

Trust Me

Latham Zearfoss

Dear Latham,

One of the nicest things a friend of mine has ever said to me was: “I don’t give a shit what you are working on”. I know this doesn’t seem very nice, but at the time it really felt wonderful. I needed to know that my friend’s love for me was of the unconditional variety that would not grow or shrink depending on whether or not she found my work to be interesting, or smart, or meaningful. Now that I reflect on it, it seems that I may actively avoid talking very often to my friends who are artists (which is nearly all of them) about our work, for fear that it would crowd out discussions about lovers and families and feelings and gossip, or that it would positively or negatively influence my affections. However, upon watching and reflecting on your videos, I think this approach may be misguided. Your work contains the driving questions and interests that also animate your life and my experience of being your friend. There are many, but let me start at the beginning, with hope.

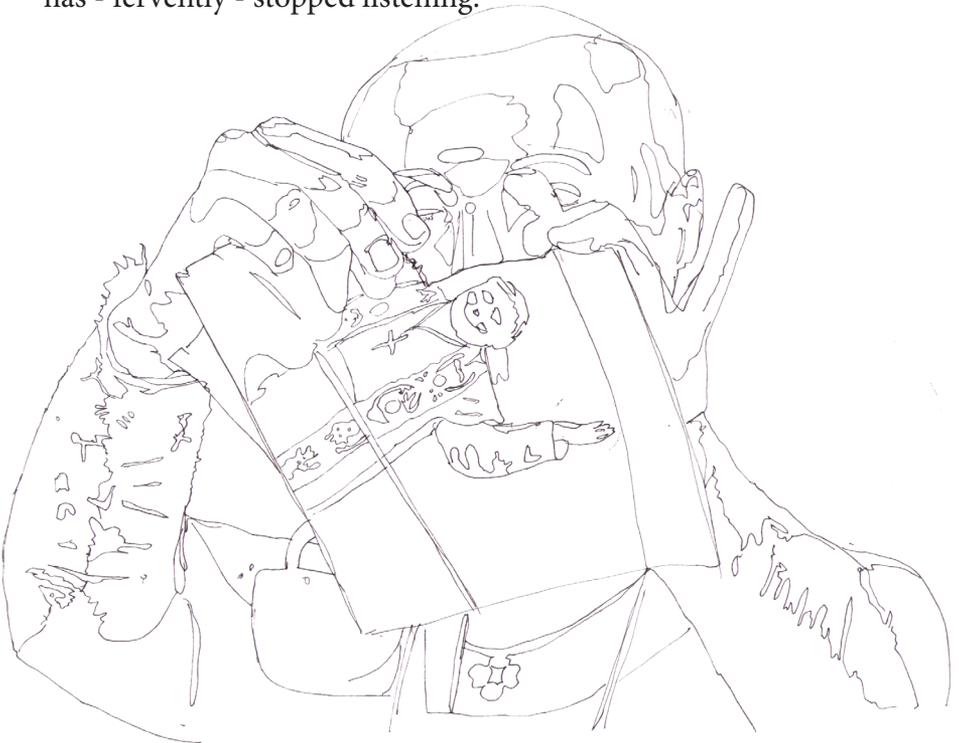
Is it too personal to say that your work gives me hope? That our friendship and your practice help me believe that the future could be better than today? Is it embarrassing, too utopian, too optimistic to be speaking in these terms? Chances Dances, the now tri-monthly dance party that you started in 2007, which I regularly attend, bills itself as “a safe space for all gender expressions”. For the most part, it is this, but, more than that, it seems to me to be an arrow toward the future—the creation of a here and a now that points toward a possible future time in which more spaces (all spaces?) are safe spaces for all gender expressions. Can a party also build a future?

