MAPPING META PORTRAIT

a socially engaged cultural probe

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Abstract This thesis investigates a process-based socially engaged practice from the perspective of a designer and architect by training. It outlines a trajectory of research as explored through two projects, *Diary (1976-2009)* and the *Meta Portrait*. Using a methodology underpinned by empathetic design thinking (Gaver, Sanders, Brown) and animated by an ethnographic and reflexive approach to site-oriented (Green, Hiller) and socially engaged art practice (Chang, Kimbell), this thesis focuses on the *Meta Portrait*, as experienced through a virtual and material-based project. The work aims to reveal unique insights into the cultural, social, and political layers that shape an individual's identity, and ultimately a place, relative to time and space (Massey).

Meta Portrait is a site-oriented method of inquiry into the social fabric of Emily Carr University. The project utilizes a visual and textual ethnographic tool in the form of a cultural probe to engage a small cross section of the university community, including myself as a participant observer. The work explores the possibilities for a type of place-specific socially engaged interdisciplinary practice, one with the capacity to understand individuals, communities, or cities through temporal and impermanent interventions within the public realm.

The possibilities for socially engaged cultural probes within an interdisciplinary social practice may lead to new ways of thinking about how, as artists and designers, we may begin to engage and/or catalyze an individual or collective agency within a place-specific framework.

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Acknowledgements   This thesis owes much gratitude to Heidi May, Rita Wong, Sadira Rodrigues, Jesse Birch, Haig Armen, Alexandra Samuel and all of the friends, colleagues, and family members who participated in the *Meta Portrait*. I would like to thank Karolle Wall, Randy L. Cutler, Deborah Shackleton, and Fiona Bowie for all of their support and guidance throughout the theory, practice, and writing of this thesis. I am grateful to my supervisor Cameron Cartiere for her vision, wisdom, and generous encouragements.

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A special thanks to Nelly Yong, Lois Klassen, Carl Wiebe, and Ruby for constantly reminding me that all you need is love.

1. Introduction

Motivations My experience as the lead designer of an architectural installation called *The Gathering Space* (Figure 1), at the 2008 Venice Biennale for Architecture left me with many questions concerning the role of public art within the urban realm. *The Gathering Space* was a large sculptural winding staircase that sat proudly in a public square overlooking the Grand Canal in Venice. During the course of the exhibition I observed hundreds of visitors as they performed the ritual of climbing, standing, viewing and then sitting on the steps, using the stair as an object, - a place to rest, gather, and socialize.

As a young architect by training, being able to participate in a prestigious international architecture exhibition was a humbling experience, and I was reminded that architecture is, amongst other things, about designing for social engagement.

Figure 1.*The Gathering Space.*
Venice Biennale Architecture
Venice, Italy. 2008.
Photo: Elisa Yon. Used by
Permission of the artist

1. Introduction

Background In 2010, on my return to Canada from a professional architecture practice in the UK, I embarked on a project to explore the possibility of a creative practice outside of architecture. I began co-organizing a social networking event for creative disciplines called PechaKucha Night™, initially conceived in 2003 by Tokyo based architects, Astrid Klein and Mark Dytham. The architects came up with the idea after having noticed the lack of opportunities for young designers and other emerging creative practitioners, to show or share their work. As a response, they designed an event revolving around a unique presentation format based on 20 images for 20 seconds each. A typical evening would have between 12-16 presenters from a variety of different disciplines. There are now over 450 PechaKucha Night™ events globally and similar types of social networking events are emerging locally, such as TEDx Talks, Vancouver Design Nerd Jams, and Vancouver's Draw by Night.[1]

My experience with co-organizing a series of PechaKucha Night™ events introduced me, in a unique way, to site-oriented curatorial and social practice. The collaborative relationship between my co-organizers and I (a general manager of a local arts venue, and an artistic director of a communication design studio) was the first time I had worked with professionals outside of my own discipline. As a group our aim was to stay true to the original concept of the event, whilst still being able to respond to the local character and emerging creative trends within the community.

[1] TEDx Talks is a local extension of the larger TED Talk events (est.1984) to bring together professionals from the Technology, Entertainment, and Design industries. Vancouver Nerd Jams engages a diverse range of professionals for community based design projects. Draw by Night Vancouver is a social networking event revolving around the creative practice of drawing, inviting open collaboration and community engagement.

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Figure 2. *PechaKucha Experiments. Portrait as Place. Photo: Ayrie Cunliffe. Used by permission of the photographer.*

Figure 3. *PechaKucha Experiments. Portrait as landscape. Photo: Amy Fong. Used by permission of photographer.*

During my first week of the Master of Applied Art program at Emily Carr University of Art + Design in 2010, incoming graduate students were invited to give a PechaKucha Night™ presentation as a way to introduce ourselves to our faculty and fellow students. For a portion of my twenty images I decided to invite others to send me an image that they thought best described my character and/or relationship to me – specifically requesting digital images that were not a direct representation of me.

I challenged friends and colleagues to think metaphorically about their choice of image. Digital photographs of landscapes, objects, places, and animals were e-mailed back to me along with short descriptive texts explaining their choice of image (see Figures 2 and 3). The exercise of eliciting metaphoric portraits of myself from friends and colleagues surprisingly triggered a reflexive learning process in which I was able to view myself through a different lens. I had an immediate reaction to chronologically order the returned images, hoping that they would reveal a narrative. The images easily brought back memories of the places, experiences, and events I had

shared with these individuals, along with a clear sense of how much I had changed in character, personal interests, and life ambitions. This experience led me to question the possibilities for a type of reflexive method of inquiry – one that would invite individuals to reflect on past and present relationships for the purposes of potentially revealing unique insights into their own identities.

My curiosity led me to expand the parameters of the investigation with a second experiment. I invited an arts administrator and faculty member from Emily Carr University to solicit one digital image and one paragraph from twenty individuals within their respective social networks. Similar reflexive experiences resulted. However, I was intrigued to note the differences in rationale my collaborators used in choosing their respective twenty participants – one participant invited a broad range individuals that included family, friends, ex-girlfriends, colleagues, and employees. The other participant lived her life very much on-line and in virtual social networking platforms. This participant decided to solicit images both from her on-line and real-life community, in some cases receiving responses from individuals she had never met in person. This stage in the process is significant as it is the first point in which the individual is forced to think about whom to request an image from, thus setting the tone and shaping the framework in which a collective representation can evolve.

These initial experiments provided the basis for the *Meta Portrait*, a site-oriented method of inquiry into the social fabric of Emily Carr University. The project utilizes a visual and textual ethnographic tool in the form of a cultural probe to engage a small cross section of the university community, including

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myself as a participant observer.[2] The work explores the possibilities for a type of place-specific social practice, one with the capacity to reveal unique insights into the lived experiences of individuals, communities, and/or cities through temporal and impermanent interventions within the public realm.

In the early stages of my research I was eager to absorb the current discourses in design and public art practices. I embarked on a literature review that introduced me to the artists and designers who have expanded the fields of public art and critical design practices. They include artists and designers such as, Suzanne Lacy, Mark Dion, Renée Green, Susan Hiller, Dunne & Raby, Bruno Munari and Charles & Ray Eames. At the same time I was influenced by contemporary social practice curators and art theorists such as Mary Jane Jacob, Claire Doherty, Claire Bishop, and leading human centred design practitioners such as Liz Sanders and Tim Brown. As I engaged in a series of mind mapping exercises, key terms and common themes began to emerge for me. Participation, collaboration, and ethnographic fieldwork are all common themes in pre-design research and contemporary socially engaged public art practice. This observation made me question the possibilities for a type of hybrid social practice, (illustrated as a Venn diagram in Figure 4). Can a socially engaged design practice exist? And if so, what would the opportunities for this type of practice be? and how does one think about the audience within this model of practice?

2 In pre-design research methods, designers such as Bill Gaver, Liz Sanders, and other innovation and design consultancies are increasingly utilizing cultural probes in the form of toolkits to elicit information about people, environments, and their daily experiences during the generative stages of a participatory design process. A cultural probe may include visual and textual ethnographic tools such as: diary documentation kits, disposable cameras, and mapping exercises.

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Figure 4.
*A Hybrid Social Practice
shown as a Venn diagram,
incorporating design thinking,
socially engaged practice, and
the concept of the audience*

Armed with an array of questions, new terms, and key concepts surrounding empathetic design and site-oriented ethnographic art practice I returned to an earlier project I started in 2009 which utilized a visual method of ethnographic inquiry. The *Diary* piece evolved from a curiosity about my past and present relationship to inhabited spaces. I challenged myself to draw the floor plans of all the houses and apartments I have ever lived in from memory. Surprisingly, the exercise triggered narratives and anecdotes of the people, relationships, and experiences associated with those places. Rather than let those peripheral memories disappear into the back my mind I decided to record them by writing small notes in the margins of the drawings. Upon revisiting the project in 2010, I produced a complete set of fifteen drawings, with consideration given to composition, graphic architectural drafting standards, and placement of handwritten texts. The images in Figures 5 and 6 show a detail and installation view of the piece.

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Figure 5. *Diary.(1976-2009)*
Detail, 2010. (Glasgow Flat).
Pen on Sketch Paper.
dimensions variable. Photo:
Elisa Ferrari. Used by
permission of the photographer.
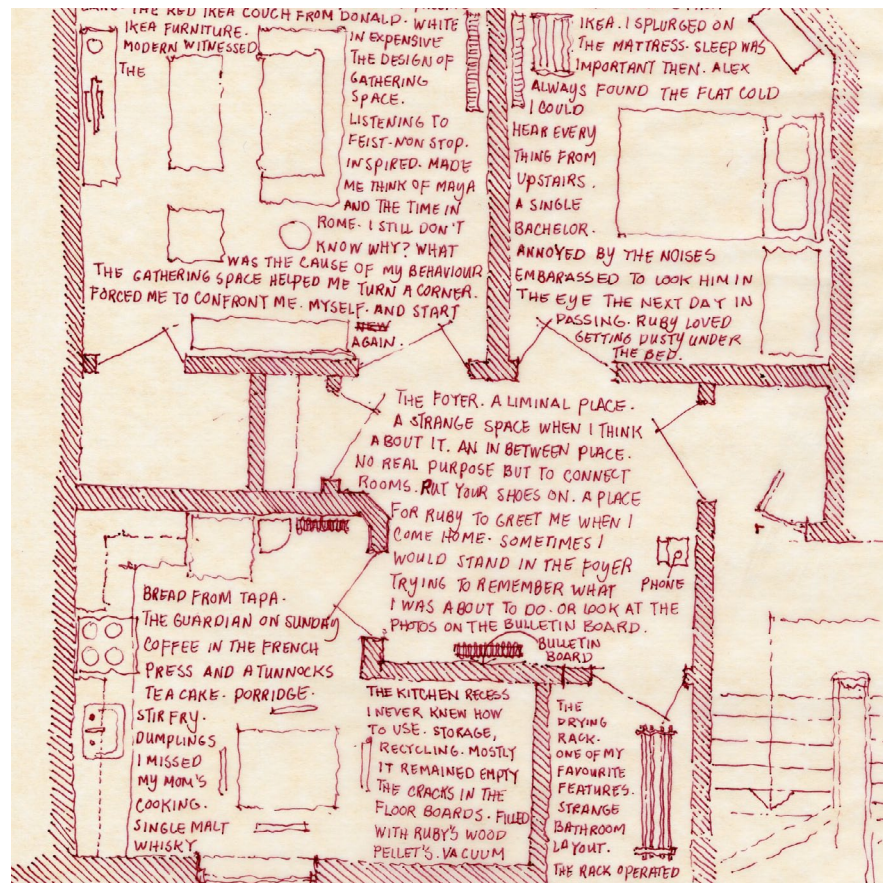
Figure 6. *Diary.(1976-2009).*
Installation, 2010.
Pen on Sketch Paper.
dimensions variable.
Photo: Elisa Ferrari. Used by
permission of the photographer.
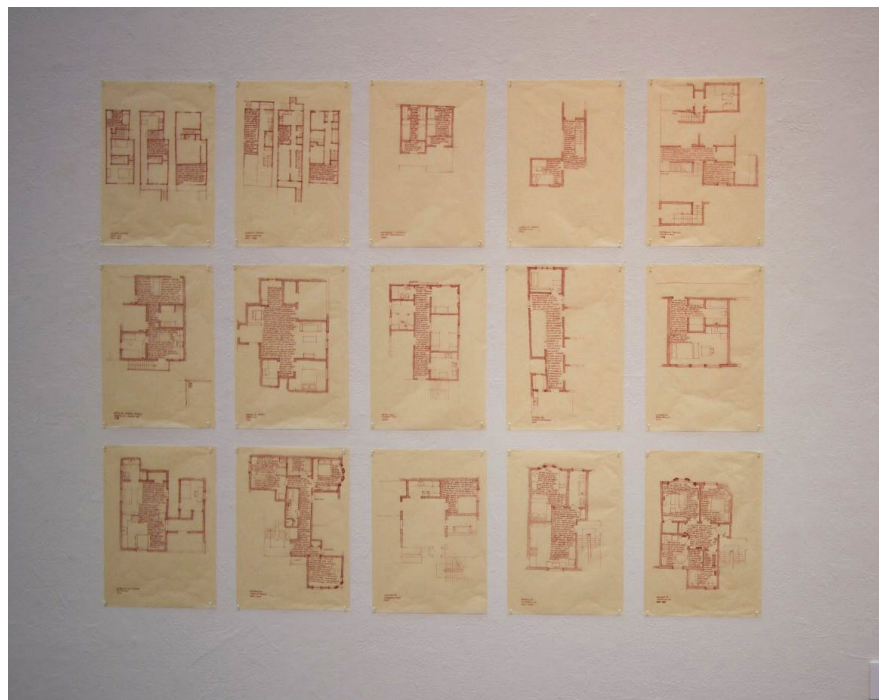
1. Introduction

The reflexive nature of the Diary piece triggered my curiosity in its potential as a tool to engage clients in a participatory design process within the generative stages of designing a space or a building.

