

Susan Ossman

Arts and Humanities, New York University Abu Dhabi, Emirates

“Invitation”:

Experimental Encounters in Pandemic Times

Visual Ethnography

VOLUME XIII | No 2 | 2024
dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.2-157

Abstract

“Invitation” was the first of three experiment/artworks that make up “Scattered Subjects,” a program that probed subjectivity in environments reshaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. The article explains how working under lockdown conditions led me to expand the repertoire for studying one on one exchanges using ethno-artistic means. It describes how I imagined “keeping in touch” with individuals confined to their homes around the world by sending them artworks by post that reflected my Parisian living room. Sharing my environment in this “hand to hand” as a way of literally keeping in touch, I then asked them to photograph the artwork in their own environments. I posted the photographs to a dedicated website in a variety of formats that intimated a totality, or single process but never visualized it. Examining these responses, the never-fully-there artwork, some “invitations” that never reached their destinations and others I was able to revisit face-to-face after pandemic restrictions eased led to new ways of thinking about space, migration and the potential art for exploring distanced exchanges more generally. It also led to considering processes of subject-making.

Keywords: Art, Experiment, Collaboration, Pandemic, subjectivity

Biographical note: Susan Ossman is an anthropologist/ artist who has worked on media, globalization, gender and migration. She has done fieldwork, exhibited, performed and published her work in North Africa, Europe, the Middle East and North America. She reflects on using fieldwork design a leading practice for composing her own art and devising collaborative programs in *Shifting Worlds, Shaping Fieldwork, a Memoir of Anthropology and Art* (Routledge 2021). She is the founding director of *The Moving Matters Traveling Workshop*, a mobile collective of migrant artist/scholars.

e-mail: smo7149@nyu.edu

“...the smallest unit of society is not one person but two”
Berthold Brecht (1992, 197)

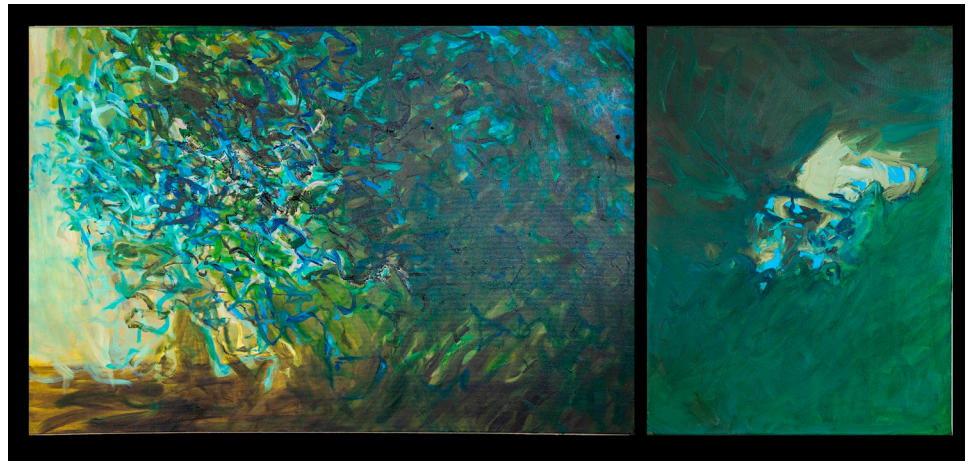


Figure 1 Remainders, 2019, Oil on canvas. Susan Osman

As 2019 ended I was finishing a series of paintings about one-on-one encounters. Each piece was formed of two panels; on the left, a large canvas presenting an abstract rendering of an exchange of touch, words or glances: tentative, loud, or tender. To its right, a second, smaller canvas registering the impact, aftermath of the exchange. Following the left to right reading of Western scripts, each diptych conveyed a minimal narrative whose movement was underscored by the titles of each work: “Remainders”, “Erasure|”, “Afterglow.” A plot but not quite a story: rather, a hovering between lived experience and concept that emerged in a process of sensuous generalization.

Unlike artworks I've made to explore events or biographies, this series of paintings generalise and abstracts from myriad encounters recoded in fieldnotes, photographs and memories. (Ossman 2021) They emerged from study of these diverse sources, which are variously able to register the many aspects of encounters and the traces they leave in the mind or heart. (Ossman 1998; 2002) Making the paintings was not so different than the work of classifying, interpreting and conceptualizing that turns reams of fieldnotes and recordings into analytic texts. At the same time, I found in the shadow of my notes aspects of encounters that I would never be able to put into in words, however expressive. As many others have noted, media such as painting can be a choice to explore what is difficult or impossible to record in a photograph or video or to write. (Cox et al 2016) These are particularly flexible when exploring affective, haptic and emotional aspects of meetings; for rendering the echoes of an encounter that endure or resurface after months or even years. Sometimes these revenants reappear in bodily postures or attitudes, at others in dreams, hopes or resentments. How might one best engage and represent them? The diptych format reduces the many waves and durations of a meeting but suggests a before and after. The expressionist, gestural style used seemed to me to be consonant with Brecht's assertion that encounters are fundamental while also conveying how encounters and their aftermaths are shaped by currents of environments that they also affect. These dynamic, even sometimes slow or subtle streams offer images that are nothing at all like the great playwright's notion of a society that might be built up of one-on-one units. Here, encounters are not even among persons or persona, but instead, reflections on types of situations: an embrace, a harsh word spoken, a joke, and their aftermaths that rippled, cut or echoed. Discrete shapes and lines are imbricated in fluid environments that reach beyond the frame. Meetings produce currents or

sparks that shape and are shaped by a dynamic environment that expands across both canvases. Aftermaths that occur “later,” not at any specific hour or historical moment.

