

Mental Travel Time

“It is not the literal past that rules us . . . it is images of the past.”

—George Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle*, 1971

The village of Alfred was created in the early nineteenth century. By 1836, the first frame house had become a select school, which eventually evolved into the New York School of Clay Modeling in 1900. Alfred is small with rows of stores and restaurants not unlike those in middle-class American towns of the mid-twentieth century; it is almost as if time has stopped. The center of town borders on Alfred University’s sophisticated campus, where Anne Currier teaches ceramics. From there to route 244, you drive until the asphalt road becomes dirt, the houses disappear, the open countryside unfolds, and you enter Scio, the town where Anne Currier lives. After several miles, on your right, close to the road, is her wood frame house, built around 1850, and her contemporary studio. She came there, after a decade in Colorado, with her husband, George Hrycun, in January 1985. In a letter from July 16, 1985, she writes that they found their home: “87 acres and 3 bedrooms! – wonderful house – studio needs work – Love, Anne.”

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Memory has always been central to my life, as I recall events, meetings, conversations, and letters that unlock the past and bring back so many of the people who have helped shape my life. Mental travel time allows you to recapture your life and move

into the past as you remain seated in the present.¹ When and where did Anne Currier enter into my consciousness?

1973: “Another Cup Show” was one of the first national exhibitions that I organized. It included artists working in clay and glass who were invited to submit cups. A cast-porcelain cup encased in a bulbous mold arrived from Anne Currier. I was quite dazzled because the University of Washington’s Department of Fire Arts, (affectionate term for the ceramic department) Seattle, brought to mind works that incorporated compulsive imagery—like the ceramics of Mark Burns, Nancy Carman, Howard Kottler, Michael Lucero, and Patti Warashina. How did her geometric abstract aesthetic survive there? Now that I think about it, it is Anne’s persistence that prevailed—her unwillingness to move from her creative position held in the midst of narrative fury.



In my time capsule, I began to think about the paintings made by her mother, Mary Ann Currier, an established artist. There may be no direct influence; however, Mary Ann’s oversize still-life paintings exhibited controlled settings of fruit and objects in space, velvet color, and carefully applied shapes within designated lines. The works incorporate natural forms not unlike those volumes that Anne achieves in her geometric constructions of intertwining soft limbs, especially in the hard-pastel drawings on board. The eldest of three daughters, Anne’s structured persona also reflects her father Lionel’s interest in math and his interest in creating blueprints with great skill, despite the fact that Anne is also a strong Southern lady who has “moved geometric forms into undulated discoveries as the application of color and texture has moved beyond architectonic vessel

¹ Eric R. Kandel, *In Search of Memory*, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006, New York, NY, p. 3.

forms.”²

Anne Currier is enthralled with the power and romance of language; she translates her feelings, desires, and observations into words that merge her creative world with the panoply of thoughts that stream through her existence. Language does that! Anne bestows names upon her work and gives words to her feelings. Her persistence in language is as steady as her need to push firmly to the edge not just her work and teaching manner but her personality.

Titles, therefore, are important to Anne; the lexicon extends our perception of her work. We are grateful that the dictionary is a tool that benefits her understanding and expands our knowledge of her art. The following was received before her exhibition held March 2-30, 1985, at my eponymous gallery in Philadelphia.

February 17, 1984: In a letter from Anne Currier to Helen Drutt, in reference to her sculpture for a forthcoming exhibition at the gallery. Anne cites the titles for individual works.

“Here’s a little definition sheet—I spent all weekend with a dictionary deliberating what to call these things!”

“*Tertium Quid* – something related in some way to two things but distinct from both; something intermediate between both.”

“*Terraqueous Rotator*—is the earth rotating between earth (land) and water.”

“*Elliptical Reel*—whirling waving ellipses.”

“*Terr-A-QUA-SI*—mumbo-jumbo work combining Terra, Aqua, and Quasi.”

“*GIRMIZI*—I was looking under the word ‘crimson’ to define/describe this piece and in the etymology was Ar: m.Girmizi – archaic.”

² Note in Anne Currier’s file, source unknown.

