

THE HOUSE ON FOUR WATERS

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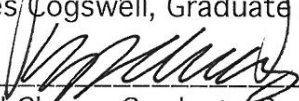
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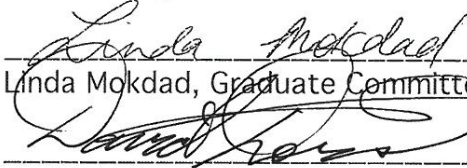
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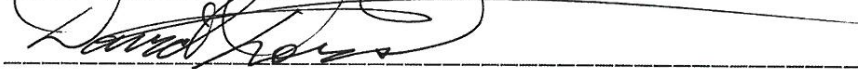
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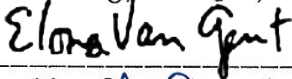
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ABSTRACT:

House on Four Waters is a multimedia installation based on a personal narrative that addresses the mechanisms of real and imagined sites of memory of two sisters. The exhibition is a form of macro collage that uses architecture, painting, video, and audio to open multiple points of departure and return for the viewer while mapping the experience of territory. The House on Four Waters embodies the notion of static displacement, which it activates through direct visual, auditory, and physical encounter. As a counter to a nostalgic idealization of the past, it uses collage and disjunction to create an alternative understanding of present.

This thesis document will provide analysis of the artwork giving insight into the cultural and political context from which it originates and the creative process, with which it came to materialization.

KEYWORDS:

Multimedia, installation, environment, mapping, displacement, house, metaphor, personal narrative, accessibility, border, fiction, collage, juxtaposition, static displacement, penetration, transformation, mark making

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PART I
TOPOLOGY OF THE EXPERIENCE / STATIC DISPLACEMENT

I lived in four countries without leaving my home. This is a common humorous response among my generation in Serbia when asked about their experience traveling abroad.

My generation was born into post-socialism¹, a term that Marina Gržinić uses to name a period specific to the New World Order in Yugoslavia after the death of Josip Broz Tito in 1980. Although I was born in Yugoslavia, throughout the course of my life its borders continued to recede, resulting in an oppressive social and political construct. As the country got smaller, detachment from the outside world grew. As a result of civil conflict and sanctions, many people were exiled from the country. Most never returned, unable to accept the post-Yugoslav identity², while the inner diaspora became othered in what is now an imagined homeland. For those who remained in Serbia, the belief that life is elsewhere became an accepted reality. In both cases, alienation was adopted as a defense mechanism against the burden of history as well as individual and collective responsibility. As a consequence, growing nostalgia for a fragment of a former identity became normalized, at the individual and national level. And as Svetlana Boym pointed out in her influential writing *The Future of Nostalgia*: “Unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters.”

My personal experience of that national fragmentation, accompanied by a sense of belonging to an increasingly globalized world, led me to explore the idea of the body as a tool for mapping space. The research for this project is based on the relationship between memory and materiality using the metaphor of static displacement as a point of departure and return. Static displacement is the condition of being displaced without moving. It can be described as a mentally inscribed state of stillness on a fluid basis. It is the skin that locks a chaotic inside to protect it from the chaos that surrounds it. As a nuanced physical and psychological space, static displacement is an integral human ability to absorb and project inward, to collapse into oneself and come together.

1 Gržinić, Marina. *Avangarda i Politika: Istočnoevropska paradigma i rat na Balkanu*. Beograd: Beogradski krug, 2005. 237, 38

2 Radović, Milja. *Citizenship and Religion in the Post-Yugoslav States*, University of Edinburgh, School of Law. *The Europeanization of Citizenship in the Successor States of the Former Yugoslavia*, Working Paper 2013/35.

The House on Four Waters embodies this notion of static displacement, which it activates through direct visual, auditory, and physical encounter. As a counter to a nostalgic idealization of the past, it uses collage and disjunction to create an alternative understanding of the present. The relationship between language and experience in The House on Four Waters is communicated through collage as a fabrication process and as a conceptual framework. The emphasis on collage principles is manifested both in the treatment of material and in the way that media communicate between each other. In my installation, materialization of the architectural space of the room and interconnections between media amplify processes of penetration and transformation in perception. These processes are initiated in the object itself and the viewer's experience of it based on the contrast between inside and outside. These elements function as a bridge between intimate, self-protected space and its exposed marginal reality.



