Kristine Thompson with Jeanne Dunning

This is an excerpt from a longer email conversation, which started in August 2007.
Jeanne Dunning was one of my undergraduate teachers in Chicago, almost 10 years ago.

Kristine: What made you begin to use photography over other mediums?

Jeanne: My background is in sculpture although, like many artists of my generation, it was conceptual art that probably most shaped me. Sculpture used to be the catch-all category for anything that didn't fit somewhere else - there was a time when young artists interested in conceptual art or video or performance ended up in sculpture departments. When I first started showing in 1986 I was showing sculptural works. I thought of myself as a sculptor or an installation artist, but I also thought (and still think) that it makes sense to use whatever medium seems like it'll be most effective at getting at whatever you want to get at. I first used photography about a year later when I had an idea that I felt I could best get at photographically.

I ended up doing a few more projects that were photographically based although I continued to think of myself as a sculptor for quite a few years. I took me a while to realize that I was probably going to stick with photography, although I never did begin to think of myself as a photographer. I think I'll always feel uncomfortable when people call me a photographer, which of course they do all the time. I don't really come out of that history or tradition and I definitely don't have the skill set. My photographs are pretty terrible by most of the criteria that people usually use to judge photography.

But one of the reasons that I did keep using photography early on is that I realized that it was solving certain problems that I kept running up against with the sculptural works. With the sculptures, so often the first thing that somebody would ask me was how did you make it? Sculpture is tied up with materiality in a way that is totally different than photographs. It is connected by a direct line with ancient traditions that understand works of art as material transformation - I take a block of marble and transform it into a woman; I take paint and canvas a transform it into a curtain and grapes. At its worst, when approached this way art becomes a kind of alchemical trick on the part of the artist. This focus on the transformation of materials, which a sculptural form just seemed to encourage, wasn't really helping me much because the things that I was trying to get at through the work I was making had less to do with process and more to do with the imagery itself. A side effect of these early photographic projects was that I found that with photography people's attention immediately went to what was in the picture instead of how it was made. They took the process for granted. Which happened to work better for what I was interested in.

Kristine: I relate to your thoughts about sculpture quite a bit. I think I am still trying to find some kind of balance between working photographically and working in a more tactile way.

My interest in sculpture really started with work that I made in an undergraduate "Art Process" class that you taught. I can't remember the details of the assignment, but I started taking bar soap from people's homes for a month and eventually displayed all of them together on a shelf….I was thinking about how objects could function as a kind of portrait of someone--about the soap being an index of a person that was different than a photographic portrait or index. It seemed more intimate and more performative. I liked the idea of people going to shower the next day to find their soap missing. And I hoped that the people who saw the stolen bars of

soap might look at their own soap differently the next time they showered or washed their hands. I enjoyed touching things that other people had handled. The transformation of materials happened by other people's hands instead of mine. This interest in getting closer to people or establishing a kind of intimacy with strangers is something that, even ten years later, is a recurring subject for me.

When I started graduate school I was making sculptures and photographs, and I was feeling torn about which was a more appropriate way to work through my questions. I was carrying out these strange operations on pieces of fruit: patching/stitching up the bruises on them and swapping the insides of one piece of fruit for that of another and then stitching them up. I sat them out in bowls in my studio to see if anyone would notice how they had been altered. But I wasn't invested so much in the materiality of the fruit or notions of still-life. I was trying to perform these gestures of tenderness and supposed healing that would actually bring about harm or faster decay. I wanted the sculptures to function on more of a metaphoric level---which wasn't really happening because it always came back to the materials….At the same time, I was making photographs but feeling frustrated that they were ultimately images on pieces of paper. There seemed to be a lot of pressure in deciding what they were photographs *of*.

I've realized that merging some kind of tactile handling of objects with a photographic process is how I want to work right now. In my most recent work, I've turned photographs themselves into sculptural objects or props that I can interact with in order to make a new photo. In this case, I'm taking on the idea of photographs—their communicative potential and their limitations as a subject.

The use of props is something that I think about in relation to your photographic work too—that there is a handling or construction of various materials: food, the blob, clothing, masks, etc. Do you think about this incorporation of objects or props as a way of holding onto a sculptural element in your practice?

Jeanne: I don't really think that it's a way of holding onto a sculptural element exactly but probably there is some way in which my old history of making things out of disparate materials makes it more natural for me to make parts of the scenes I'm photographing. I'm not trying to take pictures of what's there so much as what I'm picturing or the way I'm seeing what's there, so sometimes I have to manipulate it so that other people can see my mental image.

