

## **DISCLAIMER:**

This document does not meet the  
current format guidelines of  
the Graduate School at  
The University of Texas at Austin.

It has been published for  
informational use only.

Copyright  
by  
Leah Mae Dyjak  
2015

**The Report Committee for Leah Dyjak  
Certificates that this is the approved version of the following report:**

**Collect/Disperse**

**APPROVED BY  
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

**Co-Supervisor** \_\_\_\_\_

Teresa Hubbard

**Co-Supervisor** \_\_\_\_\_

Ann Reynolds

**Collect/Disperse**

**by**

**Leah Mae Dyjak, BFA**

**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
The University of Texas at Austin  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

**Master of Fine Arts**

**The University of Texas at Austin**  
**May 2015**

## **Dedication**

This report is dedicated to the memory of George Bryant, who has been an inspiration in his eccentricity, irreverence toward the status quo, and utter brilliance. I continue this work in the vision his mother Marie Louise Kopp Bryant, who would never allow her family, community, or land to be lost.

## **Acknowledgements**

This work would not have been possible without the ongoing support of my partner and true love Eric Bryant. I was only able to continue this project with the help from the inspiring women in my life, Julia Handschuh, Elizabeth McClellan, and Kelli Hitchcock. They helped me glue all the pieces together. I want to thank Eugene Bryant for always giving me permission while appreciating all that I do. To my beloved teachers Teresa Hubbard, Dr. Ann Reynolds, and Bogdan Perzynski, each of whom escorted me through these last few years by offering their own depth of heart and profound wisdoms, for which I am grateful.

## **Abstract**

### **Collect/Disperse**

Leah Mae Dyjak, MFA  
University of Texas at Austin, 2015

Supervisor: Teresa Hubbard

This master's report is a discussion of the body of work that has come into realization during my last three years of study. As an artist I am interested in collectivity and the entropy of people, places, and objects. I use my training as a photographer as a foundation and a way to look at the world. It is the poetics and complexities of places and people that drive my art work and which have inspired me to expand my practice beyond photography. I write about my creative work in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where I have been performing and photographing a site-specific project, *Collect/Disperse*, for the past three years. My work deals both with stewardship for the land in the form of a historic family property, and care-taking for an individual whose compulsive collecting habit uniquely connects to the history of the place. The current iteration of Collect/Disperse is responding to the rising water line and loss of history due to encroaching gentrification.

## Table of Contents

List of Figures.....	vii
Text.....	1
Bibliography.....	10

## List of Figures

Figure 1:	Life's Work Artifact #1, 2012.....	1
Figure 2:	George Duncan Bryant, 2012.....	3
Figure 3:	Cycles of Phycology, 2013.....	5
Figure 4:	Video Still from Labor Performance, 2015.....	6
Figure 5:	Lifes Work Artifact #2, 2013.....	7
Figure 6:	Site from Above, 2013 .....	8
Figure 7:	Borrowed tools, 2015.....	10
Figure 8:	Collective Cosmologies, 2015.....	11
Figure 9:	Reconstructed Grid, 2015.....	12
Figure 10:	Lifes Work Artifact #3, 2013.....	14
Figure 11:	Fragmented Histories, 2014.....	17

*My father was a landscaper and loved working with his hands. I spent my childhood helping him dig holes and shovel fill. I was a reliable daydreamer, and an unreliable worker. Instead of using stones for their intended purpose, I would examine their nuance and attach a story of how they came into being and then make small groupings of them in secret. By the end of the day I had created an archipelago of stone islands, each its own distinct place.*

Provincetown, Massachusetts, is literally at the end of the road. Like many wanders before me I found myself there and in love with the strip of sand between sea and sky. Here, I found my way into a historian's garden. Instead of small stone mountains there were stacks of books and other objects considered to be part of an archive, a life's work, exposed to the elements. This is my self-assigned home. Collapsed onto this site is a person, a habit and a history of this place. Here the sea caresses the sand through the broken seawall. A bit of the yard is lost twice each day.



