

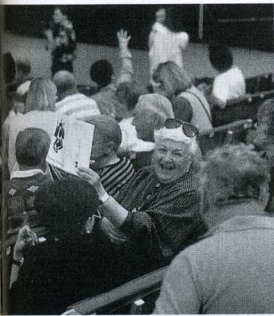
# Sheila Levrant de Bretteville

I have been asked to speak on this day devoted to 'strategies and forms of expression of the oppositional and reflexive traditions' and to talk about these traditions in my own work and that of our students at Yale university. Frankly, I'm not fully comfortable with doing this, because first, I'd prefer that the students do their own talking about their work; teachers are there to listen to students and help them learn how best to communicate their own ideas. And second, although a student might choose oppositionality as the appropriate position to take in a project, I don't feel that we are teaching oppositionality per se at Yale. Our starting point is not the radical conceptions of cultural production that Fredric Jameson suggests lack a critical distance: **negativity, opposition, subversion, critique, and reflexivity.**<sup>1</sup> Rather, what is central both to my own work and to the educational program at Yale is a process that involves asking, listening, reflecting, suggesting, and sustaining. It's a process that entails on the part of the designers a deep sense of connection and initiative in creating their work. They learn to ask and listen to themselves as authorities in the process of creating, and to ask and listen to others, to establish a dialogue with the design audience. This is an interactive method of teaching and making. At Yale, it's asking the students about their experience and their wants and needs and then helping them realize those things through suggesting possible paths. And in my work as a designer, it's asking the people who have lived and worked at my sites about what they remember and what they need remembered so that what I do with them reflects and sustains them – and ever, I hope, sustains people who come along to those sites in the future.

I'd like you to bear in mind these concepts – of asking, listening, reflecting, suggesting, and sustaining – as I show you both some student work and some of my own.

Each year, the first week-long project that we give at Yale to the new students is aimed at getting them to think of making an external innovation of what they're thinking. One year, Irma Boom's assignment was simply: **make something that represents a place in New Haven.** The point is not just that the students learn their way around New Haven and locate where to get the materials and machines they want to use, but that they begin to think of their work as growing out of their own connections to places and to people. They move through the city and in the process pay attention to their own thinking, locate their emotional attraction to content. One student, Heidi Fener, whose background had been in anthropology, stopped at a fish store where she interviewed the people who'd been running it for years. She made a set of laminated cards that carried some of the quality of the place and people in a transformed, condensed form. The questions this small work brought up are

<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'The cultural logic of late capitalism', in *Postmodernism: or the cultural logic of late capitalism*, Durham university press, 1992. p 48



Audience reception of  
Class action brochure



easily as much of value to the student and her future work as the thing made. What does the materiality of the work signify to us designers, to the fishmongers? Are they the audience as well as the participants in her work?

In our first meetings with incoming students we have often provided a starting point for their investigations by giving them a text, a film, or an audiotape. The problem rests on identifying the ideas and structures of the given text as a starting point for generating their own ideas. One year I chose an essay by Salman Rushdie about *The Wizard of Oz*. The text interwove references to the original book by Frank Baum, the various iterations of the screenplay, a nuanced description of Rushdie's own experience in seeing the movie for the first time in New Delhi, conflating images of Indian gods with the Wizard of the film, and how for him the story evoked reflections about how he might be as a parent. We watched the film on video together, ate popcorn, and viewed a video tape with some out-takes from the film, and I also brought in a doctor from the Yale school of medicine who was using the bar codes to reference images on re-purposed video discs. With the 'magic wand', you could scan the bar code and pick up the part of the video disc that you wanted to display. After reviewing this material in its various forms, and beginning to design their own work, the students became clearer about how what each thought and understood is informed by what another has thought and done, using a text as a starting point for hearing your own ideas and giving them visual form.

One student, David Comberg, interpreted *The Wizard of Oz* as being about asking for help. With a magic wand, you could get help by scanning the bar code and calling up images from the Wizard that he had pre-selected.

Now, I must admit that I had an agenda in choosing the Wizard. My agenda was to tell the students that I am not the Wizard, that if they come to Oz, otherwise known as Yale, they will find that they already have a heart and a brain and courage – that these are not what the teachers will give them; they already have them. In other words, I was using the text to reinforce the importance of the individual in a democracy – a notion that we value in the program at Yale. Both student and faculty have agency and knowledge; every voice is heard, not just the voice of authority.

