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# Memories of a Hungry Dog

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.

*The Dumps: Always and for Never.*

Alisa Arsenault

*I am not a romantic. I am the  
victim of a loveless heart.*

Nicole Kelly Westman

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*The places we have known do not belong solely to the world of space in which we situate them for our greater convenience. They were only a thin slice among contiguous impressions which formed our life at that time; the memory of a certain image is but regret for a certain moment; and houses, roads, avenues are as fleeting, alas, as the years.*

— Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*

It's a hot summer morning. I'm sitting in the passenger seat of my grandfather's Buick and he's at the wheel. I rest my head in my hand, staring out against the parade of trees lining the street. We make the usual small talk — the weather, the lousy condition of the asphalt, other drivers, where we should eat for lunch — before there's a lull and we grow quiet again.

Suddenly, a memory.

"You know," says my grandfather, his eyes absorbed on the road. "Years ago we were out West with your Aunt Shirley, and we drove up through Lake Louise and down to Banff. What a sight, quite a bit different than Truro. They have great little restaurants around there, all family-owned businesses. We would pop-in for a meal and were very impressed, great heaps of food that I could never finish. They knew what they were doing. We never ate at the big name places, why would we want to? And don't you know it? On that trip I got a speeding ticket. The bugger caught me flying down the mountain when the speed limit dipped to 50 kilometres. Your grandmother wasn't too impressed, but we had a good laugh about it later."

That particular story has had decades to change, as stories often do, but I've heard iterations of it before — the road trip out west, Lake Louise, Banff, and so on. I still listen intently, though, because I know that with every telling something will be added or taken away, those small details, call them fugitive minutiae, which more often than not

reenergize the story itself, imbuing it with new life. And perhaps that's the mark of every good story: it bends over time, and if it doesn't, it's becomes a flavourless history lesson. Even my telling of his story is wrong, but it's somewhere in there, an exercise in weaving the threads of time together. This much is true, I didn't know about the speeding ticket.

Memory is fickle, slippery. Sometimes it drips away all on its own, other times it returns like a hungry dog — as unpredictable and savage as it can be saccharine and loyal. Critical theorists such as Michel Foucault have argued that memory holds a strong relationship to self-representation, meaning that most acts of self-representation are generated through a synthesis of memory and invention. The artists Alisa Arsenault and Nicole Kelly Westman demonstrate the ways in which this synthesis holds aesthetic and social potential. On the one hand, they cultivate remembrance in themselves or others precisely for its contact to the past, to what may have been. Let us call this substance, or the "meat" of their practice. On the other hand, they lend investment to creativity, as artists do, in order to strategize new ideas through the visual sphere.

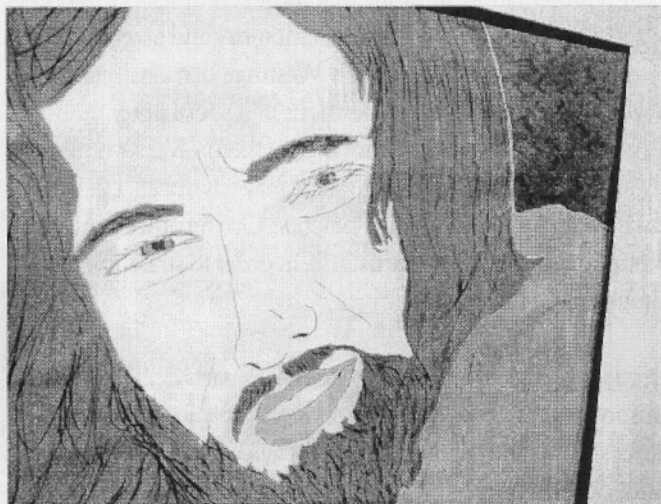
Alisa Arsenault's installation *The Dumps: Always and For Never* speaks to the unspoken narratives of familial relationships, and specifically, her mother's memories and experiences of failed love. Through a series of sit-down interviews with her mother, Arsenault collected narrative accounts of her mother's pre-marriage relationships, later creating (imagined) portraits of her mother's partners in rudimentary facial masks. These masks soon became the centerpiece of a video work where Arsenault recreated the break-ups, acting out the role of her mother and her mother's former partners.