Side view of The House on Four Waters showing entrance and one of the side monitors, Russell Industrial Center, Detroit 2015

PART II METAPHOR AS A COLLAGE AS A PROCESS

There is a house in the middle of the courtyard. It consists of two parts; the first half is made of stone and the other of wood. There is a basement and a first floor, two doors, two windows, two rooms and two scents. It is called The House on Four Waters even if it is on the top of a rocky hill and there is no river nearby. Why is it called that no one can explain. The House on Four Waters (the beginning)

Fragmentation – Chaos – Homogeneity

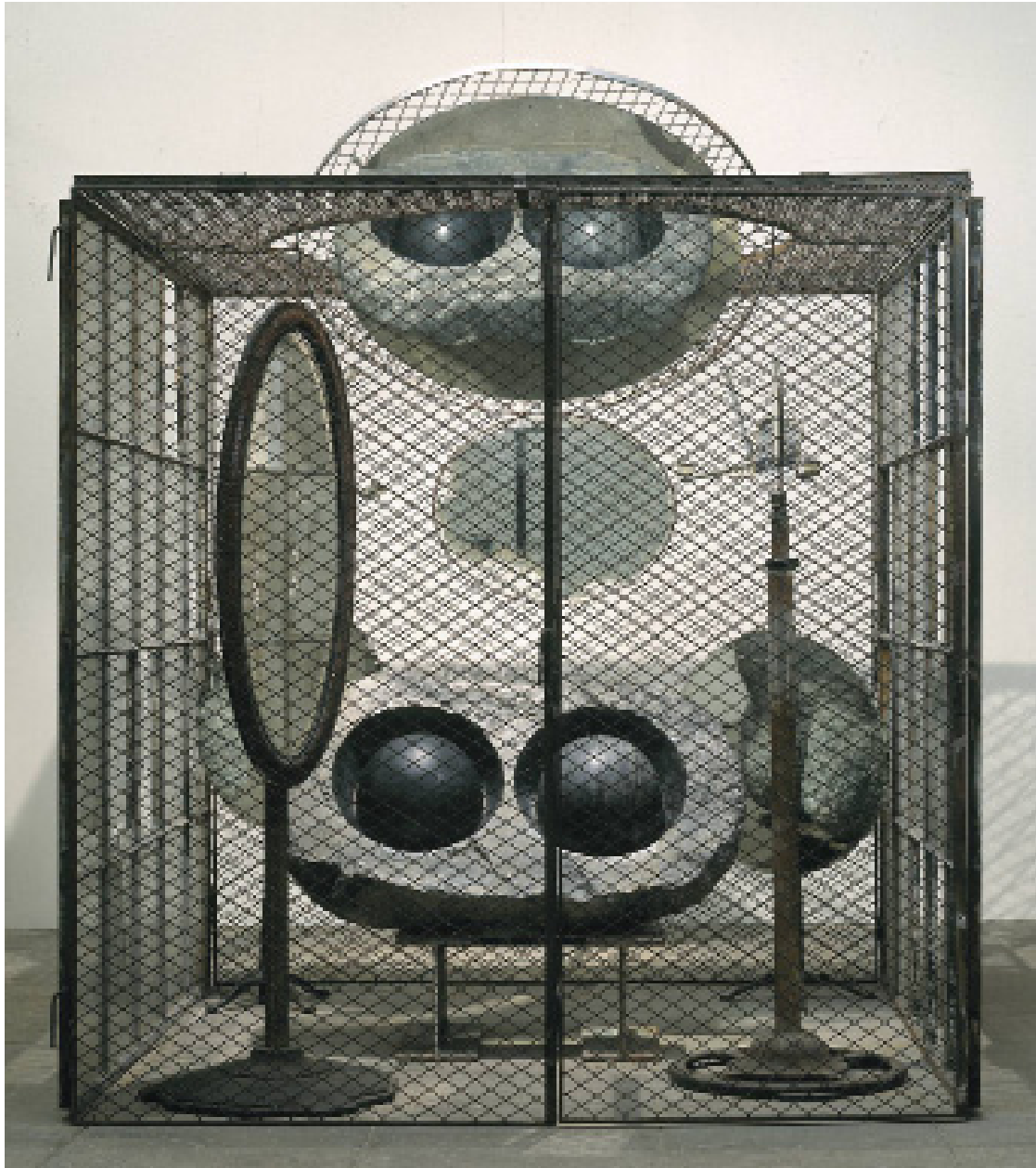
Dating back to Surrealist and Dadaist experiments, artists have found ways to deal with the present through the past by using collage and assemblage strategies. In collage, content exists “side by side,” using juxtaposition as the main form of placement. The material is static but the forces between fragments pull the wholeness of the experience together. The House on Four Waters is a metaphor that unifies shifting ideas about the past into a coherent image. In a similar way, George Lakoff defines a metaphor as “an image schema that provides meaning and organization to thoughts, actions and language”.

