



"The Last Words of John Muir / Occam's Razor"  
2007  
C-print, wood, paint  
5" x 27.5" x 38"



"Always Be Prepared (Gallery Lean-To)"  
2007  
reclaimed drywall and wood  
7' H x 8' W x 5 1/2' D



"Double Western (Transcriptions of Walks through the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey onto the Wilderness and Vice Versa)"  
2007  
color video no audio  
12 minutes

*I first met Letha Wilson when she took my Business of Art class at the Lower East Side Printshop. Subsequently, she showed up again a few years later in my Artist in the Marketplace program after she finished grad school at Hunter. It has been a pleasure to watch Letha's studio practice develop. Letha also has incredible skills as a web designer having worked for many years with Artists Space, an alternative space in New York City, in charge of their artist registry and later as an Associate Curator. When I wanted to make sure that I had up to date information about work samples and being an artist in the digital age, the first person I thought to speak with was Letha.*

J: This is an interview with the former Associate Curator at Artists Space and artist extraordinaire Letha Wilson on July 29, 2006.

Artists Space purpose and concerns when documenting a show are completely different than those of the artist. I'm trying to make artists understand that they can't rely on their venue to get them good documentation or documentation that they can use in the future. So I'd just like to know, what would you consider when documenting a show?

L: Part of the problem would be that we only had a certain number of shots, usually dictated by our budget, of how many actual pictures we could take. It was usually only between eighteen and twenty. And, often there would be three exhibitions in the main space. Sometimes, it's not even possible to shoot every piece just because of the logistics of time. So a lot of times, we would have to depend on the artist having a shot of their own work that we could get a copy of.

Our Director would always make a point, during meetings or presentations, that when she was trying to present Artists Space, wide installation shots that show the whole space don't really give you a good idea of the show. But in some ways, we have to have some pictures of the whole space. So the key would be to have maybe one or two installation shots and then some detail shots of a particular area of the show or of pieces that are really important to the show. A lot of times, there are works that were site specific that may have more details that need to be captured or particular things that would never exist again because they were one time pieces like William Pope.L's Peanut Butter Painting. We would take more shots of that, because it was something that we wouldn't be able to photograph in the future.

J: And how was this documentation ultimately used?

L: Most of it really is historical for Artists Space's bios to document the show.

J: And so you shot slides?

L: We shot slides.

J: Did you also shoot digitally?

L: We finally bought a digital camera a couple years ago and I started supplementing the slides with the camera. Sometimes, the press wants images as soon as possible. When The New York Times calls, we often have to take digital shots because we haven't had the slides of the pieces taken yet. The slides are usually just for our archives and are often only used as a reference for staff or outside people doing research on old shows. Often Artists Space will have students that come in to look at the slides of past shows, and also we use slides to apply for grants.

J: Yes, because when you submit a NYSCA (New York State Council on the Arts) or NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) application, you need to show them certain examples of what you have done in the past.

L: We ended up supplementing these slides with digital images.

J: So, your thinking was not focused on the individual artist? It was more about what will serve Artists Space?

L: Yes and trying to document the show as best as possible in the few shots we had as well as focusing on pieces that would never exist again like those that were painted on the wall or like Lisa Sigal's painted installation that was destroyed afterward. A lot of pieces were very temporal, so we'd focus on those, but once we got the digital camera, it became a lot easier because we could just take a lot more pictures and put them on a cd. She was out of town when that show came down, so in those situations we would try to help as much as we could. But basically, we'd try to preserve as much information as we could for Artists Space grounds and future reference.

J: But if you were shooting somebody else's work, even if you were taking a hundred shots, you wouldn't rearrange any of the elements because only the artist could do that. And of course would the artist come in and take their own documentation?

L: They are totally welcomed to. Sometimes, artists already have documentation of the work before they have given it to us.

J: What would you say is good documentation? What are the qualities of good documentation? What are the qualities of a good work sample? You saw so many as the intake person at Artists Space file. How many artists did you intake during your years there?

L: Thousands. The artist file is now at four thousand, but the general number of submissions to

Artists Space is at least one or two a day. I was there for seven years. First of all, as far as slides go, good color correction, a clear image, straight on shots, and being lined up. As easy as that sounds, you would be amazed by how bad some of the slides are; they're really dark or you can't see what's going on. A lot of times, because we are looking at so many, we aren't able to project them, so it is really important for an image to be clean, color balanced, and centered. One of the really basic things I thought about a lot of times when I would look at artists work and even videos was that I didn't really understand what I was seeing. Is this image an installation, is this a sculpture, or is this a documentation of something else? Sometimes, it may have been clear in the artist's head, but as an outside viewer I was really confused.

