One Thing Led to Another

The Story of Deborah Margo’s Salt and Paper Intervention and the Tangents and Events that Followed

Edited by Petra Halkes
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-Written by Petra Halkes, unless otherwise indicated-
How One Thing Led to Another

The story begins with RIA.

We, Petra Halkes and René Price, are an artist couple in their sixties. We live in a big old house with an empty dining room that we don’t want to fill with useless furniture. In 2006, we began asking local artists to give presentations in the room: talks about interesting research trips, residencies or exhibitions outside of Ottawa. To this day, Salons and other events continue to be held here. All of the get-togethers focus on reading and discussion of contemporary art; sessions are well attended by a little more than twenty people each time.

Then, in 2011, we began to show exhibitions in our dining room, and retro-actively named our whole enterprise RIA, after my sister, who died in 2006. I like to hear her name. Besides its memorial role, RIA also stands for “Research in Art.” The story behind the name RIA, then, shows the home-based cultural character of our project: it aims to bring art’s impersonal abstractions—the abstraction of theory as well as of the mysterious machinations of the global art-world— into a domestic sphere. The opposite of abstract, home is a deeply personal place where most artists made their first work of art.

In 2012 and 2013, a number of exhibitions by Ottawa artists follow one another: Gail Bourgeois, Anna Frlan, Lynda Hall, Patti Normand, Joyce Westrop, Sherry Tompalski, Bozica Radjenovic, Svetlana Swinimer, Dan Sharp and Gayle Kells. Each exhibition was documented with images and essays which are still online.¹

The exhibitions were well attended. Festive openings were followed by serious discussion sessions with friendly peer critics. But, after almost two years of regular exhibitions, we looked for an exhibition format that could deviate somewhat from the regular exhibition pattern of install-open-discuss-close- take-down. The disconnect, between one exhibition and the next, seemed unnecessary in this informal setting, and represented a lost opportunity to let artworks and ideas of one exhibition linger and play a role in the projects that would follow. We envisioned an exhibition path much like the working process of an individual artist in which the creation of one work inspires the next. The home-setting, with its absence of commercial and institutional demands, seemed particularly suited to a free, creative flow.

¹ http://researchinartottawa.wordpress.com
This is not to say that such a process can only be created at home. We are inspired by some long-term curatorial projects in world-renowned galleries which we follow online, such as Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam, and, in particular, Anthony Huberman’s The Artist’s Institute at Humber College, New York. Here, the work of one artist remains central for a season in order to let his or her work inspire thought, ideas, new art and discussions involving other artists. This seemed an idea worth trying, so we invited Deborah Margo to be the key artist at RIA for the season of 2013/2014. Margo has extensive experience creating interventions in unusual places. Her work combines different disciplines including sculpture, drawing and ephemeral installations that draw connections to the architectural and historical contexts of the public and private spaces in which they have been installed.

And then, one thing led to another. Follow the trail of what happened next..............................................
1. August 14 – September 4, 2014:

Deborah Margo’s Residency at RIA

For three weeks in August 2013, when we were in The Hague, Deborah Margo came to our house almost every day. On a typical visit, she would turn on the sprinklers in the garden, pull some weeds, chat with our tenant Izabella, who was gearing up for her last year at law school, and put one fifty-pound salt lick in the laundry sink.\(^2\) By the end of her residency, she had brought in seventeen salt licks of different sizes—some new, others in varying stages of disintegration—and had placed them in the oddest nooks and crannies in the house. She had also used some Tyvek that she had found in the Project Room, a leftover from another project.\(^3\)

Tyvek is a strong, plastic-fibred paper used in construction. The paper was draped throughout the Project Room and flowed from the windows into the back yard and front walkway. Desk lamps were propped up on upside-down chairs underneath the paper. When lit, they revealed the organic-looking patterns of the plastic fibres.

Margo’s work at RIA’s showed her inclination to observe keenly what is at hand, and to introduce unusual objects and materials into everyday situations. There is something of a surrealist painting in a meeting of salt licks and Tyvek on the walkway of a house. But, unlike the Surrealists, Margo does not master such situations in paint and canvas; her meetings of objects remain temporary and changeable. By leaving much of her artistic agency to the processes of decay, chance and accidents that shape the fate of creatures and things alike, she shows a humbling respect for things and natural processes, and a willingness to see art making as a collaborative process between humans and objects in the everyday environment. As writer and curator François Dion wrote in a 2007 catalogue essay: “The work of Deborah Margo always takes the risk of not being art. It benefits projective imagination and creative practice through an exchange with the potential of the material world and its subjects, in the observation of their becoming.”\(^4\)

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\(^2\) A salt lick is a block of salt and/or other minerals, which serves as a nutritional supplement for deer and cattle.

\(^3\) For that other project, see: EBA/Quartair Exchange= Dutch Settlement + Interference. Catalogue for the exhibitions. (Ottawa: Enriched Bread Artists 2014).

Relinquishing artistic skills and procedures to indeterminate natural processes and chance requires a shift in human-centred thinking, which is not easy for artists who have grown up in a Western, modernist culture. Margo, too, has her doubts, as she lets us know in her day-book at RIA’s. After putting a salt block in every room of the house and a big yellow one in the garden, she writes in her second week: “no longer sure what I am doing – the beginning point made sense! Now what?”

But she persists: moving, looking, thinking, marking…..

In the third week, Margo invites photographer Lawrence Cook to take photographs. “Pictures taken with available light,” she writes in her daybook, “a story within a story – document?” Cook’s photos are documents of art works in process, of objects and contexts that will never look the same as they did at that fleeting moment when the camera clicked. The photo, on the other hand, unchanging, attains a sense of permanence, and conveys the skills and style of its maker. Taking advantage of the play of light and shadow, Cook helps us see the drama of the salt blocks, the life of these “dead” objects.
Margo invites another photo artist, Lynda Hall, who takes small snapshots while talking and listening to her and to us. Our presence is visible in Hall’s photos, an arm, a hand, a towel: signs of human life among the objects. Margo wrote, in her second week: “Where does the object belong among all these many other objects?” Hall’s photos ask where the human belongs among all these many other objects.

Are the photographs—the stillness of the image, the tangibility of the print—simply documentation or are they works of art? To push this question further, let me ask: are the photos the “real” art work, rather than the installations?

It is Margo’s installations, however, that began this particular creative process, which is, to repeat Dion’s words, “an exchange with the potential of the material world and its subjects, in the observation of their becoming.” In such a process, the borders between subject and object and between art and life are reconsidered. In such a process, who the artist is remains an unanswered question.
2. Saturday September 14, 2013, 4 – 7 PM:

Deborah Margo: *Salt and Paper – Interventions at RIA*

On the afternoon of this Saturday, approximately forty viewers are given a ten-minute timeslot to explore the house and find the *Salt and Paper* installations. There is no opening, the artist is not present and neither are we. Sabrina Chamberland, one of Deborah’s students, has been hired to hand out maps.

Visitors poke around the house on their own, sometimes meeting a stranger or friend on the stairways, in the laundry room or kitchen. They find, among the everyday stuff and P&R’s eclectic art collection, seventeen blocks of salt and yards and yards of Tyvek.

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Deborah Margo, *Salt and Paper Installation*, detail. Photo: Lawrence Cook
3. September 15, 2013:

Deborah takes most of the Tyvek and many of the saltlicks back to her studio and works with the natural marks left on the paper.

4. September 23, 2013:

Ten visitors return for an evening of discussion in which stories arise about privacy and voyeurism, about paper and attics, the meaning of upturned chairs and the scientific and mythical properties of salt. Ideas for new events come up. Lawrence Cook suggests to spread out from RIA to other spaces. A few visitors take home a small salt lick, to put in their own gardens.
Gail Bourgeois, *Soft Chair*, drawing and collage. 2014
5. October 11, 2013

Gail Bourgeois spends a morning at RIA, sketching the remaining salt licks. From her sketches and notes, she creates a series of drawings and writes an essay:

An Early Tangential Exploration

By Gail Bourgeois

The first time I experienced the salt licks was as a visitor to *Salt and Paper* where artist Deborah Margo placed bright, differently coloured salt blocks in the domestic spaces of Petra and René’s home. These temporary placements forwarded the home’s lived rooms as containers (a body) for them and raised many interesting questions about art and how it can be seen and understood. Inherent to the character of showing artworks in a domestic setting is an interest in the permeability between the private and public and between the lived and imagined. It provides the artist and the viewer a potential to experience new ideas and different ways of thinking about making and of viewing art.

