Relational Viewing: Affect, Trauma and the Viewer in Contemporary Autobiographical Art

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy

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RELATIONAL VIEWING: AFFECT, TRAUMA AND THE VIEWER IN CONTEMPORARY 
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ART

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By

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Graduate Program in Visual Arts
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
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**Doctor of Philosophy**

Date__________________________ ______________________________

Chair of the Thesis Examination Board
Abstract

This dissertation examines the communicative relationship between contemporary autobiographical art and the viewer. By analyzing the work of six artists, Richard Billingham, Jaret Belliveau, Larry Clark, Nan Goldin, Lisa Steele and Bas Jan Ader, I maintain that lived experience and personal history condition the way viewers respond to autobiographical art. I turn to literary theory as a critical methodology to argue that autobiographical art operates as a catalyst for identification, memory and self-discovery. I use affect and trauma theory to demonstrate how artwork produces meaning and discourse through the viewer’s feelings, emotions and bodily sensations. Consequently, I survey the importance of affect in generating ethically appropriate responses to trauma-related art. With the viewer’s subjective gaze in mind, I also weigh the possibility of trauma-related artwork triggering traumatic affects in the viewer through conscious and unconscious forces. My response to affect theory further reconceptualizes how empathy and community form new social relationships between the viewer, the artist and others irregardless of physical, cultural and ideological differences. In this regard, my study shows that autobiographical art is a pedagogical instrument for learning about others while learning about the self as well: through the artist’s life one may come to better understand their own.

With extensive research and close analysis of select visual material, this dissertation proposes several interrelated points. Chapter one considers the types of responses that photographs of family tragedy generate in the viewer, how viewers connect to these photographs and what meaning can be gained from these encounters. In chapter two I examine three different philosophies of community to argue that inclusion, identification and universality are capable of transforming existing social structures and political relationships. The third and final chapter
problematizes the communication of memory by deconstructing how conventional memory is performed. It also addresses why the logic of representation collapses during the artist’s communication of trauma and explains how the conscious and unconscious reverberations of pain surface unexpectedly through the haptic sense. Overall, the dissertation seeks to contribute to contemporary research on autobiographical art, affect, trauma and their complex relationship to spectatorship.

**Keywords**

Affect, trauma, contemporary art, autobiography, relational viewing, community, silence, touch, memory, identification.
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Introduction

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... shadows of people one might have been; unborn selves.

—Virginia Woolf, The Waves

Several years ago, I encountered the work of the English photographer Richard Billingham. Turning the pages of his photo book Ray’s a Laugh (1994), I was struck by Billingham’s amateur aesthetic, asymmetrical framing, muddy texture and rich contrast of colour. I initially overlooked the socio-political issues that most critics and scholars concentrate on and instead focused on the formal characteristics of the images. Yet once I allowed the subject matter of Ray’s a Laugh to penetrate, I was never able to view the work in the same light again. For me the work became, in a sense, painful to see. What happened was that I recollected the events of my childhood while viewing Billingham’s images. When I was a child my family was in some ways similar to the Billingham family but I also had experiences that were uniquely my own. In his visual autobiography I came to envision my own life. My experiences with Billingham’s photographs and other autobiographical works that are similarly personal and emotional, foreground the theoretical approach to this dissertation project. I intend to show that viewing autobiographical imagery is a relational experience. Further, I will address why critical interpretation of autobiographical art necessitates a conceptual framework that considers how viewers relate to artwork conveying the life experience of others.
The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines autobiography as “an account of a person's life written by that person.”\(^1\) However, what the OED does not mention is that autobiography has traditionally been a white, male, European and bourgeois genre. To write an account of one’s life typically required ample leisure time and therefore wealth as well as a good education and access to books and similar resources. Today circumstances have changed and autobiographical testimonies of many ethnic backgrounds and classes—including the disenfranchised—are readily available in various written forms and as works of art.

Within contemporary art, autobiographical work opens up the possibility of creating new kinds of relationships between people of different backgrounds. It can operate both as a representational transference of lived experience and as an apparatus for experiential, relational viewing. When viewers encounter work that deals with the autobiography of the artist, they engage cognitive and affective processes that involve identification, memory and sometimes trauma. In this practice of relational viewing, the artist’s work functions as a powerful catalyst for memory, whereby viewers draw upon their own life stories to connect with the work. The radically subjective negotiation of autobiographical imagery in relation to memory comes in many forms, but this study considers two of the most recognizable: ordinary memory\(^2\) and sense memory.\(^3\) On the one hand, the ordinary memory of the viewer uses the subject matter of the image to engage with systems of dis/identification to engender a moral or political response. On

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2 Charlotte Delbo describes common memory as “properly representational; it is the memory connected with the thinking process and with words—the realm in which events are rendered intelligible, pegged to a common or established frame of reference, so that they can be communicated to, and readily understood by, a general audience.” Therefore, because of its link to collective forms of communication, common memory, or ordinary memory, may be of significant socio-political importance. See: Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 29.

3 Bennett describes sense memory or deep memory as that which is “affective,” “nameless,” “unspeakable” and exists outside memory proper, Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 25-34.
the other hand, sense memory registers an unspeakable, affective response that bears the psychosomatic imprint of a traumatic event or experience. In relational viewing, these complex feelings and emotions are registered only as they are experienced in the present. Consequently, the viewer not only perceives the image in the present, but projects it back into their own memory, body and being—the image serving as a prosthesis to the memory of lived experience, in other words, to the biography of the viewer itself. Thus, relational viewing privileges the lived experience and personal history of the viewer.

**Methodology**

The modernist emphasis on medium as the primary source of artistic significance has lost popularity and made way for postmodern explorations which use the viewer’s own life as a perceptual instrument. For instance, Corina Caduff has stressed the importance of employing lived experience and personal history as a methodological tool for interpreting contemporary art discourse. “Autobiography as method describes an approach in which one’s own person serves as an object and instrument for expressing certain perceptions, interpretations and reflections.” This is not to suggest that autobiography as critical method is a narcissistic exercise intended to amplify the viewer’s ego. While Narcissus once saw his reflection in a pool of water, here the viewer’s reflection is not their own—it is an image of the Other. The centrality of the viewer in

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4 Ibid, 22.


contemporary art theory is a logical development from poststructuralist critiques of the author and the shift towards the reader in literary theory. With a great deal of scholarly emphasis placed on the viewer’s lived experience and personal history as a generator of meaning, it is important to consider how the act of seeing is conditioned by the viewer’s own life, by the viewer’s own biography. Autobiography, in particular, relies on viewers for meaning because it allows for the projection of lived experiences into the recorded history of the artist. This methodological approach resists conventional positivist and humanist modes of understanding autobiographical discourse that for centuries have seen the artist’s biography as the primary source of meaning. By concentrating my analysis on the viewer’s perception, I make room for viewers of different genders, ethnicities, ages, sexes and social classes.

This study emerges out of the turn towards relationality and confessional discourse in contemporary culture. This study analyzes the work of six photographers and video artists to demonstrate how autobiographical art is an experiential, relational genre that privileges the viewer’s lived experience and personal history as a way of seeing. Artists who make use of autobiography as a representational strategy have most readily employed these media since the late 1950s as the ideal means of capturing self-narrative, personal affects and their immediate environment. The dissertation is organized into three chapters that pair artists together to critically examine their work relative to chosen themes.

In the first chapter I examine the work of Richard Billingham and Jaret Belliveau who both challenge the visual content and orthodox subject matter of traditional family photo albums. Most if not all of the photographs I respond to in this chapter could be considered, in Jill Bennett’s language, “traumatic imagery” or “trauma-related art.” In my first case study I demonstrate how Billingham’s photographs in the *Ray’s a Laugh* series fuse aesthetic form with
political significance, thereby producing a meaningful dialogue with viewers of different backgrounds through affect. The second case study in this chapter focuses on Belliveau’s photographic series *Dominion Street* (2003-2008) which, like Billingham’s *Ray’s a Laugh*, openly records family-related tragedy. I maintain that Belliveau’s visual material allows for a communicative exchange grounded in the viewer’s own lived experience and personal history. Viewers project and negotiate personal events and key life experiences onto Belliveau’s visual autobiography to gain access to difficult material presented in images of the artist’s family, often gaining insight into their own relationships and themselves in the process.

In chapter two I take up the issue of community as a social discourse which navigates terms of inclusion and exclusion through shared affects. Breaking the chapter into three corresponding sections, I analyze the work of three different theorists who engage with the idea of community by using Larry Clark’s photo book *Tulsa* (1971) and Nan Goldin’s photo book *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986) as material examples. The first section surveys Rancière’s study of the political crisis in the West related to the collective turn towards ethics and its deep impression on social and cultural discourse. Using Rancière I demonstrate the ways that Clark’s “outlaw” friends unsettle the social fabric of the ethical community by generating powerful affective responses such as fear, resentment and terror. In the second section of the chapter I examine Nancy K. Miller’s affirmation that identification and disidentification structure the intercommunicative relationship between memoir writers and their readers with particular emphasis on community. Miller’s ideas guide me in formulating how dis / identification in autobiographical art can structure phantasmatic social boundaries between communities. In the third and final section of chapter two, I analyze Goldin’s *Ballad* to demonstrate the potential for

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connecting people from different communities through universally shared experiences, feelings and emotions. I propose that communities are able to expand the limits of their inclusivity by considering the common affects that they share with the marginalized or excluded, such as love, loss and suffering, as opposed to focusing on difference.

In the third and final chapter of the dissertation I reconceptualize the crisis of representation afflicting trauma discourse by examining the work of two artists, Bas Jan Ader and Lisa Steele, who challenge the notion of unrepresentability through conscious and unconscious aesthetic strategies. To do so I turn to Bennett and her exegesis of the cognitive and affective registers of memory formation in relation to trauma-related art. I illustrate how common memory and sense memory operate interchangeably to create a radical visual aesthetic.

In the first case study I respond to Ader’s experimental film *I’m Too Sad to Tell You* (1971), where the artist literally frames crying as a sublime gesture, and argue that Ader’s tears represent the visual expression of traumatic affects. I conclude this case study by contesting that Ader’s crying is the story of a wound that is too painful to be heard and thus it is forced to take the aesthetic form of raw, distilled emotion. Like Ader, the conscious and unconscious reverberations of trauma are also identifiable in Steele’s early feminist video *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects*. In this second case study I show how the presence of trauma is communicated through Steele’s own sense of touch. My argument, in effect, offers a radical alternative to the idea of unrepresentability in trauma discourse.

**Literature in the Field**

The communicative interactivity between the artist and the audience has been evaluated by Nicolas Bourriaud in his influential book *Relational Aesthetics*. First published in English in
1998, it is one of the most influential contributions to understanding the social and collaborative possibilities of contemporary art discourse. According to Bourriaud, relational aesthetics characterizes “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.”\textsuperscript{10} Beginning in the 1990s, new kinds of practices emerged in which artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Douglas Gordon and Carsten Höller sought to directly engage with the “interhuman sphere: relationships between people, communities, individuals, groups, social networks, interactivity, and so on.”\textsuperscript{11} In this abstracted space of social expression, relational artists enact a field of rhizomatic interactions and exchanges with audiences that specifically address our shared experience in the world. For example, Tiravanija’s early work included the cooking and sharing of food for gallery and museum visitors while Höller fabricated enormous metallic slides that rushed participants from lofty heights to the ground. Although Bourriaud attempts to locate and describe an art movement characterized by its social behaviour and collaborative potential, his writing does not directly reference autobiographical art. It does however help to define an emerging field of artistic production that emphasizes process and social interaction. I am interested in investigating a distinct but related aspect of contemporary art that emphasizes a reliance on affect and exchange.

Within art history discussions of autobiography have been influenced by literary theory and poststructuralist critiques of authorship, namely Roland Barthes’s influential 1967 essay “The Death of the Author,” which shifted intellectual concern away from the artist’s biography.
as the primary source of meaning to focus instead on the performativity of language itself. In doing so, poststructuralism resisted traditional positivist and humanist modes of understanding autobiographical discourse, ruptured Modernism’s preoccupation with authorial presence and, most importantly, conferred agency on the reader as a central exponent of meaning. If “the death of the author [really] is the birth of the reader,” as Barthes had proclaimed, then he and other poststructuralists enabled literary theorists like Paul John Eakin, Elisabeth Bruss and Philippe Lejeune to anticipate the relational manoeuvres between the author and the reader.

Barthes and Lejeune provide a strong theoretical framework for relating the reader of autobiographical literature to the viewer of autobiographical visual art. The critical leap that I make here implies that, while perceptual experience and signification may change, the underlying principle behind the communicative strategies proposed by Barthes and Lejeune fit well within the relational viewing model. For instance, Lejeune’s provocative 1974 essay, “The Autobiographical Pact,” was one of the first significant attempts to flesh out a hypothesis that rationalizes how readers perceive and respond to autobiographical literature. Although somewhat formulaic in his reasoning, Lejeune deconstructed the author’s undisputed claims to truth, thereby providing the reader with the conceptual resources to evaluate the factual integrity of the author’s autobiography based on their own subjective responses. Once the reader locates sufficient evidence to conclude that the autobiographical text is honest and sincere in its presentation of truth, accuracy and fact, then a metaphorical “pact” or “contract” is entered into

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12 In his essay, “The Death of the Author” Roland Barthes attempts to decenter the notion of authorship by arguing that textual analysis has historically emphasized the speaking voice of the author rather than language and writing structures. He suggests that contemporary culture’s notion of the author in literature—an entity mainly informed by an inclination towards positivism—constricts the lines of flight available to produce meaning. According to Barthes, “the explanation of the work is always sought in the man who produced it.” See: Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” Image, Music, Text (New York: Hill and Wang), 142-148.
between the reader and the author.\textsuperscript{13} In reality, this pact or contract determines the attitude of the reader and from there a new set of critical engagements may follow. I perceive the artworks selected in this dissertation as performative, with no absolute truth or ultimate meaning in and of themselves. Rather, they take on meaning by way of their complex interaction with viewers and in relation to different viewing contexts.

With the artist no longer such a dominant figure in the interpretation of artwork, the experiential aspect of viewing relationships has gained importance. Over the past decade, cultural theorists like Nancy K. Miller and Jill Ker Conway have reflected on the “memoir boom”\textsuperscript{14} of the 1990s as a source of self-knowledge, personal growth and social enrichment for readers. They claim that our collective interest in reading autobiographical accounts lies not so much in gaining knowledge of the author, but in gaining knowledge of ourselves through a multifaceted process of identification and disidentification with the author.\textsuperscript{15} In her book, \textit{But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People’s Lives}, Miller suggests, “other people’s memories help give you back your life, reshape your story [and] restart the memory practice.”\textsuperscript{16} Like that of the literary memoir, autobiographical art also operates as a catalyst in the recollection of lived experience and speaks to the power of memory in generating affect. Ultimately, relational viewing—and autobiographical discourse in general—is a “model of


\textsuperscript{14} Miller and Conway locate the memoir boom of the 1990s as a significant moment in our collective cultural history because suddenly intimate personal disclosures were seen in a variety of media. While Conway focuses on the accessibility of memoir, arguing that it is one of the only genres of literature that a non-specialist can read with ease, Miller points to the Clinton Scandal (and to this we may add the OJ Simpson murder trial) as a cultural motivation for such boundless personal exposure. See: Miller, \textit{But Enough About Me} and Jill Ker Conway, \textit{When Memory Speaks: Exploring the Art of Autobiography} (New York: Vintage, 1998).

\textsuperscript{15} Miller, \textit{But Enough About Me}, 3.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 25.
relation that organizes the experience of reading autobiography itself.” In other words, according to Miller and Conway, autobiography facilitates meaningful relationships with others as an integral part of its internal structure.