During the summer of 2010, I was asked by an acquaintance to provide some advice on the renovation of a new home she and her husband had just acquired. We met informally to discuss her plans, budget, and initial ideas to make limited alterations to the layout. Out of curiousity, and as a way to understand her experience and relationship to domestic spaces I invited her to draw the floor plans of her childhood home, as shown in Figure 7. The drawing exercise allowed me to identify the experiences and features of the house she most associated with during her formative years, and enabled me to engage in a series of preliminary layout sketches. I parted ways with her after our initial meeting, leaving her with a few sketches. A few months later she contacted me via a social networking platform, tagging me in a photograph of her newly renovated open-plan kitchen and living space. She expressed her appreciation for our initial conversations which were instrumental to their approach in envisioning their new home. The image in Figure 8 shows a new exterior window and door screen that connects the new living space to the garden – a feature I had suggested after listening to her speak fondly of the natural landscape surrounding her childhood home.

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Figure 7. *Sketch by Nicole Chaland of childhood home. 2010. Used by permission of the author.*
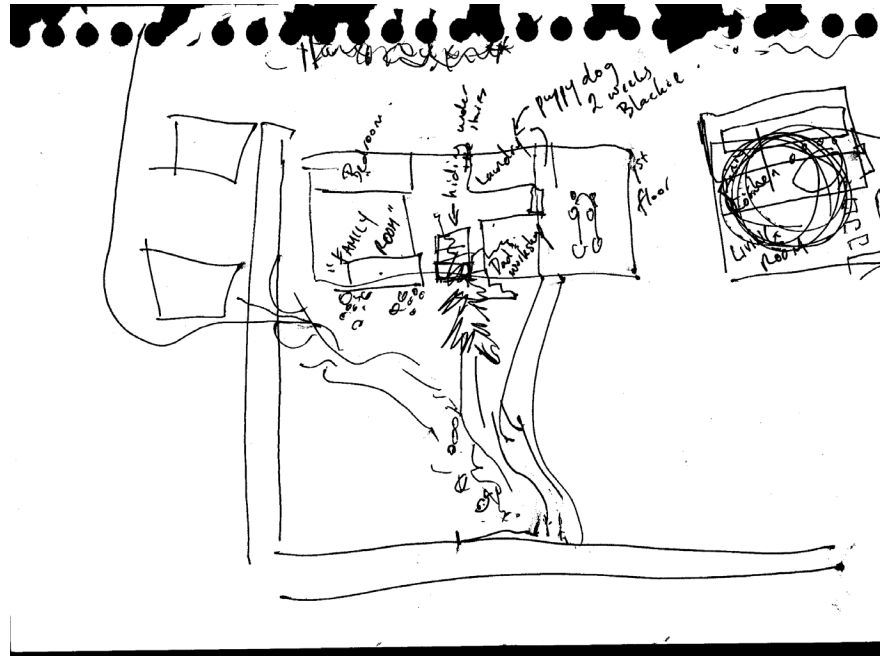
Figure 8. *Coach house interior showing new window and door screen.Victoria, BC. 2011. Photo: Nicole Chaland. Used by permission of the photographer.*

1. Introduction

Diary (1976-2009) and its applied possibilities formed the basis for the *Meta Portrait*. In both the PechaKucha experiments and *Diary* projects, my initial questioning of place and identity utilized a visual method of inquiry, first implemented on myself, then engaged and applied to others. These experiments formed the foundations and methodology for the *Meta Portrait* as a site-oriented and socially engaged method of inquiry.

In chapter two I will describe a hybrid methodology at the intersection of ethnographic artistic practices and participatory design research practices. Key terms and concepts will be introduced such as: design thinking, socially engaged public practice, cultural probes, and reflexive methods of inquiry. In chapter three I will be examining the concepts of site and place within the work of artists and designers: Renée Green, Lucy Kimbell, Candy Chang, and Susan Hiller. This section will conclude with the concept of a living archive, examining the notion of the archive as a site – a space in which an individual and collective perception of place can be explored and experienced. In chapter four the: methods, observations, limitations, trajectories, and implications of the *Meta Portrait* will be examined.

2. Hybrid Methodology

Situating the Praxis "The evolution from design to design thinking is the story of the evolution from the creation of products to the analysis of the relationship between people and products, and from there to the relationship between people and people" (Brown, 2009, p.41).

Tim Brown, CEO of IDEO, a design and innovation consultancy firm based in Palo Alto, California is a leading figure in integrated user-centred design practices. "Design thinking" is a term commonly used by Brown to describe a non-linear approach to problem solving proposing that design thinking can be adopted by other professionals within industry to address contemporary social and environmental issues. The combination of design thinking, user centred design methodologies and methods are increasingly being used to effectively empower the individual or end user in industries ranging from product design to healthcare.

Design thinking, underpins much of the way I approach problem solving in architecture and as a designer in a more general sense. It is non-linear, reflexive, collaborative, and participatory in nature. The term first appeared in the 1980's with the emerging practice of human-centred design. It became prominent in the 1990's by Richard Buchanan, then a Professor of Design at the University of Chicago, when he wrote his influential article, *Wicked Problems in Design Thinking,* proposing that "Design problems are 'indeterminate' and 'wicked' because design has no special subject matter of its own apart from what a designer conceives it to be" (p.98).[3]

3   Buchanan cites the writing of mathematician, and designer Horst Rittel who proposed the term *wicked problem* (1972) to describe the often confusing and contradicting levels of information, values, and consequences designers are presented with when solving design problems. From Rittel's arguments, Buchanan identifies the unique relationship between determinacy and indeterminancy in design thinking.

2. Hybrid Methodology

Useless Machines/Munari Leg Splint/C. & R. Eames Design as Art/Munari What is Design?/C. Eames Make Tools/Sanders IDEO / Brown Wicked Problems/Buchanan Cultural Probes/Gaver Art & Architecture/Rendell Designing Interactions/Moggridge Change by Design/Brown

1933   1942   1966   1972   1985   1991   1996   1999   2001   2007   2009

Timeline Contextualizing Design Thinking
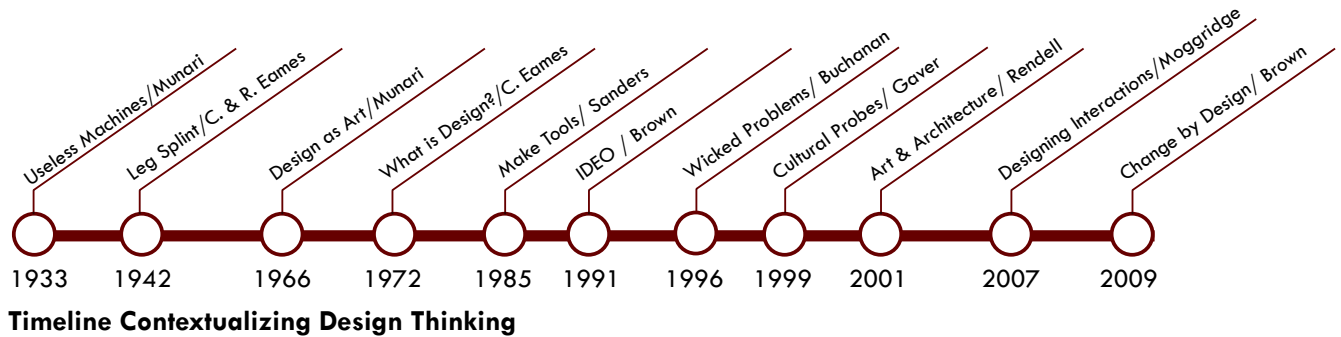
Figure 9.
Timeline contextualizing design thinking.

In order to visualize and contextualize how I am thinking about design thinking and socially engaged practice, I have created a series of subjective timelines in Figures 9, 10, 11 and 13. They identify key artists, designers, and theorists who have framed and influenced the historical and cultural context of my praxis. The timeline in Figure 9 highlights early design thinkers, Bruno Munari and Charles & Ray Eames, designers and artists who were continually pushing the boundaries of design as a vehicle to understand the world through a material practice. Munari, an Italian artist and designer, commonly identified as a member of the Futurist movement and a contemporary of F.T. Marinetti, lived a life of art and design, whose work often invited the viewer to question the role of design in our everyday lives. Today he is fondly remembered for his illustrated children books and his *useless machines,* a series of kinetic sculptures inspired by Wassily Kandinsky and other abstract painters of the early 20th century. A *useless machine* was an object absent of purpose.[4] This body of work gave Munari the freedom to look beyond the functional ethos of design, triggering a period of artistic production that allowed him to fully explore his designer's curiosity about the world, often blurring the boundaries between art and design disciplines in pursuit of an aesthetic innovation.

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4 In Munari's book, *Design as Art,* he describes his kinetic sculptures, produced between 1934-1954, as useless machines for their inability to satisfy market demands, increase capital, or produce goods for mass consumption.

2. Hybrid Methodology
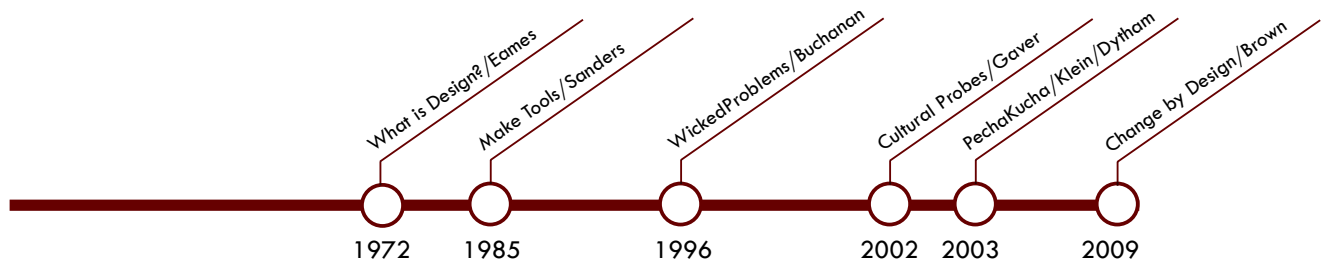
Timeline Situating Meta Portrait

Figure 10. *Timeline Situating Meta Portrait, identfying specific references for Meta Portrait*

The *Timeline Situating Meta Portrait* in Figure 10 contextualizes the *Meta Portrait* with specific references drawn from the designers and research practitioners identified in the *Timeline Contextualizing Design Thinking* in Figure 9. In a 1972 interview, Charles Eames, the celebrated American architect and designer identifies the importance of acknowledging design parameters,

Here is one of the few effective keys to the design problem - the ability of the designer to recognize as many of the constraints as possible - his willingness and enthusiasm for working within these constraints - the constraints of price, of size, of strength, balance, of surface, of time, etc.; each problem has its own peculiar list (2007a, p.155).

Eames highlights the designer's subjective process in identifying design parameters and perhaps alludes to how a design will reflect the author as much as the end-user. Contemporary innovative design research practitioners such as Liz Sanders of Make Tools, Tim Brown of IDEO, and Bill Gaver, an interactive design researcher at Goldsmiths, University of London also recognize the importance of the design team's collaborative agency in designing not only the object, experience, or system, but also the parameters and constraints of the design problem or opportunity. This is one of the key aspects of design thinking – one which embraces a reflexive, participatory, and non-linear approach to problem solving that can be applied across disciplines and professions. As Tim Brown (2009) of IDEO suggests,

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"The next generation of designers will need to be as comfortable in the boardroom as they are in the studio or the shop, and they will need to begin looking at every problem–from adult illiteracy to global warming – as a design problem" (p.38).