Evolving out of slow wanderings throughout the house, I formulated questions about the awkwardness of the blocks (randomly?) placed from the basement to the attic. If they are sculptures, I wanted to locate a reason for them in the space. Salt blocks in a domestic space, where does meaning lie in their placements? Do they represent an abject state? Should the history or the physical properties of salt be of interest?

Are these questions relevant or are they arbitrarily provoked by the exhibition? Such questions led me to think critically about art’s potential to create a space of otherness.

In a space of not here and not there, I felt lost between the familiar, Petra’s home, and an estranged container for art, the house. Normally non-closure is welcome as a way of inserting myself into an artwork. While disrupting the sanctuary and comfort associated with “home,” perhaps the scale of the blocks aided their isolation. Blocks of salt, inorganic compounds representing food conservation, corrosion and even currency, were a beautifully composed presence of colours and textures. Fending for myself in a search for meaning, I felt a strong desire to sit with them and to draw them extended into the surrounding spaces. I wanted to link them with meaning inherent to their context.

The second time I saw the salt licks, many had been rearranged and concentrated in the Project Room for an evening of discussion with the artist. The open conversation
changed my perspective on the blocks and their placement, making them more familiar. Listening to the artist and the experiences of others who attended the exhibition affected my initial viewing. The intention of the artist in creating work is paramount but is not necessarily received by the viewer.

Drawing is slow and is constructed of things seen closely. It was a weekday morning less than a month later when I arrived at Petra and René’s ready to draw. I wanted my drawings to begin a different, more intimate experience. Arriving in the garden, a large full-sized block covered with crystal bubbles glistened with rainwater and small autumn leaves of gold delicately held in a circular crevice at the top. I looked at the block and the bowl it was sitting in and then at our surroundings. The colours were too beautiful and the textures too seductive. There was nothing for me to do. All was perfect, at home. I did not feel apart from the block in the garden; I was of it.

Over the next five hours I sketched, chatted and ate lunch with friends. Certain blocks or the context of a block turned out to be less interesting to draw than I originally felt. The basic colourful cubes were made flat by the overall even lighting. The blocks in the attic provided the only exception. One light source from a window behind where I was sitting on the top step highlighted the crevices and surface imperfections, turning them into mountains and valleys of great magnitude.

In my studio, collecting together my descriptive sketches, I circled back to ideas of drawing the spaces around the blocks by representing the literal blocks and creating a challenged domestic space to ground them on the drawing surfaces. The attic drawings depict a satisfying fit of the blocks into their spaces that shows them at home.

As I was growing up, every meal, of every day, was spiced with salt and pepper. Few other seasonings were used. Perhaps that is another layer of meaning for me. When my mother died, I found the green metal box full of recipes she had saved over many years, starting when she married my father. Each recipe is one like the next.

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5 See my experimental art video on the subject of the slowness and repetition in the drawing process titled, every day matters. http://vimeo.com/67503134

HAM A LA KING CUSTARDS
Costs 65 cents (February 1947)
Serves 4. Woman’s Day Kitchen

3 eggs, grade B, separated
1 12-ounce jar ham a la king
Salt and pepper

Beat egg yolks; add ham a la king; season to taste with salt and pepper. Fold in stiffly beaten egg whites. Pour into 4 greased individual casseroles; place in pan of hot water, bake in moderate oven, 375° F., for 25 to 35 minutes or until set.
6. October 16, 2013:

Tangent 1: Kenneth Emig, *Point of No Return*

As a first *Tangent* to Deborah Margo’s interventions in the RIA Artist Project Room, Kenneth Emig provided a compacted exhibition in which the vernissage, performance, artist talk, discussion and finissage took place in one evening.

*Tyvek* played a part in the exchange project between Quartair Contemporary Art Initiatives in The Hague and the Enriched Bread Artists of Ottawa, which I had organized for August 2013. We had traveled to The Hague with a large roll of *Tyvek* to use in the EBA exhibition *Interference*, at Quartair. We installed one hundred yards of Tyvek into the gallery, to set a process of *Interference* in motion.\(^6\)

Emig experimented with *Tyvek* and theatrical lights in The Hague, where he was taking part in the exhibition. Before the other EBA artists arrived, Emig had worked on site for days, experimenting with two theatrical lighting fixtures on the draped paper. His documentation of this process shows dramatic compositions of lit shapes in white and coloured lights.

To our surprise and delight, we found another *Tyvek* installation (by Deborah Margo) in our home when we returned from The Hague. Then we invited Emig to go on a *Tangent*, taking Margo’s paper installation as a starting point and taking advantage of the opportunity to use his experimentation in The Hague.

Comparing his work with paper and light to the medium of drawing in its directness, changeability and forgiveness, Emig changed the shapes and colours of his projection by the re-positioning of lights and screen to provide a potentially endless series of variations.

It is only when he picked up a knife that he reached the point of no return.

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\(^6\) See footnote 3, page 4
Emig turned his suitcase gallery into a stage for one of Deborah Margo’s salt licks.

Kenneth Emig, *Point of No Return*. Photo Kate Oaksley

Tangent 2: Winter Garden: Linda Luneau and Deborah Margo

+ works from RIA’s collection by: Gail Bourgeois, Alex Cameron, Len Chodirker, Lynda Cronin, Mariko Paterson, Mendelson Joe, Juliana McDonald, Marie-Jeanne Musiol, Patti Normand, Bozica Radjenovic, Chrystl Rijkeboer, René Price, Brent Roe, H. Masud Taj, Paul Walde.

The summer of 2013 was warm and wet, and the gardens were lush. At the end of September, the dozens of house plants in our garden looked too good to be tossed on the compost heap, too alive to be left to freeze. They were brought in, along with Margo’s salt licks that had been worked at by rain and leaves, as well as the dishes they sat in, transformed by the salt and disintegrating. The RIA Project Room began to look like the outdoors, and the idea evolved to create a winter garden exhibition, integrating art and nature. For this exhibition, Margo reworked a sheet of the Tyvek paper that she originally installed in the garden during her summer residency at RIA. The work, The Bone Geometry of Moving from There, to There, 2013, shows the unexpected organic quality of this building material, a meshing of nature and culture.

Linda Luneau was invited, a painter and draughtsperson whose work is inspired by the tenacity of the urban forest and the beauty of the city’s rivers and Gatineau Park. In her lifelong battle with mental illness Luneau found solace in the growth and decay of plants and trees, which led to a deep political concern with environmental issues. Her painting, Another River, brought a summer landscape into the Winter Garden. The title refers to a poem by the American poet W.S. Merwin, and, Luneau said, “echoes the sense of loneliness that one sometimes experiences in nature.”

The painting provides a sense of anticipation, counteracting the anxieties conveyed by the leafless trees in her drawings, which were made during a particular stressful time in her life.

In addition, Winter Garden highlighted some works from our private collection that have a particular relationship to nature, or simply looked good in the garden!

The garden, nature and the vexed position of landscape painting in contemporary art were the focus of this exhibition, which was complemented by an evening of readings from Jennifer Stead’s story of how she came to be a landscape painter.

7 W.S. Merwin, “Another River” in The Atlantic Monthly; April 1997; Three Poems; Vol. 279, #4: p. 103
Linda Luneau, Another River. Triptych, c. 2003
Winter Garden. Painting: René Price; Sculpture: Bozica Radjenovic
Deborah Margo: The Bone Geometry of Moving from There, to There. 2013

A Book of Complaints is a personal story which became Jennifer Stead’s award-winning thesis accompaniment for her M.F.A. exhibition at the University of Calgary in 2007. In conjunction with the Winter Garden exhibition, Stead was invited to attend a Reading Out Loud session, where participants read excerpts from her thesis and discussed these with the author. The event attracted a number of landscape painters. Indeed, the evening became a love-in for practitioners of a genre that is much maligned in contemporary art.

