Billboards are ubiquitous in New York City. The newest form of the billboard, one that reflects the screen culture of the twenty-first century, is the digital billboard: a constantly evolving series of images, graphics, and animations that pulse rhythmically with consumer possibility. On a summer afternoon in Times Square 2006, an interesting rupture disturbed the flow of typical images selling perfumes, deodorants, shoes, and other luxury goods. Sandwiched in between images of impossibly beautiful models and shimmering lip gloss, pedestrians were confronted with a video of a man talking about organizing migrant farm workers. Small groups of people gathered to watch and listen as a man standing in front of a set of microphones solemnly described the importance of personal responsibility and providing youth with an alternative to violence. Was this a speech happening in real time? Who was this person speaking such powerful, almost familiar words? In fact, this video was part of a series of reenactments of protest speeches from the 1960s and 1970s called *The Port Huron Project* conceived by the artist Mark Tribe. Since 2006 Tribe has staged a series of six reenactments presented in the same locations where the original speeches were given. Tribe selects individuals to deliver the speeches to an audience of invited guests and passersby as a form of civic engagement. Each of these reenactments is documented using video and photography, then rebroadcast online, on select public screens such as the one in Times Square, and in exhibition spaces.

Although Tribe’s work is self-described as art, did passers-by consider it as art? Can historical reenactment be a form of art? Without the parameters of a gallery or museum, can public art serve as public history? What are the assumptions we make about what art looks like, sounds like, and feels like, and how are artists currently pushing those assumptions in new directions, toward new artistic methods and models that allow us to look at history in new ways?

In conversations we have about art with family and friends, there is a common misunderstanding that artists spend most of their time alone in a studio producing objects that will ultimately find their way into museums or galleries. Given that most...
art education practices in K–12 schools still follow a traditional studio-based pedagogical model—students working independently with a specific media towards a predetermined object or image—the idea that the artistic process is often inspired by a moment of deep insight that propels an artist to work furiously and determinedly in isolation until the piece is finished, or more specifically ready for sale, is understandable. Artists have popularly been identified as people with a “gift” or talent, a specialized set of skills that allow them to make desirable images and objects.

Throughout art history, artists have continuously expanded the methods, tools, and subjects informing their work, including breaking down perceived distinctions between art and life, as well as the seemingly isolated role of the artist in society. These interests have taken shape as an emphasis on conceptual or idea-based work over purely aesthetic work, an interest in initiating dialogue and debate with viewers rather than simply delivering content to them, crossing disciplinary boundaries that have pushed art and artists out into the fields of anthropology, biology, philosophy, engineering, architecture, and, most importantly for the purposes of this book, history. Artists are increasingly taking on new roles and skills as they participate in these fields and generating new ways of understanding what visual art can be and do. Performing the roles of curators, ethnographers, archeologists, researchers, educators, and archivists many artists working today are border crossers who use their interest in the world of ideas to enter and draw from a wide range of fields and practices. More specifically, artists have begun to borrow historical methods and sources to inform their work. Reenactments such as The Port Huron Project offer one example of an interdisciplinary event where the artist plays the role of producer, researcher, documentarian, and community activist in their own right.

The deep divide between how art is conceived in the middle and high school art classroom and the contemporary art world is similar to the divide between history education at the middle/high school and university level. K–12 instruction in the arts tends to be medium- and technique-based—that is, organized around teaching students how to use different kinds of materials, such as acrylic paint or clay. In contrast to this, contemporary artists work across disciplines, engaging with different topics and methods to explore contemporary themes, ideas, and questions, including relationships to history. For those artists specifically interested in historic themes and events, the methods they use to investigate the past are often similar to those employed by professional historians: mining archives for primary and secondary documents, conducting oral histories, and asking critical questions as part of the process of opening dialogue about the past and its relationship to the present. Some artists also make use of methods that amateur historians and ordinary citizens use, such as historical reenactment and autobiography—methods often dismissed by experts as not rigorous enough to engage with the past thoughtfully. But these methods also contribute a great deal to efforts to make sense of the past, and offer important strategies that teachers can use in their classrooms to encourage students to engage with history in a thoughtful, critical manner. In this essay we focus on a range of historical methods and practices that artists have begun to appropriate and reframe under the auspices of art.
As we looked at the work of artists in relation to the strategic use of archives, historical reenactment, oral history, autobiography and memoir, and photography we identified three primary contributions to historical research and subsequently the teaching of history. The artist projects we spent time researching offered much more than an illustrated or literal record of history. Instead, artists were involved in creating experiential work designed to involve multiple senses or more often, a physical relationship to stories and ideas about the past. Central to the work of many artists, and rarely considered by historians and history educators, is the multi-modal and emotional quality of the historical record. Many artists working with historical narratives, as well as non-historical material, explore the ways that viewers can participate more viscerally, can perhaps even embody the feelings, emotions, and experiences of an idea or event, whether past or present. We argue that this embodied way of knowing is crucial to learning about both history and art. A Western reliance on logic and reason and the notion that methods of inquiry must be based on observable, empirical, and measurable evidence has strongly influenced the ways that not only science, but history, mathematics, and most other categories of knowledge have been framed. Since its formal introduction in the late nineteenth century, the scientific method has served as the most accepted means of pursuing and establishing knowledge, one that privileges a neutral process of observation, data collection, and analysis. This method de-emphasizes an emotional stake in the process of pursuing knowledge, which is considered to cloud or corrupt otherwise pure information. Offering a divergent perspective, the feminist theorists Alison Jaggar and Susan Bordo (1989) among others have long argued that emotions are a useful and necessary way that we construct knowledge about the world and its history.

