



**Se(a) Crossings:**

*Time in the midst of the pressures of chaos*

*...a thesis essay on one graphic designer's effort to create ripples of change.*

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M A R A J E V E R A F U L M E R

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**Introduction:**

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine yourself in a quiet place, a place where the only sounds you hear might be the lapping of waves, and the singing of birds, as a gentle breeze caresses your face. If the moment could last forever, you might think yourself in paradise. Imagine that, before you let your eyelids fall, you were staring up at the sky, a blanket of stars so heavy you could feel their weight. A coolness in the air kept you comfortable, chasing away the heat of the day. A glow on the horizon promised a new day. But for now, you were content to listen to the distant roar of the ocean as its tendrils reached your toes as only light trickles of warm salty water. Your day will come and work will be hard, but there is time enough for laughter, for friends, family, and reflection as you perform the tasks necessary to contribute to your family's survival. Whether you work in the city or live in the rural village, your ties to your extended family remain strong and consistent. Your efforts are part of a collective and you are duty-bound to your extended family to share what you earn or own. And when you can afford to buy from a grocery store, when not bartering or at the open market, your purchases might include a liter bottle of Palmolive bottled at the Colgate plant in town. You normally take the bus back home or share a taxi with a friend when available. Your children, if sick enough to stay home from school, are safe with aunties whose jobs are home-bound. For even if the many tasks you have to do are not complete, or if they are challenging beyond your abilities, there are others to step in to share the load, or a loaf of bread, along with a story or song to lift your spirits.

Now imagine that you are forced to awaken from your reverie by the sounds of horns blaring, car tires screeching, the pre-dawn of a new day in the city where you live, where the sodium lights brighten the night sky, obliterating any sign of a celestial heaven. Your day passes by the tick-tock-tick-tock of a digital clock, while you remain in constant access through email and mobile telephony with co-workers, friends and family. Your car is an appendage without which you feel panic, as it is necessary to get to your work, to take the children here and there, to run the many errands that demand your money and time and energy. You do this work mostly alone, feeling the stress and pressure to earn more money to pay for the things that life in a hectic modern world demands. You talk to your parents who live in Florida or Arizona once a week at best and your siblings even less often. The grocery store offers two dozen different brands of shampoo in different variations and sizes, a choice so overwhelming that you depend



upon advertising to tell you which one to buy for your suspected hair type. The television blares night and day, if not to inform then to keep you company late into the night as you take care of the pile of bills and paperwork necessary to keep up with the household expenses. For if you don't take care of it, you risk affecting such abstract concepts as your credit rating, or have your car repossessed or worse. If your child becomes ill, you must take time off from work (often without pay) for everyone else you know works, too, and there are no friends or family available to help pick up the load. Childcare becomes a crap shoot filled with fear over the risks to your children's safety.

These scenarios just begin to touch on some of the concepts that are addressed in the installation titled "Se(a) Crossings: Time in the midst of the pressures of chaos". A play on the homophone See and Sea, the title toys with the idea that time changes depending upon where you are, who you are, and how you live. For most of us in the USA, finding "time" is kept by the tick-tock of a watch, a test of strength under pressure, of finding order amidst chaos. For many people across the ocean, finding "time" is social, a frame of mind, something that is always there, if you choose to recognize it. In this installation, you would see it through your own cultural lens, bring your own cultural and experiential baggage through which you might interpret the images that are presented. It is by one's willingness to take the journey that we begin to create understanding. And this installation was designed to help promote the sense of a journey for those willing to take the first step into the "time" poem.

### **A Creative Challenge:**

Imagine two parallel lines. Mathematically, we are taught that two parallel lines are lines that do not intersect. However, add a third dimension, tilt the field, and then two lines that are parallel on one plane can intersect on another. I see these occurrences as *opportunities for crossing cultures through parallel lines of understanding*. Another way to describe it would be the ripples of water made by a droplet. Each of us is our own drop of water in an ocean. But the ripples will eventually intersect and make change. Sometimes, if done forcefully, it can lead to a deadly tsunami (such as in war). But if done gently, the opportunity for creating change can permeate and spread across the world, one droplet at a time, through the ripples of peaceful yet effective change.

