

**SPONGE: An Artistic and Pedagogical Methodology**

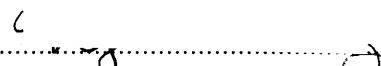
by Hope Ginsburg  
B.F.A., Sculpture (1996)  
Tyler School of Art

Submitted to the Department of Architecture  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Science in Visual Studies


at the  
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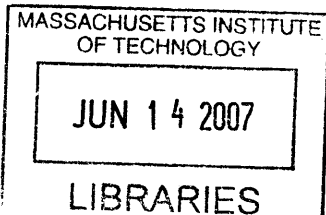
  
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### **Abstract**

This thesis introduces SPONGE, a project developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology between October 2006 and May 2007. SPONGE is a workshop model based on immersion, absorption and making connections. The project is both an artistic practice and a method for teaching and learning.

My intent in the writing that follows is to give the reader a complete sense of SPONGE. I will begin with a narrative description of the first SPONGE. Once the concept of SPONGE is clear, I will put the project in an art historical context by providing a synopsis of site-specific art and social practice.

The current debate about the role of aesthetics in socially based artwork underlies my discussion of the role of the visual and the sensory in SPONGE. Talking about aesthetics also invites an exploration of the autonomy of artistic praxis. I will argue that by creating a distancing framework, SPONGE avoids the dissolution of art into life, even as it celebrates

content that exists outside of a traditional art context. A space is thereby preserved for criticality.

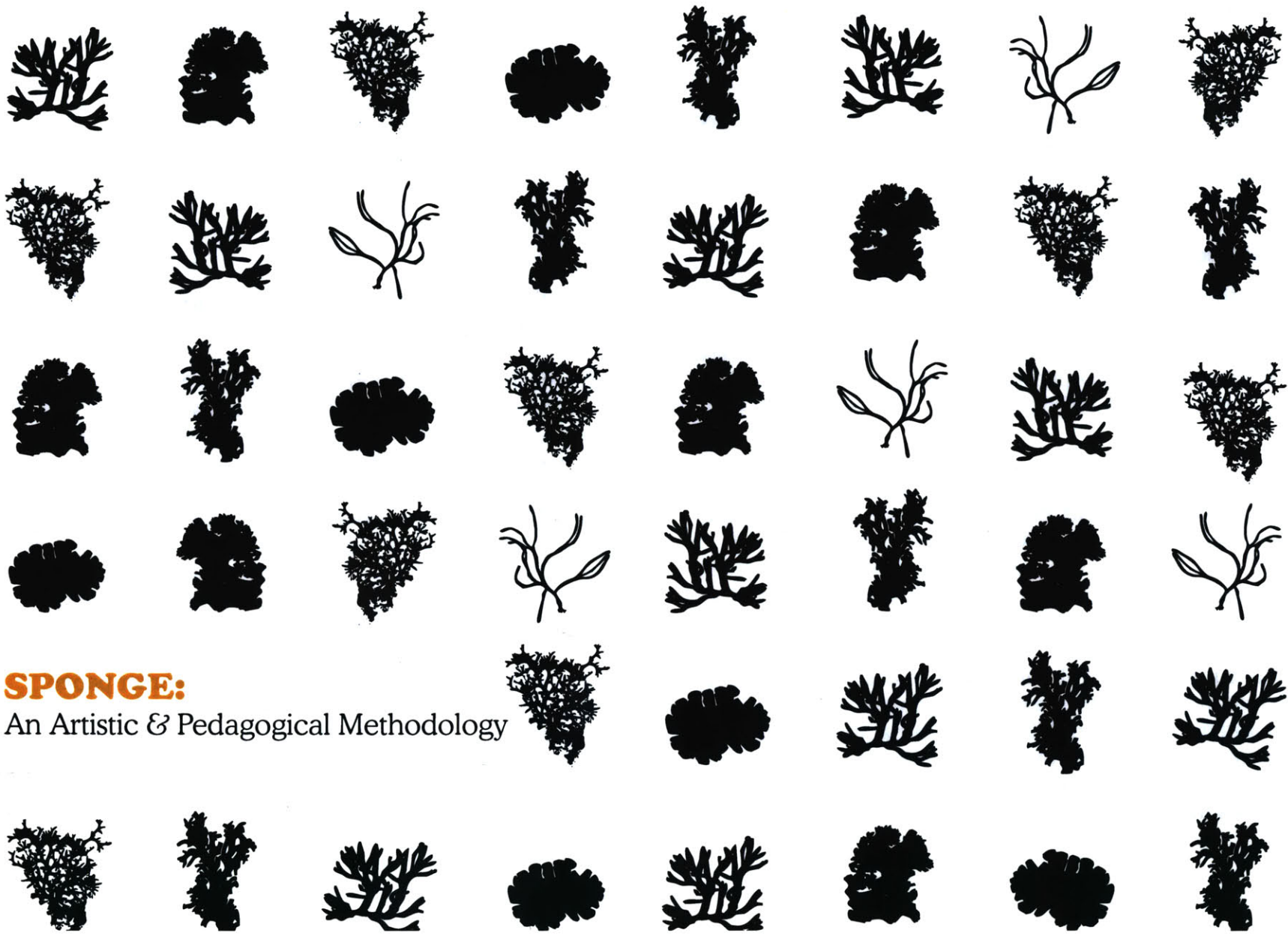
With criticality comes the politics of the SPONGE, which will be considered in terms of pedagogy. I will address the role of the participant and the way in which SPONGE encourages independent thought and the assembly of ideas.

Once SPONGE has been evaluated through the lens of aesthetics, criticality, and pedagogy, I will put forth some thoughts on the future of SPONGE. I believe the workshop has the potential to be adapted for use in almost any context and I propose that any field of inquiry may find its place in SPONGE.

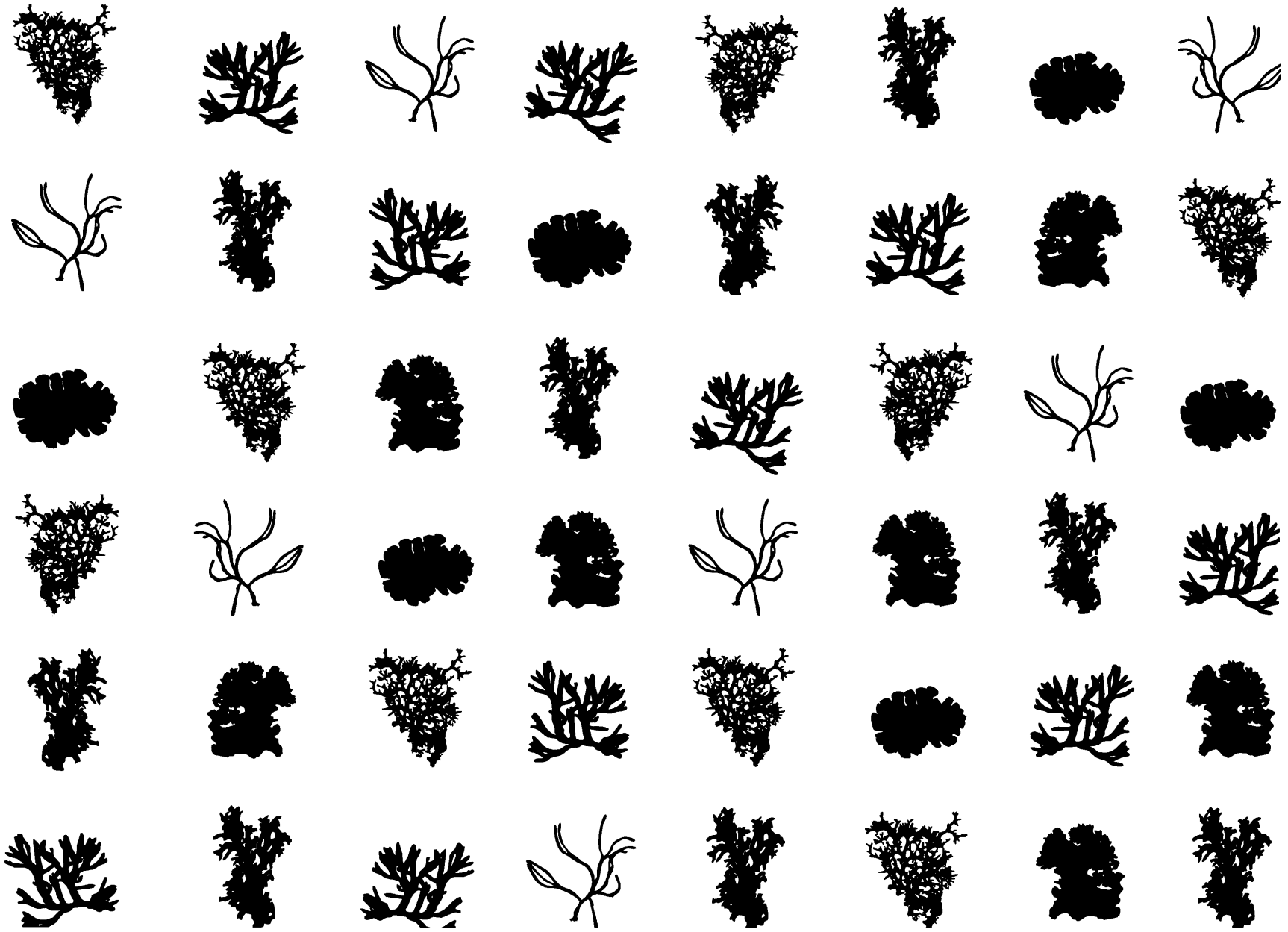
I have included excerpts in this text from an earlier paper entitled "The Artist as Employee." It is from that paper, and my desire to find a formal structure for my artwork, that SPONGE emerged. I will conclude this thesis with what I feel is an appropriate endpoint for a project that will continue to evolve: a section on the origins of SPONGE.

Thesis Supervisor: Krzysztof Wodiczko

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**SPONGE:**  
An Artistic & Pedagogical Methodology



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## INTRODUCTION

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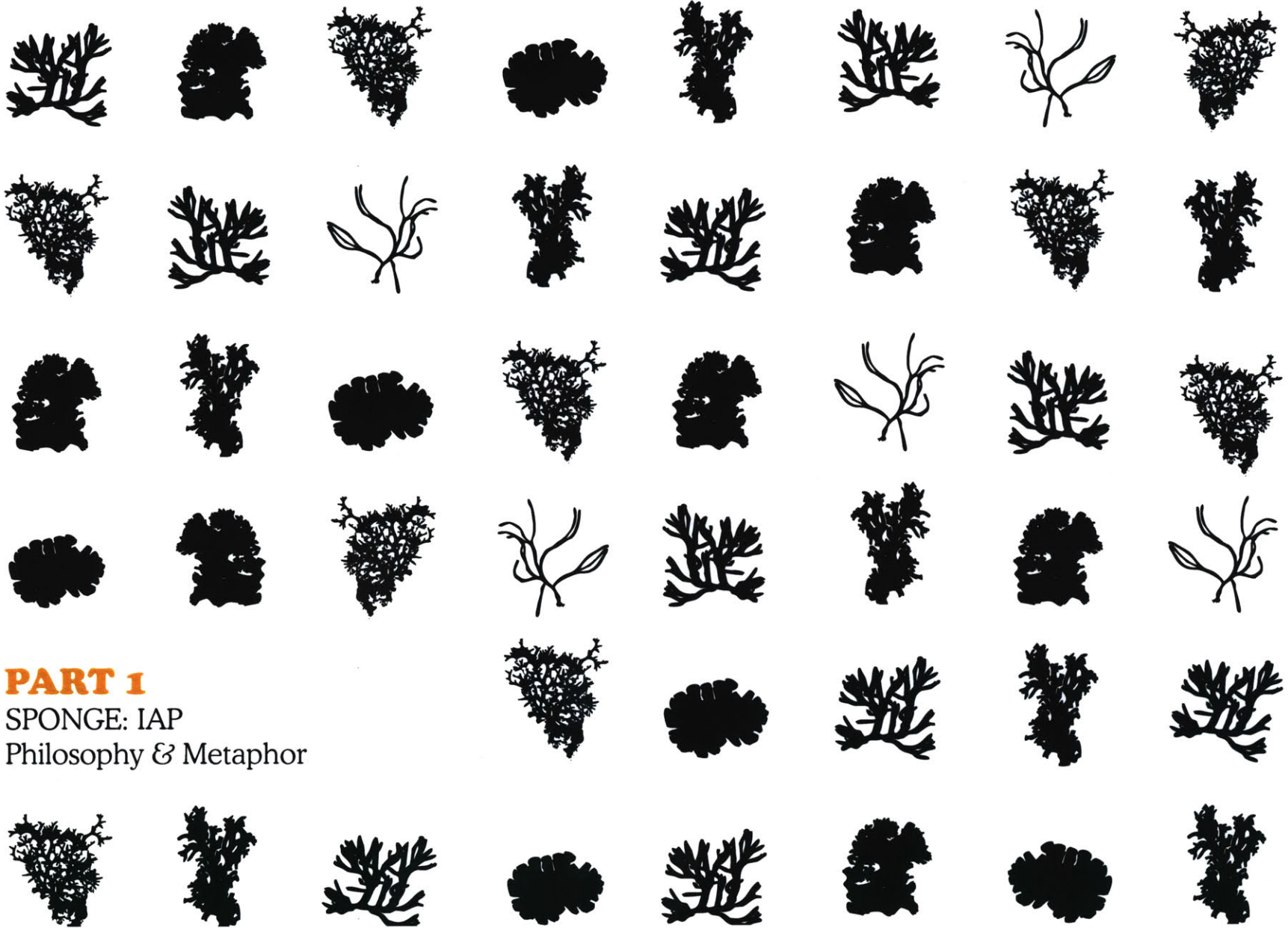
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The current debate about the role of aesthetics in socially based artwork underlies my discussion of the role of the visual and the sensory in SPONGE. Talking about aesthetics also invites an exploration of the autonomy of artistic praxis. I will argue that by creating a distancing framework, SPONGE avoids the dissolution of art into life, even as it celebrates content that exists outside of a traditional art context. A space is thereby preserved for criticality.