What remains is not only an engagement in taboo — here, the meticulous investigation of her mother's (sexual) partners — but also an exercise in dramaturgy, allowing the artist to fluidly shift identities between mother, boyfriend, and herself, reminding us, in the words of Oscar Wilde, that "a mask [is apt to tell] us more than a face."



Matthew Ryan Smith (MRS): Where did the idea behind this work come from? I ask because, here, you're essentially confronting a taboo, that being the relationships, particularly the sexual relationships, between your mother and various partners before she met and married your father.

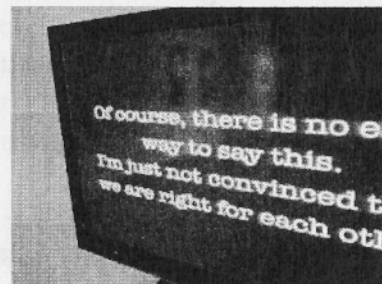
Alisa Arsenault (AA): I don't know if I would use the term sexual ... more so romantic relationships, because my mother was quite young when these relationships took place, having met my father in high school. She also never spoke to me about the possible sexual aspects of these relationships ...



But to answer your question, the idea behind this work sprouted during a trip to the pharmacy with my mother around Christmas time in 2013. Driving through the nearby neighbourhood, my mother pointed to a house, and began to tell me the story of Dinky Dalton, a former high school boyfriend of hers, whom had once lived there with his family. The story was so perfect. It was humorous and heartfelt, very real but at the same time I could feel her exaggerations as well as the things that may have purposely or accidentally been left out, and I knew I wanted to explore this and other stories of hers further.

At the time, I was getting over a break-up and so I was very interested in relationships, especially how and why two people choose to be with each other for a prolonged period of time –

how that initial decision is made, when so many factors and difficulties are at play. It never seemed taboo to me, to be asking these questions of my mother.



MRS: Was there any hesitancy from your mother in opening "old wounds" with past flings? I ask because it doesn't seem like a very comfortable subject to broach, particularly when it's your own daughter initiating the conversation.

AA: She was definitely a little hesitant at first. Especially once she knew that I intended to this information as material in my artistic practice. For a few days, she refused to give me any more information and made me beg for it a little – a process I'm sure she enjoyed – but, in the end, she was a very willing and gracious participant. My mother is a captivating storyteller. She is very observant, and the minute details she remembers about people, places, and events, make her stories particularly enthralling.

MRS: Did you feel or see your mother differently after this process?





AA: A little. We have always had a very open relationship and have discussed many things, throughout my life, with not very many taboos between us, and so my mother has always been fairly human to me, very much a friend. It was however brought to my attention to what extent, and for how long, we carry the memory of certain people. These men, my mother once knew, obviously affected her and her life and although I have only gotten to know them through her words, facial expressions and sighs, their proximity to her at some point in time, have somehow become a part of my heritage.

MRS: I'd like to address the title of your work — *The Dumps: Always and For Never*. Could you explain how this title came about?

AA: The title of the work speaks to what I mentioned previously: despite the fact that these relationships have come to an end, they still belong within the realm of an always, since they still exist within my mother's memories and now my own ... and now yours as well ...

I'm interested in family folklore, because it is constructed of truth and of lies. Things that are passed on are constantly shifting. Individuals have such control over their heritage and how minute or vast they wish it to be. These men are not part of my family lineage, but they were part of my mother's life and therein they can somehow be a part of mine, if I choose them to be.

For me, the title also references the idealization of relationships. I think in the end my mother chose a partner with whom she felt she could have a family, because that is what she wanted. There is no real reason or explanation as to why this decision took place. It just did. My dissection of it won't bring me closer to a truth, because it is built of my own perceptions.

In French the title of the piece is *Les rebuts: À tout jamais... jamais*. Jamais meaning never and à tout jamais meaning always. I think it's interesting that the same word comes into play when describing opposites. One concept negates the other, and so there is nothing left to hypothesize about, no data to calculate, no facts to overturn, no information to grasp or understand and yet there is an undying willingness to keep searching and questioning, to find one equation ... one answer for something unanswerable.