A Book of Complaints is unpublished but can be found online in the Links page at www.researchinartottawa.wordpress.com

“Expulsions and exile, losses and grieving. One July after the land had been sold, the new owners invited us back for a picnic and an afternoon swim at my grandparents’ cottage. Instantly immersed in a multiplicity of concurrent poignant moments and shared loss, my cousin Sally and I burst into tears at the sound of the screen door slamming shut”. (p.4)
There are many ways to read Jennifer’s text, and find points of discussion. There is, to begin with, the strange fact that this personal story, albeit interwoven with a wide range of art historical references, could have become a thesis that won the author the Chancellor’s Gold Medal for best Master thesis of the year at the University of Calgary.

Getting an MFA provides a great, intensive time for artists to find directions and shape their art practice. The university’s encouraging environment provides many opportunities for discussion, but writing the thesis can be quite a challenge. We all know from reading and writing any kind of “artist statement,” being put in a position to “theorize” your work can lead to some strained prose and far-fetched theories. Stead put her story, which starts from a more personal place, out there for us to consider it as an alternative.

The relationship between language and the visual is complicated. Although words form part of our thoughts, it often seems impossible to adequately translate emotions and visions into words. Stead stubbornly maintains that there is something unique to painting, something that cannot be adequately expressed verbally: “our paintings give form to ideas that are fragile and risk obfuscation if scrutinized and resolved in language before paint.” (p.23)

In her well-defended opinion --relying on intuition and experience--Stead takes issue with well-known writers on the landscape, such as Simon Schama, and counters his deconstructive viewpoint by foregrounding emotion and personal relationships with friends and lovers, that complicate how we experience the reality of nature, of place.

Yet she does question our relationship to nature, and especially to place. She does not advocate a Romantic transcendence into nature, but asks what role does the natural environment, and our own specific place in it, play in creating our identity, our home? “How do I determine where I can locate what are wilderness, a park and a garden, and where home might be?” (p.65)

How realistic is it to think that a natural place, a landscape, a garden can provide a sense of identity in these nomadic times?
9. January 12, 2014:

Tangent 4: Jane Bennett: “Powers of the Hoard, Artistry and Agency in a World of Vibrant Matter”

We watched a youtube recording of a lecture that was hosted by the Vera List Center of Art and Politics at the New School in New York 2011. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=q607Ni23QjA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q607Ni23QjA)

In this lively lecture Bennett looks at hoarding, and the t.v. program *Hoarders*. Setting aside the psychological, therapeutic point of view of the producers of the program and the social workers and psychologists that are featured in it, she focuses on the draw that the multitude of things in the world has on people, a draw that becomes an overpowering force for some people.

The screening was followed by several study sessions on Jane Bennett’s book, *Vibrant Matter, a Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press 2010)

Bennett’s “materialist vitalism” emphasizes a shift in a human-centred view of the world, by paying attention to what she called “the call of things.” We are so used to considering “things” as “mere matter,” that it is difficult to find a right kind of vocabulary for this new way of thinking without courting accusations of animism, romanticism and vitalism. Bennett mentioned in her lecture that the difficult task of “translating” the call of things might benefit from attempts in art and poetry.

A respect for the flow of things prevails in all of Margo’s work; reading Jane Bennett provided a theoretical context for the ongoing projects.
Sitting with Salt – Notes on Jane Bennett’s Thoughts and Deborah Margo’s Things.

“We are walking, talking minerals.” – Vladimir Ivanovic Vernadsky.

At this point, January 2014, we had lived with Margo’s drawing and salt licks for months. Since the initial installation, the salt and paper had disappeared or moved, morphed and changed, crumbled, crystallized, grown, been drawn and drawn on, cut up, admired, mused on, photographed, talked about, used, and even tripped over. Not just us, but many visiting artists, as well as water and air, were affected by and had an effect on Deborah’s salt blocks and paper scrolls.

The salt licks in particular were making us think about the meaning of objects in our life, and how so much of that meaning is determined through context. They were so out of place in a domestic setting where they’d never attract cows or deer, the task they were made for. Yet the materials that salt licks are made of are not alien to our bodies. Minerals are as necessary to human health as they are to the health of the animals the blocks were intended for. “We are walking, talking minerals,” Jane Bennett quoted a late nineteenth-century scientist in her book Vibrant Matter, a Political Ecology of Things. ¹⁸ I brought the chair with the small brown salt lick into the RIA room from the upstairs balcony. Margo had placed it in a small dish with water, a dish that had become crusted with salt, as had the block itself. The water seemed to be leaking through the dish, so I added another bowl. There was a stain on the chair seat. I kept watering the block, and

¹⁸ Vladimir Ivanovic Vernadsky was a late nineteenth century Russian scientist. This quote was found within a quote of Margulis and Sagan, in Jane Bennett: Vibrant Matter, a Political Ecology of Things, (Durham and London: Duke University Press 2010): “What struck [Vernadsky] most was that the material of Earth’s crust has been packaged into myriad moving beings whose reproduction and growth build and break down matter on a global scale. People, for example, redistribute and concentrate oxygen and other elements of Earth’s crust into two-legged, upright forms that have an amazing propensity to wander across, dig into and in countless other ways alter Earth’s surface. We are walking, talking minerals.” P. 11
one day, its base had eroded into smaller pieces. I rearranged them. The thing seemed quite alive, and so I pulled up another chair in case it needed company.

“This arrangement needs a title,” I mused to René one day. “Sitting with Salt,” he said. I was reminded of Gail Bourgeois’ words in the essay she had sent me about her encounter with the salt sculptures: “Fending for myself in a search for meaning, I felt a strong desire to sit with them and to draw them extended into the surrounding spaces. I wanted to link them with meaning inherent to their context” (p. 13).

It wasn’t just me, then, tempted into a little anthropomorphism by the salt blocks in my house. Thinking about the cosy grouping of weathered ones snuggled in a layer of insulation up in the attic, made me smile. The restless little one on the chair, the one that people want to sit with, made me care; I watered it, I rearranged its broken pieces.

Anthropomorphism has been eschewed in the mechanical, scientific culture of Western Modernity. With the development of analytical science, a clear division between what is alive and what is not, what is subject and what is
object, has been a sine-qua-non for empirical science since the seventeenth century. But, from antiquity to the present day, there have been alternative approaches to knowledge of nature in which the boundaries between subject and object are not strictly adhered to. In the last couple of decades, the discourse in a range of academic disciplines, from philosophy, political science, social studies, anthropology, as well as in literature and art, has been heavily focused on blurring, or even erasing the line between subject and object, human and animal, animate and non-animate.

Bennett proposes a “vital materialism,” drawing the vibrancy of things into new assemblages that could spur humans to become more responsible and caring for the world they live in. A fastidious scholar, she provides a wealth of historical background, in particular to related, historical theories of vitalism. She carefully outlines similarities and differences between her thoughts and those of Baruch Spinoza, Henri Bergson, Hans Driesch and Theodor Adorno, and contemporary thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway and many others. Her radical suggestions about affinities between mere matter and human life are at times expressed almost hesitantly, as if she is searching for a new vocabulary, expressing a different way of thinking about the life-world.

According to Bennett, the life-world is characterised by a vitalism that is a material life force, “a life” that is not restricted to humans or animals, but is shared by all things and natural and cultural processes in constantly changing configurations. She writes: “First, a life is not only a negative recalcitrance but a positive, active virtuality: a quivering protoblob of creative elan” [which, as she notes on p. 54 can be destructive as well as constructive]. “Second, a life draws attention not to a life world of human designs or their accidental, accumulated effects, but to a interstitial field of non-personal, ahuman force, flows, tendencies, and trajectories.” (p. 61)

Bennett’s words bring us close to ideas that surface in Margo’s practice, where things are not, first of all, an extension in space, but integrated in a flow of energy and interconnected in an infinite number of assemblages. All things share an impulse to seek alliances with other bodies.