“*For George* – my husband’s favorite piece” – (Romantically dedicated to George Hrycun, her husband)

Her titles continue:

Cucumflexor, 1988–1990 Titles from pastel drawings on hard board. [The drawings incorporate amazing movement which illustrates broad sweeps of ribbonlike furls.]

January 27, 1991 “*Infundibulum*, *Cylindrical diplex*, and *Konostoma* are the pieces. . . . For the 14-year show. *Horizontal Sequent (pk)* is here at my house and *Horizontal Sequent (gr)* is one of the boxed pieces in N.Y.C. . . . send to Philadelphia. *Inversion* and *Brody Slide*.”

October 22, 1991 “*Horizontal sequent*—another title.”

1992-2006 – Past titles include: *Rollway* (1992), *Angulated Still Life* (1992), *Distraction* (1996), *Fault* (1996), *Eleusis* (1999), *Dipolar Association* (1999), *Zoar* (2000), *Ricochet* (2001), *First of June* (2002), *Vorticella* (2005), and *Cloven* (2006).

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Her epistolary style is visually beautiful—a cursive script in broad ink strokes on plain paper, 5 x 7 lined cards, and postcards from her journeys or workshops. In the eighties, as we entered the age of facsimile, Alfred University’s fax paper became a familiar vehicle for correspondence. Her passion for writing was not lost with e-mail, however; in addition to the computer, she discovered the digital camera in 2001–2, which provided her with the ability to make personal notepapers. Words of compassion, words

of vengery, descriptions of landscape, biographical documentation, views of the studio as well as her beloved dog, Iris, sharp reminders that she requires attention and respect and that her work is great. Letters detail her plans, both private and public and always confirm her dedication to her studio and students above all else. Often letters arrived with decals accenting the address or “pointing” to her thoughts, or honoring a holiday – butterflies, candy corn, pumpkins, witches, Elvis – or a black cat with a blurb coming forth from its image requesting information. Three years ago a sheet of teapots arrived citing the overdose of teapot exhibitions; but the envelope, without a doubt, with a decoupage of decals forming a magnificent Chardin-like still life was exemplary. Is it possible that Howard Kottler’s³ legacy and passion for decals has been reborn in Anne’s letters?

My archive of her letters to me contains thoughts that bind me to her thinking and daily life. Through the quotes and statements, a lively view of Anne Currier is achieved that connects me with her work but also taking me into her lively verbose self. The words communicate her changing moods and unedited responses.

February 2, 1982 – “There are new things happening that I find visually and intellectually exciting and challenging—I just need to learn the vocabulary for exploring new forms and their fabrication. My middle finger bears the calluses of rubbing but worth the pain.”

³ Howard Kottler was a Professor of Ceramics at the University of Washington: Well known as a Decalcomaniac.

June 16, 1983 – “Sending that soup tureen was a good pocket pincher!” [This refers to her submission for the second exhibition, “Soup Tureens ’83,” held at the Campbell Museum, Camden, New Jersey.]”

July 17, 1983—“I was in the backyard being vibrated by an oscillating sander—refinishing some chairs.”

March 26, 1984 Louisville, Kentucky – “If the next 2 kiln firings go well (Hail Mary!), you will be receiving some very ‘hot’ pieces—I’m not bragging, I just know!”

April 9, 1984 – “The two pieces that I spoke of in my last letter came out great—in my estimation anyway! I trust you’ll find your patience in waiting to be worthwhile.”

May 4, 1987 – “*Cupreous Resorption* is NFS—primarily because I want to keep it in my collection—for my family.” [However, it was eventually sold to a private collection.]

February 11, 1988 – “I’m excited about the new work. I think it’s good—clean and definite.”

November 20, 1988 – “Enclosed are the most recently completed and photo-documented drawings. Pardon my criticism—but I do think I’m getting better with them.”

March 4, 1991—“It was good to hear from you last night. After you called I had to go down to the studio—lantern in hand—to stoke the stove down there so my clay wouldn’t freeze. Still no electricity this a.m. No electricity in Alfred. . . . Of course today the sun is out—really quite beautiful—above freezing and everything is melting fast. Now we just have to watch out for huge ice chunks falling on our heads!”

