

Rachel Junker

IP Thesis Final

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Collected Correspondence

I began this project with a box of letters. A collection of correspondences I have received in return for my own which were written haphazardly, frustratingly, intentionally and lovingly over the years. These letters serve as a record of absent people, times, and places, the envelopes their repository. Correspondences are often times held as intimate objects, tucked away in boxes. My boxful, letters stacked and protruding, is a recorded history of what and who has informed my life; in turn a fragmented portrait of myself. A record of myself. By preserving a record of myself through these correspondences, elevating their sacred nature, I am uncovering a view of my life for existing and coming generations that would otherwise be non-existent. My need for preservation in this way stems from fear.

I am fearful of death, the loss of memory, of existence being forgotten. When others tell me stories I feel the need to collect them, I take on the duty of their preservation, they become sacred to me. I attach myself to my collection of correspondences to preserve the record of myself, a record I wish was present for many family members I hardly knew. My father's father; an angry, confused, medically dependent, leather skinned man with a tattoo on his arm who we visited at the nursing home. My mother's mother, whom I knew only as secluded, unapproachable and very ill. My brother, ten years my senior, has a very different recollection of these people, before age and disease robbed them of character and life. It is through the sharing of stories and recollection of memory that I am able to piece together the hearts of these people I stood no chance of knowing, and it is with my boxful of collected correspondence that others will be able to do the same for me.

It is through letters that the character and personality, the relationships and the things held important to people give insight into particular lives and time periods. Today's digital age has caused the decline of the hand written letter. People are either confused or a bit impressed when they find out I partake in hand writing letters, and even more so when they realize I am writing longhand, not just a thank you note or friendly greeting card. Technology is convenient, most of us live in reach of a technological device and wifi, but letters are time intensive and demand attention; they are not fleeting like emails which are often deleted or ignored, and they do not risk the lack of personalization the click of a button; SEND ALL lends. I view the record of a person created by correspondences as more encompassing than photographs or stories alone. It is through a correspondence that the complexity in depiction of a person is most defined by their interactions with others, the way they moved through times in their lives described in full. We are all made up of stories and the day we cease to exist, the stories are what remains. Letters tell all sorts of stories, they are descriptions, apologies, instruction, encouragement, they are minutes or hours that were set aside to share in a life together, and that deserves attention.

The artist E.F. Higgins found value in the way that envelopes told a story even when separated from their contents. Envelopes are a platform which becomes stamped, dated, post marked and delivered. Isolating the stamp and postmark, Higgins is one of many stamp artists that views the stamping of an envelope as a platform which uses art to communicate ideas. By creating stamps, these artists, including Higgins, personalize an already existing form of print and illustration in a way that is easily multiplied and distributed. These artists utilize the envelope form, which is often devoid of narrative, to communicate a message which is fragmented in comparison to the letter itself, but arguably more interesting for the imagination the sender requires of the receiver. The work done by Higgins inspired me to look beyond the piece of paper that holds the letter, acknowledging the security the envelope offers, the same security I reach for in collecting correspondences by the boxful.

One historical form of documenting the record correspondences hold is by printing them in books. Many authors and poets have been immortalized in written print via the collection of their correspondences as a gateway into their lives. One of the most intriguing examples of these records, *The Gorgeous Nothings*, relies solely upon the jotted-down poems and ideas Emily Dickinson wrote on empty envelopes. This method of preservation uses the timeless form of a book to give the viewer a sense of personal connection to the writing. Presenting Dickinson's envelope writings as unaltered scans, I hold this collection higher to most for it delivers the poems in a way that is accessible publicly without stripping them of their distinctive form. The viewer is able to experience first hand the intimacy of Dickinson's handwriting, the materials she reached for in bringing a story to physical existence.

I started scanning my box full of letters, similar to *The Gorgeous Nothings*, as a way to organize them; by sender and also by date to present in book form. It was my intention with this book, to present a correspondence in full chronological order. The viewers of this book form felt intrusive entering into a relationship that was not their own. To address these effects on viewers and create something more subtle, I removed the content of the letters completely and created a sculptural piece from sewn envelopes which was in turn, entirely void of meaning. My first attempts to create a record were found lacking in content and also form; they neither described the importance of the correspondence as a collective nor displayed their delicacy. A narrative needed to be placed where I had stripped the original content of the letters or they would be nothing more than paper. By incorporating illustration I felt I would be able to transform the feeling of reading someone else's correspondence into an equally intimate but less intrusive act. I wanted to use illustration but needed to develop a platform on which to do it.

I began to think again of Higgins, of the envelope as a vessel that encases a letter, keeping it safe. Similarly, ceramic vessels have been used to house important and sacred objects, from everyday needs to precious heirlooms and sacrifices. Experimenting with clay as my platform, hand building envelopes, I used an unfolded envelope as reference, cutting clay that had been rolled out to size, folding my pattern. These first envelopes felt lacking in the delicacy that paper envelopes have. For a short time, a two-piece mold seemed an appropriate alternative. I was able to produce envelopes quickly but they proved too thin to cast successfully. I also realized that a mold form would feel mass produced and impersonal in comparison to something I was hand building. I moved to slab-built envelopes. Trying many types of clay, I was able to isolate a clay body which kept its integrity when rolled thin. I began

thinking of the handling of these ceramic envelopes and how I could encourage viewers to pick up and spend time with these objects.

Looking at ceramic artists, I came across the work of Jeannie Marchand who transforms flat clay slabs into visceral flowing objects begging to be touched. I began emulating folds into my ceramic envelopes, similar to Marchand's work, and also illustrating pieces of correspondence on the reverse sides with various techniques from image transfer to acrylic painting. Providing fragmented narratives and playing with form gave the envelopes a character of their own, but it was not able to show the importance of the collected correspondence as a whole. To communicate the importance of the envelopes as a whole, I had to convey them as one. Transitioning to a tile piece, I was able to show the importance of each envelope individually and also collectively. Instead of adding additional layers upon the clay to add narrative, I continued manipulating folds in the envelopes to create a low-relief image that is only complete when all of the envelopes are displayed together.

This work was never truly about presenting each narrative or story alone in its exactitude. It is about confronting a fear of being forgotten. It is about conveying that written correspondence creates record. It is about my boxful of letters and how they will preserve and create a record of my life when no one else can. Seventy-two envelopes tiled on a wall measuring a total of four feet by five feet, the envelopes retain the paper-like folds creating a low-relief self portrait, literally forming a record of myself. From a close distance, the portrait of myself is lost and the viewer sees that each envelope is unique, as is each letter in my collection. At a certain point, distance from the tile piece obscures it into a wrinkle upon the wall speaking to the subtle complexity of correspondence. In hand building these envelopes from clay I am mimicking the same tenderness of communication and care put into interpersonal relationships found in the act of letter writing. Taking form as a tile piece, the delicate formal ceramic nature acts as a shrine of sorts to these people, places and times found in my boxful of correspondences.

Works Cited

Bervin, Jen, Emily Dickinson, and Marta L. Werner. *The Gorgeous Nothings: Emily Dickinson's Envelope-poems*. New York: Granary, 2012. Print.

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Documentation of Final Work

