

ART PAPERS

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ARCHAEOLOGY?
IRIS HÄUSSLER
EXPERIMENTS

SCUM
JERSZY SEYMOUR +
SOFT CORE DESIGN

CONVERSATIONS
ROAD TRIP WITH
JEREMY DELLER

AFTERLIFE
JOEP VAN LIEFLAND'S
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Iris Häussler, *He Named Her Amber*, 2008-2009, installation detail: former historic kitchen of The Grange (1840), currently used as staging area for the archaeological excavation (courtesy of the artist; photo: lakub Henschen, 2009)

ART PAPERS is about contemporary art. That's all we've been about for thirty years—stubbornly, unpredictably, and reliably. We understand contemporary art as a constellation of practices variably wielding ideas, images, space, sound, materials, encounters, discourse, and text. We also define it as a permeable realm subjected to the multiple, changing, and incessant pressures of contemporary life. That explains our fierce and unruly curiosity.

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Informed, assertive, authoritative, and accessible, ART PAPERS is the essential, independent guide to contemporary art.

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Between 2005 and 2008, the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) conducted a 276-million-dollar, Frank Gehry-designed overhaul of its gallery spaces, expanding the museum by 97,000 square feet. *Transformation AGO* involved a radical reworking of the AGO's entire architectural structure, with one notable exception. The Grange, the oldest brick house in Toronto and the original site of the AGO, remained tucked away at the center of the sprawling silver edifice that slowly rose around it.

During the summer of 2006, a construction team was doing trenching work in the park behind The Grange when the backhoe operated by one YingYi Chu came up against a strange object buried in the ground. It was a crudely formed cone roughly fourteen inches in length, beige in color, which appeared to be made of some kind of waxen substance. Chu passed the cone along to a supervisor; it then traveled through the chain of command, eventually landing under the desk of Matthew Teitelbaum, the AGO's Executive Director, where it languished in a storage box, forgotten.

Approximately a year later, Jennifer Rieger, The Grange's Historic Site Coordinator, received a package from Boston containing the papers of one Henry Whyte. Whyte, it turned out, had worked as butler at The Grange between 1817 and 1857. As part of his occupation, he kept meticulous records of the daily activities of the house. In reviewing the papers Rieger noticed some obscure references to a young maidservant named Mary O'Shea, who had immigrated to Canada from Ireland in 1828. O'Shea, it seemed, had a proclivity for securing bits of leftover candle wax from around the house, which she would roll into balls. According to his notes, Whyte became aware of O'Shea's secret habit one night, when he noticed her take a "waxen globule" and bury it under a loose floorboard. Rather than confront O'Shea about this curious behavior, Whyte continued to observe her, noting the locations of hidden objects with meticulous detail in his papers. Perhaps due to her tendency to suspend objects in the stolen beeswax,

Whyte named her "Amber," and referred to her by that name from that point on.

Questions arose immediately. Who was Amber? What was she up to? Did anyone else discover her behavior? Why didn't Whyte report her activities and dismiss her? What was the nature of his interest in her? Would the map reveal other objects hidden in the house? Rieger began to have hope of answering the last question when, in April 2008, the AGO contracted a local archaeological team, Anthropological Services Ontario, to conduct an excavation of the Grange site.

The excavation's lead researcher, Dr. Chantal Lee, is a young anthropologist of Korean extraction whose dissertation, *Family Dynamics in Times of Famine*, informs her interpretation of Amber's immigrant experience. She specializes in an experimental form of archaeological reenactment, which, in Lee's words, stems from the notion that "interpretations are filtered through our human experience." Reenactment, for Lee, enables the researcher to glean information about long-past events through an intuitive process of experiential speculation.

