AGITYPE
Changing the World One Letter at a Time

Sheryl Oring
Agitype, first used in 2018, is a combination of two words: agitate and type, with secondary references to agitprop. The goal of agitype is to attempt to arouse public feeling through printed letters.

Introduction by Mark Ormond

Unlike any time I can remember in the past six decades, there seems to be a lack of public consensus about the importance of a common language. As an increasingly polyglot culture we have moved away from a shared interest in this. For many social media has taken the place of face to face communication where body language and visual clues might inform conversation. A constantly changing vocabulary of abbreviations and emoji’s require daily diligence. Individuals no longer think about denotations and connotations of words. They maintain the right to define the meaning and use of them. For many the dictionary or thesaurus is not a primary source for definitions or synonyms. All these aspects of twenty-first contemporary communication challenge our ability to share a common understanding of content and context.

The focus of this exhibition and publication is Sheryl Oring’s contribution to our understanding of history and ourselves. It could not have been better timed. As an artist and journalist Sheryl Oring has fostered a dialogue about world events and issues that we all share. The performances documented in the exhibition and publication demonstrate the willingness of individuals to commit to expressing themselves. Her method of capturing the voice of everyman through dictation to someone sitting at a manual typewriter provides a verifiable original and a copy. There is no possibility of digital malfeasance or internet hacking to interfere with the truth. How refreshing and pure these performances are. How lucid are the opinions of the participants. We look forward to the new performances that Sheryl Oring has created and that will be part of the exhibition in Sarasota.

October 12–December 8, 2018
Lois & David Stulberg Gallery

Richard & Barbara Basch Visual Arts Center
Ringling College of Art and Design
Sarasota, FL
Q&A

with
SHERYL ORING
& Ringling College’s
MARK ORMOND

Mark Ormond and Sheryl Oring talk about her work, the current climate for words and her exhibition at Ringling College of Art and Design.

MO: We shall be exhibiting Writer’s Block on the campus this Fall. You made this work in Berlin in 1999. We have chosen to exhibit it because it is powerful work that seems particularly resonant today. In our world at the moment there exists those who are questioning the veracity of the written word, the need for transparency in government and the importance of a free press. How do you see Writer’s Block differently from when you first conceived of it?

SO: It gives me shivers to think about this. The work started as a way to grapple with the Nazi book burnings that took place all across Germany soon after Hitler took power. It was meant as a tribute to the writers whose books were burned as well as a way of publicly remembering these horrific events. When the show traveled to Budapest, Hungary, in 2002, it called attention to censorship that happened behind the Iron Curtain. And then in 2003 in New York, I worked with PEN and the National Coalition Against Censorship to present readings at the opening that addressed contemporary censorship. The New York show was held during Banned Books Week, an event that highlights books that have been banned or challenged in school districts across the country. While these two shows were powerful, they referenced censorship that was either historical or distant in some way. Then in January 2018, the work was shown on the University of Virginia campus, just five months after hundreds of white nationalists rallied on the campus over the removal of a Confederate statue and then a counter-protester was killed. Showing the work on the site of such violence and upheaval made it seem frighteningly relevant today. Unfortunately, I don’t think things are changing and so this work seems just as relevant, or perhaps even more so, than when it was made 20 years ago.
**MO:** Writer’s Block seems also to be about all the voices that were silenced when possessions were confiscated and individuals who were writers were murdered. It seems inconceivable that this could happen again and yet it appears that it is happening in countries where there are dictatorships.

**SO:** There’s a book I came across recently called Burying the Typewriter: Childhood Under the Eye of the Secret Police by Carmen Bugan, who grew up in Romania and sought political asylum in the United States in 1988. She writes about how her father, a dissident, had two typewriters: one that was registered with the state and was used for innocuous tasks, and another that was used for protest fliers and the like and was buried in the garden each day before daylight. The typewriter was a dangerous weapon in this totalitarian state, and this family figured out how to use it. I am so impressed by this story, and hope that others might be inspired by it.

**MO:** As a journalist who decided to make art and/or an artist for whom words are of unique importance, what do you see as the importance of words and our understanding of them?

