

LOVE & LONGING

A multi-media [exhibition](#) and curated video sampler

Root Division, San Francisco

November 8 – December 2, 2017

Curated by Mel Day

(700 word-sample from 1500 word essay)

*“Now that my ladder’s gone,
I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.”*
—W. B. Yeats

Love & Longing shares descents into the unknown, artistic responses that perpetuate their own kind of fulfillment—“when the dark becomes another kind of lover” (John Tarrant). Through trying circumstances and a range of socio-political contexts, the works in *Love & Longing* share a sensibility fraught with loss. They offer reactions layered over time.

For this show, I include works that chip—or pound—away at the wall separating art and life. They challenge, complicate, intensify, confront, and grapple with deepening engagement and connection. Sometimes they demonstrate radical empathy. The artists expose a multiplicity of entanglements, occurring over long periods of time, projects with sustained inquiry.

The works in *Love & Longing* include series, excerpts from larger bodies of related work, or ‘nested’ pieces (works within works; multi-faceted collaborative works). The exhibition draws on a wide range of media—drawing, performance, painting, participatory projects, sound, installation, video, textiles—and conceptual strategies, from the unflinchingly serious to the deadpan, from one-on-one to larger, public encounters.

I’ve curated the works for *Love & Longing* as an extension of my research into the unknown, inner parts of ourselves. I consider the selected works to perform—rather than represent—an ever-present, enduring love and longing, a searching for real connections over time. I was initially inspired to curate this show after seeing, first, the late San Francisco painter **Mark Stocks’** (1951-2014) visual and collaborative birthday gifts to SF-based painter and framer **Gary Janis**, and, shortly afterwards, EfrenAve’s collaboration with his father. An earlier interaction with work by Linda Mary Montano resonated. Combined, these experiences led me to develop my initial proposal.

Stocks’ gifts to Janis spanned decades, moving me with their layers of love and longing. They show art and friendship intertwining through a visual conversation between their disparate artistic styles (photo-representational and abstract). It’s hard enough to remember someone’s birthday, let alone create a skillfully wrought, intensely symbolic, and emotionally-laden trompe l’oeil painting. Among these, Stocks faithfully rendered one of Janis’ signature bold, abstract paintings. In another, he intermingles his recurring theme of the unrequited love and longing of a butler for the woman who employs him. When I met Janis, he told me

enchanting stories of shared birthday dinners, complete with Stocks' famous magic tricks and surprise birthday paintings. Janis clearly missed his friend deeply.

While co-organizing an exhibition for the Cubberley Artist Studio Program, shortly after my encounter with the Stock/Janis works, I discovered **EfrenAve's** symbolic and ornate mango-sticker collaborations with his father, Pedro Alvarez Perez. This collaboration developed as a response to Perez' health challenges. The mango stickers merge the love and longing of a son for his father in difficult circumstances along with layered stories of seasonal workers, drawing connections between the hard labor in the mango groves and the intense work of creating these collaborations.....

A few years ago, I had an extraordinary experience with **Linda Mary Montano's** Art/Life Counseling at Stanford's Performance Studies International Conference. So I was ecstatic when Montano agreed to share her Art/Life Counseling sessions as Skype calls on selected Saturdays. These participatory, radically empathetic services would minister to exhibition visitor-participants-in-need. Unfortunately, though for her own understandable reasons, Montano can no longer perform Art/Life Counseling for this show. A wall label notes the withdrawal of the work and marks its absence. In a way, the label "performs" the loss to *Love & Longing's* viewers, and acts as a marker to the exhibition's own entanglements of love and longing. Perhaps they are my love and longing, and I invite visitors to read my thank you note to Montano, written shortly after I engaged with her work (and later published in the Journal of Performing Arts).

Another work by Montano is part of *Love & Longing*. In "Nurse! Nurse!", Montano turns ritualistic, performative ministrations towards aging, mortality, self-care, and the body. We are invited to participate in our own 'remote preparation' and consider our future, aged behavior by watching the work from the wheelchair provided. [...]

EfrenAve in collaboration with Pedro Alvarez Perez (Santa Clara)
Carissa Potter Carlson (Bay Area)
Moir Clements (1924-2015) in collaboration with Mel Day and Laurence Upton (UK)
Mark Clintberg (Canada)
Miriam Dym (Bay Area)
Jonn Herschend (Bay Area)
Chris Komater (Bay Area/Peninsula)
Kija Lucas** (Bay Area)
Linda Mary Montano (NY)
Jillian McDonald (NY/Canada)
Peggy Phelan (Stanford scholar/Performance)
Joel Daniel Phillips (Bay Area)
Dario Robleto (Texas)
Mark Stock (1951-2014) in collaboration with Gary Janis (Bay Area)
The Welcome Project (Syrian Women Refugee Enterprise Project in collaboration with I Am You)

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Art/Life Counseling with Linda Mary Montano by Mel Day
Published in the Journal of the Performing Arts: On Time
Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, Vol. 19, No. 3, June 2014

Edited by Branislav Jakovljevic & Lindsey Mantoan

I had an extraordinary experience with Linda Mary Montano's "Art / Life Counseling," a performance piece. (Yes, the same artist who tied herself to another artist for a year.) Montano had broken her hand and so was unable to perform in person. In her stead was an installation that included a large mirror and a wooden dresser in front of it with a note on top inviting viewers to call for Art/Life Counseling. Since Montano is based in New York, she required her visitor / clients to call before 4pm.

We were all busy setting up and running around to panels and performances yet I somehow arrived at the gallery space earlier than I expected on Friday. I found myself alone with the Montano's piece, staring into the mirror: without giving myself an opportunity to think it through, I took out my phone and dialed her number. Cold-call counseling—and potentially intense personal self-disclosure—seemed risky, to say the least, and yet the possibilities of such an encounter were too intriguing to pass up.

