

Sheryl Oring

Editor of *Activating Democracy:
The 'I Wish to Say' Project*

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Sheryl Oring is an interdisciplinary artist, author and educator whose work explores democracy, free expression and public dialogue. Best known for her long-running participatory project 'I Wish to Say', she invites members of the public to dictate messages to political leaders, which she types on a vintage typewriter and sends to the White House.

She has a new book coming in 2027 with Corey Dzenko, *Secretary to the People: Civic Engagement Through the Art of Sheryl Oring*

Tell us more about your new book coming out next year – what inspired it?

In 2024, I was working on putting together an exhibition that documented two decades of my 'I Wish to Say' project where I set up a public 'office', perform the role of the secretary and invite people to dictate postcards to the U.S. president. As I sifted through the thousands of messages that I had typed over the course of twenty years, I was struck by the depth and richness of the work. This show was curated by art historian Corey Dzenko at Monmouth University in New Jersey. In the course of working on that show, we discovered that my earlier book was out of print. All of this sparked a discussion about whether I should update my first book, *Activating Democracy: The 'I Wish to Say' Project* (also from Intellect), or propose a totally new one. Through discussions with Corey and the team at Intellect, we decided that a new book was the way to go. Intellect also found a way to make the first book available again, which is great as it feels extremely timely and relevant right now.

What has your research process revealed so far and have any discoveries shifted how you think about your own work?

One of the biggest revelations in the book is the deeply personal connections to and inspirations for my work. Prior to working on this book, I typically focused on the more activist elements of my work and wasn't exploring the ways my work also functions as a self-portrait that visualizes some of the constraints I felt within my own family. I grew up with a very difficult sibling.

When we were growing up, my brother was prone to violent outbursts, but only when my father was not at home. This created a situation in which my father never witnessed the true extent of my brother's demons and, therefore, did not believe me – or my mother – when we tried to describe the violent rages that were commonplace while he was away. Ultimately, my brother died by suicide in 2010 at age 43.

Has anything in the writing and editorial process surprised you?

I was a little surprised at how quickly the book came together. I have a journalism background so I am used to writing on deadline, but this book came together in less than a year from the time we conceived of it until we turned it in to the editorial team at Intellect. It was clearly a book that wanted to be written.

How does *Secretary to the People: Civic Engagement Through the Art of Sheryl Oring* build upon and expand the themes of your previous book?

This book is purely focused on my practice, investigating various aspects of my work and how my work has been integrated into public spaces, schools, universities, libraries, and museums. Art historian Corey Dzenko is the editor of this new book and she brings a wealth of perspectives to the new book. The earlier book used my practice as a framework to explore not only my work, but also a generation of artists making politically and socially engaged art.

When did your passion and interest in art and activating democracy begin?

It started in Berlin as I worked to create a large-scale public artwork called *Writer's Block* that I made as a tribute to the writers whose books were burned in Nazi Germany. I created sculptural cages out of rusty construction steel and filled them with typewriters, making a visual reference both to extreme censorship such as the book burnings and also to forms of self-censorship. This was my first big public art project and it was definitely a passion project! I collected hundreds of typewriters that were donated to the project from Berliners and people from other parts of Europe. Making this work was physically taxing and challenging in so many ways, but it was all worth it when I saw people engaging with the sculptures. Working on this project ultimately led me to my next big work, 'I Wish to Say'.

In light of Women's History Month, are there any women who have played a role in activism and helping strengthen civic engagement that have inspired you?

On a personal level, my paternal grandmother always inspired me and also inspired my work as 'Secretary to the People'. She was a secretary at the University of Maryland. As far as artists go, there are so many! Lorna Simpson, Yoko Ono, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Marina Abramović, Else Lasker-Schüler. I've also been listening to some of the interviews Tracey Emin is doing in conjunction with her retrospective at the Tate Modern and thinking about her as a role model as well. Her work is so incredibly raw and honest and I've always loved it.

Looking forward how can we encourage more women to get involved in activist spaces?

I'm passionate about working with students and while I have a long history of working on university campuses, lately I've been looking for opportunities to engage with high school students as well. It's important to empower girls at this critical point in their lives and encourage them to speak out. I'm on the board of the National Coalition Against Censorship and I am starting to do some work with their Youth Free Expression Project that encourages young activists in the free speech arena. Serving as a mentor to empower young people feels like one of the most important things I can do right now.

How is art important for social change and catalysing civic participation?

Artists are often the canary in the coal mine – that is, they see things that others don't see and through their work can raise a red flag. So I see artists as critical for this work.

You often work with tactile materials like typewriters and postcards. What does physical interaction add that digital communication can't replicate?

In the age of AI there is something more and more valuable about things like a hand-typed message. Through the small mistakes that appear and even the differing strengths of the marks on the page, the typing is evidence of a human touch. The typed messages are also documentation of our times that cannot be disputed or digitally altered. They are the opposite of fake news.

For readers who are less familiar, could you explain what social practice art is and what it means to you and your research?

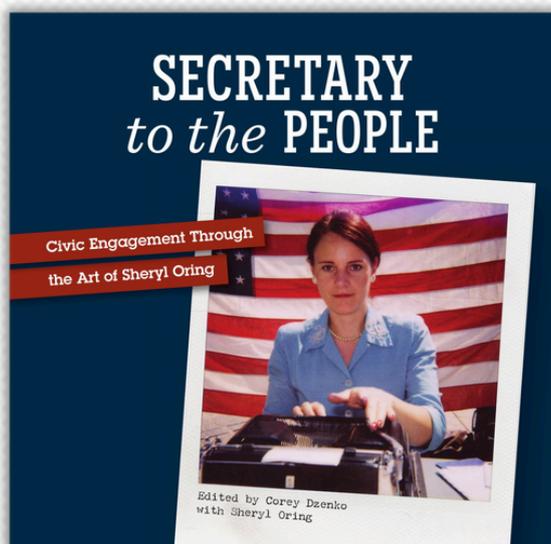
When I first started making art my work did not fit into any established categories or genres, so I often got put into fields such as 'new media art' or 'new genres'. As time went on, new terms such as 'social practice art' or 'socially engaged art' cropped up. This was an attempt to describe art practices such as mine in which the social interaction becomes the art. However, for me this term is a bit restrictive. My work defies categorization. It encompasses social practice and it also includes so much more, from performance art, political art, activist art, printmaking, book arts, mail art, sculpture, photography and public art.

Your secretary persona is visually striking and historically loaded. What does embodying that image allow you to say about gender, labour and power?

There is a quiet power in the secretary role. Secretaries are the keepers of secrets, often serving as gatekeepers and holding real power over access and communication. By dressing as a secretary from the early 1960s, there is also a reference to the feminist movement of that time, which also happens to be the era that I was born into.

Who do you envision as the primary audience for this book and what conversations do you hope it sparks among readers?

Art students and teachers as well as art curators and art educators working within a museum context are all part of the primary audience for this book. We included a section of case studies that explore how my work has been integrated into schools, universities and libraries as well as other public spaces and I hope this inspires people making art and people presenting art to think outside the box when it comes to making and showing art.



Coming soon!

Secretary to the People

Edited by Corey Dzenko
with Sheryl Oring