As Alison Jaggar suggests:

> Just as observation directs, shapes, and partially defines emotions, so too emotion directs, shapes, and even partially defines observations. Observation is not simply a passive process of absorbing impressions or recording stimuli; instead, it is an activity of selection and interpretation. What is selected and how it is interpreted are influenced by emotional attitudes.

(p. 154)

It is difficult to remain emotionally distant when viewing the work of Kara Walker, Ben Sakoguchi, or Martha Rosler. The provocative images that these artists produce can often feel unsettling, inspiring a visceral, physical reaction that pushes beyond a purely intellectual response. The work of these artists highlights the emotional texture of history that is often captured in historical novels and movies, but is largely missing from the way we teach history in schools.

The second contribution made by contemporary artists whose work addresses the people, places, and events of the past is their ability to reframe our understanding of historical research and its methods. Artists can challenge linear narratives of the past and the idea of “objective” representations of history. In particular, we were interested in artists who question how we speak about the past in terms of truth, subjectivity, and...
authenticity, artists who are engaged in the “subversive function of art ‘not to be politely absorbed but rather to challenge and disrupt’” (Becker in Garoian, 1999, p. 137). Artists such as Glenn Ligon open new ways of thinking about how we engage our students in the complexity of history: its multiple layers, contradictions, and tensions. These artists also offer tangible evidence that history is a subjective field of study, reflecting the unique perspectives, biases, opinions, and fallible memories of its authors.

The third significant contribution that contemporary artists offer to the historic record is their interest in seeking out unique perspectives and previously unheard voices often in the form of unrecognized individuals or communities. Artists are establishing new primary sources and create works that could be considered primary documents in their own right as they collect the stories of marginalized, unconsidered sources. We argue that the work of these artists, and specifically living artists, should be considered secondary sources, and in some cases, as primary sources in historical research—for an interpretation of the past that merits the attention of other historians. And this raises new questions, such as: If we consider works of contemporary art as historical analysis in its own right, how does this challenge the way we think about what constitutes a primary or secondary document? How do art objects, including photographic images, reframe what we can learn through historical research? In short, we believe that contemporary art provides a space to imagine alternative historical methods and arguments.

These contributions suggest not only ways that artists are involved in the creation of historical knowledge, but strategies that can be applied to a classroom context. Informing our own thinking about the pedagogical approaches we present for investigating history in Part II, these ideas inspired our thinking about opportunities to create art that moves beyond technical skills and into the realm of content, concept, and process, into new ways of thinking about the past that can help us make sense of the present. They also suggested important questions about how history is constructed and understood. We do not attempt to answer these questions, but pose them in relation to each artist as a series of provocations to explore. In what follows, we explore four historical methods used by contemporary artists: archive, oral history, historical reenactments and memoirs/autobiography. These methods suggest not only relevant classroom practices for use with students, but opportunities to help students construct an emotional, embodied relationship to the past; to consider the voices and perspectives that are, and are not, included in the historic record; and to embark on a critical, investigatory journey into the events of the past that uses questions and debate to reframe their own understandings about history.

tHe ArCHIVe

Recently, the archive has become a locus of investigation by contemporary artists, a topic for art exhibitions, art books, and symposiums: Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art, an exhibition of photographs by contemporary artists who use archival images in their work, presented at the Institute of Contemporary Photography in New York (Enwezor, 2008); Deep Storage: Collecting, Storage, and Archiving in Art, an exhibition and catalogue that looked at storage and archiving as imagery, first presented in Munich and then at P.S. 1 in New York City (Schaffner, 2008); The Archive (Documents of Contemporary Art) (Mereweather, 2006), an edited book of essays on archiving.
concept and art practice, to name a few. These artistic investigations interpret, contest, redefine, and reinvent our understanding of archives, both their structures and their materials. Like historians, artists understand the archive as a collection of documents, images, or objects that contain a wealth of information about the past, as well as a physical space that houses these documents in order to collect, preserve, and store them. The artists highlighted here explore the archive as it shapes the way we construct meanings about the past. In addition, their work often refers to the idea that the archive serves as a representation of our historical memory. These artists assert that this site of history should be examined not only cognitively, but also physically, emotionally, and viscerally. Not surprisingly, many of the artists who reference the archive in their work use photography as their artistic medium—one that is also most commonly collected archival material.