Figure 1. Life's Work Artifact  
#1  
2014

Through my creative practice I act as a steward. I am able to activate this site by utilizing available materials and transforming their materiality with the labor of my body and some old tools. I hold this space in the way I know how, drawing from history and my muscle memory.

### **Place/Site**

Provincetown, Massachusetts, was originally founded as a fishing village that attracted artists, writers, and sailors in the late eighteen hundreds. The town is surrounded by water on three sides with a single road connecting it to the rest of the world. Since I first landed there in my early twenties, fewer ships have dropped anchor in the harbor, women and families have been priced out, writers' shacks and houseboats have been demolished. Most of the people that own homes in town are there less than two weeks per year.

469 Commercial Street is almost the singular vestige of the former artist colony and fishing village. The place of local lore no longer exists. Many visitors think the site is abandoned, since other than the arrival of more plates and random detritus nothing but the tide changes. The flour bin from the old general store is turned over among some rusty tools and is used as a bench. The soft earth is covered with sharp shards of crockery eroding into the sand. It appears to be a place that time forgot and all the artists have left. The parking lot has stayed the same. The surrounding houses have been sold and bought, giving Provincetown its modern face-lift. There has not been a resident in 469 Commercial Street since the 1940's. There is no running water, no kitchen, no real space to live. Just a large yard, a blacksmith shop, a broken-down fence, lots of broken plates, and an unobstructed view of the sea. The land is public/private space. It is not for sale and it is not the perfect garden of new-era Provincetown taste.

The broken dishes that cover the yard have always been broken methodically by color. The fragments were wheeled to specific areas of the parking lot according to the hand-written maps that George Bryant clipped to the front door with clothes pins. The rest of the shards were spread out like seeds on a field. In the night, the pile of whole plates grew.

The layer of shards in the car park has worn thin. Patches of dirt poke through the once mosaic-like collection of broken plates. The shards take on the properties of sea glass, worn smooth by the salt air, the weight of car tires, and foot tracks. All of this discard that once belonged to someone ended up covering the earth. Million-dollar views

are filled by the broken plates of strangers, once-useful objects ground back into the matter from which they came.

## History

Collect/Disperse started in the winter of 2011 as a response to a compulsive collecting habit. The broken dishes found along the shore line of 467 Commercial street have been piled there for the past twenty years. I noticed them the first day I arrived in town when I was twenty. These piles were considered a life work and an historical archive collected by my partner's father, George Duncan Bryant. He claims he is a fifth



Figure 2.  
George Duncan Bryant, 2012

generation Provincetownian, a “native” if you asked him. He referred to me and almost everyone else as a ‘wash-a-shore’. George could be found in the parking lot of what is now Angel Foods, formerly Bryant’s Market, smashing plates, toilets, mugs, figurines, unused tile, and anything else made of earthenware. He fabricated an exaggerated tamper from scrap metal and attached it to the end of a long handle. The dishes were collected from the local swap shops and free stores where George would spend the better part of a day waiting for a specific kind of crockery to arrive. This curated dish ware could be anything with a particular pattern, message, or color. Generic, all-white crockery was mostly passed over as it did not add to the aesthetics of the car park. It was only used for buildup in specific locations on the property. The original intention for the plates was to create an even grade of the land. My intention is to hold the space by installing a social sculpture and recreating a functional archive that anyone can contribute to.

After years of his collecting, a no-trespass order was issued, and George was forbidden from stepping foot on his own property. During the winter of 2011 he was living down the road in my apartment and I had taken up residence in his house. The house was owned by George’s mother, which had been abandoned the prior year due to the no-trespass order. 471 Commercial Street was a former rooming house that had been run by Marie Louise Bryant. I slept in room number 3 overlooking the adjacent property because it was warmed by the sun and had a single working socket for a space heater. It also had an unobstructed view of the rest of the property, the foundation for an unfinished building, the blacksmith shop, Angel Foods market, the sea, and the parking lot where the shards of pottery covered the ground.

