

# **Stony Brook University**



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**Thank You for Spelling Grey, Gray**

A Thesis Presented

by

**Shannan Lee Hayes**

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

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in

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Abstract of the Thesis  
**Thank You for Spelling Grey, Gray**  
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in  
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Certain words, objects and experiences in art and in life provoke such a subtle yet significant interruption in our sensation and cognition that they shift the way we view, think, and understand our place in the world. I want to consider the conditions that constitute these moments, and explore the nuance of difference that is always there, but often not perceived. Essential to perceiving the self, or to becoming a self, is the exchange with difference, the acknowledgment of the other, and the perception of shades of gray. In fact, to find gray substantial and beautiful. Certain words, objects and experiences have the ability to bring the fullness of tears, smiles and laughter to our face, without needing to know whether or not they are true. To perceive *is* to engage with the other.

In this thesis I will explore some thoughts on language, perception, knowablility and the self in relation to my approach to art and the experience of being in the world. Building upon these ideas, I will offer an account of the three language-object social sculptures in my solo thesis exhibition, *Thank You for Coming*.

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Figure 1.  
*Social Exchange*  
sample text detail  
actual size

## **I. Introduction: On Doing**

I am interested in making art that functions on several levels. The work must not only show, represent, or symbolize the content; I would also like it to embody and evoke my conceptual curiosities. For example, a work of art might look like this or represent that, but my primary concern is: *what does it do?* How does it work directly on and with the viewer? To phrase it this way ('work on the viewer') might sound as if I am looking to control, manipulate or shock in the name of art; this is not my intent at all. What I want to do is provoke mind-body engagement.

Rather than set up a dynamic in which I, as artist, make work that then you, as viewer, at best enjoy and at worst ignore, I am interested in stimulating an experience of exchange between the viewer and the object. This relationship requires some give on behalf of both work and viewer to be successful. Usually this exchange takes place in my work on both the levels of surface and substance. For example, I think it is important to initially offer the viewer aesthetic pleasure. If they are interested in the surface of the work, they will spend more time with it. This aesthetic experience constitutes a preliminary interest, which I then look to turn into curiosity by interrupting the viewer's habitual perspective. If this is achieved, engagement with the work begins and substantial discoveries can be made. In this way, the work gives sensual pleasure to the viewer, the viewer gives time and consideration to the work, the work offers new thought and perspective to the viewer, the viewer gives meaning and (personal) significance to the work, and so on.

This interaction is not one of co-authorship, in which the audience physically and publicly participates in constructing a part of the work, which in turn is put on display for future audiences to see. I, as artist, still reserve control over the conditions the viewer may consider. I am not interested in seeing what happens when you give this stranger a pencil and that stranger a piece of paper and tell them to draw. In fact, I am not even interested in letting the viewer know he plays a part in making the work. Instead, the interaction I am interested in is a private and personal interaction that takes place in the sensual, cognitive and perceptual experience of the viewer. This is an interaction that can occur in all art, from painting to installation, if the art is successful in provoking a nuanced experience of something anew in the viewer.



At this point, considering my pronounced interest in the viewer's experience and my apparently preconceived goals, one might question my 'authenticity' as an artist. Haven't I just set up a "means to an end"<sup>1</sup> dynamic, in which I manufacture an object that I predict will evoke a desired result from my anticipated viewer? Couldn't this process just be thought of as a loosely hypothesized and poorly controlled psychology experiment, or a somewhat creative design project? Even worse, does this suggest the cold intellectual ego of Conceptual Art by dismissing human imagination and expression as sentimental? In other words, one might point out, it seems as if I have eliminated the artist's hand completely, setting up a kind of commercial interface, in which the viewer need not consider where the work came from, so that he can instead focus on his desires and pleasures? What about process, you might say. What is genuinely mine about my work at all?<sup>2</sup>

Over the past three years at Stony Brook I have come to be concerned about these issues. As my ideas have become more complicated, the time and dedication required to accomplish them has significantly increased. Whereas much of my earlier process consisted of just thinking, until an idea seemed substantial enough to try, and then just doing it, the success of my recent art depends on extended work, at least a modest budget, and endured interest. If I position all emphasis on the final phase of the process, the viewer-object interaction, what will keep me invested in the thinking and making phases? To continue to make art, I have to actually enjoy what I am doing- enjoy the process of creating and making. And once I realized this, I found it sad that I had to remind myself of it.

But returning to the question, 'what do I want my work to do?' what once seemed like one question has become two: 1.) what do I want my work to do for the viewer, and 2.) what do I want my work to do for me, as artist. I am reminded of R. G. Collingwood's *Principals of Art*, in which he articulates:

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<sup>1</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Principals of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938).

<sup>2</sup> Despite the intentionally minimalist and manufactured aesthetic of my forms, I physically make (sometimes with help) all of my work by hand. The social process of learning a new art or non-art craft (selected specifically for each new idea), the striving for mastery and idealized perfection, and the inclusion of mistakes and human gestures are important parts of my process.

We know a man for a poet by the fact that he makes us poets. We know that he is expressing his emotions by the fact that he is enabling us to express ours.

Thus, if art is the activity of expressing emotions, the reader is an artist as well as the reader. There is no distinction of kind between the artist and the audience. This does not mean that there is no distinction at all... a person who expresses something thereby becomes conscious of what it is that he is expressing, and enables others to become conscious of it in himself and in them(selves).<sup>3</sup>

Even while romantic, there seems to be something worth shooting for in this idea. Art can be a way of becoming aware, and enabling others to become aware, of the nuanced lived-experience.

So, a question follows: what experiences are we jointly becoming aware of through art? Collingwood might respond: if the artist is to artfully express his true experience, and not just amuse a specialized group of other artists, this experience (or emotion) must be one shared by all. But more recent thinkers might reject the possibility of this, claiming that neither the same lived-experience nor the same art experience between any two people is possible. I would like to acknowledge both of these views, and say this about my position:

1. As artist I naturally decide what I am interested in exploring, and explore it because it is important to me. This is the idea that the best work a person can make is her own. Even though this seems like an obvious truism, doubt is often the shadow of art, and it is something (like the case with enjoyment) that I have to remind myself of. I will discuss explicitly what my interests are in the following sections.
2. An enriching process for me is one that allows me to interact socially in the world, learn something new about an experience outside of my own, and realize something about myself to which I had previously been blind.
3. I work toward the aim that a finished piece will directly 'do' something to or for the viewer.

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<sup>3</sup> Collingwood, 120-122.

4. The most satisfying works are those in which the viewer not only gains an unexpectedly new experience of something he previously thought he knew, but when his experience is also so unexpected to me that the viewer, in turn, offers me something anew and shows me what the work really can be.



Figure 2.  
*Social Exchange*  
sample text detail  
actual size

## II. Themes and Methods: Language-Objects

I have noticed certain themes and methods that reappear in my work, regardless of the particular content or topical situation I am addressing. I am investigating perception and the structures of social space. My interest in perception has led me to the theory of spectatorship explained in the previous section. It is also the reason why I largely work with objects in space, i.e. sculpture. I am interested in the embodied experience and the sensual. My interest in the invisible structures within social space has led me to work with language. Language is not only often the content of my work, but observed language-acts are often the motivation for my work. Moreover, language is the method *through which* I work. In this section I will explain what interests me about language, how I view language as a method, and how I am looking to incorporate the object.

