

AWP 2022: Philadelphia, PA

EVENT OUTLINE

Event Title: Worth a Thousand Words: Integrating Visual Elements into Creative Nonfiction

Event Description: Writers trade in words, but sometimes words aren't enough. A panel of award-winning memoirists and essayists will discuss how photos, documents, original artwork, and other visual elements can deepen, complicate, and illuminate creative nonfiction. Discussion will cover craft concerns, like what can be described vs. what must be depicted, and how to go about weaving images into text; as well practical ones, like permissions and convincing publishers that images are essential to your work.

Event Category: Nonfiction Craft and Criticism

Event Organizer & Moderator

Chelsea Biondolillo Chelsea Biondolillo is an artist and the author of *The Skinned Bird: Essays* and two prose chapbooks, *#Lovesong* and *Ologies*. Her work has appeared in *Best American Science & Nature Essays*, *Orion*, *Brevity*, *Diagram*, *River Teeth*, *Passages North*, and others. Her collages have been exhibited in Oregon and Washington and collected in online and print anthologies. She is a former Colgate O'Connor and Oregon Literary fellow, and is a current member of the Pacific NW Collage Collective.

Event Participants

Lilly Dancyger Lilly Dancyger is the author of *Negative Space*, a reported and illustrated memoir selected by Carmen Maria Machado as a winner of the '19 SFWP Literary Awards; and editor of *Burn It Down*, a critically-acclaimed anthology of essays on women's anger.

Mary-Kim Arnold Mary-Kim Arnold is the author of *Litany for the Long Moment* and *The Fish & The Dove*. A former arts administrator, she now teaches in the Nonfiction Writing Program at Brown University.

Megan Culhane Galbraith Megan Culhane Galbraith is a writer, visual artist and author of *The Guild of the Infant Saviour: An Adopted Child's*

Memory Book. She's the 2022 Writer-in-Residence for AdopteesOn, the Associate Director at the Bennington Writing Seminars and the founding director of the GIV Young Writers Institute.

Grace Talusan Grace Talusan is the author of the memoir, *The Body Papers*, and in 2022, was named a fellow for the Brother Thomas Fund, US Artists, and the NEA in Creative Writing.

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements (5 minutes)

Chelsea Biondolillo: Welcome to *Worth a Thousand Words: Integrating Visual Elements into Creative Nonfiction*. A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone's use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

I also want to note: A couple of the panelists will have books available to buy at the end of the panel, so we are going to do our best to end on time and not keep the next panel up.

I'm going to start out by introducing everyone up here, and then we will each take a few moments to talk about how and why we use images in our work. Then we will move into a round table discussion.

[Read above bios]

Participant Initial Remarks (10 minutes)

Mary-Kim Arnold

In some ways, the driving question of my memoir is, how can you tell a story that you don't know? For me, as an adoptee, the not knowing was really the whole story, and the evidence of the not knowing was contained in these photographs and in these artifacts that only served to pose more questions, to point at all the gaps and silences and misinformation that shaped my life. It was such a strange feeling to see these images that I didn't recognize, or have any context or language for. And there were documents — letters between my mother and the director of the orphanage, medical reports — the reduction of a life to observable data points. So what ended up becoming the memoir arose from these questions of what even is an image and what is its relationship to the life it represents? These photos were the only evidence of the earliest years of my life, years for which I had no memory and no language, so I was fascinated by them, in the way that they pointed to this central paradox — me but not me, a life and a death.

At the time I was preoccupied with the work of two artists — Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, the first Korean American artist I was introduced to — and Francesca Woodman, whose work was showing at the time. They both died young and tragically, and I was thinking about what happens to all that possibility that their lives and their work had held? And there was a way in which that was the question of my own life, too. Or at least the life of the two-year old Korean child I had once been. There is something, I think, about prose and sentences that can lean toward certainty, toward clarity or knowing that images can suspend for a time. And I really wanted to spend some time in that unknowing.

[Slides: (1) image of passport photo; (2) 2-page spread from *Litany*; (3) photo from trip to Korea; (4) photo from orphanage; (5) 2-page spread from *Litany*; (6) photo in hanbok]

Chelsea Biondolillo

I'm first going to talk about how I've used images in past and current projects and say just a few words about why. #Lovesong is a chapbook assembled as a collage of photographs that were originally posted to Instagram, micro-essays that were almost all first published on Twitter, and "found" text excerpts, which are all taken from love letters I've received over the years. In *The Skinned Bird*, photos are major components of two of the essays, "The Story You Never Tell,"

which is an obscured/erased essay, and “Enskymment” with text-photo pairs. These aren’t the only images in the book, but they’re the big ones. My latest work in progress so far includes drawings, photos, and collages. In “On Ghosts” there are collected drawings and photos. And in “Weeds” I’ve paired color-coded text with facing page full-color collages. Neither are published yet.

As far as the why: My first degree was a BFA in photography. My art school thesis was a conceptual piece where I posted short statements all over town on flyers and posters. (Which means I wrote for my photo thesis and took pictures for my first essay collection.) I tend to write most often in fragments, which lends itself to interleaving image making. My studio is for writing and making. And for me, the images can inspire writing and vice versa. My process is almost entirely intuitive/reactionary—I have executive function limitations that make long-range plans or strategies very difficult to execute.