**SO:** There are many forms of communication but for me, words and language have always been the most important. It may go back to an experience in 5th grade. I was in grade school in Ithaca, NY, for one year as my parents were on a sabbatical at Cornell. The school I went to there was light years ahead of the school I’d been attending in Grand Forks, ND. The teacher brought in a poet to the classroom and we wrote poetry once a week. At the end of the year we made a book. That introduced me to the playfulness and seductiveness of language, which I am still drawn to today.

**MO:** In our world today, some individuals do not appear to be interested in finding the primary source of information or the initial voice of an opinion or fact. In your projects you retain a copy of the original. You retain the evidence of the voice of the person dictating to you. Those documents are a powerful reminder of the significance of copies of originals. In the virtual aspect of the art world today it is sometimes difficult to determine original authorship. Sharing through social media provides practically no way to track the use and/or translation of information shared by the artist/creator. What level of interest do you find younger artists place in originality, original sources and crediting original sources?

**SO:** This is an issue that often needs to be discussed with students. I’ve had several incidents of plagiarism in my classes and these experiences have made me realize that young people just don’t understand the idea of originality in the same way that I do.

**MO:** Have you found that young artists are curious about your process?

**SO:** Young people are intrigued by this work and my process. It’s the perfect antidote to the digital world we live in. They are drawn to the tactile nature of the typewriter, as well as the way it engenders real conversations. They are also drawn to working on projects that involve teamwork, working with others in real life. I think young people crave human interaction and off-screen conversation. But often, they don’t know how to start. This framework I’ve developed gives them a way to meet people and talk.

**MO:** About fourteen years ago you initiated the I Wish to Say project where individuals would dictate and you would type a postcard
to the President of the United States. What has changed about that project with respect to the public’s response?

SO: The issues have changed over the years, reflecting the zeitgeist of the day. So, for instance, gay marriage was a significant topic prior to the 2015 Supreme Court ruling that legalized it. The messages reflect the hot topics of the day. There were times I was not sure I would continue the I Wish to Say project. But the interaction with college students around this project have kept it alive. Students love it and it has impacted the lives of some of my students to such an extent that I just can’t walk away from it. In spring 2016, my university sponsored a bus trip to New York City so 60 students could work as volunteers on a large-scale version of this show at Bryant Park. There are a number of students who went on the trip who I’m still in touch with and who tell me it changed their lives. For one of them, it was her first visit to New York. She fell in love with the city and after graduation found a way to move there. Another student became so enamored with the project that he helped me as a volunteer for a year and then began working with me to create a version for school classrooms. He’s now starting to work as an art teacher at a middle school in North Carolina and is continuing to work with me on this. He’ll bring I Wish to Say into his classroom and hopefully we’ll find a way to make the project available for other teachers.

MO: Do you think your role playing liberates individuals to become part of your performances?

SO: It breaks down barriers and invites people to participate in a very different way than if I were a news reporter. It definitely encourages people to take part.

MO: Today’s iPhones, iPads and laptops require a manual dexterity and finesse that is very different from the full fingertip exertion demanded by a manual typewriter. On typewriters there is also the sound of the keys jumping from the mechanism and striking the roller bar through the paper. Do you think the physicality of typing and the object quality of materials reinforce the idea of commitment to an idea on the part of the individual participating with you?

SO: The physicality of the typewriter definitely plays a role in drawing people in. It seems especially compelling in our digital society. The idea of sending an actual letter rather than an email is really striking to some people.

MO: You can hack into a database and you can compromise an iPhone or computer. You cannot do any of those things with a typewriter. In your performances you can operate without that fear or concern. What concerns
do/have you had with respect to maintaining the integrity of your work and the veracity of your outcomes?

**SO:** A few years there were a flurry of reports about international governments reverting to using typewriters because of security concerns. In 2013, Spiegel Online in Germany noted that “According to a report in the Russian newspaper Izvestia, the Federal Guard Service (FSO), which is responsible for the security of the Russian president and several high-ranking officials, is looking to buy 20 typewriters. They would be used to ensure that particularly sensitive documents existed only on paper and would not be electronically archived in ways that anyone with a security clearance could quickly make off with them.” And a year later, The Guardian reported that: “German politicians are considering a return to using manual typewriters for sensitive documents in the wake of the US surveillance scandal.” So yes, the typewriter as a machine that cannot be compromised is an interesting way of looking at it. As the work grows in scale to include typists other than myself, the top concern relates to training the typists to work like I do. I’m finding it’s hard for some people to remain neutral while they’re typing, and also hard to find good touch-typists who can spell. These are skills I’ve developed through my past work as a journalist—and earlier work as a secretary, I should mention.