This year we changed the initial project so that we no longer give the



David Comberg, *Asking for help*, 1991. Video disc, wand, book with bar-codes

students a text; we outline a process, they choose their own starting point. Just as they choose the academic and studio courses that they want at Yale university, assembling a program that will give them the tools they want to have when they graduate, so here they choose their own text, film, chat room – whatever. Throughout their time at Yale no content is dictated by the faculty; it is supplied by the student. We have set up a structure that encourages and values students to have time to think and reflect, to give form to the content they choose, because we think that this sets them up to be active in the world.

In the class called 'community action', students are learning just that. The students are given a newspaper and asked to choose any content that they feel needs addressing in action, and then they design that action with the faculty members' help. Out of this class came a collective group which calls itself Class action. It now includes both current and past students who identify issues they want to address and work together as a collective. This group uses the media to enlarge the visibility of their projects. Receiving press coverage for their project of a pro-choice billboard, they were invited to the International design conference

in Aspen in 1994. When they saw the conference invitation with an abstract image of woman, their 'action' was to produce a folded printed sheet with an image that reconfigured the parts to create another gender's figure. For the centrefold image they replaced the parts again, this time with all the various body parts of the woman. The collage makes literal what the viewers were seeing in it by abstraction. On the back of the folder Class action wrote: **this is the image of a woman: naked, on her back, legs spread, contorted, passive, available, resisting, willing, afraid, in control, a mugger, a whore, a decoration, a symbol. She has no identity. She is an identity.**

**She's the logo for this conference. They added that they had produced this commentary to initiate discussion at Idca 1994 about the representation of human bodies.**

Class action's issue-oriented work requires a certain media visibility to be most effective, but not every person, process and product needs to appear in the media or be published to be effective. Most of what happens at Yale happens quietly, privileges the individual more often than the collective, and most of the work is regularly discussed in private conversation or within a small group process.

Each of our students is asked to create a body of work on an area of interest to them that relates to design. One student, that same Heidi Fener



Community action,  
New Haven, 1992. Students  
painting pro-choice billboard



of the local fish store, chose the somewhat 'degraded' landscape of the shopping centre – the super language of the supermarket. She went into the supermarket and looked at the signs and packaging almost as if she were an ethnographer, looking at the supermarket language from inside and outside at the same time – as if she were seeing exotic speech. She made packages that integrated a commentary on the supermarket and its language. Her work was reflexive in that it revealed what it was playing on; she appropriated the form and content of the supermarket in order to critique that form and content.

In a similar project Heidi critiqued the American game shows, which are commodified in our culture. Game shows blur the distinctions between themselves and the commercials embedded in them, and the prizes that they offer are those of the commodity system. She took the form of a TV guide, and where the guide would normally print a description of the shows on TV, Heidi embedded instead a critique of the shows. At the end of the second year the students work together to design and build an exhibition of their work, and for that show Heidi created a corner that was a symbolic supermarket. She had a machine that you see at the delicatessen counter where you take a number for service, only Heidi printed critiques on the little slips of paper. And she had a big roll of butcher paper printed with commentary; the visitors to the exhibition could tear off a piece of the critique and take it away. She also created boxes with images and words that were part of her critique. Heidi's work, like the projects of Class Action, is critical, but the critique is more nuanced and embedded within the formal exploration.

*2 New perspectives on historical writing. Edited by Peter Burke. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992. p 6*

Now I'm going to talk about four projects of mine. Like Heidi, I interpret places as if they were texts. And like many of my Yale students and teaching colleagues, my subjective interpretation of the texts determines the form each work takes. My work is site-specific and based in the lives of ordinary people who have lived in a particular place and are generally overlooked and excluded from power. I am interested making it possible for us to listen to those people in my work, for history has not given them a voice until recently. A useful interpretive framework for my work can be found in the history-from-below movement among historians that **reflects a new determination to take ordinary people's views of their past more seriously.**<sup>2</sup> Another concept of history



Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, *Path of stars*. New Haven, 1994. The star for Joseph McAlpine



I find helpful is Raphael Samuel's view of history as a **dialectic of past-present relations**.<sup>3</sup> This appeals to me in part because of my own personal history: my parents were immigrants, and I am most fascinated by the lived experience of immigrant neighbourhoods. What I want to do is make the plurality of voices of people in those neighbourhoods visible, allowing us to listen. I believe that each has something to say that we should pay attention to, so my work casts their words in stone and concrete and steel. It makes the ordinary permanent, and in the process the ordinary becomes extraordinary.