1 There were however countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa where no particular rules were instituted.

To paint, I needed to extract myself from the ambient maelstrom of the very worlds I examined on the canvas. I worked between the home office and backyard studio of my California ranch house. (Ossman 2021)

Then came COVID-19.

Suddenly, the busy world I fled to work in solitude was silenced. The kinds of face to face, body to body encounters that I had been exploring ceased or took on new intensities within the “bubbles” formed by families or house mates. With the start of lockdowns, going to the supermarket became a dangerous adventure for the confined majority. Meanwhile, newly singled-out “essential workers” sped down empty boulevards to deliver food or huddled around COVID victims streaming into emergency rooms. As contagion threatened and states tried to separate body from body through ever-changing forms of sequestration, a seismic shift occurred in people’s relationship the environment, others and themselves.¹ Confined we were transported as the familiar ground of life as usual moved beneath our feet. Locked-in, we were estranged from habits and expectations as well as others. It was as though we had entered an artwork that shifted our perspective on ordinary things we took for granted. Or, like the whole world had suddenly experienced the displacement and estrangement that anthropology has made into a research method. “Life before the pandemic” took the position of “home” in classical ethnographic fieldwork parlance. (Clifford 1998; Marcus 2012, 433) Under those changed circumstances, what could actual artist or anthropologists make, do or be? What kinds of movement or imaginative *décalage* could generate art or motivate ethnographic estrangement when the taken for granted habits and imaginations were so perturbed?

It seemed I was destined to answer these questions by maintaining a quite usual way of working for an anthropologist/artist: by making moves that shifted me from one strange world of lockdown to another. In June 2020 I braved the empty LAX international terminal and landed in Charles de Gaulle airport wearing layers of plastic and a face shield. I traveled in Paris to meet my new-born grandson. But in August a pandemic-delayed mammogram revealed a tumor: I had breast cancer. A summer vacation became a temporary migration as I settled into an apartment in the 18th arrondissement for a year of treatment.

Moving to a second country while the world shifted under everyone’s feet; fighting a disease that spread from within even as the threat of the virus persisted from without; the dual life of the ethnographer/artist seemed to be my lot. But how might one make sense of displaced displacements? What kinds of estrangement and distance might be possible in such a topsy-turvy situation? As I was spatially pushed from “lockdown” to “confinement,” and imaginatively moved from fear of contagion to a more immediate fear of dangers proliferating within my body, it was a familiar dynamic that offered a strange stability and pushed me in new directions. It was the habit of working through estrangement with its letting go of expectations and the process of making things otherwise that provided a sense of balance. And, which encouraged me to probe what was possible under these altered conditions.

Perhaps paradoxically, I decided to engage actual others using all means at my disposal. How could encounters could be generated. that traversed and

challenged the ambient digital worlds? What elements of the “présentiel” (face to face- co-present) might linger or be imagined? How might one not only figuratively, but literally, “keep in touch” ? These questions led me to return to work on encounters with “Invitation,” the first in a series of three projects I called “Scattered Subjects” (<https://www.scatteredsubjects.com>.) In what follows I explain how that project picked up on my pre-pandemic preoccupations but this time focused on particular encounters with others that were not generalized but gathered in a hybrid artwork that, like the people themselves, could never be assembled in any one place.

Designing “Invitations”



Figure 1 The Livingroom, rue Marcadet. Susan Osman.

When I first moved into my new Parisian apartment, it felt more like a zoom-set than a home. On the screen where I worked and where most social life occurred, the living space was resumed as the back of a sofa, the lower corner of a painting on the wall, or a chair and coffee table. I would have enjoyed the opportunity to share a broader view of my new home with my interlocutors. But many people sought the opposite: using “screens” to present themselves online as cut-outs speaking in front an idyllic mountain landscapes, famous paintings or designer furniture. I felt no qualms about showing the actual place where I lived and worked in the blur of public and private that confinement produced. Sharing spaces, repeated encounters make a house a home. In my newly furnished apartment, I was more than ready to welcome visitors, even if only electronically.

It was surely this desire that others get to know my place that led me to take photographs of the salon, bedroom, kitchen and even the tiny bathroom and email them to people close to me. Still, while the images offered knowledge of my circumstances. sharing them electronically also intensified my awareness of the physical distance between myself and others. It did not produce an encounter. The photos could not bring even friends living on the other side of town into the picture of my hands-on life.

As a serial migrant who has settled in the US and France and Morocco and the UK multiple times, I was used to distanced relationships and the how they are readjusted with migration. (Ossman 2013). Those previous migratory experiences likely heightened my sense of what made pandemic so solitude so absolute. When someone moves to a new country, they know webs of relationships will be rewoven. But there are usually new people to knit into one's life, new meetings to be had. During the pandemic, the possibility of friendships, ordinary appointments or even greeting neighbors in the hallway were curtailed. When contact was necessary, exchanges were masked and perfunctory. In Paris, I was extremely privileged, economically, but also in other ways. I'd previously lived many years in the city. I knew the language. I had many friends. As a citizen I was able to secure excellent medical treatment thanks to the national health system. Still, thrust into the strange world of pandemic confinement, connecting to the immediate environment was nothing like I'd experienced before.

