War Correspondents: Ellipses From Within The Bubble

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

By

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To my wife Maureen, who supported me through thick and thin, coaxing me gently to get this damn thing finished. With love and thanks.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the many people who graciously gave their time, accommodations, and memories to me in the pursuit of making this happen. To my mom, Cynthia, and to my dad, Bill, who helped inspire the idea, I’ll never forget you. To all the men and women who participated in the secret war in Laos: yours was the noblest of efforts.
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ABSTRACT

WAR CORRESPONDENTS: ELLIPSES FROM WITHIN THE BUBBLE

Sean Watkins, MFA
George Mason University, 2009
Thesis Director: Tom Ashcraft

*War Correspondents: Ellipses from Within the Bubble* distills the mapping of physical and emotional paths into a physical and visual conclusion of my journey discovering memories from participants of the secret war in Laos. In my thesis, I talk about abstracting the medium and content of traditionally understood linear documentary narrative into new media content. I engage in the importance of activating the exhibition space with an asynchronous and harmonious symbiosis of form and content, each inextricable from the other, in order to successfully challenge the notion of documentary formats. I discuss my audience’s responses to my work. The process of designing, building, and the difficulties and surprises encountered along the way are described. I conclude my thesis with the importance of how the way I make things gives me different satisfactions, and how those discoveries guide me into the next project.
Certainly the content of films, animations, and video games have their place in the theater, or watched and played with on T.V. These are their targeted mediums of distribution. I began making animations and videos with the intention of showing them on the flat screen, or projected on the wall, and that was interesting enough. But the moment I saw a Tony Oursler installation, I knew I had moved on to a new understanding.
of what was possible. By adding the plasticity of space, objects, and interactivity to its form, *War Correspondents: Ellipses from Within the Bubble* experiments with and questions the codes and forms that deliver documentary content. I use metaphors of portrait gallery, the bubble, and ellipses to define my installation’s content. *War Correspondents* also stands for memories of my father as well as the paths I mapped to uncover them.

**Object and Content**

Content is a glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash. It's very tiny--very tiny, content. (Willem De Kooning)

In activating the gallery space, I realized my installation was comprised of two equally important elements: The content, consisting of the moving imagery and sound, and the object, the means for distributing the content. In order to wholly relate to the concept, the form of content delivery needed to be as involved with the activated space as the delivered messages from the interviews. I wanted the information from the video clips and the object in the room to merge as though one entity, to create new content that would change the viewer’s perception of his environment during and after their visit, and enable them to participate in the newly created experience of the portrait gallery. Marshall McLuhan’s philosophy and communications theories help explain how new experiential understanding is created from all media.
Marshall McLuhan is credited with the idea “The Medium is the Message”, which essentially means that besides the object being what it is physically, new content is created from the use of the object. A new environment that never existed before the introduction of the object can now be experienced. In McLuhan’s words, for example, “a light bulb creates an environment by its mere presence.” In chapter one of his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McLuhan writes: “Whether the light is being used for brain surgery or night baseball is a matter of indifference. It could be argued that these activities are in some way the ‘content’ of the electric light, since they could not exist without the electric light.” (McLuhan 1964:8-9) In the same way, *War Correspondents* delivers new content and experience inside the gallery. My imagery, projected on the circle of easel backed screens, presents quite a different feeling than if projected on a large screen or television set. The interviews I present in my installation are embedded features of the object, integrated into the form as firmly and purposely as tiles mortared to an armature. Activating my installation’s electrical componentry creates a new environment, providing new content in which the viewer can engage with memories told by children who also participated in the secret war in Laos. They and their memories are given life as the cinematic ellipses that attempt to complete the whole tale, and are honored in their own portrait gallery.
The Portrait Gallery

The portrait gallery theme made perfect sense for my interviews. It accords those of us who were there during the secret war in Laos the same honor that is bestowed upon other people deemed worthy of that historical significance. In my installation, a memorial stands both figuratively and literally, representing our contributions to and participation in the same effort our parents and government lived and died for. Figuratively, the portrait gallery references the importance we as a culture attach to the structures that house our heroes, and adds my interviewees to the metanarrative that shapes our cultural understanding. Literally, the installation was built as a portrait gallery in the round using light as the medium of presentation rather than oils or tempera.
In appropriating the portrait gallery motif for my installation, I am not trying to subvert the gravitas associated with its ideal. On the contrary, I am giving due respect to what it stands for. As a symbol of national pride, the portrait gallery memorializes the accomplishments of those who reside within. I call attention to the cultural processes and decisions which make someone valid enough to show in a portrait gallery. I am by all means subverting the collective thinking, doctrine, and status quo that decides who goes in and who stays out. Certainly not to challenge those already indoctrinated into history, but to ask my audience to give consideration to validating our inclusion as well. Citizens of any culture will probably debate over what the tenants represent, because truthful representations or fabricated myths shroud, confuse, and define our heritage. We as a culture depend on generally accepted histories to tell us who is the right symbol for some particular narrative. By memorializing the children in our own portrait gallery, my new
narrative confounds the perception we carry of history. We are also heroes and witnesses to the struggle for the cause of the United States’ involvement in the secret war in Laos. In applying the same level of significance to the people in my documentary as is given to the well-known heavy hitters Richard Nixon, General Westmoreland, or Robert McNamara, I give my viewers the opportunity to ask why I did it. In a way, artist Andrei Monastyrski accomplishes the same thing in his *fountain* installation.

