

IT'S TEATIME

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by

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It's Teatime is in memory of my grandmother, Emily Pearl Dorsey, who showed me how to share love with the world.

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ABSTRACT

It's Teatime

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Western Carolina University (November 2015)

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When my grandmother, Emily Pearl Dorsey, passed away I thought life would never be the same. I was right. After years of investigating my memories, and recalling them through my artwork I have come to realize the true beauty of memories and shared experiences. *It's Teatime* celebrates the shared histories of unique objects, stories, skills, and most importantly, simply spending time together. Our shared precious moments only stand the test of time by being passed on to each other. Many years from now, all that will remain of our time together is the story, and maybe some papers stained with tea from a party long ago.

It's Teatime compares how memories connect people through both physical and virtual art experiences. My thesis show is an interactive art installation that explores collective memory in active engagement versus virtual connectedness during tea parties, and the impermanence of memories through the deterioration of tea bags. I am creating two contrasting cycles of remembrance—one where people participate in a tea party then metaphorically leave their mark by staining the walls with teabags after the tea party in the museum; the other where people watching the tea party live on the Internet can leave comments on a live web feed as their way of

marking our time together. The physical stain of our existence contrasts the online comments that exist only in the virtual world. These physical acts then become memories completing the cycle with only a trace of the event left by the tea stains and comments.

Some of the conversations already occurring in the art world about collective memory, food, and physical versus virtual existence include Jennifer Rubell's edible installations and Rirkrit Tiravanija's curry feeding performances. They have all influenced this installation. I was also inspired by performance artist Marina Abramović's utilization of live internet feeds to contradict the intimacy of spending physical time together in "The Artist Is Present" (Anelli, "MoMA.org | Interactives | Exhibitions | 2010 | Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present | Portraits"). These artists explore themes I delve into further in my thesis.

INTRODUCTION

My work typically reflects on the past, and how collective histories unite people, both traditionally and in the age of technology. *It's Teatime* takes this research a step further to engage each museum visitor in a full-body interactive experience that engages all of the senses in a tea party set in a gallery. Sharing tea, a worldwide phenomenon, brings the act of remembering to each cup and hand. Each guest will have the opportunity to become part of the art on display in the museum and virtually around the globe. Our conversations and time together will be the focus as the white room acts as a museum pedestal—lifting, holding, and displaying our shared moments and special memories. Symbolism throughout the installation and performance comments on daily life, spiritual practices and rituals, as well as the preservation of these important aspects of life and individuality. Each tea party will be available to viewers through a live webcam, accessible anywhere in the world, and in the museum itself. This contrasts the intimacy of the physical acts within the space, and comments on the global trends of disconnecting, social media, and non-physical socialization.

STEEPING

The tea parties will be available to guests both in-person as attendees (and part of the art performance) and to the world at large via a live feed. Museum visitors will have the opportunity to participate, or view the live events on a screen in the museum.

It's Teatime, hosted within a 15-foot by 30-foot museum gallery, displays thousands of quilted tea bags covering each wall from the floor to about seven feet high. The visitors are en-

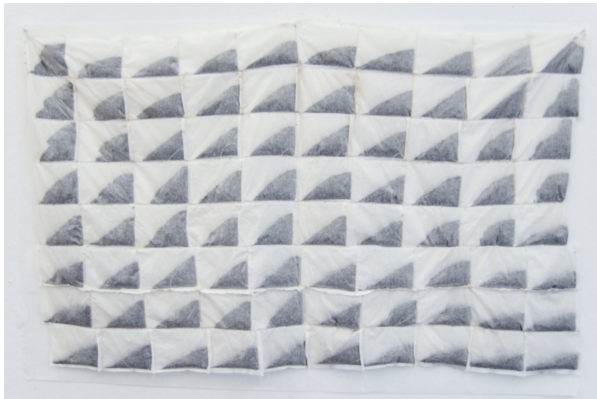


Fig. 1. Leigh Ann Parrish, Quilt Sample from *It's Teatime*, 2015, Cullowhee, NC.

veloped by the walls as they are seated at the table occupying the main space. The tea bags are predominantly machine-sewn into 24-inch by 39-inch “quilt squares” then arranged in a tile fashion, and nailed to the walls to create padded cell “wallpaper.”

I learned to quilt from my grandmother, and remember it being a time of great joy and peace. Sometimes large groups of women in my family would get together and quilt, sometimes Grandma just quilted alone. She made a quilt for each of her grandchildren to receive when they completed high school, so quilting has always been held in high regard in my family.

