

It is important to be aware of our changes as they happen - before they become fully integrated into our characters - so we can acknowledge that we are ever changing. I found it necessary to encapsulate this semester's communal growth within a medium other than our malleable minds. I did not want to directly translate our accumulated experiences verbatim, but rather transfer the important and most relevant aspects of our growth into an art piece that others can experience.

To incorporate all of our transitions, I interviewed each of my peers and took an anecdote from each to create 42 etchings. Along with a short quote, each print has a connected pattern of lines to represent "lifeline landscapes." For, just as you cannot see the gradual change of a mountain, we cannot accurately see our personal transformations without a distance. All 42 prints were made using only three plates, and so lines are repeated but not represented in the same manner, showing we are all similar from our experiences but never the same. Now, OS34 is connected by a series of simple lines and colors that play together: blue for trust and responsibility, red for energy and passion, and silver for illumination and reflection. Lastly, all the pages are encased within a box that is forced to flower every time it is opened, paralleling out eternal growth. The title, *The Art of Transformation*, reflects our changes as a semester transformed into an art piece but also illuminates the fact that art, in itself, is a transformation. I hope that this new level of thought will make it possible for other viewers to experience our personal changes as well, but in their own light.

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Abstract:

This essay talks about theories of personal transformations, transitions, and changes that individuals experience, while also delving into the historical and scientific outlook on memory and physical documentation. It addresses how the personal transformations and changes that myself and my peers have experienced during our time at Oxbow can be linguistically and visually represented in an artistic book. Oxbow is a semester school in Napa, California for juniors and seniors in high school that focuses on the integration of project based academics and studio arts. To start my final project, which is a 5 week intensive study on a topic of our choosing, I conducted 41 interviews of all the students here, not including myself, to try to tackle the question of, "What have been our personal transformations here and have we all experienced a personal change?". Upon trying to answer these questions, I began to do research to prove why the pair of art and writing is an effective way to transcribe an experience and withhold memories in an efficient way. As a result of the interviews, I found that every student believes they have changed in some aspect as a result of coming to Oxbow, even if they can't see it themselves just yet. As a whole, we have become more independent, open, confident, smarter and accepting people. It is important that I try to assess all of these changes and find a way to represent them visually so people from outside of Oxbow can empathize with our personal transformations and so that I can encapsulate our infinite growth as Oxbow students.

Something in my life was missing and this something wasn't being found because I didn't know that I had lost it. Maybe I had never even had it in the first place. In this mystery of my unknown absence of self, I was compelled to take on a new direction towards Oxbow. Only now, after a few months within the Oxbow bubble, has the question of why I came here arose within my mind again. What was it that was not present in my old life that I possess today?

On the first day of Oxbow, Stephen Thomas, the founding director and head of school, tells us all that, "We have just done the best thing we could do at this point in our lives, which is to step into the unknown."¹ In effect, we will all come out of this "unknown" knowing that we have gone through some transformation. This idea of the irreversible and unavoidable change that all Oxbow students report experiencing has been locked in the back of my mind since the very first day. However, the problem with a change that takes place over a period of four months is that we are incapable of seeing it ourselves because it is an ever-present yet very gradual change. It is a change that is more easily seen when reflected back on. It seems that I cannot see myself change because the present is endlessly morphing into the past, and by that point, what is left is merely a memory, and memories are easily corrupted. The thought of my memories being corrupted was something I wanted to avoid at all costs.

To solve this problem, I used the process of personal reflection and kept a journal for the first few months here at Oxbow. I thought it would help me remember all the things I have experienced for lifetimes to come. The process of journaling is something that I have done for years but only now do I notice a major flaw in my tactics: the only things I chose to write about were the events that happened and important words that were spoken; I never recorded what I was feeling or how these events affected me on a personal level. I would consider this an inadequate attempt at trying to preserve the past. However, in the process of this self-reflection, I have learned that it is impossible to preserve the past, and to keep it alive is to torture it.