Sitting with Salt showcases the invisible movement going on inside matter, be it ever so slowly. The salt lick has shown great transformations since Margo first put it out on my balcony. The water I poured over it while watering my plants, has changed the block a great deal. But water is an outside force, applied by me to this object. This is of interest, of course, and creates beautiful forms and surfaces, whether the water is applied with a watering can, by cow tongues or by a hurricane.  

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9 See Margo’s Hurricane Irene Remnants, on her website: www.deborahmargo.ca see also p. 30
Deborah Margo, detail of Salt and Paper installation. Yellow salt lick in RIA’s garden. 2013  Photo: Petra Halkes
The yellow salt lick that stayed in the garden during the summer and fall months of 2013, corroded little, and, once taken inside for the Winter Garden, imperceptibly so. Yet, although the salt blocks transform very slowly, their change is not as slow as other matter we come across in our house, such as wood, glass, metal. The changing salt blocks, then, despite their solidity, remind us, visibly, that decay is shared by all matter, and that the difference is only in the speed of change, which for most matter is so slow to be invisible.
10. April 6 – May 13, 2014:

Tangent 5: Never Forever: On Holding Things Together and Letting Go

Exhibition with works by Gail Bourgeois, Karen Jordon, Deborah Margo, Christine Nobel, Susie Osler, René Price and Bozica Radjenovic.

In the spring exhibition, Never Forever, Sitting with Salt was moved to the porch, awaiting warm weather and company. For the Project Room, Margo brought in a number of salt-licks that had similarly been changed by water, but under very different circumstances. The salt blocks, placed on the RIA Project Room’s cabinet, belonged to a series that had been installed in a field in Vermont, during a residency there in 2011. After the field was completely flooded by hurricane Irene, Margo managed to locate and salvage most of the blocks. These blocks, Hurricane Irene Remnants, tell a tale of survival, but they have lost their monumentality. Their deep grooves of erosion caution viewers that nothing will last forever. As life’s transience includes our own death, it is not an easy truth to accept. One response to life’s unbearable contingencies would be a detachment from the real world and historical consciousness.

The artists that were brought together for this exhibition, including Margo, do not show such a Stoic attitude. Rather, they represent humans’ futile, but persistent efforts to hold things together; some re-enact these efforts in an artistic practice that is filled with obsessive, repetitive “doing and undoing”.

They contemplate and re-enact human attempts to create a permanent order, to make things last, keep our bodies whole, extend life, defy death. This exhibition invites us to think about the natural inevitability of transience, as well as the heroic human efforts to create unchanging systems, against knowing better.

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10 Helen Day Art Centre, Stowe, Vermont. See Margo’s website http://deborahmargo.ca/irene.htm

Deborah Margo, *Hurricane Irene Remnants 2011*
Such efforts go back a long way. **Gail Bourgeois** reminds us of this in *everyday matters*, a video work that references Prometheus, the ancient Greek hero who created man from clay and stole fire from the gods to bring divine, everlasting power to humans. Bourgeois, whose main practice is drawing, comments on the persistent, ongoing endeavours that are required for the making of art. She shows the slow process of drawing, by creating a work through marking and erasing, doing and undoing. This repetitive process then becomes a metaphor for the creation of a coherent art practice: a process of repeated applications and rejections.

Bourgeois extends the metaphor of drawing even further by bringing in the myth of Prometheus, whom Zeus punished for his human ambitions with endlessly repeated torture: he chained him to a rock and sent an eagle to peck out his liver every day. The liver would grow back the next day, upon which the winged torturer would return. According to some versions of the story, Prometheus beat the odds eventually, when he was rescued by Heracles and made amends with Zeus.\(^{12}\) The acquired power of fire, however, enabled a human progress that turned out to be not so divine. Despite our bright civilization, our human lives continue to resemble drawing as a process of doing and undoing, of the making and erasing of lines.

\(^{12}\) Prometheus Unbound, a play attributed to Aeschylus.  
In an age of computers and keyboards it is easy to forget that writing, like drawing, is based on lines. Bozica Radjenovic’s sculpture, *Story within a Story*, with its flowing handwritten text, reminds us of the closeness of writing and drawing. A roll of acetate, with the exact height of the artist’s body, is completely covered in red words. The meaning of the words can only be guessed at, since they are difficult, indeed impossible, to read. Radjenovic told me that she used an excerpt from Orhan Pamuk’s novel *My Name is Red*, but that the choice was arbitrary, if slightly determined by the word *Red* in the title. What mattered to her was the writing as writing: the red line that ran from the permanent marker held by the hand of the artist. The anthropologist Tim Ingold, writes in his book *Lines, A Brief History*: “We fail to recognize the extent to which the very art of writing, at least until it was ousted by typography, lay in the drawing of lines. For writers of the past a feeling or observation would be described in the movement of a gesture and inscribed in the trace it yields.”

There is, perhaps, an inherent contradiction in both the lines of drawing and the lines of handwriting. Drawn lines walk and flow outwards from the body of the artist, and allow the artist to follow their dynamic paths. Lines draw us out of ourselves, crossing and intermingling with lines of others in constant movement. But lines can also be descriptive and defining, pinning things down in a precise, delineated image, or circumscribing them in words.

Upright, and rolled up, Radjenovic’s sculpture stands for a human being, a subject held together by words. But the roll looks fragile, and the words tentative, as if they could spill out into the world at any moment.

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In Christine Nobel’s drawings and paintings numerous ruler-drawn lines form grid patterns that fill the picture plane and suggest an expansion beyond its edges. Nobel’s organic brush strokes in soft colours punctured by occasional stronger tones, interweave and overlap the straight pencil lines that barely contain them. The hesitant hand-made quality of these frameworks, which are sometimes filled with randomly repeated patterns of marks and squiggles, belies the grid’s reputation as an empirical chart that delineates and measures knowledge. While the grids in these works mimic the meticulous repetition of patterns in ancient tapestries, they also hint at the longitudinal and latitudinal lines of a map. The reference to an above-ground, panoramic view of the earth is corroborated by titles that indicate large stretches of landscape: Arizona, Asian Pathways. Nobel’s veiled, yet map-like views of geographical locations that are tightly interwoven with signifiers of human transcendence, indicate a profound awareness of the cultural/nature mesh to evoke an experience of pure, untrained beauty.

The grid here marks a desire to envision an all-encompassing cosmic structure of which nature, including human nature, would form a part. Such a gods-eye view can only be glimpsed in these paintings, as in real life; our brief, embodied existence provides only a limited view, in time and space, of the infinite wonder of the world.
Obsessive mark making takes on a different method and meaning in Karen Jordon’s sculpture, *Still*. She began her work with a whole, functioning wooden kitchen chair and chipped away incessantly at its legs, spindles and seats until the chair barely held together, became a specter of its former self. The glass coffee table serves here as a plinth and provides a view of the floor beneath. Here lie the countless wood chips that once belonged to this chair, held it together and pronounced it whole.

Still clearly recognizable, what has been destroyed, through Jordon’s destructive whittling, is the chair’s function, which was to provide a place to sit. What has emerged instead is an object that speaks of fragility, of the impossibility to exist as a singular, bounded entity in an interconnected world.

A chair raises a body off the ground, creating a distance from the earth that sustains us. This particular characteristic of a chair is highlighted here by the sculpture’s position on the table and by the backdrop of Margo’s drawing which was created with natural elements. The chips on the floor underneath the glass table take on an organic quality; they hark back to the wood of trees and the forest, with its natural decay and growth. With a gentle humour, the chips make a mockery out of the chair as a symbol of strength and human control and, by extension, as a “seat of power,” an emblem of authority over human and non-human nature.  

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Still, the achingly human presence of Jordan’s chair draws out compassion rather than political indignation. An empty chair has the evocative power to stand in for a body, for the individual who is meant to sit on it. What is foremost recognizable, then, in Jordon’s sculpture, is the frustration of not being able to hold things together, to create a permanent unity, separate from the eternal contingencies of the world.
Obsessive collecting can be seen as another attempt to gain control, to create a systemic unity in a bewildering world. Susan Stewart, in her trenchant book on people’s relationships to objects that become special in their lives, writes about the collection that it is “a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context.”