Lee, a rather quixotic woman of great intensity and commitment, inspires complex reactions—one AGO volunteer I spoke to about her whispered to me conspiratorially, "You know, I don't like her very much." Since her research began, she has worked incredibly long hours on the project, often sleeping on a cot that is half-hidden in her office in The Grange. When I asked her about the cot, and whether she had been authorized by the museum to spend nights inside the house, she demurred, saying only, "I prefer if you haven't seen this."¹

Despite, or perhaps because of, Dr. Lee's rather unorthodox methods, the excavation thus far has yielded some impressive finds, which are currently on display as part of a guided tour of The Grange. As a public institution invested in visitors' responses to its activities, the AGO has decided to temporarily halt the excavation in order to allow museum guests to experience Amber's creations for themselves. Trained volunteers lead visitors through the ground floor and base-



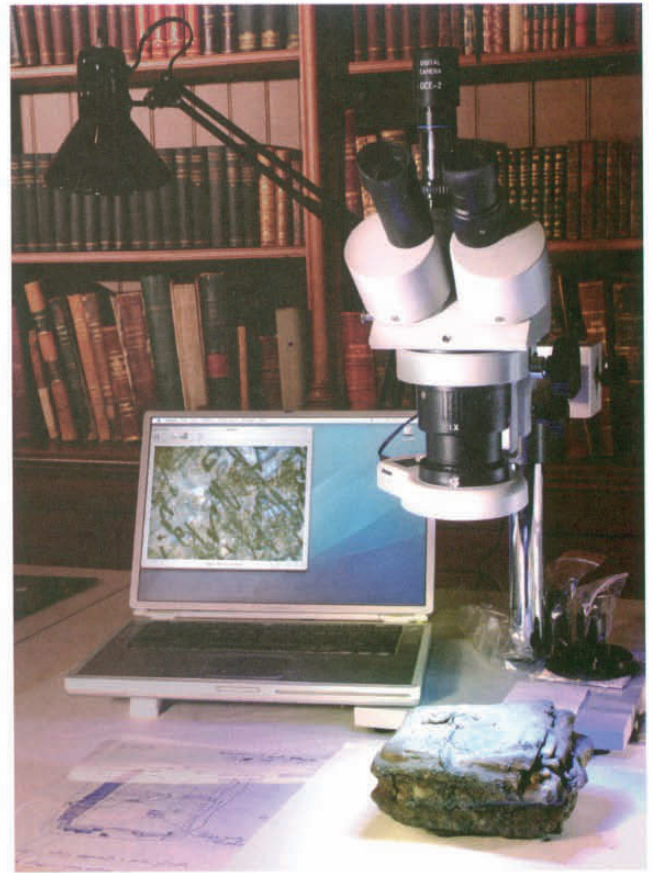


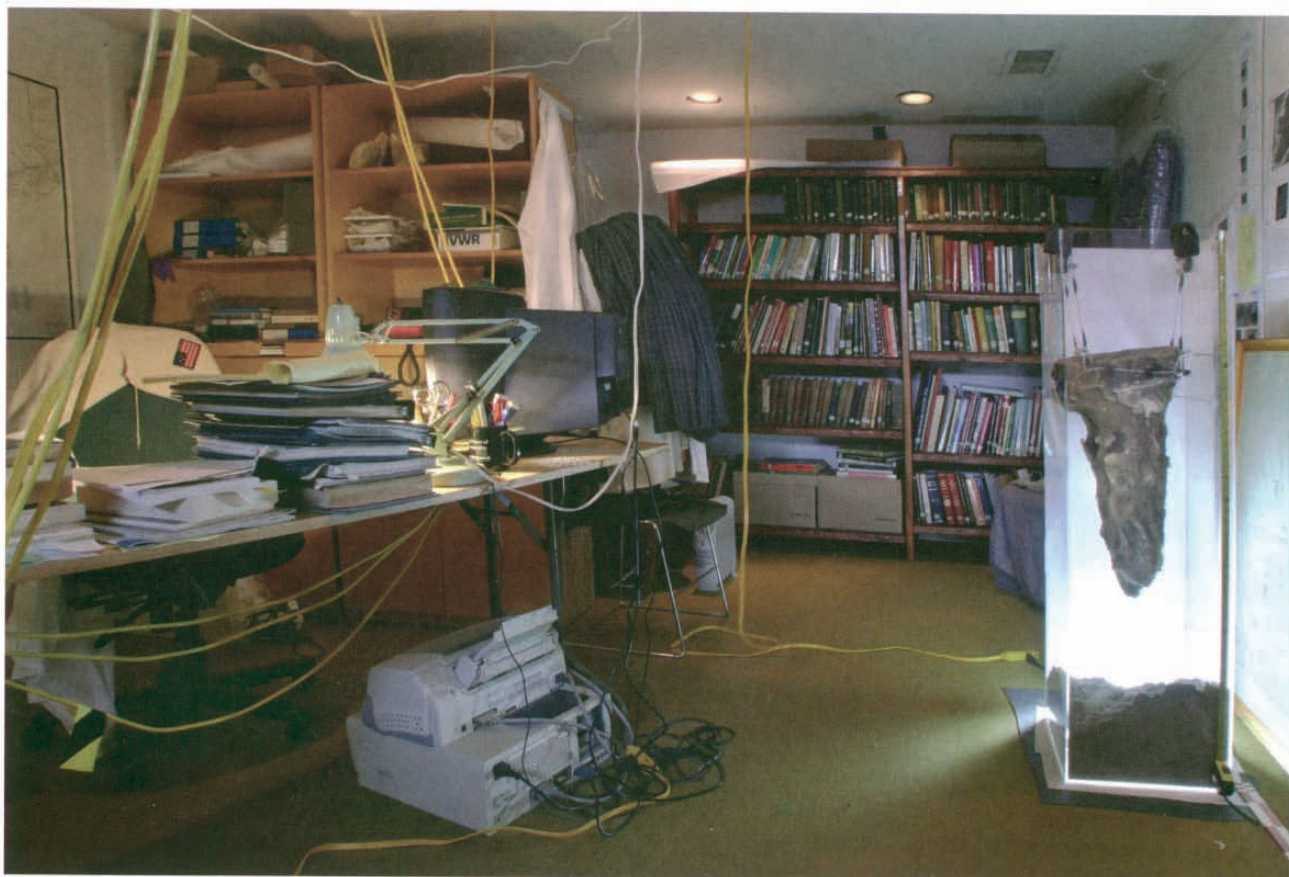
Hidden In Plain Sight:
Iris Häussler's *He Named Her Amber*

ment of the house and show the excavation in process, as well as the various objects that have since been recovered. As a result, the research team has received hundreds of responses speculating on everything from Amber's religious background, to her sexuality, to her family's potential demise in the Irish famine. According to Lee, "something interesting is happening. [...] Over time, a kind of collective intelligence is manifesting itself. We hear of people who have found hidden chambers in their own house, we hear of old Irish folk customs, and Anishinaabeg myths ... some of these comments may turn out to be interesting leads. They've collected quite a thick binder by now."