There was a fence separating this house, 471, and the yard, 469. In the dead of winter and night, I would wake to the sound of dishes smashing directly outside my window. As I looked out I would see George with his head lamp and his Crown Victoria which was so full of books it moved more like a sinking ship than a car. I would catch him throwing black plastic bags of dishes over the fence. The dish drop happened a few times a week, until the pile of plates along the fence became too large to ignore. Since I could not take them back to the free stores from which they came, I followed in the legacy of my partner’s father and began smashing the discarded earthenware and spreading it out over the car park. This was not to honor his tradition but only to get rid of the plates that kept reappearing each week. Although my intentions were other, it



Figure 3. Cycles of Psychology, 2013

became a way for George and I to work collaborate. He was able to keep collecting and I found a way to make the work that could articulate the absurdity of the situation.

I often found myself cleaning a thirty-year-old mess instead of making art. Since I was not able to be engaged in my creative practice because of the chores, my chores became my art and way for me to warm myself for a few hours a day. With my own labors and connection to a home which is self-assigned, I attempt to salvage a broken history for a viable future. This original labor performance served as template for Collect/Disperse. George was well-loved and his life work was notorious. Since then I have done more labor performances in which I collect dishes and disperse them in my yard in Austin. The broken pieces are then shipped to Provincetown. Having a test-site here allows me to continue my engagement in practice and material.

### Action

The action of collecting and breaking plates is a way for me to control the chaos of an uncontrollable and unstable situation. The gesture is no longer about its inception



Figure 4.  
Video Still From  
Labor Performance,  
2015

through George but becomes about place-making. I repeat a gesture as a place-maker, holding space for a different future. My actions struggle against changing economics and the rising sea. It is a way for me remake the property, to deal with a mess and carry on a local legacy. Through this gesture the notion of home is broken down and redefined. Shards create a collaborative project that can be added to, taken from, and changed.

The repeated gesture of breaking plates fulfills my own compulsion to redefine wholeness through the entropic cycle of wear, turning once-whole utilitarian objects into the very matter from which they were made. Shards to stones to sand. People send me collective baggage in the form of dishes to be crushed. I send them someone else's shards in return, worn, weathered smooth as sea glass. By putting the broken-down pieces on the ground I am creating a palimpsest for the land, a reverse archeology to piece a place back together. Dispersing collective artifacts onto an abandoned site becomes a method of conservation. This action changes the narrative between dystopian past and utopian future. Through a seemingly Sisyphean gesture I am resisting the loss of this land to gentrification and rising waters. After each performance is complete I experience immense satisfaction. This sensation is physical in my

exhaustion and tangible in the form of freshly shattered dishes. This labor performance allows me to engage in a cathartic gesture. I am able to shed a traditional feminine role with dishes in the kitchen and put on herringbone coveralls and embody an engineer, an alchemist, transmuting the broken dish ware into a new form.

## Ecology

The land that makes up Provincetown is a spiral within a spiral. It's a two-by-four mile sand dune with numbered strips of concrete. The dunes shift with the winds often erasing the only road by their migration.



Figure 5  
Life's Work Artifact #2, 2013  
(The Cape seen from above)

The yard of 469 is held by a four-foot tall seawall. This retaining wall stretches one hundred and sixty nine feet from one end of the remaining property to the other. The pylons are in very bad condition. Twice daily the tide fills all of the holes with water, taking pieces of wood and anything else that has been shoved into the wall to fill space. When walking along the beach at low tide one can peer inside and find pieces of broken dishes, fragments of toilets, books, old wooden signs and other random detritus. The objects were placed inside the wall with

purpose, to keep the sea from stealing the sand that is our yard. Sometimes the objects will release to the water. I have often walked outside with my morning coffee at low tide to see the beach littered with wet papers from George's archive.

The contractors with whom I consult over the sea wall told me a story. The story goes: along the shore from Wellfleet to Provincetown the rich pay millions for sand to be dumped along their eroding waterfront yards. Most often a storm sweeps in the following week to take the precious sand and then some back out to sea. It's the plight of Sisyphus, revisited. In an absurdist gesture, I break the plates in an attempt to add material to the yard. It is a gesture of worship, labor, perhaps it becomes a ceremony. I add mass to the shoreline by breaking down excess and refuse. The dishes have

reached their last stop in the cycle of consumerist culture, a truck ride away from the landfill where their banalities and histories will be buried in the rest of our waste.