Contemporary human-centred design practice requires designers to be empathetic participant observers when working with individuals, groups, and/or communities during the generative stages of a design process. Participatory design, co-creation, co-design are all terms commonly used to describe human-centred research methods. They are meant to engage end-users in a dialogue with designers to reveal insights into the way individuals relate to their environment, objects, and to each other.

Socially engaged public practice, as an expanded field of public art, is an art movement characterized by its unique ability to engage and communicate with a broad and diversified public on issues across social, cultural, and political divides. The movement has been linked with the Situationists and the Fluxus artists from the 1950's, and 1960's. The writings and artistic practice of artists such as Allan Kaprow and Guy Dubord firmly established a precedent; merging life with art, often inviting the viewer to participate in experimental artwork; incorporating elements of performance and installation in a spontaneous way. The 1970's witnessed a more dialogical approach to social practice with the work of Suzanne Lacy, Judy Baca, Judy Chicago, and Lesley Labowitz; utilizing "techniques developed in the feminist movement (consciousness-raising groups, the analysis of self-other relationships) with artistic strategies drawn from Kaprows happenings and performance art" (Kester, 2004, p.125). More recently artist Suzanne Lacy coined the phrase *New Genre Public Art* in 1995 and the term

2. Hybrid Methodology
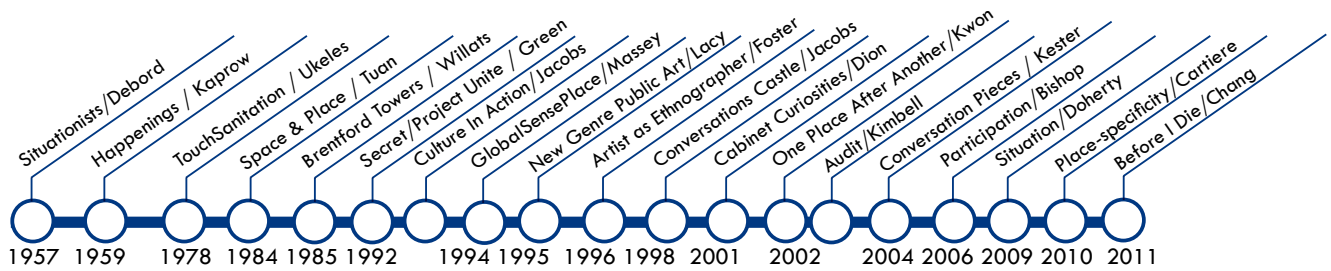
Timeline Contextualizing Socially Engaged Public Practice /
Critical Theory

Situationists/Debord · Happenings / Kaprow · TouchSanitation / Ukeles · Space & Place / Tuan · Brentford Towers / Willats · Secret/Project Unite / Green · Culture In Action/Jacobs · GlobalSensePlace/Massey · New Genre Public Art/Lacy · Artist as Ethnographer/Foster · Conversations Castle/Jacobs · Cabinet Curiosities/Dion · One Place After Another/Kwon · Audit/Kimbell · Conversation Pieces / Kester · Participation/Bishop · Situation/Doherty · Place-specificity/Cartiere · Before I Die/Chang

1957 1959 1978 1984 1985 1992 1994 1995 1996 1998 2001 2002 2004 2006 2009 2010 2011

Figure 11.
*Timeline Contextualizing
Socially Engaged Public
Practice and Critical Theory*

Socially Engaged Public Practice[5] is now more commonly used within the contemporary art discourse. The 1990's also saw the emergence of the 'artist as ethnographer'[6] with the practices of Fred Wilson, Andrea Fraser, Mark Dion, and Renée Green. These artists continue to push the boundaries of site-specificity through their site-oriented and project-based works, often responding to and engaging individuals within an institution, community, or specific locale.

The *Timeline Contextualizing Socially Engaged Public Practice and Critical Theory* in Figure 11 illustrates my interpretation of a streamlined overview of socially engaged art practitioners and critical theorists who are informing and contextualizing the way in which I am thinking about a hybrid social practice.[7] The overview incorporates examples of participatory design methodologies, curatorial practice, critical theory, and an ethnographic approach to socially engaged art practice.

5   The term *social practice* was originally borrowed from sociology by Lydia Mathews and Ted Purvis in 2004. It has since appeared in the writings of Harrell Fletcher, Claire Bishop, Clare Doherty, Miwon Kwon, Grant H. Kester, and Cameron Cartiere.
6   From Hal Foster's 1996 essay, *The Artist as Ethnographer*. A critical analysis of the ethnographic turn in the emerging creative practices of contemporary artists.
7   Guy Debord (Situationists/Paris) and Allan Kaprow (Happenings/New York) established a precedent for contemporary participatory art practice, often inviting the viewer/visitor to be part of the artwork, leading the way for other artists such as Suzanne Lacy, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Renée Green, Mark Dion, Lucy Kimbell, Sophie Calle, and Candy Chang. Contemporary curators, writers, and critical theorists such as Mary Jane Jacobs, Hal Foster, Claire Bishop, Clare Doherty, Miwon Kwon, Grant H. Kester, and Cameron Cartiere have expanded the critical discourse surrounding site-oriented and socially engaged practice over the last twenty years.

2. Hybrid Methodology

Originator
Collaborator
Volunteers/ Performers
Immediate Audience
Media Audience
Audience of myth and memory
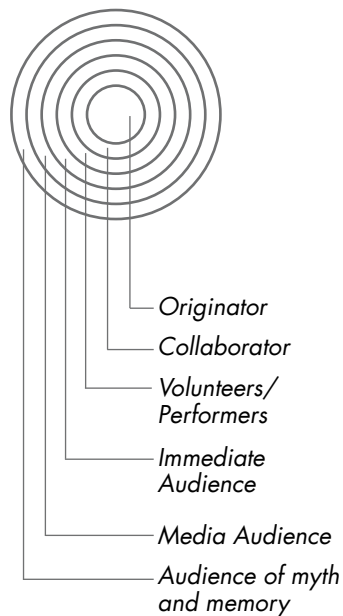
Figure 12. Suzanne Lacy's audience model within a socially engaged practice. From Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public art (1995), p.178.

Working with people raises further questions – specifically what constitutes an audience? The audience whether an end-user, viewer, or participant is clearly at the intersection between participatory design practices and socially engaged public art practices. However the methodology and ways in which data is collected, organized, reinterpreted and presented back to an audience is potentially what differentiates a socially engaged practice from a design practice. Suzanne Lacy's audience model in Figure 12 identifies the layers and the multiple roles individuals can play within a socially engaged art practice. The originator of the work lies at the centre of a series of concentric circles, moving outwards Lacy identifies the roles typically present: collaborators, volunteers, performers, the immediate audience, and the audience of myth and memory. These roles are not static, but constantly in flux, with the separating boundaries acting more like permeable skins. Conversely, within a participatory design framework, the audience can be thought of as a specific group of end-users usually defined by age, gender, income bracket, and other criteria for the purposes of defining the needs of a specified user. In this scenario, the participatory end-user ultimately represents a larger consumer audience for which the product, experience, and/or service has been designed to satisfy. In merging an empathetic design and socially engaged art practice together, one would naturally question the kind of audience, visitor, viewer, or participant a socially engaged design practice would attract or appeal to?

Typically, during the generative stages of a human-centred design process, once the raw data is collected from participants and/or user groups, the information is analyzed and used by the design team in scenario building and prototyping exercises towards the final design. Rarely is this data seen

2. Hybrid Methodology
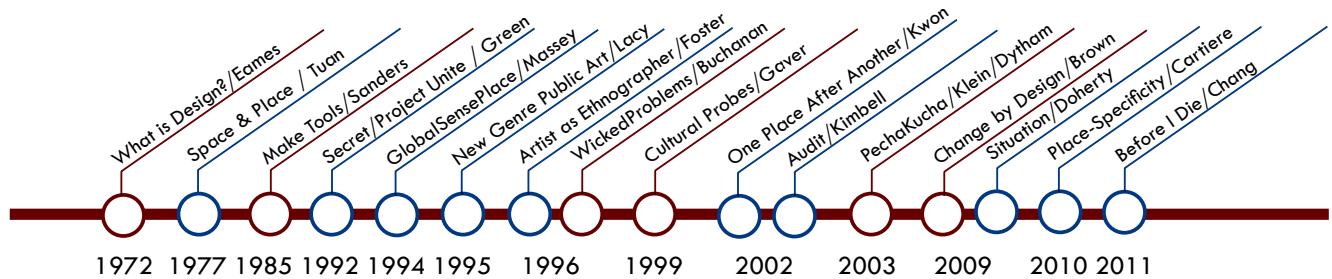
Timeline Situating Meta Portrait

*Figure 13.
Timeline contextualizing
Meta Portrait, combining key
participatory design references
from Figure10 with socially
engaged references from
Figure11*

or presented to an outside audience, as it is often used merely as a tool towards developing the main design objective. This moment in the design process is one that could be explored further within a hybrid social design practice, one that could take into consideration and respond to the broader social, political, and cultural contexts reflected in the collected data.[8]

The contextual *Timeline Situating Meta Portrait* in Figure 13 attempts to merge specific references from the previous contextual timelines in Figures 10 and 11 as a way to visually represent a cultural and historical framing of the project. The *Meta Portrait* is foundationally situated within the canon of participatory design thinking, influenced by the experimental design and research practices of Charles & Ray Eames, Liz Sanders, Bill Gaver, and IDEO. In aligning the *Meta Portrait* with critical theorists such as Yi-Fu Tuan, Doreen Massey, Miwon Kwon, Grant H. Kester, Claire Doherty, and Cameron Cartiere, the method of inquiry is provided a new lens through which to explore the concepts of place and identity in relationship to site-oriented social practices, and expanded fields of public art. In the following section I will examine the *Presence Project*, which attempts to expand the possibilities of pre-design research methodologies as applied to specific community groups.

8   For contemporary artists and designers working within a socially engaged model, navigating the ethics of representation is a complex area of discourse that needs to be taken into consideration when working with human participants. As I pursue the on-line and physical manifestation of the Meta Portrait, questions of the extent to which personal information, social networks and identities are to be revealed will need to be considered. As an academic research project, institutional research ethics procedures have been followed (Refer to Appendix I).

2. Hybrid Methodology

Meta Portrait as In 1999, interactive design researchers Bill Gaver, Tony Dunne, and Elena

Cultural Probe Pacenti (2004) proposed cultural probes as a way to "elicit inspirational responses from people—not comprehensive information about them, but fragmentary clues about their lives and thoughts" (p.53). The images in Figure 15 are of a cultural probe in the form of a toolkit that Gaver and his research team designed for the *Presence Project* in 1999. The purpose of the toolkit was to elicit responses from the elderly living in three distinct communities in the following cities: Oslo (Norway), Amsterdam (Netherlands), and Pisa (Italy).
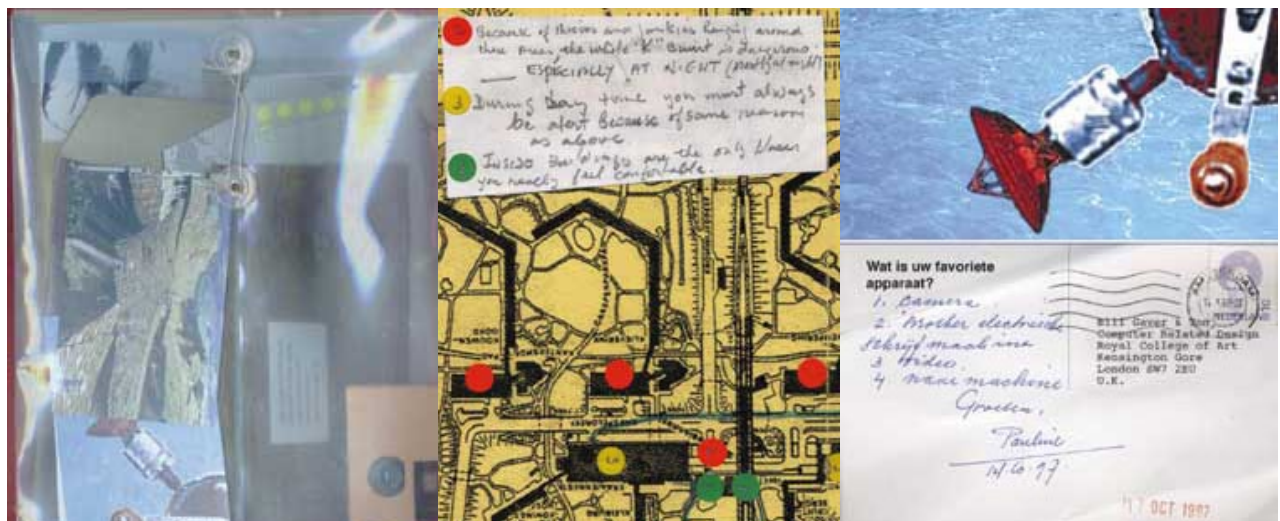
Figure 14. *Presence Project Toolkits, mapping exercise, and postcards. Designers and researchers, Bill Gaver, Tony Dunne, and Elena Pacenti,1999.*

What is specifically of interest is the way the toolkits were designed. Taking inspiration from the techniques of collage, pyscho-geographical maps, and the subversive textual and photographic advertising languages commonly used by the Situationist artists from the 1950's, the toolkit consisted of: a disposable camera, a photo album and media diary, a series of postcard questionaires, and a mapping exercise – all designed to access and reveal insights into the elder's everyday routines and experiences of place within their respective communities. Once the data was returned, Gaver's research

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team utilized the information to stimulate and evoke their imaginations as artists and designers. "We weren't trying to reach an objective view of the elders' needs through the probes, but instead a more impressionistic account of their beliefs and desires, their aesthetic preferences and cultural concerns" (Gaver, Dunne & Pacenti, 1999). Gaver's research team went on to propose three different designs for interventions within the specified communities in response to the information and insights as a result of the cultural probe.[9] This approach to cultural probes – as a way to access and reveal a broad "impressionistic account" of a community is a key aspect of the *Presence Project*'s methodology that is shared with the *Meta Portrait.* Through the use of a visual and textual method of inquiry, coupled with a unique framework for engaging two levels of participants, the generative stage of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data is performed collaboratively and in dialogue with the primary group of participants. The dialogical engagement with my primary participants allowed me to access a secondary level of information, evoking individual reflexive experiences, common/diverging social, cultural, and political characteristics that continued to shape the method of questioning for future sessions with the primary participants.