But these relationships are not always so reassuring. In the discursive shift from spectator to secondary witness, the viewer of trauma-related art can be made vulnerable to the distressing affects communicated by the artwork; hence, the viewer can internalize the trauma to which they bear witness. Dominick LaCapra employs the term “muted dose” of trauma while Geoffrey Hartman uses the term “secondary trauma” to describe occurrences like these where trauma imagery registers trauma-related affects in audiences. However, affective responses to trauma-related art are so subjective that it is difficult to express precisely how these affects function within each individual. It is also difficult to speculate on how the presence of trauma impacts the artist’s work. In this regard, I use the psychoanalytic framework of Cathy Caruth and Dori Laub to question the experiential characteristics of trauma, from involuntary flashbacks to the repetition of events in the mind. Caruth and Laub also inform my analysis of how trauma manifests itself in the artist’s conscious and unconscious drives. I argue that autobiographical artists who communicate trauma to viewers through visual material reconfigure the aesthetic organization of the artwork itself. Leigh Gilmore is similarly concerned with how the structural characteristics of aesthetic forms shift dramatically when writers attempt to express the traumatic experiences that shaped their lives. For Gilmore, these “limit cases” in autobiographical literature

17 Ibid, 2.
18 Dominick LaCapra in Bennett, Empathic Vision, 9.
enact a radical deconstruction of literary autobiography yet adhere in some ways to its aesthetic principles. My critical approach to trauma-related autobiographical art resonates with Gilmore because I also consider the artist’s communication of traumatic experience and its resulting effects on their visual material.

The works that I examine in this dissertation are not calls for political action or social reform, but instead investigate degrees of self-reflection which lead to new meanings, knowledge and interpersonal relationships. The exploration of the self and the relationships with others that autobiography creates establish a social bond which spans beyond the sphere of the autonomous art object to impact the social world. This discursive oscillation between visual art and society has the potential to directly influence the political conscious.

Theoretical Framework

In many ways we relate to autobiographical artwork like we relate to other people. During conversation, cognitive processes like memory and identification trigger powerful affects that negotiate how the discussion will proceed. The audience’s visual and experiential engagement with autobiographical art functions in a similar way. By exploring the events and experiences from their private lives through visual material, autobiographical artists encourage viewers to respond using their own life. Rooted in self-reflection, this interactive dialogue is a powerful instrument for critically examining visual discourse and doubles as a process for better understanding the self. Thus, autobiographical art challenges the modernist vision of autonomous art by producing discourse beyond the restricting spatial and theoretical boundaries of the art object. In this way, it follows the key principles of Bourriaud’s relational art, especially the

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notion that the interhuman sphere of art, a corporeal site where social and collaborative relationships exist between people, establishes a broad sense of community.

The sense of community that contemporary autobiographical art can generate between the artist and the viewer occurs primarily through affect and is not dissimilar to the emotional registers that connect individuals and groups in social discourse. In his book *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière describes how communities define their way of being and their political ideals through the experiential logic of shared sensation. According to Rancière, “the solitude of the artwork is a false solitude: it is an intertwining or twisting together of sensations, like the cry of a human body. And a human collective is an intertwining and twisting together of sensations in the same way.”\(^{22}\) The community of sensation, or *sensus communis*, that Rancière sketches is largely informed by artists who appropriate and transform the perceptions and affections that shape everyday life to form new aesthetic expressions and social relationships. His argument references the heterogeneous character of the interpersonal encounters made possible by relational aesthetics artists. The multiplication of sensory connections and disconnections in the community, says Rancière, reframes the political tensions and relationships between individuals, their world and how they adapt to it. In other words, “the ‘community of sense’ woven together by artistic practice is a new set of vibrations of the human community in the present; on the other hand, it is a monument that stands as a mediation or a substitute for a people to come.”\(^ {23}\) Essentially the *sensus communis* is an affective community (after Maurice Halbwachs’s book *The Collective Memory*)\(^ {24}\) that manifests itself through shared and unshared sensory experiences, meaning that the community’s ontological structure is established through

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\(^{23}\) Ibid., 59.

feelings and emotions. In effect, this complex sensory process otherwise negotiates the systematic terms of inclusion or exclusion in the community. The repercussions for visual discourse are significant, and in this study I examine how the affects produced by representations of disenfranchised subcultural groups foster relationships and mediate differences within the community-at-large.

My interest in the communicative possibilities of affect led me to consider the ways that visual encounters with autobiographical art fundamentally question the appropriateness and responsibility of spectatorship. Autobiographical art constitutes its audience through affect. To be precise, the constellations of feelings, emotions and bodily sensations that are produced in viewers generate new kinds of knowledge, as Gilles Deleuze maintains in his book *Proust and Signs*, which point towards a new paradigm of body / thought discourse. Deleuze, who closely follows *The Ethics* by Benedict de Spinoza, views affect as a sensory apparatus which produces sustained cognitive analysis or deep thought. On the whole, basic human idiosyncrasies like bodily sensation and cognition reasoning function as a psycho-sensory harmonization to beget a more comprehensive theoretical perspective. With this in mind, it becomes easier to conceptualize how autobiographical art constitutes viewers through affect and relationality in a way that is related to but different from relational aesthetics. Bennett also engages a form of Deleuzian body / thought discourse in her book *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*. Using affect and cognition as analytical instruments, she explores the complex relationships between moralized spectatorship and trauma-related art. For Bennett, self-

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reflexive empathy represents the most appropriate and responsible method of visual engagement with trauma-related art because it recognizes the discursive, transhistorical and experiential differences between the spectator and the primary witness to trauma.\textsuperscript{28} “Empathic vision” is used to describe this radical mode of seeing and feeling that places empathy at the heart of the audience’s affective response to images of suffering. Though trauma-related autobiographical art can produce affects in viewers such as empathy, it can also generate powerful affective responses that border on the traumatic.

This dissertation examines the communicative relationship between contemporary autobiographical art and the viewer. I maintain that lived experience and personal history condition the way viewers respond to autobiographical art. I turn to literary theory as a critical methodology to argue that autobiographical art operates as a catalyst for memory, identification and self-discovery. Affect and trauma theory are then applied to demonstrate how artwork produces meaning and discourse through the viewer’s feelings, emotions and bodily sensations. Consequently, I survey the importance of affect in generating ethically appropriate responses to trauma-related art. With the viewer’s subjective gaze in mind, I weigh the possibility of trauma-related artwork to trigger traumatic affects in the viewer through conscious and unconscious forces. My response to affect theory also reconceptualizes how empathy and community form new social relationships between the viewer, the artist and others regardless of physical, cultural and ideological differences. In this regard, my study shows that autobiographical art is a pedagogical instrument for learning about others while learning about the self as well: through the artist’s life one may come to better understand their own.

\textsuperscript{28} Bennett, \textit{Empathic Vision}, 8.
Chapter I. Painful Seeing: Encountering Images of Suffering in Family Photography

Cameras go with family life.

—Susan Sontag

Art expands the sympathetic imagination while teaching us about the limits of sympathy.

—Geoffrey Hartman

With the development of new photographic technology, such as instant cameras, photography became less expensive, more mobile and easier to use. Instead of visiting commercial studios to have portraits taken by a professional, families were able to shoot their own photographs in and around the home. Consequently, many of those families archived their collection of images and other ephemera in photo albums. The family photo album has become a standard fixture in many Western households and represents a visual chronology of family experience. But more often than not, the album displays moments of happiness and leisure, which does not accurately characterize the family dynamic. What fails to fit the conventional social image of family values, love and connectedness is excluded from the family photo album. In other words, pictures considered to be negative in content are filtered out of the album so that a fabricated and idealized façade of congeniality is all that remains. However, some artists have re-examined how audiences perceive family photo albums in order to probe the darker, more hidden aspects of family life.²⁹

One of the earlier interventions of this kind came from the photographer and filmmaker Larry Clark, who revolutionized how audiences interpret conventional family photo albums (fig.

1). Produced between 1963 and 1971, Clark’s photo book *Tulsa* includes provocative snapshots of his outlaw friends and the reckless lifestyle he was all too familiar with—one fuelled by sex, guns, drugs, violence, suffering and death. In *Tulsa* Clark powerfully demonstrates that so-called social deviancy and disillusion with the American Dream were not confined to urban centres—the stereotypical domain of gun and gang culture, prostitution and destitution—rather, it was concealed in suburban neighbourhoods throughout the United States. Almost immediately upon its release, Clark’s work caused a sensation in the New York art scene while striking terror in the hearts and homes of suburban middle-America. Clark commandeered the formal appearance of the family photo album by mimicking its scale, layout, captions and physical texture, but unlike most photo albums of the time, *Tulsa* was bound in black. Ultimately, Clark’s influence extended to vernacular photography and art photography alike.
Originally exhibited in slideshow format with musical accompaniment in New York City bars like The Mudd Club, Nan Goldin’s *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* used narrative devices to imbue her photographs with cinematic qualities. Her slideshows allowed audiences to focus on the beauty of her individual photographs and made it possible for Goldin to recite personal anecdotes about her friends at the same time. This radical display technique harkens back to the tradition of holding intimate slideshows of significant events for a select group of family and friends. Goldin’s early body of work caught the attention of critics, curators and other artists in Europe because it questioned photography’s indebtedness to painting while it embraced the structural language of cinema. Published in book form in 1986, almost fifteen years after *Tulsa*, the work retains much of its cinematic qualities and relevance to family life (fig. 2). Like the original slideshow itself, its pages confront and challenge the fallacy of idyllic love and raise the unnerving possibility that close relationships are just as precarious as loneliness. Although influenced by Clark’s *Tulsa*, Goldin went a step further by conceptually framing her photo book

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as a family photo album and by describing her group of subjects as “The Family of Nan.”

Beyond the community of insecurity that Goldin’s *Ballad* portrays, it still remains the quintessential example of a vernacular family photo album operating as high art.

Following the artistic interventions of Clark and Goldin, English photographer Richard Billingham and Canadian photographer and filmmaker Jaret Belliveau investigate family dynamics by selectively displaying unconventional photographs. Billingham and Belliveau are part of a broader movement in art photography aimed at representing everyday lived experiences through pictures which include candid documentation of family tragedy and loss. In 1996 Billingham published photographs of his father’s chronic alcoholism and his family’s debilitating poverty in the poignant and politically-charged photo book *Ray’s a Laugh* to critical acclaim. A little over a decade later, Belliveau exhibited a series of works titled *Dominion Street* at Gallery TPW in Toronto. The solo exhibition featured old family photographs, sculptural objects and a narrative series of pictures representing his mother in the years leading up to her cancer diagnosis, her ensuing medical treatment and subsequent death. By making their private lives a public display through art exhibitions and book publications, both Billingham and Belliveau use their family’s trauma as a meaningful source of subject matter. In this regard, these artists are in the contradictory position that many autobiographical photographers (and photojournalists) encounter: they experience trauma while recording the traumatic experience of others. As literary theorist Leo Bersani makes clear, it is important that audiences do not reduce the trauma of the artist and their subjects to mere points of aesthetic concern.\(^{31}\) To do so suggests a troubling lack of empathy and marginalizes the real life pain and suffering that undercuts these

types of photographs. Instead, Billingham and Belliveau’s work allows audiences to reflect upon the possibilities and limitations of framing family trauma as art photography.

It is important to differentiate between the everyday trauma I reference in this chapter and other occurrences of trauma such as historical trauma. Literary theorist Dominick LaCapra proposes that two categories of trauma discourse can be readily identified. His first category, everyday trauma, is “related to (even correlated with) transhistorical absence (absence of/at the origin) and appears in different ways in all societies and all lives.” In other words, everyday trauma proposes that certain traumatic events and experiences—such as disease, physical violence and death—are recurrent in most communities. However, this is not to suggest that traumatic experience is shared given that trauma is defined by its experiential singularity. LaCapra’s first category strongly challenges his second, namely historical trauma. Quintessentially, historical trauma is limited in scale, is “specific, and not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject position associated with it.”

Examples of historical trauma include, but are not limited to: the Holocaust, the Bhopal Disaster, and 9/11. My references to trauma in this chapter, however implicit or explicit, are specifically everyday trauma unless specifically stated otherwise.

Billingham and Belliveau experience trauma as they capture and record the trauma of family members for art audiences; however, by encountering their work, viewers bear witness to trauma and the possibility of experiencing trauma or post-traumatic memory themselves. Art theorist Jill Bennett suggests that “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

32 Dominick LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 77-78.
mind fails to process in the normal way.” Hence, if the audience is susceptible to trauma through affective engagement with trauma-related art, then the mere act of viewing raises important questions concerning appropriate viewing conditions, lived experiences and ethical responsibility. Literary theorist Geoffrey Hartman follows a similar line of thinking. For Hartman, “by focusing not on [the] suffering felt by the sufferer[…] but on what we should feel, how we should respond, the ethical thinker as secondary witness is made to enter a symbolic sphere that challenges or even lies beyond the ethical.” Although we may have an obligation as viewers of traumatic imagery to acknowledge trauma’s presence and to feel for its victims, we should also be aware of the potential for certain photographs to register trauma or generate post-traumatic memory in us.

In response, Hartman uses the term “secondary trauma” while LaCapra uses “muted dose” to describe instances where trauma-related art may register trauma in audiences. In other words, being a secondary witness to trauma implies that a faint trace of trauma can register affective and psychological distress in the viewer. Nevertheless, the responses to trauma-related art are so subjective that it is difficult to accurately describe how these operate on each individual. For some, an artwork may be described as traumatic because of the social and experiential forces behind its meaning. For others, the work may trigger unconscious drives that cause previously forgotten memories of traumatic experience to resurface. Literary theorist Leigh Gilmore proposes that in this form of post-traumatic memory “repression is motivated forgetting. Remembering traumatic memory… requires a ground and a cue. A ground alone—getting well out of hurting range, for example—is not sufficient. A cue is needed, like Proust’s madeleine, to

33 Bennett, Empathic Vision, 11.
35 LaCapra and Hartman as quoted in Bennett, Empathic Vision, 9.
act as a trigger to retrieve memory.” Bennett approaches the expression of trauma through trauma-related art by arguing that it should be described as *transactive* rather than *communicative* for the reason that “it often touches us, but it does not necessarily communicate the “secret” of personal experience.” Yet she is quick to note that affective engagement with trauma-related art does not necessarily convey the experience or meaning of trauma itself. Bennett looks to Gilles Deleuze, who is heavily influenced by Benedict de Spinoza, to explain how feelings, emotions and bodily sensations are catalysts for sustained cognitive analysis and deep thought. For Deleuze, “more important than thought there is ‘what leads to thought’[…]impressions which force us to look, encounters which force us to interpret, expressions which force us to think.” Ultimately, affect may hold the key to a new kind of critical thinking, where the body and mind are no longer disconnected but integrated to produce a form of body / thought discourse.

And it is through affect that empathy becomes the most politically and morally appropriate response to traumatic imagery. Psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut defines empathy as “the

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38 Gilles Deleuze as quoted in Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 7.
capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another.” However, the act of projecting oneself into the life of a primary witness of trauma is problematic for a number of reasons, most notably because it downplays the absolute singularity of traumatic experience. LaCapra states that an “emotional response comes with respect for the other and the realization that the experience of the other is not one’s own.” Film theorist Lisa Cartwright has a similar explanation of empathy. She uses the term “empathic identification” to distinguish her concept of empathy from Kohut’s more traditional connotation. In Cartwright’s definition, empathic identification is a radically subjective moral perception that facilitates “the otherness of the other”:

In my empathy with you, in thinking I know how you feel, I do not need to know about you or identify with you[...] I do not see from your position[...] I may not necessarily know about or share your experience, much less your grief. I may even acknowledge that I cannot know what you feel from my own experience, even as I “feel for you.”

For Cartwright, affect and empathy are so closely linked that empathy comes out of an affective response. In Cartwright’s sense, empathy does not mean imagining oneself into the life of another as it is represented through art; rather, it recognizes the crucial differences between the spectator and the other. In essence, empathy means to feel for another and is not an attempt to feel like another. Cartwright’s definition of empathic identification shows how audiences can respond to art using feelings and emotions without compromising the subject position of the

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40 LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma, 40.

