is seen and known of our surroundings however curated to foreground the overlooked view of the audience. I am a facilitator for the viewer to be the explorer. I attempt to open up opportunities for imagining in public space. Art has a way of revealing what, until now, has been hidden or only partly known. Interventions disturb space to produce multiple opportunities to engage, such as displayed in Walter De Maria’s proposal for *The Art Yard*. In any case, when considering the work of Francis Alÿs, I revel at how his work translates the political as poetry without the artist being assumed as a savior or confused with some sort of social activism.

I am often asked about my work is if social engagement is something I need for my reputation or if it is a genuine motivation? I am inspired by film directors Federico Fellini and Yael Bartana's use of cinematics to create fictions as critiques of social structures and I am interested exposing similar metaphors and critiques of through visual relationships cultivated from my direct experience. A visceral approach allows the presence of the artist's body to be felt within the presentation. I labor to suspend the inherent associations of objects, in order to imbue them with the potency of the poetic gesture. That "*process saves me from the poverty of my intention*" relates directly to the necessity of my presence within the creation of the work to transmit the message through my body. While, I am absorbed in intimacies of a material, my focus and direction of my attention lies not in the present but the future, not on the functionality of tools but on the work to be done.

Place is created because the events which happen in a space; both ecstasy, misery, meditation and everything in between, hover over that space and create an imperceptible membrane of experience that embeds itself as a hallowed ground. My works throughout graduate school were epic, urgent, and *Sisyphian* acts of labor in the public realm. Sometimes the action dissolves like in the work *Between You Me and the Wall* or it might not take flight, such as the "Icarus wing", or illuminate new meanings in the effect of *Between a Stone and a Shrine*. Working in the public allows the depth of the story to be cultivated into a social narrative. My interactions on the street level, lay the breadcrumbs for my analytical reflection that generate narrative to build new memories on the site. The process becomes a relational dialectic between our body, tools and a willingness to tend to the surroundings... So why not intervene?

APPENDIX 1

Gilded light in the cold air this afternoon,
Across the moving glitter of the rivers and the calm fertility of soil
A train, a machine, a tool,
Has traveled through vast windswept domains
Delivering a luminous monument to this post-industrial town.

Sunflower seeds scatter onto the worn streets
Which become hard to distinguish
From rocks and from the earth,
Disturbing us to the depths of our being.

To some it seems
The walls of our buildings have become useless
In the turning cityscape.
Houses invaded by ivy and abandoned
The earth in cracks,
Like a ruin,
However, they are fertile ruins.
Infinitely fragile and beautiful.

Keep the dreams of our pasts alive
As we march into future that is emerging.
Accept these flowers,
These seeds, and golden artifact.
Placed in this hallowed ground,
In time they will sprout sunflowers,
Rooted to stand up to the wind.

Raise the monument
Above the day once more
To let us remember
The depths of space and time.

Solid and mute
Vast and hidden
Between a Stone and a Shrine.

It's time the stone made an effort to flower.
Earth to earth, soil to soil, seed to sprout.



Between a Stone and a Shrine 2014
By Oreen Cohen

Between a Stone and a Shrine Part II: The Procession, Poem written by Oreen Cohen, prop used by Mr. James Watts during the burial of the casket. Inkjet on plantable seed paper. 1/24/2014

APPENDIX 2

Thesis Film Links

Storyboard Stop Motion Animation:

"Between a Stone and a Shrine by Oreen Cohen. Supported by FRFAF." YouTube. January 08, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJ4WvBMdlol>

Between a Stone and a Shrine Part I: The Gilding Workshop:

"Between a Stone and a Shrine Part I: The Gilding Workshop." YouTube. April 22, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOiyg2Q4-z4>

Between a Stone and a Shrine Part II: The Procession:

"Between a Stone and a Shrine Part I: The Procession." YouTube. April 22, 2014. <https://youtu.be/Y1xOzmAz7EY>

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