

Margins & Marginalia Portfolio III “Mini-Auto-Ethnography”



“One and Three Chairs” - Installation by Hersey

Take a seat...

At the beginning of the semester, I introduced you to “One and Three Chairs,” a work of conceptual art created by Joseph Kosuth in 1965. According to Kosuth, this work is an artistic presentation of the three principle ways of being a chair, which aims to link its “concept” to other accounts of representation and narrative. Over the last two classes, we have discussed the “mini-ethnography,” which unlike traditional ethnography focuses on a specific, limited area of ethnographic concern, devises a plan of approach to answer questions regarding this concern, and executes the plan accordingly. Much like Kosuth’s work, ethnography of this sort attempts to place its results within the broader cultural narrative from which it derives, and later within that which it itself moves. With their work complete, mini-ethnographers present their findings to appropriate bodies for evaluation and further assessment.

With the above class work in mind, and in the spirit of Ballenger’s take on research, I would now like you to conduct what might be called a “mini-auto-ethnography.” Here I would like you to not just stand before Kosuth’s work as he had intended, but to imaginatively enter the work itself. Nor do I ask that you attempt to conduct a mini-ethnographical work. Instead, focusing on the subjective pole of field work, research, and writing, you will need to think about various ways in which you can and actually do present yourself to others, and perhaps more importantly, how you relate to these various presentations yourself. In addition, I ask that you remain mindful of all that we have done together this semester, including and especially your first two portfolio assignments.

“One and Three Selves” Conflicting Claims

On page 170 of *The Curious Researcher*, Ballenger discussed how to evaluate and handle conflicting claims. Here we will be looking at what is often a more vexing dilemma, but one with which you will certainly be familiar: namely, the experience of having conflict within our own identity. However, I want to look at this as a fundamentally healthy experience, though at times this of course can be anything but enjoyable. Just as Thoreau has an interpretation of three chairs which varies slightly from that of Kosuth, here we will see that “conflict” itself has many faces. To make things even more interesting, we will look to conflict within three aspects of the “self”: desire, imagination, and memory.



Part I. Conflicting Desires

“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. He wrote me: one day I'll have to put it all alone at the beginning of a film with a long piece of black leader; if they don't see happiness in the picture, at least they'll see the black.

Chris Marker - *Sans Soleil*

Desire is a threshold power, and is therefore liminal: by its very nature it points beyond itself to something “other.” This “beyond” indicated within desire itself may be something intellectual, emotional, erotic, or any number of other “objects of enormous range and significance. Desire can point beyond itself to something external, but it can also point to something “other” within, such as a dream that we have about our future which we have yet to fulfill. And because it is living, it is also active in this regard. Most desires point both outwardly and inwardly in some manner.

Conflicts of desire can be extremely complex, and there are several reasons why this is the case. For our current project, we will have the advantage of limiting our conflicts of this sort as related to writing, but you would be wise to keep this complexity in mind as you work.

Themes: For this part of the portfolio, I would like you to think about the various themes that we have addressed this semester, and to find one that you would like to continue to address, and if given full freedom, would most desire to pursue through further research and writing. By this, I mean that I would like you to think about the theme which has left you most curious or full of wonder, and which you would like to address in light of your own life and experience. To begin, you will need to create an interest inventory. This will help you to *re-search* all that we have done this semester, and to narrow down your list to just those themes or combinations of themes which you would like to pursue.

Interest Inventory: Take another look at pages 27-37 of *The Curious Researcher* to refresh your memory about building interest inventories. Then revisit all of the works that we have covered this semester. You do not have to use the exact inventory categories found in Ballenger's text, but those he provides are quite helpful. Once you have thought about our work this semester and created some lists, look for themes which might possibly spark some interesting ideas, and about which you have a working knowledge at this point in the semester. For instance, you may look to places such as Walden Pond, trends such as Facebook use, or history as Chris Marker understands it, and decide that identity is an interesting theme to expand upon. Once you have decided upon an angle of interest, you should be able to speak about it without notes for a period of one minute without repeating yourself. You might want to try to do so with a friend or family member before moving on to the discussion of imagination. Once you have something to work, with write it down as your tentative theme of interest.



Conflicting Imagination

“In my films I follow an opposite trajectory to that of the makers of political films. They have a skeleton, an idea and then they put on flesh: I have in the first place the flesh, the skeleton appears later.”

Chantal Akerman - *Moving Image Source*

Imagination, like desire, is a threshold phenomenon, and in their workings desire and imagination are allied. Desire sends us in search of ourselves and what is other, and imagination allows us to articulately express the shape of that search. Here you will have an opportunity to make use of these powers of your own imagination, as you shape your desired thematic development, thereby increasing your working knowledge of your chosen theme.

Conflicts of Imagination frequently result from the fact that it is often quite difficult to decide which avenue to take in the shaping of our desires as the imagination presents us with various possibilities for doing so. However, a more fundamental conflict can arise as we attempt to navigate our choices in relation to those made by others. We can “copy” or “imitate” others, but imagination is fundamentally original, in that it originates in the individual. In our context, as we are attempting to shape our desire to develop chosen themes, we will see how imagination allows us to develop a thesis by first exploring several working hypotheses. This will help us to summarize our own ideas and those of others in a manner which will guarantee that our thesis will be our own.

