



MK GUTH: Paying Attention

January 20 – April 1, 2018
Hallie Ford Museum of Art
Willamette University

Teachers Guide

About the Exhibition:

MK Guth: Paying Attention features a range of still-life installations from the past six years that are intended to illustrate how social interaction is shaped through rites and treasured objects. Included in the outer galleries are still-life installations that use books, serving ware, and utensils to imagine prospective dinners inspired by art, music, places, relationships, and milestones. Guth's most recent still-life installation, *What Needs to Be Said*, invites visitors to share their thoughts and feelings in five bound books on such diverse topics as art, ecology, identity, love, and politics.

The centerpiece of the exhibition is a new installation entitled *Choreography for Reading Aloud*, a mixed-media installation of books, manuscripts, letters, and diaries selected by the artist from Willamette University's Archives and Special Collections, housed at the Mark O. Hatfield Library. Visitors are invited to select transcripts from the texts to read aloud, either individually or as a group, creating a cacophony of sounds where stories collide and information overlaps. How does the transmission of meaning shift when books, manuscripts, letters, and diaries are read simultaneously by different readers and amplified by voice?

About the Artist:

MK Guth is a nationally recognized Portland, Oregon, interdisciplinary artist and an associate professor at Pacific Northwest College of Art. Born in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, in 1963, MK attended the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where she received her BA degree in sociology, and New York University, where she received her MFA degree in studio art. Over the years, she has been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions in the United States, Australia, and Europe, and her artworks are included in public and private collections in this country and abroad.

For the past fifteen years, MK has made artwork that brings people into a cultural conversation with one another. She first gained national attention for her entry in the *Whitney Biennial* in 2008. Her installation there, entitled *Ties of Protection and Safekeeping*, asked visitors to record what was most dear to them on scraps of cloth that in turn were woven into a 1,940-foot braided sculpture. In 2012 she created installations entitled *When Nothing Else Subsists, Smell and Taste Remain* at The Art Gym at Marylhurst University in Portland, where she used food as a vehicle for triggering memories and emotions.

About the Work:

Art has a job to do. In the case of my work, I tend to use the concept of the everyday – reflecting on the everyday in the content, materials, and processes of art making – to refocus attention on analyzing and addressing everyday acts, rituals and processes with new appreciation and understanding.¹

MK Guth

MK Guth's work asks viewers to pay attention, especially to the things we tend to overlook, the everyday actions we take for granted, and the small rituals we perform unconsciously. It makes us aware of how we interact with objects and with other people, in different contexts and spaces. It asks us to have a conversation, maybe one we have had before and didn't pay much attention to, or about something we have never considered. It asks us to think about the nature of art, how we engage with it, and the ways in which art mirrors society and social interactions.

¹ MK Guth, quoted in "Realigning Our Sight: An Interview with MK Guth" with Sarah Margolis-Pineo, December 19, 2012

Works in the Exhibition:

MK Guth's work begins with familiar objects that anchor us to a place and time. These objects may trigger memories and in a different context or unusual place (like the museum or gallery), they redirect attention to the mundane and familiar so they stick in your memory in a different way.

Democratic Dinner is one in a series of dinner-themed still life installations featured in the exhibition. As the artist states, these vignettes place “the ritual of dining within the context of art to attune the viewer to an act that is so familiar that we take it for granted. It’s this combination of producing something collectively as part of a mundane action within the context of an art experience that forces us to reexamine what we already know.”² Each dinner vignette features a book made by the artist that includes instructions for “activating” the dinner (the theme, the setting, the number of participants, the menu, readings and/or conversation topic, etc.) as well as hand-crafted utensils and serving ware, and found books that serve as prompts for the dinner’s theme and for the rituals and interactions that take place.

1.



Democratic Dinner

2012

Eight stainless-steel spoons, one glass jar, one artist book, one selected book (*Stone Soup* by Marcia Brown), one walnut shelf

Collection of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University,
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Democratic Dinner is based on the story of stone soup, where a group of people come together to try to make a stew out of random ingredients. This dinner is designed for eight people with a host who initiates the dinner by inviting guests and asking that they bring some sort of ingredient to contribute to the soup. All the ingredients must be used and the guests need to work together to make something that tastes good. This is the challenge of the dinner. The spoons are to be used for the dinner.

Discussion and Activities:

In the classroom and at the museum:

Each dinner in the series offers multiple experiences and ways to interact with the work:

- The first is through the object as traditional still life that you meditate upon and appreciate for its composition: the arrangement of objects, the shapes and visual rhythms. You may admire the textures of the roughhewn shelf and utensils, and the hand-blown glass. You may recognize universal symbols such as books = knowledge,

² MK Guth, quoted in “Realigning Our Sight: An Interview with MK Guth”

dishes = nourishment. You may be intrigued by the unknown past of the used books, and in some cases, familiar titles may evoke stories or memories.

- The second way of engaging the work is when the dinner itself is activated (performed), with the still life acting as a prompt (or theme) for the dinner, and the participants using the books and serving ware. Each dinner has been activated by the artist as part of the creative process and several have been activated in private gallery settings, or by the owners of the individual works.
- The third way of engaging the work is what Guth calls the liminal or “in between” space where you consider a possible future – perhaps activating the dinner somewhere else, or imagining how you would engage with the work. What would the setting be? Who would you invite? Who may you have to exclude due to restrictions (number required, dietary restrictions, etc.)? What would be served and what would you bring if that were a requirement? What actions would take place? What would the conversation be about? What would you add to that conversation? What would it be like to use the utensils or serving ware?

