OPENING NIGHT!

INTRODUCING SHEA HEMBREY

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LIVE from the New York Public Library

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Celeste Bartos Forum

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: My name is Paul Holdengräber and I'm the Director of LIVE from the New York Public Library. I am delighted that tonight is the Fall LIVE season's opening night with Shea Hembrey. Stay tuned for our season this fall, which includes evenings with Harry Belafonte, Ariel Dorfman, Rick Rubin and Russell Simmons, Joan Didion, Diane Keaton, Gilberto Gil, Umberto Eco, Jessye Norman, Anish Kapoor, Brian Eno, and many more. When I heard of Shea Hembrey's project, his biennial, Seek, which showcases a hundred artists from around the world, I simply could

not resist. I was reminded of the project of Komar and Melamid, the seriousness and an at-play, the way in which Shea makes us question what we find of value and what we seek aesthetically as beautifully and rewarding, how the art world lifts us up and mostly lets us down.

Shea Hembrey grew up in—and now I hope I pronounce this town correctly—Hickory Grove, Arkansas, in a family of farmers, factory workers, hunters, trappers, musicians, and cockfighters. Though he has developed the majority of his craftsmanship skills on his own, he has a varied formal art education, including an MFA from Cornell University and a year studying Maori art in New Zealand. His studio is now based in a sleepy town in New Jersey. I like asking our guests what they are reading. Here are the five books Shea is reading right now: *Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain* by David Eagleman; *The Art Instinct* by Denis Dutton; *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer; *Jacobson's Organ and the Remarkable Nature of Smell* by Lyall Watson; *The Gold Cell* by Sharon Olds. We ask our guests to provide us with seven-word biographies. Shea Hembrey in seven words: "Watches, thinks, makes, stops, then looks again." So now pay attention. Stop. Think. Look again. Ladies and gentlemen, here comes Shea Hembrey.

(applause)

SHEA HEMBREY: The music was Yma Sumac, I don't know if you're familiar, popular in the fifties, and that's my favorite song to play in the studio when I need to get energized, it's the "Gopher Mambo." So the theme for tonight is introducing Shea

Hembrey. So I'm going to take that as my job. I'm going to introduce you to me and I'm going to introduce you to the recent project that I finished in the studio. And I'm going to be informal and playful because that's very much who I am. It's great to be here at the library because a library is a place that means a whole lot to me. Coming from such a rural place, books is what has made the difference in my life, and the path of books has led me from a dirt road in the middle of nowhere in Arkansas to where I am now.

When I think of libraries, I always think of probably my favorite library I've ever been in, which was the national library in Vanuatu, which is an island in the South Pacific, a set of islands. I remember going—I was there doing art research for over a week—and I went to the library, and I've never been to a library that had this holiness and this feeling of reverence. People were standing waiting for a seat, and waiting for, you know, a desk to open up. And when they got called, it was like they'd won a gift, which is exactly what I think it should be like when you go to the library.

When I started middle school, I had the chance to—I always had art classes when I was in elementary school, and when I started middle school I had a chance to either take an art class for the first year or to work in the library. I didn't take an art class, and for the next five years I didn't take an art class, I worked in a library for all those six years of middle school and high school. And that really says a lot, I think, about who I am as an artist. Research is super important to me, as much as making. And at that library, I made a best friend, and her name was Betty Roley and she was a sixty-year-old librarian and I had her for those six years. And she made such a difference in my life. And as you can

imagine I was super cool in school because this sixty-year-old librarian was my best friend. And also I carried a briefcase to school, but you know, that was me. I was very serious about school. And so what happened during that hour every day is she really didn't make me work, she let me follow whatever I was curious about, and let me do research. And I had that gift for years of just getting to dig in, and I think that's very much formed me as who I am as an artist today. I'm going to get cottonmouth, excuse me.

So I think to introduce who I am I need to launch in some stories about growing up and how I grew up and where I grew up. And I'll tell some of my favorite stories that I know friends love. One of those is when I was five we had two television channels when I was growing up. Because we were in such a rural space, that we had a thirty-foot antenna, and if you turned it one way you got one channel, ABC, and if you turned it another way you got PBS. And when it would start to get winter, you'd have, we'd have kind of the family meeting, and decide do we want—it would freeze up, so you would have to choose—is it going to be a winter of PBS or a winter of ABC? We didn't watch a whole lot of TV anyway, but we would have this discussion of the choice. And the way you would tune the television is someone would stand in the living room, someone would stand in the doorway of the house, and someone would be out in the yard by the thirty-foot pole with a vise grip: "More, more, more! Less, less, less!" until you tuned it in.

So when I was five, the only thing I really ever remember watching when I was little was documentaries. And I remember when I was five there was a PBS documentary from the

Arkansas local PBS network that was about animals in the Ozarks. And we would spend our summers camping and fishing in the Ozarks and there was this little fish that I'd never seen before that they introduced, this little sculpin that could change colors; it was camouflaged, and it could change colors a bit. And I was so excited because I had never seen one, and it was on the river where we would always go and spend our summers. And so that was my mission, after I saw this fish, was to find one. So all that summer when we were there, I was searching for this fish, searching for this fish, looking in the moss beds, and finally one day I found them. I found one of these little fish. So for a couple days I was trying to catch him, I knew which moss bed he lived in and I was skulking after him. So finally one day I caught him, put him in, you know, like a little plastic camp cup, and I was running around to show him to everyone in camp, like, "Look it's the fish, it changes colors," and telling them about this fish. And before I could get it back into the water, it died.

