

TRICK YOUR BRAIN AND SMILE

WHEN AN ARTIST OF
OPTIMISM IS CRUELLY
TAKEN AWAY, WHAT
REMAINS OF HER
MESSAGE?

BY BONNIE TSUI

ON THE AFTERNOON of February 25, 2015, artist and curator Susan O'Malley was at home in Berkeley, taking care of business. She posted a note on Facebook asking if anyone could help her transport a piece of artwork down to San Jose, where she was curating a show at the Museum of Quilts and Textiles; several people cheerfully responded. She exchanged emails with her editor about the final page layouts for her first book, *Advice from My 80-Year-Old Self*, which will be published by Chronicle Books this month. In the next room, her husband, Tim Caro-Bruce, a computer programmer, was working from home.

O'Malley was nine months pregnant with twin girls, scheduled to deliver them in just three days. Instead of puttering about the small studio she'd set up in the two-bedroom bungalow in North Berkeley, she worked from the olive-green couch in the sunlit living room: feet propped up; laptop, phone, water bottle, and high-calorie snacks at the ready. The babies were deeply wanted. The couple had tried for several years to have children, and they were overjoyed that they would soon have two. Caro-Bruce's parents were in town from Wisconsin to help prepare for the twins and visit their daughter Emily, who also lives in Berkeley and who herself had just given birth. Later that afternoon, they would swing by with some lamb stew for dinner.

Though the studio was currently quiet, O'Malley had begun to ratchet up her work as an artist. She'd been a part of the Bay Area arts community for more than a decade—as a gallery manager, as a curator and print center director at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, and as an emerging fine artist in her own right. Though she took

her art seriously, she didn't hold it up in a place of lofty pretension. She was goofy and silly and had a healthy sense of fun when it came to her chosen career (she'd once taken the liberty of declaring herself "artist-in-residence" of the San Jose neighborhood where she'd grown up). Now, following her mother's rapid illness and death the year before, she'd summoned up the courage to dedicate herself full-time to her work.

The kind of art that O'Malley made was preoccupied with the social connections in our lives. In recent years, it took the form of big, colorful prints and public murals that distilled simple life lessons and transmitted nuggets of wisdom. Her

work was meant to comfort and subtly provoke. For a 2012 exhibit celebrating the reopening of the Palo Alto Art Center, she solicited community advice from passersby. The resulting posters, hand-printed using vintage processes, have the starry-eyed feel of early-'60s advertising: "Take More Chances, Make More Friends" in red, white, and blue type; "Love Is Everywhere, Look



Susan O'Malley in early 2014.

for It" in bubble-gum pink; "Enjoy Your Hair While You Have It" in shades of orange; "Don't Ever Lie" in lime green. She thought of these messages as community-authored public service announcements. One colleague playfully described them as "little slaps of love." They conveyed a zest for life, a love of serendipity, and a generosity of spirit. Not everyone loved them wholeheartedly—one critic labeled them bromides and asked, "Are we meant to enact these phrases or scoff at them?" But for many more people, the messages resonated. "People who normally didn't get art always said they got Susan," says Christina Amini, an editor at Chronicle Books and O'Malley's best friend.

In the midst of grief, what can art do? O'Malley herself was well acquainted with the question.

During her mid-20s, before she entered graduate school at California College of the Arts in 2004, O'Malley struggled to find a work identity that felt right. "Susan equals waitstaff at a winery?" she once wrote to her friend Matt Haber after she'd moved back home to San Jose post-college. "Yikes." When she finally found her way into the arts scene, though, she made herself indispensable: curating shows, collaborating with other artists, working as a juror for arts prizes, instigating school-wide doodle contests and other social art projects with high school students. The interactivity of her process, and the public accessibility of her art, mattered to her. While many people would shy away from confronting strangers, she made the act a centerpiece of her work.