The impulse to analyze and critique the archive runs strong in the work of many artists whose work is located in historical methods or events. What is an archive? Who determines what materials are archival? What particular histories do archives tell? Conceived as powerful institutions that warrant creative criticism, the archive itself can serve as a space for critical and visual inquiry. Jenny Holzer’s series of Redaction Paintings (2006), featured in Chapter 7 (see Figures 7.3–7.5), speak to these searching questions. As the basis of this series of silkscreened paintings, Holzer utilized government documents released through the Freedom of Information Act and available from the National Security Archives, as well as the archives of the FBI and American Civil Liberties Union. Holzer first photographed these obscured redacted documents, and then silkscreened them onto large canvases (Figure 4.1). In addition to creating large printed versions of the documents, Holzer also projected the documents onto the facades of urban buildings. In both versions, Holzer re-presents previously undisclosed documents to new publics, in and out of the art world. Holzer does not alter the original documents in any way other than through the transfer processes she uses. Simply by placing them in a new visual format, making them larger, and exhibiting them in new ‘public’ spaces, Holzer shifts the way these politically charged, highly obfuscated documents can be read. Intentionally opening and placing its questionable holdings on display is a brash...

Figure 4.1 Jenny Holzer
Hand Yellow White, 2006.
act of protest. These documents could be considered primary historical sources, but the fact that most of the text is blacked out and illegible raises questions about the kind of history they actually represent. How do we read the history of this particular moment when the evidence has been erased?

The site-specific public work *An Unusually Bad Lot* by Shimon Attie (Figure 4.2) uses archival research to re-present the past from a contemporary vantage point, excavating hidden or forgotten histories in the process. Shimon Attie (1998) describes this form of excavation as “peeling back the wallpaper of today to reveal the histories buried underneath.” *An Unusually Bad Lot* presents the history of a building: the former site of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, which, before becoming a space dedicated to contemporary visual art in 1982, served as a police station and jail. Attie spent months in the police archives studying thousands of pages of case files containing photographs of prisoners and other detainees along with texts written about these prisoners by arresting officers, judges, psychiatrists, and family members. Attie used the front facade of the building to present laser-written text choreographed to correspond with photographic portraits of former detainees. Each night, pedestrians could witness the former history of the site, as well as the different stories contained in the portraits and corresponding police descriptions. By juxtaposing two narratives—first, the voice of authority (the texts written about the prisoner) and second, the silent mug shot of the prisoner—*An Unusually Bad Lot* visualizes the archive in a new way. Attie’s presentation asserts a particular relationship between archival text and image that suggests the contrasting or contradictory information they contain. The image of a unremarkable young woman is shown next to the statement, “She did not seem to feel the least shame for being arrested for fornication, not even with a colored man.” Obviously social and cultural attitudes have changed regarding issues of sexuality and race since the nineteenth century when these primary documents were created. Connecting his temporal

*Figure 4.2 Shimon Attie, detail, An Unusually Bad Lot, 1999–2000.*
disjunction with the use of text and image suggests contradictory messages. Attie’s work refocuses the viewer’s attention on the kinds of histories that archives tell and the ways that different narratives shape our understanding of history. This juxtaposition creates a tension that has to be examined more closely in light of Amitava Kumar’s (2000) insight that “to begin to see the contradictions is to become aware of history and therefore, another relation that this history has with the present” (p. 26). If archives are the repositories of the official versions of history, whose stories get told through archives? Whose stories and what histories are missing from archives? How do we research the other narratives that are not recorded, that have no voice or advocate?

Not often considered by historians and scholars is the sensual experience of the archive. The sensual experience is what the collaborative team of Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler focus on, specifically the most significant institution that preserves the official record of our national history: the National Archives. Ericson and Ziegler’s work diverges from the idea that art is a purely visual experience and instead requires viewers to employ additional faculties; to experience other dimensions of history. In *The Smell and Taste of Things Remain*, exhibited in 1992, Ericson and Ziegler created an installation that literally invoked the smell of our nation’s history. Upon walking into the exhibition space the viewer was greeted with the aroma of musty books and long-forgotten records—the antiquated scent of dust and age that we associate with history. At one end of the room, an antique cabinet known as a “pie safe” stood open, revealing eighty amber-colored jars filled with a liquid that was crafted by the perfume designer Felix Buccellato to smell exactly like the National Archive in Washington, DC, that “imparts the collective heritage of the United States and its democratic ideals” (Weintraub, 1996, p. 214). By connecting an abstract concept such as history with a smell, Ziegler and Ericson suggest a collective way of locating our ideas about the past. They continue:

> This artwork encourages us to expand our understanding of history beyond the temporal, spatial, and physical to include all our senses as a way of knowing. How can we capture the taste of history—its sounds, its kinesthetic movements, its spatial configurations?