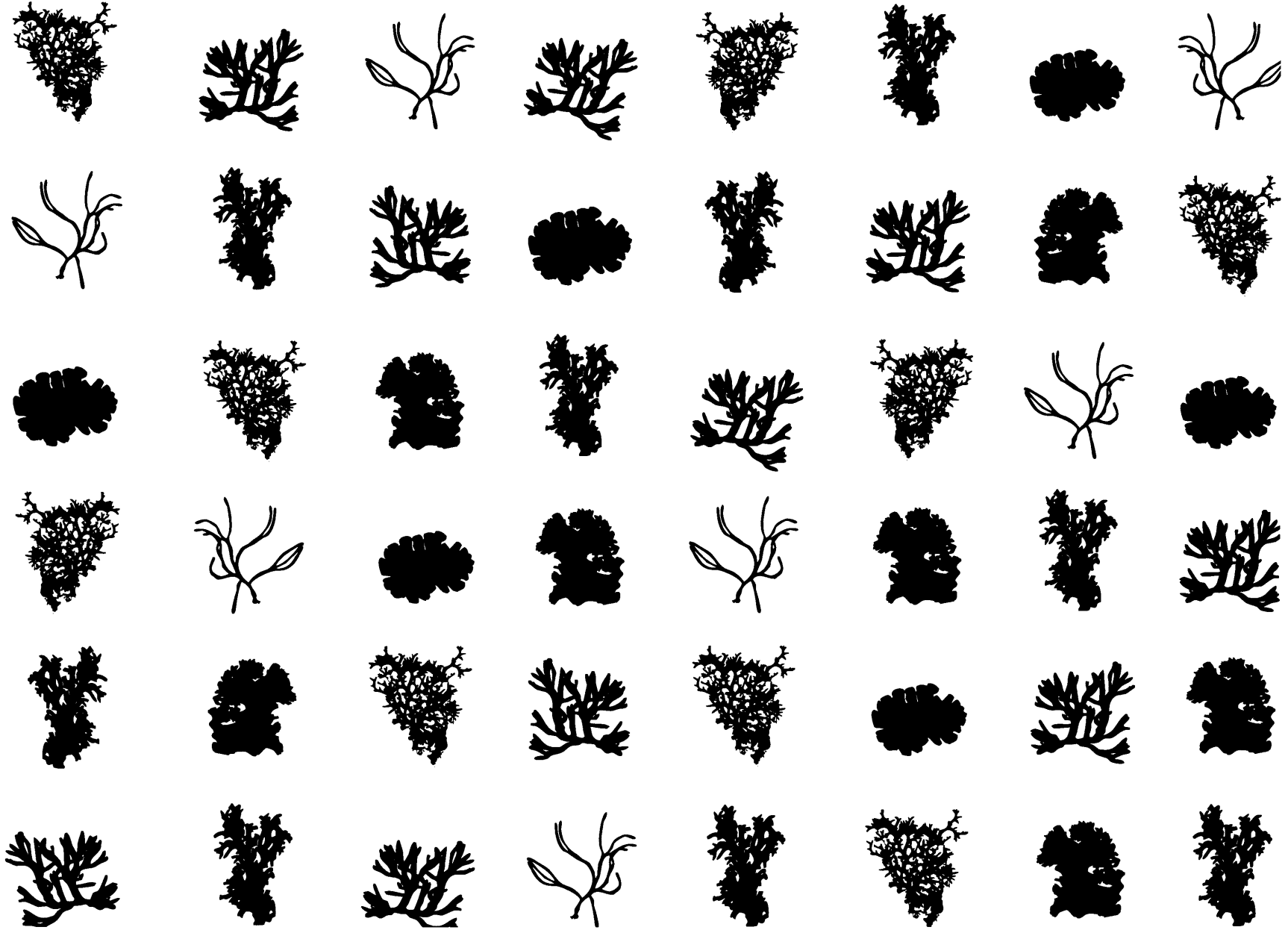
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I have included excerpts in this text from an earlier paper entitled "The Artist as Employee." It is from that paper, and my desire to find a formal structure for my artwork, that SPONGE emerged. I will conclude this thesis with what I feel is an appropriate endpoint for a project that will continue to evolve: a section on the origins of SPONGE.



**PART 1**  
SPONGE: IAP  
Philosophy & Metaphor



## PART 1

### SPONGE: IAP

The first SPONGE was held during the Independent Activities Period (IAP)<sup>1</sup> at MIT, from January 16th-19th 2007. There were seven participants including myself. Two were affiliated with the Center for Advanced Visual Studies: Meg Rotzel, who is the Curatorial Associate, and Pam Larson, a research affiliate at the Center. The group included two undergraduates: Joanna Rodriguez-Noyola, an architecture student, and Joy Perkinson, a materials science major. The two graduate students who participated, Mary Hale and Monica Rush, are in the Architecture Program and the Technology and Policy Program, respectively.

SPONGE was promoted with a poster campaign across campus and with a listing on the IAP website. Below is the workshop blurb followed by a detailed description of SPONGE.

*SPONGE is an experience in total immersion. During each of the four absorb-a-thon days one theme will be investigated in depth. The workshop will string together reef ecology, Mongolian craft, art & industry, and the notion of utopia. You will see four films (maybe 5), go on two field*

*trips (one to an aquarium and one to a museum), make a pair of wool- felt shoes, and read at least one manifesto. In keeping with the model of sponge reproduction, you will leave the workshop prepared to lead a SPONGE of your own.*

#### DAY ONE

**Theme:** Undersea

#### Schedule:

- 10:00 Welcome and introduction in the SPONGE classroom
- 10:30 Van departs for Woods Hole Science Aquarium. Read aloud from SPONGE Reader during trip. Topics include sponge biology, reef ecology and the history of aquariums
- 12:00 Lunch in Woods Hole
- 1:00 Tour of Aquarium
- 3:30 Travel back to MIT and finish the SPONGE Reader
- 5:00 Screen *The Deep*

#### Bibliography:

Sue Hubbell, *Waiting for Aphrodite\**  
Jaap A. Kaandorp and Janet E. Kubler, *The Algorithmic Beauty of Seaweeds, Sponges, and Corals.*

George Karleskint Jr., Richard Turner and James Small Jr., *Introduction to Marine Biology.*

Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom, On the Kitsch Experience.*

Ginger Strand, "Why Look at Fish?"

\*For full citations, please see the SPONGE: IAP Bibliography in the appendix of this document.

#### Film:

*The Deep.* Narrator David Attenborough. The Blue Planet. 2001.

SPONGE began in the gallery area adjoining the graduate studios of the Visual Arts Program. The space was transformed into a classroom equipped with a large banner I'd designed with images of the ocean's depths, a video projector, and several bottles of SPONGE water (that is, bottles of water with custom-made SPONGE labels that corresponded to the images on the banner and all promotional materials). My studio, just off of the main space, served as SPONGE headquarters. The studio space was also painted to mimic an undersea environment and stocked with all the materials and supplies we would

need for the four following days.

When everyone arrived, the participants introduced themselves and my role as facilitator began. I explained a bit about the goals of SPONGE and presented the workshop schedule. Our first day was organized around the theme of undersea life. On that day we would learn about sponge biology and behavior and have our first field trip, a visit to the Woods Hole Science Aquarium.

I rented a twelve-person passenger van to take us to Cape Cod. Each participant received a copy of the first SPONGE Reader prior to the workshop. There were two copies in the van, along with the original source material. Since our goal was to absorb as much information as possible, we used the time on the road to go through the Reader. Each participant took turns reading aloud. By the time we arrived at the Cape we completed a chapter on sponges from a marine biology textbook; an article on aquariums, urban renewal schemes and corporate mishandling of the oceans; and part of a text on the nineteenth century obsession with aquariums and replicas of the natural world.

Our tour guide at the aquarium was marine veterinarian Dr. Williams. He spent two hours taking us through the contents of each tank and he gave us a “backstage” tour of his fish hospital. We saw quarantined fish and a post-operative sea turtle, and we learned how the filtration system for the entire facility worked.

There is a relationship between being a “sponge” and being an expert. In the SPONGE lexicon someone who is “spongy,” like Dr. Williams, is a high practitioner of his or her discipline, fully immersed in his or her field. But the term also refers to those with a *desire* to learn and absorb. SPONGE makes the assumption that any participant can be a learner and a teacher. The workshop structure sets up a context for the exchange and transfer of knowledge.

On the return trip, we delved farther into the SPONGE Reader. We finished another textbook chapter on coral reefs. Every day of the SPONGE ended with a film that was connected to the day’s theme. In order to cap off our investigation of undersea life, we screened David Attenborough’s *The Deep*, from *The Blue*

*Planet*, a BBC series about the oceans. Joy Perkinson proclaimed that she was changing her major from materials science to EAPS: earth, atmospheric and planetary sciences.

## **DAY TWO**

**Theme:** Mongolian Craft

### **Schedule:**

- 10:00 Meet in SPONGE classroom for slide lecture about Mongolian craft, felt show-and-tell, and wool-carding demo
- 11:00 Move to downstairs SPONGE for wool felt-making demo
- 12:00 Begin first felt project
- 1:00 Lunch
- 1:30 Felt-making, finish first project
- 3:00 Design felt shoes, bag or hat. Make templates and lay out wool bats.
- 3:30 Screen *Genghis Blues*

### **Bibliography:**

Judith Hoos Fox and Amy Ingrid Schlegel, *Pattern Language, Clothing as Communicator*  
Bradley Mayhew, *Mongolia*

Paula L.W. Sabloff, *Modern Mongolia, Reclaiming Genghis Khan*

Gunilla Paetau Sjoberg, *New Directions for Felt, An Ancient Craft*

**Film:**

*Genghis Blues*. Dir. Roko Belic. Perf. Paul Pena and Kongar-ol Ondar. 1999.

Day two signaled a transition from sponge as topic to sponge as activity and metaphor. Mongolian craft day was largely focused on making wool felt, which is sponge-like in that each wool fiber must absorb water so that its scales are forced outward, locking with the scales of other fibers during the felting process to make a dense textile. The process also involves agitating the wool in (hot, soapy) water.

On the morning of the second day, I gave a lecture on the history of felt and its uses in Central Asia. I covered the table with books on felt and Mongolia, piles of wool, felt objects and felting tools. I also gave a wool-carding<sup>2</sup> demo and each participant took turns combing wool fibers onto the drum carder. We then moved to an area of the building that was set up as a felt-making studio.

Participants were gearing up to make a pair of wool felt shoes (though some chose to design a hat or handbag.) But the first project was a simple piece of felt with an inlaid design. Everyone worked along with my demonstration of both the felting and fulling<sup>3</sup> process. The group completed their samples and moved on to preparing the bats for their more ambitious project.

At the end of the day, we moved back upstairs to watch the 1999 documentary, *Genghis Blues*, which I chose because the main character is a very good example of what I mean by being "spongy". The movie tells the story of Paul Peña, a Bay Area musician who played with T-Bone Walker, Jerry Garcia and Bonnie Raitt in the early 1970s. He also wrote the Steve Miller Band hit "Jet Airliner." Peña, who lost his vision due to congenital glaucoma, lived alone in a small apartment and, after the loss of his wife, left only once a day to go to the corner store. Peña spent much of his time listening to shortwave radio. One day he heard a program on Tuvan throat singing, a Central Asian type of vocalizing in which one voice creates two tones simultaneously. Peña was fascinated

by the mix of guttural and high-pitched sounds and he began to teach himself the process. As he became more involved in the singing he started to contact people who knew more about it. The disc jockey who had aired the original broadcast put Peña in touch with one of the two founders of the Friends of Tuva Society. (The other founder was the physicist Richard Feynman.) Peña also used two dictionaries and a vision aid called the Optacon to translate from Tuvan to Russian to English, and proceeded to learn the Tuvan language. The more engaged Peña got in the exploration the closer he got to Tuva itself. The documentary captures Peña's eventual trip to Tuva and his friendship with Tuva's champion wrestler and throat singer, Kongar-ol Ondar. By the finale of the film, Peña has won honors for his performance in the national throat-singing competition. The musician immersed himself in the world of Tuvan singing. And by doing so, he found himself in an expanded network of friends, ideas and parts of the world. To my mind, Paul Peña is a master sponge.