In the months since the AGO's reopening in November 2008, more than seven thousand visitors have toured the Grange excavation. What most of them did not know before their visit is that the excavation and the Grange tour are the work of conceptual artist Iris Häussler. Amber, Henry Whyte, and even Chantal Lee and Anthropological Services Ontario are fictional characters in a site-specific installation commissioned by the AGO to mark the *Transformation* and reopening of the Gallery. Visitors are not explicitly informed that the tour is an artwork; there are no signs, no tidy white cards, and no press releases to tip them off. The AGO's only public advertisements of the tour, on the website and at the gallery's entrance, actively reinforce the suggestion of actuality: "Take a tour of the unexpected excavation at The Grange, offered daily every hour on the half hour, starting at 11:30 am."

Only after the tour do visitors get a clue as to what they've experienced, as they receive a sealed, folded paper, which they are invited to read once they've left. It contains a statement by Häussler that ellipti-





cally explains the project, and her reasons for presenting it as a true story. For Häussler, a crucial dimension of the experience of *He Named Her Amber* is not knowing that it is an artwork; as she puts it in the letter, the project is designed to create an experience that is innocent of the categories and expectations that often hamper our encounters with contemporary art: "We cannot un-know what we know. We can start from a naïve, child-like fascination, then obtain new knowledge about the context, then re-evaluate our experience. But we cannot go through this process in reverse." Visitors began receiving this letter in February 2009, three-and-a-half months after the exhibition had opened. Previously, they would receive Chantal Lee's business card, and tour guides would encourage them to contact Dr. Lee with any interpretations they might have as a conduit for the work's disclosure. This invitation was taken up by many visitors, who, as Lee notes in my interview with her, responded enthusiastically with suggestions about possible answers to the mystery.

