Collective History: Reparative and Materialized Memory

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Introduction

You do have a choice to become consciously historical--that is, a person who tries for memory and connectedness against amnesia and nostalgia… where we place the weight of our existences on the line, cast our lot with others, move from an individual consciousness to a collective one… history charges us to know the past in order to consider what we want to conserve and what we want not to repeat or continue.

-Adrienne Rich, *Resisting Amnesia*

The contest of what we popularly recognize as United States history has gone hot again. Confederate monuments have been toppled, the federal Capital has been seiged, and there are numerous bills across the US attempting to keep critical race theory out of the classroom. Culture wars are not new, and this one is painfully old. It lies between those seeking to repair a culture of exploitation--of people and environment that the wealth and power of the United States was built on--and those who are content to benefit from it. It lies in the hypocrisy of a document that recognizes all men as created equal, while laying out a three-fifths compromise and only granting voting rights to white men over 21 who own land. It’s a question of who the government was built to serve and who participates in policy making. I sit in this space and engage in these histories because as a white, cisgendered, upper middle class, mostly heterosexual woman, the descendant of both enslavers and abolitionists, I recognize the violence and injustice of my culture and seek to disrupt the mechanisms by which social inequality is reproduced.

Upfront, I want to acknowledge that there are many arenas of society that require reform to achieve an equitable and sustainable culture, many of which could have a more immediate effect on vulnerable communities. That said, as an artist, with a background in metalwork, media, design, and digital fabrication my lane is that of arts and culture. Understanding that white supremacy is embedded in every aspect of American life, within the realm of arts and culture it’s imperative that we ask how we can work in a reparative mode. What does it look like
to recognize historic inequalities and help foster equity? My work is deeply rooted in intersectional feminism and takes seriously the counsel of Audre Lorde, “divide and conquer must become define and empower” (Lorde 112). To this end, my research orbits twin suns: the capacity of objects to act as documents telling the stories of our world, and the capacity of objects to empower political subjectivity and convey agency. These suns bolster each other, engaging memory and knowledge, the roots of power and resistance. I create objects that engage discursively with contemporary history and ask, what do we need to remember so we can forge a consciously equitable future.

The concept of reparative history finds an intellectual home with post-colonial studies, critical race theory, and queer theory, seeking to “unpack the complex interconnections between past and present” (Bergin and Rupprecht, 5). It expands the frame of history and who gets included in the national project, challenging dominant historical narratives. Beyond that though, it connects directly to the black radical tradition of resisting hegemonic power structures and amplifying alternative cultural memory. “Reparative history is about more than just contemplating injury and apportioning blame. It is about agency and it can be wedded to a form of memory energised by the emancipatory activism, solidarity and political struggle of the past” (Bergin and Rupprecht, 12). My work owes a deep debt to the (largely) people of color who have plumbed the inadequate archives and analyzed primary source documents against the grain to unearth a more comprehensive view of the past and understand the lives of people whose lives were never directly documented.

Primary questions of my research ask, how is cultural inequality reproduced and where have people successfully disrupted social hierarchy? These questions bring me to look at both objects of bigotry and objects that have effectively been used for anti-racist purposes and where they’ve been able to propagate an equitable social future. An example of the former lies in the confederate statue, many of which dot the landscape of towns across the United States to this day, professing the heroism of men and women who fought to preserve race-based slavery.
These statues normalize white supremacy and for decades helped justify the violence of Jim Crow. Specific examples of the converse can be seen in the identity empowerment of the international Soul Style movement, which embraced natural hair and used overalls to build solidarity with sharecroppers during the Civil Rights movement. What’s valuable to understand about both of these examples is that they’re working discursively using collective understandings and imagery to place specific values and assert specific ideas in the realm of the everyday, normalizing their ideals.