So I was crying because the fish had died, and it was, you know, the special fish I had finally found. And my mom said, "Don't worry. Put it on ice, we can take it home and you can show it to family when we get home." So it goes in the ice chest, it goes home and it gets put in the freezer, so anyone comes to our house, I'm like "Look at my fish!" So out of the freezer it comes and I show them the little frozen fish. But what my family didn't know is that when they weren't looking or it was night and everyone was in bed, I would get the fish out of the freezer and fill up water in the bathtub or the sink, and play with him. And I knew how long I could play with him until he started to get really like kind of gooey, like felt like uncooked steak, and then he'd have to go back in the freezer.

So he had these two little indentions where I would always just play with him. So I had him for years, I played with him for years. And then, getting older, I remember getting home from high school one day, and there being food everywhere and walking in the house and Mom said, “Don’t freak out. The refrigerator died, but the fish is at your grandmother’s, it’s in her freezer.”

And so the fish went through a couple of freezers and it finally got buried when I went off to New Zealand because I was going to be leaving the country. And now I’m really sad that the fish was buried; one of its fins was missing, it was really completely falling apart. And he became like the mascot of our freezer, every time you opened it he would be there. And there actually there’s a picture of me at five, and my sister got a new puppy and that lump in my hand is my frozen fish. **(laughter)** And I’m happier than she is, I think. Don’t you love the shag carpet? My sister’s so tough. I love these horrible high cut-offs and her suspenders because she’s so stylish now, it’s so funny.

And also that same year another story that friends and family would point out and say a lot of who I am, is I remember walking on the side of the road in the dirt, you know, they would grate the road and there would be like berms of sand along the road. And there was this perfect little egg sitting on the side of the road, and I remember picking it up, it wasn’t cracked. It had fallen from the nest in the tree above, and I knew it was a turtledove, because my dad told me. And I remember listening to it and holding and looking at it and telling them, “This is going to hatch.” And my parents, because they’re the kind of parents who let you keep a dead fish, let me try to hatch it. So I wrapped it in

a washcloth, it went everywhere with me, and then at night it got put on the lamp, my bedside lamp. And after three days it hatched. And they were all completely shocked, and I wasn't shocked because I could tell there was, you know, there was life in there. Well, the sad part of that—I didn't know how to—none of really knew how to take care—now I could take care of a baby bird if I hatched it out. But at that point I didn't know enough of how to take care of a baby bird.

So now let's go to six, and I'll tell you some stories from when I was six. No, I'm kidding. I'm not going to—we'll skip along a little bit. **(laughter)** I can ramble on endlessly about my childhood, though, because it is really quirky. I never even thought of it as quirky until you move away, and then you realize, that was really strange. So I've been working as an adult artist for like twenty years now. And for sure the hardest was the first five years, because I remember thinking all the time, "What can I do that's new? What can I do that's new?" And that was what I was really focused on, trying to figure out how to do something important and new. And then I remember one day meeting with a professor and having this discussion that really changed things and it was the idea that, what would you make if no one could see it? What if you had to work in the studio for two or three years, no one would ever see it, what would you choose to do? So what would that look like? And I remember thinking about that, and thinking, if I figure that out, then I know I have my voice. Because it's the labor that you have to do, it doesn't matter if it ever gets any attention. And from that point on I remember just having such a kind of a discovery of voice, and just such a relaxation about no pressure anymore, just do what—follow the question, follow the research, follow the passion.

And that, I don't know, that peace and freedom has continued, and it's amazing how just not questioning your voice and owning it so prepares you to ask the big questions. So I'm amazed by the power of art. I love—and I'm often surprised by the power of art, and I'm also sometimes frightened by the power that art has over me. A really good work of art—I can't hardly even look at it—today, Vicki just showed a wonderful piece, we were looking at things in the special collections and as soon as she showed it, I just turned around because I can't, you know, it's just too powerful, hold on—you know, let me prepare myself, let me brace myself. And that's something I'm always hoping that's going to happen when you go to a museum, that's something's going to really hit you and that you have to look away or that you have to sit down. I always call those conversion experiences, when you become a believer in this work, when it gets you.

And a couple of those, I'm always hoping these are going to happen and I hope they'll be a surprise. That's a great thing about going to museums, not knowing if there's going to be this great conversion experience today. I know I'm going to find things that I enjoy, but is there going to be a work that overpowers me? I remember being in Sydney over ten years ago and seeing this large Cézanne exhibition and there being one still life painting that was in the show that I walked through and then I went back, and I walked through and I went back, and then I walked through and I went back, and that was that morning. And I stood there in front of it all day until the security guards repeatedly asked me to leave. So I spent all day in front of this painting. I just physically couldn't make myself move on. And I was trying to figure out, what, why, what is going on in this painting,

why can't you even walk away from it? And I don't even know if I can explain it well, but the best way that I can try to talk about it is that the paint wasn't paint; it had the energy and speed of human flesh, as if it was alive. And I remember thinking, okay, I'm tripping out, because I'm not seeing paint, I'm seeing flesh, and why am I seeing that? And then I'm thinking, well, you know, when you paint skin, it does become salt and peppered with your DNA—you know, I am seeing, I'm sensing that maybe. And so eventually security guards asked me to leave, and I'm relieved because I have to leave Sydney and I'm not going to have to go spend tomorrow standing in front of this painting.

So those wonderful, overcoming moments, I never can fully figure them out and I think that's why I love art. I'm always wanting to find this, I always want to provide this for someone else, and how do you do that? And it's sometimes frightening when you think of—I remember being in Fairbanks and seeing these Inuit stones in a case and running to the bathroom and locking myself in and saying, "Don't try to break them out." Because I just remember looking at them and thinking, "They need to be outside, they need to be in the elements, they don't have their power because they're not out in the elements," and you're like, well, that seems totally ridiculous. But okay, "Don't get out of the bathroom stall, stay locked in here until you talk yourself down because you can't break them free, 'cause no one's going to believe you, because how's that—'oh, they needed to be freed.'" But they did need to be freed, so finally I just had to rush from the bathroom out of the museum, like, you know, "Don't try to free it."