Until February, when the AGO called a press conference and announced that they had commissioned the installation, the only clue that had been issued publicly came in the form of an article by Sarah Milroy, which ran in the newspaper *The Globe and Mail* in November 2008.² Exhorting her readers, "You must go to The Grange," Milroy did not reveal the artwork so much as hint at its true nature. She even concluded the piece with a direct reference to one of Häussler's earlier

installations, *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach*, which caused something of a sensation in Toronto when it was exhibited in 2006. Assisted by independent curator Rhonda Corvese, Häussler rented a small house, filled it with furniture and over a hundred sculptures, and attributed it all to a fictional character, a German émigré who had lived reclusively in the house until suffering a stroke. Soon, an article proclaiming "Reclusive Downtown Artist a Hoax" appeared on the front page of Canada's *National Post*, and the exhibition became one of the most notorious art projects of the year.³

The AGO's decision not only to commission *He Named Her Amber*, but to willfully perpetuate its hidden nature for many months, conjures a whole host of thorny issues. Is this an elaborate game? An attention-getting tactic for an institution eager to raise its international profile? As a publicly funded museum, has the AGO breached the public trust? At what point does the AGO's collusion with the artist become unethical?

These questions have incited some visitors, as well as some AGO staff, to cry foul. Since the project was revealed as an artwork in February 2009, Häussler has received a host of angry emails from disenchanted visitors who felt deceived by the piece and the museum that commissioned it. Margaret Deery, an AGO visitor, wrote to Häussler: "This staged operation was a complete waste of our time at the AGO; we could have spent a lot longer viewing worthwhile arte-

PAGE 32: Iris Häussler, *He Named Her Amber*, 2008-2009, installation detail: former historic kitchen of The Grange, 1840, currently used as staging area for the archaeological excavation [all images courtesy of the artist; photo: Iakub Henschen, 2009] / PAGE 33: installation detail: assessment of discovered artifacts, temporarily housed in the historic Goldwin Smith Library of The Grange [photo: Iakub Henschen, 2009] / PAGE 34, TOP TO BOTTOM: installation details: stereo microscopy identifies handwriting on Object #24, a package of letters encased in beeswax [photo: Carlo Catenazzi/AGO, 2008]; excavation of Object #17, a large cone of beeswax cast on site underneath the brick floor in The Grange basement [photo: Iakub Henschen, 2009] / ABOVE: Dr. Chantal Lee's office in which she studies methods and materials that may have been employed in the creation of "Amber's" artifacts. The illuminated cone is a replica of Object #17 with original materials, commissioned from a local artist [photo: Iakub Henschen, 2009]

facts and not something that was a complete fabrication. We feel we have been duped. Shame on the AGO." When I contacted Deery three months later for further comment, she explained that her anger at the museum had only grown since her visit. "I have to say that the whole thing really grates with me still," she wrote.⁴ "I've never felt so taken in and would be happy never to set foot in the AGO again. Every time I see an advertisement for the AGO on the back page of *The Globe and Mail*, I ask myself what poor sap is going to be made a fool of this time." Deery was one of the few such visitors who agreed to be quoted; the vast majority of people I contacted wanted nothing further to do with the project.

Many of the volunteers who work at the museum as Gallery Guides were similarly incensed when they learned about the piece. In consultation with Häussler, the AGO brass in charge of the installation, including curator David Moos and Rieger, decided that only essential members of staff would initially know about the project, namely the museum board, the public relations department, and the volunteers who would be conducting the tours. Until the public announcement in February 2009, the majority of AGO staff and volunteers were blissfully unaware that there was an unlabeled artwork in their midst. Many volunteers recommended the tours to visitors without actually knowing what they were recommending; as one Gallery Guide put it, the AGO's decision not to initially disclose the project meant that volunteers unwittingly "cheated the public."

