Relational Maneuvers in Autobiographical Video Art

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Thus when I come to shape here at this table between my hands the story of my life and set it before you as a complete thing, I have to recall things gone far, gone deep, sunk into this life or that and become part of it; dreams, too, things surrounding me, and the inmates, those old half-articulate ghosts who keep up their hauntings by day and night.

—Virginia Woolf, The Waves 166

Autobiographical video art offers supplemental means of self-expression that radically transforms intersubjective relationships with the viewer. Since the introduction and circulation of the Sony Portapak on the commercial video technology market in the United States and Canada during the 1960s, autobiographical video art has become a productive instrument in reframing archetypes of critical spectatorship by generating experimental aesthetic strategies. Part of the impetus behind this discursive shift is the fact that video art provided many female visual artists the opportunity to engage with media unburdened by legacies of phallocentrism. In particular, video technologies revolutionized twentieth century art by allowing artists to produce artworks that operate outside the bureaucratic, capitalist, and aesthetic systems that restrict the subject matter of conventional broadcast media. By doing so, transmedial video art disconnected from the regulatory commercial film and television industry in such a way that the agency of the individual artist could determine the trajectory of its future.

Relatively inexpensive, easily mobile, and user-friendly, personal video cameras helped transmedial video artists in the early 1970s such as Lisa Steele and Colin Campbell to limit significantly the monetary expenses of production that have plagued traditional film media, and to experiment with their own bodies and autobiographies as sources of subject matter. In producing
video art about their own lived experiences, these artists were also creating artwork that intersubjectively communicates with viewers as well. Such exchanges carry epistemological relevance. Steele’s seminal *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects* (1974) and Campbell’s disarming *True/False* (1972) forge complex relationships with viewers that deconstruct critical spectatorship by positioning the viewer as an interlocutor—one who receives and responds to verbal and visual dialogue.¹ For curator Diana Nemiroff, “The most provocative performances for the camera are those that engage the spectator on a conceptual level to participate either physically or psychologically in the action. On these occasions, the communicative exchange at the heart of all performance is set in motion, and the social implications of the performance are understood” (42). In this intersubjective exchange the artist conditions states of being that can trigger affect and provoke memory. Steele and Campbell continue to influence contemporary video artists such as Peter Kingstone and Irene Loughlin, who have worked to reconceptualize the interlocutor subject position by using unorthodox transmedial aesthetic strategies that have come to define contemporary video art that makes use of audio-visual elements.

While autobiographical video art has traditionally served as an instrument for feminist aesthetic innovation, political agency, and cathartic utterance, it has also been referred to as a discourse that enacts a broader sense of community. Scholars such as Michael Renov have explored the psycho-social dimensions of autobiographical discourse in recent artistic practice while arguing that particular transmedial video artworks aid viewers in cultivating a deeper understanding of themselves and other people. Renov has used Wendy Clarke’s powerful *One-on-One* (1991–1994) series to illustrate the possibilities of video art to forge meaningful relationships with viewers that extend well beyond geographical locations and social differences. In a very similar way, literary theorists including Nancy K. Miller have refuted the idea that reading memoir and other forms of autobiographical literature is a solitary activity, and instead have reconceptualized the genre as articulating intersubjective relationships with the author, resulting in self-discovery and interpersonal connection.² Paul John Eakin also argues against the autonomous subject position of the autobiographer to reclaim the idea that the individual is a sum of its parts, and those include the lives of—and relationships to—others (43). The autobiographical act is not, and never has been, a singular experience.

In tracing the vicissitudes of transmedial autobiographical video art and its intersubjective relationships with viewers, we may come to better understand its place within the canon of art history. The artists and artworks discussed in this article challenge the idea of spectatorship as a neutral subject position by manufacturing visual devices intended to move the viewer away from passive complacency into critical subjectivity. The selected autobiographical video art
also relies heavily on the viewer-as-interlocutor to listen and respond to the artist, thus fulfilling the cyclical modalities of the artwork. My argument supports these observations while attempting to locate and define how transmedial autobiographical video art produces intersubjective relationships between the viewer and the artist. The first section of this article examines how Colin Campbell and Peter Kingstone’s artwork poses a fascinating case study for the way aesthetic playfulness can be framed as a game. In effect, both Campbell and Kingstone question the authenticity of the artist’s autobiographical agency, thereby provoking the viewer to seek out the falsehoods in their rhetorical exercises. In this regard, Nicolas Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics model has been particularly useful in establishing how intersubjectivity exists within a participatory aesthetic sphere. However, literary theorist Philip Lejeune’s influential 1974 essay, “The Autobiographical Pact,” was one of the first significant attempts to theorize how readers subjectively interpret and respond to autobiographical modalities of communication. Lejeune’s formulaic elucidation of an autobiographical pact between narrator, reader, and publisher reliant upon identities of name between the author, narrator, and central protagonist (12) is particularly useful in determining what is at stake when autobiographical video artists deconstruct the truth of their lived experiences and personal histories. In addition, Michael Foucault’s definition of confession, specifically as it pertains to rituality and reconciliation, helps us to understand the social performances and judgmental actions of the viewer-as-interlocutor.