In Ottawa, in his residential home in which the RIA project room is housed, René Price’s Parkdale, is an ever-growing collection of miniature vehicles (and some towers) that has drawn the attention of visitors for the last couple of years. Restricted by spousal rules that limit the collection to a single display case, Price has resorted to adding numerous plexiglass shelves, stuffing layer upon layer of cars into the case, to the point where it has become impossible to see most of them. Recently, he has added “side-wings” to the beleaguered cabinet.

The cars, trucks, buses, trailers and planes are not collectors’ items, but mostly common, mass-produced toys. Exceptions are a few beat-up vehicles from the fifties, the artist’s childhood possessions that formed the inspiration for this project. Price satirizes the collector’s impulse to create a comprehensive compilation of specific things, by exaggeration. Stewart writes: “The collector can gain control over repetition or series by defining a finite set [ ] or by possessing the unique object.” Price’s collection is defined by categories that are hopelessly infinite: 1. Trucks. 2. Buses. 3. Red cars. 4. Mobile homes. There are some rules regarding size (small) and price (cheap).

Dollar stores everywhere accommodate the artist’s desires, and his preposterous collection has become a comedic comment on collecting, consumerism and spoiled children.

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17 Ibid p.160
Satire or not, Price’s collection also shows a pleasure in the sense of abundance that is evoked by the sight of hundreds of objects all in one place. There may be more to such excess than the joy of acquisition; could we see such collections, as well as obsessive repetition in making multiples in art as a way to model, to imagine, fullness in a playful way? Perhaps Parkdale is Price’s castle in the sky, an image of a place without want, his personal heaven or Candy Mountain.

Nature itself plays with such fullness, with a profusion of seeds and shells, with pebbled beaches, trees dressed in thousands of pink blossoms, and meadows covered in buttercups. These are fleeting collections, most so short-lived that some of us are tempted to hold on to them in some way: we collect shells and rocks, press leaves, and most of all, take pictures of the same trees and fields, year after year.

It may seem that Susie Osler’s intent was to preserve the beauty of a field in bloom with her creation of 2000 ceramic flowers, which certainly looked stunning when she planted them en masse in Ottawa’s Central Park. The installation (Re)Seed, (2011) was far from permanent, however. Osler invited visitors to take one of the flowers with them, and “plant” their transitory gift in any place that seemed to them in need of a bit of love, a bit of beauty. All she asked of the takers, in return, was to send her a photograph of the sculpture in its new location. In (Re) Seed, Osler enacted nature’s playfulness, a playfulness in which impermanence is a given. Like nature’s ephemeral collections, Osler’s ceramic flowers congregated only to be dispersed. They found new unexpected places, where they continued to delight and add to human stories of movement and change. The project encouraged participants to be like nature, unafraid of letting go.

Osler’s current installation, (Re)Seed (Re)Seen, is partly a documentation of the 2011 project, and partly a further development. Osler has created a number of new flowers which, unlike the earlier collection, are unfired. The fragility and ephemerality of these “raw” ceramic objects challenges conventional ideas within the ceramics/decorative field, of creating durable, lasting objects. The unfired flowers are meant to be taken and planted somewhere where they will disintegrate and release the seeds they hold to a new, artless life. Accepting this gift poses a challenge for the takers: will they act “like nature” and plant their flowers in locations where neither they nor anyone else will see them again, or will they hold on to them as valued keepsakes?
The documentary part of (Re) Seed (Re) Seen consists of sixty-odd photographs that the artist received from people who had planted one of the Osler’s flowers from Ottawa’s Central Park. The photographs tell myriad stories instigated by the flowers. The variety of locations in which the flowers appear show the project’s interactive, dispersive and time-bound features. Yet, for the artist, in wanting to show this “documentation,” a certain ambiguous feeling about the ephemeral nature of life and art’s pleasures crept back in. As she reflected in an email sent to me, “doesn’t the documentation of the project, in the form of these photographs, constitute another form of holding on?”

There is pain in letting go, in knowing that holding on will never last forever. The artworks in this exhibition speak of a longing to keep things together in coherent systems that are somehow disconnected from the world and the passage of time. Yet they deny that humans can lead autonomous, individual lives, in a cultural sphere that is disconnected from nature, or that a human being can lose her “self” in a cosmic, divine unity. Such ideas are shown by these artists to be wishful thinking, ways of imagining a life without wants. While the art works draw attention to a persistent human desire for an impossible wholeness, and to the anxieties this utopian longing creates, they also show us the beauty of impermanence, the fear as well as the mystery and excitement, of life in porous bodies open and connected to an ever-changing world.
Susie Osler, (Re)Seed (Re)Seen (2005-2014)
10. May 3 and May 10, 2014

Tangent 6: Art in Odd Spaces – A RIA House Tour

Gail Bourgeois, Vera Greenwood, Dipna Horra, Deborah Margo, Stephanie Nadeau, Svetlana Swinimer.

In a discussion night about Margo’s installation, on September 23, Lawrence Cook suggested that we take the project out of the house, to other locations. Judith Parker offered her closed-off, unused back staircase. This led to a plan to organize a HOUSE TOUR OF ART IN ODD SPACES, as the sixth tangent to emerge from Deborah Margo’s initial installation. We put out a call for “Attics and Other Odd Spaces,” and received five responses with great potential. The tour was organized for May 3 and May 10.

The six homes that were opened to approximately one hundred visitors were beautiful and interesting enough to be part of any house tour. The RIA tour was not just any house tour however! Three of the homes were in or near Hintonburg, within walking distance from each other. Another home was in the Glebe, and two were in the suburbs: Alta Vista and Nepean.

The hosts led visitors only to a basement, a guestroom, a storage room, an attic, a lavatory or a staircase. Some of these spaces had strange features—a secret staircase, a hidden door—and they each displayed a surprising art installation by one of six well-known Ottawa artists. Taking their cues from the history and present use (or non-use) of these odd spaces, the artists created original works using video, sound, drawing, and sculpture.

A special thank you goes to the hosts: Judith Parker, Frances Slaney and Peter Gose, David Dunlop and Susan Ball-Dunlop, Lynda Hall and Michael Tardioli, Nancy and Félix Baele, and to René Price, the driver of The Big A shuttle van.
René Price, *The Big A Shuttle Van. Leaving from the RIA premises*
Art in Odd Spaces: the Installations:

Gail Bourgeois, *The Summer Kitchen.*

**Bourgeois writes:**
*The Summer Kitchen* is dedicated to Mary Berthe ... she lived in this house by herself the majority of her time on the street ... everyone knew her ... she was a Catholic nurse ... her sister was a nun ... they lived together here for awhile ... this room is where Mary stayed during the warm months ... it was her summer kitchen ...

This installation is not about Mary Berthe ... this work is about representing personal memories turned around and around until they become smooth ... as shards of glass are worn by the seawater that carries them. The objects represent memories that may have little or no relationship to the origins of an experience ...

... *The Summer Kitchen* follows a thread of abandon and reclamation.

I have tried to imagine what it would be like to sit in this summer kitchen on a hot summer day. Likely, I would have daydreamed and thought about things. I would have read and drawn to subside feelings of anxiety as the hours passed. The objects I have included are about that process of passing time ... they are about hardened or wrapped anxiety and packaged pleasures. The objects on the walls were made for *The Summer Kitchen.* The bookcase and cupboard contained things gathered from my studio.

**Vera Greenwood, Apt. 2c**

**Greenwood writes:**
Before entering the installation, the participant was informed of its fifty-three-minute sound component, and that due to the number of people waiting to experience this Art in Odd Spaces intervention they would only be allowed to listen to five minutes of the audio loop. They were told not to worry about keeping track of the time; after five minutes a bell would ring, indicating that their time was up. After passing through the curtained doorway at the top of the stairs, each participant’s experience of the installation depended on the actions they took. Here is the scenario:

- numerous battery-operated candles descended the steps of a darkened staircase.

- a blue light softly glowed overhead at the base of these stairs, subtly illuminating a striped scarf and a black umbrella hanging from wall-mounted coat hooks.