(quoted in Weintraub, 1996, p. 214)

Artists use not only the archive for research, but also the collection of artifacts in an effort to question, debate, and reinvent our understanding of how archives can be defined and populated. For example, the Atlas Group is a project led by the artist Walid Raad, which produces semi-fictitious events and individuals in an effort to represent the contemporary history of Lebanon. Started in 1999, *The Atlas Group Project* is an online project (Raad, n.d.), as well as exhibitions that take place around the world. Physical documents including film, videotapes, photographs, and notebooks that have been created as part of the project are housed in New York and Beirut. The unorthodox methods of the Atlas Group disturb common notions of authenticity, veracity, neutrality and point of view in relation to the archive. Raad’s creation of a fictional archive strategically challenges the idea that primary documents, specifically video and photography, exist as unbiased, authentic forms of history. By constructing fictional evidence and representing simulated events, *The Atlas Group Project* questions the presumed authority of the archive to represent the past in an impartial manner. What are the similarities and differences between photographs as primary documents in historical research and photographs as art? Can each form serve a different purpose in historical research? In light of these
questions, can art be considered a primary document? If so, in what situations and how might that change the questions we use to investigate primary documents more broadly?

A particular project within the Atlas Group archive is titled *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* (2001; Figure 4.3), a video that presents the testimony of a fictional person named Souheill Bachar in connection with the crisis of five American hostages held in Lebanon in the 1980s. This “captivity narrative” as Raad calls it, is the story of an imaginary sixth hostage who is Arab. The testimony addresses various aspects of the crisis, including the experience of captivity from an Arab perspective and the differences between Arab and Western notions of masculinity. Bachar’s fictional story gives voice to another perspective typically missing from the international news: the Arab as hostage. By introducing a new perspective on the widely documented real crisis in Lebanon, this artwork suggests a different relationship between Arabs and the West. How does our understanding of the Middle East and Arab identity shift if we begin to consider the notion of Arabs as hostages, geopolitics and dominant Western ideologies rather than the constant image circulated by the media of Arabs as perpetrators, instigators, and terrorists?

Another artist intent on expanding the parameters of archival documentation is Melinda Hunt. Basing her work on existing archival research, Hunt uses a different strategy of presentation in the *Hart Island Project* (Figure 4.4). Found archival documents are used as a framing device to present new contemporary narratives. Taking the form of an installation, a book, a film, and a work of public art, the *Hart Island Project* combines fragments of the island’s history with contemporary photographs in an effort to simultaneously represent the past and the present of this poignant site. Hunt uses burial records, prison documents, logs, and newspaper clippings to contextualize and situate photographs of present-day burials at Hart Island by the photographer Joel Sternfeld. In addition to these official archival documents, Hunt includes written narratives provided by inmates who are ferried from Rikers Island prison to dig the graves for unclaimed bodies. Each photograph captures a moment in the burial process that is framed by a set of different documents. Hunt has mined the Department of Corrections archive for contextual references, but has also expanded the archive by including new kinds of historical narratives: the statements of the prisoners. In this sense, Hunt both presents the archive and redefines it to include new, previously unrecognized voices.

**Historical reenactment**

Historical reenactments as *The Port Huron Project* are one method that contemporary artists frequently use to frame and reframe the past. Performing history is literally an embodied experience that opens other ways of knowing the past from the vantage point of the present. The dramatic staging of historical events brings to the foreground
questions regarding what and how we remember (and what we choose to forget).

Artists such as Greta Pratt use the photograph to capture a form of vernacular history, creating a collection of images that reflect a living history. In her exhibition catalogue Using History, Greta Pratt (2005) writes: “I decided to photograph how Americans remember the past, in order to understand what is revealed by the events we choose to celebrate as history” (p. 1). To create the series of photographs for Using History, Pratt visited pageants, county fairs, parades, and reenactments at various historical sites that she had learned about in elementary school: Plymouth Rock, Jamestown, Gettysburg, and Mount Vernon. The subsequent photographs tell us about how different communities and individuals commemorate and remember the past, today. As she says:

I observed historic iconography everywhere and realized that its usage elicits a predictable response, valuable for selling merchandise, constructing identity, and invoking patriotism. I began to understand how the framing of the past evolves, reflecting the beliefs and ideals of the present.