My obsession to record and "save" my old life dwindled after early break, which is a mandatory free weekend that ensues our first month of Oxbow. After this, I found it to be an unnecessary pastime and I experienced a major shift in the way I viewed temporal and physical documentation to record memory. I realized that to encapsulate myself into words was, in a sense, my own prison and it was hindering my growth as an individual because I was only focusing on who I was in the past and not on who I was becoming. It was during this break that I effectively let go of my strong attachment to my past self and did I not bring it back with me to Oxbow. With this new light of *non-attachment*, I believe that I am now capable of collectively recording the transitional journeys of my Oxbow semester, OS34, successfully.

At Oxbow we all face many changes to our daily lives and routines right away - a new schedule, a new town, and new people - but these changes are just benchmarks that we experience outside of ourselves. Our physical environments may change but it is when our mental environments are changed that we experience a *full* transition. When we change on the inside we are forever changed in the way we think, the way we feel, and the way we view the world. Oxbow is one long transition into something unknown that we must embrace wholeheartedly to experience the benefits. Steve Nobel says in his book, *Personal Transitions*, "Change is like moving along from point A to B: there is no depth, merely movement. A transition involves depth, because our heart and soul are engaged" (10). In these terms, Oxbow is the perfect place to experience a transition. We become fully immersed into a new dynamic of studying that makes us want to learn outwardly but it is also at the perfect time in our lives where

¹ Thomas, Steven. (2015, May 20) *Redefining Success: changing direction mid-stream*. TEDxNapaValley. Retrieved April 12, 2016, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4pgoEK-9UgU>

our inward discoveries can be endless. For example one of our assignments was to design a personal experiment. During this experiment we conducted intensive research but the difference was that we actually enjoyed the researching process because our topics interested us. Inevitably our topics were also very personal so we ended up researching about personal growth and experienced self-discoveries along the way. At Oxbow, we are loved and accepted within a community of like-minded people that inspire and challenge us everyday which inevitably kick-starts us into experiencing major transitions from our old lives.

In every transition there is a catalyst: someone or something that pushes us to act on a change or opportunity given to us. Steve Noble says, “a catalyst is anything or anyone that lights the fuse and blows up our old life” (93). It can be a physical catalyst or purely mental but each holds some sort of motivational presence that guides our thoughts and actions. They begin to dissolve our past selves by peeling away our hardened layers and exposing our truest selves; fears and habits alike. They simultaneously present the gateway for growth because they also expose our hidden gifts and abilities. All in all, they make the invisible visible and we can then learn to embrace our full self because we can then learn to respect and appreciate even the parts of us we want to ignore.² Oxbow was the catalyst for me to start refining my methodology of recording the past. With lots of deliberation, I now think that a better way to record the past is to create a body of work that is not an encapsulation of who we are now, but rather to create a work of transformation that captures our growth as individuals.

Reading itself is a transition across the invisible bridge between the mind of a writer to the mind of a reader. However this transition is only traveled by through the means of letters on a page, which can lead to misunderstanding and confusion. Sometimes messages can and should be relayed through artistic means because there is the ability for a plethora of interpretations. Visual language can also recreate the emotional experience that the artist experienced during a transformation in a way that words can't. This is because emotions are the unspoken language that we all share and our emotions can be conjured by even the slightest gestures on a page. It is in the realm of the idea that you may not remember *what* someone said to lift your spirits when you were down but you will always remember how they made you *feel*. The same goes for personal experiences, we may forget the events that shape our journeys and we may forget the specific chronology of dates but we will certainly remember the strong emotions that were prevalent throughout. This is why art is a great way to see your personal growth, no matter how gradual, because the emotions that are provoked within the process of making the art and viewing the art are most likely the same emotions you experienced during your transformation. If you make your emotions come alive through your art, you will successfully remember how you felt during that time.

Art itself is a personal transformation. In his book *Art as Experience*, John Dewey explains that it is common knowledge that the mediums of artists undergo physical change until the desired piece is acquired, but he continues, “It is not so generally recognized that a similar transformation takes place on the side of “inner” materials, images, observations, memories and emotions. They are also progressively re-formed; they, too, must be administered.” The single act of taking personal transformations from our minds and transitioning them into art will inevitably cause the artist to experience as much change as the art itself. Sometimes even our unknown and unseen changes that we process might be illuminated when our emotions are painted on a canvas or etched into metal because the artistic process parallels the personally

² Nobel, Steve Ahnael. (2014). *Personal Transitions: Beyond the Comfortable into the Real*. Scotland: Findhorn Press.

transformative process. Art can cause further completion and refinement of the “self” because art, in all its forms, is some process of personal change.