[Slides: (1) 2 pages from Lovesong, (2) 2-page spread from Story You Never Tell, (3) page from Enskymment, (4) 2-page spread from Weeds, (5) 2-page spread from Weeds (6) 2-page spread from Xness Joy]

Lilly Dancyger

When I first started working on Negative Space, I set out to write an artist monograph about my father, Joe Schactman, who died when I was twelve. He left behind a large body of work, and I wanted to immortalize it, to create an archive and share his work with the world. So when I started reporting the story of his life, interviewing people who knew him and piecing together a timeline of his work, my focus was on contextualizing the art—the story was entirely in service of the images.

Over the course of the decade it took me to complete the project, it transformed from an artist monograph into a memoir, but rather than scrapping the original vision, I incorporated it into the memoir to create a hybrid work. The result is very much a memoir—it tells the story of my father’s life, heroin addiction, and death; the story of the ten years I spent researching his life and learning to see him in a new light; and my story of growing up without him, dropping out of high school to be a hellion on the Lower East Side, and eventually finding way to something like stability. But these three narrative strands are all still organized around the themes in my father’s artwork—the images are still at the core of the project. So I

don't think of the images in Negative Space as illustrations, but as the organizing principle of the whole book, a narrative strand in their own right.

[Slides (1) "Ow pin" image-and-text page from Negative Space, (2) dog chain drawing image page from Negative Space, (3) leaf deer image page from Negative Space, (4) Daphne sculpture image page from Negative Space, (5) rabbit print image-and-text page from Negative Space, (6) "Pink Lady" sculpture image page from Negative Space]

Megan Culhane Galbraith

When I was a child, I wanted to control the world because, as an adoptee, I had no control. I built miniature worlds and created dioramas imagining myself into existence. *The Guild of the Infant Saviour: An Adopted Child's Memory Book* is told in a fractured narrative that mimics the way we adoptees get our information. I was at the mercy of stories my birth mother told me, which were born from shame and trauma. She wasn't interested in telling me what I wanted to know, but rather what she felt I needed to hear. So, I became interested in the idea of memory as a coping mechanism; in what was left unsaid and why. Like Mary-Kim's, mine is also a narrative of not knowing. I learned how to write into the silences and using images, in particular dolls in a dollhouse, was a way for me to begin to form the questions I needed to ask.

The dollhouse is a tiny stage on which I recreate my baby photos. The images allow space for the reader to connect the dots. Dolls are mute, yet meaningful. They're objects of maternal devotion, given to girls to practice for motherhood; they're used by therapists to help children process trauma; they're creepy, weird, and hypersexualized. Aren't they perfect medium, then, to illustrate female desire, the dystopian nature of adoption, and the shame leveled upon unwed mothers? When I play, I create worlds where women rule on a 1:12th scale. Playing with dolls gives me power over how to tell my story and allows me to stay curious, which is a childlike and playful approach to artmaking. Practicing 'beginner's mind' is a fun place to be, especially because adults sort of ruin everything.

[Slides: (1) The Guild of the Infant Saviour cover/Little Megan doll; (2) Collage 3) Megan on nap mat; (4) memory book collage (5) DOMECON “practice babies”; (6) Megan’s childhood bedroom]

Grace Talusan

I wanted the pages of my memoir, *THE BODY PAPERS*, to show photographs, images, and documents mostly because I liked the way they looked. Also, they served as a kind of evidence, or receipts.

I also used images as a way to poke my memory. If memoir was based on memory, I wanted to see if there was anything else there that might fall out of my memory bank.

As I was revising my book, my father gave me the Kodachrome slides that he had taken during our first years in America. They smelled like the basement in my parents’ house where they had been forgotten for decades.

I projected the slides onto a wall and the images became life-sized. I looked at hundreds of slides, but I stopped at this one image for a long, long time.

This is me as a girl with my family in New Hampshire. My father caught me at an unguarded moment.

This is the moment that cracks everything open for me. I was a child. I was that small.

I was compelled to move towards this image.

Closer.

And closer.

And then I had a flash of memory and I was back inside the yellow dress and that summer day in New Hampshire during the seven year period of my childhood when I was being sexually assaulted by my grandfather, night and day.

Faced with this forgotten life-seized image of myself, I was able to access a part of myself that I had denied. I wrote about it in my memoir and included this image, but I did not include this next one.

I turned off the part of my brain that said this was a silly thing to do and instead followed my instinct to move towards the image of the girl. And then I reached out my hand to myself, through time. I reassured that girl. I forgave her and I asked for her forgiveness.

I promised her that someday, I would write her story.

And people would hear it and they would not turn away. No, they would believe her. They would listen.

[slides 1: Filipinx girl in yellow sundress sits on a bench next to her mother; 2: same photo closer; 3: same photo closer; 4: same photo closer, 5: same photo, negative image; 6: same photo projected on a wall, with a hand placed over girl]

Moderator Questions (30 minutes)

1. What rules or organizing principles did you use when deciding where and how to place images throughout the text? How did you decide which images to include, why, and where?
2. In your work, what can images do better than text, or better than text alone?
3. Some technical questions: What kind of color vs black and white issues did you have? Did you scan images or take photos/have photos of work taken? Were there any other technical considerations you hadn't planned for?
4. Have you had any trouble publishing excerpts with images, or did you experience pushback getting the images in the book?
5. Any books you recommend that use images and text effectively?
6. What do you hope to see more of in the book market, or, where is this hybridity headed, do you think?

Chelsea Biondolillo: Before we open it up to you for questions, a couple of notes. Lilly will be headed to the bookfair right after this to sign books at the SFWP table. I have a few copies of my books to sell/ sign after the panel (because I don't think they are in the bookfair). Megan and I will be reading new work at the Rock n Roll reading on Saturday, 3pm at Tattooed Mom's.

Audience Q&A (10 minutes)