41 Cartwright, Moral Spectatorship, 24.

42 Ibid., 34.
other. Instead of struggling to gain knowledge of how the other person feels, she also helps us to conceptualize how empathy and affect should condition our viewing of trauma-related art.

Cultural theorist Ruth Robbins analyzes the autobiographical writings of the newspaper journalist and editor Ruth Picardie in her essay “Death sentences: Confessions of Living with Dying in Narratives of Terminal Illness.” Diagnosed with breast cancer in the mid-1990s, Picardie scrutinized her illness through a series of written texts first published in *Life Magazine*, 1997, a subsidiary of the *Observer*. For some readers the texts were deeply touching and almost painful to read: they produced “a lump in the throat, [and] a discomfort in the eyes.” In her essay, Robbins proposed a response to Picardie’s writing and similar texts that leaves room within critical theory for affective responses. She argues, “[T]here are times when it is an ethical failure on the part of the reader to dismiss emotional and bodily response to textual materials.”

I adopt Robbins’s literary-based hypothesis for my discussion of autobiographical trauma-related art, to facilitate the realization that it could be ethically irresponsible for audiences to repress or ignore their own emotional responses when encountering certain artworks. Robbins shows that the connection to the witness of trauma, on the most basic human level, is constituted through affective engagement. If feelings and emotions are a key component of the human condition itself, then they should not be denied as a methodological tool for critical interpretation.

The term “affect” is derived from the Latin *affectus* or *adfectus* which, roughly translated to English, means passion or emotion. Bennett describes affect as an embodied sensation and “a process of seeing feeling where feeling is both imagined and regenerated through an encounter

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44 Ibid., 157.
with the artwork.\textsuperscript{45} For Brennan, affect is an energetic dimension and social phenomenon that is distinctly physiological in origin. By her definition, it is biochemically interactive, intercommunicative and interpersonal; it is an occurrence where little differentiation exists between an individual and their environment.\textsuperscript{46} Spinoza also connects affect to the emotions and passions that preside over us as human beings. He maintains that individuals negotiate emotion and passion using ethical judgements and reasoning to achieve freedom, survival and happiness in their daily lives.\textsuperscript{47} All of these examples help to illustrate that affect is radically subjective and, most importantly, relational.

Through my analysis of trauma, affect and the ethics of exhibiting trauma-related art, I consider how viewers relate to images of suffering, what kinds of responses may be produced and what can be gained from these encounters. I am particularly concerned with the rhizomatic field of relations enacted between audiences and artwork. Because everyday trauma is inclusive and recognizable throughout society, I argue that affective responses to artwork representing trauma can offer ways of bridging differences that may limit our understanding of each other. Thus, artwork that engages affect connects both individuals and group while producing new social relationships in ways that conventional viewing encounters do not.
Thatcher and John Major oversaw the dismantling of the welfare state and mass de-industrialization. As a result, individual citizens were largely left to fend for themselves. During a 1987 interview Thatcher affirmed, “I think we've been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it's the government's job to cope with it.” Those who lost their jobs or could not find any work in the booming and low-paying service sector were forced to live off of a modest dole and faced losing both financial security and their self-dignity in the process. Neoliberalism, popularly known as the Third Way, essentially amputated the hands of government from the free market economy, which was devastating for Britain’s lower and formerly middle-class citizens. With Ray’s a Laugh, Richard Billingham traces his personal experience during this difficult period of social transition. The photo book exposes the pervasive failure of deindustrialization and social welfare reforms in Britain while representing a nostalgic call for working-class security.

Building on a British preoccupation with photographing the lower classes, exemplified in recent years by artists like Nick Waplington and Martin Parr, Billingham documented his family in their Midlands council flat from 1990 to 1996. A cunning take on the BBC television comedy series with the same name, Ray’s a Laugh was published as a photo book in 1996, just two years after Billingham received his undergraduate degree from the University of Sunderland. The majority of the photographs in the book were taken by a common Instamatic camera using built-in flash and inexpensive film that was developed at the local chemist’s. Billingham had not intended to publish or to exhibit the photographs; instead, he originally used them as source material for large-scale figurative paintings (fig. 3). Following their discovery by a professor

48 Margaret Thatcher as quoted in “Epitaph for the Eighties: ‘there is no such thing as society.’” Women's Own Magazine, 31 October, 1987, pages unknown.
visiting Billingham’s undergraduate studio, the photographs were heralded as extraordinary works on their own. Less than a year after *Ray’s a Laugh* went to print, Billingham’s national and international popularity soared when several of his photographs were exhibited in Charles Saatchi’s 1997 exhibition *Sensation* alongside work by other notable young British artists such as Tracey Emin, Mat Collishaw and Sam Taylor-Wood.

In *Sensation*, Billingham’s photographs were enlarged to 120 x 80 cm in size. However, when a selection of the those works underwent a extraordinary shift in meaning when they were scaled down to book size and published in *Ray’s a Laugh* due to altered context and viewing conditions. The experience of observing, analyzing, flipping through and mulling over the images in a photo book replicates the setting and atmosphere of encountering conventional
family photo albums and thus differs from seeing the same images in an art gallery or museum. As Susan Sontag has argued, “up to a point, the weight and seriousness of [images of pain] survive better in a book, where one can look privately, linger over pictures, without talking.”

*Ray’s a Laugh*, as a photo book, may produce a stronger emotional connection for audiences because they are given the opportunity to negotiate Billingham’s family album alone and on their own time, in their own space, in silence, without the fear of others noticing their emotional reactions. Viewing the work under the same conditions as other family photo albums may also serve to highlight the aesthetic beauty of the work and garner appreciation for its dramatic break from the vernacular tradition. However, Sontag also reminds us that a book can easily be closed and put away, just as we can walk away from images in an art gallery or museum, and the powerful emotional experience that we may encounter is as fleeting as our time spent looking through the images.

An art book masquerading as a family photo album, or vice versa, *Ray’s a Laugh* may rest innocently on coffee tables, yet wound upon opening only to be quieted again with its closure; though just because the book is closed does not mean that the pain it represents has come to an end, nor does it imply that the empathy felt towards its subjects desists. Even though, as Cartwright suggests, “like an identification card, empathy can expire,” the knowledge and meaning gained from empathy may continue to exist long after the initial feelings associated with empathy have subsided. Feelings of empathy extend beyond the physical encounters with the artwork itself and can act on the spectator later on when powerful emotions have the ability to make way for and inform critical thought and analysis. This distancing may allow audiences to develop a deeper intellectual engagement with the work while also enabling

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50 Ibid.

them to interpret their empathy. It could also entail thinking about why it was registered, how it functioned and for whom it was felt.

Billingham’s work has been praised for its aesthetic qualities by distinguished art critics such as Ralph Rugoff and Julian Stallabrass, but it has also incited reproach for the way that it portrays his family. His pictures most often portray a poverty-stricken lower class family, while his audience is a middle and upper class audience. Because of the class issues, critics tend to be severe in their moral judgements of the work and of the family itself. Characterizing Billingham’s family as a lower-class “human catastrophe,” art critic Outi Remes suggests that Ray’s a Laugh reveals society’s curiosity towards poverty. As most of Billingham’s family were unemployed while the series was being documented, art critic Tim Adams finds the Billingham family “endlessly time-killing” and the artist himself as a “profound chronicler of time wasted.” His libellous evaluation of the family’s work ethic and behaviour goes so far as to insult them with the title of his article: “From my family…to other animals.” The comparison here is obvious: Adams is likening the behaviour of the Billingham family to wild animals. Finally, Stallabrass seems to suggest that Ray’s a Laugh is a lower-class intrusion into the elitist sphere of high art: “with the prints, the lurid patterning, decorative knick-knacks, tattoos, filth and general disorder of his parents and their home are brought into contrast with the minimal space of the gallery.” He also relates an anecdote where someone described Ray’s a Laugh to


him as “middle-class porn”;"54 ‘porn’ in the sense that a middle-class audience finds pleasure in looking at images of poverty, physical violence and suffering. As some of the critical reception has shown, Billingham’s work provides upper class critics and audiences with an opportunity to reinforce social stereotypes and denigrate the lower-classes, whom they may consider lazy and uneducated. Billingham’s series also serves to reinforce the non-empathetic political philosophy that Thatcher exercised during her administration’s reign in the late 70s to the early 90s. Crude forms of non-empathy such as these generate disaffection which makes reaching out to others over class, spatial and ethnic lines exceptionally difficult if not impossible.

While critics have discussed Billingham’s work in terms of its subject matter, Billingham himself discusses his photographs in terms of their aesthetic merit and seems to expect his viewers to contemplate the rich formal properties and beauty of the work as well. In a way, this circumvents the family dramas that they so explicitly represent (fig. 4).55 Speaking on the public

![Richard Billingham, from the Ray’s a Laugh series, (1994)](image)

**Figure 4. Richard Billingham, from the Ray’s a Laugh series, (1994)**


55 Stallabrass makes reference to Billingham’s interest in the aesthetic properties of his photographs over its dramatic subject matter: “Billingham expects that the viewer will respond to these pictures as vehicles for the aesthetic.” See: Stallabrass, *High art lite*, 252.
reaction to *Ray’s a Laugh*, Billingham explains that the work:

captured the general public’s eye because they were looking at the subject matter…I thought everybody could read photographs, but they can’t…It was ‘Oh, look at those stains on the wall, look at his mum’s tattoos…’ and I never saw none of that, honestly, that just happened to be there. People weren’t seeing the beauty underneath, none of the composition, none of the pattern.⁵⁶

Although he desires that audiences appreciate his technical and compositional aptitude, Billingham’s intentions do not determine the photograph’s meaning;⁵⁷ and more to the point, his subject matter powerfully unsettles most if not all attempts at pure aesthetic contemplation. While the artist may be well-acquainted with his subject matter, in both a literal and figurative sense, many viewers may not share the same experiences. The Billingham family responds to *Ray’s a Laugh* in a similar way to the artist, namely by rigidly avoiding the misery and suffering that it so powerfully represents. Speaking on behalf of his mother and the rest of his family Billingham says:

[M]y Mum will be looking at the book and if she hasn't got full concentration on it she will say, 'Pass me a fag, Ray.' They relate to the work but I don't think they recognize the media interest in it, or the importance. I don't think that they think anything of it, really. They are not shocked by it, or anything. We're used to living in poverty.⁵⁸

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Consequently, the audience’s narrow focus on particular themes and objects (instead of on the Billingham family’s suffering) might arise from a struggle to identify with them, which alludes to the larger issue of class discrepancy between the family and the audience. *Ray’s a Laugh* also illustrates how class may condition the production of empathy. By concentrating on the stereotypical signifiers of the lower class home and its inhabitants—such as untidiness and tattoos—some audiences may avoid the experience of empathy simply through their preoccupation with the differences\(^59\) between themselves and the Billingham family. This suggests that class can condition the ways that audiences perceive images.

To encounter artwork that represents pain and suffering in an appropriate, responsible and critical way, viewers might adopt a way of thinking that Bennett refers to as “empathic vision”: a mode of seeing and feeling that places empathy at the centre of responses to traumatic imagery.\(^60\) As an ethical and political form of spectatorship, empathic vision involves feeling for another while simultaneously becoming aware of one’s own position as a witness. Cartwright is similarly concerned with reining in empathy as an ethical response by concentrating on the moral significance of feeling *for* rather than feeling *like* the other. She shifts the traditional understanding of identification to make room for a mode of identification that involves empathy. Yet she is careful to keep her understanding of identification in check so that it does not compromise the singular position of the other:

In the model of empathic spectatorship, we may downplay the factor of knowledge in the experience “I know how you feel” and analyze the nature and experience of that

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\(^{60}\) Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 1-21.
projective relationship in which I am myself “made to feel” and subsequently act “on your behalf.” Importantly, you may not reproduce in me the same feelings that I witness in you.\(^6^1\)

Empathic identification references the viewer’s recognition of the visible facial movements and bodily gestures that signify the affects of another person—anywhere from pleasure to agony. Audiences can learn how to respond to the behaviour, action or event inflicting the subject in a picture by reading their affects with cognitive reasoning and moral judgement. Thus, to identify with Billingham’s work may not necessarily mean being able to identify with his family’s lived experiences or physical environment, but instead may mean identifying with the movements, gestures and expressions that signify their suffering. As Cartwright hopes, this process of identification, which confirms the presence of suffering, can lead to strong feelings of empathy. This conceptual approach to empathy further demonstrates the ethical importance of maintaining the “you” / “I” distinction.

Although Bennett and Cartwright suggest that empathy is based on the acknowledgment and differentiation of “you”/“I,” they and others such as LaCapra and Hartman warn against “overidentification” with primary victims of trauma. Overidentification is an ethically precarious response that viewers encounter when they attempt to imagine themselves in the place of the trauma victim, to feel like them and to draw comparisons between the other’s suffering and their own. Overidentification with Billingham and his family may in actual fact reveal a fundamental lack of empathy. According to Cartwright, “to possess, to enter, to inhabit, to control, to animate, or to touch the other is, crucially and firmly, not to (want to) know or to be the other.”\(^6^2\) Her

\(^6^2\) Ibid., 25-26.
conceptualization of distancing the “you”/“I” duality is useful because it provides a strong example of empathy going too far to the extent that it is no longer empathy but something else entirely. Bennett’s concept of empathic vision and Cartwright’s concept of empathic identification call for understanding and compassion of the other through affective responses and the realization that even though one may be familiar with the experiences of the other, the other’s experience is powerfully unique.

These ideas can be weighed against several photographs from the Ray’s a Laugh series that candidly represent physical and emotional suffering. It is difficult to single out specific examples because the photo book has many to choose from, but some of the most powerful images represent Ray and Liz arguing or physically fighting. For instance, one photograph represents Liz standing over a seated Ray with her left fist clenched and arm cocked in the direction of Ray’s head (fig. 5). Because Liz fills much of the viewer’s visual field and Ray does

*Figure 5. Richard Billingham, from the Ray’s a Laugh series, (1994)*
not, we get a sense of her power and Ray’s diminutive temperament. Ray appears indifferent or unresponsive to her physical threats and verbal barrage because his head is turned slightly down and away from her fist, perhaps towards the television. The artist has skillfully demarcated the image into two distinct sections—Ray on the lower left and Liz dominating the right—that is visually reinforced by the circular knobs on the cabinet drawers in the background. Separating the space in the photograph in this manner is a cunning visual device that seems to ask the audience to almost literally take sides by empathizing either with Ray or with Liz. The ceramic figurines and kitsch objects in the background compliment the intricacy of Liz’s tattoos in the foreground, while the rich pattern of her dress sharply contrasts with the opacity of Ray’s grey blazer. Billingham’s close perspective and use of flash to illuminate the scene thrusts the figures towards the viewer in order to heighten the sense of intimacy. It is useful to recall here Bersani’s warning of the dangers of aestheticizing trauma because this image not only demonstrates a compelling aesthetic strategy, but it is also about family tragedy.

In addition, the photograph reveals the trace of three viewers who bear witness to this turbulent and one-sided verbal altercation—Billingham the photographer, what appears to be his younger brother Jason, and the viewer. While Billingham snaps the shot, Jason folds his arms behind his head in the top right-hand corner of the picture plane, seemingly unsure of how to react and how the altercation will unfold. As viewers, we are witnessing two sons as they are subjected to their parents’ quarrel that has escalated to the brink of physical violence. Because the brothers appear to be helpless bystanders to this conflict, audiences may feel empathy for Billingham and his brother Jason. Audiences may also empathize with the family as a whole, because of the debilitating poverty that might have contributed to their situation. Audiences can see that Ray’s state of mental and physical health is so damaged that he does not even the
courage or possibly will to defend himself, and thus, we witness Ray, sick with alcoholism, sit in wait at the very moment before possibly being battered. Intense affective engagement with the image lies somewhere in this crucial detail. Because we do not know whether Liz will hit her husband, if her children will attempt to defuse the situation, or if Ray will defend himself, the image generates powerful affects through the anticipation of violence.