Language is a living thing. It is sensitive to the cultural climate that it inhabits, as well as to the users that inhabit it. And this is one of the most interesting qualities of language to me: its inherent flexibility and inexactitude. The place of a sound in a word, a word in a sentence, a speaker in a situation, a situation in a geographical site, and the mediation of the word through technology and the body, all influence the enactment of language. Context becomes essential to determining the rightness of a particular language use. Dialect, slang, revisions to the dictionary, and the development of pidgin and creole languages attest to the notion that language is not a rigid, authoritative thing. Though it contains rules- definitions, grammar, and sentence structure- the correctness of language is ultimately decided by the community that uses it. It is based on practice rather than theory or law. Linguist Edward Callary of Northern Illinois University explains, "It is a social rather than linguistic judgment to label one person a 'better' pronouncer than another, and it ignores the facts of language. The rules of English provide the possibilities; they specify what can and cannot be done within the context of spoken English. Those who participate most fully in the richness of English know the rules and use the rules for their maximum effect." <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Edward Callary, "Phonetics," in Language: Readings in Language and Culture (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 131.

I am interested in the folding of language and layering of meaning that exists in such social activities as sarcasm, etiquette, and identity. I use text in a way that offers both direct and indirect cues to meaning. At the basis of my method is the idea that language does not transparently show or tell. Words are not unmediated concepts or things in the world. While it is possible to identify a pure form of the word in theory, everyday use of language is far more entrenched in habit, expectation, intention, desire, emotion, self-awareness, interpretation, and ambiguity. Words do not carry unmediated information on their surface, nor do they need to for understanding to take place. This is not to say that language, or the use of it, is inherently superficial. This is, however, an attempt at investigating surface and substance within systems of symbolic exchange.

Language has the ability to not only exemplify meaning, but also embody significance. This second type of meaning, which I will call meta-meaning, encompasses elements of the situation beyond that which the speaker intends to directly address. I first became interested in the construction, understanding and experience of embodied meta-meanings while studying literary criticism, and trace my approach to art back to this relationship with the written and spoken word.

When analyzing a text of brevity, the critical reader is encouraged to attend not only to what is said, but also how it is said. I find this idea to have great implications in both the formal language-arts (poetry, short stories, speeches, etc.) and casual social language. But let me put social language aside for a moment, in order to first explain more closely the significance of literary devices in relation to layers of meaning. Repetition of a particular word or phrase, for example, can be used to set the reader's pace, emphasize importance, hyperbolize, create rhythm, interrupt flow, increase tension, etc. Similarly, sentence structure, word sound, and metaphor add layers of interaction with the word beyond a surface reading of a text. These examples, called literary techniques, are tools a writer may choose to employ in order to engage his reader in deeper experiences of the text. The reader need not be familiar with these writing tools. If the technique works as intended, the desired experience will translate through the act of reading. If however, the reader is familiar with such devices, it is possible for him to both experience and intellectually understand the workings of the text. In either case, effectively used literary techniques impregnate the word

with meta-meanings, which either work to assist the theme of events discussed within the narrative, or create a curious tension between what is being said and how it is being said.

Having now separated out a difference between what a speaker says, and how a speaker says it, a third element comes into play: context. Who is the speaker? What is the situation in which he is speaking? How are factors outside of the conversation contributing to the exchange within? Embodied meta-meanings develop in connection to all three of these elements: content, mediation, and context. All equally important, it is interesting then that often only content gets “spoken.” The other two remain unsaid.

The deconstruction of language into content, mediation, and context does not solely pertain to formal works of literature. In certain social practices it seems extremely important to attend, again, not only to what is said, but also to how, when, why, and who is saying it. This is how language works. Sometimes aimed at clarity and transparency, often layered with complexities, subtexts, and agendas, language is an activity in the world. As such, understanding is not and should not be taken as passive or flat (on the surface of the page or as a direct line of communication between speaker and receiver). Whether concerned with reading literature, writing an email, listening to a loved one, speaking to a potential employer, picking out an outfit, or viewing art, varied attention to context, content, and mediation will yield varied understandings and experiences of the same object or situation.

Of course, totality is impossible. No one person can take the omnipresent position of complete sensitivity to the three above stated elements of meaning. This includes the author/artist. And to suggest a prerequisite of total knowing to engage a text (as well as the controlled ability to not know, *when not knowing is fashionable*), is to close that text off to all but a rare, focused group of readers. This is not what I am after. A layered meaning approach to art is a way to open the work up to a multiplicity of viewers and readings. It is a way to celebrate and explore the spaces between various understandings, perspectives, and persons in general.

Space is an important component to both the theory and pragmatics of language. As such, it has become an important factor in the formal composition of my work. My practice is greatly tied to a strategy of space through sculpture, and to my thought process through anticipating the interactivity between the object/image/text and the viewer. Yet, the idea of

space as ‘possibility’ remains metaphorical without context in the world. Thus my difficulty with the works of Fred Sandback, despite my great admiration of him. In his work, form is expected to carry too much weight as the perceptual experience attempts to extend metaphorically outside of the white cube in order to imply certain truths about the lived world of social activity and culture. I can say these works use line to imply plane, that the invisible void of volume of the room is rendered visible through these simple gestures of taut colored string, and that the navigation of the viewer around these works in space confirms the single point perspective of unmediated viewing. But to say that these taut strings call forth examples of situations where a limited perspective of single narrative have serious repercussions in the world, (all pun intended) would be a stretch. This work can be understood cognitively, and incorporate the body through perception, but is it too much to ask for a third element, namely ‘being in the world.’ Might this be the missing component to evoke emotion, necessary for self-relation?

Bringing the word into sculptural form (3-D and 4-D) makes allusion to language’s physical presence in the world, as well as it’s inseparability from pragmatic use. Like written text, the language-object becomes an artifact of a particular language act. It is an objectification of past time. But the sculptural object need not have identifiable words or text for it to function as language. Literary techniques translate smoothly into formal techniques, setting up structures of meaning within the shape, material and process of the work. Let’s take repetition again. In viewing a work, formal repetition can create visual rhythm, sometimes flowing and hypnotic, sometimes fragmented and tense. In making work, the same can be said of the maker’s gesture. The viewer’s experience of a work is directly related to the evidence of the maker’s body in the mark. Unlike in literature, the viewer and maker need not ignore their presence in the physical world to experience and develop the allegorical world of the art. Sculpture is present in the lived-body’s space.

I am prompted to investigate the relationship between language, object, and life by a stranger's recent straightforward inquiry: If you are interested in language, and particularly the ambiguity of spoken language in everyday life, why do you use solid, physical sculpture when language is such an immaterial, flexible thing? I think this question touches on



something important to me. Objects exist in the world of the sensual. Language, in the world of the cognitive. Language-objects activate both.

Like the writer who uses spoken and unspoken elements to build layers of meaning beyond the surface of the text, sculpture allows me to activate both the positive space of the object, and the negative space of the implied, unpresent subject where the object is not.<sup>5</sup> Here the object, also comprised of content, mediation, and context, replaces the word. But now the world of viewer becomes part of the work; the piece extends out of the object to the exhibition space and the viewer's embodied space. With Roland Barthes and other postmodern thinkers, we know that the object's history (material, process, and source) and art history (relation to the cannon) are not the only players in making meaning. In my work I don't just acknowledge the role of the viewer's personal history (knowledge, mood, identity, felt relation to art, etc.), I consider it to be an important, if not the most important, *media* of the work.

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<sup>5</sup> This activation of the object's negative space as the viewer's embodied space is achieved beautifully in the sculptural works of Sara Greenberger Rafferty and Beth Campbell.