Art, especially the media arts such as those practiced in the umbrella field of graphic design, has the potential to create moments of insight, and possibly change the way people of different cultures view each other. Throughout my recent works, this concept of creating cross-cultural understanding is the thread that connects it all and has been explored from a wide range of directions and media and subjects such as graffiti and the voices of alienated communities, through the real experiences created in the form of educational cross-cultural journeys, as well as virtual creative experiences such as in the installation "Se(a) Crossings."



### ***Divergent Voices and the role of Graphic Design***

While exploring ways in which to accomplish my goal, I have found myself reaching, or more accurately being pulled, into a cultural community that was new to me and incorporated several segments of the community of Flint. I found that while each of us has had one of those moments in our lives where we have hit a crossroads, it is not the same for all of us. Sometimes there are folks who can clearly see the path ahead. Sometimes there are those who are willing to let fate take them on their way. And sometimes, through the madness of insecurity, there are those who are driven to act in ways that society deems unacceptable. All have been represented in one form or another through the people I have encountered through my own work as an artist and educator.

As with several of my other projects, public forms of visual expression such as graffiti and murals play a role in the expressive nature of this installation, whether it is seen in the pro-democracy graffiti in Fiji that demonstrates the frustration to speak out against the chaos of political upheaval, or through the Flint-based graffiti expressing a need to make visible (and heard) the alienated voices of youth amidst the urban decay. The graffiti, especially, is pertinent to portraying the voices of a community which might otherwise go unheard or exist in isolation.

Whether it is in Flint or in the tropical islands of Fiji, art and media may have the power to break down the stereotype of what is good and bad, civil or uncivilized. Graphic design should be expanding into the role of facilitator in order to break down the walls of fear and confusion. As one of my former students said, “Trouble is everywhere...” And it is my assertion that part of the solution to “troubles” is in opening up avenues to mutual understanding through the effective application of art, media and design.

In this age of new media and 24-hour television, it becomes of urgent importance for the field of graphic design to embrace our role of facilitator by improving the channels of communication through the creation of environments that invite the beginning of understanding. This requires extending the range of experiences by designers in training, from addressing the challenge of building technical proficiency, to embracing such divergent subjects as philosophy, anthropology, and political science all in an effort to create an intelligent designer capable of connecting meaning to their message in a way that touches humanity. While this poses a challenge for educators dealing with a wide range of learning styles and often poor educational preparation, it is my firm belief that graphic design must be taught in the context of humanity. What this means is that graphic design must be taught through the infusion of meaning, by connecting the role of graphic design to these more “academic” subjects, not only through demonstrated cases, but also through offering opportunities for students to find connections to their own experiences, their own world and beyond, through the application of creative solutions in graphic design.



### **“Se(a) Crossings” – a demonstration of connections**

In creating the installation for the MFA exhibition, it was my aim to find an imaginative and engaging way to address the concept of making a cross-cultural journey one that would begin to provoke questions and the beginning of insight. My work is an extension of personal experiences which took me to worlds both disturbingly alien and thrilling, that challenged my sense of status quo and offered new means of seeking balance. After working in the graphic design field in upstate New York for many years, I moved to Fiji to work as Art Director for the University of the South Pacific where I learned to appreciate the Pacific Way of life. I lived in Fiji with my husband Keith, and daughters’ Sarah and Anastassia from 1991-1997 when we moved back to the USA to live in Grand Blanc, Michigan where I now serve as Associate Professor/Program Coordinator in Graphic Design at Mott Community College in Flint. These regions, though on the surface appear opposite ends of the spectrum, have much in common and much to share in terms of how its populations chart their futures. These connections were explored in several works that I developed, including “Wizdom vs. Slick”, a book about a Flint graffiti artist and the choices some make at their personal crossroads.

In an effort to explore how these connections could be demonstrated, the “Se(a) Crossings” installation uses the concept of layering, overlapping, changing directions, different perspectives on time and changing waves that build an environment which attempts to challenge the visitor. Video, audio, transparent and translucent imagery are all used in this multi-channel mixed media installation and arranged to entice the visitor to enter and walk around and explore. The main goal of this project was to create an environment whereby the viewer would be disoriented then reoriented into a different frame of understanding. The main content through which the journey occurs is through exploration of Fiji and Flint, breaking stereotypes and finding connections across the seas of time and place.