(Pratt, 2005, p. 1)

In her series of photographs, Nineteen Lincolns (2005; Figure 4.5), Pratt presents portraits of nineteen Abraham Lincoln impersonators as individuals with unique connections to this nationally mythologized president. In corresponding statements written by each impersonator, the viewer is able to read how individuals interpret this historic man’s legacy. Pratt’s photographs represent “a meta-level reflection on reenactments that have occurred in the culture” (Jay, 2006, p. 32) by ordinary people based on their own experiences of social class, race, gender, and sexuality. It is these differences that are highlighted in the photographs and accompanying texts as we read each impersonator in relation to the others. The resultant Nineteen Lincolns challenges notions of linear history and instead, as Martin Jay (2006) suggests, visualizes “history as repetition and

Figure 4.4 Melinda Hunt Adult Mass Burial with pages from Hart Island Burial Record Books, 1997.
Also using photography as her medium, the artist An-My Lê (whose work is featured in Chapter 9, Figures 9.2–9.5) explores the idea of conflict and war through photographs that simulate the look of warfare, while remaining safely in the realm of fiction. Both real and imagined, Lê’s photographs document staged, theatrical moments from the maneuvers enacted by U.S. Marines stationed on military bases in California who are preparing for combat in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as Vietnam war reenactors in Virginia and North Carolina. The photographs from the Small Wars series (1999–2002) portray a group of dedicated Vietnam War reenactors as they recreate particular battles and confrontations. Required to participate as a reenactor in order to photograph the events, Lê is also included in several of the images as a Vietcong sniper and South Vietnamese translator. In the photographic series 29 Palms (2003–2004; Figure 4.6) expansive vistas of the harsh southern California desert overshadow miniscule tank formations. These images are paired with more intimate images of trainees involved in staged combat that takes place in replicas of Iraqi villages complete with fake anti-American graffiti. The trainees have not yet participated in fighting, but the images suggest that war is taking place and being witnessed. Conflating real and imagined, these images reveal their theatricality only in their titles. The reenactments that Lê documents suggest what Nato Thompson (2006) calls “an embodied experience with many of the qualities of ritual” (p. 17). Lê presents a living history of war that is carried out by real people in real time, but is based in a perceived sense of what pivotal events such as war might feel like.

Some pertinent questions surface in light of this particular strategy to reimagine and document historical themes and events. The photographs of historical reenactments by Greta Pratt and An-My Lê convey particular stories about American-ness and Ameri...
history. These stories are different from those told in more accepted forms of historical record such as newspaper photographs and accompanying articles printed in 1971 about the unfolding events in Vietnam. How are these stories of American identity similar and/or different from the stories told through pageants, reenactments, and tableaux that were staged in the past? Do these reenactments distort history? Do they perpetuate stereotypes? What can one glean about history from these reenacted photographs?

orAL HIstory

The increased interest in using oral history as a method of investigation among artists opens new opportunities for debating notions of truth and subjectivity in relation to representing history, especially hidden or previously unrecognized historical narratives. Often artists deliberately choose oral history as a method to document the stories of people who are socially, culturally, economically, racially, or ethnically marginalized. Oral histories capture and record the narratives, experiences, and feelings of people through video and audio recordings in order to create a more vivid and nuanced picture of the past. A common method for historians conducting research, artists have begun to use oral history specifically for the interactive and dialogic nature of the process, but have interpreted different aspects of the process for their individual purposes and interests.

Looking at the work of a cross-section of artists who use oral history, one finds that depending on the ideas being explored, oral history interviews are often used in three different ways: one, as a general inspirational foundation as is exemplified in the work of Tomie Arai; two, as excerpts that are integrated directly into the work; and three,
as a complete interview that is used to construct an experience or relationship to a
conversation, such as in the installation *made in usa: Angel Island Shh hh* (2000) by
Flo Oy Wong (featured in Chapter 8, see Plate 7 and Plate 8, in Insert).

Tomie Arai is interested in working with people to make art and often uses the
oral history method as inspiration. Although formally trained to conduct oral history
interviews, Arai does not adhere to the common methodological procedures of
verification. The process by which the interviewer submits the collected narrative
back to the person interviewed in order to have them approve, edit, or alter the material
in an effort to make it truthful to the teller’s vision. She explains:

looking for some kind of truth was not the purpose of any of these interviews. And, so, in
a sense a lot of the interviews themselves became for me like stories, or sort of narratives,
which were very close in some respects to fiction. And, that opened up a lot for me in terms
of what the art could look like or what possibilities could be.