January 12, 1992 – “I don’t want to go to Miami; I want to go to the studio.”

[Refers to the migration of all artists to the Art Fair.]

March 11, 1993 “Outta space/outta time. Time to fire up the studio woodstove and get to work.”

February 12, 1999 – “I just bought this new fountain pen—I didn’t need it, I just wanted it—so now I have to use it! . . . The big ‘centerfold’ and cover article is on Tony Cragg. Boy—between him and Sir Anthony Caro, you’d think no one in the twentieth century ever really touched clay.”

March 28, 2000 – “Thank you for your call this a.m. I think you must have amazing upper body strength—all the lives that you support—and like the Timex watch you still keep ticking.”

April 19, 2000 – “Interesting to read in the *New York Times* that Rem Koolhaas won the Pritzker. My itinerary includes visits to some of his buildings—i.e., the

Kunsthal in Rotterdam and Dance Academy in Amsterdam. P.S. FYI—at present, I have no plans to go to SOFA: NYC.⁴ I have to stay home and try to do some work in the studio.”

June 13, 2000 – “We are currently in the midst of a fabulous thunder- and rainstorm—my lights here in the studio are flickering—the rain is torrential! My slabs and cylinders were made last Thursday but still remain as wet as when I made them, due to all the rain and high humidity. All the flowers—poppies, irises, peonies—will be wiped out, I’m afraid.”

September 17, 2001—“I trust that neither of your children was harmed in this most unspeakable and horrific act of terrorism. . . . I wanted to attend the Art Alliance opening last week⁵—my teaching schedule made it prohibitive since my classes are Wed.–Fri. Given all the events of the week, it was more important to hold classes and be available to students.”

October 22, 2001 –“I hope that the following comes through ok—I have copied the letter that I rec’d from . . . the Phillips Museum of Art in Lancaster, Pa.— . . . called last week and left a voice message on my machine— . . . I have no idea who the other nine artists might be but it is of no concern—I want the exposure—and at the moment, the only exhibit for 2002 is the one in May at the Gardiner in Toronto. . . . So, this is just an FYI for your files—I wish the requests were to

⁴ Sculpture, Objects and Functional Art, A biannual art fair held in Chicago and New York, U.S.A.

⁵ Reference to September 11, 2001 which coincides with opening of “Poetics of Clay: An International Perspective” at the Philadelphia Art Alliance, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.

purchase the work!!! I need cash for the new studios we plan to build next summer!”

September 14, 2003— Scans from her sketchbook arrived revealing her linear thoughts which would eventually assume a three dimensional form.

January 10, 2004 – One comes from a mold – one is a mold – It’s brutally cold here – minus 19 degrees this A.M. when we woke. (Images of a hat mold and fungus on her photo-framed note paper)

March 22, 2004 e-mail – “I have some pieces in the studio to photograph with the digital and download to send to you. My elves are on strike and have left the planet—i.e., it's just me! Images of finished pieces are on another computer! It will happen—give me a few days. Anne.”

March 26, 2004 e-mail – “Regarding the M.A.G. [Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, New York] exhibition . . . For now, here is what is available. I really like all three pieces—*Homage* is the sibling to *Span* that was acquired . . .from SOFA/Chicago—it was in the Groot booth. OK—off to do some glaze tests for the new work. The maple syrup is flowing! George and I may need to go eat pancakes as a matter of seasonal duty! xoxoxoAnne”

