



LETTERS TO THE PRESIDENT “Socially engaged art invites collaboration with people, communities, and institutions in the creation of art,” Oring explains.

The art of democracy

When Sheryl Oring returned to the United States in 2004 after six years in Germany, she felt out of touch.

Out of touch with American politics, and out of touch with how people were feeling about the upcoming election.

So, as a socially-engaged artist with a background in journalism, she decided to launch what has become known as the “I Wish to Say” project. In her part-research, part-public-art endeavor, Oring sets up a 1960s-style public office of sorts – complete with vintage typewriters – and invites individuals to dictate messages to the president.

Since 2004, “I Wish to Say” has traveled to dozens of cities – from New York to Oakland to Raleigh – and has produced more than 3,200 postcards that have been sent to the White House. Over the years, the project has been highlighted by ABC, NPR, and The Washington Post, to name a few.

Now, Oring has brought over a decade of work together in “Activating Democracy: The ‘I Wish to Say’ Project.” The book captures her unique project and examines the role of art in advancing public discourse, free speech, civic participation, and democracy.

The assistant professor of art started exploring the idea of a book in 2015.

“I knew the 2016 election would likely be historic, and I felt like I had enough material to make this kind of a book,” Oring says. “I hope it will inspire students and others to make work that engages in important political and social issues.”

In addition to her book, Oring is sharing the project through a new digital archive. The thousands of postcards are now available

to the public via a searchable web application created by Oring and UNCG University Libraries. The archive is designed to spur additional research.

“‘I Wish to Say’ is a poignant, anecdotal sampling of voters from cities across the country,” Oring says. “It makes a very human portrait of what people were thinking at the time. I want students and scholars to be able to use the digital archive as a research tool.”

With a new president in the White House, Oring is planning future “I Wish to Say” performances and exploring how to integrate her work into the classroom.

She’s also applying the concept in new ways, including a public art project called “Greetings from Tampa Bay.” The final product, residents’ stories about the city typed and integrated into an aluminum sculpture, will be installed this summer in the Tampa International Airport.

Ultimately, Oring’s goal is to provide a platform for individuals of all backgrounds to speak out. The key to the project’s success? Listening.

“In the end, that’s what we all want: a chance to be heard,” Oring wrote, in an op-ed published last fall in the San Francisco Chronicle. “It is not only the act of speaking, but the act of listening that makes this possible. This is what I wish to say, and I hope the next president is listening.”

*By Alyssa Bedrosian • Photography by Todd Turner and Jillian Clark
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