Critical theorist Grant H. Kester identifies the challenges community-based artists face when working within a socially engaged framework and highlights the "signifying authority" artists can hold when working collaboratively with individuals. In reflection, my position as a graduate student placed me in a less authoritative role as I engaged faculty members and administrators. This situation allowed for a more reciprocal level of exchange and dialogue.

9   The final design proposals focused on digital networked interventions to assist and facilitate the elderly in communication and interaction with other inhabitants within their respective communities.

3. Situating Site and Mapping Place

Site and Place This section will identify contemporary artists with unique approaches to exploring the relationship between place, and identity within site-oriented artistic practice. Three projects will be examined: *Secret* by Renée Green, *Audit* by Lucy Kimbell, and *Before I Die* by Candy Chang.

It is not within the scope of this thesis to examine the extensive literature surrounding concepts of site and place as it has been explored, defined, contested, and used interchangeably within contemporary art and architectural discourses over the last forty years, however I feel it is important to define these terms in order to situate the *Meta Portrait* within a historical and cultural context.

Figure 15. Renée Green. Scenes from a Group Show: *Project Unité, Firminy. 1993.* Photo: Renée Green. Used by permission of the artist.

"What does it mean to do a site-specific work, and how is it possible to do or make something which has any effect on an environment unfamiliar to one, or which has a significant effect upon oneself. Ultimately I think the latter half of the above question is the recurring beginning for me, because whatever is done or made reflects oneself, even when another environment is meant to be a focus. How literally one brings this subjective perspective to the forefront of course varies" (Green, 1992, p.78).

3. Situating Site and Mapping Place

Friday Morning, Day 5: Firminy
5:40am. As I was walking down the hall with the keys I need to open the various doors to get to the toilet, I had a flashback to when I was a security guard in college. I worked the night shift, midnight till 8am. On the hour I'd have to make my rounds through various campus buildings to check that doors had been locked. For a moment I couldn't remember whether I'd had to wear an item of clothing with the word security written in bold letters across my back, similar to the vest I've been wearing all week which says immigration. At first no one said

Figure 16. Renée Green. Scenes from a Group Show: *Project Unit*é, *Firminy. 1993.* Used by permission of the artist.

African-American artist, Renée Green engages in a type of ethnographic fieldwork practice. Her work is often described as site oriented and project based, constantly challenging the boundaries of site-specificity to incorporate more expansive understandings of cultural and social conditions. She is able to work in a multitude of mediums: sculpture, installation, architecture, photography, and video just to name a few.

*Project Unit*é, *Firminy, was* a place-based exhibition[10] that took place at Unité d'Habitation, one of the 20th century's most influential examples of modernist architecture, designed by architect Le Corbusier. For one week Green inhabited the cell-like apartment she was assigned. During her stay she established her own place within a place, erecting a pitched tent within the apartment from which she would read books about Le Corbusier, reflect

10 Claire Doherty in her book *Situation* identifies place-based event exhibitions as an indication of the contemporary curatorial trend to address the discourse of place-making.

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on ideas of space, sketch, photograph, film and write journal entries of her everyday experiences. The resulting daily production was then displayed within the apartment for viewing by visitors when the artist was not there as shown in Figures 15 & 16.

In *Secret (1992),* Green was influenced by Michel de Certeau's definition of space and place. "Place implies a fixed location, 'the elements taken into consideration and beside one another', each situated in its own 'proper and distinct location', whereas space is defined as a 'practiced place'."(Green, 2009a, p.78). For Green, the intersection or meeting of the artist and the place became the space for cultural production. Through this lens, she was able to inhabit the place with a clear inquiry in mind. "A preoccupation of mine, in this and some previous work, has been: how does one designate a private space for reflection in a public space?" (Green, 2009a, p.78).

Green's artistic methods of production and intention to explore one's unique sense of place within an unfamiliar locale is what is of interest to me in relationship to the *Meta Portrait.* Upon establishing a "private space for reflection" Green creates a documentative framework from which to explore a subjective interpretation of a place. Similarly, the *Meta Portrait* can be understood as a type of socially engaged framework – a "space" to explore one's unique interpretation of place.

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In her book, *Re/Placing Public Art: The Role of Place-specificity in New Genre Public Art*, Cameron Cartiere suggests:

A public artist working within a place-specific model can, at best, only put forth their own version of that place; a version that inherently is a unique interpretation of the place given the individualised reference to place that, according to Bachelard, each of us carry with us (2010, p.40).

The intention of the *Meta Portrait* is not to reflect an objective sense of place, but rather a subjective one that is derived collectively. As Green's *Secret and Diary (1976-2009)* illustrates, defining place is highly subjective to our individual experiences and memories.

Many contemporary artists continue to push the boundaries of interdisciplinary social practice. Lucy Kimbell is a British artist whose background in management consultancy informs her work – often incorporating elements of art, design, social sciences, and unique methods of data gathering.

Figure 17. *Lucy Kimbell. Audit. 2002, p. 72. Example of a completed survey. Reproduction used by permission of the artist.*

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Figure 18. *Lucy Kimbell. Audit.*
2002, p. 73. Excerpt from book
used by permission of artist.
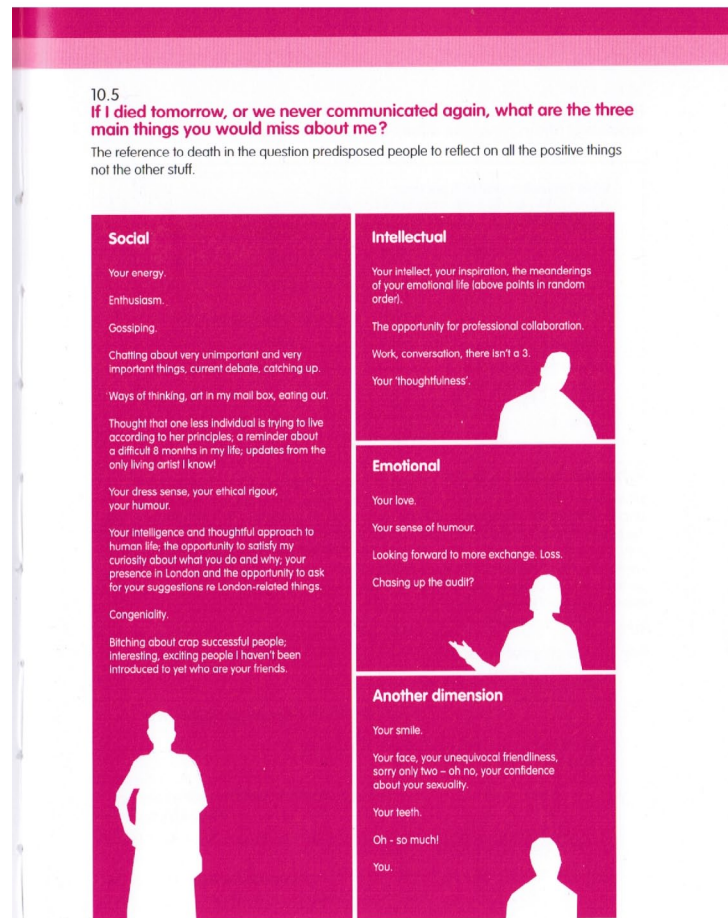
In *Audit (2002)* Kimbell invited 70 friends, colleagues, and family members to assess and rate various aspects of her personal and public life across nine categories: relationships, context, financial value, cultural value, social value, environmental value, value to others, value of the specific audit, and the last section in the form of a question - What am I worth? The data was collected using survey questionnaires Kimbell had designed, as shown in Figure 17, and reinterpreted through a series of information graphics as shown in Figure 18. The graphics revealed unique insights into the way we collectively and individually define personal value. The final work was presented in book form. Additionally, one can download electronic copies

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of the questionaires from the artist's website to potentially try on their own.[11]

Audit is an example of a project which is difficult to contextualize, even Kimbell recognizes this by the end of the process of analyzing the data. In an interview with an auditor she comes to the conclusion that perhaps the project was not an audit but a portrait of herself, collectively explored by her social network consisting largely of two main groups of people, her business colleagues and her professional artistic community. From my reading, this work sits at the intersection between ethnographic artistic practice and human-centred design. On the back of the artist's book, one can find the following category tags, "Accountancy / Art / Business / Cultural Studies / Economics / Humour / Management / Philosophy / Psychology / Sociology / and nearly any other discipline you care to think of". In the introduction to the book Kimbell identifies some of the questions readers may have about the project. There are a few which resonate with the *Meta Portrait*, one specifically alludes to the applied possibilities for the data gathered,

"Some readers will want to know if the methods explored in the book have any relevance as research tools in the field of management. They will try to identify elements of the book that might be useful to other people, if shorn of their more creative aspects" (p.5).

As a designer and artist, the data generated inspired me to think about how this ethnographic method of artistic inquiry may continue to inform other areas of knowledge and artistic production. What does the generated information reveal about people, communities, cities? What is less clear in Kimbell's documentation is how the self-reflexive process of her audit effected her – as an artist, woman, friend, daughter, colleague, etc.

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11 The *Audit* questionaires can be downloaded from the artist's website: lucykimbell.com

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Figure 19. *Candy Chang. Before I Die. 2011. Installation participation.*

"Before I die I want to…sing for millions, see my daughter graduate, eat a salad with an alien, see the leaves change many times, be someone's cavalry, straddle the International Date Line…" (Candy Chang, 2011, para. 2).

Candy Chang is a public artist, designer, and urban planner. Her practice often engages individuals living in communities and cities in a dialogue about public spaces and how those spaces can be better designed to support and nurture the well being of individuals living within communities. In her installation, *Before I Die* she was able to engage a community in New Orleans – post hurricane Katrina, in a dialogue about the regeneration of place through a participatory art installation. The project involved cladding the exterior walls of a condemned dwelling with a series of stencilled chalkboards (Figure 19 & 20). The stencilled text was a fill in the blank question – "Before I die I want to _____". Through this engagement Chang was able to engage a community into a dialogue about the future aspirations of the residents within a community. She also designed a Do-It-Yourself toolkit (Figure 21) which includes materials and instructions for individuals to implement in their own communities. The toolkit can be requested from her website.

Figure 20. Candy Chang. Before I Die. 2011. Installation view.

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Figure 21. *Candy Chang.
Before I Die. 2011.
Do-It-Yourself toolkit.*

This additional facet of the project perhaps contextualizes the installation more as a tool for engagement and challenges the notion of site-specificity. *Before I Die* interventions have recently been implemented in other cities such as Brooklyn (NY), Chicago, San Diego, Amsterdam, and Lisbon. The recent intervention in Chicago will witness the wall installation situated within six different neighbourhoods across the city. Chang's toolkit and instructions for implementation is versatile enough to be applied to communities globally – resonating with social events such as PechaKucha Night, which operates as a non-profit organization.[12] However, the engagement with the place allows it to maintain an element of locality within the context in which it is situated, generating content specific to that place. In a similar fashion the Meta Portrait, understood as a framework for engagement may have the potential versatility to be applied to other types of communities: institutions, government bodies, corporate entities, etc.

The *Meta Portrait* as a site-oriented socially engaged cultural probe aligns closely to Doreen Massey's understanding of place as a point of departure:

Instead then, of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a larger proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent. And this in turn allows a sense of place which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local (1994, p.154).