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For the past five years, the digital camera has provided Anne with the means to make a visual record of her observations. She captures everything: a leaf on the ground

wet with rain; a close-up of the raindrop; an Art Deco countertop in New York; a swan in the pond; a tree in a haze of snow or stark in the cold air after the storm. Images of early rhubarb are soft and succulent and subdued by the surrounding earth; the morning mist over the pond brings to mind the stretches of color bound to influence Anne's palette. What her eye sees as leaves unfolds in a pile on the earth as a frozen pond streaks its layer of ice toward a shoreline, or her studio at spring thaw, winter, summer, or autumn. Emerging milkweed buds, grass, deciduous twigs, George hidden in the pine, are all part of these images that are at once gathered into the broad sweeps of succulent grays, tans, and ochers that are Anne's palette in the resulting sculpture and drawings. For those of us who know Anne, we have Scio and Alfred in all of its seasons. These photographs, as she observes her environment, are another side of Anne that enhances the lives of her friends. Why do I think of Robert Arneson's famous piece the *Palace at 6 a.m.*? Perhaps, because he, too, captured images from his personal life and celebrated them in his work. His obsession with Alice, his development house in Davis, California, can be seen in his paintings, drawings, or three-dimensional ceramic sculpture.



The written messages and explanations continue for over twenty years marking a relationship that is not only professional but between friends.

In a letter dated March 8, 1985 I wrote that “the intellectual pursuits of organic and geometric forms are combined with color and unexpected textured surface. The drawings seem to intuitively expand the ideas conceived in clay—they are reminiscent of Indian temple structures.” The late Stella Kramrisch, whose scholarly writings and exhibitions on Indian Hindu temples and the manifestations of Shiva were world

renowned, praised Anne's gentle harmony and similarity of individual shapes. My mental travel time, once again, takes me to a conversation from more than twenty years ago, in which Stella Kramrisch said that Anne's drawings were an abstraction of the intertwining figures in the Indian temple reliefs. Her early statement "Earth's lifeblood streams through the members of the figures and gives them form," could be applied to Anne Currier's reliefs of a decade ago.

Insights into her descriptive vocabulary and understanding of Anne's work continue with her personal statements: "In my cylindrical pieces, I strive to create a sense of the continuousness of forms which are concurrently singular and interdependent as they pass through and around each other, alluding to a logical disruption of orbital and gyroscopic movement and perspective."

Anne Currier, [date unknown]

"The ceramic objects are the products of my curiosity and need to experience the physical and visual exchange of masses and voids. Projection and recession, hard and soft, light and shadow, substance and impression are aspects of the works' subject matter, if, in fact, it can actually be given a name. It's an obsessive compulsion to experience inside and outside—moving into and through a space and time—using the simplicity of cylinders, cones, planes and edges. Light and shadow are crucial to the illusion and exchange of recession and projection. The process of working with the clay shapes provides a clarity and occasions to physically being there, at that moment in time, when the material shapes intersect, extend, collide or pass through/over/under one another to create a space. A glazed surface that looks soft and absorbs light yet actually feels like a

120-grit sand paper is part of the interplay.”

Anne Currier, 1997, Scio, New York

Her statements and letters succinctly describe not only her work but her obsessive personality—that desire to experience everything, to move in and out of personal as well as scholarly experiences. She yearns to visit and revisit those works of art that have become her mentors—like Rogier van der Weyden’s *The Crucifixion, with the Virgin and Saint John and Evangelist Mourning* (c. 1450-55) and Raymond Duchamps-Villon’s *The Horse*, [1914] “whose combination of organic and mechanical projections and recessions move in space and yet it has areas of mass and power and then areas that are delicate and detailed. Why do I like it? Because I wish I had made it!” Because Anne continues to confront situations that are challenging—with friends, professional peers, and students—the challenges extend daily to her work in the studio. She pushes her imagination to its limits, constantly bringing the natural sphere that surrounds her into the work and shaping architectonic forms that defy the limits of the method by which they were built.

In 1998, a review in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* suggested that “[an] odd mixture of refined elegance and vigorous constructivism is what gives Anne Currier’s abstract ceramic sculptures their edge. She cuts across boundaries of shapes to create enigmatic slabs.” As a person, she cuts across boundaries of personal behavior, reflected both in her letters as well as her teaching. Indian tradition says, “Everything in *The Mahabharata* is elsewhere, what is not there is nowhere.”⁶ In the life of Anne Currier, everything is everywhere.

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⁶ Jean-Claude Carriere, *The Mahabharata*, Harper & Row, 1985, New York, NY, p. xii.