In the second section of this essay I explore the work of Clarke to consider the ways that community operates in recent transmedial video art. Here I refer to community in a general sense: as a rhizomatic social entity capable of drawing intersubjective relationships between individuals and groups. One of the central concerns in my discussion of community is the social dimension of sharing experience. Steele’s transmedial video conceptualizes how testimonies of traumatic experience can lead to degrees of reciprocal testimony in the viewer. Articulations of suffering and loss construct meaningful relationships that culminate in emotional connections regardless of social difference. In the conclusion of my article I provide a close reading of Irene Loughlin’s restaging of Steele’s video performance *Birthday Suit* to examine the ways that traumatic testimony and reciprocal confession might assuage physical and emotional pain while producing a deeper knowledge and understanding of not only the artist but the viewer as well.

**PLAYING THE GAME: STRATEGIES OF DETECTION**

One of the first studies in art theory to closely scrutinize intersubjective relationships within contemporary visual art is Bourriaud’s problematic—yet
much needed—1998 book *Relational Aesthetics*, which contributes substantially to our understanding of the social performances and participatory frameworks that have characterized contemporary art practices since the 1990s. That decade witnessed a curious tendency among visual artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Douglas Gordon, and Carsten Höller to engage with what Bourriaud calls the “interhuman sphere relationships between people, communities, individuals, groups, social networks, interactivity, and so on” (7). Tiravanija, for example, orchestrated grand feasts of traditional ethnic gastronomy inside conventional gallery spaces to facilitate unpredictable social connections between members of the audience who incidentally perform as collaborators. Along similar lines, Höller is known for manufacturing enormous aluminum slides that meander throughout gallery spaces with the intention of bridging both aesthetic and experiential dimensions.

Bourriaud defines relational aesthetics as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (113). In this abstracted space of metacultural expression, contemporary visual artists enact a field of rhizomatic relationships with the viewer that specifically addresses our shared experience of the world. The artwork is only completed when audiences take up an active role in executing it. The autonomous “form” of the art object is thus removed from its inherent physical dimensions to instead generate realities that connect heterogeneous individuals and communities, thereby following the Enlightenment ideal of emancipation. While Bourriaud attempts to identify a particular movement in recent art characterized by its social function and collaborative potential, he fails to address explicitly autobiographical or confessional genres. Nevertheless, the relational aesthetics model provides a significant impetus towards understanding how social forms of intersubjectivity operate in contemporary visual art practice.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, literary theorists such as Lejeune drew attention to the intersubjective maneuvers enacted between the writer and the reader in such autobiographical literature as memoir, diaries, and travelogues. In exploring these author-reader dynamics in autobiographical literature, Lejeune develops the idea of the “autobiographical pact,” which he broadly defines as a metaphorical “contract” entered into between the author and the reader: “What defines autobiography for the one who is reading is above all a contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name. And this is also true for the one who is writing the text” (19–20). As opposed to literary fiction, biography and autobiography are referential texts: they claim to provide knowledge about a reality exterior to the text, which is submitted to tests of verification: “Confronted with what looks like an autobiographical
narrative, the reader often tends to think of himself as a detective . . . to look for breaches of contract.” Such breaches can occur when readers encounter proof that puts to question issues concerning the proper name of the author or truth-value of the life writing.

For Lejeune, the pact offers the reader a discursive framework for detecting and adjudicating the identity of the writer, incidentally emphasizing the idea that autobiographical discourse is powerfully relational. A similar theoretical claim can be made supporting critical spectatorship of transmedial autobiographical video art. Indebted to legacies of Conceptualism, creators of such art have long been fascinated with the intersubjective potential of the idea of the viewer-as-detective. In such work, the viewer may enter into a contract with the artist that is not only dependent upon the proper name—commonly printed on didactic wall panels in gallery spaces—but also on complex subject matter and radical transmedial pragmatics. The intersubjective dimensions of the autobiographical pact help to determine the critical responses of the viewer, particularly in terms of memory, knowledge, and affect. From there a new set of critical engagements may follow. The dynamics of reception and the resultant intensity of critical engagement play a crucial role in determining how audiences develop close relationships to autobiographical forms of communication. The artists and artworks discussed below hold the potential to antagonize viewers in such a way that they are almost compelled to respond. It is important to consider how artists enact a field of intersubjective relations with their viewers because it helps us understand how the act of seeing is conditioned by our personal histories and lived experiences.