After seeing the first work, it may come as no surprise that a later image represents Ray and Liz bloodied after a violent encounter. Unlike the previous photograph, this image seems to be taken in haste because its formal characteristics and composition are not as strong or controlled; however it may be much more poignant (fig. 6). Here, Billingham snaps a shot of his parents in the same room but in different clothes, which indicates that this event occurred at a different time or on a different day. Liz, who appears to bleed from the nose, hands a tissue to Ray in order for him to clean the wounds on his face and the blood on his sweater. Liz’s other

Figure 6. Richard Billingham, from the Ray’s a Laugh series, (1994)
hand, still clenched but resting on her chest, lies in wait. Ray looks dishevelled and disoriented as he reaches his hand out into the air to receive Liz’s tissue. Upon closer inspection, the situation may have escalated significantly as Billingham’s picture leaves evidence of a knife handle at the lower right-hand corner. Seeing this object in relation to the event at hand, we may be shocked by the possibility of it being used to inflict serious injury or even death. Above the knife stands a figure whom we can assume to be Jason, once again acting as witness to his parents inflicting physical pain and emotional suffering on each other (and their sons by association). Where we may have empathized with Ray in the last image, here there are no signs or captions to indicate fault or guilt. Consequently, it is more difficult to empathize when the attacker/defender position is unclear, so once again the audience’s empathy be invested in Liz and Ray’s children. Ray’s a Laugh, like Goldin’s series of post-battering self-portraiture in the Ballad and elsewhere, not only exposes the effects of domestic abuse, an altogether secretive and disgraceful realm of family dynamics, but also disrupts the concept of the domestic by shifting the boundaries of the domestic (interior) space to the public (exterior) space through book publications and exhibitions. Both photographs help to unsettle the stigma surrounding domestic violence while pointing to the fact that it is still very much alive.

Ray’s a Laugh provocatively challenges traditional family photography by presenting suffering as subject matter. In doing so, Billingham has shown that our conventional family photo albums are idealized portrait-chronicles that fabricate happiness and exclude many of the problems associated with family life. Although he prefers his work to be analyzed aesthetically rather than politically, to do so shuts down the discourse surrounding its relation to poverty and class issues in Britain. In her book On Photography, Sontag argues that “the quality of feeling, including moral outrage, that people can muster in response to photographs of the oppressed, the
exploited, the starving, and the massacred also depends on the degree of their familiarity with these images.”

But it is still possible to feel a strong emotional attachment to Billingham’s work even if the viewer is not deeply familiar with his subject matter. As Sarah Bassnett suggests, “an affective response can be particularly important in relation to issues that are difficult to grasp and links that are not easily forged.” For audiences unaccustomed to living in or seeing images of poverty, Billingham’s work forges meaningful connections through empathy and thus helps us to understand others who we would not relate to otherwise.

**Jaret Belliveau and Dominion Street**

Jaret Belliveau is a Moncton-based photographer and filmmaker whose work addresses illness and loss. His series *Dominion Street* (2003-2008) began as a visual investigation into issues of power and family dynamics. However, ten months into the project Belliveau’s mother was diagnosed with stomach cancer, which soon spread throughout the rest of her body. Because Belliveau is an emerging Canadian photographer the critical discourse around his work is limited, but those that have discussed the work often place it in the tradition of cancer and AIDS photo-documentation. For example, art critic Daniel Baird finds Belliveau’s work as continuing photography’s preoccupation with death: Nan Goldin’s representations of AIDS victims, Richard Avedon’s portraits of his dying father and Annie Leibovitz’s unsettling pictures of Sontag living with cancer. Belliveau and the aforementioned photographers, says Baird, demonstrate that disease and mortality are the conditions of human life.

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64 Bassnett, “Archive and Affect in Contemporary Photography,” 244.

similarly concerned with Belliveau’s exploration of cancer and death by insisting that his work originally “began as an innocent look at the identity of a contemporary family but ended with a candid view into illness, loss, and mourning.” Likewise, art critic Eleni Deacon has described his work as a touching compilation of photographs that communicate some of the troubling moments in family life that are usually excluded from conventional family photo albums. What becomes clear from Belliveau’s work is that it shares a unique connection to Billingham’s *Ray’s a Laugh* because it candidly documents private family moments, makes use of suffering as subject matter, and similarly, it maintains a strong conceptual relationship to traditional family photo albums.

As a body of work that has been exhibited in different arrangements over several years, *Dominion Street* found one of its most comprehensive stagings at Toronto’s Gallery TPW in 2010. There, the artist included photographs that had not been exhibited before in addition to old family photographs and objects that functioned like sculptures, such as his brother’s battered red leather jacket which hung on the wall by a single nail. By presenting his colour photographs alongside mostly anonymous, older black-and-white family photographs, Belliveau traces a loose narrative that chronologically archives his family’s nearly century-old visual history (fig. 7). But not only does *Dominion Street* function as a genealogy of his family’s lived experiences, it also operates as a catalyst for personal memory. For the artist, this body of work is fundamentally about his family, specifically his mother, yet it also speaks to the audience’s family as well.

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68 For my review of this exhibition, see: “Documentary Photography and the Family Frame: Jaret Belliveau’s Dominion Street,” *Fuse Magazine*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Summer, 2010), 42-43.
Figure 7. Jaret Belliveau, Dominion Street, exhibition installation, Gallery TPW, Toronto, (2010), image courtesy of the artist

Commenting on the interpersonal viewing relationship that exists in *Dominion Street* Belliveau says:

You're not looking at someone die at a rebel uprising or of starvation - you're looking intimately at your neighbour. I think that's why it evokes emotion in people[…] Obviously, people have relative experience[...] photography, as we know, isn't about the picture - it's what you bring to the picture. People don't even see my mother. They see their mother or father. 69

Belliveau’s photographs allow audiences to reflect upon their own experiences with cancer and other people who may have been directly affected by it—mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, friends and relatives. Here, intense affective engagement can be produced through the memories of those who have passed on. This not only creates a connection to the dead through memory, but it also establishes a connection to the living through empathy. Strength and resolve

69 Jaret Belliveau as quoted in Handysides, “On Dominion Street.”
can be found in Belliveau’s images as viewers can recognize that they are not alone in their struggles with cancer.

Upon learning of his mother’s illness, Belliveau sought her approval and permission to keep taking her photograph while she underwent chemotherapy treatment. During a revealing e-mail correspondence with the author, he clarifies just how this exchange proceeded:

My mother and I had one specific conversation about photographing her when she was ill. It took place in the hospital during the first week of her treatment. I was sitting in her room with my camera and she asked me what I wanted to do and I explained to her that I thought we had an opportunity to make [artwork] together that would show her battle with cancer and her recovery. She agreed that this was a good idea. We also discussed the fact that I was going to have to show just not the positive moments and that I was aiming to represent many sides of her struggle.70

On this occasion, she considered her illness as a narrative possibility where photographs could document her “story” and encompass a beginning (diagnosis), middle (treatment) and end (cure). However, it is unclear as to whether her consent included the exhibition of the photographs in an art gallery or museum setting: “my mother and I didn't discuss [the] manner the photographs would be displayed or what the actual end product would be but she did know I wanted to make a book of the whole story, which would include images from when she was healthy and sick and her recovery. As we know…one step had to be forgotten.”71 At this point questions arise concerning the subject’s intentions, the creative licence of the artist and the appropriate venues for presenting trauma-related art. Has the artist not met his mother’s expectations by displaying

70 Belliveau, e-mail correspondence with the author, 8 May, 2011.
71 Ibid.
photographs of her in an art gallery rather than an art book? Is the artist sanctioned, by the very state of being an ‘artist,’ to take certain liberties concerning the circulation and exhibition of their work? How does this change when the artist is also the son of the subject? Should some images be confined to books so that the gravity of their subject matter is not diminished? Do particular affects depend on viewing contexts? *Dominion Street* powerfully illustrates the problems associated with representing the dying, the limitations of voyeurism and the complicated ethical responsibility of the photographer / family member. Ultimately, audiences may be left to ponder whether Belliveau’s mother would have granted him permission to show the images in one context and not the other, or perhaps even both. Even if we are not aware of her intentions for the series, the images communicate her physically unconscious state and thus we can recognize her inability to direct or control the way she is re / presented. For viewers, looking at images of others who have fully lost their agency represents a crisis of morality.

As a photographer of human illness, Belliveau’s practice can be considered a form of autopathography, which typically references literary autobiographies of illness but whose meaning has been expanded by art theorists such as Tamar Tembeck.\(^2\) Several decades before *Dominion Street*, the American feminist artist Hannah Wilke created her own autopathographic series of photographs called *So Help Me Hannah* (1978-81) to explore her troubled relationship with her mother’s breast cancer treatment (fig. 8). As Tembeck explains, Wilke’s use of

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autopathography as an aesthetic instrument engages rhetorical devices that trigger affective responses while compelling viewers to be torn between reactions of empathy and non-empathy.\textsuperscript{73} This is a crucial point because autopathographic photography not only necessitates affective engagement, it questions the ethical responses of viewers who bear witness to trauma. For Tembeck, as for Robbins, it seems irresponsible for viewers to dismiss the fact that they are looking at artwork that represents individuals in pain and nearing death: autopathography “asks the viewer to bear witness to a fellow human being’s experience: an experience that ultimately mirrors or foreshadows that of the viewer.”\textsuperscript{74} In other words, autopathographic images operate as \textit{memento mori} (reminders of death) to the living. Empathy for subjects may come out of the moving realization that the other’s suffering or death may eventually mirror one’s own. An

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 87.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 99.
appropriate response identifies that, in the act of viewing autopathography, the viewer most likely exists as a healthy body and as such resides in a privileged position. In contrast, responses of non-empathy may surface from the destructive social stigmas and metaphors attached to particular illnesses, specifically cancer, AIDS and tuberculosis, that theorists and sufferers like Sontag vehemently attack. In her book *Illness as Metaphor* Sontag maintains that society perceives cancer as an “invasive” “enemy” which the patient responds to by setting up “defences” like chemotherapy in preparation of all-out “war.” By challenging the metaphorical relationships constructed between cancer and its sufferers by doctors, therapists and others, Sontag hopes to drain cancer of its evil connotations by advancing the truth behind what it really is: an illness. Non-empathy can also exist well-beyond the attitudes and stereotypes that serve to limit sympathy. At work here are radically subjective encounters that mean images of sick or diseased bodies produce negative affective responses, including fear, disgust and shame.76 Negative affects serve to impede empathic responses by negating the idea of feeling for another while characterizing an ethically problematic emotional distancing between the viewer and the subject.

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes investigates the viewer’s reception of photographs in relation to cultural codes and phenomenology. The first of these codes is the *studium* which describes things that most of us can readily identify or understand at once in a photograph from our pool of cultural knowledge. Secondly, the *punctum*, a Latin word derived from the Greek for ‘wound,’ is the purely subjective and emotionally touching detail in a photograph. Like the

75 “The controlling metaphors in descriptions of cancer are, in fact, drawn not from economics but from the language of warfare: every physician and every attentive patient is familiar with, if perhaps inured to, this military terminology.” See: Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Picador, 1977), 64-67.

affects of trauma itself, the *punctum* is difficult to communicate through symbolic language and often escapes it, even as it holds the capacity to, as Barthes maintains, “distress.” Experienced as a bodily affect, the *punctum* wounds, pricks, bruises, cuts, stings or punctures the viewer in some way. Relating his personal experience of the *punctum* to the reader in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes describes it as:

[A] detail [that] overwhelms the entirety of my reading; it is an intense mutation of my interest, a fulguration. By the mark of *something*, the photograph is no longer “anything whatever.” This *something* has triggered me, has provoked a tiny shock, a *satori*, the passage of a void.  

Barthes’s conceptualization of the *punctum* informs us about trauma’s radical subjectivity and how it can be transacted to audiences, warning of the potential somatic hazards of studying photographs. The *punctum* appears to be something in the photograph that, like trauma, generates the sensation of pain similar to the “muted” dose of trauma or “secondary trauma” that LaCapra and Hartman describe. But not only does the *punctum* produce an intense affective response, it can also characterize what philosopher Brian Massumi calls “a shock to thought;” in other words, it can act as a catalyst for sustained cognitive analysis. 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. Thus, affective shock, like the *punctum*, reveals how trauma can produce knowledge while demonstrating the transformative potential of the photograph.


78 Brian Massumi as quoted in Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 11.
Barthes describes photographs as being temporally conditioned to signify ‘that-has-been’ and accordingly we are obliged to accept that what we see in the photograph is a vestige of history. While looking through old family photographs of his mother shortly after her death, Barthes describes how he stumbled upon a photograph, which he titled Winter Garden Photograph, and he talks about the punctum of the photograph as the way his mother, as a young child, holds her finger in her other hand. This simple gesture strikes him in a strange way because it symbolizes her innocent and gentle temperament. The Winter Garden Photograph also made Barthes aware that photographs were much more than evidential passages of time; they were tormenting signifiers of life and death. In an approach that is similar to Barthes’s, Belliveau negotiates his relationship to his mother while looking at the photographs he took of her:

The years I have spent with this work, editing and shaping it has been 10 fold more difficult than the actual shooting was. It is the reflection that these events actually happened and that this key person is really gone! I still think I see my mother in crowds and or driving in a car that passes. That is where the photographs become a reminder of the reality I now live in. A little more alone and disarmed. The whole experience of photographing seems like a dream until I look and absorb my work then the concrete truth hits me again and again. As the camera was a place I could go through my mother’s treatment, a type of visual sanctuary where I could respond to her pain and capture her

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Barthes, Camera Lucida, 96.
struggle, now the photograph[s] are the proof. The undeniable reference to that time and that experience.  

Engaging with the photographs of his mother shortly after her death reminds Belliveau that she is, as Barthes puts it, “a reality one can no longer touch.” If affect and touch share a strong conceptual proximity, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick stresses that they do, then the painful sting of the punctum for Belliveau and Barthes may also be connected to the recognition that their mother’s touch and physical presence is lost forever. The viewer may experience a similar fate at the sight of a photograph of a deceased loved one.

In her book, The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World, Elaine Scarry proposes that “physical pain has no voice” and can be identified through its “unsharability” with others. If pain, as an operation of trauma, cannot be adequately translated through symbolic language then, says Scarry, seeing another in pain represents an ethical crisis because an audience can either react with doubt or certainty in relation to its existence. In the following passage from The Body in Pain, she further elucidates the problems of communicating pain interpersonally:

Thus when one speaks about “one’s own physical pain” and about “another person’s pain,” one might almost appear to be speaking about two wholly distinct orders of events. For the person whose pain it is, it is “effortlessly” grasped[…] while for the person outside the sufferer’s body, what is “effortless” is not grasping it[…] So, for the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that “having pain” may come to be

80 Jaret Belliveau, e-mail correspondence with the author, 11 May, 2011.
81 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 87.
thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to “have certainty,” while for the other person it is so elusive that “hearing about pain” may exist as that primary model of what it is “to have doubt.”\(^8^3\)

Belliveau and Billingham challenge the sense of doubt produced by pain and instead convey the certainty or near-certainty of their subjects’ pain to audiences through pictures. When the gap between certainty and doubt is bridged, there is more opportunity for an ethical engagement with the other’s pain. However, it must be understood that the photograph does not convey the particular sense of another’s pain, it merely communicates the presence of pain. Even then, the photograph carries the burden of pain’s power to silence because it speaks not from the mouth per se but for the eyes: “even the artist—whose lifework and every habit are to refine and extend the reflexes of speech—ordinarily falls silent before pain.”\(^8^4\) The problem of grasping another’s pain can be explored in images such as *Untitled* (2004) where the Belliveau’s mother receives the horrific news of her worsening condition by a doctor as she is surrounded by family and nurses (fig. 9). If emotional and physical pain cannot be communicated through verbal language, then the absence of a detailed caption for the photograph strongly supports this idea. In the photograph she is seated on the side of her hospital bed leaning forward while she openly weeps with her face in her hands. A family member holds her to console her in the foreground as her husband listens to the doctor in the background. Beside her husband a nurse practitioner looks on at the embrace while her son takes a photograph of the scene from the opposite corner of the room. Consequently, we are not able to perceive his reaction to the situation, but we can imagine


\(^8^4\) Ibid., 10.
his grief. We can also imagine the emotional pain of his mother through empathic identification. For Cartwright, “in empathy… I recognize the feelings I perceive in your expression. “You” move me to have feelings, but the feelings may not match your own.”¹⁸⁵ Because most people are familiar with the bodily and facial gestures associated with “feelings” of emotional pain, they can recognize its presence in this image and respond to it by feeling for Belliveau’s mother. It is not important that audiences know the Belliveau family personally because they can still forge a meaningful relationship with them through empathy.