- here, the stairs curved gently to the right and ended abruptly at a closed door, marked 2c

- positioned beneath this address was a brass peephole that viewers might gaze through.

- a conversation between two women could easily be overheard through the locked door.

[http://veragreenwood.ca/apt-2c](http://veragreenwood.ca/apt-2c) (images and text)
[http://veragreenwood.ca/apt-2](http://veragreenwood.ca/apt-2) (audio)
Dipna Horra, Jack’s Room

For her installation in a spare room of the home of Frances Slaney and Peter Gose, Horra interviewed Gose about the notes that were stuck on the closet door by Jack, son of the previous owners: “My name is Jack. This was my room for 17 years. I truly hope this house serves you well.” Gose and Slaney had found them there when they moved into the house in 2005, and have never removed them.

Horra installed sound equipment in the closet, and turned the door into a speaker.
Deborah Margo, *The Traffic of Matter*

**Attic Installation at RIA**

MacTac? Did I ever line cupboard shelves? How did it and that *Penny Saver* from 1997 end up in my attic? I know the boards were put across the beams to provide a bit of footing in this floor-less space but where they came from is a secret not even their marks can tell me. The insulation, according to a label on the attic door, was blown in or dumped there in 1980. I think it is cellulose, which, Wikipedia tells me, “is an important structural component of the primary cell wall of green plants, many forms of algae and the oomycetes.” In some former life, this grey stuff belonged to plants? Imagine the transformations undergone and the pathways taken, for it to get to this “final” destination.

In the attic, as in the larger world, the migratory ways of matter are mysterious, but at least I know where the salt licks came from. It was one of seventeen mineral blocks that Deborah Margo brought in from her studio when she created her *Salt and Paper* intervention in our house, August 2013. The ones she placed in our garden, our bedroom closet, our laundry sink and kitchen were hard to miss, but, since our attic is rather obviously seldom entered, we didn’t know about the group of ornately transformed salt licks that had found their way to the top of the house. Until Margo told us, about a week after we had returned.

She had discovered this space that, with its exposed, nearly a century-old structure, its moon-like surface and its messy disarray, seems so completely disconnected from the rest of the house. The blocks were at home here, their travel stories not any stranger than those of the other matter: cellulose, wood, paper, plastic.

-Petra Halkes
Stephanie Nadeau, You (the protagonist)

When David Dunlop and Susan Ball Dunlop renovated their house and built the guest bathroom, they decided to leave the servants’ staircase, which includes a window, undisturbed. These stairs are now blocked by the bathroom’s sink and counter, hidden behind the mirror. They are still accessible by climbing on the counter and opening the “medicine cabinet.”

The lavatory is accessible from the entrance hall, the door is near the main staircase of the home. Nadeau hung a pair of opera glasses in this space, which you can see on this photo, as well as its reflection in the mirror. The cord was rigged so that if you grabbed hold of it and looked around, you would find the mirrored door to the medicine cabinet slowly open and you would discover the hidden staircase, leading up to a window.

In this window, Nadeau had placed two text panels, which could be deciphered with the help of the opera glasses.

Each visitor was given some private time, to take in the scene and ponder the text....

...and to flush.
Imagine this is a novel, and you (the protagonist) are looking up a disused staircase into a window. The light reveals words that obscure the view out. You think about how long you stood staring into the mirror before you reached for the cord, and allowed yourself to look beyond your own reflection for signs of something else. You worry that this experience will bother your sleep tonight, will make you dream of your own dead spaces, of how you block them in with their light and old uses, and of the dust collected there.

Your character’s next move might be to wonder when and why, in the history of this house, did the inhabitants reconfigure the way up. You study the wear on the steps, to find a sign of age, an indicator of use. Standing alone in this stranger’s bathroom, you shut the mirrored door, and decide some mysteries aren’t worth solving. Instead, you take up the pen beside you, and on a single square of toilet paper, write down the worst of your shame and the hardest of your memories, and flush it down.
Svetlana Swinimer, Twittering Then....And Now.

For Art in Odd Spaces, Swinimer installed her video in a crawl space above the eaves of Nancy and Felix Baele’s suburban home, a space that is only possible to enter though a child-sized door in the guest room closet. Visitors, while crouching down in the closet, could view the video through the small, open door and hear Swinimer’s voice accompanied by the twittering of real birds on the eaves outside. Prior to viewing the art, visitors were given this text, written by Nancy Baele:

Artists are like birds who feed on air: the air of their times, the air of their imagination. Svetlana Swinimer is part of this long art tradition. In her video Twittering, Then and Now (2009) she pays homage to the air of the past by grounding her work in a poem by Velimir Khlebnikov (1885-1922).

Khlebnikov, a futurist Russian poet reacted to the increasing tempo of his times by responding with a new language, a language of his imagination. Stimulated by the realities of speed and machines in the early twentieth century when an agrarian society was becoming industrialized, he wrote inventive, unconventional poetry. His poem, “Rusalki Poute”, is a sound poem, composed of un-words, with no meanings to be found in a dictionary. In Twittering, Then and Now, Swinimer is heard reciting Khlebnikov’s poem:

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Swinimer links this poem to the restless electronic twittering of our times. As a twenty-first- century call-response to Khlebnikov’s twentieth-century poem, she divorces the acronyms commonly used in twittering from their accepted meanings and turns them into pure sounds: abstractions, un-words. Freed from their habitual keyboard lives, the words are now allied as much to Khlebnikov’s futurism as to ours. Projecting fluid bird- and computer imagery in her installation, she melds Khlebnikov’s language with the staccato sounds of today’s twittering abbreviations.18

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18 G2G (got to go) BFF (best friend forever) BTW (by the way) BRB (be right back) LMBO (laugh my butt off) LOL (laugh out loud) IMHO (in my humble opinion) SYL (see you later) OMG (oh my god) TTUL (talk to you later) L8R (later)
Swinimer’s installation is a provocative invitation to see, hear and consider the roots and realities of our own modernism.
-Nancy Baele

Svetlana Swinimer, *Twittering, Then......and Now*. Video installation
11. September 7, 2014:

Tangent 7: DOCUMENTUM ONE

This exhibition tells the story of how one thing led to another following Deborah Margo’s initial installation *Salt and Paper* in September 2013. It attempts to encapsulate, to gather leftovers and examine residues of the creative process, the flotsam and jetsam of the events. Besides original “artifacts,” that form traces of the year’s events, it shows a few new works participating artists put together with bits and pieces that relate to work they had shown at RIA. The exhibition also displays documentation: files, photos, charts, and a “zine” edition of the online catalogue. DOCUMENTUM ONE becomes a reflection on the afterlife of things and their configurations in this long-term curatorial art project.

As one ought to deduct from its parodic title, DOCUMENTUM ONE documents in bad faith. It attempts to emulate Documenta’s drive to comprehension, on a (somewhat) smaller scale: instead of five years, it covers one year; instead of the world, it sticks to RIA in Ottawa. ¹⁹ Big or small,

¹⁹ The intent of the first Documenta exhibition in Kassel, 1955, was: “first, to document and trace the development of the fine arts in our century in Europe, from the revolutionary, unsettling antecedents to the beginning of our century; and second, to define, as precisely as possible, the positions achieved today. Today, the renowned quinquennial exhibition includes artists from all over the world. "Hatje Cantz publ. Art Dictionary: [http://www.hatjecantz.de/documenta-5041-1.html](http://www.hatjecantz.de/documenta-5041-1.html)
In Documenta or in DOCUMENTUM ONE, the problem with showcasing, recording and archiving art objects and events remains one of choices, of inclusion and exclusion. Exhibitions can only provide subjective viewpoints, and tell stories of events that are always re-shaped through memory.

This is not to deny that Documenta isn’t possibly the most successful showcase of contemporary art in the world, anymore than it is not to recognize that there were some excellent artistic events happening at RIA this year, but DOCUMENTUM ONE reflects on the necessary incompleteness of exhibiting, archiving and documenting works of art and art events. Questions of what, why and how to shape these cultural conventions, have become more urgent in our computerized world with its seemingly unlimited potential for a virtual inclusion of everything. It is into this vast flow of an ongoing global discussion that DOCUMENTUM ONE sets its tiny foot.

