

THE BUNFOLDER

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Sheryl Oring sets up her "I Wish to Say" office on the Belmont University campus in Nashville, Oct. 2008. Photo by Dhanraj Emanuel

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Capturing the Quotidian: Book Artists Explore New Tools – Performance, Travel and Story Collecting – to Reveal a Community’s Character

By Miriam Schaar

Hillary Clinton popularized the maxim that it takes a village to raise a child. Sometimes it also takes a village to make a book. At least that’s how several adventurous female book artists see it. The artists crisscrossed nations, their own and others, to collect stories they published in lively, idiosyncratic books. They also became characters in their own scenarios, assuming personas that turned their research into a kind of traveling performance art.

Foremost among them are San Diego-based Sheryl Oring, who often posed as a public secretary; faux Girl Scouts Jennie Hinchcliff and Carolee Gilligan Wheeler, a.k.a. the Pod Post Press; and Annabel Other, self-anointed Head Librarian of The Bristol Art Library (TBAL) in the United Kingdom.

We’ll look at their work below, noting first that the book arts world has long attracted artists who collect stories for broader audiences, like the pioneering folklorists who crisscrossed Appalachia in search of old songs. In the Seventies, for example, artists like Alison Knowles, associated with the Fluxus Movement, and Yoko Ono helped make performance art as well as artist books more familiar to today’s artists.

More recently, Margot Lovejoy solicited readers’ secrets on her website (www.confess-it.com), and used their confessions for artist books and installations. In New York City, Warren Lehrer and Judith Sloane composed *Crossing the Boulevard* (W.W. Norton), a book plus CD that celebrates the stories of immigrants in Queens, where both live and work. Lehrer and Sloane also perform many of the book’s dramatic stories in a theatrical staging.

Tiffany Ludwig and Renee Piechocki, known as Two Girls Working (www.twogirlsworking.com), asked women, “What do you wear that makes you feel powerful?” Their answers appear in *Trappings, Stories of Women, Power and Clothing* (Rutgers University Press), a handsome book that makes clothing the vehicle for exploring issues of class, sexuality, and race.

Sheryl Oring, Jennie Hinchcliff, Carolee Gilligan Wheeler, and Annabel Other uniquely embody this confluence of bookmaking, performance, travel, collecting and community. Each embarked on a long-running, long-distance performance, engaging audiences of hundreds or thousands

a few at a time. For years they adopted the personas of a secretary, a pair of Girl Scouts, and a librarian, complete with costumes and props. Staying in character throughout their wanderings, they projected the voices of private individuals into the public sphere, collecting communal stories from behind the scenes or as front-and-center facilitators channeling the wisdom and wishes of otherwise silent citizens.

Sheryl Oring – Secretary to the Unvoiced



Sheryl Oring sets up her I Wish to Say office on the Belmont University campus in Nashville, Oct. 2008. Photo: Dhanraj Emanuel.

Sheryl Oring began her interactive *I Wish To Say* series in 2004 as a response to the Bush administration; junior’s, that is. A journalist who had worked for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *International Herald Tribune* and *The New York Times*, Oring wanted to give a voice to ordinary citizens she felt mainstream media overlooked.

She set up a “portable public office,” complete with a 1950s turquoise Royal Quiet De Lux manual typewriter, and traveled the country asking people how they would answer the question, “If I were the President, what would you wish to say to me?” Inspired by memories of a secretarial grandmother, she dressed in hot pink, bright yellow or robin’s-egg blue dresses from the Fifties. She was always perfectly manicured, and often accessorized by fabulous sunglasses and a feather boa. The effect was a persona that was part Marlo Thomas’ *That Girl* and part Dora, the public letter writer in Walter Salles’ *Central Station*.

Oring conducted her first session in Oakland, California, with support from The First Amendment Project. People lined up around the block, waiting their turn. Afterward, she crisscrossed the country, setting up her desk, among other venues, in a laundromat in Tuba City, Arizona; a park along Los Angeles’ Skid Row; on the Las Vegas Strip; in public squares and college campuses; and at several locations

in Boston and New York City during 2004's Democratic and Republican presidential conventions. During the latter, the late Peter Jennings, then anchor of ABC's *World News Tonight*, named Oring a Person of the Week, focusing a rare national spotlight on an artist book project. The clip is available on YouTube at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbF1IVfLCII>>.