I'm more aware of how the way I treat the photographs themselves shows a sculptural influence. I attribute a lot more significance to scale and framing than your typical photographer. I treat the work of art like an object rather than an image. Especially earlier on, I never thought of my photographic work as images *per se*, but rather as things that share a space with you and that you have a relationship with that is partly physical. I guess I sometimes have frustrations with images because they feel too distant, too mediated. It seems like artists never stop trying to move back towards that unmediated experience that we know is impossible. Still, some things seem more mediated than others. The draw of materiality and tactility is that it feels so much more direct.

Your question makes me think that in a sense my photographs could be understood as all just documentation (as opposed to documentary – there's that conceptual art influence again). Yours too. But the difference is that with my work, the manipulation of the props really is just to get the picture. With yours, the picture feels like it's an index of things that you did, and your physical and spatial relationships with those things. Your work really is more like sculpture!

I have a strong memory of your soap piece, and it's cool that it's still informing you in some way. I feel like I understand your fruit manipulations well and I also think that I would have understood them in the way that you describe if I had seen them. They don't sound to me like they would have seemed to be about fruit or about still life.

Kristine: I've been curious about when you decide to use your own body in your work and when you use other models. I was imagining your toe-sucking video with a model instead of you, and that strikes me as being a much less powerful piece. That video seems to have a strong relationship to performance-based work or endurance work where the artist's body is tested or pushed to an extreme. And given the simultaneous childlike and sexual references/reactions to one's own body that are communicated, it seems like it is necessary for it to be you in the work. But I was wondering about some of the photographic pieces--like *Leaking* or the untitled mustache portraits where you include yourself. How do you decide when to include yourself and when to photograph other people?

Jeanne: You're right, until recently pretty much all of the video work has had a relationship with that genre of endurance work. I wonder if you are right that the Toe-Sucking Video would be a weaker work if it were not me. I'm not certain it would but I don't really know. The first works I ever made where you could see people's faces were the mustache photos and when I made them it seemed really important that I include myself. I didn't want anyone to think that I was making fun of the women in the pictures or taking advantage of them in some way and a lot of decisions in that work were made in order to dissuade people from that kind of interpretation. It is so easy with photography to seem to point the finger at others, as though the photographer is above or exempt from whatever he or she is pointing towards. It seemed important to implicate myself in the questions and conflicts I was pointing towards. Maybe you didn't know that there are three works called *Leaking*, one with me in it and two with other women. So there to, I could include myself but also not have all the focus on me. In general, it would have been a lot easier to just routinely use myself in the work. But I was always trying to avoid a situation where people would look at the work and think it was all about me. I didn't want people to think that I was just talking about myself, but rather to think that I was trying to talk about things that are more widely experienced and felt, that maybe pertain to all of us, including myself. So the work is always a mixture of pictures and videos of me and of others, still including myself but trying not to signal that it should be read as only self-reflexive.

Kristine: I think the way that you articulate not wanting to make fun of the people in the work is the reason why I appreciate that you are the body in the Toe-Sucking Video. Rather than asking someone else to carry out such an awkward or vulnerable act, you perform it yourself. I think my choice of words before was wrong. It wouldn't necessarily be a weaker work if it were someone else in the video, but it would bring a different set of issues and power dynamics for you to direct someone else to perform in that way. As the video exists with your body, the visceral and psychological aspects of the gestures that you're enacting and the time that it takes for those to unfold—that can be the focus.

This question of when an artist uses her own body and when to use another person's body is something that I think about a lot. When can an artist use her own body without it being read as *merely* self-reflexive or solipsistic? When should an artist label an image where her own body appears as a self-portrait?

I think about the differences between visual artists and writers in this regard. Writers are able to write themselves into different characters as a way of including themselves but simultaneously talking about things that are more general….They can even use the "I" in ways that people still

interpret as a kind invention or character…..but once a visual artist's image is recognized, once it is known that she is using herself in her work, it is almost inevitably defined as a kind of self-portrait—in ways that I feel may be limiting. I wonder if it is possible for viewers to read the artist's body as a character in the same way as they might read a writer's character….

Jeanne: That's an interesting comparison. I often find it frustrating that people will label any work that pictures the artist as a self–portrait – it isn't always the case! But then, perhaps we'd lose something too if people looked at visual art as fiction – are we gaining something by this kind of implicit assumption that we are telling the truth or that the work is transparent that way?

Kristine: How has your use of photography or thoughts about photography changed during your career?