I was lucky to regularly get together with my son, his partner and their two children, who lived nearby. In the ambient silence, the buzzer that signaled their arrival at the entrance of the building made the entire apartment vibrate. I could hear each creak of the old lift that climbed five stories to the fifth floor and brought them to the door of my flat. When they stepped into the rooms the very walls of the desolate spaces I'd photographed were set in motion. It was as though I could feel and observe the kinds of brushstrokes I'd painted a few months earlier moving the air. Simple actions like closing a door or playing with a rubber ball sent sound waves bounding off the walls, filling the rooms with vibrations. As one or another person moved, their figure shifted the perspectives that shaped the living space for me, now an engaged observer.² (Damish 1987; Strathern 2002) My granddaughter pirouettes during on-line dance classes redefined and colored the studio/office, as though marking it with a performative "punctum." (Barthes 1980; Ossman 2021, 1071) Her presence focused and defined the space in ways that persisted after she departed.

Each visit was framed by hours or days of solitude. Yet, the memory of each resonated in my greater awareness of how the gold curtains, grey settee and view from my window. Each participated in a shared experience that contributed to making this space a home while also simultaneously making an evolving "us" and shaping "me." Alone, I hardly felt separate from my surroundings. When someone visited, I realized perhaps for the first time how sensing the same breeze and light coming in through a window was as essential a part of an interaction as exchanged looks, words or emotions. The apartment was not simply a "stage" for a particular performance nor was it just a background or milieu however dynamic, akin to those I'd painted earlier that year. The particulars of a shared place at a certain time of day, the way sounds echoed and the time it took to navigate the narrow corridor from the kitchen to the dining table in the living room; these contributed to making the apartment a home.

Visitor's gazes, gestures and touch coordinated in subtle patterns of call and response with the light coming from the window as well as with me. I thought back to pre-pandemic debates about extended epistemology and blended, disseminated subjects. (Alisson and Ossman 2014; Biehl and Locke, 2017; Blomberg 2018; Strathern). But now, I would not examine subjectivity from different theoretical perspectives, eras, or from diverse cultural viewpoints. Instead, I would devise a pandemic-appropriate call and response that would seek out palpable ways of bringing people together to open new ways of getting at processes of subject formation: for humans and for artworks. If it is in encounters with others that subjects are formed, how might one explore not only barriers but possibilities for being together in spite of everything?

2 Making noise was one of the few possible ways for people to express themselves collectively during strict lockdowns, for instance, to cheer hospital workers. For an ethnographic study focused on sound during pandemic Vietnam see Schwenkel, 2025 in press.

3 For a discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic, touch and debates about Western modernity and visions see Giordano and Welsch 2022.

Clearly this would require action, not just observation, however participative, collaborative or empathetic. An approach that was creative of the conditions and processes for experiment was necessary. Luckily, I could look back at a long line of such projects across art and anthropology. I could draw on my own previous experience using one-on-one exchanges to shape artworks and collaborative programs. (Ossman 2018; 2021).

Developing a patterned, dynamic and productive way of delimiting “the field” amidst the myriad movements of the world is a challenge under any circumstances (Faubion and Marcus 2009). What was possible in this restricted and unprecedented situation? What was *promising* and exciting in that grim era? What freedoms could be had or forged? (Foucault 1987). I had discovered the importance of shared sensations that could not be pictured in photographs. This led me to think about the expression, “to keep in touch.” Could I imagine a way to be “in touch” at a distance?³ How might I do this in ways that allowed the environments each person inhabited to participate and evolve with our exchanges?

As a forever, and fated, anthropologist, what I sought was to think beyond what is “given.” In this case, so much as unstable, changing, in flux. One thing that persisted before during and since the pandemic was the common-sense face-to-face/digital divide. I did not reject any technology as I contemplated possibilities for palpable encounters, instead, I thought about the affordances of electronic, digital exchanges as part of a broader range of media.

Not only historians but still living generations of people like me maintained global connections long before the emergence of the “World Wide Web.” As a child I was taught to compose letters, invitations and greeting cards in careful cursive script. Even when I bought a typewriter then a computer as a graduate student, I printed out letters to send by affordable, if sometimes sluggish postal services. I’d observed how illiterate people in countries like Morocco, where I began fieldwork in the late 1980’s, turned to public scribes or even to me to “keep in touch” with relations living in another town or abroad. I often felt nostalgia for the days I would eagerly await the postman and the thrill when he handed me a personal letter. Already at that moment I could, anticipate reading a particular friend’s handwriting.

These memories were part of what sparked the idea of making an artwork/letter to convey something of my living situation to people I knew. But it was also the situation in 2020 that led me to decide to make the postal service as a collaborator in my new project. Along with the internet, delivery services of all kinds were increasingly part of daily life in the decades leading to the pandemic. Mail was not always regular, but still relatively reliable. And it was international. I could work with the post office to send something palpable to people. I would conceive artworks that would reflect my home as I experienced it and sought to share it.

I would imagine welcoming a family member, friend or colleague to my home by fashioning a custom-made artwork that reflected the spaces I wished to invite them into. I would send it off by post. I had made work intended for individuals before, in a project called Lifeworks (Allison and Ossman 2014). But that work had involved substantial face to face exchanges and only one individual for extended periods of time. For “Invitation,” I would entertain various people for shorter periods, one after another. And, significantly, I would ask for something in exchange. The RSVP of the email in which I requested someone’s participation was specific: I requested a photograph of the artwork taken in the place where they lived. I wanted them to share their environment with me, in a kind of reciprocal invitation.