Sheryl Oring on ABC World News Tonight

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Oring typed more than 1,000 postcards bearing such comments as “Dear Mr. President... We need help. You help people in Iraq when they need it. Over here, we’ve needed help ever since I can remember and we’re not getting help.” And: “It’s really hard to find a job on the reservation. You can work at the grocery store or at the pizza place. But it’s hard to find a professional, career-oriented job.” And: “Please stop saying things you can’t back up.” And much more.



Sheryl Oring takes a letter in lower Manhattan, 2004. Photo: Brian Palmer.

She stamped the cards “Urgent,” had her correspondents sign them, snapped their pictures, and sent the originals to the White House. She retained carbons for a booklet, exhibitions, archiving, and her website <http://iwishtosay.org/index.php>>.

Oring kept her own political feelings out of the project. She was surprised by how widely people’s pleas varied and how little they seemed to comport with stereotypes about political attitudes attached to locations. She was also surprised by how accepted her persona was. “I’m still amazed how people seek me out, when in my outfit,” she said. “It’s a completely different experience from journalism, where you are often met with resistance when trying to get someone’s opinion.”



Sheryl Oring channels a youthful voice in Houston, 2006. Photo: Dhanraj Emanuel.

In 2006, Oring launched *I Wish To Say: The Birthday Project*, inviting people to send 60th birthday wishes to then President Bush. As in the first project, the dictated cards expressed all sides of the political spectrum. Oring, as usual, was careful to not interject her thoughts. As before, she often found herself surprised and moved by the emotions she encountered. One woman said, “So disappointed in the way you’ve handled the Iraq war situation. What were you thinking?” Said another, “Happy birthday. I would rather my president lies about sex than war.” Said a couple, “Quit spending so much money. And make the tax cuts permanent... We’re 100% with you on the war on terror.”

Again, Oring hit the road. She conducted an 11,000-mile cross-country trek to parks and flea markets in Brooklyn, Indianapolis, Raleigh, Tampa, Houston, Des Moines, Albuquerque, and Yosemite, among other locales, with funding from Creative Capital, the Puffin Foundation, and the New York Foundation for the Arts, among other sources.



I Wish to Say: The Birthday Project, Sheryl Oring's limited edition of eight artist book based on her 2006 tour. Photo: Dhanraj Emanuel.



Early editions of I Wish to Say. Photo: Dhanraj Emanuel.

The result, *I Wish to Say (The Birthday Project)*, was a full-color, 140-page book published by Quack! Media Press in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Packed with photographs by Dhanraj Emanuel, the book is a delightful exercise in cross-cultural empowerment.

Oring revisited the project in 2008, the year Barack Obama faced off against John McCain. She mounted 20 exhibitions around the country, and made herself available for visitors to write cards to both candidates. She was surprised by the intensity of criticism of the Gulf wars, and by the amount of optimism about the possibility of change. Results were sent to both parties.

Oring feels her work, always collaborative, is a natural outgrowth of her journalism. Currently working on a project called *Creative Fix* with the New Children's Museum in San Diego, she has been asking artists, musicians, architects and students to describe how they would fix the country, if they could.

Pod Post Press, Making Every Day a Good Mail Day

Jennie Hinchcliff and Carolee Gilligan Wheeler, The Pod Post Press (www.podpodpost.com), are on a mission. In our email-besotted world, they want to rehabilitate the art of letter writing. Through traditional letters and mail art, Hinchcliff and Wheeler are finding worldwide communities through the U.S. postal service.



Carolee Wheeler (left) and Jennie Hinchcliff, aka the Pod Post Press.

Wheeler is a conservation technician at Stanford University Libraries who teaches at the San Francisco Center for the Book, and conducts collaborative projects with other artists. Hinchcliff teaches book arts at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, and works on independent book arts projects under the banner of *Red Letter Day*, the name of a quarterly she publishes and edits. They met in 2006 at the annual Bay Area Book Arts Jam in Los Altos Hills. Immediately drawn to each other's ideas, they decided to work together as the Pod Post Press.

The Press soon consumed the bulk of their artistic practice, which they largely attribute to the positive reinforcement of working as a team. They sometimes lament the lack of reward for and acknowledgment of the skills they have mastered to bind books, edit and publish zines, and print in letterpress. But both agree the feedback from their mailed out project is especially gratifying and keeps the Press moving forward.

Presentation makes the Pod Post unique. Hinchcliff and Wheeler travel frequently to zine fests and book jamborees, encouraging the use of everyday materials to make art. They also created a system of "permissions," entitling anyone to make art. Using the merit badges offered by the Girl and Boy Scout organizations as a model, they designed their own series of 18 merit badges (available on their website) honoring those