(personal communication, December 14, 1999).

Beginning the silkscreen series *Memory-in-Progress: A Mother–Daughter Oral History
Project* (1988–1989) during her residency at the Chinatown History Project (NY),
Arai drew on individual and collective memories to construct a living history of the
different ethnic/racial groups of Asian communities living in Chinatown. Tape-recorded
interviews served as the loose foundation for a series of prints including *Chinatown*
(1989), *Laundry Woman’s Daughter* (1988), *An Immigrant Story* (1989; Figure 4.7),
Additional sources of inspiration for the prints included collected photographs, recipes, stories,
and archival research. The oral history interviews that she conducted in order to complete
the *Memory-in-Progress* series are housed in the Chinatown Museum and Arai considers
them a separate element from the silkscreen prints. Arai also uses excerpts of oral

![Figure 4.7 Tomie Arai: *Memory-in-Progress: A Mother–Daughter Oral History Project. An Immigrant’s Story*, 1989.](image-url)
interviews in several of her other works. For example, in *Double Happiness* (1998; Figure 4.8), an installation that depicts a traditional Chinese wedding banquet, she etched excerpts from interviews she conducted with bicultural adults onto the back of featured chairs. Each chair stands for a person she interviewed and tells his/her story.

Jackie Brookner’s installation *Of Earth and Cotton* (1994–1998; Figure 4.9) incorporates oral history methods and documentation more directly. Sculptural portraits of feet made of soil are viewed against a video backdrop documenting conversations between the artist and former cotton farmers. In addition, historical photographs made for the Resettlement Administration/Farm Security Administration that depict the working and living conditions of cotton pickers during the 1930s are projected alongside the video. From 1994 to 1996, Brookner followed the westward migration trail of workers in the Cotton Belt, interviewing men and women in six different areas who had picked cotton.
by hand in the 1930s and 1940s. As the men and women spoke about their experiences and memories, Brookner hand sculpted portraits of their feet using local soil. The video conveys not only the dynamics of the interview—viewers see and hear the interview as it takes place—but also the dynamics of the artistic process as the artist sits on the ground in front of the person being interviewed to sculpt their feet.

The historical photographs commissioned by the federal government convey proud, heroic workers whereas the video and interview present the geriatric bodies and difficult stories of a life spent picking cotton by hand. The juxtaposition of the sculpted feet, video, and commissioned historical photographs, many taken by Works Progress Administration artists, creates a web of complex and intricate relationships between historic and artistic knowledge, racial stereotypes, embodied history, and different ways of knowing about the past. These intimate perspectives confront the contradictory stories told about this historical period, the noble laborer dedicated to the land. How do we narrate the multiple and often contradictory stories that are part of history? Would Brookner have solicited a different series of narratives had she been sitting on a chair with a tape-recorder rather than sitting at the feet of the interviewees? Does the way an interview is conducted alter the history that gets told?

AutoBiogrAPHy/memoIrs

How is the use of autobiography or memoir in art different from art based on oral history? An obvious difference is that the autobiography, whether visual or written, is based on the artist’s personal memories of experiences and events, whereas the oral history narrative is based on the stories told by other people and re-presented by the artist in a written, auditory, or visual form. An autobiographical work is framed by the artist’s personal recollections representing a particular moment or period such as childhood, specific memory, or a significant experience, whereas an oral history interview is guided by the expectations for a collective conversation and the types of questions asked.
both autobiography and oral history, fact and fiction cannot always be clearly delineated because memory is subjective and often fallible. However, autobiographers and oral historians assert that their methods are an attempt to tell the truth as best as they can. The desire to tell the truth and the lines that separate fact from fiction are often a source of interest and exploration for artists, who can more dynamically skirt the borders between subjectivity and objectivity. Looking at the work of contemporary artists reminds us that “Autobiography is the product of various factors—real experiences, together with things heard, seen, read, narrated and invented. Fact and fiction are inextricably woven together” (Steiner & Wang, 2004, p. 27).

Drawing on his own experiences as a Japanese-American citizen and those of his family, Roger Shimomora’s autobiographical paintings chronicle events in U.S. history that were of particular significance to his family. In the American Diary series (featured in Chapter 7, see Plate 3 and Plate 4, in Insert), Shimomora created a visual image to accompany each entry from his grandmother Toku Shimomora’s diary recording her daily experiences in the internment camp where she was forced to live from 1941 to 1943. Toku’s diary entries address a particularly controversial moment in U.S. history: the forced incarceration of Japanese-Americans during World War II. The artworks do not simply reproduce the diary entry in a visual manner, as an illustration of the text, but rather comment on aspects of American popular culture through the iconic use of bicultural signs and symbols. As it shares much in common with literary autobiographical works that are considered primary historical sources, we suggest that Shimomura’s visual biography should also be considered a primary document in the context of written diaries from that time.