I was interested in encounters as they made relationships, a places, selves and broader worlds. So in the email I sent to a rather random list of family, friends and colleagues to ask them to participate in the project I also made sure to let them know that their photographs would be collated with others and shared anonymously on the “Scattered Subjects” website.⁴ Each Invitation and return photograph would thus be simultaneously unique and part of an evolving, overarching artistic/ experiential process. Together the photographs would create a collage that could never be puzzled together.⁵

Today, I realize that this never-together artwork related to my migration and previous migrations in ways I did not at that time. It recalls the impossible dream that many serial migrants have of bringing their far-flung family and friends together in a single place for just one day or occasion (Ossman 2013, 6). “Invitation” was no nightmare, but a kind of reality check provided by the forced staying in place of the pandemic. At the same time, it suggested a different and evolving geography by which people we encounter over the years and in different places come together, beyond copresence, beyond congregating, beyond communities or collectives. The completed artworks in the homes of individuals and the online never all there artwork on the website help to envision a social world that is composed of subjects composed through complex encounters, composed by the call and response I will now describe in more detail.

Made for You

In the September 2020, I sent 33 emails to people on five continents to ask them participate in the “Invitation” project. I received 30 responses, 28 of them with the snail-mail addresses I needed to precede. In anticipation of receiving the photos, I used a prefab web design platform to create *scattered-subjects.com*. Working digitally much as one might paint on a pre-stretched canvas or scribble in a notebook purchased at a stationary shop, I used the site to explain and sketch out the project.

A foray to the outdoor delivery desk of the local art store began the process of making the Invitations. I bought paper that matched the changing colors of sky I viewed from my fifth-floor window, charcoal and pens, gouache and brushes and carbon paper that would rub off on recipients’ fingers. I had thread left over from hemming the curtains and tubes of gouache. I gathered scissors, markers and a needle. I then set out these materials on the coffee table where my friends might have set their cup of tea and sugar spoon and got to work.

4 I later learned some people close to me were offended for being left off the list. May this be a formal apology. The list was intended to include people with whom I have a variety of relationships, since those were the subject of the work.

5 I designate the full artwork as “Invitation” while capitalizing each particular piece that composed it to distinguish between the two aspects of the project and also the “invitations” we extend to others as part of daily life.

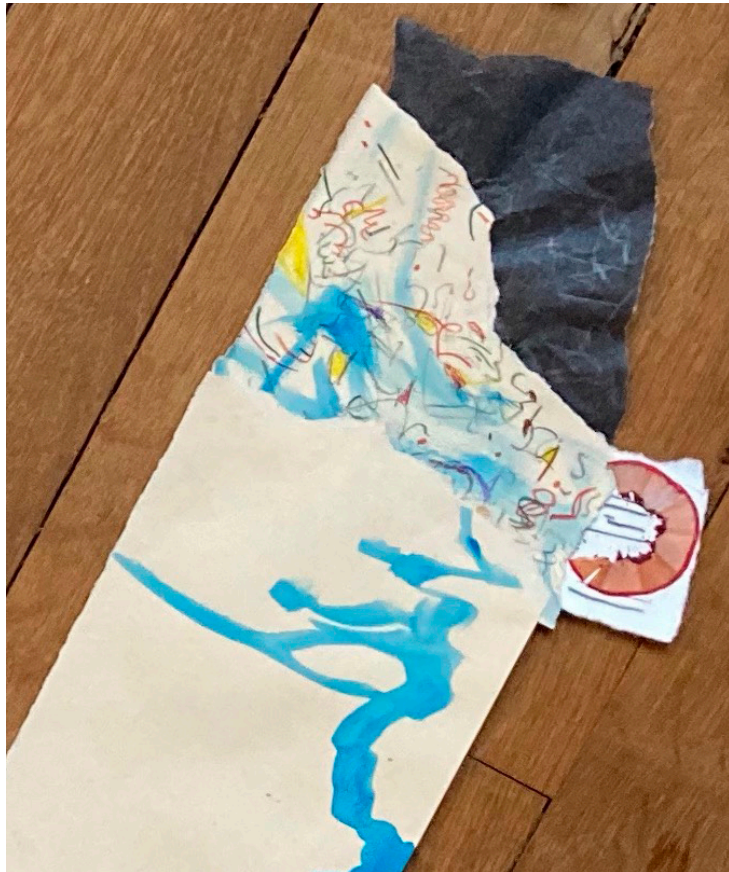


Figure 3 Making. Susan Osman.

Each Invitation was conceived as a self-sufficient artwork for a particular friend, family member or colleague. Participants in the project played no part in making the works or deciding their subject matter. I was not in touch with them while I was compositing their Invitation. As I started each piece, I thought of what I knew of the recipient's tastes and habits, personality and appearance. These thoughts influenced the lithe forms or scale of geometric forms I fashioned to make the collages. I imagined how the recipient might respond to them. For instance, I added extra thread for a friend who sews. I adjusted the line or shapes to correspond to my perception of someone's style or tastes. The colors and materials reflected the hues and changing light in my living room. But they do not depict, instead, they register the action of my hand with the intent to produce a distanced encounter that yet involved the place I inhabited. What I shared was not a picture as much as an instance of my own action on and with what I could make of my environment *for them* at that time, under those conditions. It was an imagined yet palpable request to visit me, share a cup of tea, and partake of the view from the fifth-floor window.