I'm always waiting to find myself in super trouble. In China a couple years ago I remember having this experience, it was an object again, and thinking, "What's the worst-case scenario if they arrest you? You're trying to break this piece free, you get put in a Chinese prison, you'll learn Chinese, it'll be a good experience, you know, the worst thing that can happen." So when I hear stories of people taking knives to canvases or hammers to sculptures, I always think, "Wow, someone was enchanted and they were trying to break that enchantment." So hopefully it never happens to me that I get arrested.

So before—I should probably talk about my recent project before I just keep going on and on. So a few years ago I was in Europe going to see all the big biennials and other shows like Documenta that were giving a survey of contemporary art now. And they all happened to line up in this year, in 2007. And I didn't expect to, you know, always find work that's going to make me want to go to prison for it, but I expect to find works that I find interesting. And I expect to find works that, you know, have these ideas that intrigue me and that I feel the passion in the work and that have a staggering technique. So I'd been going and seeing these for months, and I was painting in Europe as well.

So the last one that I was to go and see was in Venice, the Venice Biennale. So I had over a week to see it, slowly taking time, because it takes time to see work properly. I always think the best way to see work is to—not that anyone needs instruction on how to see work—but if you can make yourself stand for at least a minute and just empty yourself out, and not try to think. Just stand there and say, "I'm in front of you, if you can reveal yourself. I'm here for a minute, and then I'm going to start thinking and evaluating what

you are as an object in front of me." So I'm in Venice and excited about this Biennale—hopefully it's the one that's going to beat all the others, because I'd been hoping for more in all the others, and I'm wanting more, just wanting to feel more and get blown away and waiting to be blown away. So I got up the morning that I was going to spend my first full day at the Biennale, and I get on the vaporetto and take the water taxi, and it's time to get out and I can't bring myself to get off and go in the venue. And I thought, "Oh, I'm not ready yet, I'm not ready to be let down or maybe I'm not ready to be so surprised."

So I just remember thinking, "It's not fair that I can say I'm not pleased if I can't put it into words." So that day I just started making notes and I spent the entire day riding water taxis. And I never went in the venue that day. I filled just scraps and scraps of every piece of paper I could get my hand on; that whole day I wrote feverishly about what I wanted to see in the biennial, what I wanted to see in contemporary art that I hadn't been seeing or what I wanted to see more of. And that night I remember going back to the hotel room and there just being a mountain of paper on the bed, and looking at it and thinking, "What the hell am I going to do with this—with all this idea—of all this. I've mapped out this thing that I want, so what am I going to do with it?" And I remember putting it in Ziploc bags and hiding it in the bottom of my suitcase. But of course it gnawed on me and I was thinking, "I'm going to have to curate my own biennial. And I'm going to have to figure out how to do that, and I'm going to have to start."

And then one day I realized, you know, that "I'm a maker, I'm not a curator, so I should just make it." And I remember thinking, "That's a ridiculous, audacious thought, because

you need lots of artists to make a biennial." And then I realized, "Well, I could become all those artists." So that was the initial idea that drove me crazy; it was the sand in my shell. And so I started to think about it and started making notes. And I decided it should be done in two years because it should be a true biennial in that way. So I started to work, and I did it in two years. It ended up being a hundred and six artists, and there are two fictional curators as well. I decided to make it in secret. I had enough voices in my head, I didn't need other people talking about it; and there's something also really powerful about feeding it, knowing that I was doing something secret that was big. And the result is the book. It's this biennial catalog, which is a 412-page documentation of this—of my biennial. And it was also fun to really, gosh, to be so many different people. And I would never choose to work as someone else, I love to work as me, so it was really weird to get this idea and then have the challenge of working as other people. And that's been super educating, and I can talk a little bit more about that later, and how do I put myself in there, how is it me through the filter of all these other people?

So I should start introducing you to some of these guys. Okay, this is French conceptual artist Sebastian Roux. And he's very interested in collections, and he's admittedly an incurable collector. And so what he presents in this biennial are two of his collections. And he's really wanting to get across focusing on what's missing from his collection, focusing on that drive to collect. So here he presents his box collection, which is entitled *12.14 Cubic Meters of Emptiness*. And it's measured by what isn't there, the empty space in the boxes, so that the more boxes he adds to his collection, the larger the emptiness. The other collection that he shows is a vessel collection, and it's measured by the volume

of water that is held. And water is dripping and overflowing and it's this, the echo, the sound is like the dripping tap in the night that keeps you calling, wanting to collect and wanting to make more and more and more.

The next artist is, she's referred to locally as the Sleepwalking Mama. She's a housewife in Memphis, her name's Audrey Keech, and she's a stay-at-home mom. And she makes work when she's asleep, and she's as surprised by what she makes as her family is. So she describes what she makes as protective talismans that protect her family. So one morning they woke up and she had painting this protective pattern around the house. This was at the foot of one of her daughter's bed, it's made out of Kool-Aid mix and glitter. And then she sewed her twins together one night—which she said she's most surprised when she sews, because she's never sewed before but sometimes she sews at night.

And the next artist is a Spaniard, Bartholomew Soto. I should say something about names. That was a great thing is getting to name all these many, many people. And I knew I wanted a lot of the names to honor friends and family that I grew up with. So when I first started naming, I got my family tree out and then I got out a piece of paper and I sat down and thought, "I'm going to write down all the neighbors who had all the farms around us growing up." So I started writing down the neighbor's names: "Rudolph Pretty, Corny Waters, Frog Heath, Dolphus Davenport, Red Payne." And I thought, "Okay, these names are ridiculous. I can't use the names of the real—" So that gave me great permission to name however I wanted to because they couldn't be as wild as what I'd grown up with.