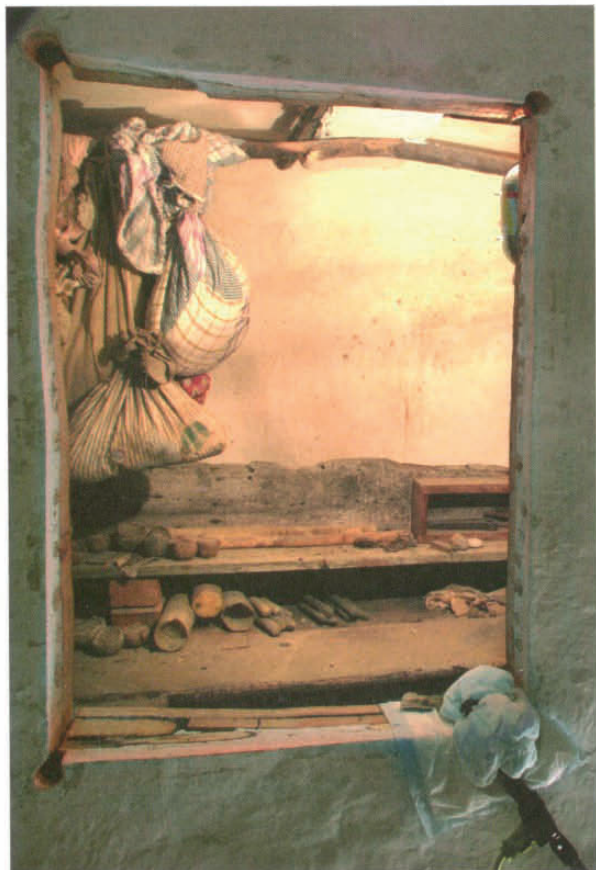
In February, I attended a meeting convened by a group of angry Gallery Guides who confronted Häussler and Moos, asking them why they were not informed about the piece. When Moos explained that secrecy had been essential in order to preserve the viewers' experi-

ence, some guides expressed their support for the AGO's decision. One elderly woman praised Häussler for helping visitors "become children again."⁵ Others, however, felt that the AGO had manipulated them. The institution that they supported so intently had let them down.

Just as some have expressed dismay at the AGO's conduct, many others have unsuspectingly taken the Grange tour without ever recognizing that it is an artwork. This paradox underscores one of the central themes of *He Named Her Amber*: the legitimating role of art institutions in deciding what constitutes good or bad art, or indeed art at all. In refusing to label *He Named Her Amber* as an artwork, the AGO is self-consciously signaling how the display of art within its walls is the product of a complex web of politically informed acts of inclusion and exclusion.

Of course, this sort of institutional critique has been a central theme in art for many decades. Duchamp did it in 1917 with his *Fountain*. Joseph Beuys proclaimed that everyone is an artist in the 1960s. What distinguishes Häussler's work, and invites further reflection on the enduring power of art institutions, is its anonymous, unidentified nature. The AGO's willingness to perpetuate the narrative that Amber actually existed has underscored art audiences' continuing expectations of such institutions to define art's boundaries in clear and assimilable ways. The visitors' and volunteers' accusations that the AGO betrayed its constituency imply an expectation that, first and foremost, a museum's responsibility is to communicate, *not* to question, what should be defined as worthy of the appellation "art."

In the wake of decades of critique, the art museum is alive and well as a legitimating apparatus. Over time, such critiques have been assimilated into the very institutions at which they have been





levied—one has only to note the multitude of exhibitions dedicated to “radical” politics in museums around the world to see this kind of absorption at work.

