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Art ConText: This, and my heart: An Installation by Lynne Yamamoto

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The RISD Museum

Exhibition Notes, Number 10, Spring 2000



Lynne Yamamoto, American, 1961- , *Untitled*, 1999, photograph.
Courtesy of the artist.

This, and my heart an installation by
Lynne Yamamoto March 10
through April 30, 2000

On collaboration, the inner lives of young women, and teaching artists – or artist teachers: An Interview.

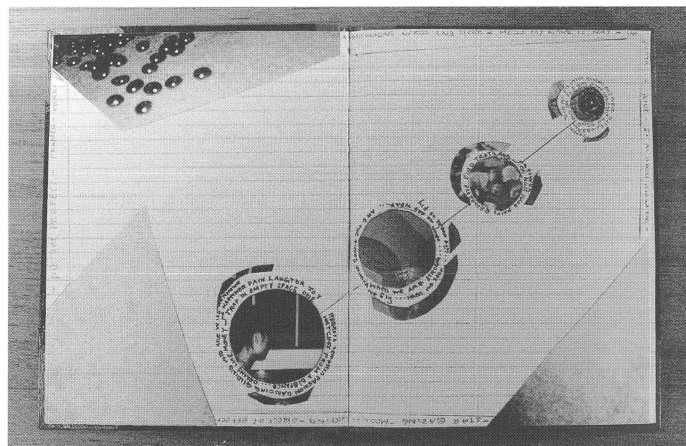
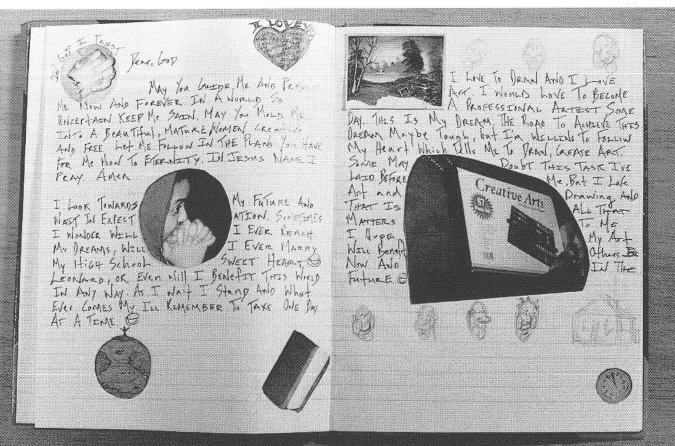
As Art ConText artist-in-residence between January 8 and March 9, 2000, Lynne Yamamoto worked with students from Providence's Mount Pleasant Public High School and a group of six students from Rhode Island School of Design in the development of *This, and my heart*. The following are her thoughts on questions posed by David Henry, Head of Education, The RISD Museum, and Stephen Oliver, Art ConText Project Coordinator.

Where did the title come from? Having named it well before the form of the exhibition was set, was there ever a moment when you wanted to change the title?

The title comes from a poem by Emily Dickinson [American, 1830-86]:

It's all I have to bring to-day,
This, and my heart beside,
This, and my heart, and all the fields,
And all the meadows wide.
Be sure you count, should I forget, –
Some one the sum could tell, –
This, and my heart, and all the bees
Which in the clover dwell.

One of the things that Emily Dickinson was seeking to convey in her poetry was a moment of intensity. Although I had some reservations – the phrase might be misinterpreted as overly sentimental when isolated from the poem that is its source – I never wanted to change it. My original plan for the installation has changed, but the emotional motivation at its core has not; thus the feeling embodied in the phrase is still true to the work.



Journals (l. to r.) by Naomi Gobern, May Kue, Karilenia Hernandez, and Rachel Paolino (photos by Stephen Oliver).

What is the central idea that you want the audience to grasp?

The installation has to do with the aspirations of young women and glimpses of their interior lives. It has been created from objects that are physical touchstones for passages in historical diaries from the collections of the Rhode Island Historical Society and Brown University's John Hay Library. Journals kept by the Mount Pleasant students are also included, adding contemporary voices. I would like the room to feel as though it is inhabited by the spirit of their words.

What qualities does this installation share with your other work?