Campbell’s *True/False* demonstrates how transmedial autobiographical video art can operate as a game of detection that stimulates viewers through jouissance. In this way, viewers can respond similarly to how readers respond to autobiographical literature: by becoming amateur sleuths bent on discovering degrees of truth present—or absent—in the artwork. In his fifteen-minute video, Campbell verbally articulates a series of sixteen individual statements followed by the words “true” and “false.” His statements are first enunciated with his head in profile position and then repeated facing directly opposite the video camera (Figure 1). The establishment of eye contact with the viewer has been strongly considered, and serves to intensify the affect triggered by Campbell’s forthright and often sinister declarations, such as “I recently attempted suicide. True. False.”; “Colin is my real name. True. False.”; “I am a heterosexual. True. False.”. Campbell’s profile and head-on positions imitate the formal appearance and ideological narratives of early police photography, such as those invented and enforced by the police prefect Alphonse Bertillon in France during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Essentially Bertillon sought to produce a comprehensive state-sponsored archival
system for identifying criminal “types” through photographic mug-shots and anthropomorphic descriptions, including measurements. Eugenicists such as the English polymath Francis Galton would later employ Bertillon’s research to support his own investigations into the ethnic and racial superiority of Western European Whites.

While Campbell appropriates Bertillon’s photographic techniques and descriptive criteria, he also implicitly challenges the photograph’s authoritative value in producing a likeness, type, identity, or essence of the individual (Henricks). By using subtle intonations in the cadence of his voice, in addition to calculated timed delays between every “true” and “false” statement, Campbell offers the viewer clues to his authenticity, but very little factual evidence. This transmedial strategy drives Nemiroff to suggest that the epistemological limits of truth itself are indeed “on trial” in Campbell’s video (40). Like Lejeune’s reader probing for breaches of contract in the autobiographical pact, Campbell’s verbal confessions encourage the viewer to detect ruptures of truth in the intersubjective field of relations, while his indexical
references to early police photography force the viewer to consider whether or not authenticity is even remotely possible in media, including photography and video. In his dissatisfaction with the ability of conventional visual media to produce an absolute truth in relation to individual identity, True/False may also represent Campbell’s attempt to queer his own image.

True/False mobilizes the viewer to occupy the position of interlocutor in a pseudo-confession. Nelson Henricks has found that viewers experience the artwork as a form of interrogation: “often my students read this video as a lie detector test. They try to determine the truth in Colin’s statements by ‘reading’ his neutral facial expression.” Lie detection machines, including the polygraph, detect lies through graphic renderings of blood pressure, pulse, respiration, muscle movement, and perspiration. In many cases, fluctuations in the graphic material are symptomatic of guilty knowledge or deceptive behavior.

Margaret Gibson theorizes the human body as a political entity that may be divided between interior and exterior—the interior associated with privacy and secrecy, the exterior with bodily function and graphic appearance. For Gibson, the human body itself doubles as a confessional body whereby its cryptic mysteries are unearthed through the lie detector machine and its physical inscriptions: “By tracing and deciphering the body, the [lie detector] attempts to graphically correlate language and bodily movement” (62). Since discourses such as biology and forensic science have reimagined the human body as materially substantial (63), bodies are objectified through lie detection to the extent that the machine itself becomes the detective, much like the viewer of Campbell’s video.

Jeremy Tambling proposes that the demand for speech is at the heart of confession, as evidenced by the psycho-social spaces of confessional discourse in the Western tradition. He cites Charles Borromeo and Jeremy Bentham as illustrating post-medieval, early modern techniques of exercising “biopower”: the approximation of physical bodies into subjection by institutional hegemony (66). Following the Catholic Church’s Council of Trent (1545–1663), largely organized by Borromeo, the black, private confession box became nearly ubiquitous, with the confessional as a concept used to demonstrate geographies of power. Bentham’s Panopticon similarly functioned as a model of power relationships within a totalizing institutional hegemony, containing an unseen eye that disciplines prisoners through a culture of surveillance rather than corporal punishment. “The history of confession,” Tambling observes, “is that of power at the centre inducing people at the margins to internalize what is said about them—to accept that discourse and to live it, and thereby to live their oppression” (6). For Henricks, Campbell’s utterances serve to position the artist within a social margin encompassing social, sexual, medical, and legal pragmatics. For example, “I am part Jewish.
True. False. I am seeing a psychiatrist. True. False. I have crabs. True. False. I snort coke. True. False.” Ultimately Campbell’s pseudo-confessions negotiate a marginalized and disenfranchised subject position so that viewers may question their authoritative power in deciphering and circulating moral judgments within Campbell’s economy of lies.6

These intersubjective realities signify an inherent tension between artists and viewers in transmedial autobiographical video art. The apparatuses of misrepresentation ontologically inherent in *True/False* read as a manifesto for the failure of transmedial representations to condition absolute truth. In the first book of his trilogy *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault suggests that the West’s greatest method for producing truth is the confessional mode:

> We have singularly become a confessing society. The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relationships, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one’s crimes, one’s sins, one’s thoughts and desires, one’s illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in private, to one’s parents, one’s educators, one’s doctors, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell anyone else, the things people write books about. One confesses—or is forced to confess. (56)

*True/False*, however, strongly challenges Foucault’s persuasive argument. In a daring aesthetic maneuver, Campbell stringently resists confession’s power to yield absolute truth. In fact, what *True/False* accomplishes is to emphasize doubt, and at most, the faint hope for truth. As Campbell’s interlocutor, the viewer is likely to judge his moral character in relation to his verbal descriptions of potentially harmful behavior like bestiality, drug abuse, suicide, and so forth. Conversely, viewers may experience powerful affects based on their own moral codes. Nevertheless, without the knowledge required to evaluate Campbell’s dubious morals and ethics, viewers may arrive at conclusions about the artist regardless of the authenticity of his statements. “For Campbell, essence and identity are not fixed,” Henricks notes: “They exist and yet they do not. It is a curious balancing act of being and non-being, a contradictory play of images and contents, of false truths and true lies.” In this fascinating reversal of meaning, the false has become the true.

Like Campbell, transmedial video artist Peter Kingstone constructs meaningful relationships by actively engaging viewers to question the truthfulness behind his supposedly autobiographical testimony. In Kingstone’s video *400 Lies and 1 Truth About Me* (2003) (Figure 2), four-hundred individual statements rendered in white text rapidly scroll across a black background, moving from the bottom to the top of the screen. The video’s formal appearance
echoes the aesthetic vocabulary of rolling credits at the end of a film. Statements vary from the near impossible and preposterous to the feasible and even the unequivocally true. On the one hand, considering the semantic categorization of Kingstone’s title, the first four hundred statements should be lies and the final statement should be true. On the other hand, although it indexically references otherwise, *400 Lies and 1 Truth About Me* may not dictate the chronological presentation of truth. Much like *True/False*, it is all part of the game, a fundamental element of the viewer’s level of engagement. Kingstone’s relational strategy can drive the viewer to play detective in the Lejeunian sense—looking for a “breach of contract” or a needle of truth in a haystack of lies. In speaking about the video Kingstone has raised an important question: “Can one tell more about me by the lies that I tell, than by the truths?”

Humor is often inseparable from Kingstone’s video work, much in the same way that it infiltrates Campbell’s videos. It helps to reconceptualize the discursive frameworks that inform testimonial truth and the authenticity of the image. According to Kingstone, “I think humour is a big part of me or part of what I am doing. Not that what I am saying is flippant—it is important—but humour sort of eases the edges and gets people to understand what

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192. I can not stay away from shopping centres.
193. I am an expert on French literature.
194. My children and I eat at Denny’s every Sunday.
195. I go to church.
196. The beer I had breakfast did not fill me up, so I had one for dessert.
197. I had a small hand in creating Mickey Mouse.
198. I can introduce myself in twenty-four languages.
199. I have great respect for the president of the United States.
200. My favorite pastime is to jet-ski on the lake near my cottage.

Figure 2. *400 Lies and 1 Truth About Me* by Peter Kingstone (2003, 06:00 minutes, colour, English); © copyright and reprinted by permission of Peter Kingstone.
Discourses on humor, which include supplementary categories of satire, irony, and parody, are often erroneously seen to detract attention from sustained intellectual analysis and deeper epistemological understanding (Molon and Rooks 50). Plato, for example, famously saw humor and its many guises as a threat to the social order: “the ridiculous is a certain kind of evil, specifically a vice,” which curtails both reason and rational behavior (qtd. in Morreal, 11). Other thinkers, however, have approached humor as a way to amend traditional meanings or overhaul established beliefs. Contemporary Canadian visual artists Kelly Mark and Kent Monkman, for example, have drawn on humor as a means of “delegitimation,” which Stuart Hall explains as a way to replace conventional stereotypes with different representations so that cultural and ideological constructions are made vulnerable and exposed (see Gérin).

Timing is one of the most significant transmedial devices that viewers use to differentiate lies from truth in both Kingstone’s and Campbell’s videos. Campbell and Kingstone employ opposite temporal strategies, yet achieve similar outcomes. In *True/False*, Campbell astutely generates an antagonistic sense of doubt about the truthfulness of his statements by reducing the pace of his movements, gestures, and actions while inflecting the cadence of his voice. In a notable contrast, Kingstone rapidly scrolls his written statements from the bottom to the top of the video screen; by doing so, he also casts significant doubt on the truthfulness behind his statements. Here viewers may struggle to locate truth because they have so little time to read, interpret, and prepare an appropriate response, which puts in question the limitations of cognitive perception. By altering the temporal velocity of their work, both Campbell and Kingstone thus widen the gap between truth and fiction, and revel in the ambiguity that this distance generates.