### DAY 3

**Theme:** Art & Industry

**Schedule:**

- 10:15 Meet at Central Square T to travel to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
- 11:00 Tour of exhibition *Soviet Textiles: Designing the Modern Utopia*
- 12:30 Lunch takeout on way back to SPONGE classroom
- 1:00 Artist's talk on Art & Industry with a focus on the textile industry
- 1:45 Felt-making, felt and full wool boots, shoes or bags
- 3:30 Screen *The Man with the Movie Camera*. Continue fulling projects.

**Bibliography:**

ArtSpace, *Factory Direct: New Haven*  
Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer"  
Hope Ginsburg, "The Artist as Employee"  
Pamela Jill Kachurin, *Soviet Textiles: Designing the Modern Utopia*  
Helen Molesworth, *Work Ethic*

**Film:**

*The Man with the Movie Camera*. Dir.

Dziga Vertov. 1929.

Day three was organized around the theme of Art & Industry, with a concentration on textile production. By focusing on two fields whose interrelationship I have explored deeply in my own work, I was able to highlight the creative potential in the merging of disciplines.

The SPONGE group met at the subway to travel together to the exhibition *Soviet Textiles: Designing the Modern Utopia* at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. The show was ideal for our second field trip for several reasons. We were able to make a seamless segue from an ancient textile craft to industrial textile production. And, the Mongolians fought with the Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution of 1917. Finally, the Soviets aimed to integrate art and design with industry and everyday life.

One of the exhibition's organizers, Alex Huff, gave us a tour of the show. Though her background was not in Soviet history, Huff used her work on the show to learn all that she could about the period. She relayed her knowledge about the textiles

themselves, America's involvement in the industrialization of Russia, and the way in which art and design became a political tool in Soviet culture. Before leaving the museum, I showed the group an object that was behind glass in the museum's permanent collection. It was a Turkish felt hat, produced in the 1980's, and no different from the projects they would complete later that afternoon.

When we returned to MIT, I gave a slide talk about my own work in the textile industry. While employed by the marketing department of Designtex, a New York-based interiors textile supplier, I made an artwork about the company's environmental product development.<sup>4</sup> The project integrated my "day job" with my art practice. It was exhibited in two alternative art spaces and in the company showroom. The materials that I developed for the artwork became company marketing pieces. And I gave a lecture at the office to students from two art schools. The project was a personal example of not only the way art and industry can fit together, but of the way different parts of life can fit together. Communicating that experience of fitting is a key component of SPONGE.

After a brief discussion of my talk, I gave each member of the group a copy of Walter Benjamin's seminal 1937 essay on activist artwork, "The Author as Producer." That essay, which challenges engaged artists to remake systems of production from within, rather than endorse political points of view from the sidelines, was the manifesto for the IAP SPONGE.

The group then went downstairs to work on their felt projects. By the end of the day, two pairs of boots were finished and two more were underway. A tote bag and a hat with earflaps were also nearing completion. Industry was the day's theme, and no one wanted to stop working to screen the film, so we projected it onto the wall of the felting studio. The group watched *The Man with the Movie Camera*, Dziga Vertov's 1929 documentary on work, play and factory life and in modern-era Soviet Union.

#### **DAY 4**

**Theme:** Utopia

#### **Schedule:**

10:00 Meet in SPONGE classroom to set

up for student SPONGE presentations

11:00 Individual SPONGE presentations

12:30 Break for Lunch

1:00 Individual SPONGE presentations

2:00 Utopia presentation while students make final quick felt project

3:30 Screen *The Gleaners and I*

#### **Bibliography:**

Wendell Berry, *The Gift of Good Land, Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural*

Joseph Beuys and Carin Kuoni, *Joseph Beuys in America: Energy Plan for the Western Man*

David Bohm, *On Creativity and Wholeness and the Implicate Order*

Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

William McDonough and Michael Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle*

#### **Film:**

*The Gleaners and I*. Dir. Agnes Varda. 2000.

On Utopia day, the last one of the workshop, participants presented SPONGES of their own. The format and subject matter for their presentations was wide

open, though I suggested two possible approaches. One was to present a workshop that would knit together their own areas of expertise and perhaps fold in topics they wanted to explore. Another option was to make an in depth presentation on one particular topic. Each participant had roughly 45 minutes for her presentation with time afterward for discussion. Following is a brief description of a few of the next generation SPONGES.

Mary Hale, a graduate student in the Department of Architecture and a native of Texas, began her SPONGE with a multimedia talk about Brownsville, TX, including maps, old photographs, short video clips and personal documentation. She then introduced bird watching in Southern Texas. Hale presented an image of every bird mentioned in a Jonathan Franzen piece on the subject, which she read aloud from *The New Yorker*.

Monica Rush, a graduate student in the Technology and Policy Program, led a SPONGE on Polynesian dance. Rush had been a member of the Polynesian Dance troupe at MIT since she was an undergraduate at the Institute. She gave us an



overview of the different styles of dance and she showed us their regions of origin on a map. Rush then used her own performance videos to teach us about the meanings of the different gestures and the way every dance told a story. Each member of the Polynesian Dance troupe had produced her own handmade costume and we were able to closely examine Rush's. Finally, she conducted a group Hula lesson, which I captured on videotape.

Meg Rotzel's work focuses on community organizing. For her SPONGE she addressed the topic from the point of view of public art and food preparation. Rotzel made a connection between her curatorial work at the Berwick Research Institute, the Boston-based arts nonprofit which she founded, her work at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, and the sausage-making she did growing up in Wisconsin. Collaboration is a key ingredient in both the production of art and food. Rotzel presented ways of using both practices to build a sense of community and to generate new types of participatory projects.

Joy Perkinson took to SPONGE like a fish to water. The project made sense of her drive to soak things up and then move on to the next exploration. And it triggered a new wave of plans to absorb. Perkinson was already organizing a sound mixing SPONGE with her bandmates when our workshop wrapped up. The SPONGE plan that Perkinson presented to our group included virtual flight training; tandem jumping; knife-throwing; Japanese rock music (based on her band Nano-saurus); and Hikaru dorodango, the Japanese practice of polishing balls of mud to a gemlike shine.

After the SPONGE presentations, the group was anxious to do more felting. Some had projects to finish and others wanted to quickly crank out one more piece. Meg made a clutch with a circle motif and Monica made an iPod case with a heart. While the group worked on their final projects, I talked about the Utopia of SPONGE.

By that point in the workshop, many of my ideas about creativity, art making and learning had seeped through SPONGE. But I wanted to draw on the sources in

that day's bibliography to indicate where some of my ideas came from, and to point out the connections between them. The following quote by the German artist Joseph Beuys indicates not only a "spongy" point of view, but the way in which it connects to both the content of the workshop and to the other thinkers that I cited.

*Art alone makes life possible-this is how radically I should like to formulate it. I would say that without art man is inconceivable in physiological terms. There is a certain materialist doctrine which claims that we can dispense with mind and with art because man is just a more or less highly developed mechanism governed by chemical processes. I would say man does not consist of only chemical processes, but also of metaphysical occurrences. The provocateur of the chemical processes is located outside the world. Man is only truly alive when he realizes he is a creative, artistic being. I demand an artistic involvement in all realms of life. At the moment art is taught as a special field which demands the production of documents in the form of artworks. Whereas I advocate an aesthetic involvement from science, from economics, from politics, from religion-every sphere of*

*human activity. Even the act of peeling a potato can be a work of art if it is a conscious act.*<sup>5</sup>

In the late 1970s Joseph Beuys was one of the founding members of the German Green Party with Michael Braungart. Braungart, who runs the Environmental Protection Encouragement Agency in Hamburg, was the chemist who worked on the environmental textiles that I addressed in the Designtex project that I mentioned earlier. In the 1980s Beuys participated in a project about art, science and spirituality, which was organized by Dutch journalist Louwrien Wijers. The Dalai Lama, artist Robert Rauschenberg and theoretical physicist and Buddhist David Bohm also participated in the project. [fnt about book and video] Following is a quote by Bohm, taken from his 1996 book, *On Creativity*.

*What is of primary significance in the present context is not a consideration of such differences in "art forms" of the creative work carried out by different groups of people. Rather, it is that each human being is artist, scientist, and mathematician all in one, in the sense that he is most profoundly con-*

*cerned with aesthetic and emotional fitting, with functional and practical fitting, with universal rational fitting, and more generally, with fitting between his world view and his overall experience with the reality in which he lives. Even in his particular work he is always concerned with all these kinds of fitting, though, of course, with different sorts of emphasis. So one has to begin with a general feeling for the whole of human activity, both in society and in the individual. This is to be described as art: the action of fitting.*<sup>6</sup>

There will be more to say about those ideas in a later section of this paper. But for now, I wanted to provide a snapshot of the SPONGE Utopia. It is organized around each individual's deep focus on his or her creative pursuits, a belief that connections are made through an immersive approach to inquiry, and the proposal that there is no field or activity that cannot be practiced artfully.

The SPONGE participants felt as we discussed the ideas above. Each person had been an integral part of making the workshop and each had given a part of their knowledge to the rest of the group.

As they finished their projects, I went back upstairs to set up the final film, Agnes Varda's 2000, *The Gleaners and I*.

The film is a "spongy" exploration of the process of gleaning, the peasant practice of going through the fields after the harvest to collect what's been left behind. Gleaning is a legally protected right in France and so the culture of gleaning is rich and multifaceted. In her film, Varda explores many different types of contemporary characters who glean in cities, in the countryside, in fields and in dumpsters. She expands the practice beyond the collection of food and discovers artists and craftspeople who make their work from gleaned material. Varda comes at gleaning from every angle, including the filming of encyclopedia entries on the topic, and Millet's famous 1857 painting, *The Gleaners*. The irony of a deep investigation of the process of skimming or foraging reflects some of the contradictions in SPONGE, which contains elements of dilettantism even as it celebrates expertise. I am comfortable with these ideas living side by side in SPONGE. Though it is about fitting, it is also about eccentricities, disconnects and irony. Nothing need be

left out of the SPONGE.

The second SPONGE workshop was produced on April 14th, 2007 for Campus Preview Weekend at MIT. The goal of the SPONGE was to expose incoming freshmen to the Visual Arts Program. For the sake of moving on to a discussion of the SPONGE philosophy and metaphor, I have placed the full description of the CPW SPONGE in the appendix of this document.

## PHILOSOPHY & METAPHOR

### Immersion

An immersive approach is one of the mainstays of SPONGE. Learning in the workshops is experiential. Subject matter is explored from within in as many cases as possible. For example, on the day we explored Undersea Life, we transported ourselves to the beach, spent time absorbing the aesthetics of the aquarium, and learned from an expert. Knowledge was transferred through our physical environment, through social interaction, through sight and sound and through touch. We read texts that approached the theme of the sea life from several different angles. And by watching a documentary about creatures at the lowest depths of the ocean, we took in visuals that were almost completely unfamiliar. Our experience was aesthetic, sensory and integrated. The classroom was decorated with undersea motifs and our water bottles were labeled with sea sponge designs. We were transported.

Immersion is relative, of course. We spent a day with the material, not a lifetime. Therefore, it is important to point out that another way in which SPONGE supports

an immersive approach is by creating a framework to communicate the results of a more sustained exploration. For example, after spending a year on an organic farm researching an art project, I was troubled by what form the project should take. I became concerned that my art practice, which had always managed to tread the boundary between art and life, had finally slipped irrevocably into life itself. I was without a framework for communicating my work. Ultimately, the piece took the form of a monologue and slide show. However, I was disappointed that so much of the experience had been left out of the final presentation.

The design of a structure that could support all of the elements of my practice became essential. The metaphor of absorption provided by SPONGE seemed to invite the many forms in which I wanted to work.

### Absorption:

SPONGE puts long or short-term investigations into a framework that allows them to be communicated to an audience of participants or viewers. As can be seen in

the description above, the model is able to absorb parts of my practice as diverse as performing, (through the role of facilitator) teaching, creating social space, designing physical space and objects, making objects, and writing.

SPONGE also creates a context for participants to absorb information and experience. To be “spongy” is to be someone who is open to absorbing new things or familiar things in greater depth.

SPONGE is flexible enough to absorb all types of content. SPONGE may be carefully designed with great attention paid to connections between themes but can also be a tool for discovering those connections.

### Making Connections:

In his second book, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, David Bohm explores the relationship between wholeness and health. The most important part of the connection-making aspect of SPONGE is that participants experience the fitting together of disparate things in a way that may show how parts of their own lives

can cohere. I have been inspired by Bohm's quote below:

*It is instructive to consider that the word 'health' in English is based on an Anglo-Saxon word 'hale' meaning 'whole': that is, to be healthy is to be whole, which is, I think roughly the equivalent of the Hebrew 'shalem'. Likewise, the English 'holy' is based on the same root as 'whole'. All of this indicates that man has sensed always that wholeness or integrity is an absolute necessity to make life worth living. Yet, over the ages, he has generally lived in fragmentation.<sup>7</sup>*

However, all of this talk of wholeness begs a consideration of the flipside. Conflict, rupture, and confusion can also be intensely creative. SPONGE is not meant to be so harmonious that it obviates questioning or incongruity. If it is assembled carefully, it will be provocative in its eccentricity. I think the following argument, made by theorist Donna Haraway captures the spirit of connection making in SPONGE.

