

# The Modern



ROBYN O'NEIL

SEATTLE

ON MAY 2002



ALISON HEARST



76110-300413



## BEING THERE ART ASSIGNMENT #7 ALISON HEARST AND ROBYN O'NEIL CORRESPONDENCE ART

*“Sunshine is delicious, rain is refreshing, wind braces us up, snow is exhilarating; there is really no such thing as bad weather, only different kinds of good weather.” —John Ruskin*

This activity packet for high school students was designed to introduce correspondence art through a conversation between Alison Hearst and Robyn O'Neil that took place in April through May of 2020.

The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth presented a 20-year survey of the work of Robyn O'Neil from October 18, 2019, through February 9, 2020. Organized by the Modern's associate curator Alison Hearst, the exhibition *Robyn O'Neil: WE, THE MASSES* explored the artist's fruitful career from 2000 to the present and included major multipaneled drawings, signature works of graphite on paper, collages, and the animated film *WE, THE MASSES*, 2011. This in-depth presentation was the first to examine O'Neil's formal and conceptual developments over the past two decades.

**Alison Hearst** is Associate Curator at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. She is the curator of the museum's FOCUS exhibition series and has presented solo exhibitions of artists including Fred Tomaselli, Mario García Torres, Joyce Pensato, Martine Gutierrez, Thomas Demand, Lorna Simpson, Analia Saban, and Stanley Whitney, among others. She was the curator of *Robyn O'Neil: WE, THE MASSES*.

**Robyn O'Neil** (born 1977) has created intricate, imagined worlds exploring themes of evolution, natural catastrophe, the apocalypse, and the beauty of nature. She is best known for her large-scale works populated with tiny male figures set in harsh landscapes, depicting relatable aspects of the human condition, such as friendship, strife, and death. Pulling inspiration from art history, popular culture, literature, and the weather, O'Neil's worlds are serious, tender, frightening, and at times comical.

**Please watch and read the selected videos and texts about Robyn O'Neil and correspondence art. These resources will provide you with context about the artist and assignment theme before you begin the activities.**

Robyn O'Neil, podcast, “Me Reading Stuff”  
<https://www.robynoneil.com/me-reading-stuff>

Robyn O'Neil, lecture at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, "Tuesday Evenings at the Modern," October 2017

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVwY5RSfS38>

Robyn O'Neil, text by Hillery Hugg for *The Believer*, "An Interview with Robyn O'Neil," 2017

<https://believermag.com/an-interview-with-robyn-o-neil/>

Art Term, Tate, "Mail Art"

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/m/mail-art>

Ray Johnson, "Mail Art and Ephemera"

<http://www.rayjohnsonestate.com/art/mail-art-and-ephemera/>

Text by Angie Kordic for *Widewalls*, "How Did Mail Art Develop into a Global Art Movement?" 2016

<https://www.widewalls.ch/mail-art-correspondence-postal/>

On Kawara, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "I Got Up"

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/284464>

## Correspondence Considerations: Two-Party Response

As our academic year wraps up and we embark on our summer season, here are some ideas that you might consider engaging with over the next months.

These activities revolve around the process of beginning and sustaining a correspondence with someone.

Sometimes questions that we compose for friends, family, and even strangers are a way for us to articulate ideas that haven't quite taken a communicable form yet. Using language, we have our own private space and pace to express our personal experiences of gratitude, reflection, anticipation, humor, regret, conflict, pain, confusion, melancholia, love, and a range of other emotions that make up our lives.

Recently, a friend of mine, Emily Peacock, reached out to the artist Wolfgang Tillmans and expressed her gratitude and the profound effect his work has had on her photography. She asked if he would look at her website, and Tillmans responded with some generous feedback that will be cherished by her forever.

Once, I reached out to Valery Spiridonov when he was still the initial candidate to undergo the world's first head transplant operation, and we began a two-year correspondence collaborating on various projects and exhibitions.

The impetus for the activity being shared with you now were letters exchanged between Alison Hearst and Robyn O'Neil right in the middle of the sheltering in place and quarantine orders due to COVID-19.

Please read the letters below and think about the ideas, references, and sentiments being shared between Hearst and O'Neil. These letters may help inspire decisions toward your addressee, topics, or format of your own correspondences.