*400 Lies and 1 Truth About Me* also operates in a similar way to *True/False* by prompting viewers to reflect upon the memories of their own lived experiences and personal history. But unlike *True/False*, in Kingstone’s video the viewer is not formally confronted with the talking head of the artist on the screen. Viewers are also not confronted with the artist’s voice, because the video is silent and without an accompanying soundtrack. It is clear that Kingstone’s transmedial maneuvers share many of the same characteristics as Campbell’s *True/False*, but by removing himself from the piece both physically and sonically, Kingstone’s video becomes less of a confession and more of an autobiographical account of possible happenings. While some viewers may find the indexical absence of Kingstone’s body or voice to be a profound gesture of insincerity and artificiality, other viewers may find it deeply reassuring precisely because it is less confrontational. Ultimately, viewers may be more open to interacting with the video when the body of
the artist is not visible or even physically present, an intersubjective positioning that works as a rhetorical strategy that encourages memory work and affective engagement.

Kingstone constructs a field of intersubjective relationships so that viewers may identify and interact with the work using memories of lived experiences. This is achieved by providing viewers with the opportunity to form questions related to his true and false statements—statements such as: “When I was born I had an extra finger on my right hand. It was removed”; “I have eaten koala steaks. They are really good”; and “I own fifteen pairs of shoes. Most of them are sneakers except for one pair of winter boots.” Following Lejeune, Miller identifies the contemporary autobiographical memoir as an important site for identification and self-discovery, and a powerful catalyst for memory. Our collective interest in reading autobiographical accounts, Miller argues, lies not so much in gaining knowledge of the author, but in gaining knowledge of ourselves through communicative processes of identification and disidentification: “other people’s memories help give you back your life, reshape your story [and] restart the memory practice” (3). Like literary memoir, autobiographical visual art acts as a catalyst for remembrances of lived experience, and speaks to the power of memory in constituting experiential viewing relationships. But for the viewer, as for the reader, dis/identification is only possible through a process of exchange, what Miller calls “interactive remembering—where the artwork initiates the construction of memory itself” (8).

Miller connects the experiential trajectory of dis/identification to memory formation: “The path of identification provides one of the major byways along which interactive remembering moves. You follow the threads that take you back, even if then there was no story, just the loose threads you see now woven into a readable fabric, material for another story: your own” (10). Here Miller cleverly illustrates the identifying process whereby the viewer weaves a tapestry of memories to constitute a larger whole. It is this formation of memory, through the processes of dis/identification with the text or the transmedial video, that elicits a moral response in the viewer/reader and allows for self-discovery: “however hellish the lives . . . they give you what your unrecorded history lacks (and that the novel used to offer): a narrative through which to make sense of your own past” (12). On this analysis, autobiography, as an aid to memory, gives birth to pockets of recollection, allowing the knowing self to discover itself along new lines. The autobiographical work then contains the ability to restructure individual memory and to act as a site of self-reflection—the autobiographer merely serves as a catalyst.

In autobiographical visual art, the lens of another serves as the mirror of the knowing self. This reciprocal relationship is hardly narcissism, but rather
a symbiosis informing past and current selves. Kingstone’s work may act as a catalyst for memory because the true and false statements he presents may trigger past experiences in the viewer. By engaging with *400 Lies and 1 Truth About Me*, viewers can use their lived experiences and personal history to produce memory and affect. Thus, while Kingstone’s autobiography is unmistakably the central element of the work, the viewer’s own life may be the key to understanding it.

**SHARED COMMUNITY: THE POLITICS OF RECIPROCITY**

Miller has argued for the macro-dynamics of memoir to record “an experience in search of a community, of a collective framework,” and for the protection of the fragile singularity of postmodern society (14). Similarly, Renov has proposed that transmedial video artworks establish meaningful social connections with viewers, and serve to reformulate traditional interlocutor power dynamics. He suggests that a paradigmatic break occurred when traditional video media such as the Sony Portapak was appropriated by artist-confessants as a DIY confessional apparatus or form of “techno-therapy” during the 1960s:

> The subjects seek not forgiveness but expressive release in the form of dialogues—between imagined subject and a present but unimaged interlocutor—from which only monologues survive. I am suggesting that first-person video confessions, addressed to an absent confessor-Other, mediated through an ever-present apparatus, constitute a discursive formation significantly different from the truncated dialogue, one that offers particular insight into specialities and potentialities of the medium itself. (85)