Monastyrski’s *Fountain*, was installed in the Museum Fridericianum for Kassel Germany’s *Documenta 12*. It informed the approach I was taking in my installation. What Monastyrski does is reassign the powerful political rhetoric implied in sixteen golden female statues that decorate the grand monumental fountain of solidarity in the
main square of The Exhibition of Socio-Economic achievements in Moscow. Originally celebrating Stalin’s purposes in 1939, the fountain no longer commands the pride it once represented in the Soviet Union. Positioning sixteen large-scale prints of the statues in a circle facing in on a layer of white powder, Monastyrski’s installation symbolizes the empty (political) position that once was a symbol of soviet power. (Documenta 12 catalogue) Where Monastyrski asks his viewers to reinterpret the meaning of well-understood Soviet political narrative, I ask my audience to re-evaluate the political narrative assigned to the content of American portrait galleries.

Figure 5. Fountain of Friendship, Moscow. Sixteen golden statues represent USSR solidarity.
Figure 6. Central gazebo with projectors establishing gravitas of the portrait gallery.

Figure 7. War Correspondents installation. Inside the Bubble. (Hidden political rhetoric represented?)
Another of the main themes of my thesis talks about what I call the “bubble”. I describe the bubble as the sheltered space in which the perception of the American way of life can be allowed to continue, normalcy inside chaos, even as we are installed inside a foreign land. More specifically, the bubble refers to a particular outpost, six kilometers northeast of downtown Vientiane. This outpost, with the aptly yet uninspiring name “K-6” was the home for the United States Information Agency’s employees and families and was the physical embodiment of the metaphor. This use of the bubble metaphor conjures up visions of a round, enveloping, embryonic and safe place to exist, and does in fact fit well with the notion that as long as we are waging war, we should be made as comfortable as possible.

The bubble also provides a platform from which to showplace the American ideal to the occupied, a safe perch from which to extol the virtues of its platitudes. Whether or not it is wanted, we, the benevolent, supply the “diminutive” country with American goods and culture as evidence of our goodwill. The patriarchal order is established.
Signified in my installation’s title, this interpretation of the bubble was carried through to its physical design. Research led me to Joyce Kozloff, a feminist artist whose work had an immediate impact on my idea.
Although the finished design of my portrait gallery ended up looking different, Joyce Kozloff’s *Targets* describes perfectly the physical form I visualized for the bubble. In this work, Kozloff also provided a nice metaphysical understanding for me. From the perspective of feminist art, I saw *Targets* as representative of the world as if inside the womb, somehow nurturing and comforting the proclivities we possess toward causing harm. The map segments inside the wooden globe are identified by the dates the country was bombed by the United States. Kozloff had created the perfect symbiosis of object and content I was looking to achieve in my thesis.

The equipment needed to project my portrait gallery wouldn’t fit inside a globe while also permitting a group audience to view it. But I felt I could still provide my audience with the sense of being inside the bubble. Immersed in the content created by the constructed objects and projected imagery and sound in the gallery, the viewers could easily sense the bubble’s presence through the way the space relations made them feel.

When I had the opportunity to be in the gallery, I asked a number of people if their experience felt as though they were inside a bubble. One commented that she felt as though she were inside a sphere of influence. Another mentioned that he felt like a voyeur, uncomfortable being privy to other people’s private conversations, as though he had invaded their personal space.
Figure 10. *War Correspondents* installation “sphere of influence” at work.

Figure 11. *War Correspondents* installation “sphere of influence” at work.
Ellipses

The material spoken by my interviewees are cinematic ellipses. Ellipses are the marks that indicate intentional omissions of witnessing, which I have re-attached to the narrative of the secret war. As a narrative device, the ellipses allow the reader to fill in the historical gaps. This reference holds great meaning for my project, since the interview vignettes reveal a side of the secret war that has been left untold. That side leaves out significant participants, the children, who as James Marten writes: “influenced the war effort, particularly as motivational symbols of home and hope for the future.” (P. Connolly 2001:104-105) We were there as soldiers dedicated to the preservation and dispersal of democratic values, and we were witnesses to the turmoil. We were a part of the big family headed by the government who was doing as it was told. The war would
show up for us over and over as our fathers were injured or killed, and families came and went.

My interviews are the memories of war correspondents. The stories told by me and my classmates are by definition what the war was like. It can’t be anything but the truth. Therefore, as war correspondents, we join the ranks of the generals, politicians, and traditional reporters who covered the war with their sets of facts and figures long ago.
Our portraits of witnessing describe the war as experienced by us, no more and no less questionable than anyone else’s recounting. The existence of the secret war in Laos had been denied by the same government sources that had instigated it in the first place, and the American public was being repeatedly lied to. It was time to tell the story from another set of reliable sources.

Figure 14. Richard Nixon on the cover of the United States’ pavilion brochure. International week in Laos. 1972.
Figure 15 News clipping: Aftermath of the secret war in Laos.

Figure 16. News clipping attesting to the existence of the secret war in Laos.
A mapping is the systematic set of correspondences that exist between constituent elements of the source and the target domain. (Wikipedia)

This is a work about memories. It is about my memories, my family’s memories, and friends’ memories. Both the constructed physical part, and the dialog content target the memories. My show maps the routes I took in collecting the memories. The physical objects and projected stories of my installation reflect my father as the genesis of the idea, without whom this project would have had a completely different outcome. The elements of my installation also trace my travels overseas to revisit the time I lived in Laos, and they document the paths I made while interviewing my classmates. It soon became apparent that the emerging memories were providing a parallel accounting of a
secret war that had been previously relegated only to professional journalists, the military, and official government accounts.