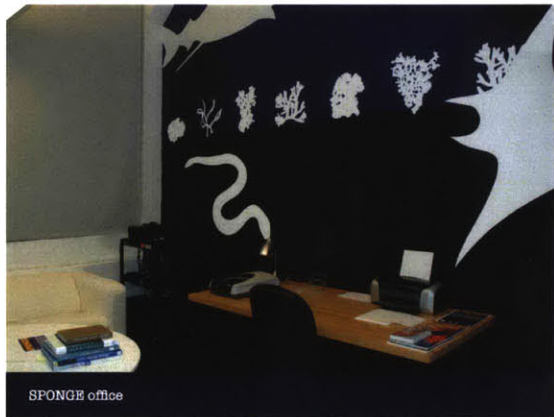
*But it is precisely in the politics and epistemology of partial perspectives that the possi-*

*bility of sustained, rational, objective inquiry rests. So, with many other feminists, I want to argue for a doctrine and practice of objectivity that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing. But not just any partial perspective will do; we must be hostile to easy relativisms and holisms built out of summing and subsuming parts.<sup>8</sup>*

### **Reproduction:**

Sea sponges reproduce both sexually and asexually. If a sea sponge is put into a blender, each particle will grow into an adult sponge. Sea sponge reproduction informs the SPONGE workshop model. Though each participant is largely a co-artist for the duration of the workshop, it is essential that there is a time for wringing out, so to speak. At the end of the workshop everyone presents a SPONGE of his or her own. This gives everyone involved the chance to learn from one another and it creates an equality between all involved. It is instructive and interesting to see how everyone interprets the SPONGE

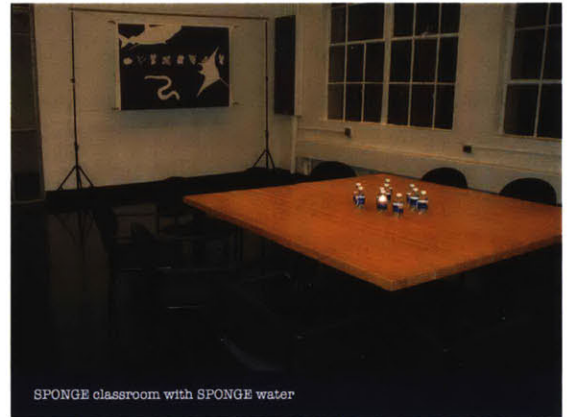
way. And it is a fertile system for producing new elements of SPONGE. It is also my hope that participants will take parts of SPONGE with them, and use the approach to inform their own thinking and working methods.



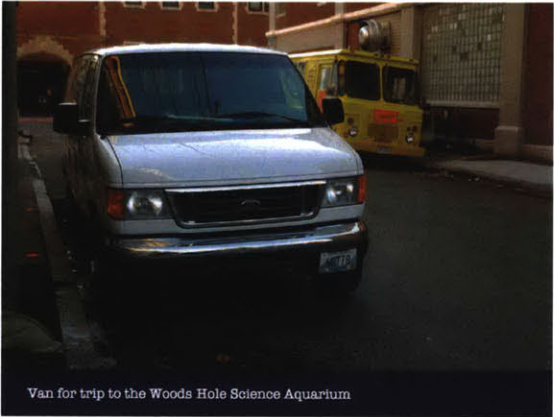
SPONGE office



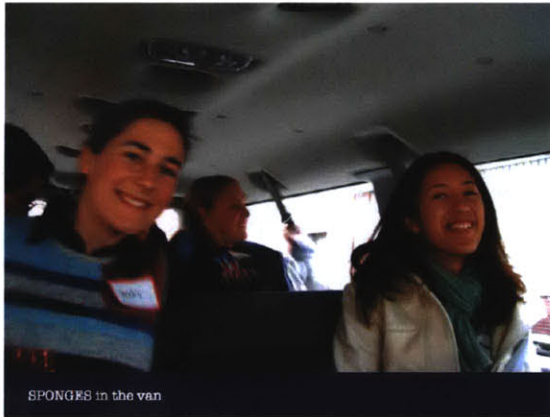
SPONGE office



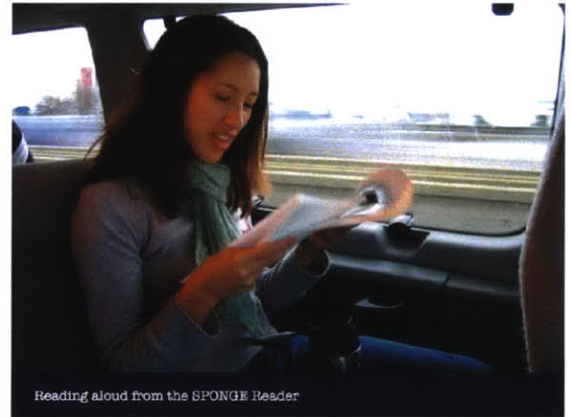
SPONGE classroom with SPONGE water



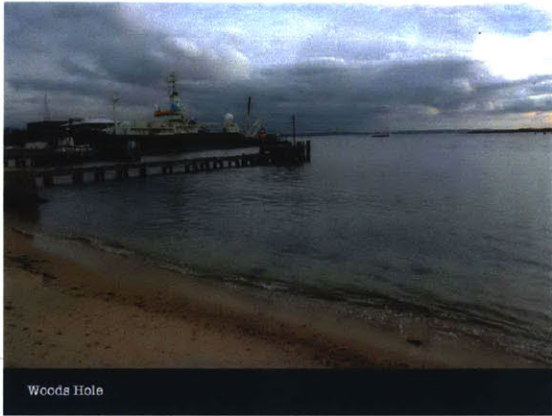
Van for trip to the Woods Hole Science Aquarium



SPONGES in the van



Reading aloud from the SPONGE Reader



Woods Hole



SPONGES tour the aquarium



Fish staring at SPONGES





Our instructor, fish veterinarian Dr. Williams



A SFONGE and a fish observing each other



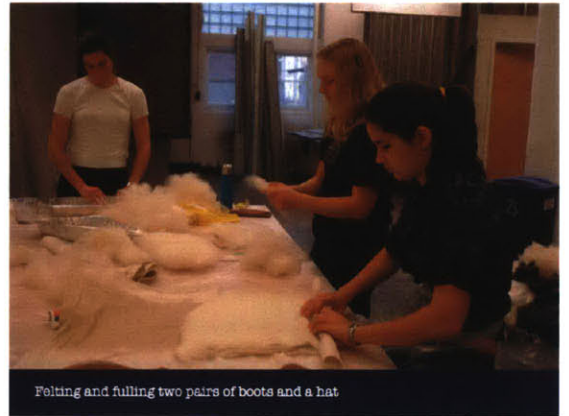
Setup for morning lecture on Mongolian craft and felt-making



Presentation of felt-making materials



Wool bats prepared for first felt project: a simple design on a flat piece of felt



Felting and filling two pairs of boots and a hat



The spongy process of making felt



In-process hat with ear flaps



Felt boots



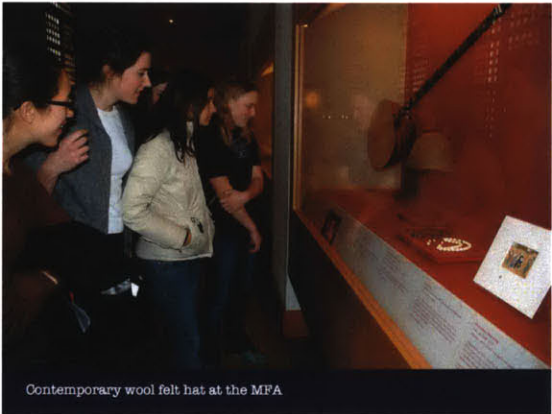
At the Boston MFA for a tour of *Soviet Textiles: Designing the Modern Utopia*



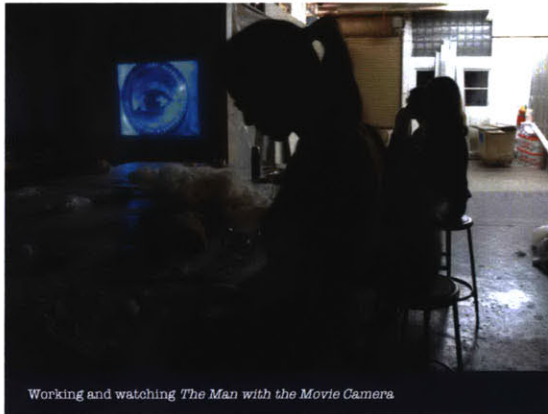
Gallery talk with one of the exhibition's organizers, Alex Huff



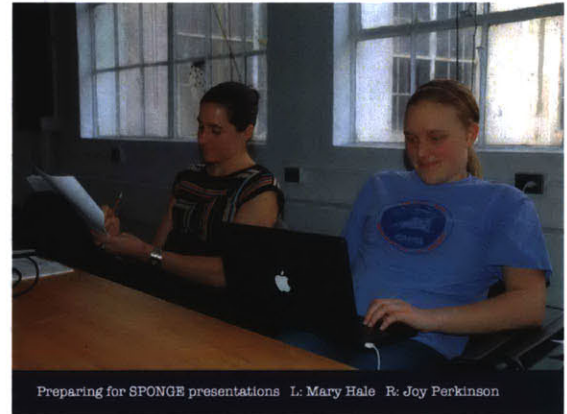
Pattern designs and etchings celebrating Soviet industry



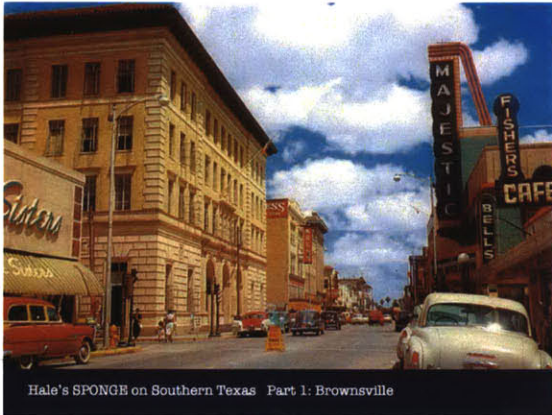
Contemporary wool felt hat at the MFA



Working and watching *The Man with the Movie Camera*



Preparing for SPONGE presentations L: Mary Hale R: Joy Perkinson



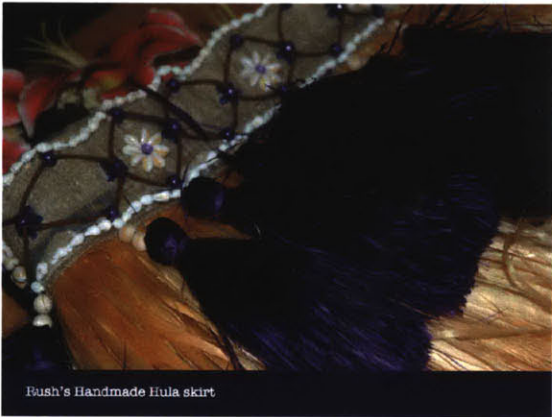
Hale's SPONGE on Southern Texas Part 1: Brownville



Part II: Birding in southern Texas Next slide: Hale's new screensaver



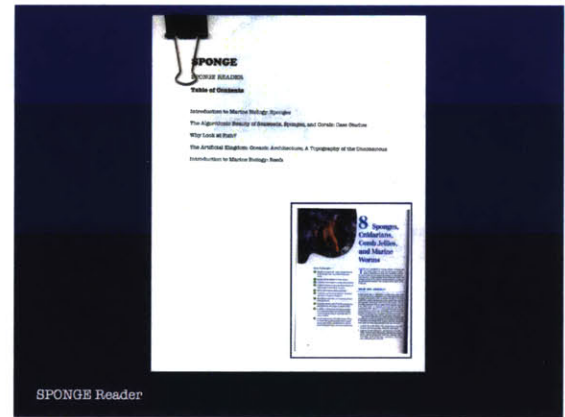
L: Meg Rotzel presenting her SPONGE R: Monica Rush presenting a SPONGE



Rush's Handmade Hula skirt



SPONGE water.