Figure 3.  
*Social Exchange*  
sample text detail  
actual size

### III. Thank You for Coming: Three Thesis Works

*Thank You for Coming*, my solo thesis exhibition in the Laurence Alloway Memorial Gallery, consisted of three individually conceived sculptural works: *Social Exchange* (2007-08), *Ambiguous Signs* (2006-08), and *Hot Air* (2008-09). *Social Exchange* is a series of over 200 miniature intaglio print 'thank you' cards, displayed on white shelves in alphabetical order. *Ambiguous Signs* is a 40 ft. long black plexi, neon sign that sits off the wall at eye level in the corner of the room. It reads 'EVERYTHING WILL BE OK'. *Hot Air* is a collection of six life-sized balloons made of beeswax and ribbon. Three balloons hang above, three lay slightly depressed on the floor. The words 'next time' and 'sorry' are engraved in two of the six balloons.

Despite the fact that I have titled each work individually, I think of *Thank You for Coming* as both an exhibition of works and an installation. This is because I consider the entire gallery space to be activated. This is not to say that the works must be shown adjacent one another in the future, but for our consideration here I will discuss the works as they were presented in my solo show, and explain the process through which they came about.

Throughout the three works themes of uncertainty, exchange, impermanence, the self and the other begin to emerge as a result of the material, language and forms used. The notions of knowability and self-control as attainable commodities are silently challenged. The psychological tone of the space oscillates from optimistic to pessimistic and back, from sincere to sarcastic and back, from rational to irrational and back, and from comforting to disquieting and back. That at first it appears direct, but with exploration and consideration is unable to be pinned down, is very important to me.



Figure 4.  
*Thank You for Coming*  
installation view of *Ambiguous Signs* and *Hot Air*

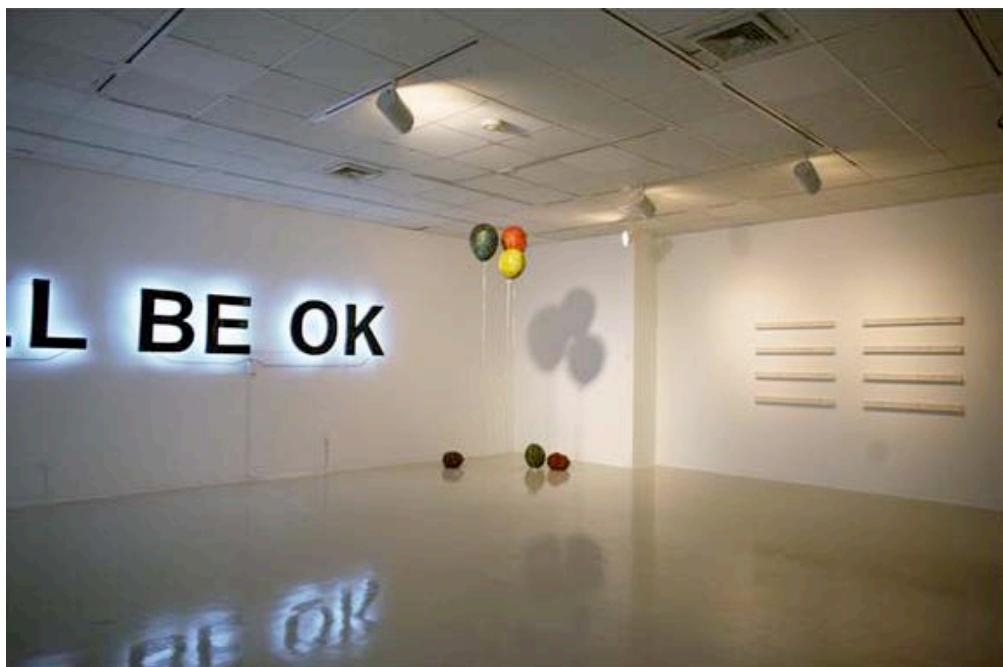


Figure 5.  
*Thank You for Coming*  
installation view of *Ambiguous Signs*, *Hot Air* and *Social Exchange* (from left to right)

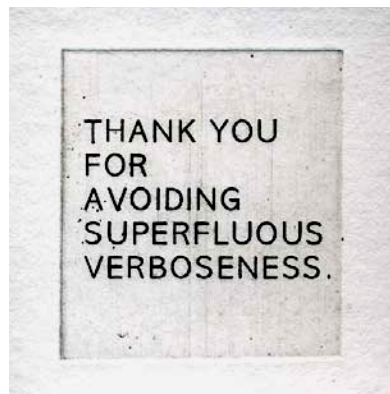


Figure 6.  
*Social Exchange*  
sample text detail  
actual size

### III a. Ambiguous Signs

I was watching the 1997 version of Michael Haneke's film *Funny Games* when I first started to notice the word OK. Not knowing German, any words in English caught my attention while reading the movie's subtitles. But in particular, this simple, non-descript word seemed to hold its own in a number of different situations as the film's antagonists carried out a series of manipulative word games. This stirred my interest in language, reminding me of moments growing up when language, and specifically the social language of class, was used not as communication but as a tool of power, identification, and exclusion. OK's ubiquitousness and vagueness seemed to play an interesting role in the exchange of language. I started to think about both the use of language as power and the word OK more.

In *Ambiguous Signs* I am investigating the power of language in two ways. First, I am interested in the ways language is used to convince one's self of some invested interest. This is like the idea that the physical act of smiling actually makes a person happy. For example, in David Levi Strauss' book *Between the Eye* he tells the story of finding an old photograph of a young boy who resembled his father. He told people that this boy was his brother who died before he was born, while fully acknowledging to himself he had no such brother and it was just an imaginative story. But after a while, he became invested in the story, and began to believe *the photo was his brother*.<sup>6</sup> The once found photo and empty object was now was a family artifact and magical signifier, all due to the self-uttered word. Effectively, when I repeat something to myself or to others, after a while I not only start to believe it, in a certain way I become it. I am able to internalize it as a part of my past, since the real past is just as unreal or even more unreal than a verbal present. And since what happens in my past makes up, in part, who I am now, my internalized 'false' memory becomes a real part of my present self. Some might call it denial, others might call it resilience, still others delusion; this is the power of self-reiteration and the notion of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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<sup>6</sup> David Levi Strauss and John Berger, *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics* (New York: Aperture, 2003), 72-74.

The second type of language power I'm interested in with this work has to do with the power of persuasion from an external (and made to be invisible) source. Here I am thinking about advertising, information and entertainment media, recreational social manipulators, and pervasive normative cultural values. Whereas in the self-persuading power of language, repetition and desire were constituents to successful manipulation, here the invisibility of the method and ease of ingestion seem to determine the level of success.

How do these ideas play out in the work? As I mentioned earlier, *Ambiguous Signs* is a significantly large, neon commercial sign. Its all caps font spells out the cultural cure-all, readymade phrase, 'EVERYTHING WILL BE OK'. What does this phrase actually mean? As the slick, advertising media and cold neon light might suggest, this clichéd phrase is relatively void of significance in and of itself. What is the 'everything' referring to here? Is 'ok' suggestive of better, good, only ok, or complacency? Even if taken as an optimistic assurance that things will improve, the 'will be' seems to undeniably confirm, things are *not* ok.