The central questions of the Grange tour—who was Amber and why did she make these objects?—further drive home the mechanisms that determine which artists and creative activities are defined as worthy or not. Amber’s ambiguous status as an artist is referenced in the installation through several subtle tongue-in-cheek references that Häussler has planted. In the Grange library, for example, a glass display case holds an array of random historical artifacts. Among these is a rosary of wooden beads, which Häussler has arranged to spell the word “ART.” While beautiful in their own raw, elemental way, Amber’s crudely executed creations hardly conform to traditional standards of artmaking. Constructed from ordinary materials, mainly beeswax, which a maidservant would have had close to hand, they betray Amber’s lack of formal training. Many of Amber’s formations encase organic materials such as fingernail clippings (Object 13), dried blood (09), paper (14, 10), human milk-teeth (02), fabric (13, 01), human hair (17, 18), and a rabbit skull (07). Of course, this naïveté connects her to a whole tradition of outsider artists, such as Henry Darger, who have proven particularly lucrative for the art market.

The excavation’s *pièce de résistance* is Object 17, an enormous wax cone that was found buried deep under the floor of the basement and which visitors can see in its partially excavated state. Since its discovery, X-rays have revealed the objects that are sus-



OPPOSITE: a detailed assessment of the floor plan of the basement in The Grange revealed several blind spaces. Fiberscope probing discovered this small chamber: a wooden storage partition had been concealed behind a thick plaster wall / ABOVE, TOP TO BOTTOM: first kitchen of The Grange, 1817: an excavation was undertaken beneath the brick skirt of the open hearth [photo: Jakob Henschen, 2009]; 1817 kitchen, The Grange: an excavation beneath the brick skirt of the open hearth uncovered marble-sized spheres of beeswax, containing spices, sugar and other organic material [photos: Jakob Henschen, 2009]

pendent in the wax: a deer's shoulder bone, a long braid of human hair, and a piece of woven fabric. In shape and manner of execution, Object 17 appears to be a successor of the cone that had been sitting under Teitelbaum's desk for the past two years.⁶

In researching Object 17, Lee wondered about the casting process that yielded this remarkable object. How could a maidservant who was expected to remain perpetually tidy possibly have cast the wax cone so deep in the dirt without becoming completely filthy? To solve the riddle, Lee contracted a young woman, roughly the age that Amber would have been, and dressed her in period clothing. She then asked the girl to carefully remove her clothes, layer by layer, and when fully naked, bend down and simulate digging the hole with her hands. The resulting photographs, on display in Lee's office, resemble an Eadweard Muybridge motion study, with the anonymous, fleshy female displayed in one hundred and forty various states of undress. The final component of the experiment is a sheet of vellum overlaying the photographs, on which a series of markings sketch out the contours of the hole. This photo-performance of Amber's nocturnal activities suggests that Dr. Lee's theory might have merit—that perhaps Amber did her digging in the nude. One wonders what Henry Whyte would have made of that.

Dr. Lee's method of historical reenactment echoes Häussler's own artistic practice. For Häussler, there is a slippage between her own identity and those of her characters when she is making the objects that she attributes to them. Like a medium channeling spirits, Häussler inhabits the interior space of her characters so completely that she often forgets that she has invented them. Describing the process of casting Object 17 as Amber would have, Häussler says, "The moment I do this work, even I am in this belief that I am excavating something. And I feel this excitement. Until I step back from my own—whatever it is—and say, 'Iris, it's all fine. It's all fine.' You know, I basically have to remind myself that I'm following a concept I have developed, that I am executing my own work." The dismissal of Häussler's fictions as mere deception overlooks her own desire to inhabit the space of belief that the visitor experiences.

In her letter to the Grange visitors, Häussler explains that the experience of *He Named Her Amber* necessarily entails an interrelation between reality and fiction. "Reality has an edge that imagination lacks," she writes. "However, finally revealing the fictitious nature of Amber's story—after a time of reflection—is absolutely as much a part of my artwork as constructing the story is in the first place. The point is redirection, not deception." In dismissing *He Named Her Amber* as a mere hoax, we overlook the particular complexities of immersing ourselves in the contours of this strange story, and then emerging from it once again.