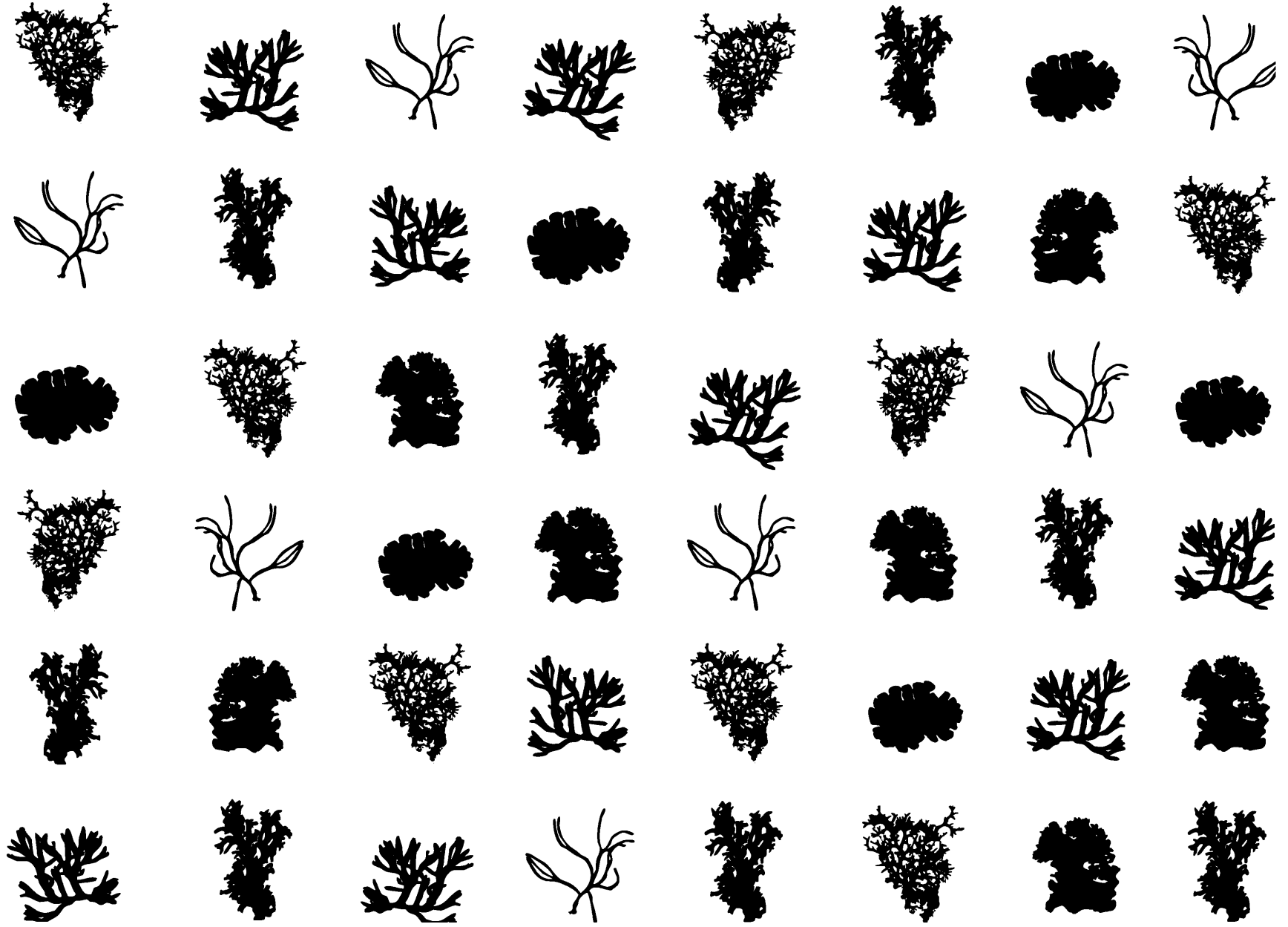


SPONGE Reader



**PART 2**  
Theory





## PART 2

### THEORY

This section of the thesis places SPONGE in a theoretical context. Each of the sections below on the historical context, aesthetics, criticality, politics, and the future of SPONGE are presented in synopsis form. The complexity of the topics suggest a more in-depth treatment than is given in this document. However, it is my intention to put forth the basic principles and to use them as a foundation for further research.

#### Situating SPONGE

Many of the artists who have influenced my work fall within the trajectory of site-specific art. In her book *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Miwon Kwon puts forth a historical genealogy of site-specificity. I will use Kwon's text to place SPONGE within an art historical context.

Kwon breaks the practice of site-specificity into three consecutive paradigms. The first phase comprises works that respond to the physical or phenomenological aspects of a site. Work during this period, which dates from the late 1960s, investigates surrounding architecture, lighting,

and dimensions of the space. It is integrated with the site, rather than functioning autonomously in a place. Lawrence Wechsler's *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees* describes Robert Irwin's site specific practice, which has been an influence on my work. Irwin is meditative in his approach to the site as he attentively manipulates the viewer's experience of the space.<sup>9</sup>

Kwon identifies institutional critique as the subsequent phase in site specific practice. Institutional critique responds to a "network of interrelated spaces and economies" in the art system. Artists respond critically to the forces behind the art market and the exhibition spaces that make up the "institution" of art. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, whose work falls within that category, has made a strong impact on my approach from very early on. Ukeles declared that "survival work—maintenance—and art, including her domestic work and her art, were one."<sup>10</sup> In her *Touch Sanitation Performance* (1978-1980), Ukeles shook the hand of the 8500 sanitation workers in the New York City Department of Sanitation. It was her first work as the official artist in residence at the DOS.<sup>11</sup>

The movement of artistic practice from physical spaces or institutions into a discursive realm signals the third phase of site specificity. This is the realm in which I see SPONGE residing. Kwon describes this discursive phase as follows.

*Beyond these dual expansions of art into culture, which obviously diversify the site, the distinguishing characteristic of today's site-oriented art is the way in which the art work's relationship to the actuality of a location (as site) and the social conditions of the institutional frame (as site) are both subordinate to a discursively determined site that is delineated as a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate. Furthermore, unlike in the previous models, this site is not defined as a precondition. Rather, it is generated by the work (often as "content"), and then verified by its convergence with an existing discursive formation.<sup>12</sup>*

The work in this third classification ceases to be a "noun/object" and is, rather, a "verb process", according to Kwon. The artwork is not bound to its site by physical permanence. It is a fleeting situation, meant to be experiential and unrepeat-

able.<sup>13</sup> This type of work, which may be referred to by terms as varied as community-based, dialogical, relational, collaborative or research-based, places artistic practice in the realm of the social.<sup>14</sup>

Claire Bishop, an art theorist and critic, who has written on socially based work, described this type of practice in her 2006 *Artforum* piece, *The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents*:

*This mixed panorama of socially collaborative work arguably forms what avant-garde we have today: artists using social situations to produce dematerialized, antimarket, politically engaged projects that carry on the modernist call to blur art and life.*<sup>15</sup>

Bishop's text is a critical analysis of social practice that calls for a method of evaluating work in aesthetic terms. As Kwon observed in her book, aesthetics tend to vanish with physical sites as artwork dematerializes into social space. Kwon describes strategies that, in their resistance to commodification become, "aggressively antivisual-informational, textual, expository, didactic-or immaterial altogether."<sup>16</sup>

This move away from the visual is a concern that I have aimed to address in SPONGE. The following section on SPONGE and aesthetics explores the issue further.

### **Aesthetics**

In "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents", her 2006 article in *Artforum* magazine, author Claire Bishop laments the standard that measures contemporary collaborative practice by its social impact instead of the its success at synthesizing the social/political and the aesthetic.<sup>17</sup> She responds to an argument that "dialogic" art should be treated as an aesthetic form with the following:

*In Conversation Pieces, Kester argues that consultative and "dialogic" art necessitates a shift in our understanding of what art is-away from the visual and sensory (which are individual experiences) and toward "discursive exchange and negotiation." He challenges us to treat communication as an aesthetic form, but, ultimately, he fails to defend this, and seems perfectly content to allow that a socially collaborative art project could be deemed a success if it works on the*

*level of social intervention even though it founders on the level of art.*<sup>18</sup>

This debate has become increasingly important to me as I have worked to design a practice that satisfies my desire to make objects, design spaces, and communicate visually. As I move farther into the realm of the discursive, I do not want the visual elements of my work to be reduced to documentation or detritus.

Furthermore, it is important to me that there be a way of communicating SPONGE to viewers who are not workshop participants. As such, I designed SPONGE to take place in two phases, the experiential and the perceptual. By playing with the word *workshop*, I can treat the project as both a happening (the workshop as an intensive course), and as a site (the workshop as a space of production). The "headquarters" developed for each SPONGE becomes an installation that can be activated for later viewers.

Along with putting aesthetics at risk, art's disappearance into the realm of the social may also sacrifice criticality. In the following section on critical distance, I discuss

the way SPONGE negotiates the presence of “everyday” content without becoming everyday life itself.

### **Critical Distance**

The dissolution of art into social praxis is part of the discourse of the historical avant-garde. In late-capitalist society, however, when everyday life is saturated with the products of the culture industry, art dissolves into life at the expense of criticality. In his book *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Burger argues that preserving art’s autonomy is the only way to keep a critical perspective. The following passage, in which Burger references Marcuse, sheds light on this issue:

*For the (relative) freedom of art vis-à-vis the praxis of life is at the same time the condition that must be fulfilled if there is to be a critical cognition of reality. An art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it, along with its distance. During the time of the historical avant-garde movements, the attempt to do away with the distance between art and life still had all the pathos of historical progressiveness on its side. But*

*in the meantime, the culture industry has brought about the false elimination of the distance between art and life, and this also allows one to recognize the contradictoriness of the avant-gardiste undertaking.*<sup>19</sup>

Though SPONGE provides immersive exposure to disciplines that exist beyond artistic praxis, it nevertheless creates a frame through which those contexts may be considered. I propose that content which is pulled into SPONGE can be viewed with increased perspective. Additionally, relationships created by the connection-making function of SPONGE may lead to new insight and approaches.

### **SPONGE and Pedagogy**

In the March 2007 issue of *Artforum*, which was dedicated to the work of Jacques Ranciere, Bettina Funcke introduces the French philosopher’s call for formal structures in art that can be put to political ends.

*Ranciere claims that the truly political approach for art today is to engage popular culture and countercultures in terms of “the capacities they set in motion” rather*

*than the images they offer. In other words, we must learn to create formal structures within which one may operate with anarchic equality. Art can be a response to the inequality of inherited hierarchies, whether the systems of art history or those of a dominating popular culture; it can break them down and propose new connections, activating previously overlooked capacities.*<sup>20</sup>

I have already shown that SPONGE maintains a critical distance from its subject matter. But along with the potential to shift our perspectives on preexisting conditions, what purpose can SPONGE serve? I propose that the project be considered in terms of what it may add to the discourse of pedagogy.

SPONGE mobilizes a method of teaching and learning that allows participants to be co-creators of their experience. The “wringing out” component of SPONGE, which asks participants to teach a SPONGE to the rest of the group, creates equality between the participants and between the participants and the facilitator. SPONGE exposes participants to a method for configuring their own ideas and for initiating their own independent projects.

And, based on the SPONGE reproduction model, those participants may carry the approach into expanding circles of their peers. SPONGE embraces the notion that individual creative emancipation is essential for effecting change at the societal level.

There is a relationship between pedagogy and performance, as Jacques Ranciere observes in his 2004 lecture, *The Emancipated Spectator*. Ranciere built the lecture around an earlier work of his entitled *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, which told the story of the early nineteenth century French schoolmaster Joseph Jacotot. Jacotot asserted that “an ignorant person could teach another ignorant person what he did not know himself, proclaiming the equality of the intelligences, and calling for intellectual emancipation against the received wisdom concerning the instruction of the lower classes.”<sup>21</sup> Ranciere’s emancipated spectator may be a student or an audience member or the viewer of an artwork. Each of those positions correlates with the participants in SPONGE. I would like to draw upon Ranciere’s writing to shed light on what I see as the participant’s role as co-creator or transla-

tor in the workshop:

*Artists, like researchers, build the stage where the manifestation and the effect of their competences become dubious as they frame the story of a new adventure in a new idiom. The effect of the idiom cannot be anticipated. It calls for spectators who are active interpreters, who render their own translation, who appropriate the story for themselves, and who ultimately make their own story out of it. An emancipated community is in fact a community of storytellers and translators.*

The assumption in SPONGE is that any participant can be both learner and teacher. The workshop structure sets up a place for the exchange and transfer of knowledge. My definition of the word “spongy” is twofold. The “spongy” person is both an expert and someone who desires knowledge. SPONGE embraces Ranciere’s principle of the equality of the intelligences, described by the author as follows:

*The common power is the power of the equality of intelligences. This power binds individuals together to the very extent that*

*it keeps them apart from each other, it is the power each of us possesses in equal measure to make our own way in the world. What has to be put to the test by our performances-whether teaching or acting, speaking, writing, making art, etc.-is not the capacity of aggregation of a collective but the capacity of the anonymous, the capacity that makes anybody equal to everybody. This capacity works through unpredictable and irreducible distances. It works through an unpredictable and irreducible play of associations and dissociations.*<sup>23</sup>

This point of view requires the facilitator of SPONGE and the participants to remain cognizant that the effect of their teaching is unknowable.<sup>24</sup> The unpredictability of the outcome of a SPONGE is to my mind, one of the most exciting aspects of the workshop.