The artworks were conceived to fit into A4 envelopes, but few are rectangular. The diverse shapes seemed to me to animate the sense of touch, both visually and palpably. Opening the envelope, the recipient would feel the irregular or pointy edges in their hands. Asymmetrical shapes might encourage a variety of placements in their environment. Perhaps the forms of some of the pieces even managed to intimate a breeze that touched my cheek and then my friend's. The pieces also included thick rubs of un-fixed charcoal or carbon paper intended to rub off on the hands of anyone who touched them. There was a performative aspect to these works that the person who received them could enhance.

The Invitation in figure 5 is an example of how some of the pieces were not just palpable but could also be considered drawing implements. Carbon paper is the main support, which was guaranteed to smudge the hands of its recipient. Small bits of white paper marked with my fingerprints demonstrate how my hands were also marked as I composed the collage, creating a distanced and time-lapsed similitude between me and the other person.



Figure 4 an Invitation. Susan Osman.

As I wrapped and stitched this piece I imagined the twists and turns of a would-be conversation with a multi-lingual intellectual. The letters/scratches suggest both the feeling of something moving against one's skin and some barely audible verbal exchange. I recall being especially attentive as I painted the splotches of color on the triangular pieces of paper rolled back from the carbon-paper "insides" then drew dots in different colors through which I sewed with thread from my curtains to pull the work together. As I "wrote" in pseudo-letters in a non-language no one understands I thought about my friend's literary skills, but also of the way the piece was a kind of letter.

It is only in retrospect that I notice how this piece reprises the diptych form of the paintings I made in California. The two sides of the beige paper are essential to the shape, but here there is no larger or smaller expanse of paper to suggest a "before" and "after" as some event followed by a shadow which is smaller, suggesting its dependence on the initial encounter. Instead, the rolled-up edges of the paper triangles on one side respond to the finger-printed white bits of paper tucked into the fold on the other side. An action of uncovering or discovering, perhaps a coordinated action that engages both me and the viewer, particularly the recipient who has also been made into a support for the artwork to draw on is intimated, but its timing is left open.



Figure 5 an Invitation. Susan Osman.

A second example is also reminiscent of the pre-pandemic diptychs. In this case, involving a kind of imitation, copying and mimesis. On the left, I etched into the carbon paper to create a spiral, on the right, the spiral is cut into the paper. As I worked, I was thinking about the way ideas or knowledge pass from one person to another: the person was one of the many teachers I've had over the years. I thought about how processes of mimesis are not just copies but add to what is passed on. Was that what I was doing by making this object?

In this example, in contrast to the previous one, there is a suggestion of movement from left to right, a direction and time-sense that is given by the bands that connect the two spheres. Both spheres are covered with “almost writing.” A vellum band painted in yellow with orange highlights creates a warm connection between the circles. A second ivory paper wraps behind the circle on the right, as though to register what the second subject took from the connection made by the bright golden strip of paper. The use of carbon paper is less calculated to smear the recipient's fingers than to intimate processes of imprinting. These processes are essential not only to a learning, but to the subject matter my teacher and friend imparted to me, which was in the realm of communications, media and meditations.

When I completed each piece, I photographed it for my records, placed it in an envelope and addressed it. I walked to the Post Office down the street and entered a grey building with blue and gold décor: colors that recalled those in my living room and the artwork I was about to send off. Standing in a socially distanced queue to buy a stamp at the self-serve machine I noticed at a woman beside me dressed in pajamas. Noticing the paint-flecked yoga pants I had on beneath my raincoat, I reflected on how the one-kilometer circle around their homes where people were allowed to circulate during strict confinements had created a new frame for “personal space.” These musings would lead me to a second “Scattered Subjects” project in which I conceived a self-portrait as walking tour within that one-kilometer frame. But in the meantime, I was engaged in making further Invitations and waiting to receive responses.

After exiting the post office and placing envelope in the letter box to send it on a trip I could not take myself, I returned home to wait, anticipating

the arrival of pictures of previously sent-off artworks in my email inbox. It took three months to complete all the Invitations, so I was still making artworks for some people while receiving photographs from others. Throughout that time the project contributed to my personal world and well-being even as I hoped it might do so for my interlocutors. It gave rhythm to my life like shared lunches, coffee breaks or dinners might punctuate one's usual social calendar. It created a pleasant buzz in the background of my solitude.

As I began to receive photographs, I realized that to simply post the rich responses I received on a single page would not be nearly adequate. I set up five different pages that present the photographs and texts in different ways. One page had information on the process and protocol to explain the protocol. "Making" visually documents the process I describe above. "Sending" is about taking the letters to the post office, and those that only made it to their destination after the pandemic. "Receiving" features the photos sent to me, along with many of the associated texts. "Assembling" allows visitors to the website to move these same images into different configurations.

Thus, "Invitation" picked up on practices of call and response I had previously developed for collaborative projects like "On the Line" and "The Moving Matters Traveling Workshop." (Ossman 2021) However, for those programs we met in groups, congregating in the same spaces was an essential aspect of how the programs were designed. In contrast, "Invitation" proceeded through one-on-one encounters, one after another. These were not discussed or blended. They were only associated by me: I did not create an interconnected network but placed myself at the center of a wheel with many spokes. Collaboration was both intimate and anonymous; rather like what happens for fieldwork, one on one relationships are collated. Except unlike the paintings, I made that generalized from these social and =sensor encounters, "Invitation" appears in public through the responses I received.

I turn now to some of the responses I received, and which can be viewed alongside others on the website.