In her larger than life installations, Kara Walker presents a full theater of imagined characters rendered in black cut-out silhouettes: young southern belles, pickaninny children, uncle toms and uppity Southern gents. These characters are rendered as exaggerated stereotypes and caricatures that exist as fantastical versions of historical stories and mythologies about the American antebellum south. Walker produces extended titles that not only place the work in the controversial site of the plantation, but identify her as the Negress: the work’s author and narrator. Not limited to titles, Walker writes extensively in connection with her silhouette installations and animations. The writings are conceived in the first-person voice and place Walker both in the historical context of the scenes she renders, but also as the self-conscious contemporary producer.

The Negress, as a term that I apply to myself, is a real and artificial construct. Everything I’m doing is trying to skirt the line between fiction and reality. And for the most part I’ve titled exhibitions and a book or two as though they were the creations of a “Negress of Noteworthy Talent,” or a “Negress of Some Notoriety.” I guess it comes from a feeling of being a black woman, an African American artist—that in itself is a title with a certain set of expectations that come with it from living in a culture that’s maybe not accustomed to a great majority of African American women artists.

(Walker, n.d.)

Walker refers to her work as “two parts research and one part paranoid hysteria” (Art21, n.d.). As a historical, autobiographical and fictional construct, how does Walker’s work relate to traditional ideas about the antebellum south? To what degree is authenticity and truth possible in historical research and interpretation? Walker exaggerates the fictional
qualities of historical representation and presents an autobiographical narrative related to a fabricated history. Given that all autobiographies are constructed, containing incomplete and partial truths, we can reconsider how we might read and use autobiography and memoirs in reconstructing historical narratives. How do we navigate the cacophony of voices that make up American history and bring these voices into a multi-layered dialogue when representing history, textually and visually? As researchers we not only have to question how we speak and for whom, but from what place in time and space.

**The Location of Photography in History and Contemporary Art**

In writing and thinking about the methodologies and strategies used by contemporary artists in relation to history we were struck by the ubiquitous use of photography. Some artists create original imagery whereas others reference found photographs from archives or more contemporary sources. Many artists integrate photography as a component of larger installations or multi-media presentations, others utilize the camera as the primary medium. This recognition that photography can serve as both a functional tool for documentation, as well as an artistic strategy, positions it at a very interesting place between history and art. What are the relationships between the ways that artists use photography and the ways that historians use photography? What can photography contribute to a visual approach to history and how can we critically investigate the layers of information embedded in the frame of a photograph, whether historic or contemporary, art or artifact?
A photograph is a single frame of history, a moment in time. Taking a photograph captures light from an instant and transfers it to paper for posterity. The Latin roots of the word *photograph* mean “writing with light.” When looking at a photograph we are connected to a moment of history as spectators and sometimes as witnesses. As a visually recorded moment, “photography is critical to the practice and authority of the archive, in so far as it folds together history as representation and representation as history” (Merewether, 2006, p. 160). Each photograph transfers the historical event to image producing “a certain archival effect” (Merewether, 2006, p.160). Photographs document a moment in history but they also provide a window through which to understand the present, the moment in which the viewer is looking at them. Like all works of art or pieces of historical evidence, photographs are participatory. They require the viewer or reader to react and interpret their content from an individual perspective: to bring a unique biographical, cultural, political, social view to the information contained within them. The subjective nature of images corresponds to the idea that history is in and of itself subjective, that is, it is constructed and interpreted according to individual points of view. While the viewer shapes their own interpretations or reactions to a photographic image, photographic images in turn shape individual understandings about history, they tell stories and suggest meanings used to interpret history.

Photography in the work of contemporary artists covers a broad range of concerns, intentions and visual strategies significantly different from the genre of “art photography” that is grounded in the idea of the autonomous role of art or art for art’s sake, many contemporary artists use photography to address the social and cultural world animated by a critical or deconstructive stance. Artists such as An-My Lê and Jenny Holzer use photography to challenge common assumptions that mechanical images capture reality and can be read as truth. In this way artists “destabilize [photography’s] authority as a technology of remembrance” (Merewether, 2006, p.160) and assert that the meanings of a photograph are not singular but multiple: they refer to many different things at once, including other images from art, mass media, and visual culture. Other artists working today, including Shimon Attie and Walid Raad, use the appropriation of existing photographic imagery as an alternative way of producing art in an already saturated visual environment. Still other artists, including Melinda Hunt and Jackie Brookner, employ a combination of both methods, using photography as a critical lens as well as a way of referencing or borrowing existing historical imagery. All photographs are mediated by the social, cultural, political, and economic experiences of both the photographer and the viewer. In the words of John Berger, photographs construct a “radical system” that can be “seen in terms which are simultaneously personal, political, economic, dramatic, everyday and historic” (quoted in Kumar, 2000, p. 47). Moreover, photographic images presented in the context of contemporary art serve as a form that moves beyond simply embracing “plural histories, multiple narrative lines, where each such line continues to move from a limited collective past, through a fleeting (but determined) present and into an unknown (but largely determined) future” (Grossberg, 2000, p. 158). Contemporary photography has the potential to “question how and what it is that photography remembers and forgets, for whom and for what purposes” (Merewether, 2006, p.162). This idea of images as providing selective knowledge based on what we remember and what we forget is important to bring into the history and art classrooms. It allows students to question the fact-based rendering of history and opens discussion on the subjective aspect of historical knowledge.
CLosing tHougHtS