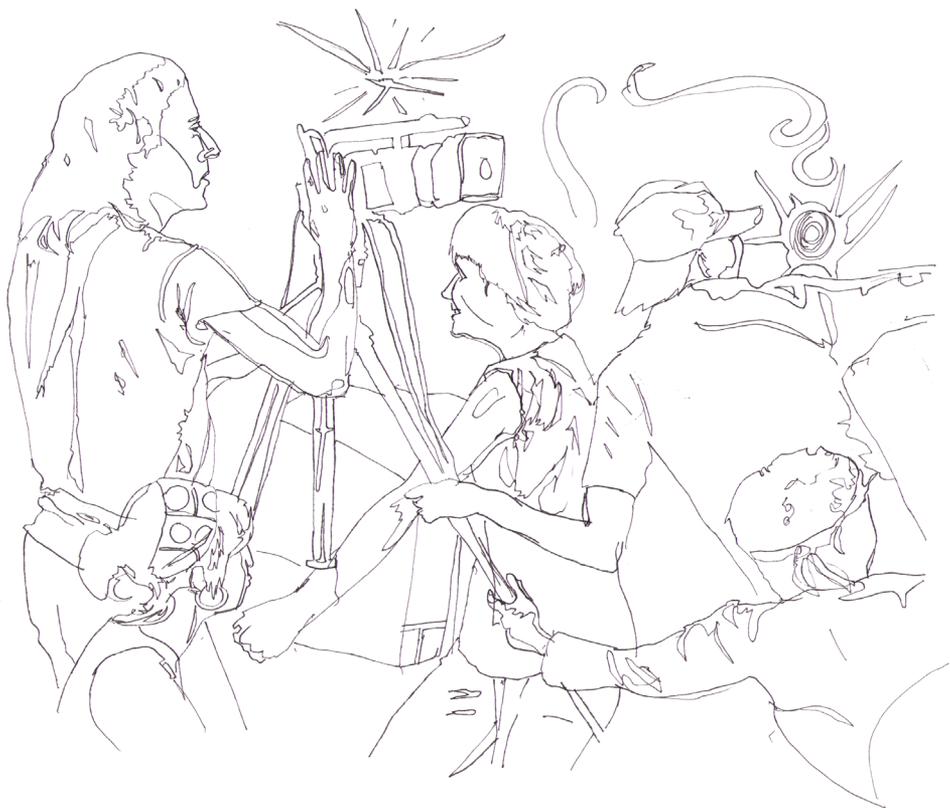
Or can art?

(R.E.H. Gordon's letter continues at the end of the program)

Morality (3min, 2010, video) and Responsibility (3min, 2010, video)

It seems to me that being manipulative is considered tantamount to being child-like. This pair of videos presents two failed political manipulations. Sinead O'Connor's infamous SNL performance in 1992 (Morality) may have successfully incited controversy, but it failed to shed light on rampant and seemingly sanctioned child abuse within the Catholic Church. Lacking context and aiming for poetics instead of didactics, her protest was met with overwhelming derision. 18 years later and with countless affidavits, subpoenas, testimonies, even Vatican record books confirming O'Connor's accusations, Vatican PR spokesperson, Father Federico Lombardi, recorded this statement which announced the "Popé's Letter to the Faithful if Ireland" in 2010 (Responsibility). Lombardi's address – dryly placating, but perfectly legible—perhaps finds the worse fate: falling into the digital void, calling out primarily, to a populace who has - fervently - stopped listening.





A Call and An Offering (co-directed w/ Dylan Mira, 23min, 2006, video)

I don't think anyone thought that Pilot would be as successful as it was, least of all those of us who organized it. Pilot TV: Experimental Media For Feminist Trespass was a temporary autonomous television studio built in Chicago in 2004. But it was intended, mostly, to be a site for trans-political, cross-discipline dialogue amongst artists, activists and anyone else who cared to be there. In many respects it was exactly this. And because it was so transformative to both of our personal lives and practices, Dylan Mira and I set out to create a short documentary that could also function as a blueprint for future replication or interpretation.

Self Control (14min, 2008, video/16mm)

If I had a manifesto, this would be it.