So the first project that I want to show you is called *Path of stars*. In Hollywood, there is a *Path of stars*, where bronze stars embedded in the terrazzo sidewalk bear the names of movie stars. My path of stars is embedded in common concrete sidewalk, in an area of New Haven that has fallen into disrepair and where many of the buildings that once held shops, movie theatres and factories are now empty. This has happened in many cities in the United States where the economy has changed, middle class, white people have left, and whole areas of cities are blighted.

Sometimes money and power, fearing the decline of cities, empty whole neighbourhoods to create highways or upscale stores and dwellings. The authorities and wealthier citizens in American cities have failed in these areas to pay attention to the lives of ordinary people; my work tries symbolically to put those people back into those neighbourhoods as part of the redevelopment of those areas.

My process begins in the street, talking to people, asking them to tell me about themselves and their neighbourhood, listening for what they find significant. For each project, I make my proposal based on asking and listening to former or current residents of the neighbourhoods in which I am working. And if my proposal is chosen and therefore funded, I then ask and listen some more, and I visit the library and try to find historical voices as well. What my project in New Haven did was to embed stars in each of the sidewalks that led into this neighbourhood.

Walking in towards the neighbourhood, the stars were arranged

chronologically so that you walked through a fragment of history, and as you walked you knew that people had been there before you, that they had been led there by their labour, and that their lives had contributed to this community. Now here I am, standing near the star for Joseph McAlpine, who came to work in 1955 at the New Haven gas company as the janitor. The workmen who helped me put this 300 pound into the ground said to me **a janitor?** and I said, **Yes, a janitor.** I had heard

Dinah Chidsey  
resident

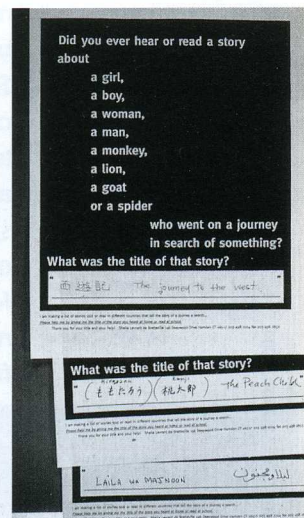
When Dinah was thirty-seven years old, she divorced William Rock, took back her maiden name, and moved to Ninth Square. Her nephew Ezekiel started a boot and shoe manufacturing on her property, and Chidsey family members continued to live and work in this Square for more than a century.

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about Joseph McAlpine from people who knew of him but I actually found him by looking his name up in the phone directory. I called him up and got his brother, who told me he was in the Veteran's hospital, so I went there to talk with him. And he told me the story about how he had gone to talk with the people who ran the gas company and asked the management **to help people come in with their bills, tell us what they could pay and make agreements they could keep.** The first person of african descent to work at this company, he became its community representative. He said **we formed a community relations board and started a college scholarship program.** No doubt, McAlpine is a star. Another way that I found stars was by looking at maps of the city over time. I saw the name of a woman on an eighteenth-century map, Dinah Chidsey. Now, that's unusual to have a female property owner in that era, so I did some more research and found that she had a very interesting story, that she had divorced and taken back her maiden name and lived there in that neighbourhood. Her family continued to live and work in this area for more than a century. Just living your life in a place is a way of contributing to a neighbourhood and deserves a star. So I didn't focus on the prominent citizens, but chose more of these lesser known people.

In order to know that I was choosing people who would speak to the people in the present, I went to places in New Haven where old people gather, I talked to former residents and asked them about what they remembered. And I spent a lot of time in a bar, one of the only remaining businesses in the area, just talking to people and listening to what they had to say. If my goal was to bring the people back to the area, I could symbolically put those people into that area through marking the ground with their stories, their voices, their stars. My four paths of stars embedded in the sidewalk cannot restore the fabric of the traditional city nor bring the people back to live here; what my work can do is to honour some of the everyday life of the city's citizens.