Much of my work originates from narratives about women. I have drawn from a narrative of my maternal grandmother's life and, more recently, from fictional narratives. For the Art ConText program, I am working with the diaries of certain Rhode Island women. As in my other projects, a great deal of research and gestation are part of the process. This is how I approach the interior life of a person or persons. In my work I am particularly interested in how the physical belongings of a person or their living environment communicate something about them. Because of the time frame for this installation, I have not been able to be as contemplative as I am normally, but perhaps that has been a good learning experience. I have had to make decisions much more quickly than is usual for me.

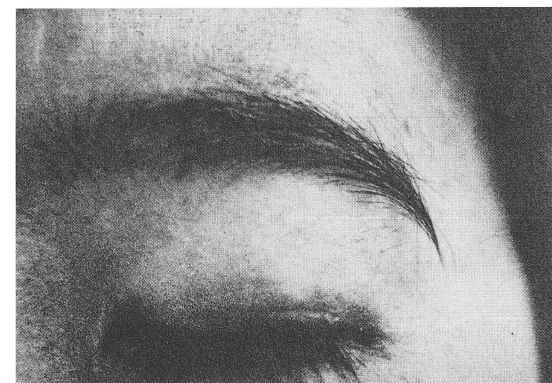
For this exhibition, you worked with students from RISD and students from Mount Pleasant High School. Is collaboration part of your normal practice?

Collaboration is a large part of my teaching practice. The situation I have found the most interesting involved a collaboration with a social studies and an English teacher at the Robert F. Wagner Jr. Institute for the Arts and Technology, an innovative high school for at-risk youth in Queens. I work there through the Visual Knowledge Program of the New Museum of Contemporary Art, so there are actually several facets to the collaboration. I have done other collaborative projects with high-school students in the past. In these situations I think it is very important that the expressions of the students have priority, thus I work more as a teacher and facilitator, and my presence as an artist is less visible.

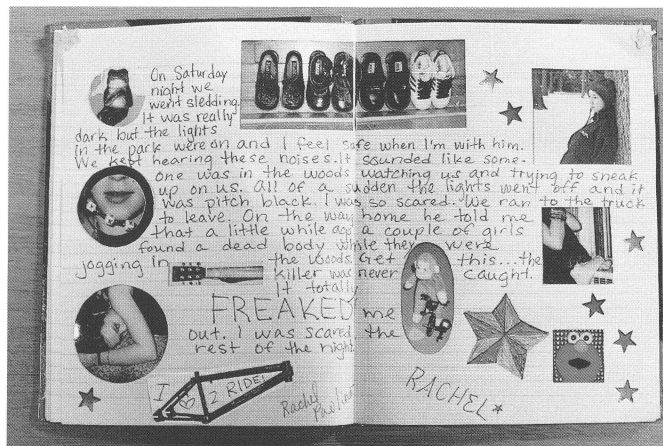
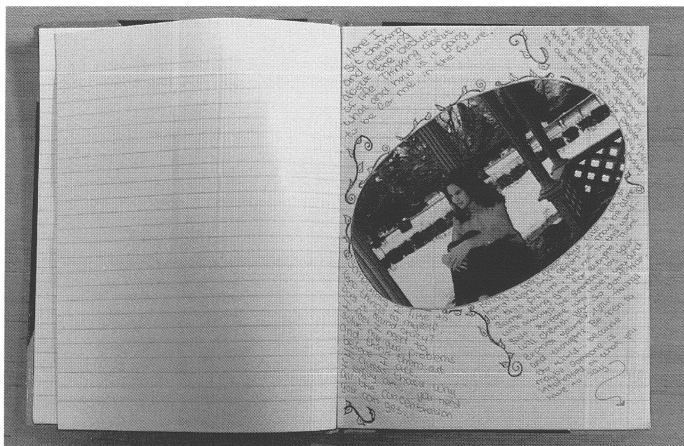
Because my artistic process is very internal and private, I have tended to keep the collaborative projects separate from my own artwork. I see them as mostly connected to my teaching. Art ConText poses huge challenges for me because it is designed so that I bear responsibility for the authorship of the physical product, while parts of it involve a collaboration with the Mount Pleasant students and, to a lesser extent, with the RISD students as well. The RISD students have been privy to explorations and changes that usually occur only in my head or in my studio.