In a local niche within this global flow, we met Jessie Raymond, a multimedia artist who graduated this year with a BFA from Ottawa University. Her thesis work addressed problems of collecting, cataloguing and preserving objects. In her work 800m, which was shown at Blink Gallery this summer, she documented bits and pieces of rubbish collected on the path to the Hurdman bus station, on her way to the university each day. She scanned these objects and made a grid-collage of sixty-six images. As well, she created a video piece in which she is seen wearing protective plastic clothing, and holding each object in a plastic bag in front of the camera. As she writes in her exhibition statement: “In this ‘current
archaeology,’ I examine the importance of frames of reference to readings of objects.”

Raymond, who did not know about the RIA Project Room until July 2014, has created a new work for DOCUMENTUM ONE, in which she visits the six sites where Art in Odd Spaces took place in May 2014, an event she did not experience. The photographs show the everyday sites, some with remaining traces of the events that took place there. After Art reflects on the ephemeral quality of the original installations and show the extent to which the meanings of the artworks depended on their contexts.

“Things” played a vital role in all of the events that followed Margo’s initial intervention. We watched the purpose and meaning of salt licks change by their placement in RIA’s domestic setting; Ken Emig showed ways to change our perception of things through light; we contemplated the transience of life in Winter Garden as well as in Never Forever. A sense of impermanence, so inherent in Margo’s practice, pervaded many of the events. But the melancholic sadness brought on by thoughts of decay and death was always countered in the RIA events and exhibitions this year; human life was broached as part of the flow of things in the world.

Jane Bennett’s book Vibrant Matter, a political ecology of things, acted as a guide in many of our discussions and in my interpretations of the installations. Bennett stresses the unknowable dimension of life that people have in common with things, which brings forth a sense of humility. She quotes Theodor Adorno: “life will always exceed our knowledge and control.”

Generally, this wisdom did not prevail in the science and art of Western Modernity. Since the seventeenth century scientists presumed a clear division between object and subject, in which the subject had the knowledge and the object was mere matter to be analyzed. In art, museums were invented, with exhibitions that displayed objects d’art in an increasingly neutral space, leading to the ubiquitous white cube in Modernism, a gallery design that remains prevalent till this day.

In such a space, art is taken out of the everyday, the object is separated from the subject, as if to avoid contamination with all that is transient, subjective, finite, always changing. As the art theorist Boris Groys writes in an article about the museum’s changing function, museums and big private art collections were created to take artworks “out of private and public use, and therefore immunize them against the destructive force of time.” However, Groys points out that in

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22 Theodor Adorno quoted by Jane Bennett. Ibid p. 14


more recent times museums (and, I would add, galleries and large private collections) have changed from “a storage place for artworks,” to “a stage for the flow of art events.” The exhibition becomes a “curatorial project” that no longer strives for timelessness, but “enacts its own precariousness.”

Curatorial projects enter the flow of life, and leave much of their outcomes to chance meetings of objects, to the contingencies of the exhibition space, and the inclusion of everyday objects as well as of time-based events and artworks.

Groys’ descriptions of the curatorial project connect to Bennett’s “thing-power” of which she vividly became aware when coming across some garbage on the street one day. The artless “assemblage” she spotted, consisted of a mat of oak pollen, a glove, a dead rat, a bottle cap and a stick of wood.

When René and I were putting together the bits and pieces that artists had brought us for DOCUMENTUM ONE, I was struck by the coincidences and interactions within “assemblages” of organic and inorganic things; how they provided a new context, a virtual presence or a natural force. DOCUMENTUM ONE creates many possible stories of the past year while continually pointing to the future, stories that, as ever, will depend on where you stand and how you see.

In the space where Deborah Margo’s *The Bone Geometry of Moving from There, to There*, hung for many months, we mounted a flow chart of the events, using the same form and material (Tyvec). The chart shows the impossibility to draw precise connections, while the images demonstrate the arbitrariness of a personal (in this case René’s) take on events.

Placed beside the *Flow Chart* and elsewhere in the room are photographs that show Margo’s original landscape imagery, as well as the changing contexts in which we lived and played with this work, placing different objects, from hyacinths to toy tanks, in front of it.

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25 Ibid p. 06
26 Bennett: Vibrant Matter p.4
Petra Halkes and René Price: How One Thing Led to Another. Flow Chart, 2014
Contexts change, time passes, but the desire to stop time, to reach an unchanging perfection, remains. The archive, a secured place where things can be preserved, kept from the inevitable decay that time brings with it, is born from this desire. It is not surprising to learn that the word “archive” has its roots in the Greek ἀρχεῖον (arkheion), which, “refers to the home or dwelling of the Archon, in which important official state documents were filed and interpreted under the authority of the Archon” (Wikipedia).

Gail Bourgeois, who last September spent a morning drawing Margo’s salt lick installation, inserted images of homes in some of her drawings. These collages draw attention to the strangeness of the context that Margo placed her rural implements in. Bourgeois found the images of homes in a manual for housewives from the post-WWII period when housekeeping was presented as a virtue. In Bourgeois’ collages, the foray of the saltlicks appears to rub against the desire to keep the house in order, and free from any contamination from the outside. Bourgeois includes a print of a burning house that shows the futility of such a yearning.

The images of home begin to converse with Judith Parker’s Salt Lick Drawing # 1, which she created by positioning a red and a white salt lick on an upside-down clay flower pot, and placing a sheet of paper between them. She left the assemblage in her garden for almost a year.
DOCUMENTUM ONE, in its incompleteness, is as flawed as any other exhibition. It provides an archive that is no more than pretense: many of the objects shown, such as the leftovers of the opera glasses and pulley that Stephanie Nadeau used for her *Art in Odd Spaces* installation, will return to their drawers in the home they belong. Some things will end up in the garbage, and it is a good bet that nothing will enter official archives. DOCUMENTUM ONE provides documents that show skewed viewpoints and tell one-sided stories of a year of events that were experienced differently by different people. DOCUMENTUM ONE shows the transience of art and of life, the impossibility to arrest time.

Yet, wisdom and humor leavened many of the ruminations on life’s impermanence this year. Art works and discussions brought awareness that life is a force shared by inanimate and living things, which include people, leading to a keen sense of belonging to the constant regeneration of the life world: new connections were made, new works created, new friendships formed.

Acknowledgements

First of all, we would like to thank Deborah Margo for her enthusiastic participation in this year-long project, for which she returned countless times to our home, and got involved in many intense discussions. I would also like to thank her for looking after the garden so well!

Our warm thanks goes to all participating artists who exhibited their art during the year and gave freely of their time: Gail Bourgeois, Kenneth Emig, Vera Greenwood, Dipna Horra, Karen Jordon, Linda Luneau, Stephanie Nadeau, Christine Nobel, Susie Osler, René Price, Bozica Radjenovic, Jessie Raymond, Svetlana Swinimer. Many others contributed to various events in some way, artistic or otherwise: Nancy Baele, Michael Davidge, Lawrence Cook, Lynda Hall, Sandra Hawkins, Karen Jackson, Judith Parker, Frances Slaney and Jennifer Stead.

Thanks also to the hosts of Art in Odd Spaces, for generously opening their homes to strangers: Judith Parker, Frances Slaney and Peter Gose, David Dunlop and Susan Ball-Dunlop, Lynda Hall and Michael Tardioli, Nancy and Félix Baele.

Thank you, Margit Hedig, for the design of the cover, and Nancy Baele for proofreading.

And a special thanks goes to all visitors, who keep returning to RIA, making our endeavours all worthwhile.