Despite the emptiness of these lingual signs, when uttered in context the phrase still has the ability to work. From time to time I want nothing more than to have those words wrapped around me like a hug. (This is why I chose the large scale and location in the corner of the room; the sign wrapped around the viewer beyond his peripheral like a hug.) And even though I do not believe that *everything* will be OK rationally, when I need more to continue than to be fully aware, these words are sometimes enough to keep me going, and often enough to influence my perceived reality. After all, they do not say that everything will be perfect or even good; they just say that everything will be OK. And when you take the good and the bad and average them together, do you not get the median OK?

On the flip side of this, I designed the sign to be black acrylic in order to reflect the viewer's image back to him. I heard once that bars often put mirrors in the bar area to encourage more drinking. The hypothesis is that as people begin to drink, and then look at themselves in the mirror, their psychological composure is loosened and instead of maintaining their projected self image, their reflection begins to remind them of the things about themselves that don't live up to their ego ideals. The mirror image reminds them of the gap between their self-image, their public image and their self. As a result of this

irreconcilable experience, they drink more to forget. This use of the mirror as a confrontation between surface, substance and self has stuck with me and played a part in how I designed the work. But to my surprise, the halo glow of the neon turned out to be so mesmerizing that the reflective quality of the black letters was largely overlooked.

Yet a different reflection did occur on the floor, which I arranged to be newly waxed. This created a double image of the sign that metaphorically spoke to the ambiguity of the phrase's tone. Was this writing on the wall an anonymous beacon of hope? A sign that there will be better times ahead? Or was this a sarcastic jest? A timely cultural critique of the coping mechanisms, symptomatic of our society, which only cause more and worse problems in the long run? There is evidence in the work to support both of these interpretations. For example, when a woman whose loved one was sick with cancer, entered the room and saw the work, she almost immediately started to cry. She came over to me, interrupting the conversation I was in, gave me a hug and called me an angel. This was the second day she had visited the exhibit; on the first day she saw the glow while walking to her job, and like a moth to light, hypnotically entered the room.

This was a strange experience. Up until this point I hadn't ever witnessed such a strong response to my work. And now, rather than take it as confirmation of the success of the work, I felt uncomfortably estranged from it. Standing in between this stranger and the work, forced in a hug, I realized this had nothing to do with me. The viewer's one-sided understanding of the work so strongly dismissed any subtlety of form and content that I found myself unconsciously, physically embodying the opposite extreme, in attempt to balance the work back out. I took on the cold, stiff cynicism of the acrylic and neon that this viewer wouldn't allow herself to see.

But what happened next, after she left, was even more surprising. The person I had been talking to before being interrupted, no longer concerned with the topic we had been discussing, began to passionately critique the previous viewer's 'mindless' response. This second viewer noted the literal 'strings attached' to the sign, the highly slick commercial style of the media, the superficiality of the material, and the glowing light as a false sense of security akin to religious beliefs. To this viewer, the sign was obviously a critique of



euphemistic language, and the first viewer could afford to become more aware of the way things really are in the world.

This surprised me. What interested me most was that such strong opposing experiences resulted from a single, apparently direct work. And both viewers believed their position so strongly that they spoke to me, without hesitation, as if I felt the same way. In many ways these responses are two sides of the same coin. Neither viewer really considered or read the sign- neither engaged with its ‘bothness’. Instead, both viewers experienced the light, projected their desires, assumed the unknown source to be credible and familiar, and swallowed the surface message without chewing the media or digesting the substance. Taking from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Peter Schwenger has spoken elegantly on this idea:

We fill our senses with appearances in order to blunt the always implicit sense that the things of this world are fundamentally distant from us:

‘Our perception, in the context of our everyday concerns, alights on things sufficiently attentively to discover in them their familiar presence, but not sufficiently so to disclose the non-human element which lies hidden in them. But the thing holds itself aloof from us and remains self-sufficient...a resolutely silent Other.’ (*The Phenomenology of Perception* 322.)

For many, the familiar presence of things is a comfort... Their long association with us seems to make them custodians of our memories; so that sometimes, as in Proust, things reveal us to ourselves in profound and unexpected ways. Yet all this does not mean that things reveal themselves, only our investments in them.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Univ. Press, 2006), 3.



Figure 7.  
*Social Exchange*  
sample text detail  
actual size

### III b. Hot Air



Figure 8.  
*Hot Air*  
detail image of depressed, secondary balloons

It happens the same every year, and every year it surprises me. I never notice how lethargic, anxious, and unfulfilled I am during the winter months until the first signs of spring shine through my window in the morning, and I find myself actually wanting to get out of bed rather than having to do so. By the time the spring of 2008 rolled around, I found myself with Jeff Koons on my mind.

Koons was in the air during my second year of grad school. He had a float in the Thanksgiving Day Parade, he had new works on the roof at the Met, and his sales on auction guaranteed him a spot in the top three wealthiest living artists (this was before the economic downturn of the '08 election year). I was never moved to pay much attention to his work before this; a few of his pieces were on my radar, but I had little knowledge of the extent of

his work. I generally just listened when people had things to say about him. It seemed that people either didn't care to talk about his work at all, or had a lot to say about what they thought of him. Neither reaction really felt like a conversation about the work, or required me to have an opinion. This changed, however, when a student relentlessly challenged me to find out more.

What do *you* think of Jeff Koons? He asked me this in a way that made it clear he was fully capable of reading up on what is said about Koons' work, and did, but wasn't satisfied with what he found. I replied with the few things I remembered having been told, and finally concluded ... Well, I guess I don't think about him much. This would have been fine, except every moment this student had to start a conversation without disrupting the class, he raised a new and researched curiosity about the art world heavy hitters. Hurst was flying solo in the auction houses, Koons was being interviewed on the roof with the demeanor of a mayor, Murakami was selling designer bags in the middle of the Brooklyn Museum, and Deitch had his own reality show contest, 'Art Star'. I usually ignore this side of art, finding it to have little in common with my goals, but with this student's frequent inquiries, Koons was in my head whether I invited him in or not.

This was when balloons started showing up in my work. Not as a conscious response, or simply because Koons himself uses inflatable things (balloon dogs, pool floats, Thanksgiving Day parade floats, etc).

One night after teaching I went home and checked out Koons' site. I was shocked to find the prolific amount of work he has produced over the past two decades. The fact that his body of work could be described as a series of series did not sit well with me. It seemed transparent that he repeatedly came up with a new idea- at best a curiosity at worst a gimmick- and would have that idea manufactured with slight variations to be consumed at high prices under the Koons brand. Yet, I really liked some of the works. The suspended equilibrium basketballs and vacuum sealed appliances not only made me feel like a little kid watching a magic trick, they were the link I had been looking for in art; an appreciation of pure minimalist form and sensation, paired with an acknowledgment of being situated in the world, imperfect, and playful. I didn't really know what to think.