MRS: If I may, I'd like to go another direction here and discuss remembrance and the act of storytelling. As you well know, memories, like stories, are prone to transformation, sometime even failure. How does *The Dumps: Always and For Never* engage the expression of memory?

AA: Well I think memory sometimes has a funny way of simplifying events and outcomes, of dumbing things down so they are more easy to digest, understand and perhaps recount to others or to one's self down the line.

For example, in the video included in *The Dumps: Always and For Never*, I portray my mother and state specific and seemingly cliché reasons why I can no longer take part in these relationships. When I asked my mother why these relationships had failed, these were the key reasons she stated. However, I think true events would have unfolded in a much more complex or unspecific way.

x x x

*I am not a romantic. I am the victim of a loveless heart.* is the title given to Nicole Kelly Westman's installation of large-scale photographic prints that 'portray' a series of textual recollections. Here, Westman's stream-of-consciousness style writings reveal a cosmology of self-questioning and introspection — ranging from descriptions of sanguine encounters with anonymous lovers to fantastical recollections of childhood adventure. What carries through this entire body of work is a subconscious landscape of imagination and perception, announced publicly in large-format works; thus creating a veritable working through of the play between the social and the intimate.

x x x

Matthew Ryan Smith (MRS): Talk to me about the aesthetics of this work. It's a sizable photographic print of your writing displayed on the wall, however it features a coloured text set against a coloured

NKW: Rather than asking questions and seeking out answers, I see the texts as combating nostalgia with a present understanding of con

your reality drains in monotony.

Contemplating their charming machines  
while disregarding the mundaneness  
that security creates through the repetition  
of routine.

This lapse of individuality  
had once consumed you  
and your paired existence.

...antic. ... the ...

sequence and circumstance. In a sense, I think of it as debate between the romance of what we allow ourselves to remember and what we have chosen to forget.

I feel inclined to disagree that memory is imperfect. I suppose memory is only imperfect if you are looking to define memories as authentic truths. There is an intimacy to memories, or at least an intimacy in being invited to witness a recount of a memory; this fluctuates depending on levels of trust. It is my hope that *I am not a romantic...* is capable of verifying an adequacy to a stranger through the invitation of intimacy and the transparency of insecurity.

MRS: Who is the "you" in *I am not a romantic*...

NKW: "You" is utilized as a way to speak of another without relying upon social norms of gendered relationship structures. I suppose I

Stating your doubts between the sways of viper blood  
and rush of spring run of

"What if we went the wrong way?"  
"Do you think it should be this far?"

The road curved to the curves of various landscapes,  
and to our left was a steep drop into a chilling lake.  
I hadn't a thing to say.

It was dark or nearly dark.  
We were told to meet at the center of the universe.  
We were told to take a gravel road from there,  
you could see the three concrete pillars there.

You started with a heavy sigh, please.  
I stepped down the bank of the river,  
that sometimes had been situated in some hollow  
somewhere in the distance. I stepped  
The three concrete pillars and the mountain side.

The pillars left and right found us before we found them.  
We walked until the night's darkness  
and only then we were left over the night again.



MRS: *I am not a romantic...* is relatable precisely because it speaks to the volatility of close relationships. Would you agree, or do you feel that it speaks to some-

thing else entirely? This aspect of the project makes me think of Nan Goldin's series of photographs *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, which explore this topic quite eloquently. There, Goldin photographed her close friends and family in all their embarrassing glory, what became known as *The Family of Nan*. Are you familiar with this work?

NKW: *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* relies heavily on the representation of others, interpreted through the perspective of Goldin as a visual documenter. Of course, it is undeniable that I have been influenced by her photographic practice, as she fought to disrupt the discourse of the photographic essay. In my mind, Goldin's *Ballad* is similar in artistic merit to the photographic series, *Tulsa* by Larry Clark, and Goldin often praises Clark for influencing her anti-voyeuristic mandate. Yet, in both instances, the audience remains enabled to view these scenes from afar. Thus privileged, the audience is unintentionally invited to apply their prejudices and biases upon people outwardly defined as marginalized. It is this kind of voyeuristic privilege that makes me hesitant, at times, to self-identify as a photographer: I am no longer interested in participating in these roles of compliance.