Taking this cue, I focus on creating objects of discourse, as such my work begins in the realm of ideas and events, the realm of media. My eyeballs are often focused on news media, books, and visual culture, seeking to understand the world and it’s social matrix. I hold my sources to a high level of journalistic and academic rigor--in a world of contested reality, media literacy is a must. Specifically, my sense of the popular discourse comes from Newsweek, The New York Times, The New Yorker, Vanity Fair, public radio, The Atlantic, or simply what’s trending on Twitter. Popular media sources are supplemented with peer reviewed books or articles. Intent on tying my objects to a lived experience, I marry photography and text, inspired by or sampled from media. Using these as aesthetic elements imply both an experience or engagement with the material world and a way to share it with others.

From there my process is built around experimentation and iterative design. This allows for an empathetic path to understanding what does and does not work, while also subverting the traditional idea of an artist creating genius in isolation. The genius is not in the creator, the success of a work of art lies in the ability to learn from what you’ve made and how people engage with it. Creation through experimentation also reflects the Arts and Craft Movement ideal that proposes in a just society labor is rewarded by it’s capacity to engage the mind. I continually think through objects as they’re being made and the design develops in coordination with production. I give my objects the freedom to be continually edited or recontextualized to gain new relevance.
The forms and techniques within my work are varied, but have found focus in three pieces that work together to engage people with contemporary history. First, is *A Public Memorial*, which presents a collage of objects, sampling text and imagery from the media to present a view of our present moment. The second, *Collaborative History* takes the focus of storytelling and with a mind to decentralizing historical authority, asks others to share their stories and images of what’s happening in the world for inclusion in an archive. *The Future Is Now* postcard set then extends the idea of owning your perspective and provides the space and directions on how to advocate for your point of view by contacting your elected officials or community members. Taking cues from my research on objects that perpetuate and destabilize social relationships and cultural mythos I focus on designing objects that live in everyday spaces, accessible to engage with on an individual level. You can see this reflected in my work: postcards engage tangible interaction, and badges prompt questions of personal identity, objects intended for public space, and more generally in the human scale of it all. I engage with traditional craft forms, in appreciation of their capacity for personal expression and as a subversion of what's traditionally thought of as high art.

In thinking about what materials to work with, I also ask how are the hierarchies of Western civilization embedded in the materials and practices of art and craft? You can see the material values of capitalism expressed in the craft world, lauding gold, silver, and precious stones. Looking beyond this traditional hierarchy of materials, I ask ‘what is most functional to the production of this item?’ and ‘how do these materials serve the finished object?’ When thinking about the conveyance of text and images, I decided to incorporate screens as they are both how we take in so much of the world and a personal vehicle for instantaneous communication; the screen as an object is deeply emblematic of our time. For other objects in *A Public Memorial* I sit with the idea of objects as artifacts and emphasize materials that won’t naturally degrade with time, including metal, enamel, and plastic. Metal and enamel are certainly considered fine materials, but I look to use them in a way that subverts their traditional
roots as indicators of wealth and embrace copper and brass—“base metals”, as opposed to gold or silver. Recognizing the values of purity and delicacy in traditional enamel work, which echo narratives of racial purity and feminine delicacy, I choose instead to embrace the graphic quality of the material, working only in opaque enamels. I also explore its resiliency and developed a method of laying enamel on an uneven surface to then grind down to produce images composed in psychedelic color.

Vibrant and abundant color provides a crucial sense of energy and activation within my work, the eye catching pop sensibility that pulls you into the narrative. It’s difficult to directly convey meaning with color, since the meaning of colors translates differently between cultures and context. That said, research into the impact of color verifies its capacity as an “implicit affective cue”. Bright, saturated colors force a viewer to engage. I use them to excite the senses, energize, and activate. I also embrace color as a way of subverting the hierarchical traditions of Western art. In Western discourse, color is often valued below line and form as an aesthetic device.

In the West, since Antiquity, colour has been systematically marginalized, reviled, diminished and degraded. Generations of philosophers, artists, art historians, and cultural theorists of one stripe or another have kept this prejudice alive, warm, fed and groomed… colour is made out to be the property of some ‘foreign’ body -- usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological. (Batchelor, 22)

I ally myself with color and other forms of “low art” as I ally myself with women, people of color, the indigenous, the deviants, and queer people.