4.23.20

Dear Robyn,

Hi! I hope you guys are doing OK and staying well & sane during this highly surreal time. It's day ~~41~~ of quarantine over here, which is wild to think about. It feels shorter, but also longer, and each morning feels a bit like Groudhog's Day. I also keep thinking of Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, like Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog, c. 1818, which is a forever favorite of mine. It's something about the lone traveler looking out to the most sublime, terrifyingly beautiful landscape—he's on his own but on the precipice of something unknown—maybe it's something scary, or maybe it's something even greater than before? I can't think of the German name where you just see the back of the subject's head... it's in Friedrich's painting, but you do it a lot in your drawings. I tried to look it up, but all I could find is "Backpfeifengesicht," which translates to "face that should be slapped!" The Germans literally have a word for everything and I love it so much.

Besides the back of the head in Friedrich's Wanderer, and how the severe landscape reminds me of your work, I also keep thinking back to your show and how a lot of the themes feel ~~so~~ oddly prophetic now. Of course many of the themes did last year—like extreme weather and climate change, and humankind's ability to ravage and plunder the natural world. Your drawing

also show the fragility of human life and that nature will prevail. That feels so close and pertinent to how, this moment where we are sheltering, protecting ourselves from each other, while nature rejoices from the break from all of us. I think that's a silver lining, but I hope we don't miss our chance to hit the reset button. I also keep thinking of your studies in suffocation drawings a lot, and how each figure is so isolated, seemingly struggling alone but together. Your work has always been so relevant, on-the-nose, relatable, but I honestly can't stop thinking about it these days! I wish I could walk through the Show again.

What have you been thinking about, reading, watching, and working on these days? What are you doing for your birthday?! Are you knitting a lot?

I have been surrounding myself with comforts - dogs, proust and cars. I watched pretty in pink the other day and thought of you. Have you ever noticed that in the scene where Andi and her dad are fighting, her hair keeps moving around? I'm sure it's from different takes, but I love it. I don't get your love of Stef, but he's such a hilarious character. I hope you're well and safe! I miss you.

Love,  
Alison



Caspar David Friedrich  
*Wanderer above the Sea and Fog*, c. 1818  
Oil on canvas  
37.3 × 29.4 inches



Robyn O'Neil

*These final hours embrace at last; this is our ending, this is our past.*, 2007

Graphite on paper

83 × 166 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Gift of Marshall R. Young Oil Co. in Honor of George Marshall Young, Sr., Chairman

5/3/2020

①



DEAR ALISON,

THANK YOU FOR YOUR LETTER! REAL LETTERS ARE ALWAYS THE MOST EXCITING THINGS, BUT NOW MORE THAN ~~EVER~~ EVER. I WONDER IF

LETTER WRITING IS MAKING A COMEBACK? I NEED TO BE BETTER AT KEEPING TRACK OF THE NUMBER OF DAYS IN QUARANTINE, BUT MAN IT FEELS LIKE FOREVER. AND YES! GROUNDHOG DAY (WHICH, BY THE WAY I JUST REWATCHED) (MY FAVORITE LINE IS WHEN BILL MURRAY SEES ME FOR THE THOUSANDTH TIME, BUT THIS TIME HUGS HIM TIGHT AND SAYS "I DON'T KNOW WHERE YOU'RE HEADED, BUT CAN YOU CALL IN SICK?") BUT IT REALLY IS INSANELY REPETITIVE, DAILY LIFE. I FEEL LIKE I'M A CAFE OWNER. CONSTANTLY CLEANING AND COOKING AND CLEANING AND CLEANING AND SO MUCH CLEANING.



AS YOU KNOW, I NEVER WANT TO HANG OUT WITH OTHER PEOPLE. I HATE CROWDS. I DON'T LIKE PARTIES OR GET TOGETHERS. BUT I AM DYING TO HAVE FUN WITH OTHER HUMAN BEINGS! I NEVER THOUGHT I'D SEE THE DAY WHERE I'M CRAVING SOCIALIZATION. I AM KIND OF GOING CRAZY. AND MY MOTIVATION SEEMS TO BE GONE. I BARELY WANT TO DO ANYTHING. AND I'M COMPLETELY EXHAUSTED CONSTANTLY EVEN THOUGH I'VE BEEN SLEEPING MORE THAN EVER. I THINK I GET MOST OVERWHELMED & DEPRESSED WHEN I REALIZE NOTHING WILL EVER BE THE SAME AGAIN. LIFE WAS HARD ENOUGH, NOW THIS.