So Bartholomew Soto, he's very much like me in the sense that he's interested in the power that vision has upon you to make you do unreasonable things. So he's playing with the idea of Medusa, of not looking at Medusa or you'll be turned, or be turned to a pillar of salt. So he's referencing this in a series that he does called *Sacred Relics*. And to see these works, you can't look at them directly, you only look at the mirror reflection of the object in the exhibition because it's too powerful to be looked at directly. This piece is—these are the eyes of Clovis, and they are pupils from ancient statues of deities. He's totally, absolutely made up all these fake relics. This is the Phoetus and Ephesus, another thing you can't look at directly.

This is a Michigan artist, Fadi Hamad. He grew up always hearing his grandmother talking about wanting to go back to Mecca. So when she was ailing he decided to do this as a gift to her and in the woods he did this giant infinity shape of a path in the woods that he entitled *Towards Ihram,* for her, because she would always say, "You know, I want to go back to Mecca, but my health isn't enough, but Allah is everywhere." So this was a gift that he made for her. And what I like about this piece is the getting down on the knees and crawling through the forest and experiencing nature in such a different way by that softness and by being on that level.

Next is a Kiwi artist who's now living in San Diego, Kiri Robbins. So when the curators went to visit with her, they went to visit with her about her sculpture, but they noticed that she had notes all over her arms. And they started asking her about them and she

explained that she was starting to suffer from memory loss as her mother had. And so she was worried, but she was convinced that maybe she could help stave off all this memory loss by things, by what she was calling preventative measures—doing these creative things that would help her not lose her memory by using, making again and again as a way of keeping a memory. So she made a set of flashcards, and she's remaking the set each week, and the objects tell the story of her life. That's the pile of flashcards—Oliver's asking questions—and that's another, that's one image from her flashcards, that's an image of a ring.

Next is Ju Hu, he's a performance artist, and an artist who does a lot of installations. And he's interested with altering time lines and playing with time. And for this project, which is called *Grove*, he camps out for a month in a small set of woods and tries to maintain it, this is in fall, and he tries to maintain the woods to the exact moment it was that he showed up. So as leaves fall, he tapes them back on the trees. If he runs into a stone, he tries to tape it back into where it was. So he sends this month trying to maintain this stasis.

This is funny. I remember—Sandy's laughing, she remembers helping me the day we did this. This is Amanda Pane, and she's worked for years with myth and legend, And for this research project, which she calls *Monstrous*, she's creating evidence for fictional creatures, and she doesn't document it, she creates them where she thinks people will run across it, because she really loves to keep the mystery going alive of things like Sasquatch. So in this one, in the next image, she dresses up in a costume and finds trails

where hunters have set up game cameras to photograph game moving by, and she triggers them. And she's always looking on websites—UFO websites and monster sighting websites, to see if her work got discovered by anyone. This is a footprint of the New Jersey Devil.

This is an image from Hettie Holden. She does all these projects where she knows there's going to be a failure, but she's trying to communicate with other species. This one, this is a diagram of the ultimate eight diagrams, a Chinese symbol. And so she does these drawings and puts them in hives to communicate with the bees. So this one is, what's it called, the hexagon, the comb for the larva—so she puts them in and then the bees chew them up and spit them out, shred the works.

Next is Esta Bergen. Esta Bergen in the sixties lost her son and husband in an accident, and she started making these books about them. And that led to her making books about all the friends and family in her community and the congregation in her community. So when she passed away last year they found these piles and piles of books that have—after looking through her diaries, they're finally starting to decode them. And she calls all her symbology a slow language and they're drawn upon patterns from her garden and quilting patterns. The two curators here are trying to demystify some of her slow language. That, by the way, is my grandmother, and that's a map from one of the books.

The next artist is Ed Fortune, and he is a performance artist and he's really interested in playing trickster and pushing it to the edge. And in this project, which is called *To*

Succeed, he—what he does is push something so beyond the boundaries that the only thing responsible is to make it fail. So in this one he started a church called the True Word Church of Christ, and he started getting Bibles and whiting out everything except for the red letters, which are the words of Christ. So for him the big challenge is when do you stop, how far do you push this? And, well, he discovered he'd pushed it too far when he goes to his small congregation and they take him and surprise him that they are starting to build a mother church. So then he has to do this whole backtrack and explain that it's an art project. I see you.

This is from Hilda Singh's *Social Outfits* project. And she wanted to make these things that people could wear that would create thoughtful social interactions. This is a *Seeing the World Through Others' Eyes Helmet*. The next one is *Spreading One's Point of View Hat*. And the next one is a *Personal Space Ensuring Device*. It has all these prongs where you can only get so close or you run into her. This was in China, and I had my friend Katherine put it on. This was one of the greatest moments of this whole project. She put this on and we started walking down the street, and these two women started screaming and running; and it was two women who cleaned the streets, and they had vests, glow-in-the-dark vests, but they weren't decorated like that. And so they were all over this garment, and asking tons of questions—which me and her totally didn't, we don't speak, we had no clue what was going on. They were so enthusiastic, and I said, "Oh, we'll go back next year and they'll have embroidered all their work gear."

This is also in China. So this was a fun part of this project is getting friends and family to be tons of different characters, and I had to be tons of different characters in front of the camera besides making the work. And I was dressed as a nineteenth-century explorer and going around town, and with my height and those clothes, it was a lot of attention. This is me as a drag queen, another artist, a Tibetan artist who now lives in Brooklyn.

This is another great memory of making the whole biennial. This was a large cube that I had put in a friend's industrial freezer so that it would be—the air would be refrigerated and it would be foggy, so I could rush it into the woods and take the photo, and it would have the correct atmosphere. So I have this huge box, and I'm running through the woods before the refrigeration will cool off to get it in site where I had found in this moss bed where I wanted to take the photos. But you had to cross a river, and the day before I had been and the river was low. And I got down there and I had my box and my friend's behind me with all the photo equipment, and I'm carrying this big box, which is kind of a ridiculous thing to lug through the woods, is this box of air that's refrigerated. So she's behind me with all the photo equipment, we get there, and the river is raging and there's kayakers. And I have to get to the other side, 'cause this is where I was going to take the photographs, and I was like, "I think I can make it." And so I take off and I have the box and I get like halfway through, and I get knocked down because of the pressure, and off I go and there goes the box, and I see it go over the fall, and I'm thinking, "do you go over the fall, or do you let the refrigerated air go?"