### Material

A dish is a container and vehicle for our sustenance. It is what our food presents or rests on between the time it is prepared and consumed. Some people lick them; we all touch our lips to the mouth of a mug when drinking from it. A set of dishes is a common gift for a couple. They are smashed at ceremonies. Breaking a dish is a common experience – our daily ritual interrupted by a sudden smash, then a pause as we reorient to the task of cleaning. There is no easy disposal for the razor-sharp shards of this material.



Figure 6.  
Site from Above, 2015

Through the transformation of the ceramic material, Provincetown's landscape is also transformed. At one point the site was covered with sand and dirt. Over the past twenty years layers of broken shards have been dispersed along the property. The newer pieces are easily identifiable. They do not yet posses what Dan Flavin refers to as "Inactive History." The worn pieces are the ones that are collected and coveted by those visiting the site. Their histories have been erased and rewritten by weather and wear. It is these pieces that represent the connection of our interior/exterior selves to an individual/universal experience. Broken plates become metaphor. They are no longer our personal belongings but belong to a place that is connected to all other places because of proximity to the sea.

### **Video, Website, Photographs**

I am asking for help from people as collaborators and fellow artists, accessing my vast community for support. The website, [www.collectdisperse.com](http://www.collectdisperse.com), serves as a nucleus for the project and from there will cast a web of connection of art, action, and place. This platform, connected to other social media sites, allows anyone to engage by virtually visiting the site. The website will evolve with the project, hosting a catalog of dishes contributed, videos of performances, photographs made on-site, and an online archive. This conductor allows me to inhabit the role of artist, alchemist, and steward. Through the use of social media and my immediate community I have asked everyone I know to help me hold and reimagine this space by contributing pottery. I have also created an online archive to hold the names of participating artists, and so with each box of dishes received, the history of these objects will be collected. Once enough plates have been collected, they will be broken and dispersed on site, like farmers seeding a field.

The use of time-based imagery is a way to chart nuance and gesture of the action and the details of the site's changing environment. Using this format not only allows me to make a record of the labor but also allows those sending me plates to view the performance from afar.

The use of still images allows me to track the changes of light and martial in a timeline. This process allows me to slow my observation and be engaged with visual description as well as physical material. When looking at my own photographic archive, I can tell the time of year based on the quality of light and the waning of greens underfoot. I am reassured about the metadata attached to each image as scientific facts are tethered to visual fiction. I have photographed the site endlessly, abstracting one's

vantage point. Sometimes the thousands of broken pieces look like the surface of the moon and other times one can identify a piece of from their grandmother's china set.

### Unearthing

This past winter I realized in order to move forward with Collect/Disperse I needed to understand the nuance of the land and how George had attempted to grade it. He claimed that the shards were three feet deep in some places from years of smashing plates. With the infinite amount of possible compositions and chaos of shattered pottery, I felt it essential to apply a kind of logic. I used the simple form of squares arranged in a grid. I appropriated archeological methods to unearth twenty years of hoarded dishes, collective wear, and the layers added through Collect/Disperse.

It was eight degrees outside and with the help of a friend we installed a ten-by-twelve foot excavation grid with one foot squares. The following day we began chipping away at the frozen earth. Each square revealed a unique composition. Some squares only had two inches of dishes before we hit average soil. Others had several feet of shards at different stages of decomposition. The terra cotta tiles that George loved to collect had worn into such a fine grain that there was no differentiating between what was once ceramic tile and the red clay earth of the Piedmont Plateau. Due to the frigid temperature, we were only able to dig about two feet before the earth stopped revealing itself to our pick axe and brush.



Figure 7. Borrowed Tools, 2015

The grid became a site-specific work that I was able to visit over several days. I photographed each individual square with my 4x5 view camera at different times of the day. I was interested in the way the temperature and the light changed the white of the plain shards.