RÜCKENFIGUR! THAT'S THE WORD YOU WERE THINKING OF. BUT LET'S BE HONEST "BACKPFEIFENGESICHT" IS EVEN BETTER. AND I'M SO GLAD YOU'RE AS BIG OF A FRIEDRICH FAN AS I AM! UNLESS I'M DREAMING THINGS UP, AND THAT'S TOTALLY POSSIBLE, I BELIEVE GOETHE CAME UP WITH THE TERM RÜCKENFIGUR BECAUSE OF FRIEDRICH'S WORK! SOMETHING ABOUT FRIEDRICH/GOETHE/FIGURES ~~IS~~ FROM BEHIND. SOMETIMES MEMORIES OF THINGS ARE BETTER THAN THE TRUTH, SO WE'LL GO <sup>WITH</sup> ~~FOR~~ IT.

WHAT DO YOU MISS THE MOST RIGHT NOW? I MISS MALLS ~~AND~~ AND HUGS. TO ANSWER SOME OF YOUR QUESTIONS, I'VE BEEN CROCHETING A LOT. I MADE MY FRIENDS A WEDDING PRESENT (A BLANKET). AND NOW I'M MAKING MYSELF A CRAZY LOOKING CARDIGAN - AN OLD GO'S DESIGN. I HOPE IT WORKS OUT! I'VE BEEN READING MINDLESS BOOKS - A SERIES OF CROCHET - MURDER MYSTERIES. THEY'RE SO BAD, BUT I'M OBSESSED. SOMEHOW MY BRAIN CAN'T HANDLE MUCH MORE THAN THAT RIGHT NOW. MY BIRTHDAY WAS SUPER LOW-KEY, WHICH I ALWAYS LOVE. I WATCHED SEVERAL LIFETIME MOVIES, CROCHETED (BROKEN RECORD) AND DAMIEN MADE ME FOOD AND DIDN'T LET ME HELP CLEAN UP - YAY! I DON'T LIKE CLEANING BY ~~THE~~ THE WAY. I LOVE THINGS TO BE CLEAN, BUT I HATE CLEANING. SIMILARLY, I HATE HAVING TO TAKE SHOWERS EVERYDAY, BUT I REALLY DO THINK BEING CLEAN IS THE SINGLE GREATEST JOY IN ~~THE~~ LIFE. FOR THE RECORD, I DO TAKE A SHOWER ALMOST EVERY SINGLE DAY. I JUST HATE HOW MUCH TIME I FEEL LIKE I WASTE IN THERE.



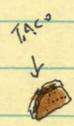
I LOVE THAT YOU REWATCHED PRETTY IN PINK! I WAS JUST ABOUT TO DO THE SAME SINCE IT'S MY #1 COMFORT MOVIE! AND SOMEHOW



I NEVER NOTICED HARRY DEAN STANTON'S HAIR MOVING AROUND!  
DAMIEN ~~LOVES~~ LOVES WATCHING FOR INCONSISTENCIES LIKE THAT  
IN MOVIES AND TV SHOWS AND I'M SOMEHOW OBLIVIOUS.

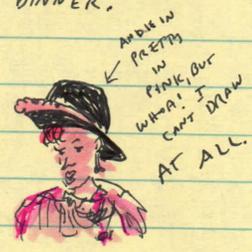
AND WHAT CAN I SAY, EVERY TIME ANYTHING HORRIBLE COMES  
UP IN ~~MY~~ LIFE, IT SEEMS AS THOUGH I'VE PREDICTED IT IN MY  
DRAWINGS. ~~IT~~ MAKES ME REALLY WONDER ABOUT MYSELF. IT  
WOULD BE NICE IF PEOPLE THOUGHT OF ME <sup>OR MY WORK</sup> WHEN SOMETHING WONDERFUL  
HAPPENS, BUT LET'S FACE IT - THIS IS THE WORK I MAKE! END OF TIMES/  
ANGER/ISOLATION/NATURE WINNING OVER HUMANKIND/CLIMATE CHANGE/DEATH/  
THE FUTILITY OF IT ALL. ~~IT'S A BUNCH OF~~ I AM STILL REALLY DRAWN  
TO THAT FINAL ROOM IN OUR SHOW - THE SUFFOCATION DRAWINGS, AND  
AS I THINK I MENTIONED TO YOU, I REALIZE ~~THAT~~ I'M FAR FROM  
DONE WITH THAT SERIES. ESPECIALLY NOW THAT WE ARE ALL IN ISOLATION.  
SO I STARTED WHAT WILL BE MY LARGEST DRAWING TO DATE, A BIG