Jeanne: So much of my early work played off of the perceived truth-value of photography. It used to be that when you saw a photograph, you knew that it had some relationship to something that had existed – that there was something in the world that it was some sort of record of, even if it might be a biased or incomplete record. It had to be indexical. And this gave it a relationship to reality that was an important subtext of my work. A painting of a sliced nectarine that looks like female genitalia might be understood to emphasize something about how the artist sees the nectarine, whereas a photograph suggested a little more strongly something about how we all see, it seemed to implicate the viewer a little more. That's all changed with the ubiquity of Photoshop. Photographs aren't necessarily indexical any more. You no longer need there to be a thing in the world to make a photograph (and of course you also don't need a camera). I feel it's a kind of loss, to tell you the truth, a loss in what it is possible to do with photographs. They used to be able to do something that they can't really do so well any more. I suppose in some ways photographs seem less powerful as a tool to me now. I have never thought of this before, but I have been shifting more and more towards video and now I'm wondering if that could have something to do with it.

Kristine: There are such rapid changes happening with the medium of photography now, and the move away from analogue processes towards digital technologies often seems like a huge loss. I'm still struggling with questions about how photography can and should be used as a tool and artistic medium today. I think the power of photography as a tool, for me, resides in the fact that it is still a way to document an event, a place, a person, or a moment in time. While the trust we have in that document may waver due to the ubiquity of photo-manipulations, I still rely on that moment-freezing power. Perhaps all of the changes that are happening with that way we (dis)trust or think about photos now has led to my interest in looking to the way photographs have been used as documents in the past. I'm just thinking about the people I have addressed as recent subjects in my work….Hannah Wilke used the camera to bravely record the way her body was failing her as she was dying of lymphoma. Ana Mendieta documented various actions or performances in Iowa that only she and the person behind the camera experienced in person. Gordon Matta-Clark filmed and photographed the people who happened to be in the restaurant that he helped run on a given day in 1971. Bas Jan Ader photographed himself crying and falling from the roof of his house….These artists wanted a record of an event that, for various reasons, not many other people were privy to in person. The fact that photographic reproductions of these original works get circulated as documents in and of themselves interests me a great deal. Many people will never experience these actual artworks in person. Instead, they come to some kind of understanding about the artists or the work based on the photographs that are circulated in art catalogues or newspapers or online.

This allows the photographic document to retain a strange kind of power for me. Photography—be it unaltered or altered—is a form that leads to a certain kind of myth-making and historicizing that I am interested in. None of these artists I mentioned were doctoring their images in Photoshop. Any manipulation that happened was in the initial framing or staging—but even more reframing and manipulation happens in the way that their work is continually re-contextualized and re-circulated. This re-contextualization and the ways that we read photographic imagery differently over time is part of what interests me about the use of cameras and photographic documentation—even as it changes with Photoshop and digital processes.

Jeanne: Yes, but of course the artists you mention weren't using Photoshop, since it didn't exist. My questions have more to do with whether it's even possible to use photography in the way that they did any more, now that Photoshop does exist. There was a simplicity to that kind of use of photography that is always a little bit in question now. It's harder now to take a photograph at face-value, even for a moment.

One of the perpetually muddy areas in the way people think about art is how they treat documentation. This is something that drives me crazy because it seems really important to me. Hannah Wilke's photographs of herself as she was dying were intended to be viewed as the work – the photographs were the work, not the action or process they document (and how horrifying and interesting to imagine an artist calling dying of cancer a work of art…). When Gordon Matta-Clark photographed people in *Food*, he thought of the photographs as documentation. The restaurant itself and what happened in it was the work. But his cuttings into buildings are more ambiguously treated though. The alterations to the buildings themselves were clearly works of art, but what about the photographic collages that have such a big market these days? Did he make those as works or as documents or as some kind of study after the fact? To me they only really make sense as documentation but they are not treated that way. When Ana Mendieta made photographs of her own interactions with the landscape, did she think of the interactions with the landscape as the work and the photograph as documentation? I suspect yes, but am not certain. Maybe she wasn't that certain herself – I don't know that work well enough to say.

With conceptual art in general, people display the documentation as though it is the work and this always really bothers me. It's not that I think they shouldn't display it – I just don't think they should call it the work. People look at pictures of works of art all the time – including more traditional works - and think they know the work, that they've experienced it, but they haven't. The thing about works of art is that you do have to experience them in person and there's no substitute – you have to be in the same space with it and have a physical, spatial, visceral relationship with it – whether it's an object or an action. I suppose the only exception would be conceptual art in the strictest sense of the term – where the work of art really is an idea. No one would seriously go so far as to look at a photograph of a painting on the wall and think that they'd seen the painting. At least I hope they wouldn't.