Applying the logic of a grid to the chaos of thousands of smashed dishes was a way for me to create order within the absurdity of my understanding of a habit. I photographed each square in the grid upside down and backwards, the same way the

Figure 8.  
Collective Cosmologies  
2015



image is revealed on the ground glass of my field camera. It is the way that makes sense to me.

While back in my studio in Austin I began to digitally reassemble the grid to bring the site into the non-site. The process was as obsessive and meticulous as George's collecting habit. As I lined the strings that separated each square, I realized that the process of accurately reassembling the work on site as a photograph was conceptually incongruent with the rest of the project. Within my own research and George's collecting, there has been a fine line between order and chaos, collecting and compulsion. I began to choose the squares in which the content interested me, created an edit and began to



Figure 9.  
Reconstructed Grid, 2015

reconstruct the grid through intuition instead of systematically. New compositions began to appear in the lines that did not quite line up. When looking at the face-mounted

images on the floor there is a brief disorientation before realizing the composition is intentionally out of order.

### **Visionary Cartography**

In the attic we cleaned out, another storage space for the life work of George, I found rolls of old paper. Without looking at the content I shipped them to Texas. Originally I was drawn to the age of the paper and the way it felt in my hands. Upon unrolling the unruly cylinder of paper, I realized that they were copies of a map of Provincetown that George had made while he was serving as the town clerk. Provincetown as seen from above is a spiral within a spiral. Without a sense of direction, walking in Provincetown can be very disorienting. According to the roads, east is west and west is east, all directions the opposite of what is familiar because of the spiral of the peninsula. On the Bryant property one of the few things George did finish was his maps. Amongst all of the moldy books were extremely detailed drawings of all of his projects on the compound. With the exception to the blacksmith shop that he moved illegally from Long Point (the very tip of Massachusetts), all of the projects are unfinished. The whole property has the feeling of an abandoned house, the kind where you walk in the door and wonder where the family went leaving all of their possessions behind.

George's maps of the property have found their way into my work. Many of the details have been erased, and I have incorporated new ones as they relate to the Collect/Disperse. These maps have provided me a way to visually explain the complexity of the site and provide visual reference to history and future of the property. I trace all of the words with new ink and add some of my own. Map-making with the use of photographs and drawing of the site opened a new way of understanding the architectural relationships of the property to the landscape.

Since 471 has sold, I often sleep above Angel Foods in a tiny bedroom. When looking through the window you can see the blue of the bay through a series of viewfinders garnished with the foliage of spite trees. George planted the spite trees to block the view of the neighbors. When the yard of the 471 was excavated the landscaping crew found that all the trees had been planted with cinderblocks to ensure great difficulty when ripping up the root system. Now an amputated windmill still crops this view. It is the base of the Salt Works, which was to be a wind-powered tool for extracting salt from the sea. There was also an unfinished foundation that was built

illegally. When I first peered through the fence twelve years ago, I saw a forest of rebar and scrap metal. When the project was put on hold, local trees were cut to exactly seven feet and used to create a temporary cover for the massive hole. When I crawled inside the foundation, it appeared as an ancient ruin. We then filled it with moldy books and copies of copies. I traded a old iron shear for the use of an excavator and bought