Working Hypotheses: Before knowing just what you will be saying about (thesis) your chosen theme, you will need to ask several focusing questions. Doing so will allow you to both sharpen and develop some tentative hypotheses regarding your chosen themes, and provide some avenues for further inquiry as you move towards more focused knowledge. This focused knowledge will not come if you skip this stage of inquiry. Knowledge and judgment are related activities, but they are not the same. For now, please remember that one of the primary causes of error is making a judgment before being in possession of adequate knowledge.

Focusing Questions: Just as you used an interest inventory to focus on a theme of interest, here you will ask three focusing questions to develop your working knowledge. You should do so with certain working hypotheses regarding your topic in mind. In other words, you probably have some idea of why you are interested in your theme and perhaps what you would like to say about it (thesis). Look at Ballenger’s suggestions on pages 39-51 of the curious researcher, and compose three questions regarding your own desire to work on this theme. While it might not be obvious to others at this point, these questions should be posed in light of all that we have done this semester. For instance, if you were curious about the function of memory, you might ask about how you rewrite memories of your childhood with Chris Marker’s film *Sans Soleil* in mind. Of course you can make explicit references to these works in your questions if you so desire. After you have created three questions, please devote a paragraph or two in a thoughtful response to each. Once you have accomplished this you may move on to the next section of this portfolio.



Conflicting Memory

"There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves . . . There is no suitable memorial, or plaque, or wreath, or wall, or park, or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower, there's no small bench by the road.

Toni Morrison - "A Bench By the Road"

Take a stand...

Desire and imagination mediate ideas and our relation to them, but this activity cannot continue *ad infinitum*; we must ultimately consolidate our work. This does not mean that we finish with something once in for all, but instead indicates that just as we have purposes for writing, we must remain true to these purposes by saying something about our chosen theme(s). Hence in addition to desire and imagination, memory is absolutely crucial. On page 215 of *The Curious Researcher*, Ballenger tells us that we should trust our memories, and indeed as we move from our interest inventories through the narrowing activity of proper focusing questions, we need to consolidate our growing knowledge properly. This appropriation of the material should result in focused knowledge, and more importantly, in judgments that can lead to saying something about our topic. This is where the thesis lies; the thesis is a conclusion of earlier work, which in fact can appear in the guise of a resolution. As we shall see, this reference to memory communicates something elemental.

Thesis (stated and/or implied) In the last section I made note of the fact that we often judge before having adequate knowledge, but we can also make the opposite mistake, which is holding back from making proper judgments when required. Often papers that I read let me know immediately that this has not been adequately understood by their writers, because the first sentences of the paper telegraph that this is the case. By this I do not mean that I expect papers to provide an explicit thesis statement from the outset, or anywhere else for that matter. But what I *do* need to see is an indication that the material has been thought through, and that something is being said about the topic at hand. This is different than simply providing a theme or subject for discussion, as it requires evaluation and judgement by the writer. In this, we see that in some senses memory is primary. By this I don't mean the memory of this or that fact, but rather that both the desire to say something and the imaginative activity spent in doing so are always *someone's*. The fact that I have a desire to say something and engage my imagination in order to do so would be meaningless if I did not ultimately recognize these activities as *my own*. Hence, as you complete the following, which is the last task of this portfolio, please keep in mind that in some ways all of the writing that you do, research or otherwise, has this element of self-awareness and analysis (perhaps this is why it is called *re*-search).

Focused Knowledge: With the above discussion in mind, please write three leads or ways into a hypothetical paper discussing what you have discovered regarding your chosen theme. In these leads, please write in such a way that I will be able to see that you plan to say something *about* this theme and your relationship to this theme in your essay as imagined. Please take a look at pages 185-186 for guidance. Your leads can be one or two paragraphs each. Once finished, see the checklist below.

Portfolio Checklist

Your Portfolio should include the following items:

1. A typed "Interest Inventory." This should be a page or so long, and should consist of at least four or five categories, such as those provided by Ballenger on pages 30-31 of *The Curious Researcher*. Much of what you include will be from class, but you can add other related thoughts as well if these help at all.
2. Three focusing questions and your responses to each. This section does not have to be long, as you will be able to answer each question with one or two paragraphs. However it should be very clear and concise. In other words, it should give me an indication of how accurate you were at this point of the assignment regarding your own working knowledge of your theme as it was addressed this semester. Please remember that you must have a least three questions, and that these must be in the spirit of those provided by Ballenger on pages 81-82 of *The Curious Researcher*.
3. Three leads to a hypothetical research essay which state or imply a thesis regarding your chosen theme and your relation to this theme as chosen and evaluated in and through this portfolio assignment. Please remember to look to pages 185-186 of Ballenger's text for guidance. These leads can be one or two paragraphs each.
4. Please include all of your work, including early drafts.



Portfolios are due on Wednesday, April 27th.