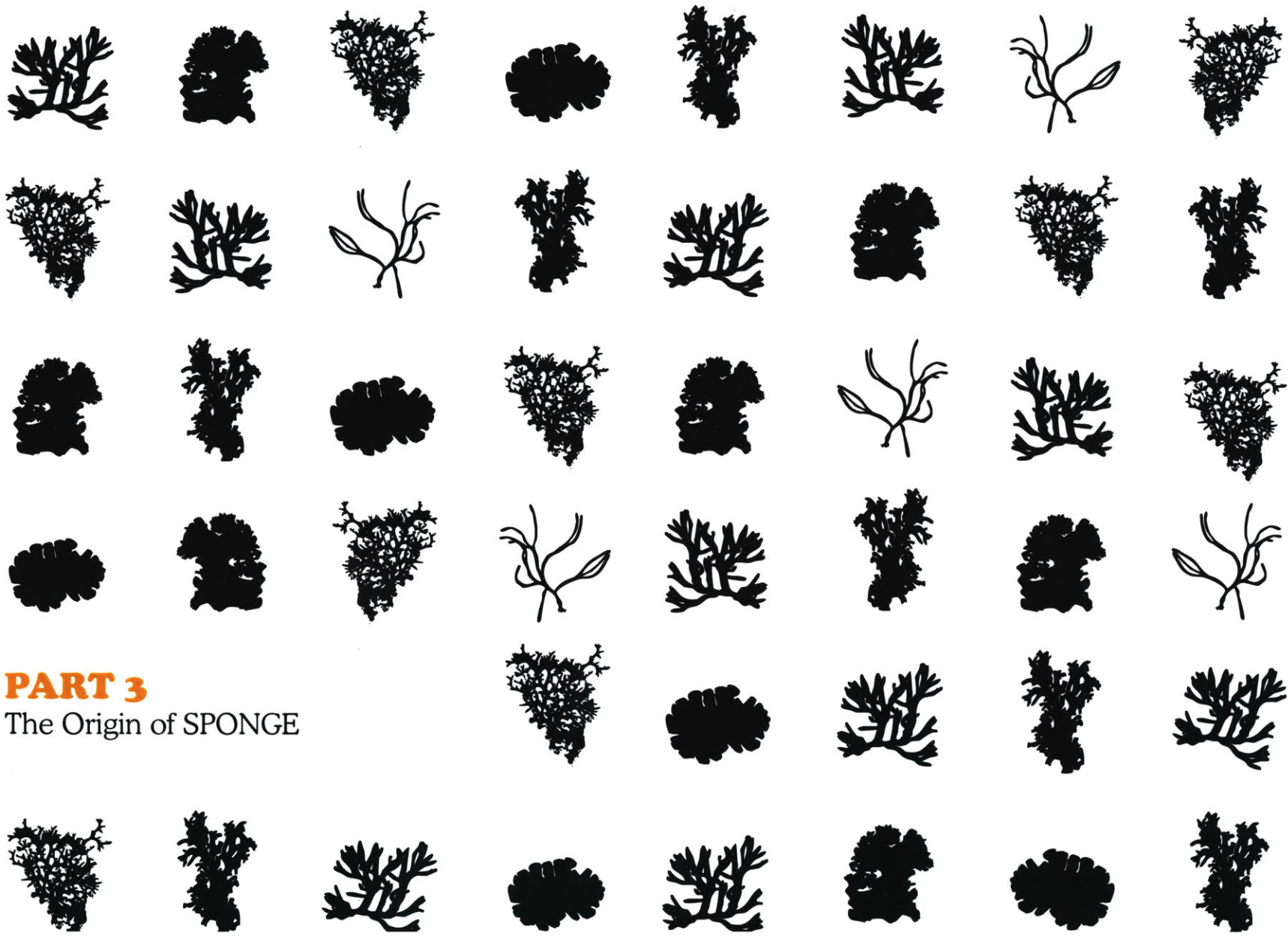
This emancipation, or acknowledgment of every individual’s propensity to think for him or herself, harmonizes with Immanuel Kant’s notion of enlightenment: the courage to use one’s own reason.<sup>25</sup> It is that individual enlightenment which paves the way to an enlightened society. In Kant’s words:

*As nature has uncovered from under this hard shell the seed for which she most tenderly cares-the propensity and vocation to free thinking-this gradually works back upon the character of the people, who thereby gradually become capable of managing freedom; finally, it affects the principles of government, which finds it to its advantage to treat men, who are now more than machines, in accordance with their dignity.<sup>26</sup>*

### **The Future of the SPONGE**

Though SPONGE has been incubated in an academic environment, the future of the project lies in its ability to adapt to different contexts, participants and fields of inquiry. I put forth the project as a methodology for artistic practice and pedagogy. SPONGE is catalytic and reproducible. The practice is not designed for my use alone. I offer the method to anyone who wishes to explore it.

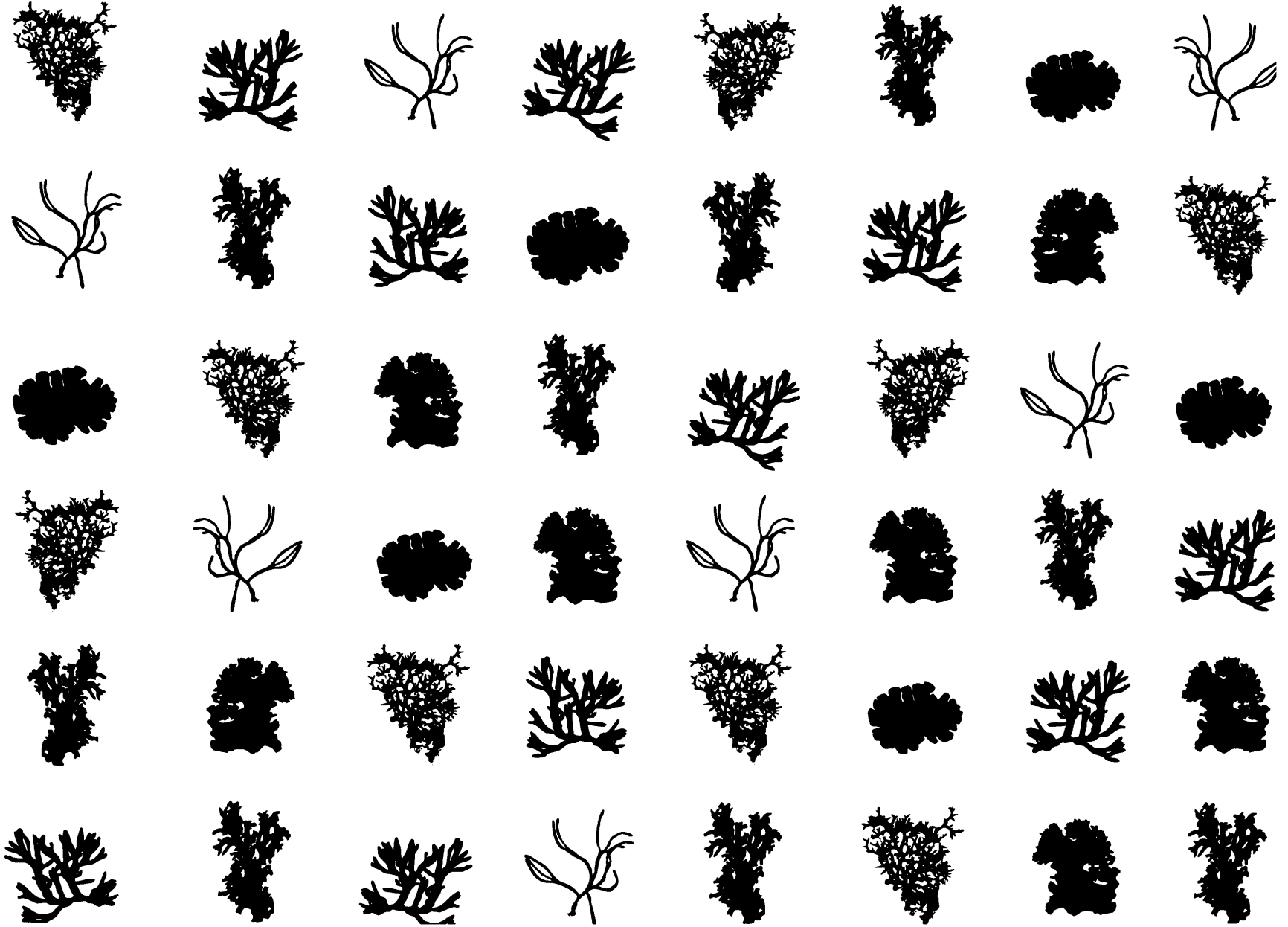




**PART 3**

The Origin of SPONGE







## PART 3

### THE ORIGIN OF SPONGE

SPONGE grew out of a model that I articulated for my practice between my first and second years of graduate school. That model, entitled *The Artist as Employee*, was built around my work on environmental product development in the textile industry and the way I integrated my job with my artwork.

Here I will summarize *The Artist as Employee* in order to explain how it gave way to SPONGE, and also include relevant excerpts from the paper itself.

*The Artist as Employee practice is a two-part method of artistic production that takes place in the corporate office and in the studio. While the job in industry, the mainstay of the practice, allows for direct influence in the move toward environmentally sustainable manufacturing, the ancillary studio practice has the role of critically observing the work in industry and of translating those observations into strategies for effecting change. The studio is also the place where the project is documented and visual art and artifacts are produced.*

Like SPONGE, *The Artist as Employee* practice addresses politics, aesthetics, and

the production of artwork that is situated at a critical distance from everyday life. Though I was invested in the model, I needed to resolve a way to work with it at MIT. Teaching a course seemed to be a logical way to set up a dynamic between my studio practice and engaged work at the Institute. MIT's winter term, the Independent Activities Period, was the ideal context to conduct my experiment.

In my conversations with visiting professor Regina Moeller, it became clear that the project needed to take a form different from that of a standard course. During one conversation in particular, I shifted gears to say something about how I'd come to MIT to be a sponge and that I really just wanted to absorb information during my time there. Regina perked up at the idea of the sponge, and we shared an "a-ha moment". The metaphor dovetailed with my conceptual concerns about immersion and absorption, and it carried with it visual and thematic associations that I was excited to pursue.

### **The Artist as Employee**

Hal Foster opens his 1996 essay "The Artist as Ethnographer" with a pithy recap of "The Author as Producer", Walter Benjamin's essential 1934 text on politically engaged art. To paraphrase Foster, Benjamin insists that the advanced artist of the left needs to do more than just demonstrate the correct literary tendency to participate in the class struggle. The artist must directly intervene in the means of artistic production. For Benjamin, bourgeois culture is transformed only when the techniques of traditional media are revolutionized.

Foster goes on to update Benjamin's "The Author as Producer" model by proposing that the socially marginalized worker has been replaced by the culturally marginalized "other" as the beneficiary of the activist artist's labor. Through the then-prevailing lens of identity politics, he outlines the danger faced by activist artists of further marginalizing their subjects through the process of "over-identification." To address that danger, Foster offers up the idea of critical distance. By producing "paralactic work that attempts to frame the

framer as he or she frames the other,”<sup>27</sup> the artist can achieve the correct distance from his or her subject.

Today, ten years after Foster’s “The Artist as Ethnographer”, forms of critical art, described by terms as varied as “dialogic,” “relational,” “research-based” and “collaborative,” have come under attack not only for their lack of critical distance, but also for their abandonment of aesthetics. In “The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents”, a recent article in *Artforum* magazine, author Claire Bishop laments the standard that measures contemporary collaborative practice by its social merit instead of considering the work’s success at synthesizing the social/political and the aesthetic. To quote Bishop: *The former [aesthetes] at their most extreme would condemn us to a world of irrelevant painting and sculpture, while the latter [artists] have a tendency to self-marginalize to the point of inadvertently reinforcing art’s autonomy, thereby preventing any productive rapprochement between art and life. Is there ground on which the two sides can meet?*<sup>28</sup>

It is with Bishop’s repurposing of that time

honored question that I’ll close my brisk précis of politically-based art. For my intent here is not to introduce a discussion of activist art in general, but rather to provide the theoretical framework that has been instrumental in the rebuilding of my own artistic practice, a practice in which I’ve long since grappled with the so-called boundary between art and life.

For almost a decade my work on environmental product marketing and research and development in the textile industry and my work as an artist have emerged side by side. Though at times I’ve created a dynamic between the two,<sup>29</sup> more often than not I’ve been conflicted about which activity should take precedent over the other, since each fulfills an important set of needs. Working in industry has given me a concrete understanding of the impact of manufacturing on the environment; the way products are made; and a behind-the-scenes view of how business ticks. It has also allowed me to play a participatory role in the transformation of business as it responds to the current environmental crisis. My art life is where I’ve protected the space for criticality and for my own hands-on production. It is

within the art context that I’ve been focused on the larger cultural issues at stake in “green” business: the need for a radical environmentalism within industry, the construction of identity through consuming, and the need for skepticism about the false or exaggerated claims of the marketing machine. Projects I’ve produced around those issues have taken the form of video, performance, installation and sculpture.<sup>30</sup>

And so, with that bit of background in place, I’d like to pull Benjamin, Foster and Bishop back into the discussion to show how working with their ideas has allowed me to construct a new version of my practice that takes full advantage of these divergent pursuits. *The Artist as Employee*<sup>31</sup> relies on one key contribution from each of the thinkers above. From Benjamin, I take the idea of active intervention into systems of production. From Foster it is the artist’s need to establish the correct distance from his or her subject and from Bishop it is the preservation of aesthetics within politically based practice. Now that the concepts of activism, critical distance and aesthetics have been identified, I can use them to understand the different ele-

ments of my practice in order to come up with an effective configuration. Though the connections are established here in a nutshell, they will be expanded upon below. In short, Benjamin's producer model becomes a way of understanding my environmental work within industry. Foster's idea of critical distance speaks to the questioning of the social and cultural issues in business world. And Bishop's call for preserving the aesthetic within a politically based practice resonates with my desire to communicate discoveries through the production of objects of my own.

So what configuration do these particular forms of activism, criticality and visual production suggest? I propose a practice that takes place in two sites: the corporation and the studio. The primary site, the corporate office, becomes the activist terrain, the place of transformative intervention. The secondary, or supporting site is the art studio. It provides the space for critical reflection on the issues in industry. It is also the place where strategies for representing the project are developed and visual records and art objects are produced. While the job in industry, the mainstay of the practice, allows for direct influence in the

move toward environmentally sustainable manufacturing, the ancillary studio practice has the role of critically observing the work in industry and of translating those observations into strategies for effecting change. The studio is also the place where the project is documented and visual art and artifacts are produced.