In the classroom:

- Read the book *Stone Soup*, by Marcia Brown (available through Chemeketa Cooperative Regional Library Service).
 - Why do you think Guth chose *Stone Soup* as a prompt for *Democratic Dinner*?
- Discuss *Democratic Dinner* as you would a traditional still life.
 - How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
 - How do the individual elements (the books, the spoons in the glass) create meaning?
- As a class, discuss soup! Soup is a dish for rich and for poor, found in almost every culture and eaten in most homes. Research the history, find simple recipes from different cultures (or have students bring recipes from home, and if it is a family recipe, share its history).
- Decide on a soup for your *Democratic Dinner*
 - Divide the class into groups of 8 (or close to).
 - Read the instructions below from the accompanying artist book *Democratic Dinner*, used to activate the dinner.
 - As a group, decide which soup you would make for your democratic dinner, and what ingredients each participant would bring. (It can be inspired by one of the recipes students found or brought from home, or it can be one created by the group) Remember the instructions: To make a good soup, there needs to be a balance of ingredients and spices. For this soup to taste appetizing and be a soup

that all the guests can eat regardless of allergies, dietary restrictions, likes, and dislikes, all the guests must work together.

- Have each group choose someone to share their choices and collaborative process with the class. What soup did they choose? Who is bringing what ingredients? How did the group reach consensus? What compromises were made?
- Discuss how the collaborative process and the resulting collective soup mirrors the realities of the democratic process.
- Has this activity made you look at soup, or preparing and sharing a meal – things you may have never given much thought to before – in a new way? Explain.

Instructions for *Democratic Dinner*:

Democratic Dinner is for 8 people including the host or hosts. No more than 8, no less than 8. This dinner is based on the notion of stone soup, where everyone who comes to eat contributes something to the pot. This is a simple idea that becomes more difficult in practice.

For this dinner, each guest must contribute ingredients for the soup. All ingredients that are contributed must be used. The host will provide wine or beer, snacks for the guests to eat while the soup is being made, bread to go with the soup, a berry crisp for dessert, and all of the pots, pans, and dishware to be used to create and eat the meal. While the host provides the wine or beer, the guests are to decide which one the group prefers to drink with the meal. Salt and pepper are also provided by the host, but all other spices or herbs must come from the other guests.

To make a good soup, there needs to be a balance of ingredients and spices. For this soup to taste appetizing and be a soup that all the guests can eat regardless of allergies, dietary restrictions, likes, and dislikes, all the guests must work together.

2.



Willamette University student participating in the activation of *Choreography for Reading Aloud*, Hallie Ford Museum of Art, January 20, 2018

Choreography for Reading Aloud activates libraries, literary collections, bookstores, and any space with consumable texts. Originally performed at the CANADA Gallery in New York City in July of 2017 and at the Reed College Library as part of *Converge 45* in August, the current installation features books, manuscripts, letters, and diaries selected from Willamette University's Archives and Special Collections, housed at the Mark O. Hatfield Library.

The printed material selected by the artist focuses on Oregon art and history. Included are the diaries of Myra Albert Wiggins, a turn of the last century Salem photographer and member of Alfred Stieglitz's Photo-Secessionist group; the papers of Norma Paulus, a prominent Oregon politician and legislator; the zines (a small circulation of self-published work, often reproduced via photocopier) of Salem artists nic and sloy; and the AIDS journals of Paul Wynne, among others.

We have probably all read aloud sometime in our life – in the classroom, maybe on a stage as a dramatic performance, or to a child before bedtime. Archival material is usually read in silence, by the sole researcher in the reading rooms of a library or archives. These words – often handwritten, many centuries old, are brought to life when spoken. When *Choreography for Reading Aloud* is activated, books, manuscripts, diaries, and letters are read simultaneously by different readers. Multiple voices are heard at the same time, focusing our attention on how we transmit and receive information and knowledge. As a reader, am I being heard? As a listener, do I strain to find something that I can make into meaning, or do I appreciate it for something new – the rhythms and cadences of different voices and words?

At the museum:

Spend some time looking at the archival material and accompanying artworks and other objects. As a class, you are invited to “activate” the installation by selecting transcripts from the texts to read aloud, either individually or as a group, and creating a cacophony of sounds where stories collide and information overlaps.

- Instructions for activating *Choreography for Reading Aloud*:
 - Up to four people may read from the bound books on the table in the Atrium Gallery. For more to participate, ask the front desk for extra copies of the transcripts.
 - Set a time for the reading (3-5 minutes).
 - Have the readers stand throughout the exhibition galleries or sit at the tables or benches. They may stand on the low platforms, sit on the high ones. Do not stand on the high platforms.
 - Make sure everyone starts and finishes at exactly the same time.
- Discuss the activation: how the familiar – words, objects, museum-going, interactions with classmates – can be experienced in new, multi-sensory ways; and how meaning is not fixed, but in flux.

Post visit:

Reflect upon the title of the exhibition, *Paying Attention*, and how it relates to your experience. Did you discover something new, no matter how small? Did you look at something, someone, or an action in a new way? Did you question or reconsider anything? Did it change or add to your definition of art? Explain.

RESOURCES

“Realigning Our Sight: An Interview with MK Guth” with Sarah Margolis-Pineo, December 19, 2012, <http://www.cristintierney.com/artists/mk-guth>

Joseph Keehn II, “Looking Through the Social Interaction Hole” in *MK Guth: when nothing else subsists, smell and taste remain*. The Art Gym, Marylhurst University, Marylhurst, OR, 2012.



