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Some Things Last a Long Time

Matthew Ryan Smith, The University of Western Ontario
SOME THINGS LAST A LONG TIME
The longstanding tradition of self portraiture is undoubtedly the most familiar type of autobiographical work by visual artists. From Rembrandt to Lucian Freud, painters have taken advantage of the unique opportunity for psychological introspection provided by their most sympathetic and patient sitters. With the advent of photography in the nineteenth century, which liberated portraiture and, indeed, painting generally from its historical obligation to depict reality, artists began to explore new ways of approaching the self as subject matter.

With the exhibition Some Things Last a Long Time, curator Matthew Ryan Smith takes on the challenging task of looking at the ways in which various contemporary Canadian artists have approached autobiographical themes in a variety of media over the past forty years. Since the 1970s, artists Barbara Astman, Colin Campbell, Suzy Lake and Lisa Steele have been widely recognized for their thought-provoking self explorations. Using the lens-based practices of photography and video, their landmark work transcended the personal to inform and reflect on broader contemporary social issues including feminism, gender and the individual’s adaptation within the increasingly mediated society of the period. Including recent work by Toronto-based Peter Kingstone and Moncton-based Jaret Belliveau in the exhibition demonstrates the sustained interest in personal narrative among a younger generation.

On behalf of Western University’s Department of Visual Arts and McIntosh Gallery, I thank Mr. Smith, a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Visual Arts, for his dedication to the development and realization of this exhibition and publication over the past two years. His astute selection of works cogently illuminates his concept of “relational viewing,” as a process through which our private lives and memory determine our response to works of art.

We thank Dr. Sarah Bassnett, Mr. Smith’s advisor within the Department of Visual Arts, for her invaluable guidance and support of the project, and Professor Patrick Mahon, who ably assisted with the early stages of the exhibition’s development. We are indebted to the Toronto-based video distributor Vtape, which provided the work of Colin Campbell, Peter Kingstone and Lisa Steele, and Stephen Bulger Gallery, which assisted us in securing Jaret Belliveau’s photographs. We are grateful to Louise Gadbois, of Western’s Graphic Services Department, for her marvelous design of this publication.

Most of all, we thank the exhibiting artists: Barbara Astman, Jaret Belliveau, Colin Campbell, Peter Kingstone, Suzy Lake, and Lisa Steele for generously sharing aspects of their personal lives with us, and, in so doing, helping us to understand ourselves and the world in which we live.

James Patten
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Matthew Ryan Smith

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines autobiography as “an account of a person’s life written by that person.” Autobiography transforms a life story into narrative, often as a way of making sense of that life. Although autobiography is perhaps most readily identified as a literary genre, it has also played an important role in visual art. Within contemporary art, many artists draw on the personal experiences that shaped their lives to address social and political issues or to create new kinds of relationships between people. In this sense, autobiographical art can operate both as a way of conveying lived experience and as an apparatus for experiential, relational viewing. In this practice of relational viewing, an artist’s work can function as a powerful catalyst whereby viewers draw upon their own life stories to connect with the work.

The idea of relational viewing emerges out of the emphasis on social bonds and relational experiences in contemporary culture. Within contemporary art, relational aesthetics has been an important part of this cultural trend. In essence, relational aesthetics uses a combination of active participation by the viewer and the interaction between people to complete the artwork. For example, artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija have staged large public cook-outs in gallery, museum, and civic spaces. The unpredictable exchanges which take place during and after the shared activity are considered to be the artwork itself.
Relational viewing is also linked to poststructuralist theory, which has shifted away from the idea that the author is the creator of meaning to instead consider how readers interact with texts to produce meaning. Some Things Last a Long Time considers the connections between autobiography and relational experience. With this exhibition, I propose that contemporary autobiographical art can operate as a site where social encounters are created and where self-discoveries become possible. I encourage viewers to use their own lived experiences and personal histories to interpret the artworks in the exhibition.

