

ENCLOSED: CERTIFIED COPY OF IMPORTANT PAPERS: an adoption process

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My piece is a visual interpretation of the legal document using a linear chronological form to present an adoption process. I focus on the application, approval, and legal processes involved in adopting a child through an agency. Using my personal account of closed adoption proceedings, I investigate the predisposed power of the legal document as well as the power of text and image to document history; to tell a story; to certify existence; to enforce/to secure/to terminate rights; to cross borders; to cross family lines/family heritage/values and tradition; to cross cultural boundaries and borders with an omniscient reach; with ultimate authority. The historic legal document is produced to bring to life a conscious decision i.e. war, peace, independence, custody, termination of rights, petitions to be heard, etc... My timeline is introduced with the words CERTIFIED COPY OF IMPORTANT PAPERS and the approximate size is 420"x5.5".

This form of visual representation is based on the poststructuralist definition of history as established through the intellectual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s.¹ I suggest that graphic or iconography based art follows the same principals as writing or the textual in historic representation as in

¹ 1. There are two meanings of the word ‘history’: (a) ‘the events of the past’ and (b) ‘telling a story about the events of the past’. Poststructuralist thought makes it clear that history is always ‘narrated’, and that therefore the first sense is untenable. The past can never be available to us in pure form, but always in the form of ‘representations’; after poststructuralism, history becomes textualized.

2. Historical periods are not unified entities. There is no single ‘history’, only discontinuous and contradictory ‘histories’. There was no single Elizabethan world-view. The idea of a uniform and harmonious culture is a myth imposed on history and propagated by the ruling classes for their own interests. [i.e. The judicial system and its legal documentation of events.]

3. Historians can no longer claim that their study of the past is detached and objective. We cannot transcend our own historical situation. The past is not something which confronts us as if it were a physical object, but is something we construct from already written texts of all kinds which we construe in line with our particular historical concerns.

4. The relations between literature and history must be rethought. There is no stable and fixed ‘history’ which can be treated as the ‘background’ against which literature can be foregrounded. All history (histories) is ‘foreground’. ‘History’ is always a matter of telling a story about the past, using other texts as our intertexts. ‘Non-literary’ texts produced by lawyers, popular writers, theologians, scientists and historians should not be treated as belonging to a different order of textuality. Literary works should not be regarded as sublime and transcendent expressions of the ‘human spirit’ but as texts among other texts. We cannot now accept that a privileged ‘inner’ world of ‘great authors’ is to be set against the background of an ‘outer’ world of ordinary history. Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson, and Peter Brooker, *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, 4th edition, (London: Prentice Hall, 1997), 188.

Jacques Derrida's characteristics of writing.² The piece references the late 1970s by using legal text and imagery of the time, elements associated with the authority of the judicial institution.³ I give the viewer an historical narrative disguised as fluid, through design techniques that emphasize consistency such as color scheme, consistency in font choice and style to delineate specific types of information such as content description.

Culture is a mixture of old and new and this idea is given visual form through montage and overlapping of images. The design created is symbolic of the present or "new" which is essentially a reshaping or reordering of the "old" historic documents. The use of established iconography, including textual based, ensures a basic level of recognition and communication of new ideas to society. This is based on the idea that all new ideas are formed from the past, or at least with a reference to them, in order to maintain communication. For example, I have used xerox copies of official government documents and typed letters of correspondence as reference of how to read the information.⁴

The documents have been manipulated and certain areas of personal importance have been enlarged to change the hierarchy. By relying on our culture's memory and preconceived notions of the legal document, I call into question its supreme authority. The power of these documents lies within our culture's dependence and respect for a "certified" or "original" document. We depend on documents to

² A written sign is a mark which can be repeated in the absence not only of the subject who emitted it in a specific context but also of a specific addressee. The written sign can break its 'real context' and can be read in a different context regardless of what its writer intended. Any chain of signs can be 'grafted' into a discourse in another context (as in a quotation). The written sign is subject to 'spacing' (espacement) in two senses: first, it is separated from other signs in a particular chain; secondly, it is separated from 'present reference' (that is, it can refer only to something not actually present in it). Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *A Reader's Guide*, Selden, 174.

³ Althusser's theory abandons the orthodox interpretation of ideology as 'false consciousness' in favour of a theory which situates ideology firmly within material institutions (political, juridical, educational, religious, and so on), and conceives ideology as a body of discursive practices which, when dominant, sustain individuals in their places as 'subjects' (subjects them). Louis Althusser, in *A Reader's Guide*, Selden, 189.

⁴ People recognize a particular piece of philosophy or scientific theory as 'true' only if it fits the descriptions of truth laid down by the intellectual or political authorities of the day, by the members of the ruling elite, or by the prevailing ideologues of knowledge. Selden, *A Reader's Guide*, 185.

verify our realities, to secure our rights; to provide for our well being, they are the structure upon which our pursuit for happiness is established and our respect and dependence on them is our security in that what is written/documented/certified will prevail.

By eliminating my own voice and that of any other than what the documents provided, I amplified the missing perspectives, revealing the historical narrative as incomplete. The dehumanizing and intended “objective” view was flawed. For this reason my piece ends by folding in upon itself with the dictionary definition of the word *authentic*. In this way, after post-structuralism and feminist theory, I question legislative doctrine and its authority to dictate or narrate human history.