

**REAL**  
**ART WAYS**

56 ARBOR STREET  
HARTFORD CT 06106  
860 232 1006  
REALARTWAYS.ORG

This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways' "Open" competition in 2006, which requested proposals from emerging artists living in New York or New England. "Open" was juried by Catherine D'Ignazio, (Co-Director, iKatun and Member of The Institute for Infinitely Small Things, Massachusetts); Omar Lopez-Chahoud, (Independent Curator, New York); and Rachel Berwick, (Artist, Connecticut).

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Real Art Ways is one of the leading contemporary arts organizations in the United States with an emphasis on supporting contemporary artists, fostering the creation of new work, and working in creative ways with community. Programs include visual arts and public art projects, music, performance, spoken word, film and video, and creative social events designed to connect people with each other. Founded in 1975, Real Art Ways is an alternative to mainstream museums and commercial culture; its programs are made possible by a diverse and growing audience, and support from a wide range of enlightened funders.

On the cover: Neither One Nor Two, c-print, 50" x 40", 2005.

All images courtesy of Real Art Ways. Staff photographer John Groo.

# Heather Beard



Line, c-print, 50" x 40", 2005.

## Spaces Between

By Catherine D'Ignazio

A hand traces a line. Someone is sweeping. No one is here.

How do you touch the past?

For "Hathaway Series", Heather Beard traveled to "America's oldest shirt factory", the Hathaway Shirt Factory in Waterville, ME. Inside the factory, workers—primarily women—made *men's* shirts for over 160 years until the factory was officially closed in 2002. Hathaway shirts were made for Union soldiers in the Civil War, Christian Dior, and the U.S. Defense Department, among other clients.

The factory now stands empty and vacant. In 2005, Beard traveled to the site to photograph what was not there.

Beard's photographs insist on the need to make the history of women's bodies in the Hathaway Shirt Factory a material presence. Paradoxically, the photographs do this by repeatedly staging

Heather Beard was born in Allentown, Pennsylvania, and currently lives and works in New Hampshire. She received a BA in Writing, Literature, and Publishing from Emerson College and an MFA in Studio Art from Maine College of Art in Portland. Her work has been shown at Chashama in New York, the Boston Photo Collaborative, the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockport, and Mass MoCA in North Adams.

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the absence of these bodies and re-telling the stories of their presence via poetic reenactment and photographic dramatization.

This was a space for bodies. People hung up their coats, sat in the chairs, worked the machines, swept the floors, and stole a moment to gaze out the window at the winter landscape. It was an environment of speed and sound—the sewing machines hummed and the women were paid via quotas based on how many shirts they could produce in the shortest time possible.

Beard's photographs perform a kind of magical documentation in that they bear witness to a social and economic landscape that has passed away. Her images relentlessly assert the presence of the past—the presence of those bodies, those people, those lives. The architecture and the objects in the factory are somehow invested with this presence. The "presencing" of the past is not exactly spectral and not exactly nostalgic. It is a carefully constructed, material, embodied absence.

In "Chairs", for example, the camera shows us a human-size chair figure at the center of the photograph. The individual is part of a row, a social landscape of chairs that are lined up, attentive. Ostensibly, people used to sit in them (for morning meetings? for training presentations?) but now the chairs sit for the people who are gone. The one in front is pitched forward, cut out of the frame, as if someone just got up and left.

You might be tempted to say that this image is about absence, but it is more complicated than that. The chairs assert their presence as bodies. They are stand-ins that reenact an everyday scenario with vivid drama and self-conscious artifice. What really happened in these chairs is not something that we have access to, nor does the camera, nor does the photographer. The past has passed, but it has left things behind (or in front of) it. This photograph re-creates a kind of historical account that acknowledges its role as dramatized non-fiction and yet still attempts to document (conjure up) what used to be. *It presences* absence as a material, visceral, tactile, yet artificial substance.



**Chairs, c-print, 50" x 40", 2005.**

Indeed, each photograph in the series pursues a strategy of poetic reenactment with the female body at the center of the investigations. We become witnesses to the artist's body, visible in several photos, undertaking small actions in the factory. Her hand traces a line on the wall. Her reflection is visible in glass on a door marked with names. Her bare legs and feet jump in front of a winter window. The body, even during these actions of historical recuperation, is never fully revealed. It is always going somewhere and becoming a past. Sometimes, this phenomenon is captured by overlapping exposures, for example in "Neither One nor Two". In other photos like "On Learning Aviation", the body is just a shadow-glimpse, a silhouetted head turned downwards, and you feel certain that its reflection will go away shortly to leave the past alone with itself.

But what is the point of these poetic reenactments? And what is our role as witnesses to these actions? As Inke Arns points out in the catalog essay to the exhibition "History will repeat itself" at Hartware MedienKunstVerein in Dortmund, Germany, reenactments create a temporal paradox that consists of erasure of distance to a bygone era while simultaneously creating *more* distance from the original historical circumstances. Beard's photographs are an attempt to embody the everyday stories that are embedded

in the factory's architecture. We must also view the Hathaway Shirt Factory's story as part of a larger socioeconomic transformation coming in the wake of globalization. Assembly and manufacturing have been exported to places where manual labor is cheap and US jobs are increasingly focused on the immaterial labor of sales, services, and symbols.

How might we go about understanding such circumstances and their implications for the real, material everyday lives of those who are affected by them? As Arns writes, "By eliminating the safe distance between abstract knowledge and personal experience, between then and now, between the others and oneself, reenactments make personal experience of abstract history possible." Beard's photographs posit a creative return to the Hathaway environment wherein the body strives to make contact, across time, with the bodies that preceded it, their actions, their labor, and their moments of poetry.

But the paradox of reenactment, according to Arns, is that it erases distance but simultaneously multiplies it by restaging that which is clearly impossible, that is, the experience of the past in the present. Beard's photographs call attention to this impossibility through artifice: their size, their use of dramatic lighting (approaching chiaroscuro) and the performative situations that they present. Something has happened, something is happening, something will happen. Because of the nature of the medium, the images are suspended in time, but they are doing everything they can to assert their staged temporality, including their distance from the viewer. History and memory are mediated by presents and futures. This is not to say that history is arbitrary fiction, but Beard's photos call attention to the fact that any recovery of the experience of Hathaway Shirt Factory women is ultimately a creative non-fiction.

In "Line", for example, a female figure traces the line created where two pieces of red wall come together. We see her arm, hand and fingers, but her body has left. The shadow of her figure is reflected on the glossy wall. The photograph becomes a vast expanse that narrates a departure—of the architecture, the figure and the figures before the figure. The wall wears its history in the form of cracks and paint strokes

and dings. What we see is the body trying to embody a thing from which it is impossibly distant: another time, another circumstance, another person. Perhaps a Hathaway shirt worker did run her hand along this line in the past. Does it resonate when we touch it again? Standing in front of this photograph, you may begin to believe that it does and this is exactly Beard's poetic assertion.

To stage my own kind of repetition, I turn again to Arns: "Reenactments repeat moments in history whose importance has not been fully understood." And how can we understand the vast socio-economic transformations of globalization if not through tracing its impact on chairs, windows, floors, dirt, and our very own bodies that are always escaping us?



**There/There, c-print, 50" x 40", 2005.**

*Catherine D'Ignazio, co-curated the Conflux Festival of Psycho-geography in Brooklyn, NY, in 2006. She teaches in the Digital Media program at the Rhode Island School of Design.*

References:  
"History Will Repeat Itself: Strategies Of Reenactment In Contemporary (Media) Art & Performance." By Inke Arns, Curator, for the exhibition of the same name. 2007.