By entering his family photographs into public discourse and framing the series as art photography, Belliveau’s work demonstrates the value of family love and connectedness but also the ephemerality of life itself. As part of documenting his mother’s story living with cancer, he

¹⁸⁵ Cartwright, Moral Spectatorship, 24.
represents a crucial fragment of it—the pain accompanying treatment—on her behalf. Not only was this process important for the artist who made sense of his mother’s illness through his photography practice but the images also touch audiences by allowing them to draw strength and renewal by engaging personal memory of loved ones who have passed away from cancer. His photographs draw from the formal appearance and style of traditional family photo albums; however, although they represent his immediate family they also speak for the families of viewers in a way. Through its affective intensity, relatability and openness to empathy, *Dominion Street* is as much a family photo album to the Belliveau family as it is for the viewer.

**Conclusion**

Jennifer Fisher insists that art galleries and museums operate as sites for affective and experiential relationships between art and audiences. This allows curators to organize affect in a way that manipulates how audiences feel and understand artwork. For Fisher:

> the exhibition rhetorics formulated by curators link objects and viewers in syntagmatic spatial relations that function as a kind of preferred reading. The aesthetic can describe the activation of an exhibition in a process that energizes and connects objects, space and individuals.\(^{87}\)

In this regard, the engagement with Billingham and Belliveau’s work in the gallery and museum system circulates, shares and absorbs particular affects and energies. As Massumi has explained,

\(^{86}\) Bassnett, “Archive and Affect in Contemporary Photography,” 246.

the body is both a material reality and an incorporeal abstraction open to affective intensities. In his own words, he describes affect as:

autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is. Formed, qualified, situated perceptions and cognitions fulfilling functions of actual connection or blockage, are the *capture* and closure of affect. Emotion is the intensest (most contracted) expression of that capture - and of the fact that something has always and again escaped. Something remains unactualized, inseparable from but unassimilable to any *particular*, functionally anchored perspective.  

Massumi’s examination of affect demonstrates that it is an interactive phenomenon which is “captured” by the qualification of emotion. If empathy can be considered a type of emotion then the “feeling for” another that Bennett and Cartwright describe represents a “closure of affect.” Put another way, affect is a contagion. Massumi does not express emotion as a constitutively negative connotation, he merely suggests that the body makes sense of affect through emotional registers. Therefore, we can experience empathy by making sense of affect.

It is Brennan who suggests that the “transmission of affect” is social or psychological in origin and is responsible for specific changes to the human body. This complex idea goes against standard notions of Western individualism where emotions and energies are thought to be naturally contained within each and every body. In her definition, affect is fundamentally an energetic force capable of permeating the skin of other bodies resulting in enhancement or

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depression of physiological energy (or what Sedgwick, after Silvan Tomkins, calls “positive” and “negative” affects). By illustrating the social functions of affect, Brennan, like Fisher and Massumi, positions affect as a socially interactive and interpersonal occurrence:

I am using the term “transmission of affect” to capture a process that is social in origin but biological and physical in effect. The origin of transmitted affects is social in that these affects do not only arise within a particular person but also come from without. They come via an interaction with other people and an environment. But they have a physiological impact. By the transmission of affect, I mean simply that the emotions or affects of one person, and the enhancing or depressing energies these affects entail, can enter into another.

Because it may be impossible for individuals to fully separate the affects they biochemically emit from other individuals affects are essentially capable of transmission from one person or thing to another (and back again). Brennan suggests that affect can be identified by “the form of transmission whereby people become alike is a process whereby one person’s or one group’s nervous and hormonal systems are brought into alignment with another’s.” If this is possible, then a viewer’s affective response to artwork can, in theory, be absorbed and experienced by others. In this exchange, audiences capture and make sense of the affects present in the atmosphere. If affect may be capable of transmission among audiences of art, then our empathic experience of seeing traumatic imagery expands Bennett’s concept of “empathic vision” by conceiving of an empathic affect between bodies. In other words, empathy may be transmitted

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90 Ibid., 3.

91 Ibid., 9.
interpersonally between bodies, that may largely differ from each other, through biochemical reactions as an affect. In our responsibility to empathize with the other, this sense of empathy may be transmitted and absorbed by others to forge an ethic founded on affect.
Chapter II. The Affective Community: Exclusion, Identification and Universality in Autobiographical Photography

One right is guaranteed to everybody
To call his short unhappy life his own
Indulge in all the pleasures of the body
To get his share of bread to eat and not a stone.
This right to life belongs to everybody
But sad to say that’s not the way things happen.
Life doesn’t go the way it ought to go.
Who wouldn’t like to have his rights respected?
But the conditions here? They are not so.

—Bertolt Brecht, The Threepenny Opera

In 1971 Larry Clark published Tulsa: a controversial series of photographs representing his ‘outlaw’ friends and their dangerous exploits in and around the suburbs of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Tulsa was considered revolutionary both because it shattered stereotypes about middle-class American teenagers and because of the formal strategies Clark developed. Using available light and a hand-held camera, he imbued the images with powerful emotions, and in the process, he redefined art photography. Clark’s photobook is one of the earliest works of visual art to respond to the emerging drug epidemic in the United States, and like no other work before, captures the desolate underbelly of suburban youth experience. Reflecting on his first encounter with the work, the artist and writer Mike Kelley said, “Tulsa was the first photographic work I ever saw that realistically depicted the drug scene. It shocked me because, at that time, that was not something you saw in the art world.”92 Tulsa not only astonished the artistic community, but it stunned the American public when it was first discussed in the mainstream media. These powerful affective responses shaped how the work was perceived among middle-class families; specifically, they helped to create a widespread sense of fear and antipathy towards Clark’s outlaw community and other marginalized groups.

92 Mike Kelley, “Larry Clark: In Youth is Pleasure,” Flash Art 164 (1992), 175.
Photographed in three separate stages—1963, 1968 and 1971—Clark’s work alludes to the legendary adventures of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg by expressing his own misgivings with the ‘American Dream.’ And he drew inspiration for Tulsa from the resilient lyrics of Bob Dylan and the uncompromising comedy of Lenny Bruce. Both performers were admired for speaking about the experiences of their generation, and like his heroes before him, Clark wanted to “cut through the bullshit and tell the truth.”\(^93\) Photography appealed to Clark as a way to access reality, and it fit comfortably with his emerging fascination with the Swiss-born photographer Robert Frank, whose photobook, The Americans, examined the paradoxes of everyday American life.\(^94\) Following Frank’s ground-breaking aesthetic, Clark employed the very techniques for which Frank was criticized for. In the magazine Popular Photography, for example, Frank’s photographs were described as suffering from “meaningless blur, grain, muddy exposures, drunken horizons and general sloppiness.”\(^95\) Yet unlike Frank, a foreign photographer investigating an unfamiliar culture, Clark was no outsider; instead, he was part of the world that his pictures captured.

In 1986, roughly fifteen years after Tulsa’s release, Nan Goldin published her own series of controversial photographs—based on a series of informal slide show presentations—representing her family of friends, acquaintances and lovers in the photobook The Ballad of Sexual Dependency. The Ballad gets its name from Mrs. Peachum’s “The Ballad of Sexual Slavery” in Bertolt Brecht’s and Kurt Weill’s The Threepenny Opera (1928). Unlike Peachum’s


tragic hymn, Goldin’s Ballad is a touching diaristic chronicle of queer and bohemian communities from the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Ever since the recognition of Goldin’s work, many artists, critics and scholars have drawn aesthetic, political and thematic comparisons between it and Clark’s infamous pictures. For example, in an essay on Goldin’s early body of photographs, curator Elisabeth Sussman mentions Clark as one of Goldin’s most significant influences. According to Sussman, the photographer and educator Henry “Horenstein saw in Goldin’s photographs a parallel to the emotionally intense photographs of Diane Arbus and Larry Clark that had, shot after shot, broken through the façade of American bourgeois life.” Moreover, she continues, “Horenstein showed Goldin Clark’s great documentary study of the speed freaks he lived with… She was awed by the way Clark plunged into the darkness of his own life to retrieve images of harsh beauty.”96 In another fitting comparison, art theorist Larry Qualls suggests, “Clark’s photos had the kind of black-and-white coolness associated with traditional fine-arts photography, [whereas Goldin’s] color shots seemed imbued with a new spirit.”97

Goldin’s Ballad was first conceived around 1978 as a series of informal slide shows staged for close friends in Manhattan bars such as the Mudd Club and Rafik’s OP Screening Room. These initial presentations featured live bands that performed their songs as Goldin’s slides were shown. Later, she added her own soundtrack, which changed with each presentation. Some of the songs she included were: Charlotte Rae’s version of “Downtown,” Yoko Ono’s “She Hits Back” and James Brown’s “It’s a Man’s World.” Goldin’s work is often compared to Clark’s but critics also draw comparisons between it and the work of German photographer


August Sander and, as Sussman does, Diane Arbus. The latter comparison seems to overlook Susan Sontag’s stinging denunciation of Arbus as an artist who occupies an “outsider” gaze towards society’s “freaks.” 98 Conversely, as art theorist Arthur C. Danto suggests, Goldin is perhaps more accurately described as a “participant observer.” 99 In the introduction to the Ballad, Goldin comments on her practice by saying, “there is a popular notion that the photographer is by nature a voyeur, the last one invited to the party. But I’m not crashing; this is my party. This is my family, my history.” 100 While her work remained an underground tour de force in New York throughout the early 1980s, by 1985, when it was exhibited in the Whitney Biennial, the Ballad had become something of a virtual monument made up of approximately one thousand pictures taken over a period of about fifteen years. 101 Because of the dense volume of images that make up the Ballad cycle, I have focused on the series as it was published in book form.

Although there are important differences between Clark’s and Goldin’s work, in this chapter I focus on the parallels that connect it in terms of community. First, I look at Jacques Rancière’s study of consensus and dissensus in the contemporary “ethical turn” in order to demonstrate the ways that community is structured through exclusion. Second, I turn to Nancy K. Miller’s research on modes of identification and disidentification in contemporary memoirs, using it as a framework for examining how dis / identification operates in structuring community. Finally, I analyze Louis Kaplan’s notion of community in relationship to the problems of treating community as a universal phenomena. By using these theorists in relation to

101 Lisa Leibmann, “Goldin’s Years,” Artforum 41.2 (October, 2002), 120.
Clark and Goldin’s work, I show the different ways that community is organized to exclude marginalized individuals and groups. In doing so, I illustrate how their work responds to and engages with the idea of inclusion and exclusion by representing other worlds to people of different communities.

The Community of ‘the Excluded’

*Tulsa* and the *Ballad* both represent marginalized and disenfranchised subcultures to a mainstream American audience, and yet, many members of that audience oppose the beliefs and behaviours of the communities pictured in the photographs. In his book *Dissensus*, Jacques Rancière suggests that the “ethical turn” in late capitalism has weakened the political structures of the West and has replaced those structures with an “ethical community” that tends to assimilate, ignore or perceive “the excluded” as a threat.\(^{102}\) Clark’s ‘outlaws’ and Goldin’s ‘Family of Nan’ carry the potential to upset the fabric of this “ethical community” by generating fear and resentment through behaviour that is often perceived as morally corrupt and physically dangerous. Using Rancière, I demonstrate how the formations of communities in the West are shaped by shared beliefs, mutual recognition and affective engagement. For this reason the ethical community may very well be an “affective community.”\(^{103}\) Affect is an important force behind community-building because it allows particular groups to create connections or distance—based on powerful feelings and emotions—and to define themselves against those who otherwise do not share the same values.

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103 This is an issue taken up in Maurice Halbwachs’s book *The Collective Memory* (Paris: University of France Press, 1952).
It seems crucial to consider the contextual basis of Rancière’s argument because it engages inclusion (consensus) and exclusion (dissensus) on a much larger and more consequential scale than I intend to address here. In his essay Rancière is mainly concerned with the ethical turn in relation to human rights violations, the ‘war on terror,’ military power and the Holocaust. He analyses these to illuminate how the collective turn towards ethics can justify acts of “evil” by “overturning” its established principles of moral righteousness. For instance, George W. Bush’s “war on terror” was justified to the American public by restructuring the moral order: “infinite justice is the only suitable justice for the fight against the axis of evil.”¹⁰⁴ In noticeable contrast, my concern in this chapter is primarily with the specific operations of inclusion and exclusion and how they work to organize community. Whereas Rancière discusses a rupture in the moral order in terms of “terror,” I focus on ruptures in the social order that relate to the physical and ideological separation of particular communities based on shared actions and beliefs as they are constituted through Clark’s and Goldin’s photobooks.

Rancière argues that the ethical turn has evacuated the distinction between what is and what ought to be.¹⁰⁵ We are not, as he claims, attempting to return to the ways of “old morality,” but are moving towards the reduction of the division between right and fact. He describes this complex mode of socio-ethical development as “consensus.” For Rancière, “properly understood, [consensus] defines a mode of symbolic structuration of the community that evacuates the political core constituting it, namely dissensus.”¹⁰⁶ In his terms, the political community is divided in relation to itself, but it is not necessarily divided between different groups and opinions. With the ethical turn, people are considered as a population, rather than as

¹⁰⁴ Rancière, *Dissensus*, 186.
¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 184.
¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 188.
individuals, and the collective interests of the global community become paramount. In other words, consensus not only decreases the space between right (morality) and fact (law) but also reduces the idea of the “people” to the idea of a “population.” Consequently, the reduction of people or disparate communities to a singular entity is at the very core of Rancière’s notion of consensus. This shift is interesting to consider in relation to work like Tulsa and the Ballad, which explores the margins of society and does not fit easily into the collective interests of the community-at-large.

Although the ethical community initially appears to be inclusive, there are many ways in which it is exclusive. However, the nature of the exclusion changes depending on the community. According to Rancière, “in the political community, the excluded is a conflictual actor, an actor who includes himself as a supplementary political subject, carrying a right not yet recognized or witnessing an injustice in the existing state of right.”\textsuperscript{107} In the ethical community, differences tend to be overlooked in the interest of a common good. Rancière observes that during the ethical turn art movements that promote interhuman exchanges like relational aesthetics are more or less received by the population as ‘good’ because they help to foster favourable types of “social bonds.”\textsuperscript{108} Here the danger is that politically-conscious art concedes to ethically-conscious art, from dissensus to consensus, and in the process loses sight of its capacity to effect social change, challenge the complacent and question established meanings. As art steadily moves into the realm of socio-ethical relations and further away from aesthetic development, it may be at risk of becoming redundant, and worse still, politically irrelevant.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 189.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 194
For instance, the art theorist and critic Claire Bishop provocatively suggests that the turn towards ethical concerns in the discourse of “social art” criticism may have been caused by scholars whose typically rigorous analysis weakens when confronted with a project’s “good intentions”\(^\text{109}\) and community-building power. These projects—like many of those found in relational aesthetics—tend to be evaluated on the quality of the social bonds that they can generate rather than on conditions of aesthetic merit or political consequence. In other words, the ethical turn may have caused art criticism to masquerade as another category of ethical criticism. Thus, art moves further away from aesthetic and political discourse and closer to the concerns of the common good. Although it seems to be a social convergence that serves the community-at-large, the ethical turn and relational aesthetics may actually mean coming together to protect the shared feelings, values and beliefs of the community-at-large.