-Petra Halkes and René Price
Biographies

**Gail Bourgeois** (MFA Concordia) is a founding member of Powerhouse Gallery (La Centrale) in Montreal. Her studio practice is drawing-based with themes and methods of working that express the tension between academic knowledge and more experimental forms of knowledge, based on her interest in collective practices and community engagement. In 2013-2014, she was artist in residence at the Diefenbunker: Canada’s Cold War Museum. *To warn other Canadians* was on view from April to September 2014. [http://www.gaibourgeois.ca/](http://www.gaibourgeois.ca/)

**Kenneth Emig** is a trans-disciplinary artist whose projects include a public art commission by the City of Ottawa, a solo dance commission for the Canada Dance Festival, and an artist residency at the National Research Council of Canada. He exhibited at the 4th Moscow Biennale (2011) and with the Enriched Bread Artists in The Hague, The Netherlands (2013). He is currently Artist in Residence at the Experiential Design and Gaming Environments Laboratory at Ryerson University in Toronto. [http://emigresearch.com/](http://emigresearch.com/)

**Vera Greenwood** (MFA Concordia) is a multi-media artist who takes a conceptual approach to representing the everyday: a way of working based on observation of the world. She has shown in Canada as well as in the U.K., France, Italy, Spain and Mexico and participated in international residencies. She recently participated in group shows at the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives and the Art Gallery of Peterborough, and created a solo installation/performance for Nuit Blanche Toronto 2013 at the Gladstone Hotel. [www.veragreenwood.ca](http://www.veragreenwood.ca)

**Petra Halkes** (BFA,MA, Ph.D) is a painter, critic and curator. She regularly exhibits in Ottawa, most recently at Cube gallery. Halkes is the author of: *Aspiring to the Landscape: On Painting and the Subject of Nature*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2006). She has written numerous catalogue essays, peer-reviewed articles, and magazine articles and reviews for art magazines such as *Border Crossings, Canadian Art, C-Magazine, Ciel Variable*, and, formerly, *Parachute*.

**Lynda Hall** (BFA-University of Ottawa) Over the past 15 years, Hall has initiated site-based cross-disciplinary art projects in schools, galleries and on farms. In 2011 Hall completed a three-week residency at The Banff Centre for the Arts, and in 2013 received a City of Ottawa visual arts production grant to photograph Barbados Green Monkeys. She currently manages public art commissions, and is participating in an upcoming show at Blink Gallery: *Something Leads to Something Else*.

**Dipna Horra** (MFA University of Ottawa) Horra’s sculptural sound installations have been presented nationally and internationally, including exhibitions at Botin Foundation in Spain (2013), A Space Gallery in Toronto (2012) and Surrey Art Gallery in British Columbia (2011). Most recently she took part in the *Electric Eclectics Festival* in Maeftord, Ontario (2014) and she is preparing for a solo exhibition at the Art Gallery of Mississauga (2014). [http://www.dipnahorra.com/](http://www.dipnahorra.com/)

**Karen Jordon** (BFA University of Ottawa) has been a member of the Enriched Bread Artists of Ottawa since 1992. Her work is process-based and involves the collection and manipulation of her own and other people’s discarded belongings. Jordon’s recent exhibitions include *Slow Dance* at Karsh-Masson Gallery, Ottawa 2012, *Hair Lines*, with Norman Takeuchi at the Mississippi Valley Textile Museum 2012, and *Interference*, a group show at Quartair Contemporary Art Initiatives, The Hague 2013.
Linda Luneau is an Ottawa painter and draughts person. Her work shows a deep political concern with environmental issues. Luneau, who studied at the Ontario College of Art and Design and the Ottawa School of Art, has exhibited in many public venues in Ottawa, including SAW gallery and Gallery 101. She took part in the inaugural exhibition at the Ottawa Art Gallery in 1992. Her work is in the collection of the City of Ottawa and in numerous private collections.

Deborah Margo (BFA Concordia, MFA Temple University Philadelphia). Since 1984, Margo has exhibited in Canada, Mexico and the United States, participating in solo and group projects. Recent projects: *Hard Twist 8* at the Gladstone Hotel (Toronto), *Beyond the Edge: Artists’ Gardens* at the Experimental Farm (Ottawa), *Buzz* at Gallery 101 (Ottawa) and *Salt* at The ARTS Project (London, Ontario). Margo teaches drawing, painting and sculpture at the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Ottawa. During the spring and summer months she also works as a gardener. [www.deborahmargo.ca](http://www.deborahmargo.ca)

Stephanie Nadeau (BFA OCAD 2005, MFA Art Institute of Chicago 2008) Nadeau’s interdisciplinary art practice includes works on paper, performance art, sound and media installation, and collaborative community projects. Her work has been exhibited in Canada as well as internationally, and is in several artist book collections including the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and the Banff Centre. Nadeau is currently Curator of Public, Educational and Community Programs at the Ottawa Art Gallery. [http://www.linkedin.com/pub/stephanie-nadeau/61/534/1b2](http://www.linkedin.com/pub/stephanie-nadeau/61/534/1b2)

Christine Nobel was born in Montreal and currently works at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. She has a BFA from Concordia University and a diploma in Environmental Studies from Sir Sandford Fleming College, Lindsay ON. In her painting, the unseen world within forms of matter is brought to life through scenes from the natural world. A solo exhibition, *North- Shapes of the Earth*, is planned for November 2014, at the City of Ottawa Atrium Gallery. [http://christinenobel.com](http://christinenobel.com)

Susie Osler is a ceramic artist and the founder of FIELDWORK - an ongoing public art project located in a field on her farm near Perth, ON. Osler has a BFA in Ceramics and Printmaking from the Emily Carr Institute for Art and Design. She spent 3 years as a resident in the ceramics studio at Harbourfront (Toronto). She is represented by The General Fine Craft, Art & Design (Almonte) and LAPAI (Ottawa). [http://www.fieldworkproject.com/](http://www.fieldworkproject.com/) [https://www.facebook.com/SusieOslerCeramics](https://www.facebook.com/SusieOslerCeramics)

Rene Price (Ontario College of Art 1972) is a mock-artist and Grand Amateur. A former exhibition designer at Parks Canada, he now lives in Ottawa and commutes to his Cornwall studio. Price’s work has been seen in solo and group exhibitions in public venues from Quebec city to Calgary. He is represented by Galerie Pink in Montreal, but gives much of his art away during performances at events such as Ottawa’s Nuit Blanche and Chinatown Remixed and through his website: [www.reneprice.ca](http://www.reneprice.ca)

Bozica Radjenovic (MFA University of Arts, Belgrade). Radjenovic’s sculptures and drawings can be seen in the Museum of Modern Art in Belgrade, and in the City of Ottawa Fine Art Collection. Recent exhibitions include *Unraveling Tension*, a solo exhibition at Mississippi Valley Textile Museum in Almonte, ON (2013), and *Interference*, a group exhibition at Quartair Contemporary Art Initiatives, The Hague (2013), where she contributed a performance work. [www.bozicaradjenovic.com](http://www.bozicaradjenovic.com)
**Jessie Raymond** is a recent graduate of the fine arts program at the University of Ottawa. As Jessie has been developing her artistic practice, she finds herself engaged thoroughly with the concept of digitization. In her work she examines the mundane and archives the small aspects of her environments as a way to understand everyday life. Jessie has participated in group shows locally such as *Spectra* (2013) in Nuit Blanche Ottawa, and *Mapping Ottawa* (2014) at Blink Gallery. [www.jessieraymond.ca](http://www.jessieraymond.ca)

**Jennifer Stead** has been a landscape painter/drawer for many years and her work has been shown in a mix of commercial and public venues. Since moving to Ottawa she has also been working on a number of public art installations for the city of Ottawa and in 2010 completed a 120-foot long landscape drawing in the City Hall Art Gallery. In 2007 she received the University of Calgary’s Chancellor’s Medal for her MFA thesis. Her work is represented in various private, public and corporate collections nationally. [http://www.kostuikgallery.com/](http://www.kostuikgallery.com/)


Kenneth Emig: The blue salt lick was originally sitting on a tree stump at Emig’s rural property, providing minerals for wildlife. He gave the salt lick to Deborah Margo, who gave him the yellow one in exchange. Traces of the blue, as well as of the yellow salt lick, can be seen in the photo Emig took of the tree stump. For DOCUMENTUM ONE, Emig glued the photo on a ten-inch stand, and placed the yellow salt lick on top.