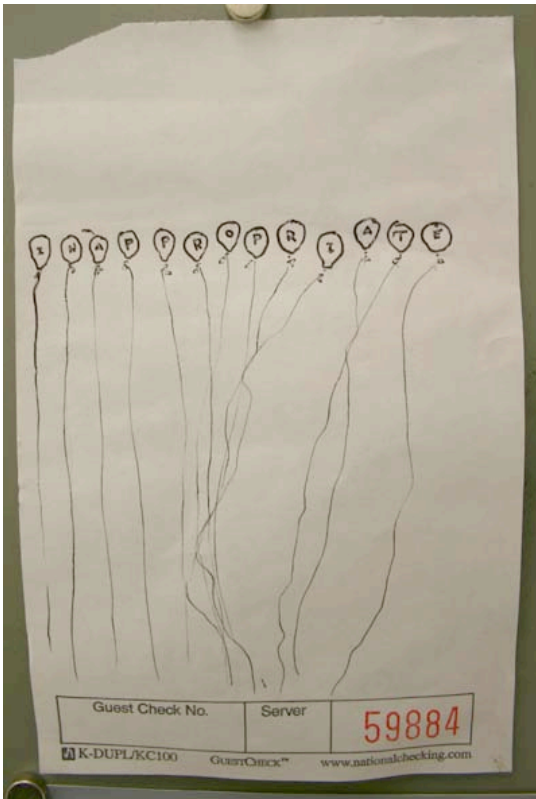


Figure 9.  
*an inappropriate sketch*

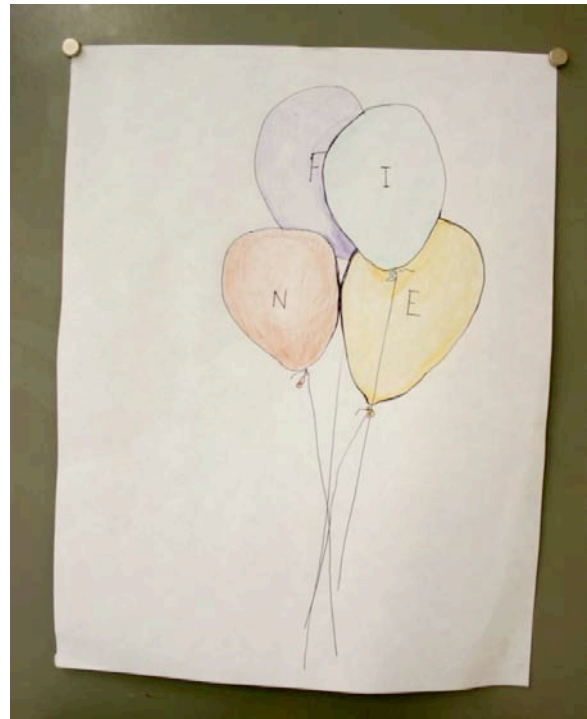


Figure 10.  
*a fine sketch*

I read though descriptions in art books to find out what the critics were saying about his work. The general sentiment was that his work was a critique of consumer culture. I watched interviews to find out what he was saying about his work. His general, mild mannered response was something along the lines of beauty and transcendence. I went on a tour behind the scenes at the Met and saw the maintenance kit supplied with *Balloon Dog (Yellow)*; this custom made case had more foam framing a microfiber rag than most painting have wall space. I couldn't reconcile these discrete claims of consumer critique, transcendental beauty, and material excess. I couldn't help but love and hate it all. What was he up to? But the day I went to the Met it was raining and the roof was closed. I still didn't get to see the work in person. For me seeing it first hand is the only authentic way to assess a work, so I continued to collect information with mild curiosity but remained tentative. I didn't want Koons to take up too much of my thoughts. Since early in my

making experience I decided I didn't want to make art about art, and Koons did not constitute an exception.

During the summer of '08, two months before my thesis show, I was invited to participate in a think-tank in Chicago. While I was visiting, a major retrospective of Koons' work was featured at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (Chicago being his alma mater city). I finally had an opportunity to see the work in person, and went ready and open.

This is what I like: I think Jeff Koons' work is amazing. I am amazed by it. I stare at the shiny metallic surface as it engulfs my image and reflects it back hypnotically. It is very much like Anish Kapoor's recent work in this way (which I also really like), but it doesn't deny culture. I blankly bask in the image of myself plastered all over huge cultural icons. Jeff Koons shows us the excess of our vanity, our mindless consumption, and our obsession with empty surfaces. He puts it right there in front of us, even more excessive (in scale) and mindless (as spectacle). But he is not encouraging us to be more mindful and consume less, rather we passively eat it all up. In many ways it becomes a celebration as much as a critique. I look at it and think, simply, 'yes.' I know better than to be entranced by shiny things, but I can't help wanting to look at it. I know I cannot touch or have these objects, these huge heavy expensive objects; I know I should not encourage such inflated value on material goods, but I look at them and feel for a moment the temporary pleasure of being empty- being mindless.

This is what I don't like: I look away and there is still a void, but this one is like having just eaten a bunch of candy and, afterwards, feeling sick. There seems to be no nutritional substance to Koons' work. A video at the front of this exhibition featured Koons talking about his work. Highly produced, the video switches back and forth between his studio and his home. In the studio Koons stands in a suit in front of busy workers manufacturing the work. In his home he sits on a leather chair with a Buddha statue discreetly in the background. He talks about oneness and pleasure, about joy and beauty. He speaks calmly, like a sage, like a model citizen, like a modest man. He does not mention his Masters degree in business, the extreme popularity of the work, the inflated art market, or the production process. He does not mention consumption, capitalism, or critique anywhere. His work is smart. It uses the capitalist machine like a factory to produce the work, distribute

the work, and create a taste for the work. It shows the viewer how empty cultural icons and consumer goods are, while making the viewer even more passive and empty. He shows the viewer himself, offers a moment of self-reflection, while flattening everything to surface. He has created a hybrid critique-celebration, a capitalist transcendentalism. While I find this to be highly sophisticated and interesting, I am unsettled by Koons' persona due to the fact that, from what I have seen, he completely ignores the economic underpinnings of his work and talks only about the spiritual. I can only make sense of this by thinking of it as an extended performance of the artist persona. But he never lets on to the possibility of his insincerity.

Which brings me to *Hot Air*. The most intuitive of all three of my works in *Thank You for Coming*, this piece encompasses many of the ideas that were on my mind while considering Koons' work. Substance and surface, sincerity and insincerity, the 'put-on,' the wink, thoughtless pleasure, rational skepticism, magic, emptiness, and impermanence were the ideas that breed *Hot Air*.

I was unaware of this influence while I was developing the work, and more aware of my move to start working with balloons as a reaction to seasonal depression. The winter months were getting to me, life was feeling heavy, my thoughts were getting tangled up and stuffy as I was stuck in the house and in my head. I needed something light and simple, something that wasn't about critique. I thought of a balloon and it made me smile. And although this was a romantic, child-like naiveté, I needed it.

I knew the simple joy of a balloon was enough for me to explore it, but I insisted on intellectualizing my interest. I had been reading a book on sarcasm for the past few months, and noticed that the author referred to words as empty signs tied to the world through meaning and context. Without these syntactical strings attaching words to the ground, they were merely "hot air" in that they were meaningless, and literally reduced to just gusts of breath.<sup>8</sup> This was a good metaphor for a balloon, I thought. But I am not actually fond of work that relies on metaphor to attain significance. This gets back to the idea that I want my work to do, not just mean or say. So while I took on the title *Hot Air* with this linguistic

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<sup>8</sup> John Haiman, Talk Is Cheap: Sarcasm, Alienation, and the Evolution of Language (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

metaphor in mind, I was also thinking that my attempt to intellectually justify the balloon was a bunch of hot air.



Figure 11.  
*Hot Air*  
detail image of “sorry” balloon

The second attempt I made to find substance in the balloon beyond simple pleasure and play, was by thinking of it as similar to ‘the self.’ One person gives another person a balloon as a gesture of solidarity (to condole, to support, to welcome, to be optimistic, to celebrate). At the same time, balloons are not solid things. They have a definite life span. They necessarily deflate. We never see an image of a balloon in doubt- oscillating in the space between the ceiling and the floor. I imagined this stage of the balloon’s life to be magical and animate. Catching a glimpse of it would be like seeing the food in your refrigerator start to dance as soon as the door closed and the light went out. But it would also



be like seeing a gracious host take off her party face, alone and exhausted at the end of the day.