Take Chris Burden's *Shoot* – to actually have been one of the handful of people who were there when he was shot would have been to experience the work. Looking at a grainy picture in a gallery of someone pointing a gun at Chris Burden is not experiencing the work. Take Dennis Oppenheim's *Reading Position for Second Degree Burn*. It seems to me that no one experienced that work but Dennis Oppenheim himself. The only access we have to it is through the pictures that document it, but that's what they are, documentation. Or Eleanor Antin's *Carving*…

The way you've been talking about your work, I'm wondering, is the work the action or the photograph? In my work, until very recently, I've been pretty clear that the work was the photograph or the video. Me sitting on the floor in my studio sucking on my toe was not a work of art. The video is the work of art. The one exception is a recent tomato fight, where the event itself was the work – so I guess I'm shifting. But I wonder how you are really thinking about your work, where you actually locate the work of art, is it the photograph or the action that the photograph documents?

Kristine: I think about my work as the photograph rather than the action that the photo documents. My recent photographs were never made with the idea that it's a performance for an audience; it's always conceived as something for the camera. But the making of each photo creates a different experience for me, which makes me think differently about my work and the questions at hand. For instance, when I made *With Ana Mendieta*, I always knew that it was staged for a camera—to exist as a photograph in the end—but the process revealed different things. For instance, laying on the floor of my studio with the photo of Ana's body laying on top of me—I suddenly became very aware of the cold hardness of the concrete floor. It made me think of Carl Andre's sculptures, and it made me think of Ana Mendieta's death. This was an unexpected outcome of what I originally envisioned. Initially, I wanted to give myself an experience in my graduate studio with a photographic reproduction of *Giving Life*, a piece that Ana Mendieta made while she was also a graduate student. I wanted to try to give myself a tactile experience with a photo in the way that she was giving herself a tactile experience with the grass and the skeleton. A lot of my work has to do with a kind of meditation on death—so in the photo that I made, I placed my body in the place where a skeleton was laying in her work. There was a certain kind of desire for historical slippage—of envisioning myself in the 1970s or envisioning Ana Mendieta still here in 2007, and what that might mean—of who was breathing life into who….And I wanted it to imply a kind of perverse sensuality between me and this woman who isn't here anymore. What was unexpected were the sensations that came in the process and the peripheral information or associations that were referenced.

Ana Mendieta is an interesting subject of your question about where artwork resides. I tend to think that she was also making work for the camera because she was so mindful of how she documented everything. She took still cameras and super-8 cameras with her to record various events. She rarely invited an audience, which makes me suspicious of the idea that the actual event was the performance in the landscape. But, in the same sense that I believe in having an experience in the moment of making work for the camera, I imagine different issues or ideas coming to the surface for her in that process too. I don't know what was revealed to her when she pressed herself up against the bark of a tree while her body was covered in mud or when she set her silhouette of flowers on fire…. What is interesting to me about this kind of work (where the location of the work is fuzzy) are the questions it raises about what an artwork can really be. My recent work is really about imagining a kind of intimate relationship with these deceased artists from the past. I'm thinking about what there is to learn from them, what kind of conversation can be initiated between what was happening in the 1970s and today.

Maybe my response to your question is a way to try to have the best of both worlds: a photograph that exists in the end for a more broad audience, but an experience that is also intensely personal and emotional in the making.... Because most of my work does include a performative element, I think the idea of where the work resides will be something for me to continually consider.

Jeanne: Everything you are saying makes sense – but, more abstractly and not necessarily in relation to your work. Don't' you think it is possible to make work that you are the only audience for? I don't think I used to think that made sense but now, having this conversation-by-e-mail with you, I find that I do. Perhaps this means yet another adjustment in what I think art is and what it should do. More and more I'm aware that one of the strange things about works of art is how few people actually do experience them. Maybe up to millions if it's a painting hanging in a major museum, maybe only hundreds if it's in someone's house, maybe only the artist if it's an event with limited duration and no one else was there. It's a strange thing that so much of the impact of works of art comes from the descriptions and documentation and mythology around the work, rather from an experience of the work itself. I mean, I never experienced Chris Burden's *Shoot* or a Gordon Matta-Clark cutting either, but they impacted me… If that's the case, why would a work of art not be able to sometimes be something that the artist experiences alone?

