

## We walk the world two by two



The route down South Elm Street. Google maps.

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In 2015, I was invited to Greensboro, North Carolina, to do a project along a section of South Elm Street. This work was part of a series commissioned by Elsewhere, a museum and artist residency set inside a former thrift store, which is also on South Elm. Elsewhere's work focuses on the idea of collection. Most artists are invited to make new installations out of the things and materials already housed within the three-storey building. I was asked to do something different - to make a new work out of the stories and people already housed in the museum's neighbourhood. This made sense to me. Although I have a robust studio practice, I rarely work directly with materials, preferring instead to investigate interactions, engage in social research and utilise familiar, often pre-fabricated structures in poetic ways.

I wound up working with approximately a five-minute walk's worth of South Elm, from the railroad tracks on one end to almost the corner of Gate City Boulevard. But five minutes can mean many things - the shift from a safe place to danger, or the chance to run into a friend. As a New Yorker, I'm trained not to notice. I walk faster than North Carolina's more neighbourly pace. Five minutes in Greensboro can easily be spent between the one step and the next, saying "hey" to the people you encounter.



Jerry Leimenstoll with his plaque, permanently installed on the outside of his home on Greensboro's South Elm Street.

My project *We walk the world two by two* is a series of four cast aluminium historic plaques that document ongoing two-person exchanges along South Elm Street. The project memorialises small moments of personal history from the everyday lives of community members. The goal is to make public otherwise unseen and unremarkable events, highlighting them as an essential element of how we develop place over time.

Greensboro is a particularly interesting place in which to engage with ideas of who makes history. Somewhat further down the road from where I worked, South Elm Street is home to the Civil Rights Museum, set inside the Woolworth's store that housed one of the first integration sit-ins in 1960. The city is rich with history and its documentation, from the transformation of the store to a museum to plaques commemorating the inventor of Vicks VapoRub or a bust of Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. marking not a site where he visited, but where he didn't. Passively aggressively, this bust's plaque suggests that if he had made it to

Greensboro rather than heading to Memphis perhaps he would not have been shot and killed.

But there's missing history too. Greensboro is an ideal place in which to examine systems of power and their impact on the creation and presentation of history. The city went through a long and detailed Truth and Reconciliation process following an outcry over the public representation of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre.<sup>1</sup> During a peaceful march against the Ku Klux Klan, five protestors were shot and killed by Klan members. When historical signage was put up to commemorate the event, the word "massacre" was considered too strong for public presentation, and ultimately eliminated: a quite literal whitewashing of the tragedy. Who gets to write history, and how that history can be either manipulated or erased, is an essential question anywhere, but one that seems publicly foundational here.



From left: the artist, Chloë Bass, Jo Leimenstoll, Jerry Leimenstoll.

'We walk the world two by two' is the third chapter of my ongoing work, *The Book of Everyday Instruction*, which explores one-on-one social interaction. Each chapter of the project focuses on its own idea of pairing, and its own central inquiry question. Chapter three's central question is, 'how do we build the story of a place through shared labour over time?'<sup>2</sup>

For this project, I interviewed subjects in pairs, allowing the relationship between the subjects, rather than between subject and interviewer, to guide the process of forming and historicising lived truths along South Elm. There's a way that two people, especially two people who know each other well, can fact check each other simply through their use of tone and gesture, not to mention their desire to restate what each remembers as 'the facts.'



Walter Jamison and Liz Seymour holding Walter's plaque inside Elsewhere, pre-installation.

With my work, I wanted to emphasize and make public the ways in which daily, unsung labour over time — as much as, or possibly more than, important, change-making moments — turn a place into what it is. The variety of interviews I conducted helped my definitions of labour to widen: from artistic collaborations (George Scheer and Stephanie Sherman), to the work of making a family (Jerry and Jo Leimenstoll), to the maintenance of a business (Mary Wells), to the emotional labour of sharing space as a city-dweller.

Interviewee Walter Jamison, for example, told me about the unwritten rules of being a young black boy in the South — where he could or could not walk, where his mother was allowed to shop or not shop. There was no moment or story of conflict that he could particularly recall yet these boundaries were real for him and affect him even as an adult. Walter's interview partner, Liz Seymour, clarified his stories by sharing the ways in which she (a white woman) and Walter (a black man) will never have the same experiences walking down the street even now.



George Scheer holding his and Stephanie Sherman's plaque inside Elsewhere, pre-installation.

While working on the project I classified my own responses to my subjects and their places as a kind of falling in love. Every time I do a project that requires social participation I find myself falling into a wonderful listening place where everyone can be someone. I was in love with each of my interviewees, at least temporarily, and I held them with care in this way. I too was held with care in turn. I joined Walter and Liz as the third (honorary) member of the Greensboro Philosophers' Club. I got to ask people about things that felt like secrets and I got to treat these secrets with honour and care. I am not by nature a joiner. I am an only child. I celebrate the particular prickly state of attention that is produced by being alone in a public space. But as a person who thrives on finding poetry in the familiar there is perhaps

nothing more intimately special than being entrusted with someone else's secrets. The best way to collect the material I love is through simple acts of being together.

In the throes of this work, my love began to extend further than my immediate subjects and collaborators. I started to look at everyone, at least for a while, as someone with a fascinating story. In my regular life as a jaded New Yorker it's hard not to view everyone and everything with a sense of scepticism and questioning. I often feel that this is the lens through which I am being regarded as well. But in the midst of a project about history something else happens. Everything comes to seem like a fascinating and essential part of how a place is made.



Mary Wells with her plaque, permanently installed on the outside of her store on Greensboro's South Elm Street.

At the end of each of my interviews I asked my pairs of participants to tell me what it would mean for them to have a plaque expressing their story embedded into their chosen building. I was delighted that the answers never included a banal expression of gratitude. Instead most participants focused on the idea of permanence. What does it mean to be on the map in this way? How does it feel to visit a record of one's own, now somewhat historicized, daily life? What does it mean if the record lasts longer than you do? Aluminium plaques are guaranteed to survive at least 50 years and Mary, my oldest interview participant, is either 73 or 74 (on the record, she couldn't remember). How will her plaque carry her daily life and work forward into the future?





A close-up of Mary Wells' plaque, permanently installed on the outside of her store.

It's only a year and a half later. Mary Wells shut down her store this week although her plaque remains. I'm not in love anymore. There are lots of ways to measure time. To call it a five-minute walk misses the point entirely. But isn't labour always something hard-earned that other people can consume in an instant?



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**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Modelled after the Truth and Reconciliation process used in South Africa, the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation process began in 1999, 20 years after the 1979 incident. For further information on the commission, including a detailed timeline of their work, visit <http://www.greensborotrc.org/> (Accessed 5 August 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Chloë Bass *The Book of Everyday Instruction* (Brooklyn, The Operating System, forthcoming).