Why did you want to work with young women?

Last year I worked with V.O.W. (Voices of Women), a group of young women from the High School of Art and Design in New York, and it was a very rewarding experience. Although the parameters and structure of Art ConText are considerably different, I hoped that the quality of our interaction would be similar. While all high-school students deal with complex challenges, I am particularly interested in those faced by young women, especially as they enter one of the defining periods of their lives.



Lynne Yamamoto, American, 1961- , *Photogravure from an edition entitled "Eyes, Dark,"* 2000. Courtesy of the artist.



Do you think of yourself as an educator who makes art or as an artist who teaches?

An artist who teaches. I identify myself primarily as an artist, but I love teaching and view it as a very important part of my practice as an artist.

What has been the involvement of the RISD students, and what do you hope they have taken from their Art ConText experience?

During the first weeks it was very difficult to have the RISD students experience the extent to which the process was an exploratory one. At a certain point, I realized that they would learn a great deal simply by observing the starts, changes, hesitations, challenges, and disappointments as the ideas for the project became more solid. It has been fun and very useful to have a group of people with whom to brainstorm and to talk through decisions and difficulties. The RISD students have been exceptionally enthusiastic and have contributed valuable insights and ideas. They have extremely diverse backgrounds and skills themselves, and it has been fascinating to observe how they have responded to this project.

I hope they get a feel for the complexities of doing this kind of work: all its rewards and frustrations. Regarding the process in general, these include such questions as how does an artist negotiate questions of authorship when some aspects are collaborative in nature? How does she respect the agency of all the people involved? In the case of my specific project, among the complications are those of how I use narratives as the origin for the physical installation. What kind of relationship is initiated between those narratives and the collaborative work?

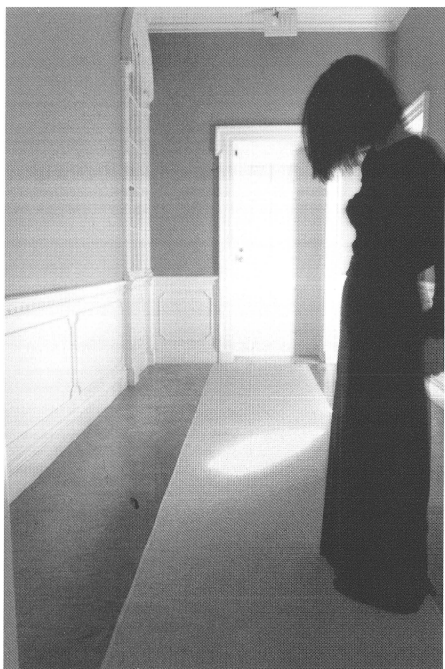
I also think it important to offer students useful feedback about their own artwork.

What about the Mount Pleasant students?

I hope the Mount Pleasant students have gained insights into an approach to art-making that they perhaps haven't come across before. I would like them to feel that they can express their personal visions, that they have learned new ways to express themselves, and that they have attained a sense that their voices are respected and important.

For this work, you and the RISD students did a lot of research about young women from the 18th and 19th centuries. Could you describe some of your explorations and what it was that you were looking for?

Initially I was interested in young women, literacy, and education in Providence, so our first explorations were in that direction. I was interested in using some of the Museum's late 18th- to early 19th-century samplers from the Balch School in Providence at that point. It was suggested that we continue our research at the Rhode Island Historical Society. When we made the appointment, Rick Stattler, the manuscripts curator, mentioned an article that had just been written about diaries of young women from the 18th century. Rick himself had just compiled an extremely useful directory to the diaries, which made them even more accessible to us. In fact, I am indebted to the fine organization of the diaries and directory because the idea of using this primary material might well have been unrealistic otherwise.



Lynne Yamamoto, American, 1961- , *Untitled photograph from "This, and my heart,"* 2000. Courtesy of the artist (photo made with Lucretia Knapp, New York).



RISD students (l. to r.) Eric Wong (2001), Brigida Swanson (2002), Leticia Tejada (2001), Laura Hsieh (graduate studies), and Lynne Yamamoto (photo by Stephen Oliver); not visible in photo, Cynthia Schwarz (2001) and Jason Sung Won Yoon (2001).