I Give You Life (12min, 2010, video/16mm)

Explanation 1: I never expected to make a video about Matthew Shepard, or Matthew Shepard's father, for that matter. But, after making this for reasons I'm still discerning, I can now see that we left something behind back there in 1998—a collective void, perhaps, that keeps widening with every murdered queer kid.

Explanation 2: This piece takes the form of a loose conversation, held between multiple mediated voices or perspectives and centers around multiple voids: the blank screen (filled), the absent vocalist (filled), losing a loved one (unfilled), discarded edits (partially filled), justice (partially filled).

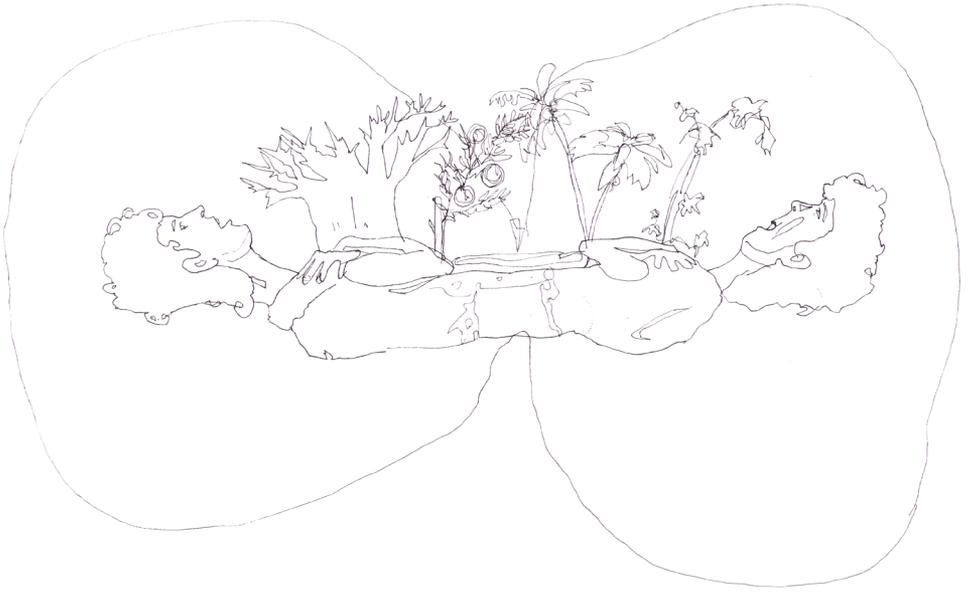


World Piece featuring Jane Fonda (12min, 2010, stereo sound)

My friend Ethan and I listened to Obama's inauguration as we drove through the barren Texas desert, touring a video program we curated. Only weeks before, Israel unleashed a brutal attack on the Gaza Strip, killing thousands of people. Incredibly bleak reports detailing the humanitarian crises and dead Palestinian children had been washing over us. Both events made me weep. When we got to Phoenix, we downloaded Jane Fonda's autobiography (audiobook)—something to carry us forward. *My Life So Far* is almost an autobiography of the 20th century. Like Jane, we've come so far (Diane Feinstein found Harvey Milk's body, now she presides over—as Master of Ceremonies—Barack Hussein Obama's historic Presidential oath). But like Jane, we are still imperfect (and, at times, brutal and deadly in our short-sighted selfishness as so many Palestinian parents can attest). This audio piece re-edits Jane Fonda's narration in *My Life So Far*, to create a dramatic, disjointed reading of all 30 articles from the United Nations 1948 document, "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights."



Myth of My Ancestors (A Re/Creation Fable) (4min, 2008, video)



In the beginning, there is a land without shame. Plants, animals, and humans live together in total harmony. Sounds a little bit like (gay) utopia, doesn't it? But all of these things are made up. The animals and plants we summoned were just artificial interpretations of things that are, were, or might have been. And we too, dancing and singing in rapture with our grumpy/happy two-headed God(s), were all too aware that we came from the dust. But this is okay, because it is no secret that the place we came from is uncannily like the place we would love to end up. This video features an a cappella recreation of "Carolyn's Fingers" by the Cocteau Twins.