The paradoxical character of the ethical community’s inconsistency towards the terms of inclusion and exclusion is discouraging. Rancière finds two different reactions to the marginalized position of the excluded in the ethical community. On the one hand, the ethical community attempts to re-establish the social bond by metaphorically extending a hand to the excluded so that they may re / enter the fraternity of the community. In this sense, the excluded are viewed by the community-at-large as a group of individuals who have fallen to the fringes of society and require annexation into the larger whole. On the other hand, as Rancière suggests, the excluded are considered a “radical other” who remain largely alien to the community; they do not share in its common identity or value system and are perceived as a “threat.” For Rancière, the community’s duplicitous response to the excluded might result in a call for social services,

or, in more extreme cases, the absolute rejection of the other.\textsuperscript{110} Perhaps the excluded in Clark and Goldin’s images are defined as ‘the excluded’ simply because social services have already failed them? Perhaps they did not seek the aid of social services in the first place? Or, more likely, the demand for social services implies that there are serious discrepancies between communities with respect to class, sexuality, gender and ethnicity in the United States. Artists such as Clark and Goldin, along with the subcultural communities they represent, present a serious challenge to the community-at-large by visualizing that the ‘American Dream,’ social welfare programs and their own families have failed to keep them healthy, safe and secure.

Two images from \textit{Tulsa} demonstrate the ways in which mainstream Americans would have perceived Clark and his friends as a threat to their ideals. In a photograph in the 1971 series, Clark is the focal point (fig. 1). He sits in a chair, shirtless and dazed, with untamed dark hair.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{Larry Clark, from the photobook \textit{Tulsa}, (1971)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{110} Rancière, \textit{Dissensus}, 194.
His right hand rests on his left forearm while his left hand holds what seems to be a long white rag or towel. In the foreground the viewer can make out a person spraying the contents of an aerosol can into a folded white rag. As you notice what the other men in the image are doing, it becomes clear that Clark himself has taken part in huffing aerosol fumes with the young man and is currently feeling its euphoric affects. The figure behind and to the left of Clark, who also is huffing fumes, holds up the Star Trek hand gesture for “live long and prosper” with his right hand. The irony of the gesture adds to the impact of the photograph, in which Clark and his friends participate in dangerous behaviour.

Figure. 2 Larry Clark, from the photobook Tulsa, (1971)

In another image, perhaps the most controversial and most widely discussed in Tulsa, two naked male teenagers assist a naked female teenager in shooting-up (fig. 2). We can assume from the course of events that the teenagers have had sex or will have sex again after getting high. The
figure to the left of the photograph leans backwards and to the left slightly as he attentively watches the female figure. His fixation on the female’s arm means that his face is positioned in profile rendering him anonymous. His right foot serves to lead the viewer’s eye from the bottom of the photograph to his semi-erect penis which incidentally points to the site of the female’s injection. As she concentrates on finding a vein in her arm, she leans her head forward enough to render her face unidentifiable as well. The male on the right side of the photograph supports the female by tightly wrapping her bicep with some sort of cord or belt so that her veins will be flooded with blood (the easier to find the vein). He also leans a little forward towards the injection site. Clark has used this figure’s left arm to lead the viewer’s eye to the female’s arm just as the penis does on the opposite side of the image. Because his long hair fully covers the face of the male figure on the right all three figures in this photograph are, for the most part, nearly impossible to recognize. The composition and lighting serve to emphasize the intersection of sex and drugs. Like the ironic “live long and prosper” salute in the previous photograph, this picture also contains irony: it cleverly uses the poster in the background of a monster as a visual device to reference the unsettling nature of addiction and the risky behaviour of suburban youth.

The first image of Clark huffing aerosol fumes demonstrates how exclusion may be dependent on age. Compared to the young men he sits with and the teenagers on the subsequent page, Clark’s noticeably older age suggests that he may be too far removed from the social order to re-enter it with any success. While this seems like a simple point it is a significant one considering that communities often set up and maintain their terms of exclusion—against what they believe to be superfluous individuals—in relation to age restrictions. For example, there seems to be no shortage of isolated micro-communities which society labels ‘retirement villages’ or ‘retirement communities’ designed for the elderly. Thus, Clark may be perceived as the
“radical other” because he has drifted too far past the acceptable limits for returning to the social order for far too long. The second image operates in a much different way. Here the three teenagers may be viewed by the ethical community as salvageable because their young age allows them to be impressionable and open to changing ‘bad habits.’ Nevertheless, for many viewers, the anonymity of the three teenagers allows the imagination and projection of their own children participating in such self-destructive acts. This type of relational viewing could be one of the main reasons why Tulsa horrified so many individuals and communities in the United States.

Clark’s Tulsa and Goldin’s Ballad energized and inspired the artistic community with its radical subject matter and innovative aesthetic qualities; however, when these books were reviewed in the mainstream media, the response was largely negative. Perhaps more than the Ballad, the reviews of Tulsa point strongly to a kind of collective hysteria amongst the American population.\footnote{Dick Cheverton, “A Devastating Portrait Of An American Tragedy,” Detroit Free Press (7 Sunday, 1971), p. 6, final edition.} Curator and art critic Philip Monk references this sense of widespread hysteria when describing the feelings of concern that accompanied Tulsa’s publication in the United States. In his words, “what start[ed] as a celebration by artists is appropriated by the mainstream media and ends as panic in the press. Nowhere is the fear greater than in the heart of the American family, the locus of the worry, the terror even, that the enemy is within.”\footnote{Philip Monk, The American Trip, exh. cat. (Toronto: The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, 1996), 12.} Monk’s quote powerfully illustrates how particular communities can be excluded through intense affective responses like fear, worry and terror. Tulsa and the Ballad were seen as providing convincing evidence that what many Americans considered to be morally corrupt behaviour was taking place in ordinary family homes, and in neighbourhoods across the country. In effect,
Clark’s and Goldin’s work antagonized the American community-at-large because it showed that the excluded were not physically segregated from the majority. Among the most contentious issues that *Tulsa* and the *Ballad* raised was that the subcultures they depicted appeared to threaten the idea of the nuclear family. Queer sexualities, interracial relationships, violence, drug use, alcoholism, gunplay, idleness, and other activities that were perceived as socially deviant seemed to at once repel and fascinate many mainstream American viewers.

Ultimately, the fascination readers and viewers may have with alternative lifestyles and unconventional subjects points to a deeply-engrained romanticization of the rebel and the ‘outlaw.’ In the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition, *The American Trip: Larry Clark, Nan Goldin, Cady Noland, Richard Prince* at Toronto’s Power Plant Gallery, Monk probed “the theme of the outlaw” to question “the continuing fascination of artists with the margins of American society.” Still, rather than present a focused sociological and anthropological investigation into fringe cultures and alternative lifestyles in the United States, the exhibition seemed to generate a form of sensationalism that went hand-in-hand with the classic romanticism of the ‘outlaw.’ The word ‘outlaw’ itself calls to mind an individual who exists at the borders of mainstream society, someone outside the standards of acceptable behaviour. Hence the “outlaw” is normally thought of as someone who lives beyond the limits of civility and may even be beyond the limits of the law itself. Grouping Clark and Goldin together in the same transhistorical context, Monk describes the outlaw as someone who imagines community and is the subject of romantic idealism. For Monk:

> Artists have always been at the forefront of the expression of “outlaw” activity.

> Sometimes they document it; sometimes they are involved in its creation. They represent

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113 Ibid., 9.
outlaw culture and produce a “drifter” aesthetic. As the margins have migrated more and more to the interior of society through various forms of disillusion with the American Dream and rejection of its premises, artists have been first on the scene to give artistic rather than journalistic or sociological expression[...] They give representational expression to a community and offer outsiders models of identification. Some might instead call this “popularizing” or even “romanticizing” that image.\footnote{Ibid., 10.}

Here Monk demonstrates that the process of identification can lead to romanticization of the outlaw yet he overlooks the idea that communities derive voyeuristic pleasure through the performance of identification. Identifying difference works to organize physical and symbolic boundaries while perpetuating the prejudices towards people who do not fit comfortably within the social order. Rancière’s theory of dissensus and his examination of the excluded helps to show how cultural expressions that represent difference through moral defiance can be radically transgressive. Perhaps nowhere is this idea clearer than in a pair of photographs from Tulsa.

In Tulsa viewers encounter several images of gun-wielding young men performing dangerous games of chance. In one such image from the 1971 cycle, an emaciated bearded man with long dark hair and sunken eyes wields a revolver and half an erection in the middle of a starkly-lit, narrow white hallway. Consequently, the picture registers an overwhelming sense of masculinity as two phalli—one symbolic the other real—dominate the composition. We can see that the figure’s eyes fixate upon the weapon he toys with in his left hand as a lit cigarette hangs loosely from his mouth (fig. 3). On the subsequent page, Clark captures the same man’s ghastly
accidental gunshot wound, which has pierced his upper right thigh (fig. 4). The gunshot was inflicted with a different gun—this time white and metallic— that rests on a chair in close

Figure 3. Larry Clark, from the photobook Tulsa, (1971)

Figure 4. Larry Clark, accidental gunshot wound, from the photobook Tulsa, (1971)
proximity to his wound. The other figure in the photograph leans forward, away from the gunshot victim, with his face buried in his left hand. This figure seems to ignore the wounded man’s agonizing cries, which we can almost hear through the man’s gaping mouth and white teeth. An ambient light source from the top-right of the image further dramatizes a scene already loaded with confusion and suffering.

Despite the subject matter, Tulsa is a moralistic narrative. Reacting to the moral character of his work in terms of cause and effect Clark says, “I call myself a moralist and my friends fall down laughing. But it’s true! Look at the work…I’m always trying to get at the consequences of actions…The point is the consequences.”115 The American public’s perception of Tulsa may have been radically shaped by the powerful affects it produced in relation to actions and behaviour that the public considered to be morally wrong. In other words, the affective community’s panic-stricken response illustrates just how close morality and affect are linked. Nonetheless, it is interesting to consider how Clark’s underlying moral system—seen through the manipulation of narrative devices—could be so widely dismissed by some members of the American public who saw his pictures. Images like the gun-wielding man and his gaping wound provide convincing evidence. Yet perhaps this is the work’s most transgressive and subversive characteristic: Tulsa created terror amongst American communities because of its provocative subject matter while it contained an ethical message. The question is whether or not Clark’s work may actually fit into the framework of the “ethical turn” proposed by Rancière in a roundabout way? It is my view that Tulsa is a remarkably dissident work precisely because it masquerades as radical while it endorses a distinct moral structure.

Identification and its Discontents

Rancière proposes that the ethical community is heavily dependent on shared identification for its organizational structure. This shows that the ethical community defines itself mainly through its differences in relation to others. The identity of the community relies on the exclusion of the Other. Thus, identification and disidentification set up the terms of inclusion and exclusion that define both the community-at-large and the marginalized.

In her book, *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People’s Lives*, Nancy K. Miller asserts that the 1990s experienced a ”memoir boom” so profound that it altered our cultural landscape and shifted the foundations of contemporary autobiographical literature. The West’s fervent participation in the memoir boom helped to transform a popular obsession into an academic trend. Miller’s work is primarily concerned with the types of relationships generated between memoir writers and their readers. For her, memoir writing does not characterize a narcissist exercise—a “terminal ‘moi-ism’” as she puts it—but a meaningful and emotionally-laden “rendez-vous” with others.116 Memoir is premised on a connection in which the writer recognizes their reader as a “partner in crime” in the sense that they are written for the reader almost as much as for the writer. In Miller’s words, “this relational mode typically portrayed within autobiographical texts is also the model of relation that organizes the experience of reading autobiography itself.”117 Just as reading can produce a sense of community between the reader and the writer, visual art may have a similar capacity to constitute a community between viewers, subjects, and the artist. Clark and Goldin’s photographs illustrate the ways that community can be produced through the recognition of common interests and the feeling that

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117 Ibid.
one might not be alone in their experiences of moral conflict, social angst and political
dissolution. This form of collective identification and shared experience are the cornerstones of
community.

Clark and Goldin’s work may touch some viewers so profoundly because it produces a
sense of attachment. Miller believes that these types of relationships govern how readers engage
with autobiographical literature and construct sites of identification and disidentification. For
Miller, “the bonds and desires that attract readers to the contemporary memoir have everything
to do with attachment.”\(^{118}\) Miller’s notion of reciprocal attachment between the reader and the
writer in contemporary memoir helps to explain some of the ways viewers can experience a
strong sense of community through their affective connection to Clark’s and Goldin’s work. One
of the main reasons for this feeling of attachment is because the artists provide viewers with the
opportunity to empathize with the subjects of their pictures and their experiences. The powerful
feelings of empathy that accompany attachment organize the bonds of community.

Miller sheds light on this complex relational manoeuvre by suggesting, “when I read the
lives of others, I also see [things like] my childhood, my mother, the craziness of my family;”
and regardless of how different another’s life may be from the viewer’s, “the six degrees of
separation that mark the distance from [the viewer’s] life to another’s are really, as it turns out,
degrees of connection.”\(^{119}\) Using Miller’s idea of relational identity we find that identification
based on shared and even unshared personal history might be why viewers reach out and connect
to the people that they see in artwork. If the act of reading about the author’s life indicates an
internal desire to connect with the author in some way, then surely seeing the artist’s life through

\(^{118}\) Miller, *But Enough About Me*, 2-3.

\(^{119}\) Ibid., 26.
pictures can produce a desire to connect to the artist or their community. This model of observation holds the potential to bridge differences and build relationships with people that the viewer may never know, who have a life they may never experience and who may belong to a different social class, sexuality, gender or ethnicity. Thus, the initial and continued interest in Clark’s and Goldin’s work may derive from a deep longing for interhuman exchanges and for a the sense that one is part of a community. In this regard, viewers may want to re-conceptualize how they look at and experience Clark and Goldin’s work by considering themselves as individuals not only in search of the aesthetic fulfillment but also in search of personal connection and community as well.

In his sagacious essay, “All Yesterday’s Parties”—the title derived from a Velvet Underground song—the writer and critic Luc Sante communicates the relational character of identification through his own association with the Ballad. According to Sante:

> [W]hen I look at [Goldin’s] pictures, even of the people and places far removed from my daily existence, I see my own life, then and now. This is not always pleasant—sometimes it can be extraordinarily painful, dredging up old but unburied feelings and unresolved knots and continuing fears—but Nan’s work won’t let anyone stop at pain. The journey is longer than that.”

Goldin’s work became a means for Sante to rediscover the lost memories of his personal history. Following his informative testimony, I would argue that Goldin’s Ballad largely functions as, in Miller’s understanding, a type of “prosthesis—an aid to memory.”

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120 Luc Sante, “All Yesterday’s Parties” I’ll be your Mirror, 103.

121 Miller, But Enough About Me, 13-14.
In other words, the work may be a catalyst for reconciling memories of lived experience, which creates the potential for identificatory and affective engagement. This relational manoeuvre is owed in part to the idea that the *Ballad*’s subject matter is strikingly familiar, topical, and accessible because it records the love, loss, and conflict that people experience in close relationships. Because the *Ballad*’s subject matter addresses common aspects of human experience, viewers can engage with the memories of past or current relationships to connect with Goldin and her subjects. Thus, not only can affect work to build community, but community can also be built through the viewer’s memory in relation to their lived experiences and personal history.