What happened next transpired over exactly 18 minutes. Montano picked up my call immediately. After an exchange of greetings, I expressed how sorry I was she had broken her hand. I asked if she had been inundated with calls and was surprised to hear that she hadn't. (We determined the time difference played a role as the gallery space typically filled up in the evenings.) She then asked me the following four questions:

1. What are the 5 most important events in your life?
2. What is your "issue?" The "thing" that keeps coming up for you (or something along those lines!)
3. When did this start? What is your earliest memory of this "thing/issue?"
4. What was your response? How did you handle it?

Then she asked me to repeat after her, word for word, her response—our peaceful pact—to this thing / issue. (Perhaps I'll reveal her response in a future blog post. For now, I'm keeping it to myself to protect its power.)

Then she sang me a song.

I sat there in the hall in Roble a combination of mesmerized, fascinated, slightly embarrassed and uncomfortable—partly because I had my phone on speaker as I had forgotten my earphones—and utterly enchanted.

I said thank you. We said goodbye.

After we'd hung up, I wandered around Roble for awhile, startled and disoriented, as if finding my sea legs. I'd felt something shift during our call. Does this sound trite? Yet I would even go so far as to call the encounter transformative. An unexpected, clarifying, restorative *soundness* settled over me.

I seek out this transformative and heightened human exchange with others in my own art / life, but it often seems beyond my grasp (a little too much to ask?), and is all too rare, in my own and others' work / lives. Human communication, let alone restorative transformation, is fraught with hurdles and gets so very, very messy.

I was astonished at how seemingly simple and powerful it was just then, with Linda. I wanted to send her a thank you note. Here it is.

[You can also read the published piece on [Linda Mary Montano's website](#).]

Mel Day (2014) Art/Life Counseling with Linda Mary Montano: Thursday 27 June to Saturday 29 June 2013 · Times variable (from 7.30 p.m. to 11.00 p.m. each night) Roble Studio 25 (performance gallery), Performance Research, 19:3, 111, DOI: [10.1080/13528165.2014.935194](https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2014.935194)

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3 of 3 Writing Samples:

V-Tape Curatorial Incubator V. 15, Toronto Canada
[WTF: Video in the Age of Sublime Uncertainty](#)
Guest Curated by Jennifer Fisher and Jim Drobnick

Remote Preparation

Mel Day

(500-word excerpt from 1500-word catalogue essay)

During the Vietnam War, the Trappist monk, poet, and social activist Thomas Merton wrote about how deep contemplative practice lays the groundwork for the seeds of change. He called this inner work *remote preparation*, “a kind of arduous and un-thanked pioneering,” which can open the mind to new thinking in the midst of uncertainty and, over the long term, guide meaningful individual and collective actions.ⁱ

Merton’s contemplative practice entailed solitude, manual labour, immersion in prayer-meditation-nature, ritualized call and response, and poetry. Over time, he began to experience ‘radical dread’ – a state of deep questioning, doubt and melancholia.ⁱⁱ To withstanding radical dread, Merton describes a practice of going beyond oneself into the unnamed potential of the present moment.ⁱⁱⁱ Such experiences reveal new ways of being-in-action that are ultimately more compassionate, open to self-correction, and intimately bound with others – and defuse confining political and spiritual classifications.^{iv} Merton himself became increasingly engaged in civil rights and anti-war efforts with Vietnamese Buddhist monk, poet, and peace activist Thích Nhất Hạnh during this time when Buddhist nuns and monks burned themselves to protest the war in acts of self-sacrifice. Ultimately,

Merton's contemplation-fueled social activism led some to believe his early death was an assassination, allegedly at hands of the CIA.^v

Given the current dark age of unfolding horror and uncertainty, Merton's practice of remote preparation is needed now more than ever. A menacing atmosphere lurks globally, along with a seemingly endless spectacle of borderline, narcissistic actors wielding the reins of power. Within this context, how might experimental video spark remote preparation to foster a deepening of impulse in Merton's sense of revolutionary exchange and visionary flow?

Video is a medium that resonates with Merton's premise for remote preparation: it can offer a performative prompt where "the 'now' [...] cuts time like a blade."^{vi} The viewer and maker are drawn together into contemplation of the unfolding present moment where one's internal uncertainties encounter the world's uncertainties, potentially discovering a new field of responses.^{vii} In Vtape's holdings lie seven diverse works that share a common thread of showing embodied process and ambiguous interpretations.^{viii} They knead the boundaries between art and life, and invite their makers and viewers to descend into the numinous unknown and participate in acts of remote preparation. [...]

ⁱ Merton, Thomas and Kathleen Deignan, *A Book of Hours*, Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2007, p. 122.

ⁱⁱ Merton, Thomas, "Chapter XV1," *Where Prayer Flourishes*, 1969 [2018], Norwich: Canterbury Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Merton, Thomas, "Foreword," in William Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing*, 1967 [2000], New York City: Fordham University Press, pp. xi-xvi. Merton uses the term "apophatic," which means to describe something (typically spiritual experience) by what it isn't—by its unknowable or ineffable qualities.

^{iv} Merton; pp. 122-23.

^v See Hugh Turley and David Martin, *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton: An Investigation*, Hyattsville, MD: McCabe Publishing, 2018, pp. 209–19.

^{vi} Merton, p. 140.

^{vii} My understanding of the value of contemplative work is influenced by conversations with Episcopalian priest Reverend Matthew Dutton Gillet, Menlo Park.

^{viii} In regard to such ambiguity, these videos function like "open works" in Umberto Eco's terminology. See *Open Work*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 44.