For Renov, the zeal with which transmedial artists disclose private experiences to the camera informs viewers of the character and potential of video media as suited for confessional discourse. Particular video media, however, also facilitate intersubjective encounters with viewers that inform communitarian ontologies. Clarke’s *One-on-One* series represents one such archetypal video confession artwork that produces reciprocal gestures towards shared community and participatory frameworks. For the videos, Clarke offered personal recording equipment, including cameras and videotapes, to select inmates of the California Institute for Men in San Bernardino County, then strictly a minimum-security correctional institution. As the artist-in-residence, Clarke was granted remarkable access to the institution’s resources and personnel. Inmates were asked to document memorable experiences or events in their lives, and then forward the recordings to individuals on the outside with whom they shared some type of relationship. The individuals
outside the prison were prompted to respond with a counter-confession, and instructed to return the tape to the inmate so that the process could repeat itself, and in doing so, strengthen interpersonal relationships. Renov claims that the One-on-One series cultivates “relationships of trust [that] are built upon a foundation of reciprocal confession, freely given and exchanged” (95). However, art critics have also read the work as a “two-way umbilical cord” that supplements communality and allows for free disclosures between confessants (Rosenberg). Chloë Taylor has referred to this relational phenomenon as “confessing the Other.”

Essentially, the One-on-One series produces a useful schema for understanding how transmedial self-expression is a social performance that transforms interlocutor dynamics by shifting intersubjective relationships to the confessant-confessant subject position; in doing so, it integrates viewers not as voyeurs but as interlocutors. By extending the video’s indexical tracings to individuals on the “outside,” the viewer embodies the position of second interlocutor in a culture of reciprocity that fosters a sense of shared community. If, similarly to True/False and 400 Lies and 1 Truth About Me, the One-on-One series represents a pseudo-confession, and positions viewers as interlocutors, they may respond to the video using a self-reflexive testimonial expression.

For Taylor, intersubjective communications are rhetorical performances that reference a yearning to speak the self from the confessant’s subject position. This “counter-confession,” she contends, becomes potentially “addictive” when viewers recognize and acknowledge that our everyday sufferings are often empathetic; thus, the counter-confession promulgates power relations between both subjects, and in doing so deconstructs confessant/confessor regimes to reconceptualize a shared confessant/confessant relationship: “the confessant’s need for a confessional response from the other and her desire to control that response . . . is viewed as necessary for mutual recognition and forgiveness. . . . The one who listens, as in the case of the scrupulous priest or the counter-confessing analyst, may become the one who speaks, internalizing the desire to confess which he aims to inculcate in the other” (168, 167). By centralizing viewer-as-interlocutor dynamics and producing unorthodox transmedial aesthetic strategies, Campbell encourages viewers to negotiate memories of their lived experiences and personal histories. Viewers may also encounter strong affect when their memory identifies (or disidentifies) with Kingstone’s pseudo-confessional utterances. In Clarke’s video, viewers may come to understand themselves better through memory work, affective engagement, and critical discourse. In these gradations of self-discovery, the experiential utterances of “another’s text can give you back your life” (Miller 7).
Recorded on her twenty-seventh birthday, Steele’s seminal transmedial video *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects* has entered the canon of Western art history as one of the finest examples of early feminist video art from Canada (Figure 3). At the beginning of her eleven-minute video, Steele’s hands can be seen against her upper thighs; she then takes a step backwards and prominently declares, “September 22nd, 1947 to September 22nd, 1974. In honour of my birthday I’m going to show you my birthday suit with scars and defects.” From that position, Steele turns away from the camera and walks through open doors to the back of a vacant room, where she reveals her naked body to the video frame—hence, her proverbial “birthday suit with scars and defects.” Appropriating elements from the formal appearance of Campbell’s *True/False*—where he presents a sequence of pseudo-confessional statements in profile position then facing opposite the camera—Steele calculatingly turns her body to her right (in profile), right again (from behind), right again (in profile), and right again, finally confronting the camera head-on to conclude the circumrotation. Steele must have been aware of *True/False*, following Campbell’s move from Sackville, New Brunswick to Toronto, Ontario in 1973, when the two quickly become friends and colleagues.
at the University of Toronto. Steele modeled her video after the aesthetic structure of the “mug shot” in order to question, like Campbell, the exterior surface of the skin and correlating bodily gestures as superficial barometers of inner character. Steele’s video is critically important to early feminist discourse in North America because it stood—and still stands—in opposition to contemporaneous advertising imagery of romanticized, idealized, and unblemished female beauty.12 As Jayne Wark has suggested, Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects was conceived at a time when male artists, particularly male performance artists, physically punished their bodies to engender psychological shock in viewers (95). With her video Steele not only presents the female body’s susceptibility to physical injury but views her topography of scars and defects as an embodiment of her personal identity and politic.