I hope that *I am not a romantic...* invites viewers to reflect upon their own narratives or circumstances in relation to the texts. I agree that there is vulnerability present, if the viewer wishes to believe in the sincerity of the texts. I am interested in working with a photographic process that is free from the stigma of portraiture and the inherent forms of hierarchy that are persistent in the medium.

Goldin's admiration for her photographic participants is undeniable due to her elegant self-proclamation. Still, the narrative is linear, and the success of the visual collaboration is accredited solely to Goldin's genius as an artist. In the end, the audience is invited into the white cube gallery and asked to look in upon a lifestyle that could be defined as volatile in comparison to their own.

I would hesitate to say that close relationships are volatile. I would hesitate to make any blanket statement.

X X X

Yesterday I had lunch with my grandfather. He told me to sit in his chair at the kitchen table, which seemed like a strange rite of passage. We sat and chatted while eating open-faced tomato sandwiches, the tomatoes picked from his garden. The same tomatoes I had eaten for years. The same garden that I ran my toy army tanks through as a child, staging battles between good and evil among the rhubarb. The tomatoes with their same taste as I had always remembered — sweet, and a little bitter, like iron or copper, metals from the earth. There he was beside me, as he was that day in the car, both a body and a body of memories.

The memories of my grandfather, and in turn my memories of him, are closely related to both Arsenault and Westman's work in that lived experience generates meaning through the vehicle of memory, a veritable reconciliation of the past with the present. In this pairing of artists, Connexion ARC traces the vicissitudes of memory's social potential, and the play of meanings it produces for the aesthetic sphere. It is here that we encounter memory made visible, intangible made tangible, carefully articulated through method and material.

X X X

Hello Matthew, sophia and John,

Here are my responses to your questions. Let me know if you have any other concerns and I will be as quick as I can to respond. I know you are looking to send this material to print relatively soon so I will try and be as available as possible over the next few days in case there is anything last minute.

1. In the interview you say, "I had an urge to preserve memories that would undoubtedly be forgotten." Could you expand on why you have the urge to preserve these memories? Where do these memories come from? Why do you not want them to fade away?

I think the reason that photography exists is due to a fear of being unable to preserve



memories. To have this back up of all experiences that 'prove' a successful life an accumulation of placeholders for the narratives of a family, or a relationship.

The memories that make up *I am not a romantic. I am the victim of a loveless heart.* are from photographs never taken. These narratives do not align within the ideals branded by Kodak worthy of documentation. They are also not the style of stories that would be told in the intimate moment of being introduced to a new photo album for the first time. Still, these stories seem as important in defining our identities as the stories of success and love. As memories they seem imprinted and yet evolving and I am interested in these hidden or excluded memories being commemorated with a tactile visual. A visual that is more grand in gesture than a snapshot.

2. Why do you continue to work with photography, as a medium? Why do you continue to identify as a photographer? When you identify the "stigma of portraiture and the inherent forms of hierarchy that are persistent in the medium"? Are you interested in this problematic, thematically?

The majority of my work is derived from a photograph, or the lack of a photograph, or the narrative component that encompasses a photograph. I am not actively photographing and thus I do not self identify as a photographer. Photography is a medium that exists through a series of taxonomies and sub-categories. My practice is not suited to the objective truth that documentary photography demands, or the artistic merit of aesthetics that fine art is concerned in presenting. I find myself critical of the stagnancy within the medium of photography. Particularly with terms surrounding the act of photographing. To think of the role of subject and documenter is concerning to me as I think this act should be considered collaborative. However, even if the role of the subject was held in a high regard I still

suspect that the photographer would be the individual benefiting from creation of the document. In all honesty there are many aspects of portraiture that I am not comfortable with as the medium advocates for an accessible gaze, presenting large scale still images in brightly lit safe spaces, for individuals to freely gawk without concern of guilt or moral responsibility.

I am interested in this problematic and I have an ongoing work, *A Subjects Perspective*, that challenges the relationship within the roles of sitter and photographer. For this series I have set up a second camera to video document myself as an instructed subject. The films are silent as a still frame would be. I still feel that all of my work is inspired by the photograph but I often struggle to relate to photographers and I am not interested in creating images in [a] camera.