Figure 18. Mekong River, near Vientiane Laos, 1972

Figure 19. Patuxai monument. Vientiane Laos, 1972
Figure 20. Street scene. Laos. 1972

In the documentary *Sherman’s March*, Ross McElwee starts out following the path of Civil War General Tecumseh Sherman’s march to Atlanta. But along the way, McElwee becomes sidetracked time after time, running into events that sidetrack his goal. The documentary becomes a personal accounting of his relationships, loss, and taking account of his life. Through the process of travelling, walking, and interviewing, I was given a similar personal accounting of myself. As I mapped the routes, I was left to think about the long strange trip of my life. Our family travelled around the world according to my father’s job, which took us to the Philippines, Colombia, and Laos. Moving frequently and beginning again and again someplace new became normal and even desirable. Even so, there were many drawbacks to leaving the comforts of a familiar place.

In her book *Military Brats: Legacies of Childhood Inside the Fortress*, Mary Edwards Wertsch talks about living the nomad life and the effects it has on relationships, uprooting, and doing the bidding of the “big parent”. Whether military or other government entity, the nomadic characteristics of military families force children to cope with mobility. Wertsch writes: “For children, the hardships of moving all revolve around loss: loss of friends, loss of status, loss of security, loss of identity. This kind of loss is part and parcel of military life, and very likely always will be” (Wertsch 2006: 256) Stories of loss, missed connections, homesickness and of people coming and going were the most poignant interview moments, reminding me of feelings I used to carry with me every time we embarked on travelling to a new country.
Ideas on the way to Cambridge

During my graduate studies, I gained vast insights into the structures of film and narrative, suspension of belief, reevaluation of convention, (the “idealized realm”), hyper reality, and many other concepts that helped glue the philosophical to the finished, concrete work. In February 2007, I drove to Cambridge Massachusetts with a colleague for a three-day software seminar. As we drove, the conversation of my living around the world came up, and I began talking about my father and what he did that allowed our family to live in foreign countries. This history provided the kernel of my thesis idea.

We talked about my family’s tour of duty to Laos, and my understanding of the complex machinations of the United States’ involvement in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam conflict and its urgent need to succeed in accomplishing the stated and unstated interests of American foreign policy. Suffice it to say, the CIA had a very important role to play in pushing back against and subverting the domino effect of spreading communism in the region. My father was a part of this, spending months at a time “up country”, about a two-hour flight north of Vientiane, in a craggy, mountainous region defined by the high Xieng Khouang plain, the Plain of Jars (PDJ). His job was to organize, train, and direct an irregular Laotian army against the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao who were using northeastern Laos as a conduit for their war effort in South Vietnam.
My father was flying in a helicopter over the PDJ searching for a team of irregulars inserted earlier on a mission. During this mission, the helicopter took ground fire. A .50 caliber jacketed round pierced the bottom of the armored Huey, mushroomed, and ripped through dad’s lower leg, shattering the bone. Evacuated to the U.S. Air Force base at Udon Thani in northern Thailand, my father underwent several operations to repair his shattered leg. Although eventually recovering over the following years, it proved to be a life-changing event for our family. This became the genesis of a wider documentary, and my thesis project.
The imagery and narrative that I wanted to cover in my installation was vast. My personal relationship with my father and family, tying my personal story to the viewer’s own experience, coming to grips with my mother and father’s political outlook and style of parenting, transitions in moving around the world, and how I came to view the world as my later experiences shaped me. All of the Destinations, landscapes, and family memories would be represented through my documentary.
"Drawing the Passing" is a documentary film about William Kentridge. Kentridge is a South African artist who literally draws his animated films. Using charcoal and erasers, Kentridge draws on a single sheet of paper. Each time he makes changes, he films it, continues drawing or erasing, filming the changes over and over, repeating this technique until the animation is complete. What resonates in me about his finished work is how the progression of charcoal and erasure marks stay behind and describe the passage of time. The past influence of the accumulated marks keeps the memory of the journey intact. As my project evolved, I was reminded of Kentridge’s process many times. The structures and marks I built and visually painted from the paths I took during the journey of finalizing my installation’s final form may have been scratched out, blurred, or obscured, but they were never completely deleted.
Figure 25. Sketches showing marks and process of design for thesis installation.
Thoughts on my Father

My father is the paramount mark, the altered scratch or erasure from which the narrative for my installation was built. The allegory of the war correspondent I present is incomplete without knowing that the “Higher Parent”, the CIA, brought our parents to Laos in the first place. My father’s involvement in the secret war there shaped the events that we the correspondents present. It is necessary to know him.
In 1950, after college, my father entered the Marine Corps, acquiring nearly 840 hours flying A-1 interceptors and Bell Huey helicopters with the 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing. Along with flying for the Corps, my father “survived” as he loved to put it, Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (S.E.R.E.) training, parachute jumping, and every other training that would prepare him in his pursuit of working in the field of insurgency warfare, strategy, and intelligence gathering. My father retired from the Marine Corps at the rank of Captain in 1958, one year after I was born.

My father was powerfully loyal to the conservative American value system. After the Marine Corps, my father approached the C.I.A. and was hired as a field officer. I was six years old when dad’s first assignment took our family to Miami Florida. My father was
tasked with training rebels to invade Cuba for the Bay of Pigs invasion, an unsuccessful attempt by the United States to overthrow Fidel Castro’s government.