With that said, working towards a reparative culture as a white woman is problematic and poses challenges that are important to understand. My work isn’t solely concerned with race, but as it concerns the perpetuation of inequitable culture, it’s worth looking at Ibram X. Kendi’s definitions of racism and anti-racism to demonstrate how inequitable culture operates. “Racism is a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities” (Kendhi, 18). This operates within the supposition that there is no such thing as a
race neutral institution, but rather that every institution is either producing or sustaining racial equity or inequity. This understanding of racism stems out of critical race theory which exists to examine the ways in which racism exists outside of individual acts of discrimination, and how racial inequity is structurally perpetuated within institutions. It's not simply a question of representation and racial equity goes way beyond how different cultures, races, and ethnicities are represented within the art that is held by institutions. It's a question of who is curating shows, whose work gets collected, what ideas get expressed when minority artists are shown, how are communities involved in the display of their cultures, who do art institutions see as their audience? While many institutions are aware of the problem and taking some measures towards racial equity—for example the Baltimore Art Museum recently sold several works so they could invest in their collection of black art—the curators, collections, exhibited artists, patrons, and audience of the majority of art institutions remain disproportionately white. I mentioned upfront that there are other arenas where reparative force is required and can have a more powerful impact, in art the real focus should be in fundamentally reworking the institutions and creating equitable access to art education. But as a person engaged in a studio based graduate degree program, the questions immediately in front of me are of representation and how to talk about race without perpetuating racist ideas or racial inequity.

To this end, I’d like to surface some of the well documented problematics of representation and discuss my strategies to avoid being the well intentioned white woman who inadvertently sustains a culture of inequality. The first being how do you represent stories that are tangibly connected to issues of social justice without appropriating stories/styles/cultures that are not yours to profit from? Understanding that I cannot speak for another person’s experience, I shy away from taking an authorial role in the direct representation of specific people’s experiences. In the pursuit of helping people’s truths be told through objects, I have begun experimenting with this type of public engagement in the Collaborative History project, asking people to submit images that convey a sense of public history and providing postcards
that people can use to contribute their own stories to the archive. While I may stylize text and images taken from mass media sources, when my work features the words or images individual people have either contributed to the projects or put into the public sphere, I do so without stylizing or editing them, mindful that the original intent and meaning remain intact. For example, part of the Collaborative History project is a slideshow of images contributed by other people, they are presented without editing and only removed when they are outside of the parameters of the project.

While Collaborative History aims at a community driven storytelling, the objects in A Public Memorial represent the inquiry into storytelling and reparative art within the context of my own studio practice, objects that have been designed, fabricated, or curated by me. It serves as a good opportunity to recognize and attempt to critically resist another mechanism of white supremacy in art and culture--the normalization and centering of the white, heterosexual experience as the common experience. The normalization of whiteness in our culture is endemic, a prime example being a class titled History of Modern Design that in reality only discusses European and American design, including non-European design only in the capacity that it’s been appropriated by European cultures. Assigned are texts, Ruskin’s The Nature of the Gothic, that discuss the “slavery of mass production” as worse than “African slavery”, assuming that the reader will not notice or feel devalued by the way white laborers are prioritized over black laborers. This viewpoint is myopic, ignorant at best. We cannot understand the American experience if the perspectives and positionalities of marginalized people are not fully considered. Now, I can’t view the world through the eyes of a black man or indigenous two spirit person, but I can ask people of diverse identity how it reads to them. I can consider, based on what I know about the experiences of gay black men, is this relevant? Does this ring true? I can ask, who is the object relatable to? If the object doesn’t feel emblematic of a plurality of perspective, I ask how I can insert a broader sense of perspective or acknowledge the multiplicity of viewpoints.
The objects within *A Public Memorial* attempt to hold space for, acknowledge, and keep in memory a wide range of recent events in contemporary America. In making objects that work to memorialize, cognizant of the need not to center a specific point of view, I work to avoid the didactic. Instead I look for ways that an object can spark someone to explore their own positionality. Some of the objects mounted in *A Public Memorial*, puts you within the context of the historic wildfires of 2020, while the screen prompts a question that begs you consider both your own personal experience, with an implication that everyone was impacted differently. I zoom out from specific personal experiences to document contemporary history that, while impacting individuals in different ways based on their material reality, constitute widely shared experiences. Further, I seek to avoid telling stories as if they are my own. While I am the author and carry a distinct political perspective that you can infer when engaging with my work, I am not the subject of my work, but rather a third person narrator.