J: If you were puzzled like, what would you do?

L: We would try to figure out what it was. We were looking at videos thinking, is this a documentation of something else or is this the actual video supposed to be the art? Then we would look at the statement, read it, and try to figure it out.

J: Were there work sample descriptions?

L: Sometimes. When that was missing, it became difficult. And at a certain point, if you have to spend a few minutes trying to understand what you are seeing, you move on because you don't have time to spend ten minutes figuring out what you are looking at. It may seem really obvious to the artist when they are thinking of it, but really straight forward language and some sort of side script or something like 'this is a sculpture' and 'documentation of this piece that happened here' is really helpful because artists get really caught up in their own work and don't realize that the person looking at it isn't as familiar with it. So when introducing new work to someone who hasn't seen it before, it is good to really use clear language when explaining and describing it.

J: Some people need it more than others. My paintings are acrylic on canvas and it is obvious, but again more and more works that have several components, are mixed media, or have particular ideas or issues, need to say so in the work sample description. Artist statements are about listening to what people ask you about your work and answering those questions. I like to say that the artist package is a studio visit with you, but you are not there. So, everything in them needs to be explained because you are not there to answer any questions that may arise.

L: And also, you have to be very concise because with the time period we have to look at artists' packages, and you might need to just make it clear and cut out a lot of words. I like it when slide scripts have info about the piece and a short little three or four sentences about them: A little bit of an expanded slide list. A little bit more information is nice. Sometimes the statement is really interesting that seems to usually be about the work in general, but it's nice having something specific about the individual pieces especially when they might need a little more description.

J: I recommend that you just have a one paragraph artist statement at the top and then work sample descriptions that kind of piece together more of the specifics about an individual work. But yes, the artist statement then talks about the general principles of the work.

Something I really want to talk about is how more and more artists are being asked to join these online slide registries. You are the expert of online slide registries because you've set up one of the biggest ones around. So I'm kind of curious about what artist's should think about in terms of submitting their work to an online slide registry.

L: I am going to start with something the last comment brought me to. Particularly for the Artists Space one, there is an area where you fill out your description where you can actually put notes about your piece. Any place you can provide information is an opportunity to provide information about your piece. People that are looking for you will find you better if you provide more information. For example, our slide registry lets you do a search or a field search for certain words. So the more descriptive and clear words you have in your artist statement about your work, the better chance someone that is looking for you will find you.

J: Like minimalist, abstract, landscape, or gender-based'

L: There are certain pre-categories that we have, that a lot of slide registries have, where you can decide how you would categorize you work. But because there are so many artists in the artist file, work can get even more specific if you are doing color, site specific, or subject matter field: 'works about Columbia,' 'political works,' 'works about the sublime in the Western landscape.' There are parts where you can get really specific in your statement which not only opens the door for people finding you but also helps you. I have actually found that this process for the artist is much like submitting your slides to anything; it helps them clarify what they are doing. They have to put it up there, look at it, and see how it appears to the public.

J: What do you mean by that? Do you mean applying to a slide file helps you do that?

L: Seeing everything there in different format. I think seeing your work on the computer is different than seeing it in slide form. The nice thing about online slide registry formats is that you have some flexibility to put your work on, preview it, and change something if you don't like it. So, it's kind of a nice little playing ground. Or a lot of times, an image that translates fine in real life doesn't translate onto a computer screen as well.

J: Like what? Do you have any examples of that?

L: Drawings, like really detailed, very fine, pencil drawings. When it's just fine delineations between colors or something with a lot of detail from far away, it may just look like dots or something. So, a lot times I recommend just using up space and putting some more detail shots in. Is it something accompanying the piece instead of just one shot of that piece? Have two shots or just the detail, because if it's not going to give the viewer an idea of the work, it's not really helpful to you.

J: Give me some other ideas about how to choose your images for a slide file? What are some don'ts? What do you do if your work is time based?