**MO:** What most interests and excites you about the upcoming exhibition at Ringling College of Art and Design?

**SO:** Preparing this show has been a tremendous honor and a huge undertaking. It is pushing me to take stock of my work and think about both the past and the future in ways I haven’t done to date. It’s also challenged me to think of my work in a larger framework than I had in the past, to understand it more deeply. It’s been a privilege working with you and the others at Ringling and I’m really excited about the ways my work is evolving in the process of working on the show.

**MO:** Were you always the person who looked at the big picture and the person who tried to find the one issue that individuals could debate?

**SO:** Someone once told me I’m the person who gets people to talk about things they’d rather not talk about. This probably grows out of my childhood. I grew up in a family with a very troubled child, my brother, who ultimately committed suicide in 2010. My parents, who were both academics, had a very hard time acknowledging the problems that were so clearly there from a very young age. This tension of knowing about the problems but not having them acknowledged impacted me tremendously and still does today. For instance, there have been two suicides in my department since I joined the faculty in 2011—one faculty member and one student. These are not discussed openly and it really bothers me. I think these difficult issues need to be discussed in families and with students or things will never change.

**MO:** Why do you think most members of the general public do not raise their voice when they could make a difference? (I am thinking of how few people vote in other than presidential elections.)

**SO:** Cynicism and lethargy are probably the top two reasons. People think their vote doesn’t matter. The results are very remote and disconnected and the election system is so complex that people often feel they are making a statement by not voting.
“Today viewers of these typewriters must necessarily ask themselves questions that are not easily answered.”

— Professor Dean Dass, University of Virginia
 Shortly after turning 30, I took a leave from my editing job at the *San Francisco Chronicle* and moved to Berlin. The impetus was a journalism fellowship, though I intended to spend the time writing poetry and imagining a different life. The fellowship was just for two months, but I took a six-month leave from my job as Assistant City Editor. Near the end of the leave, I called my boss in San Francisco and quit my job. Soon after that, I began imagining *Writer’s Block*.

The idea for the work grew out of an intense engagement with the cityscape of Berlin in the 1990s, a city in transition, where apartments were still heated with coal ovens and basement storage lockers were filled with several generations worth of stuff. Towering construction cranes dotted the skyline and rough construction steel seemed to be piled up on every corner, as contractors built and rebuilt the city. Household goods were being boxed up and sold at flea markets as residents prepared to move into shiny new homes. Among the plates and silverware, books and photographs from several generations of Germans, I also began to notice typewriters. An Erika here, a Rheinmetal there. I bought a beautiful Erika from the 20s and then another slightly newer one. Then told myself it was time to stop.

Meanwhile, on my walks through the city, I often found myself standing in the middle of Bebelplatz, staring down into the sculptural installation created by Israeli artist Micha Ullman as a reminder of the Nazi book burnings that took place on the site in 1933. I was drawn to this place again and again, as I grappled with the history and tried to understand how people could burn books.

On one of these walks, I started thinking about what I could make out of typewriters that would serve as a tribute to the writers whose books were burned. And so the idea for *Writer’s Block* was born.
May 10, 1999, installation and performance at Bebelplatz, Berlin, José Giribás Marambio.

“The impact of “Writer’s Block” comes from the unsettling sight of beautiful old typewriters upended within rough, rusty cages.”
— The New York Times

**Writer's Block Installations**
May 10, 1999, Bebelplatz, Berlin
1999 Jewish Museum Berlin
2002 Lions' Courtyard of the Buda Castle, Budapest
2003 Boston Public Library
   Bryant Park, New York
2018 University of Virginia, Charlottesville
   Washington and Lee University, Lexington, VA
   Ringling College of Art and Design, Sarasota, FL
I WISH TO SAY

If I were the President, 
what would you wish to say to me?

After *Writer’s Block* was shown in Berlin, I began imagining an international tour of the work that would call attention to other forms of historical and contemporary censorship. For a U.S. show, I had my eye on Bryant Park, the giant public square located directly behind the main branch of the New York Public Library.