Lastly, I want to speak to the complications of representing trauma in art. First, it’s necessary to recognize that not only is it inappropriate for white people to capitalize off of trauma inflicted by racial hierarchy, but also the capacity that it has to cement an image of victimhood and perpetuate the image of inequity. You can see this plainly in the dying Indian narrative, where the popular conception is that tribal culture is dead because the popular narrative of tribal culture and indigenous Americans is one of death and decline. That said, we must stew in the knowledge of our past and as Elie Wiesel said, “for the living and the dead, we must bear witness” art that memorializes and recognizes the specific horrors of our national history is important. I would point you to Dawoud Bey, Faith Ringgold, Kara Walker, Sherman Alexie, Howardena Pindell, Carrie Mae Weems, Arthur Jafa to name just a few, who tell those stories authentically, empathetically and with beauty. There are myriad reasons why their nuance is best captured by someone directly impacted by the violence of this world. But even if it I could draw on the experiential knowledge of racial trauma to inform the stories I tell, they would do little to further tangible anti-racist work were a white woman the recipient of that
acclaim. My intent is not to explore or exploit trauma, nor is it cement within collective memory a narrative of victimhood. A Public Memorial has many intentional omissions.

My goal is to look at our difficult reality and engage the emotions we need to survive: affirmation, joy, empowerment, humor, comfort. In my work I seek to create objects of memory that recognize our full story, empower the best parts of ourselves, marginalize the worst, and provide space to express one’s own truth. With vibrant colors I hope to transmit energy and excitement and embrace the ethos that to revel is a radical act. With approachable, recognizable, comforting forms I seek to give affirmation to the injured without rubbing a thumb in the wound. While there is so much to mourn in our contemporary political history, to be an agent of history is to be activated, to vibrate with the intensity of what is and the excitement of what could be.
Works

The future is now postcard set

This set of postcards acts as an archive, collaging contemporary images documenting the human impact on the environment with mid-century retrofuturist illustrations of the future, mostly taken from Arthur Radebaugh’s newspaper cartoon page series ‘Closer Than We Think!’, which envisioned the future rife with the fast paced developments of science would provide. These postcards make tangible the well documented connection between our climate crisis and the development of a consumer lifestyle enabled by technological manufacturing. Coupled with a handmade postcard holder, this piece appropriates the forms of manufacturing and presents them with careful intention. These cards are free to be taken and have a qr code of the back leading to information on how to contact your elected representatives. They present a call to speak one’s truth to disrupt the mechanics of capitalism that run through our economy and our environment. The handmade postcard holder seeks to embrace the rationality of modern, industrial design while embracing the humanity and individualization afforded by small scale production.
Collaborative History

History is not a static past, but rather a shared present with different subjectivities and perspectives. What information gets documented and remembered impacts the futures that we build. To that end, this piece provides space for people to share history as they experience it. These contributions can come in many forms: written, through pictures, drawing, poetry, choose your own form of expression. Blank postcards provide prompts for open ended storytelling. It also asks people to go through the images on their phone and contribute any that tell a story of the world. Images are posted to @collaborativehistory on Instagram. This is a project in its infancy with the intention of building an archive that captures a historical narrative directly from the people who live it.
A public memorial

A spontaneous shrine of sorts, this piece utilizes the connective space of a public bulletin board to engage in memory work, collaging objects that explore the relationship of our past to our present. These objects document different events and cultural touchstones from both distant and contemporary history, using screens to recognize how we both take in and engage with the world outside of our immediate physical space. These pieces operate dialogically, asking questions, replying to them, and prompting the viewer to interrogate their own position to history. The objects are not cemented in place and as the piece continues forth through time, it leaves open the possibility of reorganization and recontextualization, added to and taken from as suits the needs of our shared present.
THE EVENTS IN BUTTE COUNTY OVER THE LAST WEEK SUGGEST A NEW MODE OF LIVING WITH CATASTROPHE MORE GENERALLY ONE IN WHICH AMERICANS ARE FORCED TO CONTEND WITH MULTIPLE ACUTE COMMUNITY SCALE DISASTERS ALL AT ONCE