Letter to Jane

August 9, 2010

Dear Jane:

Perhaps you already know about dismemberment from your fragmented life and your treatment by a certain pair of radicalized - cruelly and transiently - French filmmakers. (Hanoi Jane, how I miss you and your time; I was 'there' too but Sweden is not North Vietnam, nor is it Hollywood or the lush-lawned Atlanta of Mrs. Ted Turner.)

I'm writing to alert you to yet another assault on your dart-board life, on the waned stardom reflected in your boomer-era face, stretched lampshade-like over (our) thinning bones. A young artist - also named Jane (not his real name) - has disassembled your autobiography in order to embed your words in a new syntax, one which you might embrace or disavow depending on where in Time we find you - that is, if we ever do.

But in this case your (story's) dismemberment has been partially assuaged by a painstaking re-remembering. Your story's new syntactic home is - like us - irreparably dated and sadly, largely unrealized. Here you speak about human dignity, a dignity you've by turns enjoyed and, on occasion, lived up to. In short, your life as enunciated by your voice has been dismembered and stitched, Frankenstein-like, into a monument to human hope and folly. Your voice - your breath - now inhabit a political/humanist document that wears your words like sequins on a moldy prom dress (of our vintage).

But not to worry, this other Jane has a long road ahead and there's little chance his star will rise to the level of yours. Could he cry and slobber as eloquently as you did in Klute? Produce a video that re-shaped the flesh of millions into starlet-like Kens and Barbies? In other words, your story is only nominally threatened by his theft. But although your version will likely prevail - and you'll probably not bother to sue - I wanted to let you know that some - those of us passing in lock-step with you - still remember. While this Jane - like the grandchildren you will never know - does not, could not.

ps: and thanks, Kimberly, for finally pulling yourself together in China Syndrome. I first saw it in a San Francisco theater where some frustrated dyke yelled: "Get it together, Jane." Which you so famously and artfully did (just in Time). I remain,

Yours truly,
Doug Ischar

Latham,

Thanks for lending me your videos. I watched them, though I am loath to report that I did not watch them in the dark with proper stereo sound as per your request—scheduling troubles and a television set more valuable for its antique- rather than performance-value prevented me from doing so. While I don't mean to appear as if I'm recommending such non-ideal viewing conditions for your work, they do reiterate for me, however, the question continually raised by the videos themselves—the question, at its core, being: what is lost?

The structure of *I Give You Life* continually begs this question. We know something is missing—sections of Dennis Shepard's original courtroom speech—but what is lost in their original redaction is, for me, the piece's central question. The goal, if there is such a thing, seems not to be a simple and arguably passive re-insertion of missing words from a pop-historical record; your version contains its own elisions. Instead, and more interestingly, the focus shifts to another set of questions, of which the following is not nearly exhaustive: at what point does historical accuracy prostrate itself before the possibility of mass cultural engagement? Is there even such a thing as historical accuracy, anyway, anymore?

For clarity's sake, we'll categorize 'anymore' as being posterior to the failure of certain moments of social potential that seem to have influenced your work: the writing of *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*; the radical social ideals that accompanied the introduction of video in the late 60s; etc. You've said that failed utopias are your starting coordinates, which, again, from the very beginning of your process is forcing the question: what's lost?