Massey's notion of place as "articulated moments in networks of social relations" implies a sense of temporal fixity from a global position. Although there are only a core group of five primary participants, each individual

12 PechaKucha Night™ operates as a non-profit organization. Partnering cities only need to apply for a handshake agreement to host PechaKucha Nights in their own cities

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represents connections to an additional twenty secondary participants – potentially separated geographically by city, country, or continent. It should also be noted that Massey's notion of place is subjective and unique to the individual who is defining that "articulated moment". Humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan identifies a universal understanding of place as home "unique to human beings among primates is the sense of the home as a place where the sick and the injured can recover under solicitous care" (1977, p.137). If a universal understanding of the home as place is one that all human beings inherently share, then Massey's interpretation of place as "articulated moments in networks of social relations" can also be thought of as temporal nodes consisting of a community of places – or homes, as embodied in each individual. Within this context the *Meta Portrait,* as a socially engaged cultural probe has the potential to reveal the unique characteristics and social relations which constitute an individual's understanding of place.

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Mapping a Living Archive American artist Susan Hiller engages in an artistic practice that combines her background in anthropology and ability to employ new media and material installation to create unique spaces for questioning the "forces at work in making and re-making of subjectivity and its potential for transformation" (Lingwood, 2004, p.9). Working with collected objects is a common thread that circulates throughout Hiller's installations. In *At the Freud Museum* (1994) Hiller works with the museum's existing collection, combining them with her own random collection of objects to produce a series of assemblages framed within archeological collecting boxes. The artist's method begins with narratives that connect Hiller to the objects. The boxes were displayed in an existing vitrine located within Freud's house - turned museum. Hiller describes the parameters of the site as a multi-layered spatial heirarchy "A box within a vitrine within a room within this institutional space within this house - one is attempting to carve out a space in which something else can happen, to make some kind of intervention" (Hiller, 1994, p. 45). The archive as a contested space to allow an artist to engage in a discursive dialogue with a collection of objects, documents, or photographs is a method that has been used by other artists such as Mark Dion, *Cabinet of Curiosities*, Weismann Art Museum, 2001, and Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum*, 1992.[13]

The parameters of the site for the *Meta Portrait* can also be understood as a type of multi-layered spatial heirarchy, except in this case the spatial heirarchies can be thought of as social heirarchies within the institutional framework, beginning with me as a graduate student within a curated

13 It is not within the scope of this thesis to examine the archive in relationship to the contemporary art discourse surrounding institutional critique beyond the artist's ethnographic approach to methods of production.

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group consisting of an administrator, assistant professor, and sessional instructors. The generated archive of digital image and text responses from each individual's social network collectively reflects a place-specificity that captures a subjective and complex series of interconnected social relations within a local and global context – a type of "time-space compression" (Massey, 1994). Massey uses the term "power geometry" to describe the movements of individuals and social groups in relation to the different scales and levels of systems in play within a place. She uses an analogy that is similar to a 1968 documentary film called *The Powers of Ten* by Charles & Ray Eames in which the viewer is presented with a constantly increasing frame of view beginning with two people lying down on a blanket and ending with a view of the earth represented as a mere dot within the frame.

In thinking about the notion of Massey's "power geometry" in relationship to the individual social networks of my primary collaborators, one might grasp an understanding of the positions we occupy in relationship to the intricate movements of social relations that exist between the varying levels and scales of connectivity within the institution.

4. Mapping Meta Portrait

Figure 22.
*Meta Portrait. Mapping of
audience model. Identifying
roles and number of participants
in relationship to each other*

*Invited Participant who did
not contribute an image/text*

Secondary Participants

Primary Participants
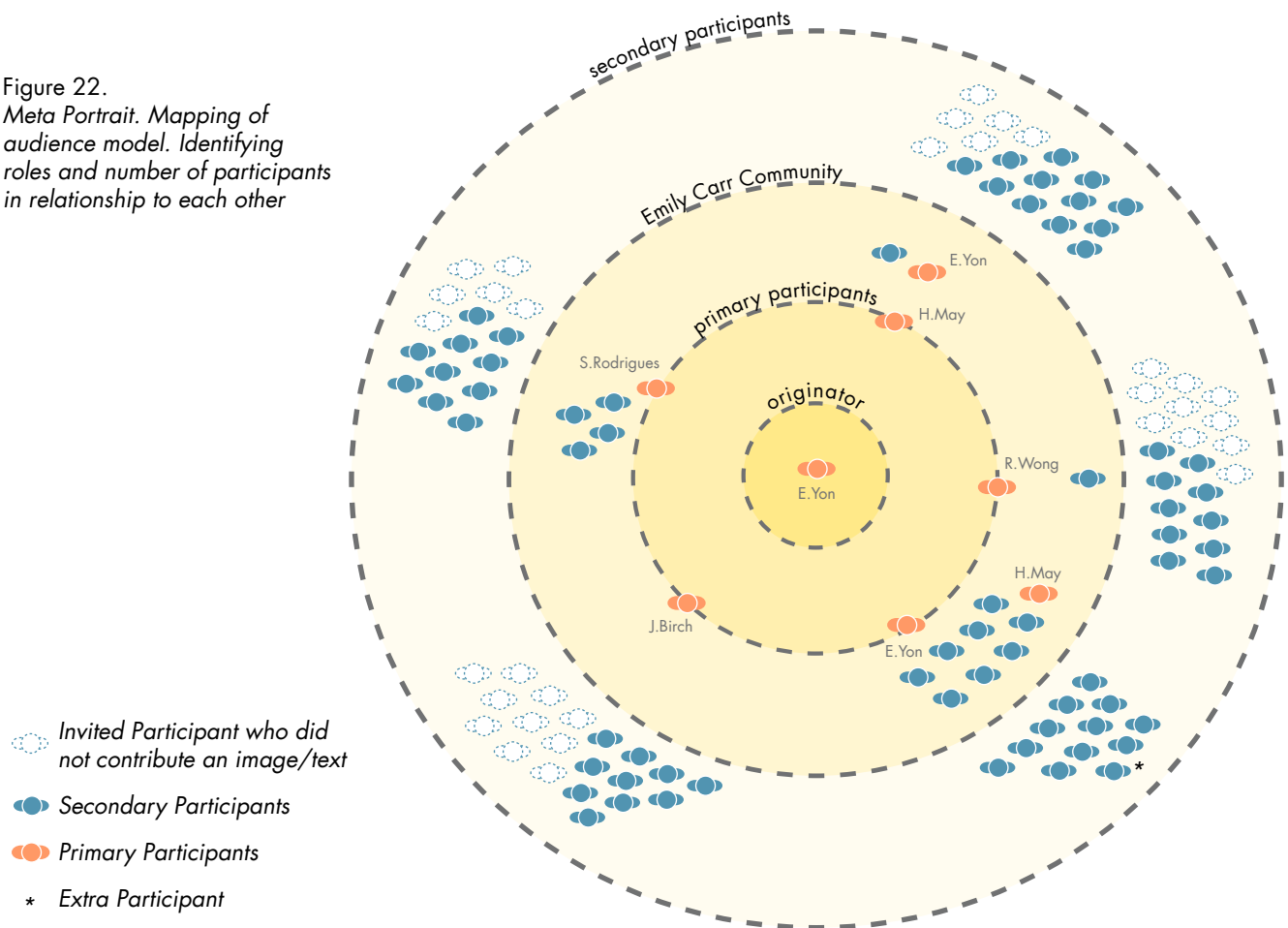
Extra Participant

Cultural Probe in Action As a site-oriented socially engaged cultural probe, the four primary

participants[14] were chosen from the community of staff and faculty at Emily

Carr University. The rationale for choosing a small cross-section of individuals

outside of my own research, practice, and position within the institution was

to potentially reveal a variety of social network types, subjective filters, and

14 Jesse Birch is a sessional instructor in Critical and Cultural Studies. He is a
curator and artist who has exhibited both nationally and internationally.

Heidi May is an interdisciplinary artist, educator, and sessional instructor who has
taught at Emily Carr University since 2002.

Sadira Rodrigues is the Dean of Continuing Studies at Emily Carr University. Over
the last decade she has worked in a variety of roles as a curator, writer, educator,
facilitator, public programmer, and arts administrator.

Rita Wong is an Associate Professor in Critical and Cultural Studies. Her praxis
investigates the relationships between contemporary poetics, social justice, ecology,
and decolonization.

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cultural perspectives within an established community – or site. The graphic visualization in Figure 22 identifies the roles of the primary and secondary participants in relationship to me as the originator of the work. It illustrates the multiple roles I occupied across each stage of the socially engaged method of inquiry as: originator of the work, primary participant, and secondary participant. Heidi May was the only other primary participant who occupied both a primary and secondary participant role.

The primary participants were asked to solicit twenty (20) images and accompanying text rationales from individuals within their social network. The secondary participants were then invited to choose one digital image they believed best represented the primary participants character, and/or relationship to them. The image is accompanied by a paragraph rationale for their choice of image. I also requested that the image not be a true photographic representation of that person. It is interesting to note that in the earlier experiments using this method, there exists an inherent rationale and/or question primary participants asked of themselves before choosing their secondary participants. In this way, the sets of images and texts begin to provide a framework for an individual and collective representation to evolve.

Once the images and texts were returned, the five (5) primary participants are represented by twenty (20) images and twenty (20) accompanying text rationales. In this iteration, seventy (70) responses were returned out of a possible one hundred (100). As a way to access, interpret and work with the responses for the collaborative work sessions with my primary participants I created image and text cards using standard archival tags

4. Mapping Meta Portrait
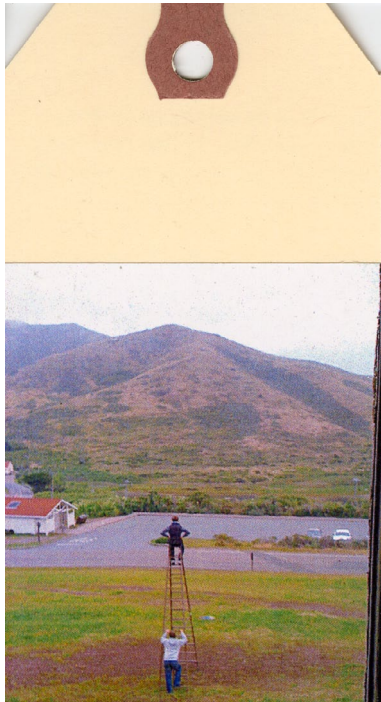
Figure 23.
*Example of image response
(above). Example of text
response transfered onto the
back of each image card
(below)*
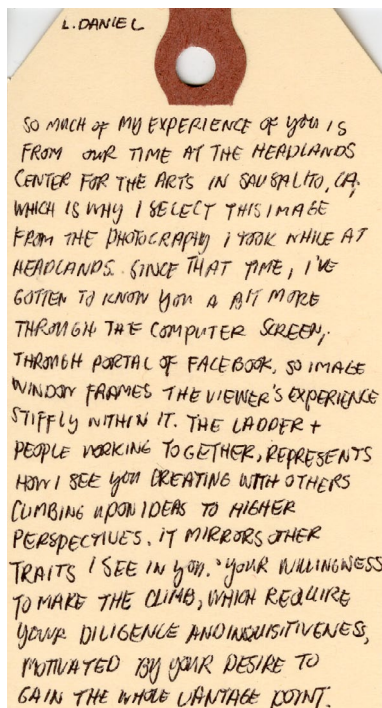
and colour laser printed copies of the returned images. On the back of each card I transferred the text responses by hand as shown in Figure 23. The process of handwriting the text onto the cards allowed me time to reflect and become more familiar with the returned material. The beginning of the work sessions with my primary participants consistently started with a question to understand their initial rationale for choosing the twenty individuals from their respective social networks. The rationales varied – from choosing only women, to choosing a mixture of friends/colleagues/mentors/family, to choosing individuals whom they know only through on-line social media platforms. As I had managed to collect twenty responses, and my participants only a portion, I decided to level the playing field and asked my participants to remove the difference so that we both had the same number of cards. Without disclosing the next step of the process, the participants chose the cards to be removed purely based on their preference of the visual image.

From here, we exchanged our individual sets of cards, taking turns reading the text responses to each other. This process of one person reading whilst the other person listened allowed us to shift our perspectives and challenged us to view ourselves through the lenses of our secondary participants. After reading each text response, the person listening would often elaborate and our conversations would often engage our experiences and memories of people, places, art, objects, food, and other personal/professional interests.

The final stage of our work sessions ended with a more experimental approach towards working with the cards. Using a webcam mounted over my drawing table I was able to record the different configurations and ways in which we organized and worked with the cards, often arranging them according

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to common themes, narratives, and/or chronologically. The exercise utilized Post-it™ notes as a way of documenting key words or groupings of cards, as shown in Figure 24. During this process we were able to see where our collective representations crossed paths and where they diverged.