When Miller discusses the complexity of identificatory relationships in contemporary memoir she addresses what she sees as its opposing force: disidentification. Disidentification is defined as the collapse or failure of identification. According to Miller, disidentification is equally as important as identification in the interpretive process of reading, experiencing, and connecting with autobiographical literature: “what seems to connect memoir writers and their readers is a bond created through identifications and—just as importantly—disidentifications;” because “although some degree of identification, conscious or unconscious, is typically present in reading prose narrative (fiction or nonfiction), memoir reading can’t do without it.”

In Miller’s broad sense of the term, disidentification references the decipherable polarity between the Self and the Other (in this case between the artist, their subjects and the viewer). Rancière’s theoretical framework of dissensus explains how disidentification might represent a substantial threat to the excluded, even as it represents a founding principle of the ethical community. Viewers may use disidentification to consider the differences between themselves, the artist, and

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122 Ibid., 3.
artist’s subjects on the basis of class, morality, age, religion, geography, politic, sexuality, ethnicity and so on. In this way, disidentification can play an integral role in preconditioning how viewers see and respond to artwork. The hazards of disidentification are that viewers can reinforce social stereotypes while further distancing themselves emotionally and ideologically from people they identify as different. Though identification directly references personal connections, associations and community building, disidentification paradoxically works to emphasize difference.

While one interpretation of disidentification points to an emotional and ideological division between individuals or communities, a second reading references the deconstruction of identity itself. That is to say, disidentification is related to the experience of unravelling individual and communal identity. In the provocative introductory chapter to his book, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics, queer theorist Jose Esteban Munoz poses the problem of disidentification within the context of performance and gender studies to challenge the discriminatory and insidious meaning that lurks behind the term. In his definition, “disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.”\(^\text{123}\) While the minority community identifies as survivors, the other community maintains the boundaries of segregation. Reading the Ballad through the lens of Sante shows how particular subcultural communities are marginalized by the rest of society:

\(^{123}\) Jose Esteban Munoz, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4.
Life was bleak on the Lower East Side in the late 1970s, but it was a purposeful bleakness. We liked it that way. We were living a movie of youth in black-and-white that in order to be grand needed to be stark. We were scavengers, and the castoffs with which we dressed ourselves, our apartments, and our minds fortuitously matched our aesthetic;” and “the makeshift, the beleaguered, the militant, the paranoid, the outcast, the consumptive romantic, the dead-eyed post-everything—all the shifting and coinciding modes and poses played well against a backdrop of ruins.124

Munoz’s powerful observations on disidentification and Sante’s instructive description of Goldin’s subcultural community relate to Rancière’s concept of the excluded as a “radical other.” Their ideas help to illustrate just how the relationship between identification and disidentification can structure the phantasmic social boundaries that define community.

In noticeable contrast, the concepts proposed by Miller demonstrate the ways that the artist and the viewer can forge meaningful relationships through disidentification and the acknowledgement of difference. This is perhaps her most influential point. Disidentification should not be a reason for expanding the imaginary and often times tangible boundaries that separate individuals or groups. Instead, it may actually represent important paths to interpersonal connections and assist in understanding oneself in relation to others. Thus, like contemporary memoir, contemporary autobiographical photography can function as means of establishing complex social relationships.

124 Sante, “All Yesterday’s Parties,” 97.
Universality and the Bonds of Community

*Tulsa* and the *Ballad* are important because they confront and challenge what the community considers “good” by documenting the tragedies of the excluded and by exploring the widening cracks in the social bond. In addition to highlighting social inequalities, Clark’s and Goldin’s work illustrates the precarious nature of sexual, racial, gender and class relationships among people of various social groups. However, this shows the potential for connecting people of different communities and subcultures through shared experiences, feelings and emotions.

In an essay on Goldin’s *Ballad*, art theorist Louis Kaplan relates Goldin’s project to Edward Steichen’s monumental exhibition, *The Family of Man*, which was originally exhibited at the MoMA in 1955. He argues that *The Family of Man* and the “Family of Nan” share similar attributes in terms of their universalizing tendencies, humanist inclinations and preconceptions of global community. Kaplan specifically questions “how this exhibition served to export a particular ideology under the cover of the universal and how it repressed social and historical differences and inequalities under the platitude that “we are all alike.’”125 He is, of course, correct in his observations about the *Family of Man* exhibition. The suppression of cultural, ethnic, political, sexual and economic diversity under the banner of photography represented a grossly miscalculated assessment of the ‘global community.’ Kaplan maintains that, much like the *Family of Man* exhibition, Goldin’s *Ballad* conflates the individual with the universal. Citing an interview with Goldin, in which she stated that, “even if the slide show involves some people who keep nocturnal hours, drink heavily, or do drugs, the issues are universal,”126 he suggests that “this move from the particular toward universal validation… whether she is aware of it or

125 Ibid., 90.

not, this repeats the very gesture of the Family of Man and its universalizing claims.”127 The universalizing approach of The Family of Nan is precisely why the slide shows and book publication have gained such widespread acclaim. Goldin’s poignant images specifically reference challenging issues such as love, loss, and conflict, which universally affect individuals and communities. Hence, while the Ballad does not visually represent every community per se, it represents particular affects that are present in every community. As Goldin puts it, “The people and locales in my pictures are particular, specific, but I feel the concerns I’m dealing with are universal. Many people try to deflect this by saying, “we don’t look like the subjects of these pictures; they’re not about us.” But the premise can be applied to everyone; it’s about the nature of relationships.”128

As Kaplan indicates, Goldin uses her camera as an extension of her body to “touch” her photographic subjects in a way that does not involve physical contact. Kaplan explains:

In Goldin’s community-exposed photography, the snapshot yields a relationship of immediacy and intimacy, a performative “I love you,” the touch and the caress of the haptic[…] If the snapshot comes out of love, then the photographic act itself must be understood as a mode of touch, as a mode of touching that touches the limit[…] Goldin thinks about the nature of the photographic act in terms of its tactile and haptic qualities. For Goldin, photography is a way of being-in-touch.129

If Goldin’s photographic practice is so emotionally intimate that subjects feel as if she is physically touching them, then this may be precisely the reason why her subjects seem to radiate

127 Kaplan, American Exposures, 93.
129 Ibid., 88.
the essence of their identity to the camera. Conversely, if the camera is a way of touching her subjects, then the Ballad is also a way for Goldin and her community to “touch” viewers as well. The idea of Goldin “touching” her audiences is fascinating because it re-evaluates how artists connect to their viewers using affect. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has carefully examined the intimate relationship between textures and emotions in her book, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. As she explains, viewers might recognize that, “the same double meaning, tactile plus emotional, is already there in the word “touching”; equally it’s internal to the word “feeling.”” Sedgwick’s analysis is important when considering the haptic character of Goldin’s work because it conceptualizes the ways that community can be strengthened through the relationships produced by “touching.”

Miller suggests that memoirs are a “record of an experience in search of a community, of a collective framework,” which protects the fragile singularity of postmodern society. Kaplan also considers what community, living among others, and “being-in-common” means to collective and personal identity. For Kaplan, work like the Ballad is always a “community-exposed” dialect of photography because, taking his cue from the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, “Being is being-with, absolutely, this is what we must think. The with is the most basic feature of Being, the mark (trait) of the singular plurality of the origin or origins in it.” Goldin’s representations of her marginalized “tribe” are always-already in search of a larger, more inclusive community because, as Nancy puts it, autonomy is paradoxically dependency. The relational character of community-exposed photography like Goldin’s speaks to one of the

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central ideas of photographic discourse in general: photography is “a way of relating to or being with others.”¹³³ In other words, the universal desire to connect or relate to others defines Goldin’s practice.

Goldin has tenaciously maintained that the relationship between her practice and her subjects is largely “about trying to feel what another person is feeling. There’s a glass wall between people and I want to break it.”¹³⁴ These rousing words articulate Goldin’s complex feelings of empathy towards her subjects. Film theorist Lisa Cartwright calls this form of affective engagement “empathetic spectatorship,” or alternatively, “empathetic identification.” For Cartwright:

[I]n empathy there is a force in that moment in which I feel that I know how you feel, a welling up and bursting forth of emotion about the object of regard, that is not held solely in the register of conscious perception and expression… my knowledge comes from the force of the object (“you,” the image, the representation), and my reciprocal sense that I recognize the feeling I perceive in your expression.¹³⁵

If Goldin approaches her subjects—The Family of Nan—in a way that attempts to identify with and understand their feelings so that she can empathize with them, I would suggest that viewers can interact with her work in a similar way. When viewers look through the Ballad they may try to recognize the feelings and emotions associated with the faces, gestures and actions of protagonists such as Suzanne, Cookie, Dieter, Kenny and even Goldin herself. This multifaceted process of identification is largely a catalyst for empathy. However, empathy does not mean

¹³³ Kaplan, American Exposures, xxiv.
¹³⁴ Nan Goldin as quoted in Kaplan, American Exposures, 82.
¹³⁵ Cartwright, Moral Spectatorship, 24.
projecting oneself *into* the life of the other person as a way to better understand them. To do so represents a failure to acknowledge the differences between the viewer and the subject and therefore is actually a lack of empathy. For Cartwright, empathy fundamentally involves feeling *for* the other person and not feeling *like* the other person.\(^{136}\) In this sense, empathy is a way of broadening our understanding of other individuals and communities. It shows the potential for affect and identification to draw people closer together rather than to have them hold onto the differences that separate them.

Arguably one of the most powerful images in the *Ballad* is the work pictured on the front cover, which is also reproduced on page 137. It is a portrait of the artist and her lover at the time, Brian, on a bed in her apartment (fig. 5). Almost tragically, Goldin conveys the emotional isolation of her relationship in a single photograph. The emotional experience in this image is explored further in a number of photographs throughout the *Ballad* series, including *Couple in*

\(^{136}\) Ibid., 34.
In *Nan and Brian in bed*, Goldin, dressed in a black slip or nightgown, reclines on her right side. Her legs are visibly bare, and her finger is decorated by what appears to be a diamond engagement ring. Illuminated by her signature tones of luminous yellow, orange and red light, Goldin gazes at her partner with trepidation and shame, her eyes distant and removed, her body position uninviting. Brian conveys a similar feeling. He sits shirtless and aloof, possibly staring out a window, which illuminates the bedroom from the left. Yet Brian does connect with the audience in a way: the photograph tacked to the wall over Goldin’s head at the top-right of the picture finds Brian smoking once again. This time his eyes are fixated on Goldin’s viewfinder, and he therefore appears to look directly at the viewer. Any sense of voyeurism is removed from the image because Goldin seems to carefully stage this composition (or at least stage herself in it). It appears that Goldin knew precisely what she wanted to convey with the positioning of her camera, eyes and body. The subject of this photograph is the precarious nature of close relationships and the almost contradictory loneliness and detachment that they can foster. With its universal theme, *Nan and Brian in bed*, almost more than any other photograph in the *Ballad*, works to engage the viewer through his or her own experience of intimate relationships. In short, empathy allows the viewer to understand Goldin’s circumstances but also to better understand their own.

In *Bruce on top of French Chris, Fire Island, N.Y. 1979*, Goldin beautifully captures a queer couple caught in the euphoria of love; here, Bruce and French Chris enjoy Budweiser beer, fruit, cigarettes and books by authors such as Rene Ricard on a sandy beach (fig. 6). Like Bruce
Figure 6. Nan Goldin, Bruce on top of French Chris, Fire Island, N.Y. 1979, from the photobook The Ballad of Sexual Dependency, (1986)

and French Chris, other queer couples can be seen embracing each other in the top-centre and centre-right of the composition. Arguably, the most touching aspects of the photograph are Bruce’s wide smile, his closed eyes, and his calm embrace. Bruce’s facial expression suggests intense feelings and emotions related to happiness, tranquillity and love. Here, viewers may feel for Bruce in his elation for French Chris. As French Chris lies on his stomach with his head turned away from the camera, viewers are able to recognize him through his name only, not through his visual appearance. This is a subtle but important element of the work. Rendering figures anonymous is a visual device used by Goldin that allows the viewer to substitute their own loved one(s) for French Chris. In this relational manoeuvre, Bruce can represent the viewer’s own feelings and emotions towards their lover(s) who are represented by French Chris. Like Nan and Brian in bed, Bruce on top of French Chris can be universally engaging if viewers relate the theme of the image to their own lived experiences involving close relationships. Thus,
works such as these can generate a sense of connection and community through shared experience.

Speaking about the difficulty of connecting the concept of universality to specific individuals or communities that are located at the margins of society, Kaplan says, “one wonders how those who are defined as outsiders (druggies, alcoholics, transsexuals, drag queens, demimonde denizens) can speak for everyone. How do the margin and the extreme represent us all when people of such subcultural lifestyles are defined as those who have been expressly excluded by the norm in and of itself?”

While Goldin’s Ballad is an emotionally stirring document of subcultural communities throughout the late 1970s to mid-1980s—specifically during the apex of right-wing conservatism under Ronald Reagan—it is also a visual study of human behaviour and the nuances of straight, gay and queered relationships. This is precisely the reason why Goldin’s work can deeply touch so many viewers. In reference to the slide show versions of the Ballad, Goldin explains, “there is a universal aspect about the slide show, and I hope it transcends the specific world in which it was made and applies to the whole nature of the relationships between men and women. It addresses people who are involved in pursuing close relationships.”

The Ballad is not only Goldin’s examination of close relationships, it is also a catalyst for the introspective examination of the viewer’s own close relationships as well. There is much to be learnt from the work in terms of the precarious nature of sexual relationships and the communities of insecurity that they can foster.

137 Kaplan, American Exposures, 93.

138 Ibid.
Conclusion

Here I have demonstrated how affect and identification can alter the terms of inclusion/exclusion, the strategies of recognition, and the bonds that structure community. I turned to Clark’s and Goldin’s work to show how autobiographical photography can shape communities and to examine how artistic expression can serve to reinforce or tear down established values and beliefs. While writing this chapter, it became increasingly clear to me that communities structure themselves around criteria such as language, shared interests, ownership, social values, identity, geography, collective knowledge and common purpose (perhaps even the pursuit of happiness?). It also became clear that communities are organized by what they encounter in the cultural realm. Clark and Goldin’s work provided a way to show how communities gain a sense of identity and place by reacting to the representation of subcultural lifestyles which threaten their way of life.

By examining Jacques Rancière’s theories of consensus and dissensus in relation to the “ethical turn” in late capitalism I tried to elucidate the ways that ethical communities overturn their moral principles in order to reject the socially marginalized. I used Clark’s photographs from the Tulsa series to illustrate how the work spread terror throughout American communities by visualizing the behaviour that threatened conservative dogma. However this response seemed to overlook the moralistic tenor of Clark’s work. Thus, Tulsa is a brilliantly subversive work although moralistic because it masquerades as “radical” while it simultaneously endorses a moral philosophy to the ethical community. Nancy K. Miller’s research into relational models of identification and disidentification in contemporary memoir has allowed me to analyze the ways that dis/identification structures community through mutual recognition and shared experience. In this section I was concerned with how viewing an artwork can establish particular
relationships between the artist and the viewer. Miller also helped me to explain how
disidentification—the recognition of difference between people—can actually be the starting
point for social change. The conditions that separate communities may become points of
connection if they are thought of differently. Finally, in the last section I analyzed Louis
Kaplan’s notion of universality in community-based photography to show how Nan Goldin’s
focus on universal experience and affect allows viewers who do not belong to the marginalized
community she represents to identify with the subjects in her photographs. If affect and
identification help viewers see similarity as well as difference, then Clark’s and Goldin’s work
can be seen as restructuring the foundations of community.
Chapter III. Memory Work: Communicating Trauma through Silence and Touch in 1970s Film and Video Art

To stand in the shadow of the scar up in the air. To stand-for-no-one-and nothing. Unrecognized, for you alone. With all there is room for in that, even without language.