Following Steele’s methodical turn before the camera at the back of the vacant room, she returns to the camera, bends forward to reveal a large scar on the side of her neck, and pronounces, “1947. Surgery at birth to remove goitre.” Steele continues the performance by presenting her left ankle to the camera in close-up along with the spoken description, “1947. Transfusion because of serious illness. Three months old.” She then turns opposite the camera to expose the back of her left thigh to the camera accompanied by the words, “1950. Fell on bleach bottle while riding tricycle in basement.” The passages of time inscribed on Steele’s flesh are what Rosalind Krauss would describe as “indexical marks” (qtd. in Wark 95). When Steele chronicles her physical wounds and candidly displays them to the video camera she gently strokes the wounds as if to mend them in a psychological dimension. What becomes clear from the indexical marks written on Steele’s body, and from the verbal description of her scars, is that Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects represents an archive-image of physical injury and trauma.

The word “trauma” derives from the Greek meaning “wound,” and “refers to the self-altering, even self-shattering experience of violence, injury, and harm” (Gilmore 6). In effect, Steele’s video explores what Dominick LaCapra has termed everyday or “structural trauma,” which is “related to (even correlated with) tranhistorical absence (absence of/at the origin) and appears in different ways in all societies and all lives” (77–78). LaCapra’s conceptualization of structural trauma allows us to understand how viewers recognize that societies share traumatic events in different ways; however, this is not to suggest that the affects related to traumatic events are shared because trauma is ontologically defined by its experiential singularity. If traumatic events frequently occur in society, as LaCapra claims, however, then viewers are likely to have experienced trauma in the trajectory of their lives. This may be the fundamental reason why Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects triggers viewers to speculate upon the indexical marks dotting their own skin and the affective
trauma that precipitated or emanated from them. Put another way, while Steele reminisces about the wounds of her history, viewers may be compelled to recollect their own. Miller informs us that memoir operates as “prosthesis—an aid to memory” (14); here Steele’s body functions in a similar way. Remembering and working through such wounds can represent a powerful source of healing and restoration.

The recollection of trauma might be dangerous for certain viewers, however, because related affective suffering can be symptomatic of the re-registration of trauma. Jill Bennett explains how trauma-related art can trigger post-traumatic memory in viewers: “the instantaneous, affective response, triggered by an image, viewed under controlled conditions, may mimic the sudden impact of trauma, or the quality of a post-traumatic memory, characterized by the involuntary repetition of an experience that the mind fails to process in the normal way” (11). Following Bennett’s conceptual logic, a past traumatic experience can potentially resurface in the present through the memories produced by trauma-related art. On the other hand, the affect produced by post-traumatic memory may also allow some viewers to come to terms with the indexical traces and physiological wounds associated with their past. And it may be reassuring for some viewers to recognize and negotiate the fact that everyone’s flesh breaks in one way or another. At the crux of this intersubjective and transmedial relationship between the video and the viewer lies the potential for empathy and an understanding that imperfection is an axiomatic trait of the human condition.

CONCLUSION

Canadian performance artist Irene Loughlin appropriated Steele’s Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects as a formal template to produce her own transmedial interpretation of the original video in 2008 (Figure 4), meticulously drawing attention to her scars and defects. In Considering: “Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects” by Lisa Steele, Loughlin’s physical body operates as a communicative apparatus relaying indexical marks and an accompanying chronological narrative to the camera. However, contrary to Steele’s recorded duration performance, Loughlin rigorously edits her video for improved synchronicity and flow. Furthermore, the indexical traces visible on the exterior of Loughlin’s skin often accompany meticulously detailed narratives of physical and sexual assault: “1974. Sexual abuse. Head positioned to hit headboard of bed repeatedly with the intent to create audible sound. Perpetrator places hands between head and headboard to muffle sound. Seven years old”; and “1985. Severe depressive episodes, hopelessness and disassociation accompanied by the desire to no longer live. 18 years old.” Whereas Steele’s video
places emphasis on the indexicality of physical wounds, Loughlin’s video is a gripping exegesis of profound emotional pain that reads as witness testimony. By performing and documenting her lived experiences through contemporary visual media, Loughlin’s engagement of *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects* is radically transformational because it strengthens her relationships with Steele while also deepening her understanding of herself.14 Loughlin’s embodiment of this intersubjective reality holds the potential to break off into fascinating possibilities—Considering: “Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects” by Lisa Steele represents the quintessential example of how transmedial video art forges meaningful and enduring relationships with viewers that open innovative aesthetic trajectories.

While the Sony Portapak and similar technical video equipment revolutionized the production of transmedial video art in the 1960s, digital technology platforms have opened the potential for innovative aesthetic strategies and intersubjective forms of communication in contemporary art. Digital software programs and projection technologies have transformed taxonomies of autobiographical art by reconceptualizing spatial relationships and interpersonal realities. Proprietary Internet media such as YouTube, Vimeo, and Dailymotion grant greater access and agency to particular artworks, and introduce visual artists to wider audiences while offering improved modalities for discourse. Similar to Loughlin’s appropriation of Steele’s work, other...
professional artists, amateurs, and art students are recreating video artworks and uploading them to the digital sphere. These videos are bound up in a DIY aesthetic that circumvents traditional exhibition venues by self-publishing video art online, establishing different social connections and communities rather than relying upon an establishment that may exclude them, and thereby positing innovative aesthetic strategies that reinterpret viewer relationships as a collective experience.