In regards to losing things, my mind immediately goes to memory. The connection with your videos is not entirely off base, I don't think. There's your ambivalent position to history—you know, what's lost and left out in cultural memory. And then there's the coincidence (?) with the seahorse. Bear with me. I had been baffled by the images of the seahorse in *I Give You Life*, so I researched a few things:

The seahorse, I'm informed, is a marine fish that belongs respectively to the phylum and family of Chordata and Syngnathidae, and finally to the genus *Hippocampus*, which will become important in a moment. *Hippocampus*, more or less literally, means horse-sea-monster, and one would have to assume that it was a coincidence in the shape of the thing that led to its use in the early 1700s to describe a portion of the mid-brain. Flash forward to present and best estimates suggest that this horse-sea-monster-shaped nugget in our heads is heavily involved in the processes of memory, spatial apprehension, and autonomic reaction—in other words, the ways in which we consciously and unconsciously—historically and emotionally—make sense of the world.

I don't know if you meant to use the seahorse for these specific references; I don't care to know and I wouldn't ask you. And I want to stress that when I say involved I mean involved; I don't believe in some kind of slippery biological determinism and I don't mean to suggest that I do. If you'll allow me one more brief cranial digression, I think I can tie things together: there was some talk in the 1970s about how we processed long- from short-term memories, one of the theories—which has since been disproved but acts as a nice, little metaphorical tool—was that the hippocampus acted like a temporary storage unit which later transferred memories to parts of the brain that would process the original sensations, e.g. visual memories in the visual cortex. The process highlights both loss and gain: recording is imperfect and transfer drops information, but it makes possible the sensual or emotional re-experience of stimuli.

For me your videos are scratching at this complex interplay between the necessity to remember and the necessity to forget—the tension between deference to the individuality of those who spark social change and the act of turning them into symbols to foster such cultural movement. And what's lost in either. You believe in utopia, and it seems to me that any belief in utopia has got to be accompanied by either an uncommon inurement to, or uncommon respect for, the experience of failure. Or by an ability to balance remembering and forgetting it. I've heard we don't possess the ability to remember pain. I don't know.

There is a lot to prattle on about, but I'll leave it at that for now. I hope you are well.

Yours,
Mike

September 1, 2010

Dear Latham,

A few years ago you sent me a copy of your piece *Self Control* (2008). We were supposed to do a studio visit but I didn't make it. We lost touch. We lived in different parts of the city. We had mutual friends. I watched that piece, *Self-Control*, on repeat, and cried. I wasn't sure why. Was art supposed to do that to someone? I put the video away, and it is only now, two years later, that I return to it.

The parts of your work that bring me back are the parts about a queer utopia. There is a hopeful idealism that I am honestly not sure we will reach. When we talked on the phone I asked you about the idea of a queer utopia—an underlying theme in your piece *Self Control*, 2008. In this piece, you are visited by somebody from the future. You aren't sure what to say to this future ghost, so you tell it about 80s pop star, Laura Branigan. As the story goes, a piano falls on Laura while she is recording in her studio. She doesn't die, but she associates this accident with music, and it scares her, so she stops making music. You take on her ghost, embodying this past for the video. Later on in the video, you place yourself in the space of a talk show host, interviewing "Latham Zearfoss." Here, you are Aimee Brown. You talk to yourself about what you're looking for—trust from the viewer, a hopeful idealism towards queer futures. In our conversation the other day, you talked about the word queer—how many different meanings there are, different contexts, the difficulty of pinning down one definition. Some are scared of it, some embrace it. "Queer is such a big word," you say. "The word queer is very queer in and of itself—it doesn't fit in neatly anywhere."

But what does that mean for notions of a queer utopia, as you suggest? What is this space and how can we arrive there, all of us, into this hopeful space of freedom. How can we "have a collective awareness and push for something better," as you say? And how can we "lie or re-interpret or embellish something that might be considered central, to create something new, and something that our new model for realizing this queer present or future"?

This is a question that I think you can answer through art, and I can't wait to see it.

Sincerely,

Alicia Eler

(R.E.H. Gordon letter continued from the first page)

Your work is about hope, and animated by questions about our futures. The now in your work is future-directed now, a today that is also a tomorrow.