L: Most of the slide registries have a place you can link to your own website. So if the artist file hasn't gotten to a point where you can post video files on their site, you could surely put your link

on the site and post it on your own site. As a video artist, I would definitely recommend if you have your own site where you can view or download videos, just have stills from it on the artist file. You could even put the link into your statement so that people can look at the real video easily. Again, if there is a section for description, it's very helpful. Even if it's from a digital video, though it is very difficult to have a small little narrative or blurb about what the video is, it's especially important to have some sort of description for the viewer when it comes to video work.

J: How about artists who tend to have lots of different media that they've worked in or have worked in different series? How should they choose images? In Artists Space you can post twelve images. What would suggest to somebody? I'm sure you've had these issues with artists.

L: Because of the nature of the artist file, as it is not curated, it is not only open to a vast library of images and artists but also open to a very diverse public. I usually tell artists to put in some pieces from each body of work because you don't know who is going to be looking at your work and it might be different then applying for a show at a gallery or something specific. The broader you cast your net in that situation, the better.

J: So, in the case of Artists Space, it's great to have a broad net. How about other live registries? Have you had any experience with others where that wouldn't necessarily be as good? Does The Drawing Center only have drawings on their slide registry?

L: Yes... The Drawing Center and I guess White Columns because it's curated. If it's something that's curated, then it might be more important for you to present a united front of your most recent work or a clear body of work. The Drawing Center is going to be just like their Viewing Program, which is a curated registry, and now the whole process will be online. It is only Drawing, but their definition of drawing is also pretty broad. If you are accepted into The Viewing Program, then your work will be included into the Solomon registry and you'll also get an appointment to see The Viewing Program curator in person.

J: So if your work is complicated, the best way to represent it would be to have a general overview of the work and then one or two details with good descriptions?

L: If it's a complicated installation, then maybe include one shot of the overall layout to give you an idea of what it is as a whole. Also, I really find it helpful to place a person in a shot to give the viewer some sense of scale. Then a few really specific detail shots that communicate what that piece is in a really clear way.

J: What were some of the common mistakes artists would make not only when you were working on the slide file but also when you were working as a curator?

L: I think one is just bad quality slides. That's the first thing you notice.

J: And what is the first thing that comes to your mind when you see bad quality slides?

L: That they're not serious, they're not a serious artist, and they're just a Sunday painter.

J: Even if the work looks sophisticated?

L: Yes. When it's just really hard to look at, seems like there's a cloud in front of it, and you literally can't see what you are looking at because it's such a dark slide, that's just the initial perception. It doesn't always become the case and there can be really good slides that aren't necessarily good work, but there is no reason that you should have to have bad slides because they're just not helping you.

J: What other kind of mistakes?

L: Labeling. Sometimes, believe it or not, artists wouldn't even have their contact information anywhere in their packet. How am I going to get in touch with you if I liked your work? I mean you wouldn't believe that they'd sent me something without an email address, phone number, or anything. So, definitely include your contact information. It's also helpful to see a resume.

Another thing that could really make or break it is being too general. Something that you thought was interesting to look at as slides could become uninteresting when reading an artist statement if it is a general statement that could be applied to any artist.

J: Kind of bland statement? I find that's one of the biggest mistakes artists make. Often times when they ask me to help them with their statement, I'll read a sentence out loud and say, 'and how many artists do you think this applies to?' and they look at me and I said, 'Gee, at least a hundred thousand I know about.'

L: There are generalizations that you hear over and over again. I mean, it's again this idea that they're not really thinking about their work. It's one thing that artists are obviously visual people and maybe aren't amazing writers, but at the same time, what I look for when reading a statement is a singular idea or unique voice that can help me understand the images I am seeing even more.

J: I like what you said, 'singular idea.'

L: And the best artist statement can then make you look back at the slide scan and actually make you look further into them.

J: Now we really have to talk about everything now in terms of digital images too, although I still recommend slides as the way to archive your images.

L: The good news about taking digital images is that there is so much more you can do to make things better, like in Photoshop.

J: To a certain extent.

L: You need a good original. I did this workshop at Artists Space that was very basic, like what is a JPEG? What is a TIFF file? What is a good digital image? All these things I did from this laymen's point of view and then I presented in workshops.

J: So, besides the JPEG quality, how do you ensure best quality of your digital images?

L: Start with a really good original. Use a really good slide or, when you're taking your digital picture with a digital camera, make sure you have good lighting. The higher the resolution you have when you take it or scan it in, the better.

J: What resolution would you scan slides at when your scanning them?