But while Dewey talks about the consummation of experiences through art, Bill Roorbach, in his book *Writing to Wake the Soul*, argues, “Telling our stories, putting our experiences into words and poetic narrative, is more than an act of artistic expression; it can be the transformative and healing work of survival... naming our human experience is often a first step in transforming it.” He not only argues that writing down our experiences is, in itself, a transformation, but he believes it is one of the first steps. Writing our stories may be the beginning, and making them into art may be the end, but each component adds to the physical embodiment of a transformation.

However, the act of putting our own personal stories into words not only requires more thought, but also the direct articulation of what we are and what we believe. The experience of trying to put your story into words is a daunting task. Through writing, our thoughts are no longer a self-conscious landscape, but are rather translated into something a communicable and livable.³ Brian Dettmer, in *Old Books Reborn as Art*, says that, “A book is alive, always changing; a landscape.” This is perfect because as our transformations become transcribed, they are simultaneously preserved within a landscape of story. And, like a mountain, we continue to grow at an unnoticeable rate. It is because of the fact that changes are gradual that they always hit us hard when we finally realize that they have happened. Sometimes we can try to lessen our shock by writing down everything we experience along the way.

To successfully record a change or growth there can be no complete avoidance of using our malleable memories that can sometimes mistake what is real and what is imaginary. In her book *A Matter of Time*, Jessamyn West says, “The past is really almost as much a work of the imagination as the future.” What she means is that both the past and the future have no physical existence and are both left up to our minds to interpret. We imagine just as much about our lives as toddlers as when we imagine ourselves when we are older. Even though this is an extreme example, it can still be said that we can never truly remember who we were because we are always clouded by who we are now. This is due to the Interference Theory, which states that forgetting occurs because memories interfere with and disrupt one another. In other words, forgetting occurs because of interference from other memories.⁴ What we think we felt a year ago is not always accurate because of the way we feel presently. This type of memory is called “retroactive” memory because your new experience “in the now” is interfering with old experience. To avoid interference between memories we try to preserve things visually, metaphorically, and linguistically. It is also an explanation for why we feel that we cannot see our own growth, because we are only attentive to who we are now. The process of journaling causes us to be engrossed by our thoughts and emotions only in the present tense. But by visually representing and documenting growth over a period of time within an art piece, it is possible to experience our thoughts and emotions on a larger scale and value our changes before they are just a part of who we are.

Forms of documentation have been transforming throughout history as well. Starting thousands of years ago, cave paintings were a type of visual language that we can still connect with today. And until the increased use of written language, oral language and memory were considered trustworthy forms of documentation.⁵ Today, books themselves are at crisis and the

³ Epiloguedoc. (2012, May 22) *EPILOGUE: The Future of Print*. Retrieved April 10, 2016, from <https://vimeo.com/42599889>

⁴ McLeod, Saul. (2008). *Forgetting*. Retrieved April 14, 2016, from <http://www.simplypsychology.org/forgetting.html>

⁵ Cave, Roderick and Sara Ayad. (2014). *The History of the Book in 100 Books*. Buffalo, New York: Firefly Books.

death of the book is a topic of interest due to our technologically dominated world. As a parallel, it was once thought that photography would lead to the death of painting but instead only new styles of painting arose. In this same light, it is possible to make a style of book that creates more of an experience for its viewers: the artistic book. "It needs to be repeated that books are much more than merely vehicles for text. Awareness of the way a book is created, the materials of which it is made, flipping through the volume to see how it is arranged, the intended readership, the clues of the previous ownership and use, and the potential problems in its conservation" (252). Artistic books should have a unique quality that makes the viewer engage and connect with the piece so they can more accurately achieve seeing and feeling the same experience as the person who made it. In the book *Etchings and Books*, by Brian D. Cohen, Helen Whybrow says that she has, "fallen in love with the notion of a book as sculpture, as journey, as unique marriage of text and image form."⁶ It is with the combination of the art *and* writing that a dance between word and image is achieved and simultaneously the transformational process is completed. A book itself can be a work of art and I wish to make a book that includes the artistic transformations of all my peers here at Oxbow.