After what seemed like multitudes of trans-Atlantic trips, I ended up moving back to the U.S. in 2003, months before *Writer’s Block* was to debut in New York.

The opening event was planned in conjunction with a group of free speech advocates I had been in contact with for years, including PEN and the National Coalition Against Censorship. Once plans for the New York show were confirmed, I began searching for other locations to show the work. Top on my list was the San Francisco Bay Area. I wanted to go back to where I’d come from and show everyone what I’d done after leaving journalism. But organizing this show wasn’t so simple. There was strong interest—an organization called The First Amendment Project wanted to be involved—but funding was hard to secure. The director of that organization invited me to the Bay Area to discuss the logistics of mounting a *Writer’s Block* show. And he asked whether I had anything I could do while I was out there that would be less expensive to produce. I’d been thinking for some time about going around with a typewriter and inviting people to dictate a postcard to the President. It was nearly 2004, and George Bush was going up for re-election in what felt at the time like the craziest election in history.

Much of the world had been sympathetic in the direct aftermath of 9-11, but as the U.S. mounted wars with Afghanistan and Iraq, international opinion turned radically and it felt like the U.S. was becoming an island run by a comical leader elected by questionable means. I had been living overseas for six years and felt disconnected from my country; beyond that, I simply wanted to know what regular people had to say, people who weren’t being heard through the mainstream media.

As I thought about using my typewriter for a person-on-the-street interview, I felt it would be incongruous to wear 21st century clothing. And so I looked for secretary attire to match the 1960s
“I Wish to Say is a truly sprawling and ambitious project.”
—Hyperallergic
era of the typewriter I was using. The work also drew inspiration from the movie Central Station, about a letter-writer in Rio who sits in the city’s main train station typing letters on demand.

I had no idea what to expect when I took out my typewriter to type at the first shows in San Francisco and Oakland and asked people: “If I were the President, what would you wish to say to me?” The response was overwhelming: people lined up and waited patiently for their turn to have a say.

By the time I’d typed the first 100 cards, I knew I had to keep typing. Without a grant or a sponsor, I found ways to travel the country coast to coast on a shoe-string during the 2004 election season. And then in the following years, grants from the New York Foundation for the Arts and the Creative Capital Foundation allowed me to keep on typing. Some 14 years later, the work couldn’t feel more current.

“...the typewriter itself draws people to her. Some young people have never seen one in use.”

—The Los Angeles Times

I Wish to Say performances

Albuquerque, NM
Allentown, PA
Atlanta, GA
Austin, TX
Boone, NC
Boston, MA
Boulder, CO
Brunswick, ME
Cambridge, MA
Charlotte, NC
Chicago, IL
Claremont, CA
Dallas, TX
Delray Beach, FL
Des Moines, IA
El Paso, TX
Farmville, VA
Flagstaff, AZ
Fredonia, NY
Greensboro, NC
Houston, TX
Indianapolis, IN
Interstate 15, UT
Las Vegas, NV
Los Angeles, CA
Madeira Beach, FL
Memphis, TN
Mesilla, NM
Monterrey, CA
Moraga, CA
Nashville, TN
New Haven, CT
New York, NY
Oakland, CA
Oxford, OH
Pittsburgh, PA
Raleigh, NC
Salisbury, MD
St. Petersburg, FL
San Diego, CA
San Francisco, CA
San Jose, CA
Tampa, FL
Tuba City, AZ
Venice, CA
Victoria, TX
Walnut Creek, CA
Washington, DC
West Long Branch, NJ
Wichita, KS
Winston-Salem, NC
Yosemite National Park, CA
Don't make a wall across America
Please help my family stay here.
It’s a playful project, but the underlying current, the content is actually pretty serious. Come up. Step up. Use your voice. Say it out loud, and deliver your message.”
—Jakab Orsos, former director of the PEN World Voices Festival, on NPR’s All Things Considered.
Soon after creating *I Wish to Say*, I was invited to create work for the Eldridge Street Project, a museum housed in a synagogue built in 1887 on the Lower East Side in New York. I knew that the framework I had created—the typist taking dictation of answers offered to posed questions—could work in other contexts, with different questions. And so for this show, I decided to ask people if they’d like to send a letter to one of their ancestors.

The invitation was wide open for people to interpret as they wished. Many chose to write to ancestors they’d never met, sometimes writing to people a generation or two removed.