I explored this idea in my first balloon piece, a stop motion video called *I am*. For this work I took a still image of a group of three balloons every seven minutes. I took pictures on this interval because I was interested in the pop-science idea that our cells regenerate at such a rate that every seven years our bodies are made up of an entirely new cells, to the extent that we are not the same person we were seven years ago. I wanted to capture the transition time between the new self and the old self, the party and the next day, full inflation to full deflation. And I wanted to loop the video, showing that this change is only part of a larger process and not an end in itself.

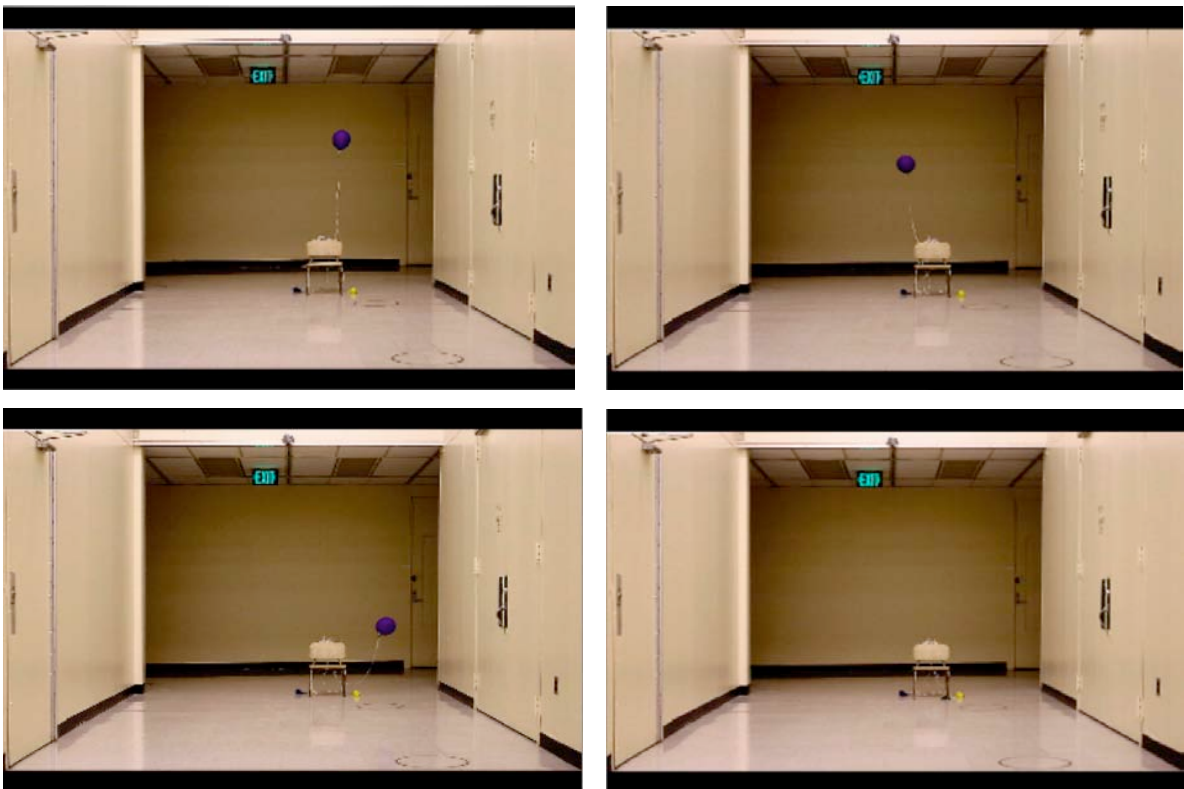


Figure 12.  
*I am*  
50-second digital video loop  
detail image of four video stills

While I found this work to be successful, it had a psychologically dark aesthetic. This was its strength, but at the same time it was beginning to read as suicide and depression, both messages I did not want to suggest. I had to get back the lightness and magic of the balloon, and I needed the materials to be less plastic and more fleshy. I did this by switching to colored beeswax.

*Hot Air* is a series of six life-sized materially altered balloons. Three hung from the ceiling, unevenly floating at different heights in the space between the ceiling and the floor. Three other balloons sat on the floor, physically dented as if deflating. The colors of the hanging balloons were vibrant, made from refined white beeswax and made to resemble the primary colors. The balloons on the ground are murkier in color and made from natural (yellow) beeswax and resembling the secondary colors. I think of primary and secondary color as evoking a simplification symptomatic of childhood, and relevant to the balloon imagery. On the yellow hanging balloon the phrase 'Next Time' is carved. On the surface of the purple balloon on the floor, the word 'Sorry' is carved. Balloon ribbon was tied to the knot of each balloon, and hung vertically from the three balloons above to just above the floor. This effectively created a visual tension by activating the negative space of the gallery.

But despite attempts to intellectualize the work, the most rewarding part of *Hot Air* was visceral: a reaction related to perception and emotion, not cognition alone. Very often when the viewer entered the space he saw magic; he saw the frozen moment of balloons in doubt. The stillness of these objects made the room feel like it was filled with potential energy. And this is important to me, because unlike Koons, I not only want to offer simple mindless joy, but I want to disquiet the viewer subtly enough that he is enlivened from his passivity.



Figure 13.  
*Hot Air*  
detail image of “next time” balloon

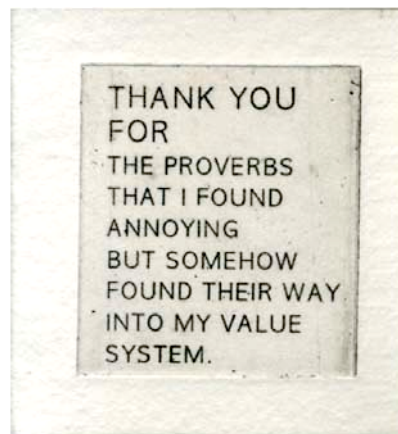


Figure 14.  
*Social Exchange*  
sample text detail  
actual size

### III c. Social Exchange

*Social Exchange* is a series of over 200 intaglio print ‘Thank You’ cards. Folded on a vertical axis, these cards stand 2 1/4 inches high by 2 1/4 inches wide. Centered on the face of each card is a somewhat irregular square print of gray plate-tone with black text. Text sits embossed on the front of each card in a sans serif, all caps font. Each card is aligned alphabetically by the first word following “THANK YOU FOR,” ignoring the words “THE” and “NOT” when following said phrase. They are displayed on eight 3 feet long shelves mounted on the wall. The shelves occupy a surface area of two adjacent 3 feet by 3 feet squares; similar in appearance to the minimalist, vertically stacked horizontal line volumes of Donald Judd. *Social Exchange* can be viewed from both the macro the micro position.



Figure 15.  
*Social Exchange*  
macro position



Figure 16.  
*Social Exchange*  
micro position

The scale of this work invites at least two distinct but related viewings. Standing at a distance, *Social Exchange* evokes the impersonal aesthetic of minimalism. Its lack of color, hard edge form, repetition, regularity, and geometric symmetry all venerate the clean but cold values of order, balance, and perfection. In designing this layout I was thinking of the two columns as two bodies, separated by an irreconcilable gap, and thus necessitating exchange. The ‘exchange’ of *Social Exchange* occurs within the shift between macro and micro,

message and meta-message, minimalism and sentimentality, sarcasm and sincerity, object and viewer, and the implied giver and receiver of the card.

