

Correspondences Portfolio III - "Benchmarks"



Mini-Ethnography

"One and Three Chairs" - Interpretation by Hersey

"The first image he told me about was of three children on a road in Iceland, in 1965. He said that for him it was the image of happiness and also that he had tried several times to link it to other images, but it never worked.

Sans Soleil - 1983

Prior to viewing the film which is quoted above, the first image that I told you about this semester was of three chairs in a museum in New York, in 1965: "One and Three Chairs," by artist Joseph Kosuth. At the time, I said that to Kosuth it was a presentation of the three principle ways of being a chair, and also that in creating it, he had tried to link its "concept" to other accounts of representation and narrative. But did it work? Does it work? If so, how?

With this work Kosuth both entered and helped to renew a conversation that has been going on for centuries. In fact in so doing, he entered into not just any conversation, but into the ongoing "dialogue" known as Plato's *Republic*. In this work, Plato famously expresses his suspicion of artists, and claims that proper narrative (diagesis) is far more reliable and truthful than mere imitation (mimesis). Ironically and perhaps inevitably, in Book X of this work he resorts to using an image of three beds to make his point. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle famously disagrees with his teacher Plato, and combines both imitation and narrative within his broader conception of mimesis (alas, proof of Aristotle's winning record in this ongoing debate can be witnessed in my spellchecker's decision making process, which yells at me every time that I even attempt to use the term 'diagesis,' while eagerly offering the term 'mimesis' as an alternative to the word 'mime'). This semester, we have looked to the changes and permutations that these ideas have undergone over the last two thousand years, particularly as these have influenced the development and practice of the essay form itself.

In your first portfolio, we worked with and through some of the classical ideas of representation and narrative, while in your last portfolio, we addressed some relevant modern interpretations of these concerns. In this assignment, I would like you to again focus on the nature of representation and narrative as you "play" with some of the "benchmarks" of this historical development from a postmodern perspective. Like Montaigne's original attempts to get a handle on his "wavelike and variable identity," you will here attempt to better understand the various concerns that we have addressed this semester from what might be called a postmodern stance and approach. Your "play" will also demand that you focus on desire, imagination, and memory as you "saunter" through this exercise. This portfolio comprises three steps, which perhaps is fitting. Please complete each stage in the order that they are presented, and begin by looking at the following two images and quotes.

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"I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude; two for friendship; three for society"

Thoreau - 1854



"We have fourteen benches on our campus:
some for solitude; some for friendship; some for society."

Hersey - 2011

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In class, I introduced you to "The Public isolation Project," and discussed the work of the artist behind this work, Cristin Norine. In the photo above, the three chairs are represented by the empty one by the table, the one in which Cristin is seated in Portland Oregon, and the one occupied by the photographer, yours truly. The photo was taken at the Thoreau house replica in Concord Massachusetts. Here I was consciously "playing" with Kosuth's ideas, Thoreau's famous quote, and the windows of the hut. In so doing, I also had in mind some of the changes that have happened in our understanding of solitude, friendship, and society since Thoreau's days at Walden Pond. Much of what we did this semester was inspired by ideas which "came to mind" through this sort of play.

The second photo which I took last Sunday, and the work that is to follow, represents my attempt to get you to engage in this same kind of "play" as a means of building upon your previous work in a slightly unorthodox manner. In so doing, my hope is that you will be able to appreciate just how resourceful you can be in your own writing, as well as in your appreciation for that of others, however unorthodox. Please, remember to have fun!

Stage 1.

For this activity, you will need the following materials:

1. Paper and pen (or related tools).
2. A camera, which can be borrowed from the media center if you do not have one to use.
3. Any other tools that will allow you to record ideas.
4. Plenty of time
5. An open mind.

In stage one of this assignment, with the above materials at hand, I would like you to approach all fourteen of the benches in the south campus quad that have quotations. While observing these benches, please record your activity in whatever way seems most fitting. As you do this, make these benches your own. By this I mean that you should walk around them, take photos, talk about them to others, think deeply about their quotations, and of course sit in them (although as evident here...



...you should be very careful around the "Confucius Bench")!

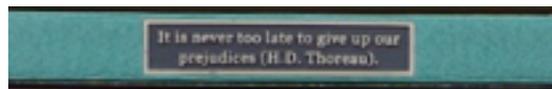
Next, I would like you to pick **three different benches: one for solitude; one for friendship; one for society.** Then, making use of all that we have covered in class this semester, please come up with creative ways to use representation and narrative in three "benchmark" essays. In other words, choose a bench that will allow you to represent solitude, record how you came to your decision, and indicate how and why you would like to present it effectively. Then do the same for both friendship and society. You may ultimately combine these three essays into one, as long as you devote two pages (with images) to each, so keep that in mind as you are brainstorming. Once you have finished with this preliminary work, please move to stage 2.

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Stage II.

- 1.) Once you have made a choice for each bench, use as much creativity as you can muster to further explain your decisions. For instance, once you have found your "solitude" bench, explain what it is about the bench that lead to your choice, and give as imaginative an account as possible to make your case. Repeat the same thing for your "friendship" and "society" benches.
- 2.) Take anywhere from one to three images of each bench to include in each bench presentation. In other words, in your entire portfolio, you will have a minimum of three and a maximum of nine images. I suggest that you take many photos of these benches to zero in on those which are most effective for your purposes. Doing so will also give you ideas.
- 3.) Within each bench presentation, please include at least two references drawn from all that we have covered this semester thus far. These will also give you some ideas. In other words, you can draw upon any book, essay, or film that might help you in your ultimate bench portraits. For instance, for my bench example below, I could choose the text *Black Walden* in support of its reference to the quote about prejudice. If I were focusing on society, I could mention the discussion of "The bench by the Side of the Road" project mentioned by Lemire in her text.

Here is a very unimaginative photo of the "Thoreau Bench" that I chose as a way to illustrate what I mean. Next to it (again somewhat pedestrian in its presentation) is its accompanying quote, from the "Conclusion" of *Walden*. This bench could easily be used to represent solitude, friendship, or society, but I would have to make some choices and do some more creative thinking to accomplish this properly. I would probably take a very different picture as well. Feel free to use this bench for any of your three renderings.



"Thoreau Bench" - South Campus - UMass Lowell
"It is never too late to give up your prejudices"

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Stage III

Once you have completed stages I & II to your satisfaction, you are ready to write your "benchmark essays." Please remember that these can be as imaginative as you like, and as such, you should keep this in mind at every stage of this assignment. Just remember once again that your final work should devote at least two pages with images to each of your benches.

Once you have finished your final essays, please write a brief evaluation of this experience. In this account, please describe the ways in which "play" assisted you in the generation of ideas, as well as anything surprising that you encountered along the way. In addition, let me know how the desire to represent solitude, friendship, and society was assisted by the use of narrative, and how your use of narrative was assisted by images and words. Finally, Let me know how walking around the quad in this manner affected the way that you perceived these benches and their interrelationship, and how you now map this space as a student; does your new map feel artistic, personal, or both? Feel free to go beyond these two choices if your feelings are best described differently, or (God forbid) you feel no different after this crazy experiment! This evaluation can be as long as you desire.



Walden Pond - Fall 2010

**These Portfolios are due on
Monday
April 25th - 2011**