And I didn't really think, I went over the fall. And then I went over the fall and underwater and come up and I didn't hit my head, and I pop up around all these kayakers, who are just like gobsmacked. And I just start laughing because there's this box. So I grab it, and I'm walking and I think I should turn around and ask one of them, "Will you sign for this package, sir?" **(laughter)** So I pick up the box and I go. And the moss bed that I thought would still be there had flooded and I thought, "This was really, what an idiot am I?" So I have to get back across, so the long and short of it is I take the photo elsewhere, and the fog disappeared that was inside it, but the mist from this waterfall made a great image anyway. And that's a long and rambling story just to say I do really ridiculous things like carry boxes of refrigerated air through the woods, but it makes total logic sense to begin with. Maybe not while you're doing it.

This is from Naya Jayasuriya, she's a Sri Lankan artist. And she wrote the longest epic that has ever been written, it's called *Sunder*. And then she decided that she was going to make animations of it. And this is from the first portion of animations, this is Griore, he is one of the main characters. And it all unfolds in the contents of a cast-off soda bottle, and the long fins and the wash rags battle out, do this battle to control sunlight.

This is from a British artist who's now living in Amsterdam, Jillander Patel and her project is called *The Hidden Body of Air*. And this is a buoy that she uses to let you know what's going on in the space because a lot of it has to do with humidity and smoke, and you have to look at the objects that are suspended to understand what's, the movements.

Next is Zora Moretti, she's in Spain now, and this is from a group of works that she calls *Finishing Another's*. She found this trove of unfinished canvases, they were canvases that were just gessoed with drawings on them by this Bulgarian artist. And she made it her mission over a decade to somehow finish the works, though she realized she never could, so these works are really about that discussion of trying to finish someone else's work.

Next is Anarosa Borrego, and she's interested in hidden views. For one whole set of works, she does portions of the backs of famous masterpieces. And in this piece it's from a series of what you see when your eyes are closed.

This is from Jurgi Petrauskas. He's a Lithuanian artist known as the *Seer of Trakai*, and these are, he calls them appeals, but really they're prayers that people come to him and have him make. And he refers to them as *Hope: Sent Outside Your Body*.

Next is by a collective of fathers from Omaha, Nebraska, and they call themselves FAGS, which stands for Fathers of Active Gay Sons. And they began making these crafty objects that would embrace their son's life, every aspect of their son's life, and this is a memento mori cum rag.

Next is by a Belgian artist, and he is interested in—he believes that there is a logic, he sees these moments of logic unfolding in nature. He can't read them, but he knows when to capture them. So this is a whole series of photographs where he's trying to capture this coded logic.

This image is from Clayton & McGhee. They're these two best friends who met each other in Southern California, retired CEOs who became friends and on a whim one day decided to start making graffiti. And this is one of them's tags, and he calls this tag the *Killer Martini*.

This is another Southern California artist, Dustbin Turner, and he calls what he does artifications. And he uses art as—he says it's his best form of currency. And after spending a day running around Southern California with a shopping cart, it's really great—every time I'm in the city now, I think, "I need a shopping cart, this is the best way to get around and carry all your stuff."

This is from Tucker Davenport, and he's a savant who counts colors. And these are diaries of his week, where he chronicles the colors of each day.

Next is Xavier Reed. He's a French artist who—he makes machines that try to right our humanity, try to correct our emotions or fix our unreasonableness. This one you can see the title here, some of the others include *A Favored Child Equalizing Machine*, *A Debaptism Vice*, and *An Inheritance Calculator*.

This is from Chloe Papineau, a South African artist, and this is a piece from a whole series she did when she was battling cancer.

This is a game board from a performance piece from Imogene Dupree, an artist in her seventies. And this is so fun because I always want to play it. One of the things I'll point out is these are raccoon penis bones, which in the South are for good luck. Like, so if you go to a casino, you put one in your pocket, so I thought it was fun to have a game where you play with raccoon penis bones.

This is from Nina Shaufner. Maybe I shouldn't say much more about Nina Shaufner's work.

This is from Azar Rezazadeh, an Iranian artist, and this is from a memorial she did to the Iran/Iraq War.

This is from Fred Salinger's work, and this is from an essay he did with images, called *Art That Isn't*. And he was attempting to make these zero-stimulus pieces. **(laughter)**

Next is from a Chilean artist, Claudia Sanz. And is this from a large *Dowry* installation of hers, and this is the *Hall of Textiles* in that installation.

Next is from a group of artists, Winston B. Davis started this project. And he started hiring migrant workers to help him on some projects, and then he decided to just start paying them to make whatever they wanted to make, and he would give them a topic. And so the topic for what is included in this biennial is How Did You Get to This

Country? And this is from Al Sepulvadah, one of the migrant workers who painted for him.

This is from Choctaw Riley's—a series of short films that he calls filmed haikus.

This is—I hear Sandy laughing again. This is from Carla Newton, a British artist. And it's called *Partial Vacuum*, it's a short film about how we instinctively protect what we believe in even when we haven't analyzed our beliefs. And this was actually shot across the river, where me and Michael and Sandy all kayaked out, and it's all these little islands. And the fun part of shooting that was just having Michael and Sandy, who are married, yell at each other for a couple hours. And I was like, "Throw stones now," so it was really great to watch them play that out.

This is from Lucy Tran, a Texan artist who grew up in her mother's salon. She did these paintings out of fingernail polish that are about personal adornment, and each one is of different clients, regulars at the salon.