At CCA, O'Malley began a long-running interactive project called *Pep Talk Squad*, in which she and Amini wore matching red athletic jackets and approached people with a question: "Is there anything that you need pep or encouragement on?" They listened, asked questions, and typed up a message for each person to keep. O'Malley was easy to talk to, and strangers shared their fears and vulnerabilities. Lanky and kinetic, she was an extrovert but a good listener. Her glasses and her winsome smile, revealing slightly crooked teeth, gave her a warm, unassuming appearance, not unlike that of a particularly magnetic librarian. The success of that project led to repeat performances over the years: at the Pro Arts gallery in Oakland; at Southern Exposure in the Mission; at CCA; at a house party; in the Yerba Buena Gardens on Election Day.

O'Malley was the kind of person who, if you admired a piece of her work, would more often than not give it to you for free. But "she had a smart selling side to her, too," says Caro-Bruce, who met his future wife while both were undergraduates at Stanford. In fact, O'Malley had a long-running fantasy of an alternate career as a high-powered advertising executive. "She valued art and did actually want to make money doing it," he says. Soon enough, that would happen, as O'Malley began exhibiting across the country and internationally, from San Francisco and New York to London and Copenhagen. For *Moment to Moment*, a 2013 collaboration between the experimental arts journal *The Thing Quarterly* and Levi's, O'Malley's work was chosen to adorn transportation hubs



O'Malley, in yellow, with her four sisters and mother, Lupita, who passed away in 2013.

in three cities: inside two New York City subway stations; in the Oxford Circus Tube station in London; and along Market Street and in the Castro Street Muni station in San Francisco. *Moment to Moment* curator Jonn Herschend, whose own work has been shown at the Whitney Biennial and SFMOMA, praised O'Malley's visual mantras for their power "to pull us out of our daily routine into something larger." Her creations were also featured on billboards at an arts festival in Poland and in solo shows at galleries in Cincinnati and Dallas. There were new commissions, upcoming exhibitions, that first book. Artist and curator Kevin Chen, who works at the de Young Museum, puts it this way: "She was going global."

On that day in February, though, O'Malley was focused inward, nervous and excited about meeting her daughters and tackling the parade of diapers, feedings, and sleep disturbances to come. She and Caro-Bruce had packed their hospital bags and installed car seats in their new station wagon. O'Malley's friend, another artist, Josh Greene, was one of her last visitors that day. He had come over to pick up a book she'd donated for his upcoming show at the Contemporary Jewish Museum: Jon Kabat-Zinn's *Full Catastrophe Living*. Greene had brought his young daughter with him, because he knew that a visit with O'Malley would be fun.

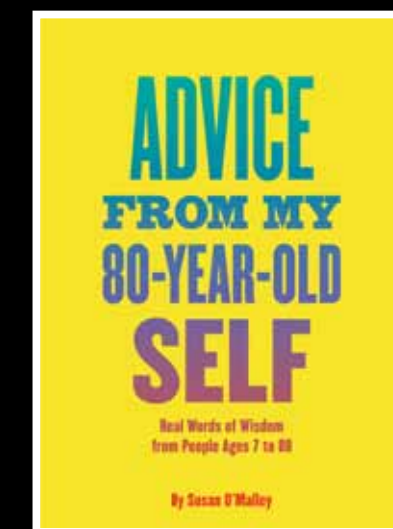
A little while after Greene and his daughter left, O'Malley got up from her perch on the couch. Caro-Bruce heard a noise and went to check on her. She had collapsed and wasn't breathing. Caro-Bruce started CPR, and then everything seemed to happen at once: His parents, just arriving at the door, called 911; EMTs arrived a few minutes later. They tried desperately to revive O'Malley, speeding her to the hospital for an emergency C-section. There, doctors did everything they could to save her, but it wasn't enough. The twins, Lucy and Reyna, survived briefly, and Caro-Bruce was able to hold his daughters before they died. Though he was in shock, he experienced a moment of astonishment when he saw them—I'm a dad—before the terrible reality set in. The autopsy later revealed that O'Malley had suffered a fatal arrhythmia caused by a rare and undiagnosed noncancerous tumor attached to the pericardium of her heart. She was 38 years old.