Portrait Observations In my first collaborative work session with Rita Wong it was apparent that her cultural background, environmental activism, and current praxis investigating the politics and poetics of water represented the ways in which her colleagues, friends, and family perceived her. Life and work for Rita seemed closely related. The returned image and text responses for Rita also revealed a unique social network composed of poets, writers, academics, close friends, and family who were all creatively inclined. Many of the responses were in the form of hand drawn illustrations, personal photographs, poems, and anecdotes. In our initial exercise working with the cards, a few distinct groupings began to emerge underneath three themes: stillness, movement, and liminal space.

Figure 24.
Image still from digital webcam video capture, working with Rita and groupings of image/text cards, identifying themes and keywords

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In reflection, my collaborative working session with Rita revealed a layer of representation and cultural identity that we both shared but was not as evident in my *portrait* as much as it was in hers. Triggered by the text and image response from her father as shown in Figure 25, Rita recalled her experience of visiting her family's village in southern China, a trip she took to reconnect with her past through the place of her ancestors. Even though the climate was uncomfortably hot and humid, she described a natural physical comfort just being there. This attempt to reconnect with her cultural identity through an ancestral place, along with the emergent themes of stillness, movement, and liminal space triggered a questioning of my own cultural identity and inspired a new approach to working with a photographic slide library which I had inherited from a man who had passed away last year.

Figure 25.
a. Mr. Wong (Rita's father) text response, b. Mr. Wong's drawing of family village in China, c. Poem by Fred Wah, mentor & friend

a.

R. WONG'S DAD - MR. WONG. (PETER)

A MAP OF THE VILLAGE HE GREW UP IN, IN CHINA.

AROUND 1948 THE RAINING SEASON, ONE DAY I WALKED BY THE POND OF OUR VILLAGE, IT WAS FULL OF WATER AND I WENT HOME, I ASKED GRANDMA "ANY FISH IN THE POND?" GRANDMA DIDN'T SAY YES OR NO, INSTEAD SHE TOLD ME HOW TO MAKE THE FISH ROD. GRANDMA GAVE ME ONE OF HER STRONGEST THREAD AND I FOUND A 8-10 FEET BAMBOO STICK, A SMALL NAIL AND MADE A FISH ROD, THAT SUMMER I CAUGHT FEW CATFISH FROM OUR VILLAGE'S POND, IT WAS REALLY FUN.

b.

c.

F. WAH.

WHEN SHE WILL BE WATER

WAS SuH
IN THE DISTANCE
DISTANCE
I hh-zuh ihh-zuh
WATER
DID you HEAR HER
WA TER
WA TER
OTTER
d [oh^h]

A SLIGHTLY REVISE POEM FROM BREATHIN' MY NAME WITH A SIGH (1981) WHICH WAS ECHOED RECENTLY WHEN ONE OF RITA'S NOTES ABOUT WATER WASHES DIGITALLY INTO THE MOMENT.

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Figure 26.
Where She Dwells, A Portrait of Heidi May. An image and text response for Heidi May from on-line friend, Rachel Baumann.

Where She Dwells, A Portrait of Heidi May
The attached image is my portrait of Heidi May. It is designed to engage in a conversation about meta-portraiture, to present and interrogate the impossibility of portraying the singular, unmirrored, real-world Heidi May. Formally speaking, Heidi May and I have never met face-to-face: there has been no handshaking, name-exchanging, nor even shy smiling from a distance let alone intimate aural conversations. We did, however, coexist in the same venue, Dockside Studios on the north end of Main Street in Vancouver (*site*), for the Jun 2011 presentation of the Not Sent Letters Project (*space*). Within this curated environment, I attentively witnessed Heidi May perform one incarnation of her PostSelf project, experiencing a high-speed, auditory animation of the ways in which selves are deconstructed, copied and duplicated, centered only to be displaced, and infinitely disseminated through the techno-affective text-and-image canals of social media epistemologies. Struck by Heidi May (the original subject) and her PostSelf work, I socially connected with her *(FB duplication of subject)* and since then our relationship has persisted within the (non)reality of social networking technologies. Because Heidi May and I share an interest in the critique of 'pomo subjectivity after-social networking,' I chose to use Googlemaps to reposition our social relationship within material and technological *space* and on geographic *site*. Bordered by tab windows in which her project keywords are open, my portrait of Heidi (*object A*) works to define the ways in which a subject is rendered an object by the act of portrayal. Though it is a screen shot, the image has been rendered in tone, texture, and focus to underscore the authenticity of this materialization of Heidi May, as a subject beyond representational apparatus. It is copyright free; and it is Google-generated, though not Google-sourced. It is a landscape portrait of Heidi May dwelling on a satellite image plateau generated through meta-web-textualities; and it works to unsettle my own assumptions about how *site* and *space* work to constitute subjects as persons and as objects of representational practices. Heidi May dwells near elsewhere.

In Heidi May's case, the reflexive nature of our conversations revealed memories mediated by virtual and real worlds. Admitting that she watched a lot of television as a child, she realized as a young adult how her early memories were mediated by TV sitcoms, and sometimes questioned whether her personal memories actually occurred or if they were projected realities. The notion of a virtual place appeared in a few of Heidi's responses from individuals she knew on-line, but had never personally met. A few of these individuals tried to visually situate Heidi using Google Maps. The image and text response in Figure 26 is from Rachel Baumann, a guest who attended a group exhibition and video screening of Heidi's in Vancouver. Although they have never met personally, they are now connected via an on-line social media platform. Baumann responded with a 350 word text response in

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which she explored the notion of virtual relationships within a virtual realm

and ended with the following:

It is a landscape portrait of Heidi May dwelling on a satellite image plateau generated through meta-web-textualities; and it works to unsettle my own assumptions about how site and space work to constitute subjects as persons and as objects of representational practices. Heidi May dwells near elsewhere (2011).

Other responses from Heidi's on-line community returned similar images

referencing social media platforms as a way to situate their relationship.

Her rationale for choosing ten (10) participants she had never personally

met, but only knew from on-line exchanges was an interesting experiment

and not surprisingly resulted in images referencing the virtual place of their

interaction. The other ten (10) responses came from friends, family, and

colleagues within Heidi's "real" social network and all referenced physical

places, objects, and abstract conceptual illustrations and/or artwork.

This insight revealed the weight and nature of physical places in defining

our experiences, relationships, our own identities and triggered a line of

questioning surrounding our virtual social networks – how do we think about

our identities and place within a virtual community?

Taking the Emily Carr community, as an example, students, faculty, and staff

all have a presence in the form of dedicated profile pages on the official

university website. In many ways, it is the first point of contact for prospective

students to obtain a sense of the type of people who are working, teaching,

and practicing at this Institution. In fact, it played a key role in assisting me

to research potential primary participants for the *Meta Portrait,* allowing me

to digitally sort through profile pages categorized by faculty departments.

The *Meta Portrait* allowed me to create my own community within the

larger institutional community, an academic support network composed of

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individuals who shared my research interests and allowed me to "carve" out a space in which my own research goals could be explored. Perhaps it was a type of literature review that needed to be experienced rather than read.

This insight triggered ideas for applied possibilities for the *Meta Portrait* – perhaps as a website tool for incoming graduate students or other research practitioners to search for individuals who have similar research interests, acting as a way to quickly obtain a sense of the type of expanded support network that would be available to them outside of the traditional facility-based resources of the institution. Within the discourse of participatory design and user-centred research, the *Meta Portrait* could assist students to become active participants in the design of their post-secondary learning experience, allowing them agency in establishing their own specialized academic support networks. This trajectory could expand the discourse surrounding student-centred pedagogical practices.

The image and text responses from Sadira Rodrigues' social network came from a mixture of friends, family, and colleagues. She began by admitting, "I inhabit different spaces in different ways and I wanted to make sure those various spaces were reflected". Sadira's responses revealed a strong character with easily identifiable groupings of images and texts that referenced a keen awareness of her cultural identity, as transcended through her love of nature and cooking. The separation of life and work was apparent in her responses – aspects which were not autonomous in both Rita and Heidi's portraits. However, compared to my own set it revealed an opposite portrait, one which reflected a strong sense of being situated in a liminal space – in transition perhaps.

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Unlike Sadira, my responses were more difficult to categorize into defined groupings and themes, an aspect I hadn't noticed during the previous work sessions with Rita and Heidi. The images in Figure 27 show a sample grouping of images from our respective secondary participants. Many of the associated text responses for Sadira referenced nature and included the following descriptive words:

solid • peace • balance • steady • defiance • serenity • solace • strong • grace • independent • daring • enduring • thoughtful • calm • cautious • stands tall • giving • rooted • versatile • support • structure • unveiling • rivaling • shelter • blossoming • beautiful • nurturing protect • nurture • dignity • indignant • majestic •

Comparatively, my associated text responses referencing nature included the following descriptive words:

contemplative • solid • kind • connector • fanciful • no beginning • no end • dark • directionless • adrift • lows • storms • quiet • richness • calm • mysterious • precision • impactful • comfortable • independence • highs • diligence • motivation • inquisitiveness • curious • climbing •

In comparing our text responses, two matching words immediately stood out to me – solid and calm. Although Sadira spent her formative years in a rural environment, and I in a large metropolitan city, we both received images referencing nature, however, as illustrated, the majority of the descriptive words paint different pictures of our character. Solid and calm are the only

4. Mapping Meta Portrait

Figure 27.
Image responses referencing nature and food.Sadira (bottom-left), and mine (top-right).
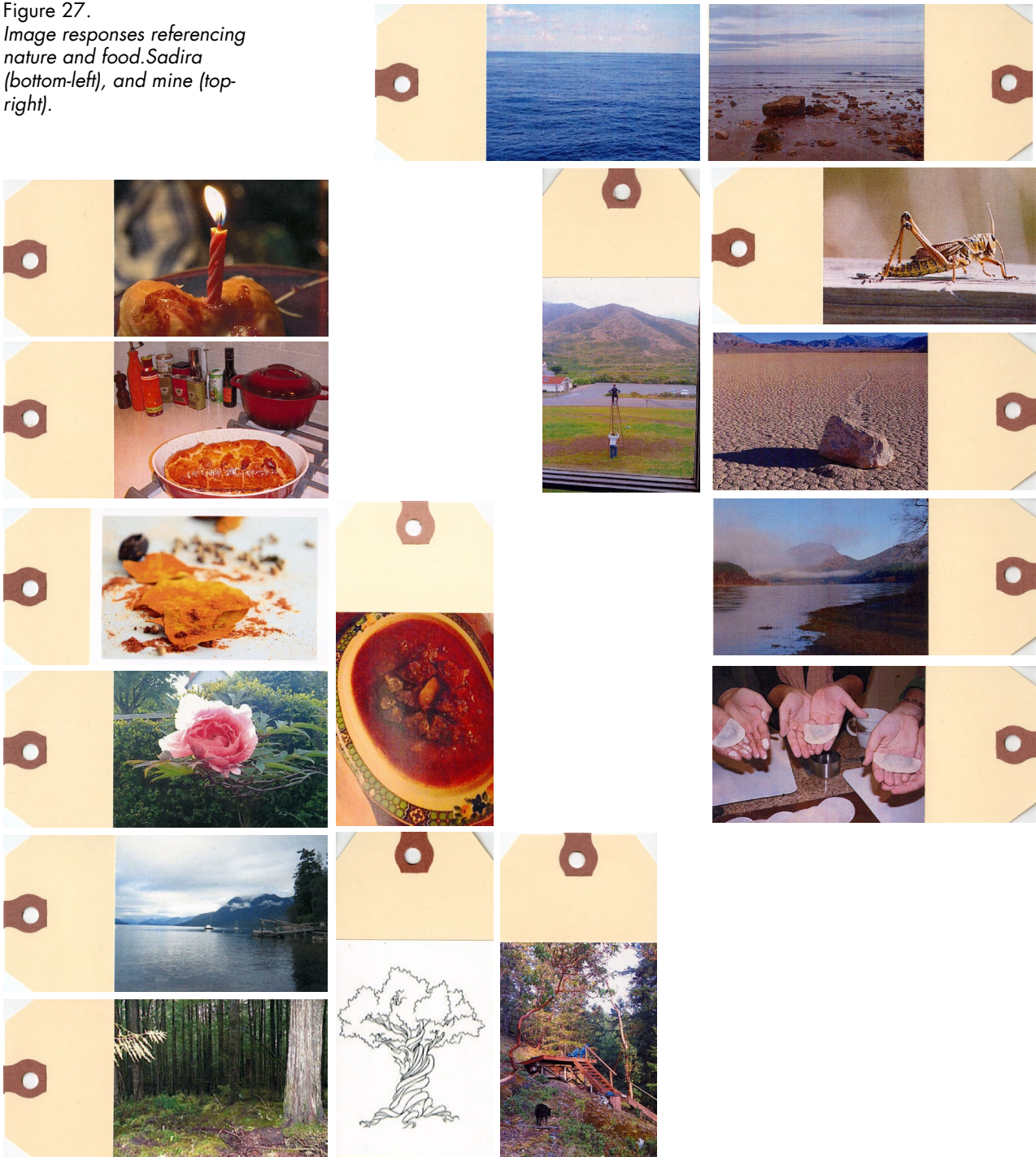
4. Mapping Meta Portrait

words which we shared. For many people nature implies a fixed sense of place, Massey suggests "We use such places to situate ourselves, to convince ourselves that there is indeed a grounding (2005, p.131). She continues to question place as it relates to nature "How then to think this notion of place as a temporary constellation, as a time-space event, in relation to this 'other' arena, 'the natural world? (p.131).[15]

The other strong grouping of images referenced Sadira's love of cooking. It was only during our conversations that I noticed one image that referenced my love of food. In both cases, the images represented our cultural backgrounds; Indian and Chinese. We shared our memories of growing up with our mother's cooking and the ability of ethnic cooking to transcend culture and identity.