Since the late 1950s, artists have increasingly turned to photography and video as a new and viable media to explore various aspects of their lives. Relatively inexpensive, mobile, user-friendly and easy to use, 35mm cameras and personal video cameras such as the Sony Portapak were commercially available during the 1960s. Video revolutionized art production by allowing artists to make work outside of bureaucratic, capitalist systems such as mainstream television. Many artists also cut production costs by using their own bodies and biographies as subject matter.

In Colin Campbell's True/False from 1972, the artist articulates a series of sixteen statements such as “I like Sackville” and “Colin is my real name” followed by the words “true” and “false.” Using subtle intonations in his voice and timed delays between every “true” and “false” statement, Campbell offers the viewer clues about the authenticity of his statements. In a daring aesthetic manoeuvre Campbell takes up the formal structure of the confession, but he resists confession’s power to produce an absolute truth.
Instead, what True/False does is emphasize doubt. If the work represents a type of pseudo-confession and places the audience in the position of interlocutor, then viewers can respond to the work using a confession of their own: the performance of confession touches upon an entrenched yearning to speak of the self from the confessant’s position. In this way, Campbell persuades viewers to relate their own lived experiences and personal history to his work.

Like Campbell, Peter Kingstone constructs a relationship with viewers by actively engaging them in questioning the truthfulness behind his autobiographical statements. In Kingstone’s 400 Lies and 1 Truth About Me (2003) four-hundred statements scroll quickly up the screen. While Kingstone’s work shares some characteristics with Campbell’s True/False, he does not appear in the video, making it less of a confession and more of an account of happenings. While some viewers may find Kingstone’s absence as an indicator of insincerity, others may find it reassuring precisely because it is less confrontational. Thus, viewers may be more open to engaging with the work on a personal level when the body of the artist is not present. While Kingstone’s autobiography is unmistakably the central element of the work, the audience’s own life may be crucial to understanding it.

Lisa Steele’s seminal video Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects from 1974 is generally considered one of the finest examples of early feminist video in Canada. Steele not only presents the body’s susceptibility to physical injury but she also views her scars as signs of her personal identity and politics. When she describes her wounds for the camera she can be seen gently stroking them as if to psychologically mend them. With statements such as “1950. Fell on bleach bottle while riding tricycle in basement. Three years old,” she traces events in her life through the marks they have left on her body. While she reminiscences about the wounds of her past, audiences may recollect their own scars. Remembering and working through such wounds can be a powerful source of healing and restoration.
Photographed over a period of five years, Jaret Belliveau’s series *Dominion Street* (2003-2008) addresses his mother’s terminal illness and his family’s sense of loss. During his mother’s chemotherapy treatment and up until the time of her passing, Belliveau photographed her as a way to “make sense” of her illness, meaning that he drew knowledge from tragedy as a way to manage his trauma. Drawing on the structure of the family photo album, *Dominion Street* allows audiences to reflect upon their own experiences with cancer. Here, affective engagement—emotional reaction—intensifies with the emergence of painful memories.

Suzy Lake’s *Pre-Resolution: Using the Ordinances at Hand #1* and #7 from her series *ImPositions* (1984) aestheticizes a performative act of violence. Here, Lake expresses a potent metaphor for destabilizing gender politics. Her frame is an optical device that blurs the boundaries between two and three dimensions, which means that it can thereby lead audiences allegorically into the work using their lived experiences and personal history. Moreover, by representing herself in profile and from behind while wearing a loose-fitting sweatshirt and blue jeans, Lake’s appearance is strikingly androgynous. In effect, she asks audiences to reconsider normative gender identities as categories of constraint.

Barbara Astman’s two *Untitled* works from her *Visual Narrative* series (1978) emphasize the connection between mood and its manifestation in bodily movements and actions (or vice versa). Here, Astman explores sexual attraction, insecurity, commitment, self-doubt, trust and communication to evaluate the unstable character of close relationships.
Her photographs encourage audiences to empathize with the female subject because the issues involving close relationships are strikingly universal.

Our memories and our personal histories offer up ways of engaging with works of art through affect and empathy. It is my hope that *Some Things Last a Long Time* initiates conversations that are both personal and emotional. The exhibition is not only meant to inform audiences about the artist's autobiography, but, in a roundabout way, it is meant to reconnect audiences with aspects of their own biography as well.
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