In order to begin my discussion of activism in the artist as employee project, I look to Benjamin's call to arms in the "The Author as Producer": *Instead of asking: what is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time? Does it accept them? Is it reactionary—or does it aim at overthrowing them? Is it revolutionary?—instead of this question, or at any rate before this question, I should like to propose another. Rather than asking: what is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time? I should like to ask: what is its position in them?*<sup>32</sup>

It is not without irony that my proposed response to Benjamin's version of engaged practice is a corporate job. But because the notion of obliterating the "dominant apparatus of capitalism" is itself obsolete, I think that a successful model for effect-

ing change in industry will have to be one in which industry also stands to gain. In short, though Benjamin's objective may be anachronistic, his demand for artistic intervention could not be timelier. Nowadays business and manufacturing practices are quite literally destroying life on earth.

It is no secret that the destruction of the environment is a global crisis. One need look no further than the supermarket checkout line to find mainstream magazines like *Newsweek*, *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue* devoting entire issues to the matter. For the sake of context, I will illustrate the point here with an alarming passage taken from entrepreneur and environmentalist Paul Hawken's book *The Ecology of Commerce: Given current corporate practices, not one wildlife reserve, wilderness, or indigenous culture will survive the global market economy. We know that every natural system on the planet is disintegrating. The land, water, air, and sea have been functionally transformed from life-supporting systems into repositories for waste. There is no polite way to say that business is destroying the world.*<sup>33</sup>

Because reversing the trend toward

environmental devastation is dependent on the radical remaking of industry, it is precisely to that end that engaged work must be directed. As I started with a grim picture, I turn back to Hawken for a rallying cry that offers a hint of optimism: *If business is prepared to reexamine its underlying assumptions and listen to ecologists botanists, toxicologists, zoologists, wildlife management experts, endocrinologists, indigenous cultures, and victims of industrial processes, without the selective filter of its internal rationale and biases, it will not only fulfill its own agenda of contributing to society by providing products, jobs, and prosperity, but also initiate a new era of ecological commerce, more promising and ultimately more fulfilling than the industrial age that preceded it.*<sup>34</sup>

Naturally, I hold the firm opinion that artists have something to offer to the struggle. In an effort to put my own abilities to work, I must find a situation in business that is both appropriate and useful. At this early stage in the project, I have the following parameters in mind. The practice should be situated in a company that is either doing important environmental work or in the process of launching environ-

mental initiatives. Given my fascination with consuming, identity construction, lifestyles and marketing, I will aim at a consumer or design-driven product company. I think it would be best to engage a large company with its own manufacturing facilities, and an expansive supply chain and distribution system to maximize the impact of incremental change. It will also be important to find a community of likeminded colleagues with whom to join forces.

The project can be launched from a variety of positions. Many product companies have employees whose job it is to spot cultural trends and translate them into new product categories. There are also roles that involve the interpretation and development of environmental standards for industry. Those standards, which address issues such as chemical and material inputs, water and energy use, disposal and social equity, are an important part of the process of industrial change. Finally there are project managers who work directly with outside environmental consultancies to develop strategies for optimizing processes at the company. Any of those positions would offer influence over mate-

rial improvements, standards of evaluation and communication in the marketplace.

The success of the project will be dependent on the way I navigate within the company and negotiate the politics of the office environment. The project requires both risk and caution and will be strongly reliant on communication skills. Finally, the force behind my ability to effect change will be a critical perspective on the actions of the company and the cultural context in which it operates.

Whether or not it is possible to achieve that kind of distance in the face of capitalist enterprise is a longstanding debate in the field of cultural theory.<sup>35</sup> However, for the purpose of my argument, I take the position that critical distance is in fact possible and that it is an artist's task to maintain it. In his "Whatever Happened to Postmodernism?" text, Foster puts it thus: *We can, however, make value judgments that, in Nietzschean terms, are not only reactive but active-and, in non-Nietzschean terms, not only distinctive but useful.*<sup>36</sup>

I turn to Foster and his ethnographer paradigm to frame the idea of critical

distance in the artist as employee practice. The key distinction between this practice and the ethnographer model is the character of the “other” that is being engaged. In the case of the artist as ethnographer, activist art is put in service of marginalized social communities. Therefore distance is needed to prevent the further marginalization of the subject by the artist’s overidentification. However, when the “other” is industry, marginalization does not enter the discussion. But the likelihood of losing perspective or becoming absorbed by corporate culture is no less of a threat. As I attempt to negotiate this role, I will rely on the studio practice to serve as a critical outpost and an incubator of new ideas.

Here I end my excerpt of the *Artist as Employee*. SPONGE was my response as an artist to the questions and challenges raised above. MIT was the project’s primary physical, institutional, and discursive site, taking the place of the theoretical corporation discussed above. SPONGE foregrounded the kind of acquisition and dissemination of new knowledge that my previous projects also demonstrate, but this time I was at a premier research institution also known as a formal and infor-

mal pioneer of hands-on learning (with its Independent Activities Period, its Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program, and hacker ethos) not to mention its students for whom learning is a genuine passion. In other words, MIT was a natural place to reflect on, theorize, consolidate, and experiment with the results of years’ worth of “spongy” practice.

## ENDNOTES

1. The Independent Activities Period takes place during the month of January at MIT. During that “winter term” students, staff and faculty may offer classes in almost any subject imaginable. Those affiliated with the Institute may take classes for credit in subjects like special relativity or participate in non-credit activities like salsa dancing, financial planning or SPONGE.
2. Carding is the process by which wool is combed so that all of the fibers are running in the same direction. After sheep are sheared and the wool is cleaned, the fibers are carded so that they may be felted or spun into yarn.
3. Fulling is the second phase of the felting process. Once the fabric has been made into felt, it must be fulling to achieve strength. A common fulling method is to roll the fabric repeatedly, which causes the fibers to twist and lock further and results in shrinkage and increased density. The fulling process may also involve pounding or trampling.
4. The artwork, *Designtex, Climatex® Lifecycle™*, 2001, was completed when I worked in the marketing department of Designtex, a textile company that developed the first 100% biodegradable commercial upholstery. Struck by the artfulness of the company’s project, I decided to reframe it for presentation in an art context to challenge received notions about the corporate. A compost bin/display unit showed the fabric at every stage of its lifecycle, from wool to yarn to woven goods to edge trimmings to felt. Inside the compost compartment, redworms turned the fabric back into soil. Information sheets that told the Climatex Lifecycle story were made available to viewers, along with my business cards. The piece moved fluidly between art institutions and the company showroom. The information sheets that I designed for the project became official company marketing materials. When the company hosted a film screening at the Guggenheim about their environmental, the *Designtex, Climatex® Lifecycle™* project was exhibited there for the evening. (It should be noted that Designtex, the company celebrated by the work, is now a major distributor of wallcovering made from vinyl, a highly toxic material that is known to be the most insidious type of plastic.) For more information about related projects, I refer the reader to: <http://www.hopeginsburg.com>.
5. Beuys, Joseph and Kuoni, Carin. *Joseph Beuys in America: Energy Plan for the Western Man*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990.
6. Bohm, David. *On Creativity*. New York: Routledge Classics, 1996. 105-106.
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11. Ibid., 296.
12. Kwon, Miwon. *One Place After*



*Another, Site Specific Art and Locational Identity.* 26.

13. Ibid., 24.

14. Bishop, Claire. "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents." *Artforum* February 2006. 179.

15. Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents." 179.

16. Kwon Miwon. *One Place After Another, Site Specific Art and Locational Identity.* 24.

17. This language also appears in my paper "The Artist as Employee" which is included in its entirety at the end of this thesis.

18. Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents." 181.

19. Burger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

20. Funcke, Bettina. "Displaced Struggles." *Artforum* March 2007. 284.

Ranciere, Jacques. "The Emancipated Spectator." *Artforum* March 2007. 271.

22. Ibid., 280.

23. Ibid., 278-279.

24. Ibid., 269.

25. Kant, Immanuel. "What is Enlightenment?" *Berlinische Monatsschrift.* December 1784. Reprinted in Foucault, Michel. *The Politics of Truth.* Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007. 7.

26. Ibid., 19.

27. Foster, Hal. *The Return of the Real.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996, 203.

28. Bishop, Claire. "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents." *Artforum* February 2006, 180.

29. See endnote number 4 for a description of the artwork, *Designtex, Climatex® Lifecycle™*, 2001.

30. For more information about related projects, I refer the reader to:

<http://www.hopeginsburg.com>.

31. I attribute the origins of the title *The Artist as Employee* to Walter Benjamin, Hal Foster and Helen Molesworth, who in *Work Ethic*, her 2003 exhibition and catalog about artistic labor, divided the artwork into four categories: Artist as Manager, Artist as Manager and Worker, Artist as Experience Maker and The Artist Tries not to Work.

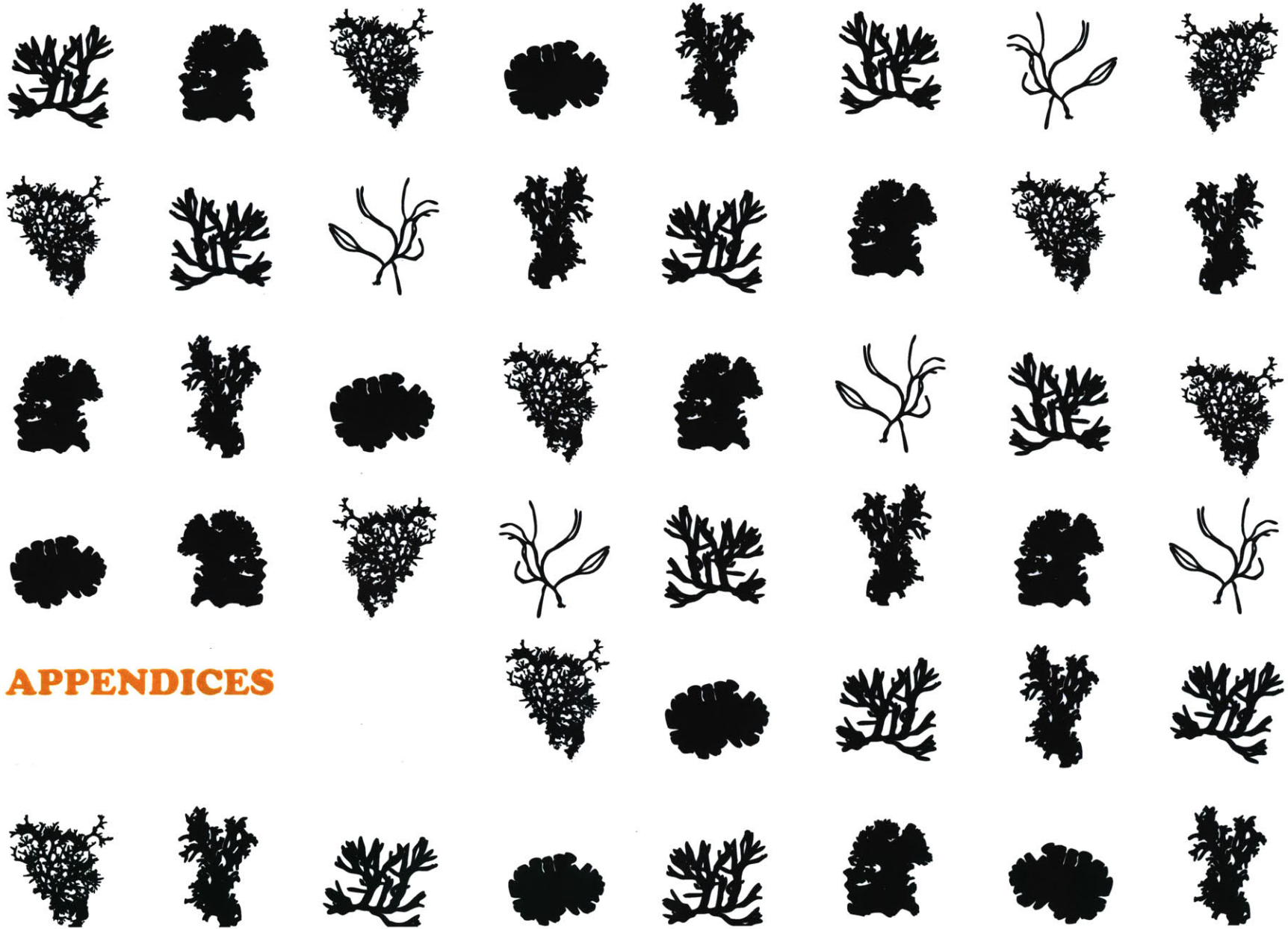
32. Benjamin, Walter. "The Author as Producer." *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader.* Ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt. New York: Urizen Books, 1978. 257.