My last participant, Jesse Birch, had yet another rationale for choosing his secondary participants – inviting close friends who were geographically separated from him. He was interested to see whether a meaningful connection could be made with the people he no longer had a physical connection with. A response from an old girlfriend triggered a conversation about the negotiation of home, explaining the difficulty they had in deciding where to live together; as she was a visiting student from Australia. For a while the solution was to live in places in-between, a "liminal space" as Jesse described it. Jesse proposed a different lens in which to look at place – from the perspective of a new-comer. What is lost when one is relocated to a new place? Conversely, what is gained, and what is potentially created?

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15 Massey acknowledges the extensive literature surrounding nature and its role in understanding place. However, she continues to argue that nature is not a fixed place, but rather one that is constantly changing geologically. Space and time are not in sync but are separated, moving constantly and at various rates.

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Our conversation allowed me to consider the feeling of placelessness new-comers might feel when arriving in a new city or country for the first time. I recalled stories my parents shared with us as kids growing up in Toronto – how they were forced to leave China because of the political and social turmoil caused by the Cultural Revolution, immigrating to Peru, then to Toronto where my parents took shelter within the burgeoning Chinese community. The social infrastructure within Toronto's Chinatown at the time was robust enough to allow my parents to support themselves, finding accommodation and employment without having to leave the comforting confines of Chinatown. Perhaps the facsimile of their ancestral home as reflected in the language, people, and food played an integral role in allowing my parents to make new connections and ultimately a new home, eventually moving out of Chinatown and into a middle-class existence outside of the city centre. I am reminded of a parting piece of advice my father gave me when I left home for my first trip to Europe. "Don't worry if you find yourself in a strange place" he said confidently – "there will always be a Chinese restaurant nearby." Perhaps it was his way of saying that you will always be home where ever you go.

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Figure 28.
Mapping exercise with Jesse Birch. Photo: Elisa Yon. Used by permission of the artist

My collaborative work session with Jesse ended with a simple mapping exercise, which perhaps illustrates Massey's notion of place as a *spatio-temporal event*, "places not as points or areas on maps, but as integrations of space and time" (2005, p.130). The image in Figure 28 and the graphic visualization in Figure 29 shows our respective image cards situated on a subjective map of the world with the Pacific Ocean at the centre. We wondered if our place could be negotiated at that moment through mapping the current location of our friends to determine an imaginary *spatio-temporal event* that would be located somewhere in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. This exercise in "unfixing place" aligns with Claire Doherty's understanding of place:

If we understand place as an unstable, shifting set of political, social, economic and material relations, and locality as produced and contested through a set of conditions that we might describe as situation, our experience of works which truly produce remarkable engagements with place will be characterized by a sense of dislocation - encouraging us no longer to look with the eyes of a tourist, but to become implicated in the jostling contingency of mobilities and relations that constitute contemporaneity (Doherty, 2009, p.18).

4. Mapping Meta Portrait

Edinburgh

Germany

Vancouver

Victoria

Montreal

Luxembourg

Regina

Toronto

pacific
ocean

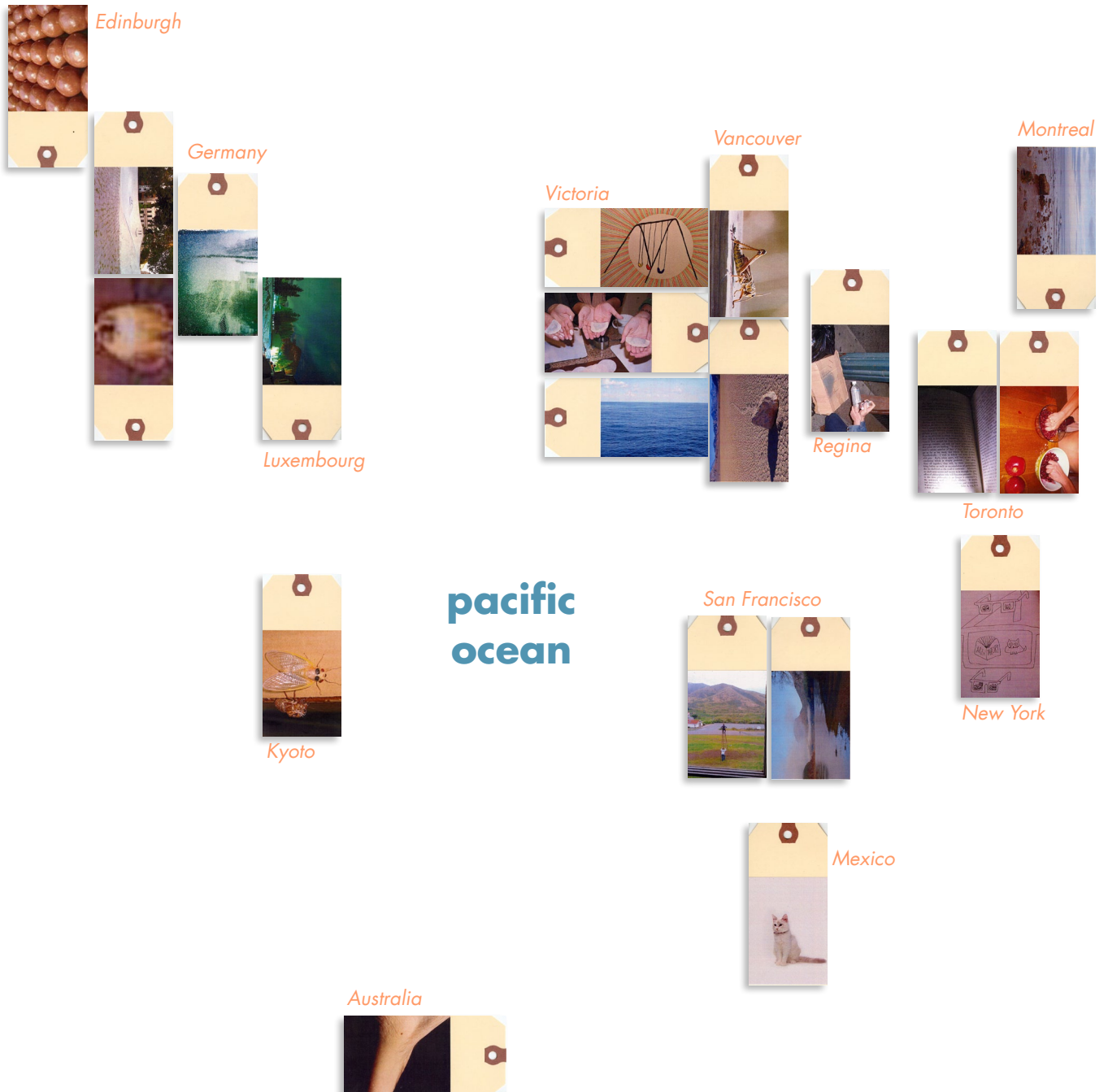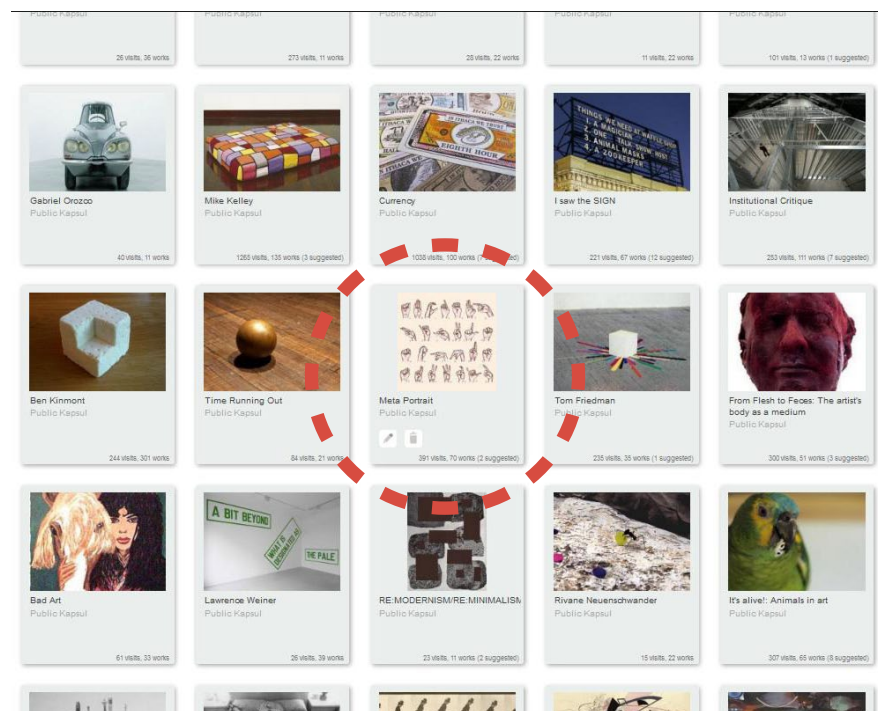San Francisco

New York

Kyoto

Mexico

Australia

Figure 29. Mapping Exercise.
A graphic visualization of my
mapping exercise *with Jesse
Birch (from Figure 28).*

4. Mapping Meta Portrait

Doherty suggests the term "situation" to describe the negotiation of place within an anchored locality and alludes to the ability of creative practitioners to catalyze a "situation" through a socially engaged practice.
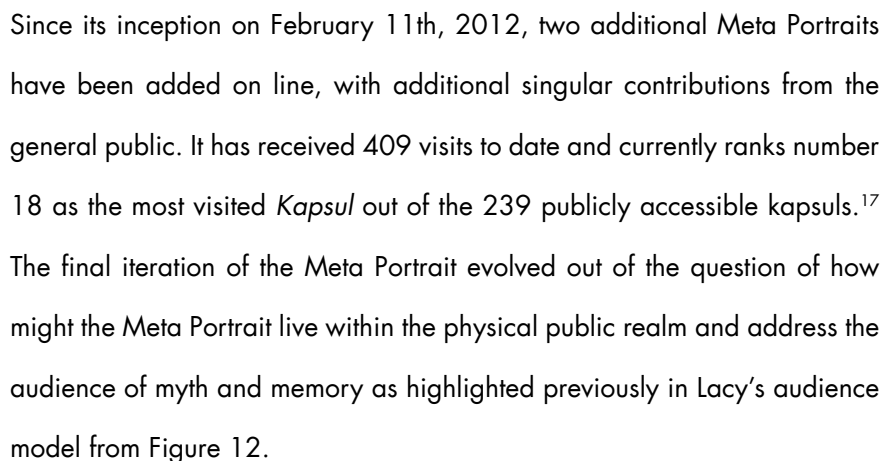
In considering how the *Meta Portrait* may live within the public realm, I returned to the questions raised from Heidi's portrait thread in relationship to the expanded notion of audiences present and accessible within the virtual public realm. *Kapsul* is an on-line, open-source platform that is used to share and collect images, texts, and videos with others.[16] Individuals can create archives or *Kapsuls* that are accessible publicly, or privately with other invited individuals. I decided to use this existing on-line platform as a site to nest the *Meta Portrait* within its 239 publicly accessible *Kapsuls*.

Figure 30. Screen capture of the *Meta Portrait Kapsul* shown nested within the other publicly accessible *Kapsuls*.

16 Kapsul.org was created by the Kadist Art Foundation, a non-profit organization based in San Francisco and Paris. "The foundation participates in the development of society through contemporary art, collecting and producing the work of artists and conducting various programs to promote their role as cultural agents."

4. Mapping Meta Portrait

In this iteration, the project lives as a collaborative image and text archive as well as an experimental socially engaged art project. Most of the images and text responses from the primary collaborators can be accessed from the public *Kapsul*. Once inside the Kapsul, the viewer can click on individual image portraits to reveal the associated text responses.

Figure 31.
A screen capture showing an example of the image and text presentation within the *Meta Portrait Kapsul*.