Self-Control, for example, asks questions... How do we build a better and different world? How can art participate in this? How is trust necessary to art's capacity to build these new worlds? And as an artist, how can you help or make your viewers trust you? Throughout your works the question is posed again and again—whose authority can we trust to escort us into this better future? Pop stars like Laura Branigan, Sinéad O'Connor, or Jane Fonda? Cultural leaders like the Pope or the United Nations? You? In your work you interrogate the type of trust we have in cultural authority figures while simultaneously aiming to arouse this same trust in you on the part of your viewers. You want us to trust you.

Laura Branigan gets hit by the piano and stops making music because it has become dangerous to do so. But here we are in your blood, and that is just the beginning of the video. Making art is always already dangerous, because we are asking, in such a public and exposed way, for our audience's trust. Is that the secret that Laura knew, lying there in the studio after the accident with her blood on the floor?

And after watching your videos, it seems to me that if there is a secret to be known about the future, it is that it is made of right now. We can say no to the present—no, the way things are is not working for me, no, I don't think this is as good as it can be, while also saying yes—yes to our interests, passions, pleasures, efforts, and angers. Being dissatisfied with the present does not mean we need to languish in negation. If tomorrow is to be more livable, it is because we were able to find energy and mobility in our negativity. Revisiting 2004's *Pilot TV*, I am struck by the force with which the organizers and the participants were able to say no and yes to the current moment at the same time, and to be alright with, even invigorated by that space of contradiction. At moments the energy of *Pilot* feels naïve, and then I think—how else is there to go about making social change than head first? How else to engage in struggle than to embrace the pleasure to be found in it—even when success is never guaranteed and failure almost always is. Dylan Mira, when asked what it would be like to do *Pilot TV* over again, answers in a way that perfectly describes this ambiguous position: "If we were to ever do this again, we would continue to fail in exciting beautiful ways and keep getting better at that."

Even real successes are so often bittersweet. The day before yesterday, a federal judge in California struck down Proposition 8 on the grounds that marriage is a constitutional right that must be open to gay as well as straight couples. This is an historic achievement, and I am thrilled. But, simultaneously, I am so disappointed by the ways the conversation surrounding gay marriage has served to publicly define a very narrow understanding of gay identity. The normativizing force of the fight for

gay marriage struck me full force yesterday when I read a New York Times article about the event that quoted Jennifer Pizer, the marriage project director for Lambda Legal in Los Angeles: “Being gay is about forming an adult family relationship with a person of the same sex. So denying us equality within the family system is to deny respect for the essence of who we are as gay people.” Wait--the essence of gay identity is having “adult family relationships?” You mean, getting married, having children, owning property? You mean gay people finally have the freedom to act upon our true essence—accepting, without question, the creation of traditional families as the center of our lives? Gay people should, certainly, have the freedom to do this if they want to--but this stance neglects all the other possibilities that have long been offered by gay identity: a reconsideration of the definitions of love, partnership, sex, families, kinship, and maturation, among so much else. It is with this exclusion in mind that the present moment of such great positive social change is also a moment of such failure. I am experiencing equal parts victorious happiness and disgusted anger, and it seems, well, strangely appropriate. In the words of the illustrious late Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “life is complicated”.

Sincerely yours,

R.E.H. Gordon

August 20, 2010

Dear Latham,

I just came across the following passage in John Dewey's *Art As Experience*, written in 1934, which made me think of your work and my previous letter:

“To the being fully alive, the future is not ominous but a promise; it surrounds the present as a halo. It consists of possibilities that are felt as a possession of what is now and here. In life that is truly life, everything overlaps and merges...Art celebrates with peculiar intensity the moments in which the past reënforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what now is.”

Love,

R.E.H. Gordon

Morality

(3min)

**A Call and an
Offering**

(23min)

Self Control

(14min)

I Give You Life

(12min)

World Piece

(feat. Jane Fonda)

(12min)

Myth of My

Ancestors

(4min)

BIG THANKS:

Alicia Eler, Mike Gibisser, R.E.H. Gordon, Doug Ischar,
Christy LeMaster and Nicholas Wylie