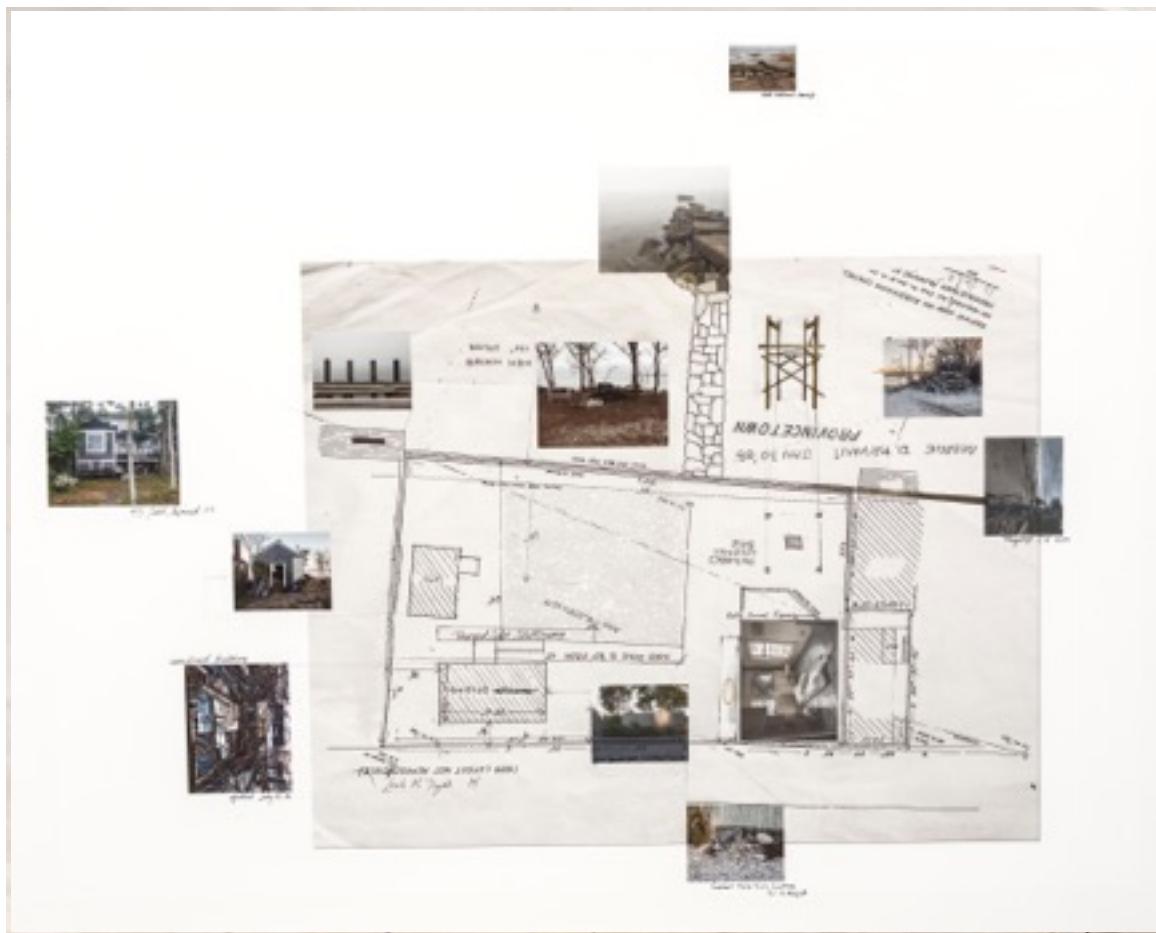


Figure 9.  
Life's Work Artifact #3, 2013

twenty-seven truck loads of fill. Ironically, it took twenty-seven dumpsters to empty out one property and then fill another with the same number.

Using one of George's maps of the property as a template, I am able to re-envision the place. By adding my own photographs and descriptions, time is collapsed and expanded on a single plane of the paper. Troubling details, such as the spite trees

and scrap metal that cover much of the landscape, have been eliminated and I have been able to redefine space through the use of paint and mark-making.

### **Labor & Stewardship**

In the coveralls of the man whom I cared for, I am able to mediate my role as caretaker by engaging in the physically exhaustive labor of breaking down and shoveling hardscaping materials. I combine ideas of the minimalist land artists of the 70's with feminist work about labor and gender roles. I claim the privilege of being immersed in the landscape for extended periods of time, as did Robert Smithson and Richard Long. I incorporate ideas expressed by Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Maintenance Art Manifesto* (1969). While *Maintenance Art* explores the confines of traditional gender roles as they interact with class and domesticity, my actions challenge the gender binary of physical labor, exploring the utilitarian functions of cleaning, caring, building, and deconstructing. My work activates the space and becomes political action in resistance to gentrification. In the face of Provincetown's rapid development into a summer resort for the rich, I excavate the history of the town to create a collective space for women, wands, and queers.