My father had an extremely logical and decisive mind. He could lay out his position clearly and seemingly without mistakes. His grasp of world history, geography, and politics was profound to me. He studied maps of the world as if they were novels, and read copiously about insurgent and guerilla warfare tactics and cases. His view of world events contained no grey area discerning his American way of life versus Communist totalitarianism.

After Miami, we went on our first overseas tour to the Philippines, where we lived for two years. Returning to Virginia for a year, we next moved to Bogota Colombia, staying for another two years. Back in Virginia again, I completed the eighth grade. Our final trip overseas was to Laos, where the memories are by far my most cherished. In 1973, having recovered sufficiently from his wounds my father suffered over the Plain of Jars, our family returned to Virginia. As expected, my relationship with my father changed. I was growing up, making new friends, learning to assimilate, and finding out that other people had wildly different ideas about the world than what I had grown up knowing. I was beginning to revolt against my father’s unyieldingly rigid world view. And my dad was increasingly angry and bitter. His sense of patriotism was challenged at home in the United States in the “liberal” newspapers, colleagues, and by me and my friends. During
the next two years in therapy recovering from his wound, my father and I grew further apart. I felt uncomfortable and stilted around him for many years.

In 1991, my father passed away quite suddenly while on a canoeing trip in Maine. It was exactly the way he would have wanted it to happen.

I Can’t Find My House!

In August 2007, I returned to Vientiane, Laos. Landing in Vientiane’s Wattay International airport brought back memories of our family arriving there some 37 years ago. Wattay had been the main airport for U.S. civilian operations in Laos. The airport had been completely modernized and bore little resemblance to the tiny, utilitarian
airfield that I remembered. I wanted to follow in the footsteps of my family’s arrival in Vientiane in 1972, so I had made reservations at the Lane Xang, the hotel our family first stayed for over two months before moving to our house in That Luang. That evening, I wandered up and down as many streets as I could. Everything looked familiar; the slow pace of Laotian culture had persevered.

Figure 29. The Hotel Lane Xang. Our family stayed here for two months in 1972.
I knew in my mind where our old house should be, near the grounds of the temple That Luang about 4 kilometers north of the hotel. Leaving the hotel, I started north. Along the way, I filmed and photographed the Patuxai, an iconic memory for anyone who ever lived in Vientiane. A tall monument in the center of Vientiane, the Patuxai is the memorial honoring those who fought for Laos’s independence. The monument’s concrete had been provided by the United States in the 1960’s for the purpose of lengthening Wattay airport’s runway. As a result, it is known as the “vertical runway”. As children in Laos, many of us had written our names inside the monument on its concrete walls. I was unable to find any of them. They had been washed away or covered over, replaced by almost four decades of other people’s dedications.
On top of the Patuxai, I looked over the city trying to reconcile what I was seeing with how I remembered it. I could see the American Compound, the morning market, and the three roads that diverged heading north-northeast: the center one to Kilometer six and the American School of Vientiane, the road paralleling it to the left disappearing into downtown Vientiane’s suburbs, and the one on the right that led to our house. The golden tip of That Luang was just visible over the treetops.
Figure 32. View from the Patuxai, looking north. The road to the right goes to That Luang and my house.

Figure 33. The Patuxai, Rue Lane Xang, Vientiane. 2007.
Figure 34. Temple That Luang. 2007.

Figure 35. Temple That Luang. 1972.
The area surrounding temple That Luang looked nothing like it had when our family lived there in 1972. At that time, the Buddhist Stupa sat alone in a huge dirt field, a stone wall bordering its rise from the earth. Other than the monk’s residence and a French lycee, there was nothing but dirt and rice paddies. Now, a number of unfamiliar monuments and buildings surround That Luang. The dirt field had been paved over. Visualizing where I believed my house should be, I started walking. Using That Luang as a central referential hub, I ventured down every road or path I could find that spoked out away from or paralleled it. I walked for miles, photographing and filming, mapping the paths of my memories of living there. Where there were once numerous houses that I knew well, there were now smaller shacks and structures built up seemingly one on top of the other. I couldn’t even find the rice paddies we all used to explore.

Figure 36. Aerial view of That Luang. (top right.) My house should be somewhere around the bottom left! Image courtesy Google Earth, 2008.
Six kilometers outside of town was the American compound. This was where we all went
to school, at the American School of Vientiane. K-6 was for all practical purposes an
American outpost, and was set up to emulate the typical American neighborhood back in
the U.S. K-6 was in actuality the former compound of the U.S. Information Agency.
Little Ranch style houses with driveways, grass lawns, barbecue grills and trampolines in
the yard were all set on streets laid out exactly the same way any suburban U.S.
neighborhood would have been designed. As Brett Dakin writes in his book Another
Quiet American: “That this place would strike me as a Lao Levittown was no
coincidence. … It was from the comfort of this suburban paradise at Kilometer Six that
the Americans had operated their extensive aid programs and information campaigns
during the 1960’s and early 70’s. Today, it had the unsettling feel of a deserted Anytown,
the appealing set for a TV program like ‘Leave it to Beaver.’ In my mind, I could picture
the wholesome American families that had been stationed here in the days leading up to
the end of the Vietnam War. Sheltered from the realities of a deteriorating political
situation outside, American kids would ride up and down the paved streets on bicycles.
When it got too late, their mothers would call them inside, and they’d be welcomed home
to the cool relief of their air-conditioned kitchens and a plate of freshly baked chocolate-
chip cookies and milk. This was the unreality of American life in Vientiane before the
communists took over, and it was carefully preserved until the very end.” (Dakin 2005:
249-250)
K-6 is currently the Kaysone Phomvihane Memorial and Museum. Kaysone Phomvihane was the founding father of Lao communism, and had taken up residence inside the K-6 compound. He died in 1992, one year after my father.
Upon arriving in Laos, you had the option of living in K-6, or of finding a house somewhere in the city or close by its center. I don’t know if others shared in this perspective, but I thought of K-6 as a kind of purgatory, where inside, Americans were able to wait out their time in Laos before returning stateside. K-6 represents the “bubble” I talk about in my documentary.