As the RISD students and I began reading the diaries, it became clear that there were some with terrific stories to tell. The next day I decided to focus on them. The diaries are beautiful objects in themselves, and I was completely captivated by being able to turn pages that had been written upon centuries ago. After quite an exhaustive search, there were still almost no images to be found of the women whose diaries we were reading. Their words and the character of their handwriting were all the means we had to discern what they and their lives were like. In general, we looked for self-reflective passages, strongly stated opinions, or unusual stories.

Beyond gender, age, and Rhode Island residency, could you characterize any similarities or differences between the contemporary students you worked with and those women that you discovered in the historic diaries?

The most significant difference is in the cultural context. Most of the women who were literate and had the leisure to keep diaries long ago were of the upper middle class. Many of the writers belonged to the network of families that comprised the elite of Providence in the 18th and 19th centuries. There are a few exceptions, however: a very slim book from a young woman, the daughter of a fish peddler, who was a seamstress and dreamed of playing the organ.

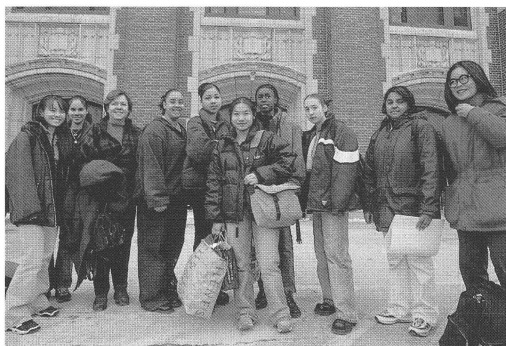
The group of young women from Mount Pleasant, on the other hand, reflects recent changes in the population of Providence. Their ethnic backgrounds are very diverse, a few have emigrated from other countries, and most are the first generation in their family to be born here in the United States. Mount Pleasant High School is a public magnet school for teaching and health, so many are studying towards careers in those fields. Some of the young women are planning to pursue studies in art.

Have you ever felt like you were prying into these girls' lives? What could be more personal than the diary of a young woman? This intimacy seems to be something you have focused on in other works as well. Can you say why you are attracted to these personal, secret lives?

I am very concerned about respecting the privacy of the students at Mount Pleasant. I have not read their diaries, except for what they chose to show me or tell me about. In the case of the historical diaries, I don't feel quite the same concern, since they are available for public viewing.

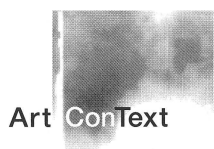
Narratives are powerful. They can convey information that would seem prescriptive or didactic in nonfiction, and they are often much more pleasurable to read. These diaries do not generally contain stated facts about the living conditions of the young women, but a great deal may be gleaned by reading between the lines. In some of the diaries, such an intensity of feeling comes through the young woman's intimate relationship with her paper confidante. When I begin a work, I need to start from that point of intensity, as, I imagine, Emily Dickinson did.

Lynne Yamamoto grew up in Hawaii and currently works in New York. Having studied as a painter at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, she began working on installations while fulfilling the requirements for her master's degree at New York University. She has participated in artist residencies in Ireland, Canada, New York, and most recently in Japan. She has exhibited nationally and internationally and has created major installations at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York and at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Phillip Morris, also in New York.



The students from Mount Pleasant High School who participated in this project are (l. to r.) Por Seng, Karilenia Hernandez, art teacher Karen Gallagher, Celina Santana, Luz Almanzar, May Kue, Theresa Martins, Rachel Paolino, Naomi Gobern, and Lynne Yamamoto (photo by Stephen Oliver).

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Rhode Island School of Design
Providence, Rhode Island



This, and my heart is the fifth Art ConText project. Art ConText, a partnership between the Providence Public Library and The RISD Museum, is designed to introduce new audiences to contemporary art; to bring art and reading programs to library branches throughout Providence; and to provide opportunities for RISD students to apply their talents. Funding for Art ConText is provided by Pew Charitable Trusts, The Institute for Museum and Library Services, and the National Endowment for the Arts.