“Autobiography,” John Berger writes, “begins with the sense of being alone. It is an orphan form” (46). I wrote this article in strong resistance to Berger’s idea; namely, that autobiographical utterances can also begin with the sense of being with others. The desire for relational forms of communication in contemporary transmedial video art exists because someone is, or soon will be, watching. Without the interlocutor, the artist, much like the viewer, becomes an absent other. I turned to these transmedial video artworks as a way to make better sense of each in the context of literary autobiography, cultural theory, and art history. Literary theorists have mined autobiographical genres for several decades now, whereas visual artists, art historians, and art critics have been remarkably slow in publishing material on autobiographical visual art. Critical interventions into transmedial aesthetic strategies demonstrate the potential for autobiographical video art to forge intersubjective relationships with viewers. On the one hand, the relational maneuvers enacted by video artists antagonize passive spectatorship and foster dynamic intersubjective viewing encounters. The transmedial video artist’s pseudo-confessions and innovative aesthetic devices construct game-like scenarios intended to produce communicative environments subject to relational tensions. On the other hand, the video artist’s physical body represents a prosthetic apparatus that encourages a synthesis of self-reflexive memory work and affective engagement, resulting in ontological examinations of the self. Put another way, in the processes of playing detective, stimulating intersubjective communication, and provoking self-discovery, the artists discussed in this essay share themselves to facilitate corresponding exchanges. These experiential relationships foster a culture of reciprocity that informs communities in the world. Although they are speaking directly (or indirectly) to the video camera (and by extension the viewer), these artworks remind us that we are essentially being called upon to respond.

NOTES

1. Almost paradoxically, without an interlocutor sharing the same physical space, video artists enabled themselves to experience freer agency in their individual expressions (see Renov 78–101).
2. For a comprehensive explanation of Miller’s theory of self-discovery, community, and interpersonal connection, see *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People’s Lives*.

3. On the relationship between affect and bridging difference, see Bassnett.

4. One of the earliest references to “relational aesthetics” occurs in Hans Tichler’s 1972 essay “A Proposal for a Multi-Relational Aesthetics”; Tichler’s essay, however, concerns musicological intertextuality.

5. For more on Bertillon’s archival system for photographing criminals, see Sekula.

6. In her book *Missing Persons: The Impossibility of Auto/Biography*, Mary Evans argues that autobiography is an impossible project because of its ties to narrative fiction and social collectivity. For Evans, autobiography cannot claim to accurately represent the “whole” life of a person yet attempts to do so through tropes of narrative fiction: “Authors of auto/biography cannot appreciate the impact of fiction on fact; that is, the sense in which individuals create themselves in relationship to fantasy” (1, 14). Nor can authors claim any absolute singularity of the knowing self because it informs the collective framework of postmodernist society, where individuality and collectivity blur ad infinitum.

7. Kingstone’s synopsis of *400 Lies and 1 Truth About Me* can be found on the Vtape website.

8. For more information on Kingstone’s close engagement with humor, see Matthews.

9. Crucial to this discussion is director Jean Rouch’s analysis of video media operating as an accelerator of inhibition that intensifies the veritable frequency of private disclosure both consciously and/or unconsciously. “It’s not exactly exhibitionism: it’s a very strange kind of confession in front of the camera, where the camera is, let’s say, a mirror, and also a window open to the outside” (qtd. in Renov 83).

10. For more on the idea of “Confessing the Other,” see especially Chapter 4 of Taylor (167–91).

11. As Gilles Deleuze maintains in *Proust and Signs*, cosmologies of affective engagement generate epistemological relevance and therefore introduce new paradigms of body/thought discourse (see Bennett 7). Following the ontological trajectory of Spinoza’s approach to affect, Deleuze views it as a sensory apparatus that produces sustained cognitive analysis or deep thought. On the whole, base human idiosyncrasies like bodily sensation and cognitive reasoning function as a psycho-sensory harmonization to beget comprehensive theoretical perspectives.

12. Irene Loughlin describes Steele’s feminist objectives: “her intention was to create and work with a proto-feminist instinct, and to really question the kind of airbrushed female body, soft porn industry that was being interrogated by the women’s movement at the time. Lisa noted that the porn industry had risen up simultaneous to the women’s movement, with an accompanying normalization of the naked female body” (“Regarding Lisa Steele’s Video” 3).

13. The author wishes to thank the artist for bringing this never before exhibited work to his attention in 2010.

14. The intended meaning is both figurative and literal, as Loughlin had close contact with Steele during the latter’s graduate studies at the University of Toronto’s Visual Studies program.
WORKS CITED