Cells (Eyes and Mirrors) by Louise Bourgeois is an example of an installation formed around bodily centered metaphor translated into a system of objects in constrained space, a cage. Gibbons, in her book *Contemporary Art and Memory*, categorizes Bourgeois in a group of artists whose work externalizes personal memory³. This autobiographical piece is rooted in *Nachträglichkeit* / Afterwardness, which stands for retroactivity, a psychological process of reconstruction and rearrangement of original experience – “not only to replay the experience but to gather new meaning and endow it with a psychological effectiveness that has been lost by the repression of the experience.”⁴ Commenting on Louise Bourgeois’ sculptural installation *Cells (Eyes and Mirrors)*, Yates makes a connection with “a memory technique first recorded by ancient scholars in which memories are linked to imaginary objects and images and arranged in the rooms of an imaginary building, ordered visually for the easy retrieval of information or experience.”⁵

3 Gibbons, Joan. *Contemporary Art and Memory Images of Recollections and Remembrance*: I.B. TAURIS, 2007. Print.

4 King, Nicola. *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2000. 16

5 Yates, Frances A., *The Art of Memory*, 1966. London: Pimlico, 1992. 18-24.



Louise Bourgeois, CELL (EYES AND MIRRORS) in progress 1989-1993. Marble, mirrors, steel and glass, 93 x 83 x 86 inches; 236.2 x 210.8 x 218.4 cm. Collection Tate Modern London.

Photograph: Peter Bellamy.

The architecture of *The House on Four Waters* is a body with a seamless, almost invisible outside that is only revealed by its chaotic and vibrant inside. The entrance is a hole in the wall. The house is wounded and the wound is inseparable from discovery. In Greek, Sanskrit and Persian, tere is understood as an open hole, as a literal hole in the body and as a transitional state (capturing the sense of passing through or changing from the state without the hole to a state with the hole) in which the body loses the wholeness of its bodily and spiritual being. (Wilson and Lindy, 35-36)

Trapped in the architecture, moving images activate a sensorial aspect of *The House on Four Waters*. Together with a reflective metal floor, and the collages that carry the presence of heavy mark making, they create an ambiguous place of both play and violence. In order to fully experience the static displacement the space needs to be occupied. Crossing the threshold both gives and takes away the power from the one who crosses it. By entering, one gets consumed by the interior. Videos of a body amplify a shift of scale that introduces a sense of inferiority. Lisa Coulthard describes this state in her analysis of extremism in films of Michael Haneke where in “the act of questioning, violence becomes a question or problem, rather than a clear-cut entity, event or action.”⁶

Confronted with a video of the body integrated into the floor of the room, the viewer enters into the state of contiguity working with “dancing seeds” and a “luminous dust” in order to produce the genesis of an unknown body.⁷ The systematic juxtaposition of media, collage, video and sound is employed to transcend meaning beyond the strictly audiovisual, where “disjunction between the visible and the verbal may point to meanings that lie between them.”⁸ This structure enables the formation of connections and the detection of liminal spaces, where antagonistic processes such as building and destroying; presence and displacement; play and violence reinforce each other. While construction is manifested through weaving of color, reused paintings, destructive interventions made with power tools on the surface make buried layers reappear, simultaneously overlapping the innocence and violence of history and the present moment.