This is from a New York artist, Danny Kravitz. These are heaps of silver ashes, and this is a memorial that he did to his Polish grandmother.

This is from Violet Waters. She is a sculptor who always buries her work, and this is a large group of conceptual pieces about the power of burial.

This is from a photographer who did these sets of portraits of workers in a Rust Belt aluminum factory.

And this piece is from Jabez Baty. I remember my sister seeing this for the first time and started laughing so hard, she recognized why the artist's name was Jabez Baty. So it was all these carvings of vulvas. Growing up, my doctor until I was in my twenties was the local gynecologist because my aunt worked for him, and his name was Jabez. So when she saw that I named him Jabez she's laughing so hard and she said, "No one will ever know how funny that is that you used his name!"

This is from Rosalee Starr. She actually died in the sixties, but all this work was recently found. She was a librarian at a local black college in Georgia.

This is from Inez Wu, she did a whole series called *The Never Portraits*, portraits of extinct species.

This is another series of portraits from Nate Gann, and he's trying to make portraits of something ephemeral as a river, so he's making these river portraits. He's using metal and embossing them to this one single instance of the flow of the river.

This is—I always laugh because it's Boomer Bazemore, that name is always so funny. Boomer Bazemore is playing with ancient Roman ways of reading the haruspices and augers, to playing with pop culture by using ancient Roman divining techniques. Like in

this one reading the entrails, like in this case entrails don't tell you anything except that you need to refer to an augur to see what a bird will tell you.

This is from Clyde Hunter, a Canadian artist. He uses inspiration as his studio subject, and this is a group of sculpture called *Muses*.

This is from Olin Burgess, he's a monk who left the order. He said he had to leave the order when he couldn't talk to a fellow brother without wanting to lick his nipples. This piece is called—I love the title of this one—*Suckle (Nipples of Adam, Nipples of Jesus upon which we could suckle yet not be fed).*

Next is Maddie Thompson, and she's been doing a whole series for a few years. This is about her virtual life, and does it have more reality—her online life that she lives—than her real lived reality.

And this is Janeen Jackson, an Australian artist. This is work, this is a crate that was shipped to a museum and when they opened it up, the work had reworked itself; it had cocooned itself and become something else. And it's funny because Janeen Jackson, I was really careful when I named everyone, to do research that I had not actually used the name of a real artist that was out there working, so I did Web searches for everything. So I get an e-mail about a month ago from Janeen Jackson, an Australian artist. And she says, "I'm a Janeen Jackson. I saw this talk online that you did, and I'm an artist, and I live in Melbourne." She was like, "What can you tell me about me?" **(laughter)** So, I

sent her her bio, and I sent her images and text about her work. And she wrote back to say that, “Well, actually, I’m also from Melbourne, Australia,” and such a moving letter back saying that she had stopped working for years, and she was going to start working again and to say thank you, and a wonderful line: “I wonder what other people you’ve secretly reawakened into doing the lives they should have lived.”

Okay, I think I’m going to quit rambling. That’s not quite half, but it gets tedious, I think, because it’s—especially showing just a few images. But I can field questions if people are up for questions.

Q: What came first in most of these—the art or the artist?

SHEA HEMBREY: That’s a really good question. It varied, and I didn’t want it to become too formulaic. Michael asked which came first, the artist or the work? Sometimes the work came first, and I had to figure out who would make that and why would they make that and the whole life of it. Sometimes it was the artist, and I had to figure out what would be important that they say. And I would never set out—it’s weird to work as other artists, because I wouldn’t set out to work as other artists, but to make this work I had to work as other artists. So every single time it was different. Sometimes I knew so much about the person and I could never figure out, “What the hell do they make, you know?” There’s the struggle, is the work going to involve this struggle they’re having in their lives? That’s really, really, really educating. I think a great MFA program would be one year where the students have to work not as themselves but as someone else, because

it really makes you think about what you naturally do. And sometimes I would start to make something and I'd realize, "No, I am totally doing what I would do." And then I'd stop and ask myself, "What's the complete opposite I would do?" And then, "Okay, but I wouldn't do that, how can you do that?" And it makes some kind of logic, and you believe in it and get behind it. And if you can figure out the opposite of what you'd do, but also that you believe in it, and you see the value in it, it's really, really educating and enlightening. Thank you.

Q: I think about four or five images back you had a Roman piece or a figure against a wall, and I wanted to ask what type of material did you use?

SHEA HEMBREY: Can I go back? Yeah, let me get to it.

Q: There you go.

SHEA HEMBREY: This one?

Q: Yes.

SHEA HEMBREY: Yeah, so it's actually—instead of using real guts and then photographing it—it's all sculpture. It's Sculpey, and then everything's painted and then coated in pigment. And it's—actually I don't know where it is, I hid it because it kind of grossed me out. Because it was sitting in the studio, and it's all glistening because I

coated it in all these levels of, like, blood and fluids, shiny fluids. But it's plain old Sculpey.

Q: Did you have to fire any artists or destroy any work?

SHEA HEMBREY: Yeah, I did a hundred and six, and six of them didn't make the final cut. **(laughter)** And it was weird; one thing that you also really learn from doing this many artists is how you keep doing the same thing over and over again. You have a certain way of working that you're like, "Okay, this is how you go about it." And I kept trying to be the same artist over and over again, and I was like, "Okay, I'm not allowed. No one can deal with this," and then you'd have to go somewhere else. And I want to show the six others at some point. Some of it's too naughty, and then even I was like, "I can't believe I did that." **(laughter)** And I didn't want the shock value to take over the value of, like, it being really important work.

Q: Do you feel a need to continue the body of work of any of these artists? And if so, would you consider it yours or theirs?