One of my former classmates I interviewed, Mark Randazzo, picked up on the bubble as well. Mark was concerned that my documentary would cast the Americans as spoiled, naïve and isolated brats, living in the bubble of pseudo-America, while the rest of the population of Vientiane (and Laos) were critically aware of the turmoil going on around them. That had occurred to me. But during the interviews, there was never any attempt on my part to paint Americans as callous, indifferent squatters in someone else’s country. I was not trying to create tension by pitting one group against another. I wanted the interviews to be honest and real, the stories relating exactly what their experiences were.
Figure 39. My MFA Thesis card showing photos of the interviewees from the 1972 American School of Vientiane’s yearbook “The Cobra’s Tale”.
Let the Story Emerge by Itself

Overall for this project I interviewed fourteen people. Nine others and myself make up the final installation. No one individual can tell the whole experience. First and foremost, I had no wish to control the interview. I wanted stream of conscious thoughts to guide the documentary. I wanted the interviews to be honest, authentic, and real. Whatever my interviewees had to say would reflect their time in Laos even after so much time had passed. So many things over the span of time had likely tempered memories, but whatever came out would be the truth, whatever came out was by definition their experience. Every participant would therefore be able to fill in on somebody else’s memories. Although I had put together a list of questions, they were meant as nothing more than a jumping off point to rekindle some memories. I explained that the only thing that would be presented in my show would be their responses to my questions and comments, and that I wanted them to form their responses as complete recollections of the scene. This was the preamble I gave to every person I interviewed for my documentary, and it was the only rule by which they were bound. The answers given to the questions I asked provided two fundamental building blocks of the content in my documentary. First, there was an accounting of the physical, palpable sense of being in Laos, to which everyone gave more or less a similar recollection. Second, the answers
gave intimate portraits of each one of my interviewees. Although everyone was in the same place, with the same possibilities, the responses reflected an amazingly wide range of personal interpretations of what they were experiencing. Indeed, no one individual can tell the whole experience.

Figure 40. Bill Snyder and friend. 1972 Yearbook photo.  
Figure 41. Lisa Rand and Curt Koenne. 1972.  
Figure 42. At left, Suzanne Boyles with her horse. 1971.
Figure 43. Susan Duncan and Martha Langevan at the morning market. 1971.

Figure 44. The ACA Compound, with teen club, movies, and the pool. Ca. 1971.
My audience might not have much if any knowledge about the secret war in Laos, and my contribution of explaining it in the documentary was important. My role would also include explaining the “bubble”, the “portrait gallery”, and the “ellipses”. As my classmates were describing the secret war in Laos, my job would be to provide clues. As it turned out, the environment made it very conducive to becoming involved with the content, and my contribution did in fact help place the audience within a sphere of influence.

The questions I asked:

• What was your sense of what was happening in Laos/Vietnam at the time?
• Why were you there?
• What was your dad/mom doing?
• What did you learn while you were there? (about Laos, the war, what people back home knew/thought?)
• What experiences pop out, stand out?
• Can you tell me stories from your dad/mom?
• What did you expect Laos to be like before you arrived? After you got there?
• Tell me about some experiences you had while living in Laos?
• What was your sense of freedom like?
• Did you have a sense of culture shock, both while being there, and when you came back to the States?
• Did you have any knowledge of the Ravens? The CIA?
• Tell me about the things you miss? Don’t miss? (What you missed from the States while there, and what you miss from Laos?)
• Tell me about emotional memories.
• Talk about your house, where you lived.
• Talk about ASV, teachers, school friends other people.
• Talk about night life there.
• Did you take any trips around the country? Out of Laos?
• What was your relationship with your parents like?

In 2007, when I had determined that my thesis was going to be told from the point of view of my former classmates, I started a mental list of those whose memories I thought would best tell the story. Having compiled a list of thirty or so names, in the end, I interviewed fourteen people for this project. I went to the Les Enfants website that I visit from time to time. At the bottom of the home page, there was a link to a Yahoo® American School of Vientiane Alumni Association group. There I saw pictures and faces from Vientiane that I hadn’t seen in 35 years. I spent days poring over the photographs and messages that had been posted. I wrote a little introduction stating that I was working on my thesis and that I wanted to interview anyone who was interested in participating. A few replies emerged, mostly regrets, but soon Becky Coleman contacted me.

Becky was one of the first people I met in our School in Vientiane. Catching up with Becky, I explained my project and coaxed her into participating, Becky also helped me contact many other classmates. Becky lived in Phoenix, and I had also contacted Curt and Terri Koenne, who also lived there. On February 14th, 2008, I flew to Phoenix to interview Curt, Terri, Lisa, and Becky.
I stayed with the Koenne’s for the four days I would be conducting my interviews. As we caught up, the memories from Laos flowed. Everything we were talking about was fresh, exactly the stream of conscious narrative I wanted them to give me in their interviews.