The strategies and methods employed by artists presented in this essay reconceive historical knowledge with “new ways of imagining our relations to the multiple temporalities of objects, people and events, and of the worlds that they and we inhabit” (Grossberg 2000, p. 158). An-My Lê’s photographs from the series Small Wars, Melinda Hunt’s Hart Island Project, and Walid Raad’s archival project The Atlas Group, each provoke us to imagine history not as a linear narrative of facts or a temporal progression of events coherently leading to the present moment, but as a dynamic, uneven, often surprising collection of memories, ideas, commentaries, opinions, and assertions that simultaneously move in multiple directions across time and space. This space is created not through static images and objects left to be interpreted passively by a viewer, but through performative, embodied experiences that suggest new interpretive possibilities for understanding and debating the meanings of history. Engaging with information in many different forms, these multi-modal perspectives can provoke students to encounter history as a lived and living experience. Presenting students with works of art that historical narratives through multiple senses provides an opportunity to embody historical knowledge beyond cognitive recognition, memorization, and regurgitation. Instead, history is an empathetic and felt space of ideas.

Artists also use historical methods in their work to foreground the notion that history is a subjective field. Historical reenactment, oral history, the archive, and photography as documentation serve as tools for constructing a critical vantage on traditional or accepted historical narratives. This critique of objective, authentic, or neutral concepts of history is an important notion for both the history and art classroom. Using the constructed narratives presented in the artistic projects featured in this essay, history and art can be presented as a series of entry points and gateways with numerous perspectives and voices to be analyzed and debated. These voices contradict the singular, authoritative stance of factual evidence so often presented in textbooks, singular artifacts, or primary documents. As an antidote to the mind-numbing culture of testing and correct answers, students can explore works of contemporary art as models for enacting their own critical approaches to historical information and navigating the messy and difficult matter of the past.

Equally important is the idea that the historical record is never complete. In their pursuit of new voices and vantage points, some contemporary artists, such as Melinda Hunt, Jackie Brookner, and Tomie Arai, place a significant emphasis on bridging the official record with new contributions from unconsidered sources. Utilizing their position as border crossers, artists model an important approach to historical research that reinforces the idea that history is an infinitely unfolding process of collecting ideas and perspectives about the past. These artists draw attention to the incredible range of voices that belong in the historic record. The individuals and communities that these artists engage in their work suggest new opportunities for students to investigate and solicit new vantage points to inform their own historical understanding, including ones from within their own communities.

Rather than the neatly factual, cohesive, and primarily textual narratives we encounter in textbooks, can we envision history and art as interconnected spaces for inquiry? Is it possible pedagogically if we begin to think about researching, writing, and teaching...
history as art and art as a location that coheres the future, the present, and the past.
The work of many contemporary artists suggests that our commonsense understanding
of history as merely about the past is shortsighted. The writer James Baldwin (1965) reminds us:

[t]he great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously
controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely
be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities and
our aspirations.

(p. 26)

By posing critical questions about the past and drawing connections to the present,
contemporary artists can inspire educators to rethink the ways history is taught,
understood, enacted, and embodied.

notes

1 New York is one of the few major cities that have a public burial ground. Dating back to the
British colonial period, Hart Island was formerly a potter’s field that now serves as the largest
cemetery in New York City, where all unclaimed bodies and the bodies of those who cannot
afford a private funeral are laid to rest. Melinda Hunt began visiting the island in 1991 and has
become a major advocate for releasing the records of the over 750,000 people buried there.
2 The Department of Corrections currently manages Hart Island and maintains all record keeping
for the site.

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programs/archive/1998/BetweenDreams/between/
Publishing and International Center for Photography.
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Grossberg, L. (2000). History, imagination and the politics of belonging: Between the death and fear
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History as Art, Art as History

Contemporary Art and Social Studies Education

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