Underneath the quilted tea bag walls, water color paper lies dormant, waiting for each person to make their stain by pinning their used tea bag to the wall, marking our time spent together. We will create cycles of remembrance by sharing memories and creating new ones at the tea party, by watching each other on screens in the museum separated by a wall, and by physical

ly recording a reminder of our time together, only to know it will disintegrate over time, like the cycle of life.

I am interested in creating a cycle of remembrance that is played out literally by the interactive tea party and figuratively by the tea, tea bags, and stains. The teabags represent the body, the hot tea is the sustaining life force, and the stains represent memory. On a personal level, the tea parties represent my own sort of communion, sharing reminders of our time together and unification through sharing tea and food. The parties also function as a memorial to my grandmother, and all the wonderful meals our family shared in her home. This is my way of carrying on my



Fig. 2. Leigh Ann Parrish, *It's Teatime Overview*, 2015. Cullowhee. NC.

family traditions now that our family has spread apart and gathers infrequently to celebrate with each other.

I wanted to create a dreamlike experience in the gallery, something familiar and comfortable, but new and unforgettable. Beginning with the floor, I installed mostly white vinyl flooring to create a cloud-like effect, but with a familiar and comforting pattern found in many American kitchens. Two small, white carts act as my assistants in the room, carrying tea, hot water, and extra items to guests. A wooden dining room table with six chairs

sits in the middle of the gallery, painted white, with the disrepair of years of love and abuse showing through in the details. Two families used this table to share family meals daily. It now lives again, welcoming guests to sit, eat, and enjoy.

The setting inside the museum gallery is a striking, all-white room. In a YouTube video, food artist Jennifer Rubell said she “created these kind of pristine white pedestals to indicate the presence of art in a very sort of stereotypical way” (Van Der Linden, "Jennifer Rubell Just Right"). She was serving porridge in small white bowls presented on large pedestals to emphasize the importance of the bowl, eating from that vessel, and sharing that moment with others. I aim to elevate the importance of the people, tea, and experience by putting my guests on a white pedestal of sorts also.

The seats were recovered in traditional white duck cloth, giving each guest a simple, but comfortable “pedestal” on which to sit. This is to honor each person with the same care given to works of art in the museum. Atop the table are white ceramic serving dishes filled with cucumber tea sandwiches, scones, sugar cookies made with my grandmother's recipe, and other treats for the guests to enjoy with their selection of tea. Each setting has a unique white cup to celebrate the individuality of each attendee and their importance at the table and the various ways tea can be enjoyed around the world. The vinyl flooring and mix-matched cups help to create a comfortable, homey feel in the stark-white room. The settings share the same white spoons, cloth napkins, hand-cast ceramic teabag holders and honey bears, and small plates. Each guest is also offered a piece of Big Red gum in honor of my grandmother, and the simple gesture of sharing a piece of gum. It was her favorite gum, and she shared with everyone freely. Flowers, food, and the people gathered will offer the only color in the space, emphasizing life, nourishment, and to-

getherness. Above the table a white vintage chandelier offers a warm glow, welcoming the guests to the table.

The biggest goal of this time together is to enjoy each moment fully, and celebrate the joy of human interaction. All this contrasts with the experience of viewers on the Internet. Internet guests will be able to see and hear the party, as well as leave comments online, but it will not be an ongoing conversation as I do not plan to engage with the comments. Internet guests are welcomed to enjoy a cup of tea in their space with us as well, but they won't have the same immersive experience as the tea party participants.

Overhead cameras capture the shared stories and conversations during teatime, displaying them instantly via live webcast on YouTube. Visitors are able to view the tea parties in the museum space, or on any computer in the world. Museum viewers will be seen by the tea party guests through a live feed in the gallery. This completes the viewing cycle and reminds tea party guests of the ever-present viewers. The live feed will only be recalled through images captured throughout the installation, documenting the memories for both the tea party guests and those watching from afar. The ability to view the parties live contradicts the small intimate setting inside the museum, and the personal connections that will be shared by spending the time together in this unique environment. Online viewers will be encouraged to leave comments, share memories, and enjoy a unique experience as well from a distance. *It's Teatime* explores human relationships, intimacy, technology and communication, as well as forgotten rituals and traditions through the juxtaposition of live versus online experiences.

WHY TEA?

Eating, feasting, and communion have long histories in art, reaching all the way back to cave drawings of hunters, gatherers, and offerings, or to the days of Alexander the Great in the 330s BCE. We are all familiar with DaVinci's famous *Last Supper*, completed in the late 1400s, and the more modern place settings from Judy Chicago's *1970's Dinner Party*. People have long been celebrating mealtimes and shared moments through art and using it to make statements. *It's Teatime* is a continuation of this celebration, and a modern twist on breaking bread and preserving memories.