DRAWING ON CANVAS (SO EXCITED ABOUT THIS!) WITH TONS OF HEADS  
DROWNING IN WATER. MY ~~WORK~~ THE WAY I DRAW CHANGES  
QUALITY IN SUCH AN UNEXPECTED WAY ON CANVAS. I KIND OF  
DON'T WANT TO GO BACK TO PAPER! IN FACT I MADE A FEW  
SMALL DRAWINGS ON PAPER LAST WEEK AND GOT A BIT BORED WITH  
THE PROCESS. I LONGED FOR THE STRUGGLE THE CANVAS GIVES ME.  
AND THAT'S THE FUNNY PART - IT'S COMPLETELY ANNOYING TO DRAW DETAILS  
ON CANVAS. THE CANVAS PULLS AND BUCKLES, MY PENCIL POKES THROUGH  
THE CANVAS HOLES PRETTY MUCH EVERY TIME I MAKE A MARK. ALL OF  
THIS SUCKS! BUT I LOVE IT. WHO KNOWS WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME.



ALRIGHT, BACK TO MY LIFETIME MOVIES, THIS ONE IS CALLED  
"SLEEPING WITH MY STUDENT." ~~WE~~ WE'VE ALL BEEN ~~THERE~~ THERE,  
AM I RIGHT? JUST KIDDING! I ATE FRITO PIE FOR DINNER.  
MY HANDS ARE COLD.

LOTS OF LOVE,  
ROBYN.



ARRR IN  
PARENTS  
IN PINK, BUT  
WHA! I  
CAN'T DRAW  
AT ALL.

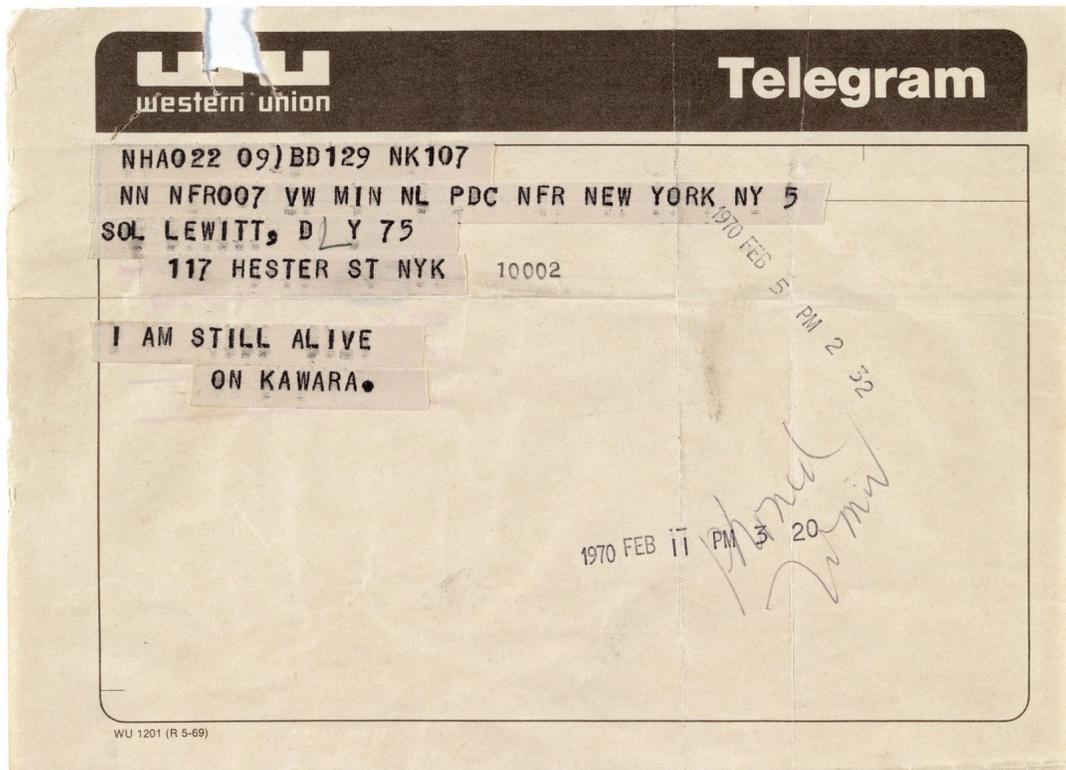
## Correspondence Considerations: One Party, No Response

Sometimes correspondences can be signals or statements transmitted to others, without the opportunity for any messages to return to you. Have you ever sent someone a message, without any expectation of receiving something back?