My next project is called *Search literature*, for a new library in Flushing, New York. I began by thinking about what it is that libraries have at their base. What is it that makes them really special? I walked in the streets around the site in order to get a sense of the place and talked with people in the street, in the stores, and in the old storefront library. What's amazing about Flushing is the vitality of the crowded streets, how varied the population of the street is. Immigrant groups have come there and are still arriving, all weaving among each other on the street – and sitting in the library. This is the busiest library in all of New York city and it was easily accessible from the street, but the new library was going to be rather grand, entered from a large stairway, and I was

Sheila Levrant de Bretteville,  
*Search literature*, New York  
Flushing, 1996. Asking people  
in the community for suggested  
titles

*Search literature*, 1997. The library  
steps during construction



concerned that the immigrants wouldn't know it was their place. In fact most of the people come from countries where there is no tradition of public libraries. So I looked for a way to invite them into the library, to show people something on the street that they would recognize and that would welcome them.

I began asking about titles of stories that are about a search, a journey, because immigrants go to a new place on a search, and people come to libraries on a search. I wanted to represent each of the countries of origin from which most immigrants had come or might come by the title of a text. I asked friends and colleagues of all ages and from various countries for titles. And I asked people in the Flushing community if they had read a story about a certain journey, to see which titles they were familiar with. And what I found was that the people answered me both in their own language and english. And so I included both languages in the design of the project.

I went into stores, schools, community centres and talked to people on the street and I found which stories were known to each group. And so all these stories appear in my work, all these nationalities and language groups, among them portuguese, french, creole, korean, german, bengali, urdu, chinese and the native american matinecock language. Although the library is not yet finished and open, I went down there to take this photograph to show you the steps, and people stopped and



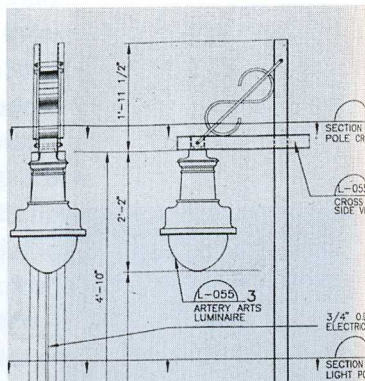


talked with me about the titles: an old woman stopped to point out that she had loved reading Joel Chandler Harris' folk tales about 'Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit.' That kind of thing happened all afternoon. And I recognized that what I hoped would happen was indeed happening: these people saw themselves in the work that I made.

The next project is in Boston, a city in decline during the 1950s. The authorities thought that the only way to improve the economy was to tear down old neighbourhoods to create new ones. And which ones are to be torn down? The neighbourhoods of those who are poor and under-represented, whose voices do not count, people without access to money and who do not yet know how to organize. In place of their neighbourhood, the authorities build highways and a new neighbourhood for much wealthier people. And that's what happened here: a whole neighbourhood of the working poor had been erased and highways were cut through here, making the place inhospitable for pedestrians trying to find their way. I was asked to improve the pedestrian paths through this vehicular environment and reveal the hidden history of that site. How do I tell the story of the people who had once lived here who were forced to move out in front of those who have moved in, funded by those who are building a new highway?

My proposal, now in working drawings that have gone out to bid, does not resolve the contradictions of this site, its history of funds and power. Integrated into the new construction of the highway, I reveal parts of the story in graphics that are sometimes literal and easily accessible, while at other times the image is coded, more subtle and ironic. For instance, across from luxury high rise towers which replaced the older tenements I have inscribed a statement into the sidewall of the highway, a statement that could represent entirely different notions of what the word neighbourhood means depending on whether it was said by a person from the old neighbourhood or by current inhabitants of the apartment towers.

I call this project *West end railings* – a pun because a major element is 6,000 feet of special, residential style railings, and because the people who lived there railed against something over which they had no power, the loss of their homes. In fact, they are still railing, because they have a regular newsletter and still stay in touch with one another; they are still a community, though a displaced one [by the way, there's a wonderful book by sociologist Herbert Gans, a classic of urban planning written at the time this West end neighbourhood was about to be razed. It was funded in part by the chief psychiatrist at the Massachusetts general hospital in the old West end who believed that when people lose their homes, it's like losing a loved one].<sup>4</sup>



Sheila Levrant de Bretteville,  
*West end railing*, 1997. Dollar  
signs at the street lights