Amini, her friend and editor, says that O'Malley's loved ones now mark time as either before the apocalypse or after the apocalypse: *I did that piece before the apocalypse. I went on that trip after the apocalypse.* But inside O'Malley's body, the cataclysm had been set in motion long before anyone knew it. The tumor, doctors said, had likely been there for 10 years. For those who loved her, there is some small comfort in knowing what caused O'Malley's death, that her fate may have been both unavoidable and undetectable. But there was also anger. That ticking time bomb could have gone off at any time—so why did it have to explode when it did?

IN THE DAYS AFTER FEBRUARY 25, news of O'Malley's and her daughters' passing spread virally over social media. The confluence of some very human impulses—our fascination with tragedy and our compulsion to make sense of it; our seeking out of artists to interpret our feelings and give them shape and meaning; and finally, our Facebook-enabled need for connectivity, which amplifies all of the above to a sometimes

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Examples of O'Malley's work, including a billboard in Poland (top right) and a pair of street murals on San Pablo Avenue in Berkeley (center). At left, the artist, TK months pregnant with twins, arranges pages for her first book, *Advice From My 80-Year-Old Self*.

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unbearable degree—intensified the impact of her death. Caro-Bruce says that he was inundated on Facebook with a flood of strangers’ messages about his wife. He soon deleted his account.

One thousand people attended the family memorial for O’Malley at Montalvo Arts Center, in the South Bay, where she was once an artist-in-residence. When parking space ran out there, attendants waved people toward spots on the meticulously tended grass. At a public memorial at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 300 people were expected; double that number showed up. O’Malley’s death was noted in major art publications, including *Juxtapoz* and *Artforum*. Over the past year, there has been widespread public appreciation of her art, of a kind that she didn’t get to see when she was alive. While Caro-Bruce thinks his wife would have enjoyed the attention, he takes the posthumous surge of interest with a grain of salt.

“The positive, uplifting art, paired with this awful tragedy—the public reacts to that somehow,” Caro-Bruce says. We’re sitting in a quiet corner of a café in Berkeley, not far from his and O’Malley’s home. Tall, thin, and bearded, wearing jeans and a sweatshirt, Caro-Bruce fits right in with the grad students tapping away on laptops in the café’s back garden. It can be difficult for him to reconcile the public response to his wife’s death and her work with his own very personal feelings. He notes grimly that when people Google her name, one of the top search phrases is “Susan O’Malley cause of death.” He feels the need to steer the interest elsewhere. “The societal response that people have to tragedy can be good: to take inspiration from how amazing someone was, to see hidden messages in her art, and so on. I can appreciate that.” He pauses, thinking. “But it doesn’t have to be how I myself respond to this loss. For me, Susan was very three-dimensional.”

Concentrating on O’Malley’s work has given her family and friends some sense of focus and purpose at a time when focus and purpose can seem like impossible propositions. A week and a half after she died, a group that included her husband, her siblings, her in-laws, and Amini finished painting a mural of hers on San Pablo Avenue in Berkeley: “Less Internet More Love.” It was part of *Print Public*, a show put up by the Kala Art Institute, where O’Malley was a resident artist in 2014. In March, a month after her death, 2,000 copies of her text print bearing the message “It Will Be More Beautiful Than You Could Ever Imagine” began appearing on walls, windows, and other public spaces all over San Francisco. It was, as her friend and collaborator Herschend put it at the time, a way “to blanket the city in love for Susan.”

The fluorescent posters papered the windows at her soon-to-be publisher Chronicle Books, along Second Street. They’re gone now, but O’Malley’s other artworks live on all over the building: in a permanent fourth-floor gallery, in cubicles, on bulletin boards, in galleys for the forthcoming book. Sometimes, when she sees her friend’s art, Amini finds herself wondering: *How can it be more beautiful without Susan?* The bleakness of the thought threatens to overtake her. Other times, though, it seems that O’Malley is still there with her, quietly in the background, reminding her that joy and beauty are still attainable.