I interviewed Becky and Lisa first. I just began talking about Laos, and our experiences, coaxing comments from her, and before I knew it, an hour had passed. Next, I started my interview with Becky. Becky and Lisa bounced their memories off of one another. High school, motorcycles, partying, and boyfriends wove in and out of the tapestry of loss, sorrow, happiness, and outright freedom. One recollection would set off a firestorm of subsequent stories that went on well after I had stopped taping.
The interviews with Curt and Terri were conducted at their home. I interviewed Terri first in their garage against the backdrop of motorcycles and trucks. Terri spoke about her father, a Continental Airlines pilot who, among a myriad of missions in Laos, had flown journalists to Hanoi to cover the release of American P.O.W.’s from the Hanoi Hilton. Terri also spoke about the differences she felt divided her family from the other families in Laos. Terri’s father was a civilian pilot, operating inside the war zone, contracted by the United States government, but they were not allowed commissary privileges. Terri’s family lived outside the bubble, and was deeply interested in the Laotian culture. Terri’s family adopted a Laotian baby, who grew up in the United States.

The next day, Curt told story after story of freedom. Tom Sawyer in a foreign land with no rules, Curt’s life as a teenager in Laos was all about going anywhere, doing anything, and being wild. Curt spent his teenage years in Laos exuberantly, acting as though Laos was his playground.
San Francisco

Two weeks later, I flew to San Francisco to interview Liz Senser (Newell), Teresa Kettle (Cowlishaw), and Mark Randazzo.

Liz Newell hosted me for four days, and was by far the richest source of emotional content. Liz told me wonderful stories centering around her family, but so incredibly different than the family life Terri Worra described. In her interview, Liz commented wryly: “No one ever gave me direction through the labyrinth.” What emerged from our time together were deep emotional scars left from her parents never being there for her. Liz Newell’s upbringing was a personification of the worst case stories examined in Mary Edwards Wertsch’s *Military Brats*.
I interviewed Mark Randazzo in his home. I learned that Mark’s work involved helping Non Government Organizations with the welfare of people around the world. I also discovered that this interest started during the time he lived in Laos. Mark was the only person I interviewed that spoke of the bubble with the understanding I had. He told me about his awakening of sorts while he lived in Vientiane, when he realized that our presence in Laos was, from my understanding, unjustified. Although Mark took advantage of the lifestyle afforded the Americans in Vientiane, he also felt an emerging chasm opening between his new realizations, and his father’s ideology.
In Vientiane, Teresa Cowlishaw literally lived in the bubble. Her family lived in K-6, one of the many who did work for U.S. Agency for International Development. Teresa talked about her community in the way someone would describe growing up in any town, U.S.A. School functions, boyfriends, clothes, bowling, teen club, riding bikes and playing with friends in K-6 and at the American Compound in downtown Vientiane were her main topics. I found Teresa’s interview one of the most enlightening for describing the attitude of those living inside the bubble. I felt as though Teresa loved being in Vientiane, and from everything I gathered as we spoke she had a very happy, American life there.
I interviewed Bryan Fulton in his home, a rowhouse in a suburb near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Bryan is the only person in my installation who was not a classmate of the rest of us. His father’s tour ended before most of us came to Laos. But Bryan had responded to my call for interviews, and wanted to be a part of it. Bryan spoke mainly about his father, and memories of being a young boy in Vientiane. Bryan was very proud of his father, an Air Force fighter pilot. Bryan’s memories were those of a six-year-old boy, vastly different, yet somehow similar to those my classmates and I shared in high school at the time. He experienced life outside the bubble, and his stories took me back to when I was his age, living in a foreign country for the first time.
Ruth Hart is one of four sisters whose family lived down the road from where we lived in That Luang. The video segments that make up the contextual, introductory part of my installation come from Ruth’s father’s home movies in Laos. Ruth’s parents believed in their children becoming immersed in whatever culture they lived inside. They encouraged their kids to find things out things for themselves by trial and error, taking buses and samlors around Vientiane. It was the best time Ruth had ever had. Even as a 5th grader, Ruth went everywhere, fearless and enabled with permission from her mother and father.
I made a promise to myself early on in developing my installation to keep the project “real”. Real in the sense of allowing the interviewees to speak with the fluidity and honesty, letting their stream of consciousness guide their responses to my questions. Real in not allowing the project to be overtaken by some political overture. Real in the sense that the exhibition space feels as though my installation belongs there. And real from the
perspective that the construction of the show remains authentic, with all electrical equipment, materials, lights, and other paraphernalia visibly participating in the final form. The choices I made editing content from the interviews squelched political overtures and allowed the stream of conscious to prevail. Careful measuring, spotting of the physical entities, and paying attention to lighting placed my show comfortably within the gallery.

Activating the Space

In her artist statement, describing her film and painting installation Delirium – delusional, Kathy Smith writes: “When reason is overpowered by emotion, or the environment is affecting our physiological state, our perception of the moment is intensified through our physical senses. The brain receives and burns these intense experiences into memories that later can cause sounds, images, color, and movement to invoke the same, what Richard Restak characterizes as ‘disorganizing emotional components’. Animation and sound can unfold and re-connect these images, turning the event into an experience.” (Kathy Smith)

The viewer needs to be immersed inside an environment that completes the installation. There are two distinct segments to my installation, minor and major, both playing integral roles in defining the completed idea. Spotting each segment physically in the space was important. Each needed to establish their individuality, yet simultaneously express their conceptual contributions to the other. The minor segment is situated immediately ahead
upon entering the gallery. Here, three looping projections present the viewer with contextual clues of the time and place of the stories being told by the interviewees in the major segment. Their purpose is to perform a visual segue to the main part of my installation. The projectors sit on simple white podiums, red and green lights from the electronics adding to the ambience. DVD players and wiring remain unhidden, arranged carefully and neatly, but purposely included as designed elements to the installation.