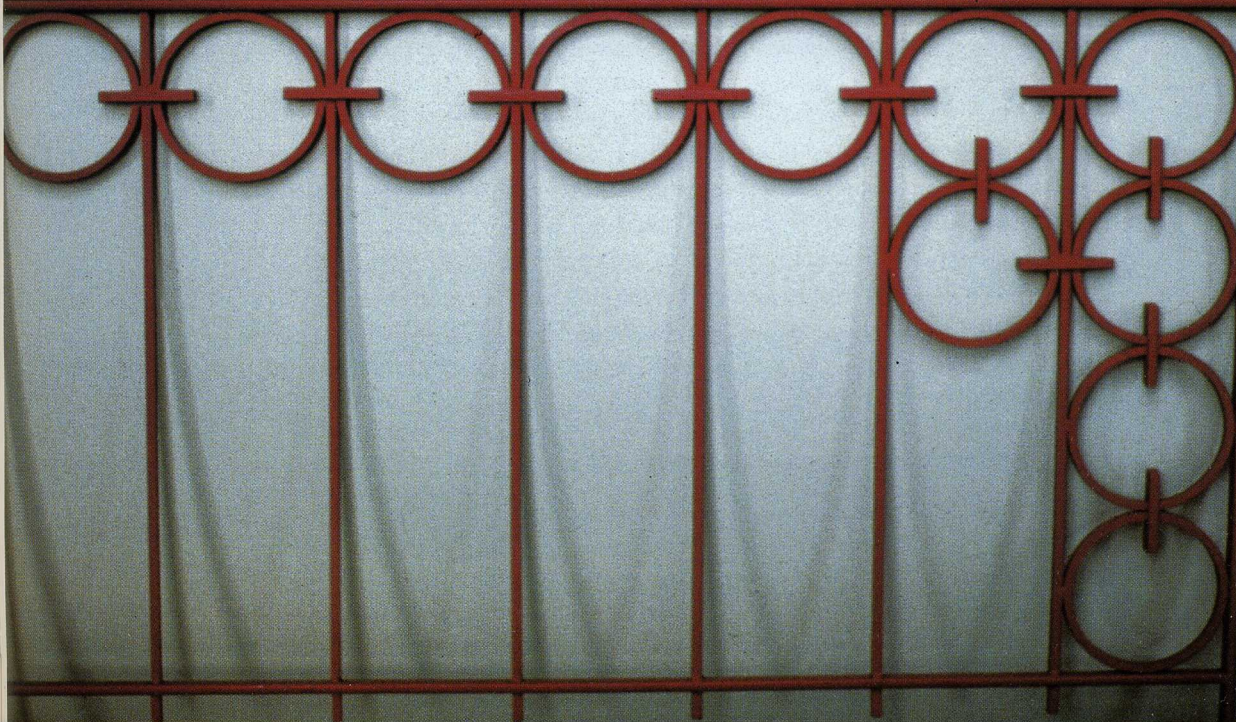
*West end railing*, 1997.  
Initial presentation model  
showing the basic unit  
that will run 20,000 feet,  
one sidewalk medallion  
with the name of the street  
that would have crossed  
this sidewalk, and the  
ghost of the tenements  
in the abutments.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert J. Gans, *The urban villagers: group and class in the life of Italian-Americans*. Free press, 1962





at 5 o'clock 500 mothers told you to go home



as part of moving into the center

*West end railings* is a work in progress by Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, developed on the edge of Charles river park, a series of luxury high rise buildings on the site of the old working class West end neighbourhood, which tries to evoke the hidden history of the neighborhood. It is part of a large highway construction project in Boston.



Walking between the luxury towers and the highway, a pedestrian would see reminders of the old neighbourhood; the names of the old streets that were once there are to be embedded where the footprint of the older, dense pattern of streets crosses the newer, long sidewalk. The railings continue this path through the network of highway overpasses and portals, helping pedestrians to find their way through the highway environment. The basic unit of the railings is divided into seven to reflect the days of the week. A circular detail typical of Boston's residential railings repeats along the top part of each day, a half day saturday and all day sunday – the times when people were hanging around on the street and could connect with each other. Each set of four railings carries a statement from a former resident about life in the older neighbourhood, and they say things like Phil Oddo, who remembered that **on saturdays everyone in the West end washed the steps to the buildings. The whole neighbourhood smelled of brown soap.** And Joe Russo remembered his childhood perambulations, **...we'd start down Cambridge street, down the seven bridges – all the way down the Charles, walk up on Auburn, come back over the Science park. We never had a problem. We got to know everyone and at five o'clock, 500 mothers told you to go home.**

Another evocative fragment is to be found in the street lighting which I have designed to echo the shape of the traditional scroll. Seen from the other side, the scroll is a dollar sign, a reference to the fact that it was dollars and greed that caused the neighbourhood to be taken down. At one point pedestrians passing through here will come to the abutment of the highway, where I have literally ghosted in an abstraction of the old tenements that once were here. The upper railing between the highway abutments ghosted with an image of the old neighbourhood carries a text panel bracketed by dollar sign scrolls. Here an official statement looms over the residents' comments about their everyday life. In the official language of the United States constitutional amendment, it states the sovereign right of eminent domain which includes the 'takings' clause: **...nor shall property be taken for public use, without just compensation...** I hope you see the little bit of irony in this comment and its proximity to the other texts and markers I am placing throughout at this large site.