IN THE MIDST OF GRIEF, WHAT CAN ART DO? O’Malley herself was well acquainted with the question. During the previous few years, she’d tried to work through the illness and physical decline of her mother by making art with her. Susan was the fourth of six children born to Lupita and Pat O’Malley, both devout Catholics. “Our mom really raised us to be tender with each other—we were very close and part of each other’s daily life,” her sister Sharon, the youngest, tells me. As adults, the two sisters and their partners lived together for four years in San Francisco. “We got in one fight in that time—I think it was over a drying rack,” Sharon says, laughing. “I adored her.”

Sharon describes their mother as a passionate, loving, creative force. When she was diagnosed with multiple system atrophy, a degenerative brain disease, Susan’s art became a survival mechanism. In two years, Lupita went from being an independent, energetic teacher of children with special needs to someone

who was largely paralyzed and wheelchair-bound. But her wit and sense of humor remained intact. One of Susan's pieces is framed above Sharon's living room couch. It's a blown-up print of a handwritten black scrawl, *I love you baby*, with the "love" rendered as a heart. It is one of the series of works that Susan made with Lupita shortly after the diagnosis of MSA; the series became her second solo exhibition at Romer Young Gallery, in 2012. "She had my mom write out messages, things she wanted us to remember, and she made these prints," Sharon says. "I love you baby,' or 'Trick your brain and smile,' things she used to always say when we were growing up."

Finding light in the darkness, being able to locate optimism even in life's hardest moments—it was a place where O'Malley was beginning to find success. When her mother was dying, O'Malley created an installation at Montalvo Arts Center called *A Healing Walk*. She installed brown National Park Service-style wooden signs along a steep nature trail there. In a grove of redwoods, one sign reads: "You Look Up." Mid-trail, there are other signs: "Your Mind Quiets." And finally, before the summit lookout: "You Are Here Awake and Alive."

After her death, Montalvo made the walk a permanent installation. "She made this thing that helped us in our grief," Amini says. "Being able to walk, and to walk with other people." The first time that Amini did the walk, it was with O'Malley. The second and third times, it was with O'Malley's family and friends, mourning her passing.

O'Malley died on a Wednesday. On Thursday, Amini accepted the anguishing chore of crafting the email to friends that would inform them of what had happened. Caro-Bruce gave Amini the list of addresses the couple had put together for the baby announcement. "We were sitting in Sharon's living room, with all of her sisters," Amini says. "*I love you baby*' was up on the wall—it's my favorite piece of hers. As I'm writing that Susan and her babies died, there's this huge piece of her love made visible in front of me." She's not sure what that moment meant to her, exactly—just that it felt powerful and important. It's not that the presence of O'Malley's art in their lives makes her death any easier, Amini says. But it makes it different. There's something to hold on to.

Caro-Bruce has read a number of accounts of people describing their experience of sudden traumatic loss as "out of the blue" or happening on "a normal day like any other." The day that O'Malley died, however, didn't feel like a normal day, because they were three days away from becoming the parents of twins. He remembers feeling calm, and a sense of anticipation. "We were expecting a major life-changing thing to happen," Caro-Bruce tells me. "Just not the thing that did happen."

THERE IS A LONG TRADITION OF YOUNG ARTISTS' WORKS being reevaluated after they pass away. Think of Eva Hesse, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Francesca Woodman. Forever arrested in youth, the artist becomes as much martyr as maker, and her work is subsequently invested with more profundity and pathos than it may have ever possessed in life. We are captivated by the tragedy of an untimely death, the unrealized promise.

"I guess it's part of human nature," Herschend tells me. "The fascination with life and death—immortality through art?—and the desire to capitalize on something like this." These elements tend to come into play whenever people have achieved some stature in the creative world: art, music, writing, film. We look to them for examples of humanity. When they go, we search their work for clues to a life intensely lived.

Christian Frock, who organized the Yerba Buena memorial for O'Malley, says that the prevailing optimism in O'Malley's pieces will always stand in stark contrast to her tragic death—and that people will gravitate to that juxtaposition. "It's important to me to frame the conversation, as much as I can, around the work that she made, and not allow her death to overshadow her intentions," Frock says.