Tea symbolizes any shared hot beverage: cocoa as a child; coffee with colleagues; a healing hot toddy prepared by your father. Regardless of the moment, it was likely nurturing, warm, and prepared in a traditional manner (whatever that means to you). This symbolism is carried throughout *It's Teatime* to remind us of the tradition, togetherness, welcoming, healing, and warmth that can be found in sharing a cup of tea.

Tea, like coffee, is also known for increasing the drinker's alertness, and thereby stimulating conversation. There are several stimulants in addition to caffeine. "Components of tea that can boost brain activity include caffeine, catechins and the amino acid, L-theanine. In a systematic review of the effects of tea on mood and cognitive function, the combination of L-theanine and caffeine was shown to increase alertness and attention-switching accuracy up to two hours after consumption. The researchers also found small enhancements in accuracy of visual and auditory attention" (Collins, "Health Check: Five Reasons to Put the Kettle on and Have a Cup of Tea"). There are numerous benefits to drinking tea, which may be part of the discussion at teatime.

It's Teatime celebrates and questions the changing nature of intimacy, friendship, and togetherness through comparing face-to-face experiences to the experience of being an observer behind a screen. The juxtaposition of the real versus the virtual tea party is meant to raise questions about the differences of each experience. We create memories all the time, but do we really remember that great chat room we were in, or the Facebook post sending condolences? How do we preserve our virtual memories, and how do they compare with our real-life experiences? Is virtual better than nothing?

THE ART OF TEA

Since the invention of photography in 1839 by Daguerre, people have been recording memories visually with cameras (Daniel, "Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History"). Photography captured the reality of a moment or memory more affordably, realistically and accurately than painting, and became popularized for these reasons. However, people soon realized photographs could be manipulated just as easily as other mediums. This made people question the legitimacy of some "captured moments" from our past. For example, Edward Curtis famously photographed North American Indian tribes to document a catalogue of the people, but manipulated the images by dressing people up in various costume pieces for the images (K, "Smiling Indians and Edward S. Curtis").

These images are now engrained in the minds of people around the globe as accurate portrayals of these people. Our memories of these people are now skewed by false representation. How do cameras and technology continue to give a false sense of reality or false memories? Since most social media apps are for sharing our daily lives, not preserving memories for the future, I wanted to include the live web-cam and video monitor in the installation to ask people to think about our connection of technology and memory.

Many artists think about the cycles of remembrance in our lives—how we make and keep memories. In 2010 Marina Abramović performed her now famous, *The Artist Is Present*. She engaged silently with museum visitors from open to close, sitting daily from March through May, turning the museum gallery into an intimate discovery of human connectedness (Anelli, "MoMA.org | Interactives | Exhibitions | 2010 | Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present | Portraits").

Her performances, like my tea parties, were available live on the web—creating memories for both the participants and viewers. Claudine Isa claims Abramović’s live feed simply “confuses access with insight, visibility with presence. Sometimes it’s okay to say you just had to be there, and leave it at that” (Isa, "MoMA’s Live Streaming Marina-Cam Invites Everyone to Be Present”). By offering a view to everyone in the world, I am also asking people to consider how they engage with art, and with each other. Access and insight are not the same as physical presence. In our ever-changing world, making the choice to physically visit with someone instead of easily engaging over the Internet in a virtual setting is becoming a rare, and our ability to preserve those virtual memories becomes ever more challenging, and results in something different. The museum facilitates a platform to examine these issues.

Other artists are experimenting with social interaction and interactive art as well. In 1992 and again in 2014 and 2015, Rirkrit Tiravanija held exhibitions offering curried rice to museum guests (Stokes, "Rirkrit Tiravanija: Cooking Up an Art Experience"). The exhibition, *Untitled (Free)*, invited participants to take an active role in creating the art, not just viewing it. By engaging with the artist and other participants, the gallery experience becomes elevated and interactive. Laura Hoptman curated the MOMA exhibition and said:

The work has to do with igniting some sort of commonality. It’s about eating and about talking to people. In every one of Rirkrit’s situations, Rirkrit himself is not indispensable. He can show up or he doesn’t show up, and he builds his work that way. There’s something very deeply Buddhist about this. And it has to do with relinquishing a kind of control and allowing chance operations to kick in (Allen, "Curry Up!").