Responses

In the emails accompanying the photographs many people apologized for taking time to get back to me. They didn't just want to place the artwork anywhere: they needed to reflect about where to place the piece. The care they gave to the representation of the artwork in their homes or gardens or in collages they created was touching for me as well as extremely rich for the outcome of the collective, evolving collage.

A couple of friends framed their works. One wrote that framing the piece recognized and set it off as an artwork that could be conserved and enjoyed for a long time. While he had touched the messy carbon paper to open the envelop, once framed, his Invitation could only act on others' eyes. Like the collective artwork his piece was displayed to anyone, but the hand-to-hand exchange remained ours.

Several correspondents told me in their return email that they chose to place the pieces so they would see them often. One friend wrote that she wanted to have a clear view of it as she went about her daily activities. Another chose to hang his from the fixture in his dining room; "I like this placement. I will see it every morning when I go to breakfast. It will dangle in possibility," he wrote. Like him, many other participants embraced the tridimensional qualities of the pieces that to me spoke of the air that we experience at a given moment in a space together. In fact, several people said they hug their pieces where they could "dangle." A few dangled over windows.

The experience of lock-down seems to have encouraged attention to windows. During the pandemic confinements, most of us spent inordinate periods of time at home, indoors, looking out. Perhaps my own attention to the window in my living room was communicated. Several collaborators pinned or taped their Invitation to the pane or frame of a window. One joined a colorful

array of scarves to frame view of a view of a Chicago backyard, a kind of larger collage that suggested life and happiness within and dimness without. Another forms an “x” across a windowpane looking out to a picture-perfect green hill of an Australian farm, as though to mark the world beyond the home as a no-go zone.



Figure 6 an Invitation looking out the window. Susan Osman.

Some placements of the small artworks seemed calculated to reference commonalities between myself and the collaborator. For instance, a family member placed the piece I sent in the mail at the center of a painting I had given her many years before. She said the placement of the photograph underscored the long history of our relationship and the story of my activity as an artist as a part of that story. A professor hung hers in front of an overflowing bookshelf. An artist and anthropologist composed a beautiful photo-collage of items one might use to make a piece such as the one it pictured. An artist with whom I often explore exhibitions and talk about our latest projects situated my small work amidst her own, larger artwork that echoed its shapes and colors, establishing a kind of dialogue between the two works. The artworks similarity and the way they could touching one another added to the delayed communication between us. “The fragment needed to be photographed with this art and not alone. I tried the fragment with different parts of the design and decided on this one. It made me think of the two of us having a conversation,” she reiterated in writing.



Figure 7 Art on art. Susan Osman.

One respondent brought other people into what I'd imagined as a one-on-one exchange. In one of the most arresting images I received was from a mother and grandmother and nurse. She pictured her collage in the center of a table with the hands of her husband, children and grandchildren circled around it. The hands of two adults and one child are photographs pasted on top of the photograph to make the family circle whole. They lived a different state and could not be visited during pandemic times. We thus view both the whole family circle and its absence during that long stay at home period.



Figure 8 The family circle. Susan Osman.

Other images include no people, but other living beings. A friend's dog looks down quizzically at the artwork. A tiny home school class convened during COVID viewed a friend's piece as a "dinosaur" or a "robot" or a "monster". Several people imagined their works as birds:

"Is this a bird sitting in my kitchen or a top viewed from above with its strings tangling? Is the center my solar plexus with movement and a bit of chaos? In any case it is a marker of our friendship and a place I see every day almost all the day."

A poem spoke in the voice of the bird-like artwork, or the voice of freedom as flight so many felt during lockdown

Let me soar
on wings I adore
you.
Let me fly

Past the rage in the sky
don't ignore
me.

I'm a winged
thing inside
cannot hide
I implore,
see -

here I go,
you don't know,
beneath wings
I still sing
you.

Reading these lines I recalled making "Winged Thing;" how I'd created a pile of different colors and textures on a corner of the coffee table. I carefully separated these from another pile: sheaves of carbon paper. I wanted their gray/blue residue to rub off on the recipient's fingers, but not the clean pages I used to shape and then draw and write on the "Invitations."

I imagined this friend in my mind's eye, at the same time of day as it was in Paris, not asleep in bed as she surely was in her time zone. I closed my eyes and felt the ocean breeze I knew flowed in through her window. It was as though, for a moment, it flowed into the room where I sat on the floor, pencil in hand. I took up a brush, dipped it in water and then in gold gouache. I sought to convey a bold, airborne spirit. Or perhaps the work suggested a writer's quill, a nod to the friend's profession. Or both. The recipient's voice came to me as I snipped at the paper. But it was impossible to imagine the beautiful poem I would receive in response. The "Winged Thing" speaks to both of us equally, responding with a winged sense of freedom to my more domesticated desire to share tea in my living room.

A friend in France also wrote lyrically to help me understand what I was doing with this project. She placed her piece in her garden and wrote of how the artwork had "fallen from the sky" inspiring her to make a bouquet.

Ce bouquet vibrant de couleurs & de matières mêlées, hymne à la renaissance cyclique confortante, du Lila aux feuilles-cœur percées de la lumière du matin, bouquet inspirée de ta pièce tombée du ciel, joyau postal de turquoise mêlé de bleu-blanc-gris orangé tourbillonnant dont

le fil jaune de Susan, précieux fil d'Ariane, nous invite à sortir de notre vie confinée.