Kristine: I imagine a work of art can exist only for the artist. Actually, this probably happens all the time for artists whose work doesn't make out into the world as easily. But even if this is the case, I still wonder about Ana Mendieta. If the work was the performance in the landscape and just for her—then why bring the cameras at all? If she was just documenting for herself to learn something after the fact, then why show the photos or films as work? I do think those filmworks and photos get talked about as her work. I guess this goes back to the frustration you were expressing earlier about how and whether artists label something as documentation….I think there is also an issue once an artist dies about how their work is put out into the world that may not be exactly as they planned or wanted….

Kristine: You finished graduate school more than 20 years ago and have been exhibiting your work ever since. I was wondering what kinds of changes you've experienced in the art world during that time--that have affected you as an artist and as a teacher. What kinds of questions do you find yourself asking your graduate students? What kind of advice might you offer students as they finish an MFA program?

Jeanne: When I was a young artist, we complained a lot about the state of the art world – about how sales influenced what got shown and what got attention too much even though whether things sold was not always the best measure of whether people thought they were good; about the sorry state of criticism; about how unadventurous and uninformed so many curators seemed to be; etc. Sound familiar? But all this has gotten so much worse in the intervening years, it almost makes the late 80s look like some sort of golden age.

I think it's important for young artists to try to get clear with themselves about what they're trying to do with their work and what matters to them about it. And to constantly revisit this question, and to stick close to their convictions. There are compromises that are not worth it because while they may help you "succeed", the work won't mean much to you any more. And what's the point of that? It's usually really hard to make art that you think is really good, and in my experience most artists find it to be lonely and thankless, at least at times. And it's certainly not usually lucrative. So I think you've got to hang on to why it was important to you to begin with, why it mattered, and use that as a guide.

Often now young artists are so caught up in learning how to work the system. They often do seem to take the equation between sales and success at face value. But given what artists do, how would it make sense for us to all accept the same ideas about what success is and what's a great work of art? There are almost as many ideas of what great work is as there are artists. I think that part of what we're each doing as artists is making a proposal about what we think is

worthwhile as a work of art, what we think art should do and be. You have to figure out what you think about that and then try to figure out how to do it. Often it won't fit into the structure of the Art World with a capital A and a capital W. Then do it some other way.

The thing I'm always telling students as they graduate is how important it is to get involved and stay in dialogue with their peers. It seems to me that early on in their practices most artists grow in large part through a series of almost dialectical responses to what's going on around them. You need people to talk to about art and whatever else you're interested in and to see a lot of stuff and to practice showing your work, even if it's just in apartment shows or events that only your friends see. My advice to young artists is to figure out what excites you and who around you is doing it or interested in it and seek those people out and get involved.

Kristine: There does seem to be an overwhelming emphasis on success amongst artists of my generation. But it seems so different to everyone what constitutes such success….Getting picked up by a gallery right out of school? Selling your work? Having your work included in the right group exhibitions? Being written about the in the right art publications? Having your picture appear in Artforum's "Scene and Heard" blog with the right people? These seem like such arbitrary and external measures of success. Ultimately, these things have nothing to do, necessarily, with the work or the questions it may raise….It is discouraging to think that personality and celebrity is the way that the discourse or the field might be determined. But I think this search for access is what makes young artists so hungry for ways to figure out how to work the system….because that seems to be the way to put your ideas and your work on the table for others to consider. Then, of course, there is the worry about how to just exist, subsist, as an artist—how to find employment or ways to support the ability to keep making work, to keep working through the questions that you may have in a field that seems so oversaturated.

I think that your ideas about finding a group of peers who value similar things is absolutely crucial. This seems to be the primary way to not become cynical and to figure out different ways of communicating and reinventing artistic conversations and questions. I feel lucky to have been in graduate school with some people who I feel have challenged and motivated me. I hope to maintain relationships and dialogues with these peers for many years to come—and to meet other people who I can engage with in different ways.

Jeanne: I have no idea if it's true, but I would like to go on imagining that Hannah Wilke, Ana Mendieta, Gordon Matta-Clark, Bas Jan Ader, and the artists I've invoked as well, even while they may or may not have been somewhat savvy about the art world and working the system, were focused on what they were doing with the work and were letting that drive them. I believe that the best case that we can make for art these days, the best definition I can come up with, is that it's a place for things that don't have a place anywhere else, a place for to propositions that don't fit anywhere else. If artists stick to the work, they're a lot more likely to do something that matters to other people in the end.