Approaching the micro position, *Social Exchange* moves from metaphoric form to recognizable objects with a relation to everyday life. Once seen as squares in a series, these now become miniature cards on display. And with a few steps closer, the cards become, more specifically, ‘Thank You’ cards. It takes very little effort on the part of the viewer for *Social Exchange* to move from abstract to recognizable to nameable. And with this transition the viewer gains a general context with which to approach the work. The system of symbolic forms is now seemingly familiar to the viewer. No longer faced with purely aesthetic cues, as in the macro position, the viewer can now read words.



Figure 17.  
*Social Exchange*  
installation view

What once appeared as an aesthetic grid of uniform, square units now becomes evident as unique, imperfect objects. The scale of *Social Exchange* requires this modal switching. If the viewer is to be able to read the cards, he must be close enough that he

cannot view the work in its totality. If he is to appreciate the experience of the aesthetic whole, he will not be close enough to notice the individual nuances. He experiences the work from multiple perspectives. By moving in closer, the viewing switches from a visual reading to a literal reading, from impersonal to personal, from recognizable art to recognizable life, and from the abstract to the specific. I would like to suggest in this shift from macro to micro, the viewer changes from passive to active. Whereas in *Ambiguous Signs* the text worked on the passive viewer like an image, here the act of reading compels the viewer to be more than just an observer.

Despite the standard use of black font on white paper seen in *Social Exchange*, color is an important part of both this work and *Ambiguous Signs*. I am interested in the metaphoric and visual difference of black and white, and the ambiguous in-betweens of gray. I can easily say **black** is Black, **white** is White, Black is not White, and White is not Black. I can describe white as either all light or no pigment, and black as either no light or all pigment, and say neither is some or sometimes. Gray, on the other hand, is always some or sometimes. Gray is the difference between black and white. And, as Josef Alber's work has revealed, perception is relative. Gray is only this specific gray in relation to this other gray that it is not. Sometimes lighter or darker, sometimes warmer or cooler, it can occur as a tonal combination of black and white, a color combination of complimentary paints, or a pixel arrangement of equal parts red, green and blue on the screen. Gray is inexact, without (even) a definite spelling. While there is Black and there is White, there are only shades of gre/ay. Because of the handmade process of intaglio (vs. digital) printmaking, each card in *Social Exchange* wears its individual plate-tone shade of gray.

The acknowledgement of gray is very important to me. In rigid binaries, the rich complexities of existence get oversimplified, omitted, or ignored for the sake of ease, exactitude and knowability. We see this in politics, race and gender identity, ethics, law, and etiquette. Each contains categories with spoken and unspoken codes, by which a person must behave and continually perform in order to maintain good standing and membership. Grayness acknowledges uncertainty, something difficult to fit into such systems. But to deny doubt, the oscillations of feeling, and the ambiguity of perspective is to reduce the self to a stable and certain category, which it is not. I think it is important *not* to encourage the denial

of imperfection, uncertainty, and playful shifting. Rather I am trying to acknowledge mutual struggle, and allow it to empower rather than stagnate.

Kim Fortun, in her text *Advocacy After Bhopal*, argues against the conventional concept of advocacy as “embody(ing) modernist ideals,” in order to acknowledge the significance of doubt within the impetus to act. “The advocate is imagined to be sure and consistent in his beliefs, leading by providing a unifying language for movement... a focused, unified self, undistracted by what doesn’t count- whether it be personal desires, secondary issues, or simple doubt.”<sup>9</sup> Doubt functions as an interruption to the solidarity of meta-narratives by acknowledging the complexity of situatedness and the gaps between theory and experience. Between good intentions and missed opportunities, between what is felt and what is said, between what is thought and what is done, between what is meant and what is understood, here lies *Social Exchange*.

In 2006, the year after I moved away from New Orleans and before starting graduate school, I worked as the administrative assistant to admissions at The Ross School, a private k-12 school in East Hampton, NY. At work one day I found a book entitled *The Art of Thank You*. Strategically placed, I am sure, this book seemed to send the subtle but clear message to our young interviewees, *Yes, you should write a thank you letter to the Director of Admission after your interview here today...* I didn’t send a thank you letter after my interview for that job. Come to think of it, I have never sent a thank you letter, note or email for any interview, and I went on a lot of interviews during that liminal year. I took this book home with me and soon learned all the other occasions I didn’t write a thank you that might merit one. Realizing this was a particular type of lonely embarrassment. As a New York transient in New Orleans during my four years of undergrad, I was graciously taken to turtle soup dinners, invited to debutant presentations, made a VIP guest at Mardi Gras balls, and included in Historical Open House tea parties. Completely out of my element, and always on my best behavior, I never once wrote a thank you note. As far as I know my lack of follow-up never prevented a future invitation, but it must have made visible my foreignness, a

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<sup>9</sup> Kim Fortun, *Advocacy After Bhopal: Environmentalism, Disaster, New Global Orders* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 51.



quality I try so hard to veil with chameleon-like acuteness. Was a verbal thank you not enough? Why didn't I know this?