6 For films of this see

This vibrant bouquet of color and myriad mixed materials, a hymn to the comforting cyclical rebirth, from lilac to heart-shaped leaves pierced by morning light, a bouquet inspired by your piece that fell from the sky, a turquoise postal jewel of mixed with orangish blue-white-grey that Susan's yellow thread, precious string of Ariane, uses to invite us to leave our confined life.

Again I was lead beyond the confines of homes and walls and beyond the "contract" of the experiment. My friend writes as though in anticipation that the text will be read by others than me, writing about me as well as to me. Her attention to my work with "yellow thread" is surprisingly like the response of another friend who responded from Berlin:

This fragment seems like a collage in process, a puzzle-piece waiting for its place in a larger design, or an assemblage not (yet), perhaps fully assembled, lines and colors and shapes and threads in suspension, waiting for a more cohesive or readable pattern.

The yellow thread is particularly suggestive, because thread, which is already "assembled" (made) or twisted from cotton fibers or (for example) silk spinning or whatever fibers, is also potential, in the sense of waiting-to-be-woven or -sewn..... beyond the original "offering". It is a promise, a gift, a challenge, a waiting-to-be-created creation, even a surprise....

Directed to think of threads, I recalled Roger Sansi's cogent observation that artists are "Moving further than relationship aesthetics, one could say that in these practices, artists are not just generic mediators in an art event, but they are proposing an actual intervention in the thread of social life." (Sansi, 2015, 13) In that time when ties were severed or stretched as thinly as the atoms that create across air waves or fiber optic cable, responses like those seemed to transform my summons into gifts. Unlike those Marcel Mauss famously theorized as imbricated in custom and hierarchy, the gifts I received in addition to the photograph I requested were not only freely given and imagined but helped me to understand what I was doing. (Mauss 2006). They responded to my experiment as well as to my offering and contributed to the larger artwork in ways I had not predicted.

When I sent off the last Invitation I was already beginning a self-portrait composed of twelve individual hybrid stations that offered a Covid-friendly walking tour of me. (Kapchan, 2025) It would be followed by "One and Many," a 24-foot-long collage painting composed of 100 individual artworks that transformed from an individual to a collective artwork to celebrated the end of COVID restrictions in Riverside, California in March 2022.⁶ Thus, the program of hybrid pandemic experiments ended, but like the effects of pandemic on the world, there were delayed effects for my projects, particularly "Invitation."

Delayed Responses

Three of the envelopes I mailed in the fall of 2020 were returned to me: "address unknown". I'd miswritten one address and on the second try it reached its destination. The two others proved to be more problematic. I sent them a second time. Again, they came back to me. This time one of them had hand-scribbled notes on it that indicated that both had been sent to the USA instead of the UAE.



Figure 9 An envelope returned a second time in Spring 2021. Susan Osman.

When it became possible to travel in the summer of 2021, I learned that one of the recipients would spend the summer in Southern France. I took a train to deliver her artwork. The second piece followed me to California and then to Abu Dhabi, where I moved in August 2022. A day trip to Dubai was an occasion to finally deliver it. In both instances, I had the opportunity to watch as my friends opened their envelopes. I was with them as they turned their Invitation this way and that, leading them to speculate on where they might photograph it before our conversations moved on to other topics.

When correspondents were distant, untouchable, the reflection of the object in a photograph seemed to take on weight, a substitute for copresence, certainly, but also a framed and objectified object that I contemplated and examined carefully as one might an artwork in a museum. During lockdowns I had abundant quiet time to enjoy, contemplate and savor each image and each word I received in response to what I'd sent off. But for these delayed pieces, the Invitation was only one aspect of our long-awaited reunions. Face to face meetings were by nature less concentrated on the shared task at hand. Contrasting these delivery dates to other instances, the dozen meetings with participants when I have had the opportunity to review Invitations since 2021 is instructive in this regard, for I could observe how the concentration and intensity of the rare exchange in pandemic days lived on in.



Figure 10 Revisiting an Invitation. Susan Osman.

When I'm welcomed to the home of someone who received an Invitation, I'm usually taken directly to the place where the artwork hangs. More people have framed or otherwise made the placement more permanent: others have left the work in the place where they photographed it. A friend who had moved house took his out of a small wooden box to show it to me. A writer kept hers between the pages of a notebook, whose pages she parted to reveal the piece. In each instance, like the earlier example of some people framing their part of the never together collage, the care with which people preserved their Invitation conveyed respect, enthusiasm and gratitude. It was as though they sought to remember and commemorate our encounters.

Looking at a piece together, often in the place where it appeared in the photographs I received earlier, was quite a different experience than watching someone receive what I had made. Viewing the artworks after the full exchange/encounter of the project was completed included that encounter as a part of the new meeting, which rather than obscuring that previous process of exchange demonstrated how meaningful it had been. To call the artworks we gazed at "conversation pieces" as a practical or analytic gesture as one might in a standard gallery show would greatly diminish them. (Cantarella 2015: Kertzer 2013) The shared history of our encounters during the pandemic and its hand-to-hand transmission added to what we could now experience as an extraordinary face to face meeting. It created a situation more like the dynamic multi-sensorial, affective and emotional encounters and aftermaths I'd been painting just before Covid-19 lockdowns than an object to be viewed and discussed. Looking anew at the work I'd made during the lockdown times; I thought of my granddaughter's pirouettes in my silent Parisian apartment; the Invitation punctuated and recomposed the space we were now able to share.