Driven by this desire to make a piece about our communal transformations and also by my curiosity to know how our individual paths are connected, I set out to interview all of my classmates about their personal transitions here. I asked a series of questions to try to trigger thoughts so that they could easily articulate how they think they have changed. I created a progressing dialogue by asking, "Why did you decide to come to Oxbow? How has your thought process changed? What obstacles have you faced here? Are there any choices/assignments that you have made this semester that impacted you? Do you feel like you have changed and, if so, how?" and lastly, "How do you think oxbow will continue to shape your life?"

Listening to the responses I received was a highlight of my time here at Oxbow. The insightful answers, the confidence, the immeasurable happiness and the concise understanding of self was so strong in *every* individual. From the interviews, I was beginning to see the changes in my peers and my appreciation for knowing and living with them grew ten fold. As I had hoped, the insights I gathered helped me to see my own growth as an individual as well because we are all reflective of one another. It is because of the infinite connections we all have to one another that many of the responses directly paralleled to my specific project.

Sarah Marlin, a classmate of mine, commented on something that I personally struggled with. She said, "*Part of me wants to remember every single moment here so that my time really never ends, but part of me just wants to... let it just happen. I will still be a changed person when I leave here but I want to remember how this has changed me and help me grow.*" The internal debate to let a memory be a memory is so tempting, but I think that right here and right now is an essential time to document our growth. In the way that saving specific moments may cloud our mind of present changes, I believe that to visually represent our collective *growth* will not stunt it or damage it in any way but rather illuminate it further.

Bob Vieira had a wonderful comment about how through the process of verbalizing and sharing our thoughts, we are transformed more than if we were to keep it all in our heads. She said, "*Writing it down and actually thinking about it is such a different experience... I think that you kind of find yourself.*" She shows us through any artistic means, we can continue to find ourselves and we can flourish within our never-ending transformational journeys.

And, I did not even utter the word "transformation" when another student, Sendra Uebele, nonetheless commented, "*You change when you come here and we transform into new*

⁶ Cohen, Brian D. (2001) *Etchings and Books*. Westminster Station, Vermont: Bridge Press.

people.” She continued, “*Those first impressions that I put out to people, that was already a whole new person.*” She had already changed upon our very first days of arrival and more importantly had recognized that she had already changed. She helps prove that we change everyday little by little but sometimes our changes are so big that we notice them right away.

Another student, Abby Levy, said that our experiences here have “*been so transformative that I think the pattern it sets is going to be really helpful for leaving Oxbow and continuing to examine myself.*” She was able to acknowledge that her personal transition here at Oxbow changed her from the inside out. She saw that Oxbow sets a permanent pattern down within our lifestyles that will likely never be broken.

However, it was Trinity Aragon’s eloquent words that resonated with me the most. She said, “*We are the final project... The change that we each feel and the set of experiences inclusively, that’s the final project.*” This is the reason that I am so personally connected to my final project. We are one in the same. With the way I have set up my final project, the art that I make will be a representation of the emotions and experiences that I have had here at Oxbow. She helped me discover that what was missing from my life was a final project and for me to start the project of my life. What I have now that I didn’t have before is the mindset, the people, the skills, the connections, the resources and the tools to accurately start building my own life.

I believe that the artistic book I am making will serve as a reminder that we never stop changing and that we should learn to recognize our transformations before they become an unnoticeable part of who we are. The only question I have left is, ‘*How have I changed?*’ I know I have changed but maybe this is only because I was told that I would. Part of me thinks that change is an illusion and that we never really change but rather we discover something about us that we didn’t see before. Maybe all the changes that we experience are within us the whole time and all it takes is a change of pace to access these unknown parts of ourselves. Nonetheless, Oxbow has definitely illuminated something within me that I will continue to explore as I finish my project and as I start to build a new life after leaving this beautiful home.

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