The emotion that poured out in these letters was remarkable. Especially at the second location when I typed at the International Center, a nonprofit serving recent immigrants in New York.
Dear Father,
I would have and still would like to know your relative back in Japan. I was not able to get B!Y information from my mother concerning my relatives on your side. I hope that somehow you can relay this information to so that I can visit your home village and meet my relatives. I'll tell your eide family.
san ya,

I'm a little in an old ahul in New York, thinking about you. Never met you but lic ur i ou. Why did you come ovre? Were you happier here or there? What did you want to do with your life? You've been talked about tor allle•t eevent y year• bl people who, life me, are named af te nu but never knew you. So? u? Tell me.

With much love,
your g andson,

:: 1 kwt -
COLLECTIVE MEMORY

What would you like the world to remember about 9-11?

“There was a quiet satisfaction in being heard, in one’s words being recorded on these ancient keyboards…. The act of inviting the telling was beautiful to me, and as fitting a memorial as anything could be.”
—Amy Gottlieb, typist, from “On Being” blog

I was a child during the Vietnam War, but never learned anything about it in school. The teachers simply didn’t know what to tell us, it was too contemporary, not yet history. And so when I was invited to create a work at Bryant Park for the 10th anniversary of 9-11, I decided to ask people “What would you like the world to remember about 9-11?” as a way to begin to step back and remember. A way to begin to grapple with what we’ll tell our children about this horrific event.

The question was open enough to allow everyone to express their own views and memories, the responses were incredibly personal and poignant.

Performance at Bryant Park, NY, 2011, Dhanraj Emanuel.
i carry your heart with me
(i carry it in my heart)
Omar (East Village)

SEP 11 2011

COLLECTIVE MEMORY

NEW YORK CITY

IMPORTANT
WHAT'S THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST?
What is the role of the artist?” That’s a question I have grappled with for years. If we expand the question to include “journalist” it is a question that underlies all of my professional work. I got in to journalism while I was a student at the University of Colorado in the late 1980s, drawn to the field because it offered a chance to give voice to the unheard. After a decade in various newsrooms, and after witnessing rampant racism and sexism regarding news selection and the treatment of employees, I began making art as a way to foster civic engagement and participatory democracy.

When the College Art Association commissioned me to create a work commemorating the organization’s centennial, I decided to pose this question during a show at the 2012 conference at the Los Angeles Convention Center. The art conference coincided with a massive naturalization ceremony where thousands of people were becoming U.S. citizens, making for a great variety of responses.

The role of art is, if a recent event happened, they can express their feelings in a painting and in that way they can show the people how they feel about that war.

Rafael, Arealo
Los Angeles
Age 11
FEB 22 2012

To paraphrase Nietzsche,
the role of the artist is to
save us from dying of the
truth.

Patla Owen
an Antonio
ROLE MODEL

What can Russia teach the world?
What can Brazil teach the world?
What can Dubai teach the world?

When Ed Woodham invited me to join a small group of artists from the United States on a trip to St. Petersburg, Russia, to stage the first public art festival in that city back in 2012, I leapt on the opportunity. The festival would be modeled on the Art in Odd Places (AiOP) festival that Ed runs each year in New York; and “model” would be the festival’s theme. As with AiOP, the festival theme was a single word that participating artists could interpret as they wished to come up with projects.

I enjoy brainstorming project ideas around language and began toying with ways to create work that somehow related to the idea of a “model.” Ultimately I landed on the idea of a “role model” and decided to pose the question: “What can Russia teach the world?” How could Russia be seen as a role model for us? Today this question is even more nuanced than it was at the time this work was created.

I saw the first show in Russia as the beginning of a larger work that would explore how second-world countries might be seen as role models for the rest of the world. Subsequent shows in São Paulo and Dubai continued this work.

Performances in São Paulo, 2013 (above) and Dubai, 2014 (below), Sheryl Oring.
“Twice a week, she sits and waits for people to come by, types their story, stamps the paper with words like ‘urgent’ or ‘complete’ and snaps a polaroid of the person.”

— Reuters

With Maueramt (Wall Department), I set out to gather stories about the wall from people who had lived with it and opinions about it from a younger generation. Performed multiple times in Berlin in 2014, the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Wall, the work documented this particular point in history when eyewitnesses to this historic architecture that divided Berlin were still living and an entire generation had grown up without it. Several hundred people sat down at my portable desk and opened up to me as I typed their words on a sleek Princess typewriter.