SHEA HEMBREY: It's weird when I finished it. Once the work is done they feel like a real person to me and then I'm done with them. And when I talk—I notice when I finish them, I talk about them as if they are real. But the point of building them and then during the work, I don't talk of them as, you know, a different person. Some of it I want to, just because it was so much fun, because I got to try on paths I never went down as an artist—

the materiality, or… But I think a different thing to do would be maybe do portraits of the hundred artists, do a whole series of portraits that show what their faces are, because I had it in my mind's eye. That's a whole other level, their lives and their stories and what they look like and sound like. We'll see. Some of it I won't be able to resist, even if it never sees the light of day, just because it's so much fun, some of the work, and it's so antithetical to what I maybe would normally do.

Q: I'm interested in that idea of the national character of your artists.

SHEA HEMBREY: A national character, the nationality?

Q: Yes, and were there any countries that you just couldn't get into?

SHEA HEMBREY: Well, that was a big challenge, because who am I to make African work, and who am I to make, you know. But it's a big fiction, so I had to give myself permission. So much of the time I was like, "Oh, this dude's Southern again." No I had to totally reenvision it before I started working. And I noticed the other day writing their ages down, so many of them are my age or older. The nationality, I don't—some of it, I mean, because of the work it would have to be that. The whole great thing about Americans or Canadians, it could be anything, you know, that was worked really, really easy. Kind of I just didn't deal with it in a way, by giving the next year's biennial; the next year the curators are going to change, and it's going to be set in Africa, and they're going to pull from a different geographic area, so this could be much more strongly based

in Europe and in North America. So this in a way is the way I got around a lot of it, because I couldn't bring myself to feel like I had permission a lot of the times, to do some of the work. And you know, I lived in Australia for a while, I mean, I lived in New Zealand for a while, and spent a lot of time going to museums in Australia, so I feel I had a sense of like pockets of places. I spent a month in Chile, so I feel like I had a sense of the art there. So a lot of them are based on places I've been, so I felt like I could, like I've spent time in Lithuania, so I could do a Lithuanian artist. So that's one thing I kind of ticked down wherever I'd been and worked nationally that way. But the world is so connected now, that it's, yeah.

Q: Did you—this is a two-part question—did you find that the artists were jealous of each other and vying for more space in the studio or more days, or did you feel more loyal to certain artists than others? And the second part of that question is how did it feel having so many artists renting space in your head? Were you tempted to make the same work? Like, were they copying from each other?

SHEA HEMBREY: Good questions. It's funny, I was thinking a fun thing to do would be to open a Twitter account for each one of them and let them all fight it out, **(laughter)** let them argue about issues. The way I had to work with them, I could only have three or four in my head at a time or it would drive me crazy. So I would be working on a set, and when they were done, I'd just kind of remove them and box them and put them away so they weren't in the studio, and that work did just disappear. So there would be three or four that I was trying to work on, and I tried to have them be different from each other,

because you could get them confused. And I would not make—I would do prep work for one, but I wouldn't really put myself, really give myself for that week, I was really putting myself as this person, you know. And mindless prep work of underpainting or something I could do, while this dried, I could go into another room, but I tried to really do one week at a time. Did I answer that halfway? I missed, I don't know, you had a lot of good questions, really, more than one. Well, I told Liz, "If I start to go crazy, please let me know, because there's so many voices in my head." Especially when they're antithetical to each other.

Q: Do you have favorite ones?

SHEA HEMBREY: I do have favorites, and I have—I don't know what this says, but my favorites as the ones that are most opposite of me and the ones that are basically me. Maybe we should just have done questions, I felt like I did a really bad slide show. I feel like we're getting much more ground here.

Q: I also have a two-part question. So one is, if and when you go back to making work as yourself again, how do you think this will affect that? Should I just ask that question first?

SHEA HEMBREY: Well, the next project that I'm thinking about a lot—I think it's got to be a bridge project, and wean me back. And it's going to be a project based on family history and a lot of family voices, giving them voice and working in a way as them and

telling their story. So that's going to be a bit of a bridge, because yes, it's kind of weird to go and sit in the studio now and it's just you. You can't blame anyone that they were having a bad day.

Q: Another question I had is I'm wondering if you found yourself having a formula as you came up with ideas for the different artists and the different projects, and did you have to push yourself to break out of that, so that you weren't falling into that pattern?

SHEA HEMBREY: Yeah, because I noticed that really fast, within the first five artists, it becoming formulaic—because this is the person and then you figure out who they are, and then this is what they make and this is how they go about it. And that's where coming in, like, starting with the work first and then working backwards helped change it. And then trying to shake that as much as possible so that it didn't become formulaic. Because there was a routine that it's—it was like I guess writing fiction, you know, you figure the personality; but what if you figured out, instead of the character first, you figured out the very last thing they did in the last scene and then you worked back. Or if you jumped in the middle and then worked both ways. It came about all kinds of ways; sometimes it was the material, and I just set myself up the challenge of, like, this material is going to be one of the artists, this roll of lead. So I have to figure that out, and that helped break the formula.

Q: I was wondering when you—when the curators started to become clear.

SHEA HEMBREY: Yeah, that's a really good question.

Q: Because I noticed that some of your artists were very studied—they were art students, they were artists, and then others were what we would call like an outsider. And also kind of what the percentage of each was.