3. I am curious as to why you would hesitate to say that close relationships are volatile? Particularly when much of the text in this work seems to address a level of volatility, ambiguity, uncertainty between people...

Volatile is an adjective that carries the burden of negative connotations and is perhaps most synonymous with abrupt violence. For me to provide a term that is capable of defining close relationships would be irresponsible. Subjectively speaking I am incapable of defining the close relationships that I have in my own life as I am not able to speak on behalf of another. I think that inevitability we are all alone in this world and the majority of our time is spent exploring our own thoughts and our personal perspectives. We as individuals fight through worrisome insecurity when navigating new relationships. Still I do not find this experience to be volatile and I would never define it as such. I think the experiences accumulated within close relationships provide a bond that is nearly supernatural in our existence.

I am not a romantic... integrates the sincerity of nostalgia. The text flows between the rosy ideals of a perfect scenario and the supposed reality of a situation. I am interested in the way that photography can trigger these emotions of regret or resentment in conjunction with romantic remorse and longing in relation to memory. I am not sure that there is anything in my life that I would personally define with the word volatile, there is a severity to the tone of the word that I am not interested in.

**4. Why do you hesitate to make any blanket statement? Is this an ethical position? What are your thoughts, your reasoning for this?**

I hesitate to make blanket statements for the same reason that I hesitate to self-identify as a photographer, due to [my understanding of] an ethical responsibility. My ethical issue with photography is in its ability to establish and reinforce prejudices through visual representation. Defining entire cultures based on the subjective interpretation of the individual behind the camera. For instance, the work of Edward S. Curtis has produced visual prejudices that are still consumed with an assumption of accuracy within our contemporary society. It takes the effort of education to distribute these enforced constructions and thus they often carry on without critique. As such, I find it difficult to state anything so blatant with a voice of confidence. Statements articulated through language, visual or text based, need to be responsible and careful in their inclusion and exclusion. I think I would rather have a conversation than make an assumption or prediction as the exchange of knowledge is more beneficial than the power of assertion.

Thank you once again for all your hard work with this exhibition and this publication. I hope you are all doing well out in the east.

Warmly,  
nkw

## Works Cited

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Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithica, NY, Cornell University Press, 2001), 34.

Oscar Wilde in Michael A. Steinman, *Yeats's Heroic Figures: Wilde, Parnell, Swift, Casement* (NY: SUNY Press, 1983), 51.

According to Barthes, "the explanation of the work is always sought in the man who produced it." In "The Death of the Author," Roland Barthes argues that textual analysis has emphasized the singular voice of the author rather than language and writing structures. See: Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang), 142-148.

Published in 1971, Larry Clark's photo book *Tulsa* challenged the vicissitudes of taboo by photographing youth from Tulsa, Oklahoma shooting speed and heroin, having sex, and engaged in gunplay. See: Larry Clark, *Tulsa*, first edition (New York: Lustrum Press, 1971).

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D. is a freelance writer, independent curator, and sessional professor based in London, ON. His writing has appeared in Canadian and international publications including Canadian Art, C Magazine, ESSE, and FUSE, in addition to academic journals. E-mail: matthewryansmith733@gmail.com

Alisa Arsenault is a contemporary artist based in Moncton who uses video and installation to explore the ephemeral and malleable construction of reality through narrative. Her work was included in *Somewhere*, curated by Pan Wendi, at the Confederation Centre Gallery earlier this year. Most recently she was awarded a creation residency at Imago artist-run centre, which culminated in an exhibition at Galerie Sans Nom in autumn 2014.

Nicole Kelly Westman is a contemporary artist based between Banff and Vancouver who uses photographic processes to explore a contemporary politics of representation and self-construction. Her work was included in *Far Away So Close*, curated by Kimberly Phillips, at Access Gallery artist-run centre this autumn. Most recently she was awarded an Alberta Foundation for the Arts grant and a residency at The Banff Centre to develop her project *Inherited Narratives*, which will be exhibited at Harcourt House and Eyelevel Gallery in the coming year.

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