And what are we to make of Amber's story? What does this fictional narrative of an obsessive maidservant yield that conventional histories cannot? For one, it redresses some of the structural inequities of history-making. On the vast majority of historic house tours, the central characters are the genteel owners—with the patriarch figuring most prominently—and not the servants who lived and worked there. The problem is partly one of documentary scarcity; as Howard Mansfield puts it, "the historical record is distorted by the fact that surviving artifacts are unrepresentative. The Wedding Dress Problem, preservationists sometimes call it. Historical societies and house museums have many wedding dresses, but who saved the workday clothes?"⁷

The objects discovered in the Grange excavation yield suggestions of the interior landscape of one of the most easily ignored historical figures, an immigrant scullery maid. We are invited to contemplate her private obses-

sions and pent-up desires. We speculate as to the particular hardships she may have endured, and the potential intimacies she could have shared with her housemates.

A passage from writer Clarissa Pinkola Estés suggests how a woman in Amber's position might have mitigated the effects of her emotional and social entrapment. Such feelings could very well have given rise to Amber's small acts of artistic subversion; as Pinkola Estés explains,

Captured and starved women sneak all kinds of things: they sneak unsanctioned books and music, they sneak friendships, sexual feeling, religious affiliation. They sneak furtive thinking, dreams of revolution. They sneak time away from their mates and families. They sneak a treasure into the house. They sneak their writing time, their thinking time, their soul-time. They sneak a spirit into the bedroom, a poem before work, they sneak a skip or an embrace when no one's looking.⁸

In believing that these waxen traces, squirreled inside the walls and floorboards of The Grange, are truly the property of Mary O'Shea, we are able to experience a past that neither official history nor art can capture.⁹

NOTES

1. A fictional character, Dr. Chantal Lee still receives emails at chantal.c.lee@gmail.com and responds to them. All quotes from Dr. Lee are excerpted from the author's lengthy email interview about the Grange excavation, June 10, 2009.
2. Sarah Milroy, "Strangeness at the Grange," *The Globe and Mail*, November 29, 2008.
3. David George-Cosh, "Reclusive downtown artist a hoax," *The National Post*, September 12, 2006.
4. Author's interview with Margaret Deery, May 22, 2009.
5. This Gallery Guide's support for the project is echoed by many enthusiastic visitors who, in contrast to those who felt deceived, have emailed Häussler in gratitude. One such visitor, Lynne Kenneith Brodgen, wrote to me on June 15, 2009: "Not only did the AGO act ethically, I believe that I would have been deprived of the actual experience of the conceptual piece had I known it was an art work. It was an outstanding experience. [...] I have not had such a wonderful thing happen to me in a long time. I kept revisiting the experience. Just thinking about it fills me with a grand feeling of awe again. It is not only refreshing, but inspiring. It is emotional splendor. I thank Iris and the AGO for affording me the pleasure of the experience."
6. The discovery of Object 17 prompted the retrieval of Chu's cone, now under a glass case in the Grange library. Upon examination it was found to be a solid cast of beeswax, with fabric and dried plant material encased inside.
7. Howard Mansfield, *In the Memory House*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1993.
8. Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1992, 237. For this reference, I am indebted to Lisa Wood, a visitor to The Grange, who mentioned it in an email to Chantal Lee dated January 24, 2009.
9. For further information, visit: <http://haeussler.ca/amber>, <http://anthserv.ca> and <http://www.haeussler.ca/legacy>, accessed June 10, 2009.

Cecilia Aldarondo is a PhD Candidate in Comparative Studies in Discourse and Society at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Her dissertation, *Lost and Found*, explores the relation between material objects and memory in Iris Häussler's installations.

OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM: archaeological re-enactment allows investigation of the parameters under which Object #17 was created. Lee hired a model to explore the relationship of body, floor and mold, and deconstructed the model's movements through sequential imaging; The Grange, a National Historic Site of Canada, main hall. An excavation was undertaken into the curved wall beneath a Pandora sculpture by Odoardo Fantacchiotti, ca. 1870 [photos: Iakub Henschen, 2009]