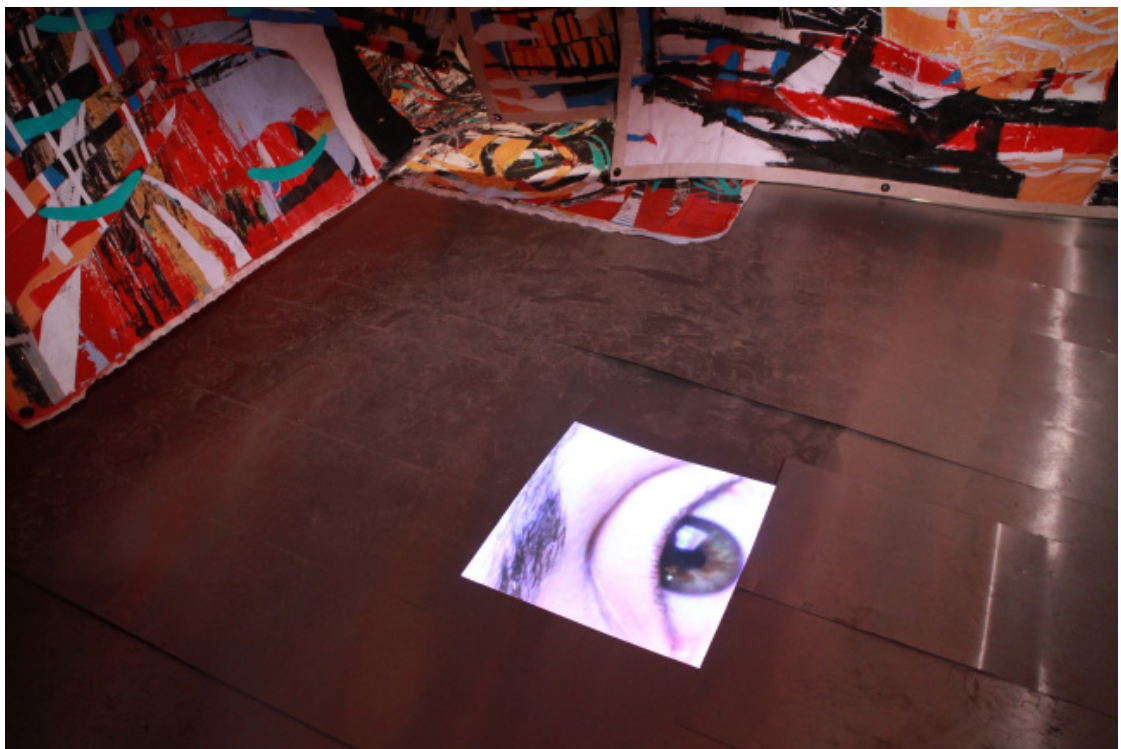
6 Horeck, Tanya and Tina Kendall. *The New Extremism In Cinema: From France to Europe*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011.

7 Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*

8 Marks, U. Laura. *The Skin of the Film Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*, Duke University Press, Durham and London. Print. 2000. 129.



*Establishing shot of the entrance of The House on Four Waters, Russell Industrial Center, Detroit
Photographer: Alex Mandrila*



*Inside of the installation with the view on a moving image integrated in the floor,
Photographer: Alex Mandrila*

While thinking about interconnection between violence and discovery in the context of mixed media assemblage one cannot help but recall Marcel Duchamp's last work *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage...* / *Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas...* (1946-66), located in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Referred to as *Landscape of Eros, Through the Peephole*⁹, the installation is positioned in the back room, making the suspension of access integral part of the experience. Once in front of the weathered old door integrated into the museum wall the viewer meets the only point of entry through two peepholes. Looking through, the viewer is consumed by a sense of wonder while exposed to a disturbingly harmonious landscape. The peephole frame mutilates the brilliantly positioned presence of a nude woman holding an old gas lamp. The element that breaks the stillness of the scene is a little sparkling waterfall in the background, which, together with the movement of a spectator's eye, makes this mixed media assemblage cohesive.

Similar strategies are present in London based French artist Loure Prouvost's collage and video installation *Far from words*, awarded the Turner Prize in 2013. In her multimedia work Prouvost uses assemblage of different historical, personal, and immediate elements to play with language and translation to explore interpretations of sensorial experiences.

⁹ Cotter, Holland. *Landscape of Eros, Through the Peephole*, The New York Times, August 27, 2009. Web.