L: 300 DPI and about 4 x 6 inches. That's big enough. You could scan them larger if you knew you were going to be printing them out at 8 x 10 inches. Then when you make it a j-peg you actually put it down to 72 DPI but you don't ever want to go back up. So, basically you want your original to be as large as possible and then make copies that are smaller from it and always save your original.

Another thing that I think it really important to consider when you're doing digital images is that everyone's monitor is slightly different so keep in mind that it will look different from one to the next. However, you can control that if you have an image that has good range of lights to darks.

J: One of the things I tell people to do is burn a CD and check their JPEGs on a friend's monitor to see how it looks or if there are any differences.

What kind of questions do curators ask you about the online artists? Do you have any interface with the people using the online artist files? Does Artists Space have an interface with that or is it just out there?

L: We've tried to put the artist and curator more in touch directly with each other so we're not as much the medium. We do get CC'd on the emails, so we see what's going on. Actually, it's more to make sure scams don't happen. We sort of keep an eye on the conversations.

Now more and more, and part of the reason why this whole online transition happened is because all the curators are doing a lot of their research online, so it's become more of a regular tool for them. It's becoming one of the primary modes of looking at work for better or for worse. As long as artists are aware of how their images look. The nice thing about the artist file is it can function as your website, because there is a unique link that you can copy, paste, and email out. But also, it's always great to have your own website because you are in control of that space.

J: As a curator, what would you want to find on their website?

L: When it's your own website, you can put as many images, in an organized fashion, going a lot farther back, a bigger range of work, more reference texts, links to shows you've been in, and more of a history about yourself. I have my website, and because my email address is letha@lethaprojects.com, when I email someone they'll sometimes go directly to my website without me even telling them to, so that's kind of nice too.

J: That's one of my tips. At the bottom of every email should be your contact information. Mine

always has my website set up so that it can be clicked on you can go right to the website.

There are a lot of online registries that ask for fees. What should artists think about in terms of joining any kind of registry? Has being on the White Columns registry benefited you in any way?

L: Yes. Actually, I've gotten in a show because of it. It's nice because it's smaller and curated. People go there, so you probably have a better chance of someone finding you there.

J: So it has a kind of good housekeeping stamp of approval of artists on it.

L: And the one thing about that is you have to update it at least once a year or else you'll get booted off, so you want to keep updating. We want the artists to be showing their recent work and keep it relevant for the curator. It's really important to keep your addresses. It's hard to remember but you need to know where you registered and what you are doing because sometimes you may be in different things and forget to update them if you move or your email changes. If your email or your phone number changes, you have to make sure you update the information. Otherwise, what's the point of you having your information out there if your contact is wrong?

J: Have you served on selection panels?

L: I sat in on a video panel at Artists Space.

I would rather pay the money to have my own website than pay to be in other registries. I think it's more important.

J: What used to drive you nuts doing this process?

L: When there's information lacking or things missing, if there's room for twelve images and they only put up three, the captions they've written aren't completed, the statements are not there, and the resume doesn't even have their contact info. You want to get someone interested and give them something to hold onto and bring you in deeper. The lack of information is frustrating. When something looks interesting but you don't have anything else to go on like a compelling statement or more images, it seems like a fluke and you just go on to the next one.

J: Do you have any recollections of any artists for whom you think they had a wonderful artist statement?

L: I'm always looking for good ones. What I would tell people when they come and ask for advice is just to sit down and read a bunch of artists statements because it usually becomes pretty clear to them what isn't good.



*and in Florence, Italy. Her work has been shown in many venues including the Bronx Museum of the Arts, Exit Art, Fredrieke Taylor Gallery, White Box, Jack the Pelican, Spencer Brownstone Gallery, and The Arts Center of the Capital Region.*

*Letha was the Artists File Coordinator, and subsequently the Associate Curator at Artists Space. During her tenure there she led the project to publish the Artists File database online in 2002, and launched the current dynamic website in 2006. Over the years she has worked with many arts organizations in New York City including Art in General, Alexander and Bonin, The America's Society, and Visual Aids. She is currently working as a Project Manager for the Drawing Center as they finalize their online Viewing Program.*

*Letha has also collaborated on curatorial projects including Majority Rules in Glasgow, Scotland, (Your Show Here) at Mass MoCA, and co-organized the Salad Days exhibition at Artists Space. Born in Honolulu, and raised in Colorado, she resides in Brooklyn.*