33. Hawken, Paul. *The Ecology of Commerce.* New York: HarperCollins, 1994. 3.

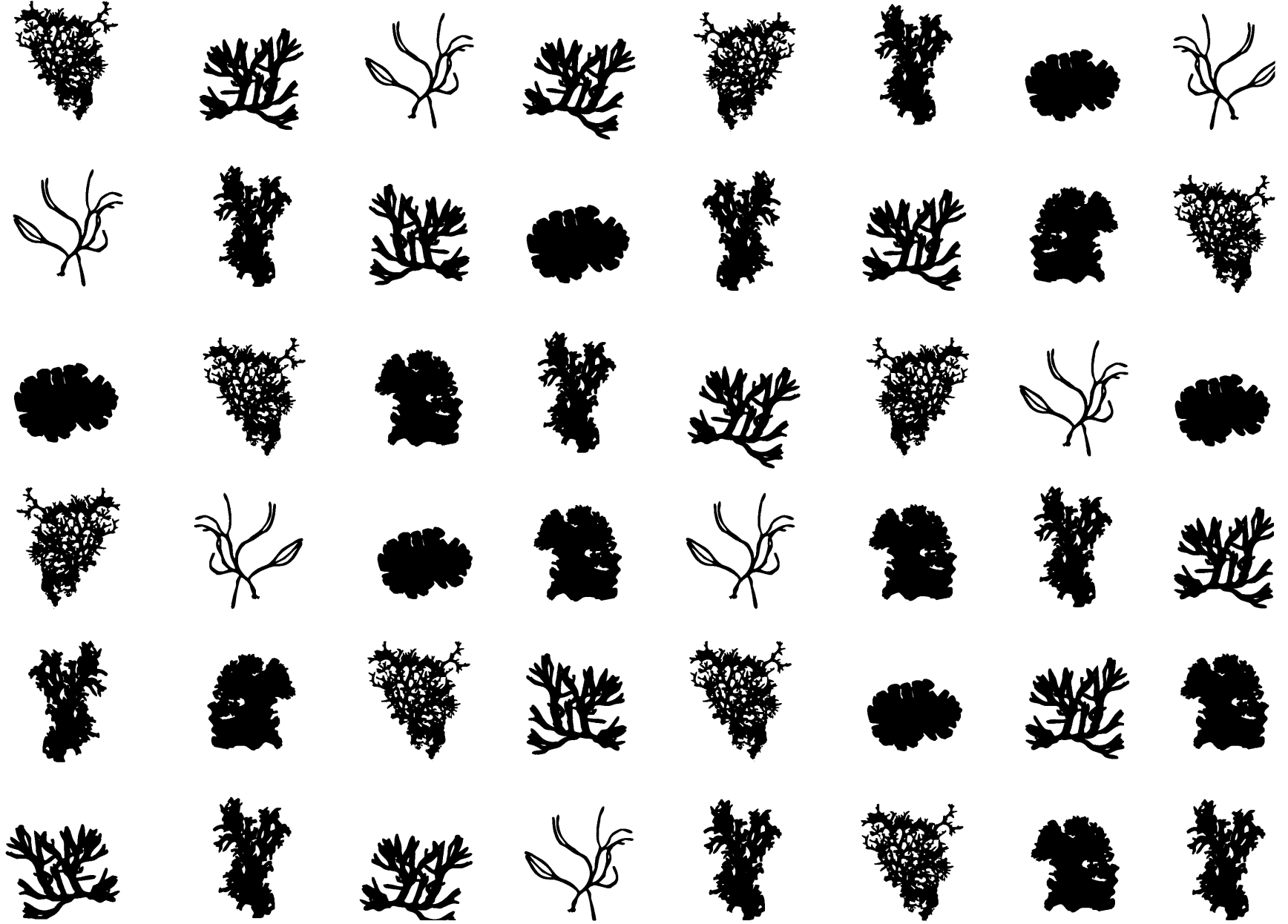
34. Ibid., 9.

35. Foster's "Whatever Happened to Postmodernism" essay in *The Return of the Real*, offers several good leads for exploring the issue further.

36. Foster, Hal. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996, 226.



**APPENDICES**





## APPENDICES

### SPONGE: CPW

*A Salty, Sour, Bitter and Sweet Workshop*

SPONGE is an experience in total immersion. In one absorb-a-thon afternoon, you will make a cast of your tongue, design an ice-cream flavor, have an ice-cream-making lesson and tasting at Toscanini's, screen one sugary film, and leave with 5 treatises on taste.

#### Schedule:

- 2:00: Welcome & snacks. Discuss ice cream flavor.
- 2:30: Alginate mold-making demonstration. Tongue casting. Screening of *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*
- 3:30: Ice-cream-making lesson and ice cream tasting at Toscanini's.

#### Bibliography:

Ackerman, Diane. *A Natural History of the Senses\**

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Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*

Rancatore, Gus and Epstein, Helen. "Ice Cream Man: 25 Years at Toscanini's" Rob-

bins, David. *The Ice Cream Social.*

\*For full citations, please see the SPONGE: CPW Bibliography in the appendix of this document.

#### Film:

*Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*

The second SPONGE workshop was produced on April 14th, 2007 for Campus Preview Weekend at MIT. The goal of the SPONGE was to expose incoming freshmen to the Visual Arts Program. In two and a half hours, the students worked alongside a video projection, learned to make a wax cast from an alginate mold, and participated in a project off campus.

Seven high school seniors who have been accepted to MIT attended the workshop. The students came from all over the US and each was interested in participating in the arts at MIT. The workshop began with a conversation in which the students described past art projects. Their works were as varied as the building of computer hardware, installations dealing with feminism and the body, photography, and 2D digital design. *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* played in the back-

ground and the group snacked on salty, sour, bitter and sweet food: olives, Sour Patch Kids, bittersweet chocolate and marshmallows

The first part of the workshop was conducted by VAP technical instructor Charles Mathis. The students mixed alginate, a material used for making dental molds, in small buckets. The alginate was then poured quickly into a small plastic cup, and the students put their tongues into the pink paste. After the molds set, they were filled with melted wax. A popsicle stick was dropped into the wax to form a spoon-handle when the tongues hardened. Once each of the students had their very own tongue-spoon, the group set off to Toscanini's [ftnt] for an ice-cream-making lesson with proprietor Gus Rancatore.

Gus started his lesson with a discussion of how the SPONGE metaphor of immersion and absorption related to ice cream making. He chose tiramisu ice cream for the demonstration because absorption is a key part of making the flavor. Ladyfingers are saturated with rum, cocoa, espresso and mascarpone cheese. The students were

able to take an active role in the making of the flavor. They grated chocolate, separated the ladyfingers, and scooped the mascarpone, all while listening to Gus expound on the loftier elements of ice cream making.

After the students' job was done, they were set loose behind the counter for an ice cream feeding frenzy. They used their tongue-spoons to scoop as much ice cream as they wanted (of whatever flavors they chose) into paper cups. Customers looked on with envy as we had our very own *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* experience. And the tongue-spoons were as effective as they were grotesque.

At the end of the workshop, each of the students received a CPW SPONGE Reader to provide as much background knowledge for their experience as possible. The Reader, comprised of five treatises on taste, included selections from *Gray's Anatomy* and Immanuel Kant, and a biography of Toscanini's owner Gus Ranca-tore. Students left with a unique spoon sculpture, a pile of literature and a full stomach. They gained a tangible knowledge of wax casting and a larger sense of

how art can leave the school and studio to engage the world around it.





Introduction and snacks in the SPONGE Classroom. Film projection.



Technical instructor Charles Mathis mixes alginate for tongue casting.



Casting.

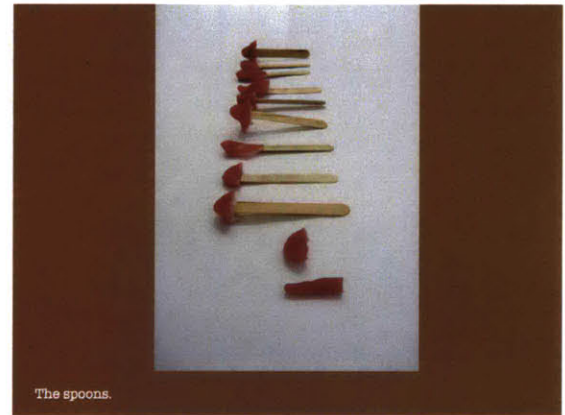




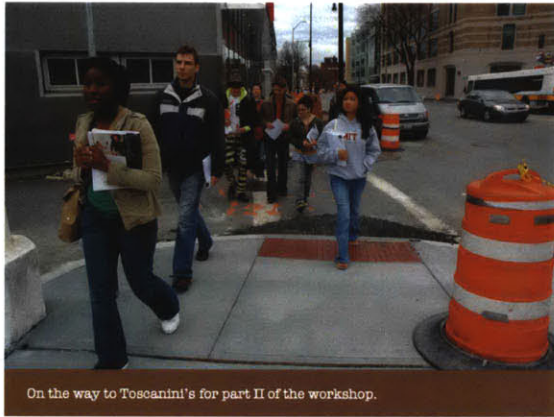
Wax cooling in a tongue mold.



Four "prefrosh" with with casts of their tongues. Soon to be used as spoons.



The spoons.



On the way to Toscanini's for part II of the workshop.



Tosci's proprietor Gus Rancatore in the window.



Gus teaches us why ice cream is SPONGY.



Adding mascarpone cheese to make tiramisu ice cream. A spongy flavor.



Lady fingers for the tiramisu.



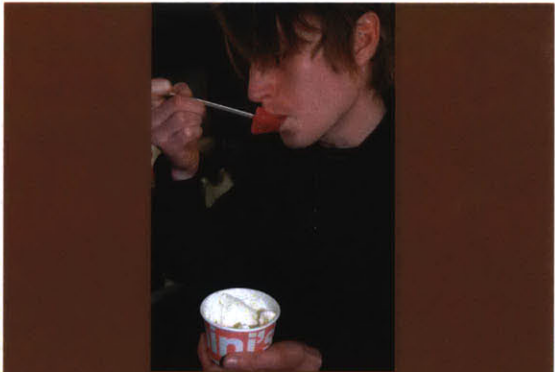
The ice-cream maker.



Let loose behind the counter. An ice cream feeding frenzy.



Scooping.



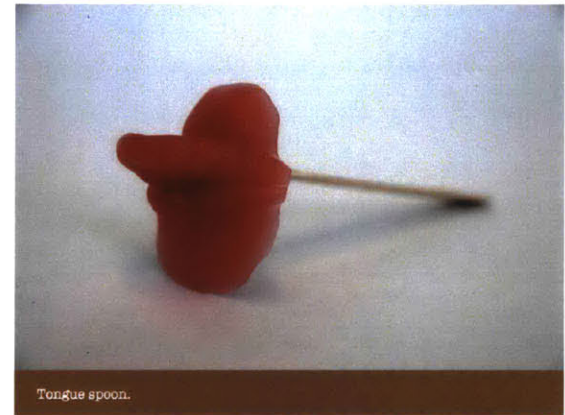
Tasting.



Prefrosh heaven.



SPONGE water.



Tongue spoon.



# SPONGE

IAP 2007

**SPONGE is an experience in total immersion. During each of the four absorb-a-thon days one theme will be investigated in depth. The workshop will string together reef ecology, Mongolian craft, art & industry, and the notion of utopia. You will see four films (maybe 5), go on two field trips (one to an aquarium and one to a museum), make a pair of wool felt shoes and read at least one manifesto. In keeping with the model of sponge reproduction, you will leave the workshop prepared to lead a SPONGE of your own.**

Tuesday January 16th-Friday January 19th  
10AM-5PM  
N52-319

Contact: Hope Ginsburg  
Email: [ginsburg@mit.edu](mailto:ginsburg@mit.edu)

Enrollment limited to 10.  
Advanced signup required.  
Participants required to attend all sessions.

Sponsored by MIT Visual Arts Program in the Department of Architecture



MIT Visual Arts Program

Funded (in part) by a Director's Grant from the Council for the Arts at MIT 





MIT Visual Arts Program  
Campus Preview Weekend  
Saturday April 14th  
2PM-4:30PM  
Meet at N52-318, 3rd floor of the MIT Museum Building

Contact: Hope Ginsburg; ginsburg@mit.edu.  
Please e-mail to sign up in advance.  
Enrollment limited to 15.  
Participants requested to attend entire session.

A Salty, Sour, Bitter, and Sweet Workshop

# SPONGE

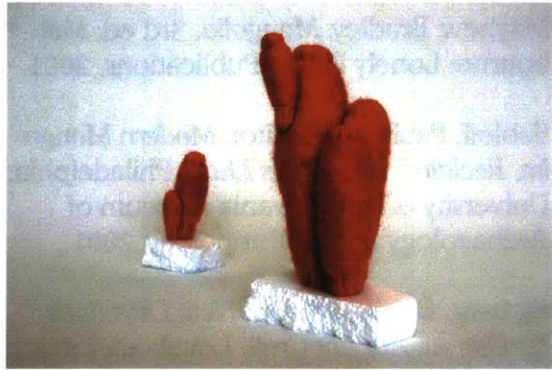
**SPONGE is an experience in total immersion. In one absorb-a-thon afternoon, you will make a cast of your tongue, design an ice-cream flavor, have an ice-cream-making lesson at Toscanini's, taste ice cream with a homemade spoon, screen one delectable film, and leave with 5 treatises on taste.**



Sponsored by MIT Visual Arts Program in the Department of Architecture.  
Funded (in part) by a Director's Grant from the Council for the Arts at MIT







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April 14th, 2007**

### **Day 4: Utopia**

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