Think about the last time you shared a message with someone just to express gratitude or how you're frustrated with their behavior or that you are still alive. These kinds of messages could be shared with a family member, old friend, business owner, political representative, educational mentor, pop culture celebrity, etc.

To help you think about this message format, I'd like to introduce a project by the Japanese artist On Kawara.

In 1970, On Kawara sent a series of telegrams to his Dutch gallerist that proclaimed, "I am still alive." This inaugurated the *I Am Still Alive* telegraph series that continued for the next three decades, in which he sent nearly 900 telegrams to recipients.



Telegramm			Deutsche Bundespost		Verzögerungs- vermerke	
Datum 4/12	Uhrzeit 1058	TSf	Leivermerk		Datum	Uhrzeit
Platz 1	Empfangen Namenszeichen Hh	Empfangen von			Platz	Gesendet Namenszeichen
RICHMOND		12	3	10 26		
LT	Jant. Herbig 8056 Indienhausen Pflaffenleite 25				Dienstliche Rückfragen	
i am still alive						
on kawara						

§ 1169/654321  
DIN A 5, Kl. 77 m  
+ FT 210  
VI, 2 Anl. 4

TELEGRAM	TELEFONERAS n° 44200,8	TELEGRAM
TELEGRAM	Exp.: Dat. Kl. Sign.	TELEGRAM
TELEGRAM	hem. on 20 49 24	TELEGRAM
TELEGRAM	Utsändes Sign. f.	TELEGRAM
TELEGRAM	NNNN ZCZC TTM719 WIB015 1-025135A305 SWSX CO UWNX 017 DC NEWYORK NY 17/15 31 432P EST	TELEGRAM
TELEGRAM	BJORN SPRINGFELDT C,0 MODERNA MUSEET SKEPPSHOLMEN 103 27 STOCKHOLM	TELEGRAM
TELEGRAM	I AM STILL ALIVE ON KAWARA	TELEGRAM
TELEGRAM	COL 103 27	TELEGRAM

Think about the statement that On Kawara is communicating to his addressees and how the simplicity and brevity is contrasted by the profound acknowledgement of life.

In some ways, the artist is sending a work of art to someone but relinquishing the touch of the artist's hand.

## Correspondence Response: Personal Interpretation

Continue to think about the text and video resources related to correspondence art and the way Alison Hearst and Robyn O'Neil shared questions and responses with each other.

As you develop ideas about how you might like to engage with this summer art assignment, continue considering the people that you would like to correspond with. What topics are you most interested in pursuing? Are you interested in receiving a response? Will the message be words or image on paper? Will your message be something to listen to while in a plane, train, or automobile? Are you interested in sustaining a long- or short-term communication? Are your inquiries and statements part of a process that can be viewed as Art, or is the document itself more relevant?

Will these correspondences capture the essence of the complex changes we are privately and collectively undergoing?

Feel free to experiment freely, always.

*“And the memory of everything we have loved remains and returns in the evening of our life. It is not dead, but sleep, and it is well to gather a great treasure of them.” —Vincent van Gogh*

Thank you for participating in these exercises about Alison Hearst, Robyn O'Neil and Correspondence Art.

If you would like to share your results, please fill out the photo release form and send it along with your files to [jbarnett@themodern.org](mailto:jbarnett@themodern.org).

Please save the file as either a JPG or PDF and include First and Last name\_Modern\_7.

For example,  
JesseBarnett\_Modern\_7.pdf  
JesseBarnett\_Modern\_7.jpg

If you have any questions about the packet, instructions, or file sharing, please don't hesitate contacting me.

Take care out there.

Jesse Morgan Barnett  
Assistant Curator of Education  
Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

# The Modern

## Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

3200 Darnell Street  
Fort Worth, Texas 76107  
telephone 817.738.9215 fax 817.735.1161  
www.themodern.org

### PHOTO RELEASE

I, the undersigned author or parent or guardian, do hereby give permission for the Modern to use photograph, video, or electronic images of the participant for inclusion in public relations, promotion, and marketing for the Modern.

I further authorize the reproduction, copyright, exhibit, broadcast, electronic storage, and/or distribution of any such photograph, video, or electronic image at the discretion of the Modern without limitations or reservations.

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Signature: \_\_\_\_\_  
Today's Date: \_\_\_\_\_