Physically, my show is a large-scale dynamic installation. It was pragmatically and aesthetically designed to activate a specific gallery space with sound and moving imagery, while also providing the physical space with numerous structures in which viewers interact and become immersed in the content. Upon entering the gallery there is room to pause, look around, and acclimatize to the pace and sense of the environment. It is darkened inside, the uncomfortable greenish-blue light from thirteen projectors infusing the gallery with a hazy mood.
Immediately upon entering the gallery, there are three projections forming a triptych. The center projection is of the Mekong river flowing strongly from right to left. The current is swift, the silt accumulated on its way coloring the water a deep, rich brown. It is monsoon season and the Mekong is swollen and powerful. From the left, a riverboat enters the frame, pushing upstream across the bottom, battling the current until it disappears slowly on the right. The laid back unhurried pace of life attributed to Laos is established. It is peaceful, and somehow hypnotic. The flow of the Mekong’s current from right to left contrasts visually with the struggle of the riverboat from left to right. I saw this as a subliminal virtual tension. The otherwise calming river also works to connect the two conflicting scenes projecting on either side of it. Projected directly to the left of the Mekong river scene are home movie clips of the Hart family filmed during their tour of duty in Laos. To the right of the Mekong is a projection showing war footage presumably filmed by the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese armies. Two perspectives
from the same time period, two opposing sides of the same conflict, demarcated by the conflicted symbol of what both sides were fighting over creates a visually powerful metaphor. Explosions, soldiers fighting, planes being shot down, civilians scurrying to get out of harm’s way contrast dramatically with the scenes of atypical Americana being played out in defiance of the raging turmoil less than an hour’s flight away.

Placed in the remaining half of the gallery is a gazebo constructed entirely of wood. It is eight feet tall, with bench seats forming a skirt around its base. Crowning the gazebo is an eight-foot diameter plywood circle, from which ten equally spaced digital projectors hang along the circumference. Ten easels were constructed to hold polypropylene white panels. These easels form a larger circle surrounding the gazebo, onto which ten perfectly
synchronized digital projections form a video portrait gallery in the round. My ten interviewees continuously fill the screens, each one taking their turn speaking while the others nod, blink, and shake their heads in a state of slow motion stasis, appearing to listen and acknowledge until it is their turn to comment.

Bench seats are built into the gazebo, referencing an outdoor public space utility such as a park, while also working as indoor museum portrait gallery seating. Plenty of space has been provided to accommodate those who wish to move around and follow the synchronized randomness of the looping conversations. There is a beautiful symmetry to the circular form of all the objects in this. An inviting environment elegantly fills the space inside the gallery.
Figure 58. Installation picture 5.

Figure 59. Installation picture 6.
Figure 60. Construction model of the gazebo.

Figure 61. Construction 1.
Problems and Solutions

There was little time to actually do the installing of all the elements for my show. Three days, to be exact. This was the first time I was going to get to see it completely installed and operational. From initial drawings, through video edits, measurements, calculations, numerous strategy sessions, construction was done and the components tested and ready. With some assistance lifting and fitting the top onto the base, the main part of the structure was set in place, exactly where it needed to be. Projectors were bolted on, DVD players, synchronizers, and sound systems were stacked and wired. Everything was plugged in. Standing on the ladder, eight feet above the floor, I began slowly powering up DVD players, synchronizers, and sound systems.
Green and red lights combined with softly whirring mechanisms, DVD trays gliding smoothly into position one above the next. The sound of setting things up was soothing and comforting. Before inserting the DVD’s onto the trays, I took a moment to reflect and smile as Donald Judd’s minimalist stacked boxes suddenly appeared in my mind. Technology is wonderful. It was going to work.

It takes about ten to fifteen minutes to power up all projectors, DVD players, sound systems, and synchronizers. Adjusting the easel backs into position around the circumference of the central projection gazebo, lining up the projections onto their surfaces takes up another half an hour. But not yet realizing it, hot exhaust blowing out from the projector cooling fans was accumulating in spots underneath the wide circle canopy of the wooden gazebo. Heat was causing onboard sensors to automatically shut the projectors down. Determining how to design a solution for this was just one of the major issues I tackled during the installation. A simple utility fan solved the overheating problem, but I would also have to have university electricians install three additional circuits in order to stop the eighty-eight amps from repeatedly blowing circuit breakers.
Technology

Much of my installation was designed around equipment I purchased for a previous project. I was documenting a journey, mapping points I travelled to in Washington, D.C. Later, while editing the video, it was revealed that an airliner had flown from right to left, passing directly through my head as I stood still on a bridge.

I was immediately inspired to follow this idea. I wanted to create a synchronized video installation of planes flying through people’s heads. I researched the necessary equipment that I would need to make this work, and came across a company called Dave Jones.
Design. This company makes synchronizers that are used by many artists. I could buy synchronizers and DVD players that would allow me to show a plane enter a display screen from the left, pass through a person’s head, then exit the screen on the right. The next screen would immediately pick up where the previous had ended, over and over, forming a perfectly synchronized loop of ten of these events. In November 2007, I filmed ten participants standing perfectly still against the backdrop of airliners making their final approach to Washington National Airport.