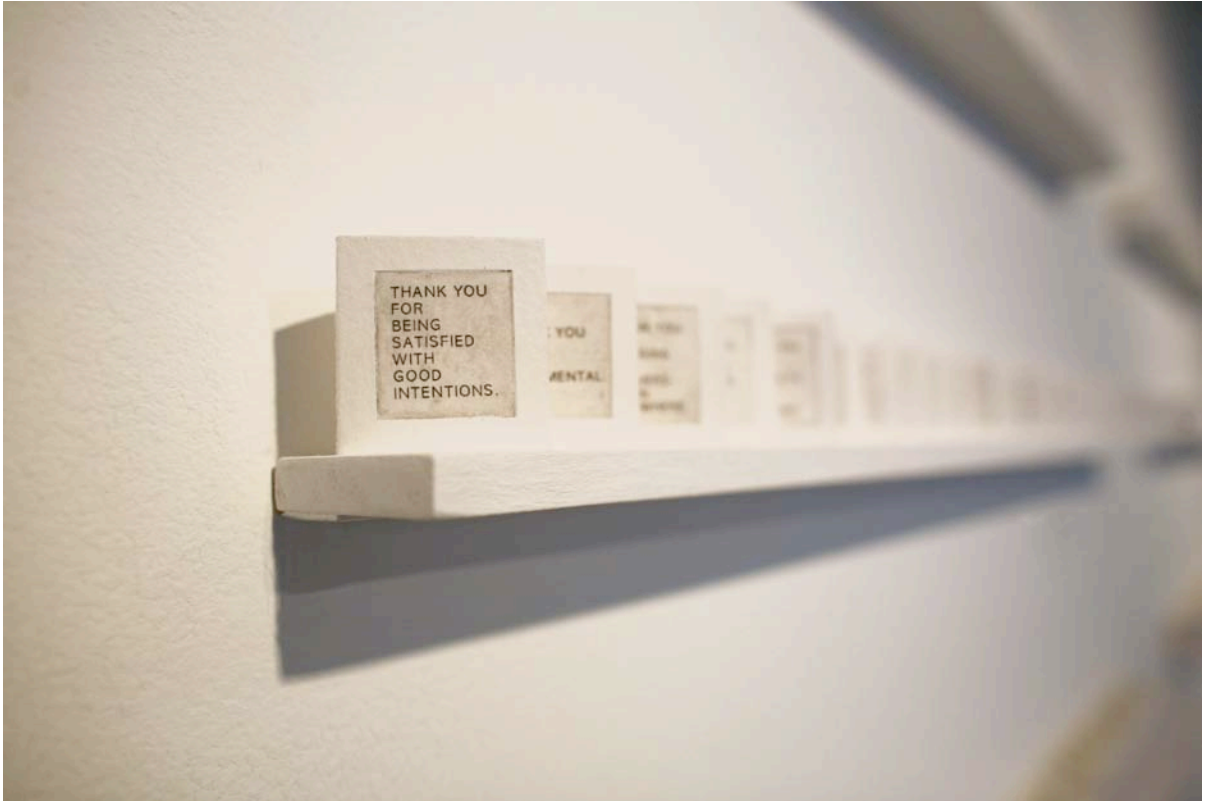


Figure 18.  
*Social Exchange*

*Social Exchange* deals with the difficulty of unspoken social rules and blemished interaction. I am interested in the instability of social space, language and identity, as well as the ways they are mediated through technology and shifting cultural trends. I have applied the tradition of printmaking to create small-scale sculptural photo etchings, emphasizing the engraved preciousness of the tradition of thank you cards in our social consciousness. But while printing aspires toward an identical reproduction akin to current commercial greeting cards, I chose intaglio over digital to ensure an element of human mistake. It is a personal record of my felt appreciation, awkwardness, regret, uncertainty, and humor. It is an

alphabetized, controlled and anonymously displayed list. No narrative before or after, other than the arbitrariness of alphabetically flanked cards. No note inside. It is a tonally shifting and somewhat laughable resonance of the days' accumulated imperfections, and a sociolinguistic look at the effect of cultural expectations and context on the way language is used in mundane social exchanges.

On an academic level, I am investigating ideas of perspective, both personal and visual, as well as the mediation of self through cultural uses of language. It is a goal of my work to isolate, expose, utter, and push to its limit the unspoken habitus of symbolic exchange. I use humor as a way to get at the body (emotion and cognition) of the viewer, while mapping the limits of felt social (in)appropriateness. On a personal level, repetition and structure within my process have become the way I face and deal with anxiety caused by uncertainty and a sense of lost control. Repetition eases my mind, acts as a physical reassurance, and builds strength. Within the process of printmaking I am able to structure my studio time into phases of productivity: cutting, etching, inking, printing, during which I am able to focus and relax my mind. It is valuable to me that this work is both a way to reflect and respond to lived experience, and a way to remain productive and satisfied, like the feeling of crossing an item off a To Do list.

*Social Exchange* is a hybrid print-social sculpture that can be read visually through elements of repetition and scale, and literally through the text. Context is removed from the familiar object of the thank you card, leaving the viewer no information about who the giver is, who the receiver is, or what the situation is. This absence of context allows for ambiguity in interpretation of intention. Questions are raised with no answer: Are these silent utterances sincere? Empty? Habitual? Sarcastic? The final two cards in the series are of a smile :) and straight face :| emoticon. These remind the viewer that the unsaid is just as important as the said in understanding the intention, meaning, and implications of an exchange. I wonder, even with no guarantor of sincerity, is the very act of silently reading "thank you" to one's self over and over enough to cause a cathartic experience?

Part of my goal with this work was to speak the unspoken rules of social space. In order to do so, I wanted the cards to exist in the world. But I was conflicted about this because also wanted them to exist as precious, fine art objects. I was weary of the

predictable and forced nature of common “take-a-way” methods in art. I didn’t want to risk *Social Exchange* becoming an interactive, performative free-for all. At the time that I showed it, I considered this issue unresolved. To my pleasant surprise, the viewer seemed to move intuitively to an apt answer. On several occasions I noticed that when visitors personally responded to a particular card, they found their cell phone a readily available and discrete way to send the card to a friend. This invention of the pix message thank you card addressed one of my initial curiosities: Is it appropriate to send a thank you email? Viewers were able to respect the No Touching sign, and still found a way to share an intimate moment with someone. As I mentioned in the introduction, these unexpected ways the work reveals itself to me through the viewer are what make it successful.



Figure 19.  
*Social Exchange*  
sample text detail  
actual size

#### IV. Conclusion: Interruptions and Transitions

The instance of surprise that interrupts the continuity of perception, so vital to the maintenance of consciousness, should not easily resolve itself into any one emotion- fear or anger, joy or calm. It should not come to rest around a particular object of contemplation. If a feeling of awe is produced, divorced from a particular emotion or object, it will linger in the mind of the viewer; the defamiliarization will continue after the film is over.<sup>10</sup>

You might have noticed in the transition from sections I. and II. to section III. that the tone of this text switches from academic and theoretical to personal and narrative. My art embodies this tension between the paradigms of intellectual processing and sentimental significance. Through my work I am suggesting we look more closely at the situations in culture that create place for a struggle between the (en)forced categories of rationality and emotion, criticality and naiveté, intelligence and romance, logic and magic, and professional and personal.

Certain words, objects and experiences in art and in life provoke such a subtle, yet significant, interruption in our sensation and cognition that they shift the way we view, think, and understand our place in the world. I want to consider the conditions that constitute these moments, and explore the nuance of difference that is always there, but often not perceived. To exchange with difference, to acknowledge the other, to perceive shades of gray, to find gray substantial and beautiful... these are essential to perceiving the self, to becoming a self, to recognizing that the other sometimes *is* a past or future self. Language reaches across the spatial and temporal gaps between the self and the other. It echoes beyond the moment of utterance to hold the self accountable for past selves, which resonate in memory as other. It gestures across difference toward an experience that is felt fuller than the limited categories of 'other' and 'self/same.' Certain words, objects and experiences have the ability to bring

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<sup>10</sup> Gregg Bordowitz and James Sampson Meyer, The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous and Other Writings : 1986-2003 (The MIT Press writing art series. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004) 253.

tears, smiles and laughter to our face, without needing to know whether or not they are true. Without needing to flatten the other. To perceive *is* to engage with the other.<sup>11</sup>

My process is one in which I respond to gray experiences of being in the world that disrupt my perception. This might be because of an ineffable, sensual experience, or because the situation interrupts my cognitive biases and allows me to see my own preconceptions. Sometimes I am aware of the influence that life events have on my work, as in *Social Exchange*, for which I kept a note pad in my back pocket from December to August, and recorded social moments that struck me as potentially ‘gray’ because neither position in the exchange could be deemed more ‘right.’ Other times I am not as aware of the impact life has on my work, as in *Hot Air* and *Ambiguous Signs*, which developed as a result of my own ‘gray’ feelings, thoughts, and doubts. In either case, responding intellectually and sensitively to embodied experiences in life is what I try to do. It keeps the work from becoming empty, hypercritical, self-centered, or abstract theory (which are often the result of spending too much time in a book, in my studio, or indoors alone). As studies within cognitive psychology and neurology have shown, being in the world and having to respond to one’s environment and others, are necessary (in part) for a person to perceive themselves and their context clearly.<sup>12</sup> Responding to events in my life as they relate to larger social issues in mass culture keeps me grounded, and I hope lends the work poignancy. I look forward to getting out of graduate school and back into the world.

So what is next? It’s hard to say for sure. But it will not be the word, or the object. It is not criticality, or naivety. It *is* something immaterial, something unknown. *In* the word, in the object, in the world. In the viewer, in the maker, in between. It has something to do with doubt. It has something to do with play.

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<sup>11</sup> Noë, Action in Perception.

<sup>12</sup> Alva Noë, Action in Perception (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004) 9.



Figure 20.  
*Social Exchange*  
sample text detail  
actual size

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