In this as well as other projects, the typewriter functions as a curiosity and a conversation piece. In Germany, the typewriter plays an additional role as a signifier of this country’s history. Going back to World War II, typewriters were used by the Nazis to keep meticulous records of all aspects of the war. Today, a visit to the Stasi Archives in Berlin reveals the systematic way East German police tracked citizens; the records are neatly recorded on typewritten cards. Ordinary citizens of East Germany, meanwhile, did not have easy access to typewriters as the machines were strictly controlled as the free exchange of ideas posed a real threat to the government. More recently, the head of Germany’s parliamentary inquiry into the NSA suggested a return to typewriters as a way to stop data leaks.
I created *Travel Desk* as part of a public art commission at the San Diego International Airport. This two-part work began with a series of performances in which typists dressed in 1960s era flight attendant uniforms took dictation of people’s travel stories.

For the project’s second phase, I worked with designer Jonathon Anderson to create a table that featured excerpts of the typed travel stories laser etched into the tabletop. Initials carved into a tree trunk along a favorite trail or into a wooden picnic table at a beloved spot serve as poignant reminders that we were here, an indelible physical mark in an increasingly transitory, digital world.

The work has become an iconic meeting place within the airport, a place where people return to again and again to trace their own stories and read those of others.

Performance at the San Diego International Airport, 2013, Dhanraj Emanuel.
The 20-foot-long *Travel Desk* table featuring excerpts of the typed stories laser etched onto its surface was installed in the airport in 2015, Mingzhao Dong.
“Oring’s tools were the people along the Riverwalk in front of the Tampa Museum of Art on Saturday afternoon. Her canvas: blank postcards to be filled with peoples’ stories and thoughts; their rambles and insights.”
—Tampa Bay Times

With this two-phase public art project commissioned by the Tampa International Airport, residents of Tampa Bay were invited to share stories about their city during a series of performances in Spring 2017. Performance locations were carefully chosen so that a broad spectrum of the local community could participate in the project. The stories were typed up on manual typewriters and will be printed on aluminum and integrated into a sculpture at the Tampa International Airport. The sculptural installation, designed in collaboration with designer Jonathon Anderson, will also feature Polaroid photographs of the area’s landscape printed on aluminum.

Performance at Tampa Museum of Art, 2017 (above) and at the Ybor City Museum State Park (below), Todd Turner.
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gitype, first used in 2018, is a combination of two words: agitate and type, with secondary references to agitprop. The goal of agitype is to attempt to arouse public feeling through printed letters.

This work draws on news stories about the #MeToo Movement as source material for drawings that are presented in the form of newspaper headlines. Chef Anthony Bourdain talked about sexism in the restaurant industry after sexual misconduct allegations against chef Mario Batali surfaced. Bourdain talked about reexamining his life, and asking questions such as “What did I let slide?” Other quotes are drawn from personal experience. “Everyone seems to like him,” was something a manager told me about my supervisor as he dismissed my claim of gender-based discrimination.

Drawing, 2018, Dhanraj Emanuel.
WHAT

LET SEE

Drawing, 2018, Dhanraj Emanuel.
DID I SLIDE?
AFTER THE DINNER PARTY

If you could have dinner next to any woman in history, who would it be and why?

After the Dinner Party celebrates women some 40 years after artist Judy Chicago created The Dinner Party, a massive triangular table with ceramic place-settings commemorating 39 important women from history. At a time when women’s rights are under attack, this work will invite people to reflect on the many contributions women make to our society.

The project started with a workshop with the typists who will perform the show. At this workshop, we discussed the question to be asked during the public performances. Typists will pose the question, then type up answers from the public. These answers will then be incorporated into the exhibition.

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—Mark Ormond,
Director of Galleries & Curator of Exhibitions

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The work represented in this show couldn’t have been made without the support of friends and family, as well as the thousands of people across the country who have spoken their minds as part of I Wish to Say. Much of this work is influenced by and created in collaboration with two designers and friends: Amy Mees and Jonathon Anderson. My deepest thanks and appreciation goes out to both of them.

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—Sheryl Oring

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