Since its inception on February 11th, 2012, two additional Meta Portraits have been added on line, with additional singular contributions from the general public. It has received 409 visits to date and currently ranks number 18 as the most visited *Kapsul* out of the 239 publicly accessible kapsuls.[17] The final iteration of the Meta Portrait evolved out of the question of how might the Meta Portrait live within the physical public realm and address the audience of myth and memory as highlighted previously in Lacy's audience model from Figure 12.

17 Figures correct as of May 23, 2012.

4. Mapping Meta Portrait

The public representation of the *Meta Portrait* on *kapsul.org* raised questions

surrounding the types of expanded audiences that are accessible from the

use of social media and open-source sharing platforms. However I was

curious to explore how the *Meta Portrait* might live within the physical realm

of our everyday experiences. In thinking about this I turned to Sherry Turkle's

notion of the "evocative object"[18]:

We find it familiar to consider objects as useful or aesthetic, as necessities
or vain indulgences. We are on less familiar ground when we consider
objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought.
The notion of evocative objects brings together these two less familiar ideas,
underscoring the inseparability of thought and feeling in our relationship to
things. We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with.
(2007, p.5)

Turkle reminded me about the personal objects many people carry on a

daily basis, such as personal agendas, wallets, cell phones, and keys. I

gravitated towards the keychain as an object with the capacity to hold both

an emotional and functional value within our everyday. A short investigation

with cohorts and friends revealed some interesting memories individuals had

associated with these objects. After a while, I began to see the keychains

as both a reflection of the individual's character and as a potential tool for

social engagement. I was curious to see if an "evocative object" could be

conceived that would link the virtual *Meta Portrait* to our everyday lived

experiences, specifically those moments of social interaction with others.

As a response, I produced a limited set of twenty keys (Figure 32) in the

form of keychains. Each key holds a unique Quick Response (QR) code that

has been laser-cut into Baltic Birch plywood. When scanned by a QR code

18 Dr. Sherry Turkle is a professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at
MIT. She has written extensively on the relationships between technology and the self.

4. Mapping Meta Portrait

Figure 32.
A limited set of twenty *Meta Portrait* keys with unique QR codes laser-cut into Baltic Birch plywood. Photo: Elisa Yon. Used by permission of the artist.
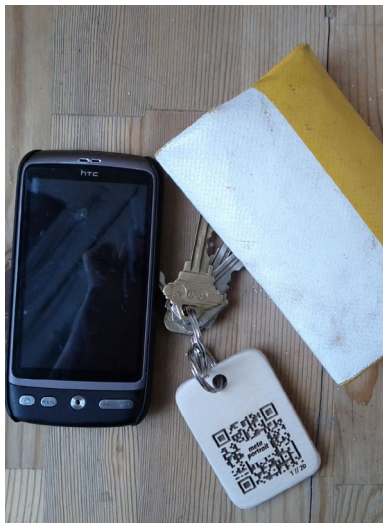

Figure 33.
Meta Portrait key as an "evocative object" amongst our everyday personal objects. Photo: Elisa Yon. Used by permission of the artist

scanner on a smart mobile device, the QR code will lead you to a private *kapsul* that can only be seen by me and the owner of the key. Embedded within each of the twenty private *kapsuls* is one of my twenty image and text portraits from my own portrait thread. The owner of the key will also be able to access instructions on how to engage in their own process of reflexive inquiry through creating their own *Meta Portrait.*
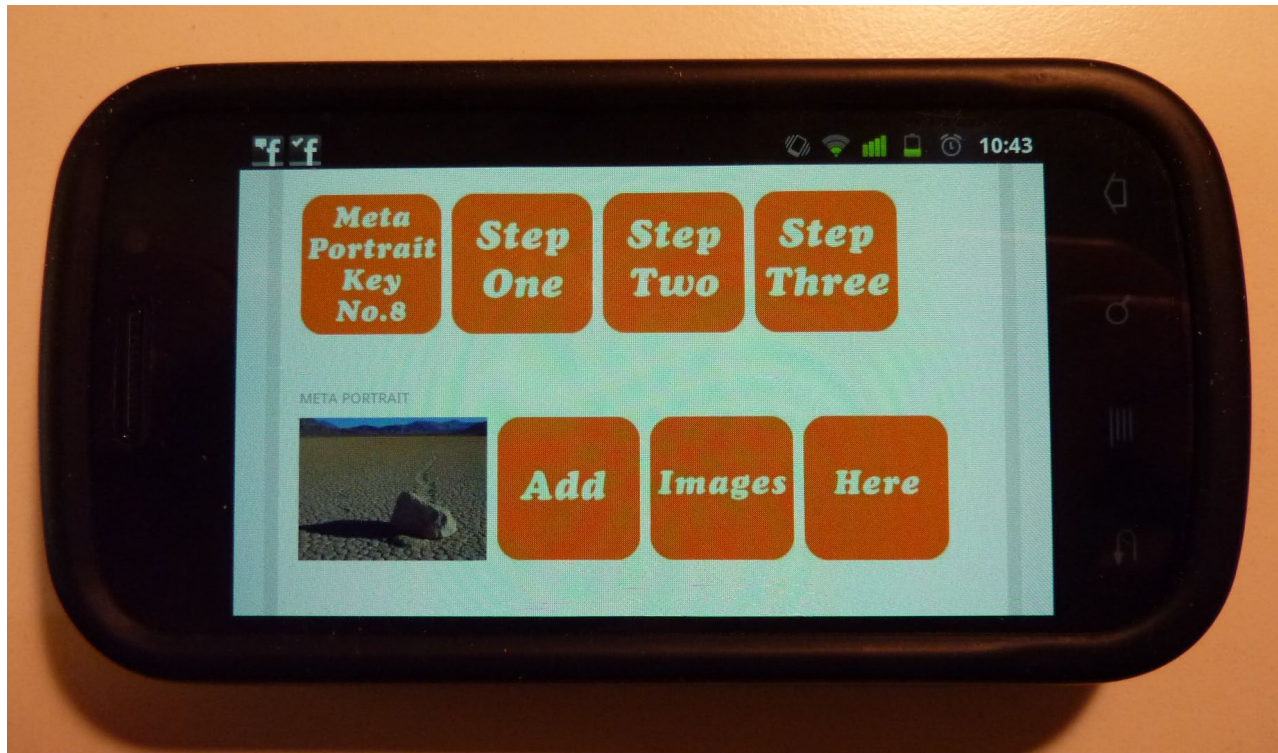
4. Mapping Meta Portrait

Figure 34.
A screen capture showing an example of the image and text presentation within the *Meta Portrait Kapsul. Photo: Elisa Yon. Used by permission of the artist.*

The intention of the keys is to scatter them amongst twenty other individuals within my present social network. It is envisioned that these fragments of my portrait will live inconspicuously amongst the everyday items of each individual. As these keys are dispersed, the *Meta Portrait* may continue to live spontaneously within social gatherings, potentially accompanying our place-settings when meeting friends in a cafe or bar – allowing the object to trigger questions and infiltrate casual conversations. Figure 33 illustrates an example screen image of what one will see on their smart mobile device once the QR code is scanned. The instructions are embedded in the icons along with one of my twenty image and text portraits. The final section of this thesis will conclude with the trajectories, reflections, and applied possibilities for the *Meta Portrait*.

4. Mapping Meta Portrait

Mapping Trajectories   "Where Ever You Go, You Will Be A City"[19]

and Reflections   (Robertson, 2011)

Canadian writer and poet Lisa Robertson contributed the above text to a public art project in Vancouver called *Digital Natives,* co-curated by Lorna Brown and Clint Burnham in 2011.[20] It is a quote that I have come back to often during the course of my research, as it has challenged me to reflect on how I understand place within my "situation" (Doherty). The *Meta Portrait* revealed the many layers that make up my own metaphorical "city" as reflected in the cultural (ethnic cuisine, popular culture, artistic practices), social (relationship types, institutional hierarchies), and political layers (ethnic backgrounds, family histories) of identity that emerged through my collaborative engagements with the primary collaborators. One could argue that these are layers we uniquely and inherently carry within us – similar perhaps to how one might think about cities. The *Meta Portrait* allowed me to carve out a place (Massey) in which to engage primary participants in conversations and questions regarding our own subjectivities towards representation, and identity. My collaboration with Rita Wong revealed a new line of questioning regarding my own ancestral sense of place and inspired me to embark on a new body of work called the *Stranger's Archive.*

19 In correspondence with Lisa Robertson, it has been revealed that her contributed text to the *Digital Natives* project was borrowed from Hannah Arendt's *Human Condition* (1958) who was citing from Aristotle.
20 Digital Natives was a public art project that took place between April 4-30, 2011. Utilizing a digital billboard overlooking the Burrard Street Bridge in Vancouver, Brown and Burnham curated and displayed 56 text messages in the form of 140 character Twitter contributions from professional artists and writers as well as members of the public.

4. Mapping Meta Portrait

Curiosity and the possibilities of the unknown, coupled with an empathetic and ethnographic approach to a socially engaged method of inquiry created a situation in which many possible trajectories could have been explored within the *Meta Portrait*. The creative process of engagement with the primary collaborators facilitated an exchange that was anchored within the discourse of participatory pre-design methods of engagement (Gaver). In reflection, this process could also have been contextualized within the discourse of dialogical practice, in which Kester identifies conversation as being a key aspect in manifesting the work within collaborative art practices.[21] The discussions revealed expansive social networks situated both locally and globally. The hierarchical institutional relationships as represented by student, faculty, and administrator reframed the power dynamic of my relationship with the primary collaborators. As the originator of the work, I felt in control of the collaborative engagement, but also subjugated by my position as a graduate student within the institution. Perhaps this dynamic provided an equal grounding for the dialogue and exchange that occurred.

As a designer and architect, the unique methodology developed through the *Meta Portrait* could be explored further for its possible application within the generative stages of a design process for architects working within multi-disciplinary design teams. In the context of educational design and architecture, how can new spaces for learning be designed in a way to support and facilitate the collaborative and interdisciplinary nature of faculty and students? How can virtual communication platforms be integrated into

21 Critical theorist Grant H. Kester proposes that within dialogical practice, conversation allows the work to be "reframed as an active, generative process that can help us speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities, official discourse, and the perceived inevitability of partisan political conflict" (2004, p.8).

4. Mapping Meta Portrait

flexible spaces for learning and still be robust enough to accommodate new innovations in technology and communication? These are perhaps some of the questions that could be further explored within participatory design research practices.

The *Meta Portrait* as a framework for engagement within a place is in conversation with Chang's *Before I Die* and *Kimbell's Audit*. It can be understood as a tool for revealing the invisible layers and unique relationships that influence our unique sense of place and may be further developed in a similar fashion to the Do-It-Yourself kits and accessible on-line questionaires that Chang and Kimbell have made readily available to a wider audience. This is perhaps a key observation within a hybrid socially engaged design practice in which the designer and artist is engaged in an empathetic approach to understanding the lives of people and their environments, but also reflecting and questioning what they are learning about themselves, and how their insights and observations can be used to inform their decisions in a type of fluid, non-linear creative process.

The process of collaboratively working with the primary participants resulted in a highly reflexive process of questioning how we understand ourselves from the lens of an other. The visual responses challenged us to think in terms of metaphor, and textual responses challenged our preconceived subjectivities and characteristics of our identity. Can the same methodology be applied to existing personal archives of photographs, books, objects, etc. to access hidden layers of an individual's identity? or reveal clues towards understanding an individual's unique sense of place? Conversely, can the methodology be applied to understand and reflect a portrait of a

4. Mapping Meta Portrait

place? The possibilities for a type of place-specific social design practice, one with the capacity to understand individuals, communities, or cities through temporal and impermanent interventions within the public realm may contribute and expand contemporary discourses and knowledge production in the following fields of research: urban design, architecture, ethnography, anthropology, socially engaged public art practice, pre-design research practice, transformation design, and arts-based research methods and pedagogy.

In our present condition of global economic, political, and environmental instability there is an increasing sense of urgency amongst contemporary socially engaged practitioners to somehow be relevant in the world as practicing artists and designers. A hybrid socially engaged practice, situated at the intersection of design thinking and ethnographic creative practices is one that has the potential to reach a broad audience, especially within our present age of digital communication, social media, and mobile technologies. Within this context, creating frameworks for engagement in the form of socially engaged cultural probes may lead to new ways we, as interdisciplinary creative practitioners can begin to understand and access the intricate layers of social relations and hierarchies before proposing interventions to engage and mobilize collective agency within institutions, communities, and cities.

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Appendix I

**Emily Carr University of Art + Design
Approved Research Ethics Board Consent Forms
for Meta Portrait**

• Primary Participant dated, 21 March, 2011
• Secondary Participant dated, 21 March, 2011

Appendix II

**Emily Carr University of Art + Design
Application for Ethics Approval Letter
for Meta Portrait**

• Letter dated, 17 May, 2011

**Emily Carr University of Art + Design
Approved Research Ethics Board Final Completion Letter
for Meta Portrait**

• Letter dated, 7 May, 2012