### **Archive**

The online archive creates a functional system of cataloging places and descriptions of this new history. Its structure imposes an order onto a site of apparent chaos. The broken crockery was an extension of George's compulsion to collect excess. Through the creation of a working archive that is in-use and changing, I engage in a different kind of excess and collecting. The archive acts as a container for stories and histories of once-whole objects, and perhaps once whole families. The material becomes broken and worn and the archive will serve a testament to their histories. This catalog will be a way to identify each person who participates in the project. By entering one's name, one embraces the identity of artist and collaborator. Without the participation of others, Collect/Disperse could not exist and there would be no transformation of land. The site is open for any one to visit and enjoy. The ground cover itself becomes an anonymous archive of collective broken history.

## **Acquisition & Excess**

These plates represent something that was once whole. They then crack and break, similar to our health and hearts. The metaphor for George and I is uncanny. This material breakdown represents the mental health of the person who started breaking plates twenty years ago, similar to how I started breaking them to deal with his mental illness. *Kintsugi* is the process of joining cracked pottery with precious metal such, as gold, silver or platinum. The philosophy behind the process is to honor the crack or damage as part of the history of the object, instead of something to hide.

A few weeks ago the back of my truck in Austin was filled with dishes. I also found myself at the musty Truro swap and Provincetown “free store.” I have always detested these places. Thrifts stores are not places I choose to frequent, but now find myself trolling the shelves for plates, mugs or bowls that would be interesting in a deteriorated form. The current function of some of these objects can be quite disturbing, with religious messages and angelic looking blonde white faces of little girls peering out from the porcelain. Smashing them and reconstructing their materiality becomes more satisfying when there is a message. Previously the pottery has been found in the last place of commerce. They are the most unwanted and cannot even be given away.

## **Moving Backward to Move Forward & Cycles**

Collect/Disperse has served as a way for me to understand my own history, a history that is real and one I wish I had. The visible history of this site creates atmosphere like no other place in town. It is magnetic with its visible age. The view, the random objects, and smashed dishes attract people to visit. I have been able to honor and utilize my own roots as a way to assign myself a home, resist erasure of the community I know, and be present with the seas as they change. Each time I come home to the cape there is less of the original shoreline.

I see myself in the center as conductor, steward, and alchemist. This contemporary ritual of giving and receiving with the use of my body has allowed me to build another kind of relationship to a place and people.

The invitation of others to be a part of this process is an essential link in completing a cycle. When I first began this project, I was obsessed with the way that I no matter how I disposed of the dishes George left for me, they would always find their way back to the property. There was no way to describe this cycle with photography alone. Collecting and breaking plates, creating piles and unearthing them in the ground, has

articulated the essence of my experience of caring for a person with a brilliant mind and a debilitating hoarding disorder.

This project has served as a way for me to invest in my chosen family and community. In order to envision a future for the site in Provincetown, I have had to draw from what I know and be comfortable with allowing gender roles to be turned inside out



Figure 10: Fragmented Histories, 2014

and upside down. I have often thought about life on the cape in the shape of a web. I am able to cast a wide net from the edge of the earth.

To spin the web and not get caught in it, to create the world, to create your own life, to rule your fate, to name the grandmothers as well as the fathers, to draw nets and not just straight lines to be a maker as well as a cleaner, to be able to sing and not be silenced, to take down the veil and appear: all are the banners of the laundry line I hang out.

-Rebecca Solnit, Grandmother Spider 2014

### Bibliography

Flam, Jack, *Robert Smithson: Collected Writings*, University of California Press, 1996  
print

Kwon, Miwon, *One place after another : site-specific art and locational identity*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2002, print

Solnit, Rebecca, *Men Explain Things to Me*, Haymarket Books, 2014 p. 82, print

Ukeles, Meirel Ladderman *Manifesto For Maintenance Art 1969! Proposal for an Exhibition “CARE”*, Artforum 1971, print

Weiss, Jeffery S. and Brinoy, Fer, *Dan Flavin: New Light*, Yale University Press, 2006  
pg. 19, print