This challenge will arise repeatedly as more of O'Malley's work surfaces this year. *Advice from My 80-Year-Old Self*, her new book, began as a series of works she created as a result of interviewing people along San Pablo Avenue in Berkeley and around the greater Bay Area, in the summer of 2014. "I've always been interested in talking with people I meet in public spaces as part of my

creative process,” she wrote on the website for the project, last January. “There is something magical about breaking the silent space between a stranger and myself. I have a theory that people are waiting to be asked and to be heard.”

The editor of *Artforum* described *Advice from My 80-Year-Old Self* as a “brilliant...inversion of that quintessentially 21st-century genre, the self-help book.” The performance artist and writer Miranda July, whom O’Malley admired for her inventive forms of social art practice, called it “powerfully unsettling.” The book is as O’Malley originally put it together, with one change: “You Have Had a Wonderful Life Good Job” had been intended as the book’s closing piece, but Amini switched it with another. It was too painful to end that way.

Starting this month, posters from O’Malley’s book will be exhibited on 36 Muni bus stop kiosks, from the Embarcadero to Eighth Street, as part of the annual Art on Market Street program. “It’s a wonderful collection of work that best represents the diversity of folks that Susan was able to talk to, from age 7 to age 80,” says the de Young’s Kevin Chen, who worked with the San Francisco Arts Commission on the show. He loves the accessibility and graphic power of O’Malley’s pieces, the lack of sarcasm or cynicism—which in today’s world counts as an act of radical subversion—and the immediate impact that they have in public places. Chen also co-curated the exhibition for the reopening of the SFAC Gallery on January 22. “The only thing we know how to do—and what we *want* to do—is to continue to extend her legacy and provide opportunities for people to experience her work who haven’t yet done so,” Chen says.

What can O’Malley’s loved ones do in her absence? They try to follow her instructions as best they can. When I spoke with Caro-Bruce, he had just packed up his wife’s studio and put their Berkeley house up for sale. He is considering setting up a formal trust for O’Malley’s estate, to support her work and that of emerging artists in perpetuity. Asked if he thinks about her art differently now, he deliberates for a long time before answering. “One thing I struggle with is the tone and content,” he says slowly. “Sometimes it seems right on—that she knew how I’d feel and what I’d need if she were gone. Sometimes it makes me crazy—the way that it is naïve. It feels kind of cruel.” In part, he adds with a rueful laugh, it’s because she would have been pissed that this was the way things had turned out.

On bad days, when Sharon O’Malley sees her sister’s art, it is nothing less than crushing. “I mean, *Advice from My 80-Year-Old Self*? That’s brutal.” On good days, though, she says, it feels hopeful. “More beautiful...I *hope* that’s true. That someday I can read these things, and it will feel better than it does right now.”

During the Yerba Buena memorial that Frock organized for O’Malley, a young woman approached the curator and asked if she could hug her. The woman, who gave her name as Shannon, had never met O’Malley, but when she had first moved to San Francisco, she had been having a hard time, working a menial job that required taking the train and then the bus to work. Along the Castro-Market Street corridor, she saw the *Moment to Moment* installations every day: “This Place Right Now.” “More Beautiful Than You Ever Imagined.” “This Is It.” When she read about O’Malley’s death, she realized whose work had been cheering her on during that difficult time. “The truth is, her work did change my life at that time, and I was just a stranger in the crowd,” she told Frock. That day, she’d come to the memorial to say thank you.

To Herschend, this story represents all the different ways of seeing O’Malley’s art. “Art should be more democratic than it is,” he says. “It should be an actual part of your life. Susan’s art did that on multiple levels. A lot of the art world is cynical, ironic, afraid of being about beauty or truth. It cloaks and hides itself in intellectualism. And she was not afraid of that.” He thinks that public art is the most important work we can all be doing—and that it is part of O’Malley’s legacy.

One of O’Malley’s goals was to come up with creative, guerrilla ways to engineer the simple act of making a stranger a friend. There’s no silver lining to her death, but there’s something poignant about her art continuing to carry out that original intent. Nearly a year after she last put words to paper, their optimism is still alive, working to connect us. ■