Marcel Duchamp. Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage... / Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas... (1946-66), Philadelphia Museum of Art, Photographs: Nataša Prjević



Loure Prouvost, Farfromwords: cars mirrors eat raspberries when swimming through the sun, to swallow sweet smells, 2013

PART III YOU AND EYE

To look is to actively make a meaning of the world. It involves a greater sense of purpose and direction... To look is an act of choice. ¹⁰

Sturken and Cartwright, Practices of Looking

In the summer of 2014 I conducted a field research for an ongoing project that focused on two distinct groups of people, particularly women, emerging from the socialist generations of the former Yugoslavia and the diaspora in the United States. My objective was to negotiate constructs of memory and home initiated by the dissolution of Yugoslavia and other 20th century conflicts and their personal metaphors. The research was composed of interviews, videos, and soundscapes recorded in these distant cultural contexts.

My inquiry started in the Balkans where I visited three former Yugoslav republics - Serbia, Montenegro, and Slovenia. Throughout this journey I focused on conversations with women discussing the complexity of power dynamics during and after the time of political conflicts. Documenting in both urban and rural environments enabled me to collect testimonies that gave a range of perspectives on ideas of home, ownership and memory. Differences and overlaps in their experience communicated complexity of the value system in the patriarchal society between two world wars; under Josip Broz Tito's social-communist regime and post-socialist period marked with civil conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina and UN sanctions imposed on Serbia. The history of this region is rich, eclectic, and complicated by social and political turbulences. When asked about "the war", each person I interviewed answered differently depending on his or her age.

In order to learn more about the mechanisms of real and imagined sites of memory which develop in the states of segregation and transition I talked with both displaced women and the ones that never moved or traveled. Through this process I invested in notions of active and static displacement that are informed by geography, social conventions and existential struggle.

¹⁰ Sturken, Marita, and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: an Introduction to Visual Culture*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.

In both groups when addressing past experience there was a focus on micro-narratives centered on particular geographical places (a country, region, town, village, street), evocative objects as gesture containers and in the case of emplacement an object as a holder of value and purpose. Often repetition in individual testimonies showed as Edward W. Said pointed out “the search for order, reiteration to prove to oneself that improbable things actually did take place”¹¹.

Part of this research resulted in a collaborative video piece titled *Her* with Iranian artist Parisa Ghaderi who resides in the United States. (Stills from the video on pages 18 and 19) The split screen one-channel video was shaped as a series of micro narratives that inform an intimate portrait of a woman. It is constructed as a merging experience of two displaced artists dealing with ideas of home, loss and female identity. The exploration starts from two opposite states: one is based on questioning the construct of memory through domesticity after the loss of mother and the other is based in anticipation of loss focusing on the body of grandmother and its transient character.



Still from 5 min video played on a side monitor embedded in the architecture of the installation.

11 Khūrī, Ilyās. *Little Mountain*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989. Print.

The act of looking at is inherently displacing.

In his book *An Accented Cinema Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001), Hamid Naficy uses Bakhtin's synesthetic chronotope to analyze dialectics of displacement and emplacement. Bakhtin defines chronotopes as organizing centers where knots of narrative are tied and untied (Bakhtin 1981, 250).

Mona Hatoum's early videotape *Measures of Distance* (1988) is one of the examples of intricately communicated personal and cultural memory of touch that is grounded in inaccessibility. Visual and narrative epistolary form is used as point of access and as a barrier. While her mother's letters on Arabic overlay and obliterate the photographs that shift from close ups of skin to establishing intimate portrait shots of her mother, Hatoum reads those letters translated in English. The letters convey deep love and longing of parents towards their children in exile while trapped in war-obsessed Lebanon. *My dear Mona, the apple of my eye...*¹²

With the similar intricacy in a visual narrative construction as Hatoum's, Jelena Jureša in her work *MIRA, Study for a Portrait* (2010-2014) deals with the history of Yugoslavia, one family and one woman creating "a work on absence which uses the form of the portrait to explore the fragility of memory as well as the relationship between the photographic medium and perception... In the reconstruction of Mira's portrait, only a few archive photographs were used. This specific narrative in combination with Jureša's photographs, traces the life of Mira aesthetically carefully and subtly: her childhood, life in Belgrade, in Sarajevo, the birth of her children, marriage, divorce, her work in an old people's home, up to her tragic death in 1990, when she died in a car accident near Pakrac, where riots soon broke out heralding the beginning of war in Croatia and the fragmentation of former Yugoslavia."¹³

12 Marks, 154.

13 Jureša, Jelena. *MIRA, Study for a Portrait, Introduction*. 2010-2014. Web.



Mona Hatoum, Measures of Distance (1988)
Photograph: Tate Modern



Jelena Jureša, MIRA Study for a Portrait (2010-2014)
Still from one of two films, exhibited as an audio - video installation, 45' 35" each
Photograph taken from artist's website





PART IV

There is a House / The House on Four Waters

For our house is our corner of the world.