LOL

BUT WHAT'S NEW ABOUT IT
Bibliography


Artist Statement

Personal objects tell our stories and speak our truths. Jewelry is given and received to celebrate relationships and rites of passage, souvenirs are collected to remind us where we’ve been. I see these spaces as an opportunity to connect to our history and contemporary cultural narratives, utilizing personal space to express personal subjectivity. And the personal is decidedly political.

I use buttons to play with labels and our complicated identities. Postcards serve both to commemorate a place or time and compose a message about the experience.

Understanding that, in metal, plastic, and enamel, these objects will outlive us, that they are our artifacts, I view them as a form of documentation. As such, I source imagery from mass media and visual culture -- news websites, magazines, or image archives -- to tap directly into broad cultural discourse. So often objects that exist to tell stories are commissioned to tell the stories of the powerful, history is written by the victors. My work interrogates the powerful and tells the story of our time.

Bio

Lisa Kraushaar is an artist, an enamelist, a metalsmith, and an intersectional feminist. Focusing on objects that occupy everyday spaces, she incorporates found imagery, text, loud colors, and humor to create objects that document contemporary cultural narratives and give opportunity for personal expression. She studied Literature, Sexuality Studies, and Cultural Studies at Macalester College where she earned an undergraduate Bachelor of the Arts. She went on to study Jewelry Design at the Fashion Institute of Technology. She was then hired as an early employee at Etsy.com where she worked for 8 years. In 2017, Lisa became the Working Artist in Residence at Longwood University. After which, she went on to pursue her Masters of Fine Arts in Metal at the State University of New York New Paltz.

Her work has been featured in the Etsy Biennial, the Longwood Center for Visual Arts, Yale Divinity School, New York City Jewelry Week, Brooklyn Metalworks, and Womens Work Gallery.
Lisa Kraushaar

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WORK EXPERIENCE

**Digital Fabrication Lab Tech** SUNY New Paltz, September ‘20 - present

*Lab Technician,* assisted with the use and maintenance of digital fabrication equipment, including laser cutter, vinyl cutter, large format printer, and computer lab

**Instructor** Discover Camp, June ’18 - August ’20

*Teacher,* developed curriculum for and taught 3D Printing, Laser Etching, and Textile Arts, Graphic Design, and Scratch

**Graduate Assistant** SUNY New Paltz, September ‘19 - May ‘20

*MFA Recruitment and Promotion,* assistant to the MFA Coordinator and organizing GA applications, promotional mailings, created website for MFA Thesis show

*Art Education Assistant,* coordinates students field observation placement requests and conducts graduate research

**Metal Studio Working Artist** Longwood University, August ‘17 - June ‘18

*Studio Tech,* maintained and organized tools and inventory, and ensured studios ready for student use. Assisted students in studio use and critiques, demonstrate techniques and safety best practices

**Program Manager** Etsy, January ‘13 - July ‘17

*Program Management,* developed and managed cross-organizational bugs program, coordinating 100+ engineers and engineering managers to prioritize and resolve bugs. Coordinated, scheduled, prepared materials for, and led post mortem debriefings, project retrospectives, and planning exercises

EDUCATION

2021 **M.F.A., Metal**
SUNY New Paltz, New Paltz, NY

2009 **Associate Degree, Jewelry Design**
Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, NY

2006 **Bachelor of Arts, English**
Macalester College, St. Paul, MN

SKILLS

Adobe Creative Suite (Photoshop, Illustrator, Indesign)
Outlook
Google Apps
Microsoft Office (Excel, Word, Powerpoint)
Wordpress
SQL
Rhino
Metalsmithing
Enamelling

PROJECTS

lisakraushaar.com
radicals.etsy.com
Welcome to New York
https://lisaboom.github.io/