Seeing each individual artwork with people who had responded to it with photographs and texts that lived on in other formats, online, was a reconnection to and a memory of the shared experience of distance and delayed encounter that I had with that individual. Post pandemic reunions focused

on the individual “meetings.” They made individual pieces into reminders of how any spark of brightness appeared so very vivid in those gloomy, silent, pandemic times.

The simple fact of being able to view a piece in a living room or study brought a sense of closure and joy. We had survived. Since participation in “Invitation” was anonymous, I was alone in knowing that one of the friends who took part in the project had not been so fortunate. For me each on-site or webs-site visit has become a silent commemoration of him.

Conclusion

“Invitation” was and is sometimes or simultaneously an act of art, way of world making and a humanistic experiment, born of displacement in solitude. (Sommer 2014). It leaped toward ways of thinking and making that speak not simply to pandemic conditions, but to aspects of encounters and making contemporary social life more generally. Confinement and the way it shifted the ground under everyone’s feet while keeping them in place was surely a condition for imagining such a program, as perhaps me on doubleness that multiplied that strangeness. Yet, the project picked up on forms of collaborative art making, ethnographic project design and experimental humanities that like the hybrid, distanced, on and off-line worlds we live in pre-dated the pandemic, and persist today.

Today, I might muse about the “return” migration of all the people temporarily displaced in their own homes. I will surely continue to contemplate how the spaces of encounters enter their making and our being. And I might even envisage a similar project reworked to test the protocol under current conditions. But mostly, looking back to when the world was stuck in place, I marvel at how forms of experiment, design and art making in collaboration that have been so marginal to art and scholarship, treated as “social work” distinct from pure research or a “beautiful excesses” added to one’s “real work” proved so productive in times of emergency when so many other ways of grasping and acting on the world failed. In our times of continued emergency and uncertainty, it seems to me that it is time to recognize that such work can not only become more central, more valorized, but recognized as the only kind of work that may be productive in the states of exception we are living.

References

- Allison, Juliann and Susan Ossman.
2014. Making Matrice: Intersubjectivity in Ethnography and Art *Collaborative Anthropologies*, Vol. 7, Fall 2014, 1-25.
- Barthes, Roland.
1980. *Camera lucida*. Paris: Gallimard,
- Biehl, Joao and Peter Locke, eds.,
2017. *Unfinished: The Anthropology of Becoming*, Durham; Duke U Press,
- Blomberg, Oile,
2018. *Practical Knowledge and Acting Together in Socially Extended Knowledge*. Carter, J. Adam, Clark, A. et al, Oxford; Oxford U Press, , pps. 87-111.
- Brecht, Bertold, & Willett, J.
1993. *Brecht on theatre: The development of an aesthetic*. New York: Hill and Wang,
- Cantarella, Luc, Christine Hegel and George E. Marcus
2015. “A Week in Pasadena: Collaborations Toward a Design Modality For Ethnographic Research,” *Field*, Spring, 53-94.

- Clifford, James, ,
1988. *The Predicament of Culture* Cambridge Mass.;Harvard U.P.
- Cox, Rupert, Andrew Irving and Chris Wright, eds.,
2016 *Beyond Text? Critical Practices and Sensory Anthropology*, Manchester;
Manchester U Press.
- Damish, Hubert.
1987 *L'origine de la perspective*. Paris: Flammarion. Translated by John Goodman as *The Origin of Perspective*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995.
- Faubion, James D. and Marcus, George.
2009. *Fieldwork is Not What it used to Be. Learning Anthropology's Method in a Time of Transition*, Cornell; Cornell U Press.
- Foucault, Michel. .
1988 "L'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté." In *Dits et écrits II, 1976-1988*, pp. Paris : Gallimard/le Seuil, Pp.1527-48.
- Giordano, Cristiana and Welch, R.
2022 "Living and Breathing Reconfigurings of the World," or Thinking in the Time of COVID," *California Italian Studies*, 11(1). <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3f0282sh>
- Kapchan, Deborah, March
2025 "Notes on a Scattered Subject in Montmartre: The Self Portrait of Susan Ossman, *Theater Drama Review: The Journal of Performance Studies*, forthcoming.
- Kester, Grant H.
2013 *Conversation Pieces, Community and Communication in Modern Art*, Berkeley; U of California Press.
- Mauss, Marcel
2006 *The Gift*, London: Routledge.
- Murphy, K.M.
2016. "Design and Anthropology," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 45,433-449.
Nakashima-Deggarod, Lydia.
2017. "Atlas of Dreams. Unveiling the Invisible in the San Francisco Bay Area', *Visual Anthropology Review*, 13, 1, Spring, 74-88.
- Ossman, Susan.
2021. "An Exhibition in Fieldwork Form", *1FHAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 202 11 (3).
2013. *Moving Matters, Paths of Serial Migration*, Stanford; Stanford U Press.
202. *Shifting Worlds, Shaping Fieldwork, A Memoir of Anthropology and Art*, Routledge: New York and London.
- Sansi, Roger.
2015. *Art, Anthropology and the Gift*, London; Bloomsbury.
- Schwenkel, Christina,
2024. *Sonic Socialism: Crisis and Care in Pandemic Hanoi (A multisensory autoethnography in three acts)*, Berkeley; University of California, forthcoming.

Sommer, Doris.

2014 *The Work of Art in the World. Civic Agency and Public Humanities*. Durham, NC, Duke University Press.

Strathern, Marilyn.

2002. *On Space and Depth*, eds. John Law and Annemarie Mol *Complexities: Social Science of knowledge Practices*. Durham: Duke U Press,