Figure 64. Compilation of Round Trip installation screen shots.
Using Apple’s Final Cut Studio I edited ten identically long segments of the ten actions, and burned ten DVD’s to play in ten professional quality Pioneer DVD-8000 players. Using ten monitors, and two Dave Jones Design DVDPlay synchronizers, and all the wiring and cables to make it work, it was first shown in the Alcove Gallery in the Fine Art Building at George Mason University. Later, in an exchange program with James Madison University, it was installed on the floor of their Fine Art Gallery. This installation and technique was the forerunner for how my thesis installation would finally appear. Other than replacing the monitors with digital projectors, the mechanical methods I employed in *Round Trip* were exactly the same as in *War Correspondents*. 
As we sat in the studio one day in Skopelos, the question was asked: “At what point does my interest in something become research?” Many times, if not always, during the process of designing a show, fate intervenes. The “third eye” of unexpected influences gives rise to new ways of thinking about where the idea evolves. I found it interesting to discover that I had now made three projects that utilized circular space in their form. My BFA Senior Project *Three Sixty* was the first of these three. It is a video where I placed two differing views of me spinning side by side. One has the camera filming 360 degrees around me, and the other where I hold the camera and film a complete 360 degree view of my surroundings. This was projected onto a flat surface in the gallery. The second, *Round Trip*, involved ten synchronized shots of airplanes flying through people’s heads, in an installation of ten monitors placed in a circle. Now *War Correspondents* appears to be either the end, or just the beginning of my research into there this idea is going.

I consider my show to be a success. Its evolution from my first idea through the final presentation was a systemic process of simplifying and concentrating what it was I was trying to say. And although it was impossible to see it completely installed until the few days before my opening, it basically came out almost exactly how I envisioned it. In
planning the installation, activating the entire gallery space was the most important consideration. There was a sort of intersecting dichotomy between the actual "object" of the piece, and the content it displayed which I found interesting. I had a rather intense struggle with some technology issues, such as too little electrical power and an overheating problem that I solved with a small fan in the center of the large "gazebo" object that held the projectors, DVD players, synchronizers, sound systems, and wiring. The responses at my opening were overwhelmingly positive, and I plan on submitting it to some area galleries, as well as the Museum of Computer Art in New York.

In my critique, the discussion touched on successes and things I might have done differently. As I mentioned, I feel the overall piece was a complete success, as far as it being a beginning in a continuing career. There were some things I wanted to have done, but due to technology problems causing time constraints for the opening date, I compromised on the introductory portion, creating an alternative set of projections for the segue into the show. These 3 videos were supposed to have been projecting onto 4' x 8' Sintra panels hanging in the southwest end of the gallery. As visitors entered, there would have been scenes from the secret war in Laos, family life culled from my interviewees’ home movies, and from my walking throughout Vientiane in search of things I thought would still be there. But because I spent so much time on the main element, and because of last minute technical issues, I made the call to project onto the walls, creating a small intimate space in the corner. This actually ended up complementing the circle of projections, while simultaneously providing a generous lobby in which people could
stand and take it all in before entering the portrait gallery circle of interviews.

We discussed how there was a deep intimacy between the people I interviewed and the audience. I received many comments over the show asking if the people could hear and see each other. Voyeurism, and the sense of being a part of their discussion was a common thread. The circular form of the gallery gave the impression of being inside the bubble we were talking about. All of these comments gave me pause and I realized that I was actually hearing these classmates of mine for the first time in 37 years. I was no more or less intimate with my interviewees as anyone else in the audience.

There was the surprise element of seeing it installed for the first time in situ, which was extremely satisfying. There was nowhere to do a test installation, so planning as best as I could for the final result was paramount to me in ensuring its success. I could see it in my mind, but the first time I saw the completed work was when it was finally installed. I learned to balance extemporaneous impulse with good planning.

*War correspondents* provided me the opportunity to explore alternative ways to present material. Condensing a tremendous amount of information into a tightly constructed package needed a few tools to make it all come together. The representative elements of portrait gallery, bubble, ellipses, and content distribution device abstract the traditional form of the documentary, warping linear narrative into conceptual art. It’s not that there’s anything wrong or uninspiring about the way documentary subject matter is laid out on television or other screen. I just think its narrative delivery method is so well understood.
that my installation is firmly anchored by it, but yet moving it into a new direction. In her essay *Against Interpretation*, Susan Sontag argues for experiencing the “thing in itself”, writing "Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back on content so that we can see the thing at all.” (Sontag 2001:14) Fair enough. But although steeped in meaning, I hope my audience still feels free to experience my installation in whatever way they want. I just hope the past acts as the catalyst that triggers forgotten memories.

I am really interested in creating more animations, but most of all, I am interested in the sorts of software/mechanical ideas that are possible with Max/Jitter, Processing, and other means of creating interactive art. I was fortunate to have been in Tom Ashcraft’s class for a presentation by artist Galo Moncayo, whose works became a new path I want to pursue. I will be discussing opportunities that will be forthcoming as the School of Art begins working in the creative quadrangle environment with the engineering and IT & U areas.
REFERENCES
REFERENCES


CURRICULUM VITAE

Sean Watkins is the Technical Director for George Mason University’s Art and Visual Technology Department. Sean designs and maintains digital art facilities for AVT students and faculty. He teaches courses in New Media art, and is currently working on a number of art projects. Sean received his BFA in Digital Arts with a G.P.A. of 3.79. Sean completed his MFA in Digital Art, graduating in spring 2009.