SHEA HEMBREY: Yeah, I'm really wild about people who would never get found, and that was a really great thing about getting to play curator because you could make all these secret people up who would be really difficult to find. Because if I curated this I would never find, you know, a lot of this work, and there's a lot of that in there, and I'm excited about that work, I always think, "How on earth is it found?" And that's why I included some things that was found, that was from the sixties, you know. Gotta go back to the first of the question, which was—

Q: I was wondering when the curators' voices—

SHEA HEMBREY: The curators' voices—When I gave myself permission to just go to fifty, and then from fifty on, to really start bringing their voices out. And then I started making notes, and then they really started to curate after I had fifty on, because I didn't want to slow the pace. And when I knew I had half it was like I gave myself permission to be the weird critic, which so weird to work at the same time as curating because, like, "No, you can't make this, because it's not going to make the cut, because we've got this guy who does it better." Or you're like, "Maybe I'd do it," and then it gets put in and he

became one of the six that didn't make it in. The curators—it's interesting, I wanted it to be a man and a woman who kind of fight, because it was kind of the voice I had in my head all the time, like, "Do I like this, do it not?"—so, it has a banter going on. If you read the catalog, they have a voice—it's hard, I don't bring that across the way the catalog does, which was really interesting to write this down. The best part of writing the catalog was to get to a point where you needed to give the artist a quote, and you could come up with whatever perfect quote you needed; it was so great. Does that answer?

A lot of these things I think it's going to take me years to think about, because it's such a weird way of working. Who would choose to play curator? And then a hundred artists? It gets complicated, I probably don't even fully understand it. The more I think about it and reflect on it, the more I feel like I understand it.

Q: You started your talk by talking about how passionately you look at art. Do you find that the way you look at art now has changed?

SHEA HEMBREY: I want to fix it for people. I—lately I notice, I see it, and I think, "Oh, they're one of my fictional people, and if I just tweak this little bit and do this little bit, then it's better and it can go in the catalog." So it's weird, yeah. And I think I'll have that for a while, which is not good, I think, because it's going to take a while to really enjoy—I mean, I enjoy work whether it's good or bad because if it's bad, I'm like, "Oh, it makes me really want to work," you know, and get out there and make work. If it's really good then it's just so inspiring. But yeah, I think that would be the difference.

Q: I have to say—looking at the catalog—now when I go to art exhibits, I feel like, "Wow, that's really a Shea project," you know, so an effect that way. But you started out by talking about your family a little bit, and I know from looking at the catalog and talking to you a bit that your family has been really supportive, and you use them in various projects and so forth. And your friend Liz who's here—I hope this isn't too personal—but she told me a wonderful story about your family doing a kind of a memorial in your neck of the woods in Arkansas about Japanese, the war—and I wonder, is it, would you mind telling about that project, this was a family project?

SHEA HEMBREY: No, well, they all helped construct it. The great thing about my family—I never tell them what was, they didn't know, this was secret, and they didn't know what I was doing, they just knew it changed a lot. And I said, "Oh, it will make sense in the end," and they always would just chip in and help. And, you know, they would go to the graveyard and dance without really understanding why. So they've always—they've been around me enough years to know that I have a logic for it, and then later they'll understand. The project I did was, there were lots of—that you were referring to—was that there was lots of internment camps during the Second World War for Japanese Americans that they took them to Arkansas. And I did this large piece in a field which was like tons of kimonos on giant poles, and my family had to be the laborers for that. And they flexed and moved, and they looked like they were flying…. I don't know, was there something else about that, that you?

Q: I just remember her saying that you guys felt it was your obligation, since you were from there.

SHEA HEMBREY: To do something, yeah. I haven't thought about that piece in—and when you first said it and were saying it, I was thinking, "Who was the Japanese artist that did kimonos because I don't remember, and did they make it in?" No, they're always really—my family's really, really. It's actually amazing that they always do such—. They're such good laborers, that's the thing. Everyone, you know, they know how to use their hands, it's the way I grew up. Everyone learns how to sew and to cook and, you know, work with metal and carpentry. Everyone has those skills, so it's great to have those people as a slave labor force. And my friends that I make help.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Maybe a three-part question. How do you think curators are going to react to your project? Have you gone to see biennials since you have made your own? And the third one is, "What are you trying to prove?"

SHEA HEMBREY: Good questions. Too many at once. Let me process. Curators? I don't know, it's going to be curious to see because I mean, I have the—doing it fictionally, it's the easiest job, right? So I'm sure they'd be very, I would be very—I think I would be very critical of getting to do it as a fiction. I saw the last Whitney, and I was like, I realized I don't need to be here because it's like blowing my mind. I need to go—it would be nice maybe in the fall and see the Venice Biennale and enjoy it because I haven't seen—I only saw the Whitney one because I tried to stay away. And I actually

tried to stay away from a lot of shows because I didn't want to—and be careful of how much I saw. One I was so busy, when you're just being such a sponge, I was trying to be careful about what I took in. What was the third—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What are you trying to prove?

SHEA HEMBREY: What am I trying to prove? Nothing and everything. One thing that makes me excited about this, which I wish I had when I was like a twenty-year-old artist, is someone who did something that was so technically big where they tried to do all these different media. Just to give me permission to try to do something really big on a scale and to use so many different media. I am not keen on the increasing use of studio assistants by artists to make their work—a lot of painters who don't paint their paintings anymore. And in many ways the technical side of this is a statement against that because it's this huge amount of one person's labor.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So is it about craftsmanship?

SHEA HEMBREY: Craftsmanship's part of it. A lot of it is by bringing the outsiders in and putting them next to conceptual artists. I think there's a big tent; art is so big and I hate to see it made into small tents. I think it's just one big tent, and I think it should be treated that way and it should be talked about that way, and they should be— You know, an outsider artist should be talked in dialogue with the top conceptual artist or the top performance artist. At heart it's all the same, I think. And I say in the catalog that's the

mission of *Seek*, is hunting down what is the power in art—what is the power for a viewer, what is the power for the maker, and what is the power that exists in it as an object? And for me it was, that was what I was seeking—a quest, and a quest to get excited about art again because when I made it I was needing an enthusiastic rebirth in art. And needing to see a big tent if I had to make it myself. And the conversation I wanted to see happening that I wasn't seeing happening. Was that too much?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I think that's a beautiful ending. Thank you very, very much.

SHEA HEMBREY: Thanks, Paul.