The Poetics of Space, Gaston Bachelard

In this context the house is used as a site of both nurturing and violent past that asks to be revisited and its potency grows in inability to access it fully. The house in the narrative is used as a metaphor for a shared experience that occupies a particular time and condition from childhood. Instead of it being an embodiment of femininity and domesticity, in this particular case it is used as a system of objects and perspectives constructed to address an elusiveness of memory and the state of static displacement. These perspectives shift in between an adult's understanding of given reality and a child's intuitively realized but ideologically informed understanding of a territory. It is also an embodied desire to create, protect and occupy space.

The apple tree is our Watchtower. It warns us of the annoying neighbors, especially the babas who always need something. When they are particularly annoying in their black scarfs and gloomy voices, we make strange sounds from the top of the Watchtower, and then they are afraid of death. Sometimes the enemies are friends from the neighborhood who do not give as much respect to the House on Four Waters as they should. When that happens we have rotten apples prepared for them. They are soft and do not hurt much, but still they hurt enough to make everyone understand that we are serious.

- *Excerpt from the story The House on Four Waters*

The narrative is a part of long distance collaboration with my sister and artist, Jelena Prljević, who currently lives in Serbia. The audio element of the narrative involves the house from our childhood that we each recall separately, providing differing perspectives of outsider and insider. The narrative is spoken in both English and Serbian. The presence of two languages informs the audience differently amplifying the importance of access while addressing the mechanisms of real and imagined sites of memory.

A failure to unify is depicted through an audio narrative containing both similar and conflicting ideas about the same experience. Narrators are introduced as two individual voices developing into multiple voices of one person. The conversation uses two forms of speech. As the story develops it becomes clear that my sister and I are taking different spatial-temporal positions as points to reconnect with each other and mutual memories. I am speaking from a child's idealized point of view while my sister uses direct speech to respond to the contemporary condition of the place. The weaving of perspectives is used to emphasize the relationship between inside and outside that reinforces a sense of longing to connect and memorize. Here personal narratives suggest complicated historical and political realities or results of inability to recall the context of memory.

The dominant dichotomy in the piece is embodied in the persistent contradictions. In that sense, the house is used primarily as a container of contradiction, being the place that is both nurturing and violent. The threshold in the story is a signifier of security and unity while in its materiality is an index of a body with the ambiguity of breaking in or breaking out of the structure. It is a liminal space connecting and separating inside and outside. The apple tree as a watchtower gives new perspective and nurtures territorialism. We are protecting traces of someone else's past while constructing a teleport to escape from it.





PART V
ENCOUNTERING THE OBJECT¹

First threshold. You are in the Russell Industrial Center in Detroit. The walk down a long hallway suggests the normality of an enclosed street, made complex by segregated spaces, rooms branching off on either side. Moving past those rooms along a linear path, you experience a sense of changing scale. Each room has a door and barred windows that allow in different concentrations of light, suggesting different levels of hospitality. Entering the room where my installation is placed, you see the gray box inside the larger space. Is it a monolith, or is it small enough to fit in your palm? You walk towards it. Your perception moves inward as you look at the house, and it, in turn, looks at you. Videos depict sensory organs, parts of a body, moments of experience that transform the house into a kind of person. The house invites you to enter it through the negative space of its torn portal. Once inside, you occupy it, and discover that its wholeness is accompanied by a sense of fragmentation, an excess of shifting sensory experience. In this way, too, the house is very much like a person—indeed, in your own unexpected encounter with the house, you may find that, in the end, it is very much like you.

- Collaborative writing on a rainy day at the Ugly Mug with my wonderful spiritual guide and jiu jitsu teacher, David Doris



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