The last project I am showing you today is in Little Tokyo section of downtown Los Angeles. Again my work takes place in a blighted area of a city, again a displaced population, again I celebrate the voices and experiences of anonymous citizens, immigrants and their descendants, and again I work with the layers of meaning embedded in a specific architectural setting, my project engaging in the history it commemorates. And again this is 'history from below'.





*the constant clanking of the street car.*

1922 Union Church is built as a religious and cultural center.

1942 Families awaiting detention gather here.

Sheila Levrant de Bretteville,  
Demographic and Little Tokyo.



In *Remembering old little Tokyo* I embed various types of evidence of the presence of a once large Japanese American population. The story of their historical experience is told through the sidewalk surface along the one remaining street. I divided the sidewalk into two zones. Closest to the buildings is a continuous honey-coloured band where parallel lines mark five decades from 1890 to 1940. In front of each doorway, brass inscriptions indicate changes in use I found through looking at the city directories.

Between the doorways, stainless steel inscriptions underscore the anti-Japanese racism that shaped the life experience and severely damaged the economic success of the community. A charcoal-coloured sixth band marks World War Two when Japanese Americans were forced out of their homes into internment camps and much more than the prosperity of this neighbourhood was lost. I chose historical acts that shaped the lives of people in Little Tokyo. For instance, the 1913 law that was intended to prevent anyone who was not born in the United States from owning property. I put this law next to the doorway of a building purchased by a man who bought the property in his daughter's name because he could not buy it in his own name. There's an inscription that refers to the fact that in 1941 the Federal Bureau of Investigation raided the 'Issei', the Japanese immigrants, unsuccessfully trying to find evidence of their disloyalty to the United States. So by the time you see Executive Order 966, the law that sent all the Japanese to internment camps during World War Two, you understand that you have actually arrived at the site of the very building where the families waited for detention.

The second zone beneath the time-line band extends to the curb and includes quotes from my meetings with four generations of Japanese Americans who lived and worked in this neighbourhood. Their voices continue across the property lines, marked by switching colour from terracotta to white to terracotta to white. These statements about everyday life in this neighbourhood include the generational mark as well as the name of the person speaking in order to locate the different attitudes, memories and preoccupations of each generation. While first-generation Fumiko Tani remembers **at Kyodo grill we mixed up Japanese and American ingredients into 'gacha' and 'champon' – dishes that were our customers' favourites**, third-generation Chris Komai says he is **as American as apple pie**.

Between the quotes are images of a variety of various ways Japanese Americans here wrap their goods, drawn in brass outline and coloured concrete. These everyday containers are meant to serve as metaphors for the way identity is placed and hidden within, the notion that what is inside cannot be known from only seeing the outside, and that you cannot understand what is inside without paying attention and going through the careful unwrapping process. One package is the Issei trunk



– the 'yanagi gori'. It is the container in which the first generation brought their belongings, and it is this same trunk that they used when they went to the internment camps, so it holds a lot of Japanese American history. One of our current Yale students, Miko McGinty, visits this site and brings me this delightful photo of herself atop the issei trunk, a fourth-generation Japanese American making her own familial relationship to the history embedded in this sidewalk surface. I could not have told these stories unless I had spent a lot of time moving through the neighbourhoods, reading, asking, reflecting. I hope that because I have tried to respond to the people in each of these places, my work will sustain them. In the same way, I hope to open a dialogue with our students at Yale. Because they create out of their own experience, choice of content and audience, their work is all different; it doesn't look like mine or that of any of our faculty, and that's the way it should be, for each of these people has his or her own way of making, his or her own voice.



Sheila Leviant de Bretteville.  
*Remembering old little Tokyo,*  
Los Angeles, 1996. McGinty  
stands on the image of the  
isei trunk