It's Teatime engages guests in a similar way, and aims to elevate the conversations and tea party activities in a more intimate setting than Tiravanija.

TEA STAIN

At the end of each tea party, guests will be asked to leave their mark on the space by pinning their used tea bag to the quilted walls. This creation of the stain left on the watercolor paper metaphorically preserves the memories of our time spent together. Each mark left will show changes to the walls over time, just like the impressions of our shared experiences are left on each other. By spending time together, we create new memories that leave traces of our shared experience.

For Internet viewers, their memories of the tea parties will be very different. They will not remember the smells, tastes, subtle sounds, and feelings within the space; they will perhaps remember it as we remember movies or Facetime conversations. They can watch as many or as few sessions as they like. They might multi-task, grab a snack, get a call, or just choose to leave the site at any time. The online viewers will also likely be mobile, watching from a phone or laptop. They can choose to leave comments or watch anonymously. User comments will act as their “stain,” the only way to know if they were there watching.

In the end, the experience and memories the guests have is all that matters. Their experiences will be different, and therefore the memories they associate with it will be as well. Tea party guests will have the full sensory experience—the sounds, tastes, feeling of each item on the table and the walls, the smell in the room, and the subtle conversational expressions shared with other guests will create a stronger and more permanent memory because of these various associations. Online guests will only experience the audio and visual sensations associated with *It's*

Teatime, but they will also have different smells, touches, and tastes to connect to their unique experience online. So do multiple stimulations really create better memories?

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development says multiple stimulations mean better memory. The more regions of the brain that store data about a subject, the more interconnection there is. This redundancy means students will have more opportunities to pull up all those related bits of data from their multiple storage areas in response to a single cue. This cross-referencing of data strengthens the data into something we've learned rather than just memorized (Willis, "Membership").

The more senses are involved, the more memories we are able to associate with an experience and recall it later. This is why as an artist it is very important to address multiple senses of the viewer, and try to give them an experience to remember.

CONCLUSION

From early childhood many girls experience tea parties as a way of learning proper etiquette and manners. Tea parties are enjoyed in the south as a way of celebrating tradition and family, sharing recipes and having an occasion for which to dress up. In Europe many people enjoy tea daily as a break from work and mid-day pick-me-up. Japanese tea ceremonies are a much more serious discipline with intense ritual and celebration. These are all very different ways of enjoying tea and spending time together. No matter how we choose to ritualize this important beverage, there seems to be pleasantness, respect, and enjoyment at the core. I hope to bring those feelings to my guests, and inspire people to connect with each other in more personal ways. By bringing the tea parties to the museum I am asking the attendees as well as the viewers to think about these shared moments, and cherish the memories we make together.

EPILOGUE

It's Teatime had many surprises in its creation and exhibition. I began working on this exhibition in March 2015. While I had intended for people to participate in this active installation, I had not planned on having help in the making of the quilted squares or installation of the exhibition. I thought I would have plenty of time to create the installation, but it proved to be a much bigger task than I planned. Luckily, I had many wonderful people offer to help.

In the beginning my husband helped with small tasks as I needed him. Next, I had just a couple of people helping sew tea bag squares, then a couple more volunteers. Eventually I decided to host a sewing bee and invite people to come participate in the process. It was a great success that created a beautiful opportunity for learning, sharing, and creating together. This sense of community and help was truly wonderful, and a great way to add more connections and shared memories to this exhibition. It taught me not only to not be afraid to ask for help with large projects, but that people want to help and be included. Creating opportunities like this allows access to art for all kinds of people, and makes the exhibition more meaningful.

People shared various stories about tea experiences including recipes, friendships, family, and even break-ups. The space welcomed people to feel comfortable, even when being broadcast live on the internet. It was also interesting to note that very few internet comments were made. While I could see how many people were watching, varying from one to five people, I could not tell who the participants were. My mom and one of the IT specialists, Zach, left a few words of encouragement on YouTube, and a few people commented on my Facebook page where I posted links to the live feed.

Teatimes have been wonderful celebrations of friendship and family, just as I intended, and I hope to continue helping people connect through simple gestures and interactive art experiences. Reminding people of our human connectedness through interactive art seemed to be most effective in person rather than virtually. It is hard to say for sure though, since so few people left comments. People in the tea parties did comment that they needed to spend more time doing things like this, and everyone seemed to enjoy the time we spent together. It's Teatime effectively engaged participants in sharing memories and creating new ones by sharing tea in a museum. Future iterations may include larger events open to the public or more intimate one-on-one teatimes where I travel around with my tea cart creating impromptu teatimes.

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