As I wrote in my exhibition Artist’s Statement:

*In this post September 11<sup>th</sup> age , drawing upon studies in visual communications and anthropology, I aim to obscure, disorient, re-orient and engage the viewer to new angles of understanding, using graphic design as a force for social change and promoting a peaceful coexistence.*

In a world full of upheaval and intolerance, we each have the opportunity to be the droplet that ripples across the pond, with every wave, we are invited to share with one another, to make our own intersections of understanding, and our own gentle waves of change towards a better world for the future of all the world’s children.



***Se(a) Crossings: Time in the midst of the pressures of chaos***

Multi-channel Video/Audio and Mixed Media Installation

Mara Jevera Fulmer, 2005

**Installation Content:**

The “Se(a) Crossing” installation contains **four videos** (each timed at 7:11;00) with stereo audio that are generally comprised of the following:

- 1) **Water Sequence** – This video segment is designed to be projected as a “splash” across the floor or walls of the installation and is purely ambient with the shimmery movement of the surface of water that has been visually manipulated. The audio is sounds of water but modified to sound almost as if one is underwater. (This video was left out of the Kresge Museum version of the installation.)
- 2) **Time Poem II** – This video is projected into an upturned dome, as if looking down into a global pond. The actual projection is bounced off a mirror and into the sandblasted dome that is hung by monofilament line from the suspended ceiling grid. The subject of the sequence is both introspective and contemplative, relating the concept of time and space, place and identity, and alludes to the subjects dealt with more specifically in the last two sequences. The audio comprises music and an ethereal recitation of “Time Poem II” written by the artist. Part I of this video “begins” the conversation with the other two major video sequences.
- 3) **Flint-side Sequence** – This video is projected onto the “back” side of one of the hanging art panels on the main “floor” of the installation. The front side of the panel has a lightly printed image of graffiti and flowers, both originating in Flint. The subject of this video is a contrasting view of life in Flint, partly told by my hosts ~ Walt and James ~ in response to them joining me in Fiji where I shared with them life in another culture, time and place. Here, they “take Mara into the ‘hood” and share their view of home. The music, voices, and other audio and visual tonal qualities of this video are meant to capture the essence of our “conversation” which makes itself more prominent in the middle segment of this video and is in conversation with the Time Poem II video and the Fiji-side video.
- 4) **Fiji-side Sequence** – This video is also projected onto the “back” side of one of the hanging art panels. The front side of that panel has a lightly printed image of graffiti (from Fiji) and Walt who is seen tossing a stone across the ocean (the metaphor was both apt and purely serendipitous). In the third segment of this video, it takes its turn in the “conversation”, and the pace has moved from slow and contemplative to quick. Eventually the connection between Walt and James (and therefore Flint) becomes more evident. Another aspect of this video is one that creates the connections between past and present, traditional and contemporary expression. The



“dance” in the last part of this video is used as a vehicle to tie together traditional and contemporary life, to illustrate that Fiji moves forward, and that art is also an integral part of their culture and society, a method of healing and growth, and a vehicle for both change and stability, lessons that we might consider here in the United States.

**Eight hanging panels** – The main “floor” area of the installation contains eight panels that are suspended by acrylic dowels and monofilament from a metal drop-ceiling grid. Their subjects can be generally described as follows:

- 1) **Women at sunrise on beach** – This is a vertical transparent layout (38x72) with light overlays of images of warriors from Fiji ghosted into the composition. The colors and contents have been manipulated so as to create a surreal suggestion of a familiar scene that is “not-quite” paradise.
- 2) **Palm trees and beach** – As with the first panel, this vertical transparent layout (38x72) also creates a surrealistic and unsettling treatment of the cliché of paradise.
- 3) **Sand dunes explorers and village folks with pig** – This horizontal transparent layout (56x39) presents the viewer with an odd scene of tourists hiking over sand dunes, where they find fragments of historic pottery. The overlays are images of life in a contemporary Fijian village, with its tin shacks, laundry lines, and wandering pigs.
- 4) **The “Guys” with coconut drinks and Flint’s “Chevy-in-the-hole”** – This horizontal transparent layout (56x39) presents the viewer with the odd juxtaposition of the “tourists” and the half-demolished factory in Flint where they come from.
- 5) **“Big Ups 2 All Flint Writers” and flowers** – In this “lightly” printed horizontal semi-translucent layout (56x39), the viewer is presented with the contrasts of Flint itself, flowers from the prized gardens of the C.S. Mott Estate next to the community college of the same name, and graffiti that indicates a rivalry between writers in Flint and others in the area. This panel has video projected onto the back.
- 6) **“Wake up Fiji” and Walt’s stone toss** – As mentioned earlier, this “lightly” printed horizontal semi-translucent layout (56x39) presents the viewer with the contrasting images of Fiji’s own graffiti (a pro-democracy response to an overthrow of the government based on greed) and the young Flint student standing on the beach in Fiji tossing a stone across the ocean. This panel will have video projected onto the back.
- 7) **Flint Labor Mural on decaying building** – This horizontal (56x39) layout hangs along the wall, framing the “pond” that is the dome, and shows an image of a building at the Saginaw/MLK intersection in Flint where a huge mural is painted depicting the labor movement in bright colors in stark contrast to the rather bleak decay that surrounds it. The mural is presented to the people of Flint as a call to action, through pride in their ties to the birth of the labor movement and as a metaphor for what is necessary to survive.
- 8) **Pro-Democracy Graffiti on burnt-out Building in Fiji** – Ironically, the building was formerly a



lighthouse (a building designed to guide ships safely through danger) that had been converted to a restaurant, this horizontal (56x39) panel hangs along the opposite wall from the Flint Labor Mural, framing the “pond” of the dome. It depicts what at first seems like a rather bleak image but then, upon further examination, one sees that it, too, is a call to action, to “wake up Fiji” and take responsibility for their future.

- 9) **Floor Typographic Design** – Returning to the theme of “Time”, the floor of this installation is a second “time poem”, this one presented in rhyme. But in order to find the verse, one must follow and walk back and forth throughout the installation. It starts with the left grouping and read front to back, then the middle from back to front, then the right section from front to back. The floor is made up of seven laminated printed strips which have been firmly applied to the floor.
- 10) **“Se(a) Crossings...An Open Book”** – As a means of giving the viewer one last piece to contemplate, I've created an “open” book which is simply an oval stand with a manipulated image of waves/water on its surface and a spring mounted upon it to hold small envelopes each holding a fragment of the images and poems presented in the installation. A special stamp has been made to look like a postal cancellation to suggest the idea of sending “letters home” from afar. The visitor to this installation is invited to take one of the envelopes home with them.





### **Making the Installation:**

All of the raw video footage used in this installation is original and was gathered either by this artist or under her direction. The footage mostly originates from two overseas voyages to Fiji that I undertook with groups of my students from Mott Community College, one in July 2001 and another in June 2004. Other footage came from trips “back east” (such as the horseracing from Saratoga, New York). Additional footage was captured in early February 2005 on the north shore of Oahu, Hawai‘i. And finally, raw footage from the city of Flint was also captured in February 2005 with the assistance of two of the participants from the 2001 Fiji Study tour, Walt and James.

All still images used in the video and the hanging panels are original and include those photographed by the artist, with additional photos provided by student participants from three Fiji Study Tours. In the case of photos of the coup in Fiji (from May/June 2000), these were provided by colleagues at the University of the South Pacific and have been used with their permission.

All video was edited by the artist using Final Cut Pro 4 HD. All hanging panels were designed and created in Photoshop CS and the “Time Poem” on the floor of the installation was designed and created in Illustrator CS, while the “book” was designed using Photoshop and InDesign CS. Cameras included a Canon GLII and a Sony TRV11 digital video camcorders. Computer work was accomplished on an Apple 1 ghz PowerBook 17” G4 with 1 gb ram and a dual-processor 2 ghz PowerMac G5 with 2 gb of ram, a 250 gb internal harddrive and a 500 gb external LaCie FW800 harddrive.

All of the audio used in this video is original and was created from audio either recorded direct to tape, or composed by the artist in SoundTrack. The “chant” segment is an original composition by musicians at the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture recorded during the 2004 Fiji Study Tour and includes Mott students among the musicians accompanying the chant. The two “Time Poems” (one spoken in the “round” video and one on the floor of the installation) were written by the artist while traveling to Fiji and back to the USA in 2004.



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*Vinaka vakalevu and Lomalomas to all. ~ mif, Spring 2005*

*(Thank you so very much and with warm wishes and love.)*