—Paul Celan

Autobiographical film and video art became popular in the 1970s within the context of conceptual art. The availability of film and video equipment for personal use made it possible for artists to explore their ideas using new media, and while the creative objectives of the artists often differed, many artists turned to events and experiences from their personal lives as subject matter. What becomes apparent from examining several works from this period is that many artists engaged with personal trauma. By focusing on the work of two artists, Bas Jan Ader and Lisa Steele, this chapter looks at some of the ways that trauma was explored in film and video art of the 1970s.

Bas Jan Ader and Lisa Steele were both working as conceptual artists during the 1970s. Conceptual art is mainly idea-driven and is concerned with intellectual and creative processes, rather than with the autonomous art object itself. Like a number of artists of the time, they were interested in the way language operates, as well as in how it fails. But unlike many other artists of the period, however, Ader and Steele used their biographies to consider how physical gestures and responses convey emotional content more effectively than language itself.

Throughout the early 1970s, Dutch-born Ader created a provocative testimonial series called *I’m Too Sad to Tell You.* The first work in the series was a 16mm black-and-white silent film from the autumn of 1970. This film is now lost. The second piece, also from the autumn of 1970, is a black-and-white photograph of the artist close-up, crying, with tears streaming down his face. The words “I’m too sad to tell you” are inscribed across the lower-right-hand corner of the photograph (fig. 1). The third piece appropriates the photograph from the second work in the series for a postcard that Ader mailed to different known contacts, which included the handwritten message, “I’m too sad to tell you” and the date, “Sept 13 1970” on the back (fig. 2). The final piece in the series was a second 16mm black-and-white silent film approximately

*Figure 1. Bas Jan Ader, black & white photograph, from the I’m Too Sad to Tell You series, (1970-1971)*
two and a half minutes in length recorded in 1971 (fig. 3).\textsuperscript{140} Like his earlier photographic work, this film also features Ader in close-up, weeping uncontrollably. In its unsettling silence, Ader’s

\textit{Figure 2. Bas Jan Ader, postcard, from the I’m Too Sad to Tell You series, (1970-1971)}

\textit{Figure 3. Bas Jan Ader, I’m Too Sad to Tell You (film still), from the I’m Too Sad to Tell You series, (1970-1971)}

agony resonates deeply with the viewer. Out of the three existing works in this series, I draw my attention to the second 16mm film because it offers a raw, real-time experience of the artist’s affliction.

In the film, only Ader’s shoulders, head and an opaque white background are visible to the viewer. He can be seen holding back his tears, wiping his hand against his forehead with his right palm, repeatedly licking his lips, removing tears from his eyes, shifting his head to the left and to the right, moving up and down in his seat, holding his forehead in his hand, blinking uncontrollably, swallowing deeply and breathing heavily. As art theorist Jan Verwoert shrewdly observes, “the grand gesture Ader frames here is a pendant to the unsatisfied yearning for the sublime: the feeling of infinite sadness.”\textsuperscript{141} From this point of view, Ader’s attraction to the sublime and drive to encounter feelings of infinite sadness appear precarious and self-destructive; however, Ader’s performance has been used to explain his disappearance at sea in 1975 and his presumed death. It has also contributed to the subsequent mythology surrounding the artist. For many viewers, seeing Ader in such an emotionally fragile condition is tremendously difficult to watch, but this intense affective transaction between the subject in the film and the audience is a fundamental component of the work. In the act of seeing, I argue that audiences are suddenly involved in the struggle of the artist to convey his trauma, and therefore this change enables a new set of relational engagements.

Steele’s seminal work \textit{Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects} (1974) is generally considered to be one of the finest examples of early feminist video in Canada (fig. 4). Like

\textsuperscript{141} Verwoert, \textit{In Search of the Miraculous}, 15.
much of the performance art coming out of the 1960s, video was a revelation because it provided female artists with the opportunity to explore a medium that was unburdened by phallocentrism. Relatively inexpensive, mobile and user-friendly, 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 and as a result, it became more suited to personal use. Steele and other artists significantly cut down the costs of production by using their own bodies and biographies as subject matter, and in making videos for themselves, artists could also make videos for others as well. For curator Diane 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.”

Much like Ader’s second film in the I’m Too Sad to Tell You series, Steele’s video Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects emphasizes personal trauma. Over thirteen minutes in length, this candid video testimony both verbally and visually archives the physical scars and defects on Steele’s body from the time of her childhood to the present day. Stark naked—in her proverbial “birthday suit”—Steele can first be heard saying, “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 there she turns away from the camera and slowly walks through open doors to the back of a vacant room where her naked body is revealed to the audience. Imitating the formal appearance of the police mug-shot, Steele turns to her right (in profile), her right again (to show her back) and her right again (in profile), and then she faces the camera. Her performance references the mug-shot in order to question the practice of relying on the body as a signifier of inner character. In this sense, Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects was important to 1970s feminist discourse because it stood in opposition to contemporaneous advertising imagery, which presented romanticized and idealized notions of female beauty. Here, Steele not only presents the female body’s susceptibility to physical wounds, but she views her scars as an embodiment of her personal identity and politic.

Through listening to her verbal descriptions and watching her caress her scars and defects, the audience comes to recognize Steele’s trauma precisely at the moment when she is

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143 For a comprehensive discussion of the mug-shot and the police archive as a disciplinary apparatus, see Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” October 39 (1986): 3-64.
working through it. After Steele turns back to the camera at the far end of the vacant room, she returns to stand in front of the camera, where she bends down to reveal a large scar on the side of her neck. She then announces, “1947. Surgery at birth to remove goitre.” Steele continues her performance by revealing her left ankle to the camera along with the spoken description, “1947. Transfusion because of serious illness. Three months old.” Then she turns to present the back of her left thigh to the camera and says, “1950. Fell on bleach bottle while riding tricycle in basement. Three years old.” Steele continues to describe the scars and defects she acquired up until 1974. When Steele presents her physical wounds to the camera, she gently strokes them as if to mend them in some way. One of the most fascinating aspects of the work is that while Steele’s skin displays the traces of physical trauma, her feelings about this physical trauma are almost impossible to identify. This is the point where Ader and Steele’s work differs: Ader presents the audience with a distilled form of raw human emotion, while Steele displays very little emotion at all. Indeed, Steele resists making her scars and defects superficial indicators of her inner character.

In the first section of this chapter, I draw upon Jill Bennett’s theories of affect and trauma to argue that Ader and Steele problematize the communication of memory by deconstructing how conventional forms of memory are performed. More specifically, I examine the ways that Ader and Steele’s experimental aesthetic strategies collapse the distinguishing characteristics between sense memory and common memory. In the second section, I turn to literature on trauma developed by theorists such as Dori Laub, Ernst van Alphen and Cathy Caruth to analyze how the logic of representation collapses in Ader’s silent film. In the third and final section of this chapter, I explore the conscious and unconscious reverberations of trauma, and I consider how these surface in Steele’s work through the haptic sense. I argue that Steele’s actions, such as
the repetitious caressing of her scars, are involuntary attempts to repair the physical and emotional wounds of her past. My examination of these works in relation to the pre-existing theoretical material aims to re-conceptualize the communication of trauma to audiences through the moving image.

**Remembering Painfully**

In 1996, art theorist Hal Foster roused curiosity by suggesting that Western society was currently experiencing a profound fascination with trauma. He argued that this phenomenon was connected to what he called the ongoing “poststructuralist critique of the subject by other means,” and he claimed that people in the West view trauma as an event that guarantees the subject. In other words, his analysis suggests that the subject, regardless of the level of their distress, is referenced as a survivor, a witness or a testifier. For Foster, the individual or community that survives trauma is granted the authority to represent that trauma. The simultaneous evacuation and elevation of the traumatized subject, according to Foster, confirms the idea that trauma discourse resolves two different types of cultural paradoxes: on the one hand, the poststructuralist drive towards deconstruction, and on the other hand, the multicultural histories influencing society. However, Foster’s controversial perspective does not account for the concerns in this paper such as the primary experience of trauma, the politics of testimony and the negotiation of traumatic memory by artists.

Considering Foster’s essay, it seems important to make conceptual distinctions between the conflicting forces of trauma. Literary historian Dominick LaCapra proposes that two

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categories of trauma can be readily identified. He names the first category “everyday trauma” and describes it as being “related to (even correlated with) transhistorical absence (absence of/at the origin) and appears in different ways in all societies and all lives.” In other words, everyday trauma shows how some traumatic events and experiences—such as disease, crime and death—are more or less recurrent. LaCapra’s first category differs from his second: historical trauma. Quintessentially, historical trauma is limited in scale, “specific, and not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject position associated with it.”

In this chapter I reference everyday trauma in relation to Steele’s video and historical trauma in relation to Ader’s film.

While LaCapra’s categories are helpful for determining the specific categories of trauma that Ader and Steele’s work engages with, Bennett’s concepts are useful for understanding the ways that Ader and Steele’s work is influenced by memory. In her book Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art, Bennett suggests that the communication of memory to audiences operates in two distinct registers: sense memory and common memory. For Bennett, who develops her theory based on the writings of Charlotte Delbo (and Pierre Janet), sense memory designates a category of traumatic memory that is nameless and exists outside of memory proper. To a large extent, sense memory registers “the pain of memory as it is directly experienced, and communicat[es] a level of bodily affect.” In noticeable contrast, common memory is fundamentally “representational; it is the memory connected with the thinking process and with words—the realm in which events are rendered intelligible, pegged to a common or established frame of reference, so that they can be communicated to, and readily understood by, a general audience.” Hence common memory, says Bennett, may be associated with narrative memory because it specifically allows for the dissemination of knowledge in the

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146 Dominick LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 77-78.
social field through shared language. What is remarkable about Ader and Steele’s work is that it utilizes elements from both categories of memory to achieve its aesthetic objectives, and in doing so, it challenges ideas about how memory is usually expressed. Ultimately, the free exchange between sense and common memory in art discourse expands the possibilities of communicating trauma through representational forms.

Ader and Steele’s work not only communicates the past event or object of memory, it refers to the present experience of memory as well. This process of reconciling past memory and “immediate experience” has the potential to generate powerful affects during the execution of their work. According to Bennett, “as the source of a poetics or an art, then, sense memory operates through the body to produce a kind of “seeing truth,” rather than “thinking truth,” registering the pain of memory as it is directly experienced, and communicating a level of bodily affect.” In other words, artists who engage with sense memory during the making of their work can simultaneously experience deep emotion. This means that certain types of memory are strongly connected to bodily affect. The pairing of memory and affect is precisely what is being performed in Ader and Steele’s work; however, the way that each artist communicates this memory is different. While Ader expresses his sense memory through raw emotion related to intense sadness, Steele expresses sense memory through unconsciously-driven physical caresses of her scars. Nonetheless, both artists use aesthetic devices associated with common memory to frame and relate their traumatic experience to the audience.

For instance, Ader’s silent film *I’m Too Sad to Tell You* radically interprets the aesthetic possibilities for incorporating sense memory and common memory into a single visual

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148 Ibid.
manifestation. By constructing his film in a narrative of three distinct sequences, Ader has ordered his work using uncomplicated descriptive language to communicate an emotion that can be readily understood by a wide audience. Here, Ader has applied the primary characteristics of common memory to frame and display his overwhelming experience of sense memory. Though each form of memory engages various conscious and unconscious impulses, Ader demonstrates how they may be used interchangeably in the moving image to create a powerful aesthetic engagement with personal trauma.

In *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects*, Steele uses the common memory associated with verbal language to archive the physical scars and defects on her body in chronological order starting from childhood and moving to the present day. However, throughout Steele’s performance, something appears to be absent or lacking. Viewers do not see evidence of emotional pain as she remembers the events and experiences that led to her physical wounds. Viewers may wonder why she seems to lack emotion as she recounts her injuries and carefully strokes her physical wounds with her fingers. Because Steele’s stroking of her wounds was not planned, touch can be seen as an unconscious impulse associated with sense memory. *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects*, much like *I’m Too Sad to Tell You*, illustrates that the relationship between common memory and sense memory in trauma-related art is more closely linked than previously thought.

**Silence and I’m Too Sad to Tell You**

Belief in the truthfulness of Ader’s distress opens up new possibilities for relational engagement. In Ader’s film, silence plays an integral role in the audience’s response to the work, but his use of a fixed, close-up camera position and bleak white backdrop only adds to the idea that his
overwhelming “gesture of infinite sadness” may merely represent a misguided exercise in
dramaturgy. Conversely, the viewer’s attitude towards Ader in relation to their belief in his pain
may directly influence their perception of his work. Mapping the nuances of Ader’s conviction
may lead to a closer understanding of the trauma underscoring *I’m Too Sad to Tell You* and why
it takes the form of silence.

Ader’s use of the close-up camera position places the audience in a position to assess
whether Ader’s confession of sadness is authentic. The inferred requirement for the confessant—
the one who confesses—to impart absolute truth to the interlocutor—the one who receives
confession—is a product of complex power relations. Incitements to discourse like confession,
according to historian Michel Foucault, “became one of the West’s most highly valued
techniques for producing truth.” In *I’m Too Sad to Tell You* it is hard to deny that a certain
authoritative control exists between Ader and the audience. Taking up the position of
interlocutor, the audience is encouraged to deliberate and judge the truth-value of Ader’s claims
to a sadness that is beyond the reach of verbalization (one of the symptomatic marks of trauma).
In other words, the audience is made to consider that Ader’s pain and suffering is not merely a
rhetorical performance for the camera. Thus, *I’m Too Sad to Tell You* also represents an aesthetic
of interrogation through its push for audiences to identify the legitimacy of Ader’s trauma with
certainty.

Pain is difficult to articulate verbally because language often fails us when we are
experiencing pain. In the early 1980s this problem led researchers at McGill University to

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develop a Pain Rating Index (PRI) as part of their McGill Pain Questionnaire (MPQ). The PRI asked patients to approximate their physical pain and the level of its severity on a qualitative data chart. Physicians used this information to determine the connection between classifications of pain and their causes. While pain is difficult for the person experiencing it, pain also presents a problem for the observer. Literary theorist Elaine Scarry suggests that:

for the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that “having pain” may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to “have certainty,” while for the other person it is so elusive that “hearing about pain” may exist as the primary model of what it is “to have doubt.”

Because the feeling of physical pain cannot be shared, its occurrence fails to be either confirmed or denied. Thus, audiences can never be certain as to whether physical pain is real or otherwise. Scarry’s analysis helps to explain the audience’s impulse to question the certainty of Ader’s audibly silent but visually present pain and why this state of inquiry is almost customary for people who observe the pain of others.

In recent years, scholars in trauma studies have focused on the unrepresentability of trauma. According to literary theorist Ernst van Alphen, one of the reasons why the logic of representation breaks down during the communication of trauma is because of the “inadequacy of mimetic symbolic language.” In effect, this means that communicative frameworks that use symbolization, such as speaking and writing, will fail to articulate traumatic experience to

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This may be a crucial reason why *I'm Too Sad to Tell You* is silent. As the title of Ader’s work indicates, the trauma that he experiences is so catastrophic that he is unable to communicate it to others. Bennett suggests that art offers a way to tackle the conventional notion that trauma cannot be represented. Therefore, work such as Ader’s may provide a way of communicating trauma beyond the limits of symbolic language.

Part of expressing Ader’s trauma through film is related to his catastrophic personal history. In 1944, after he was discovered hiding Jewish citizens on his property in Holland, Ader’s father, a Calvinist minister, was driven to a nearby forest by Nazi occupiers and was shot. Bas Jan was just two years old at the time. In 1971, almost thirty years after his father’s death—the same year that he produced *I’m Too Sad to Tell You*—Ader transformed this traumatic incident into an unsettling photographic projection called *Untitled (Swedish Fall)* (fig. 5).

![Figure 5. Bas Jan Ader, Untitled (Swedish Fall), photographic projection (1971)](image)

In the first projection, Ader can be seen standing in front of large trees in a forest. In the second

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Ernst van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature and Theory* (Stanford: University of Stanford Press, 1997), 42.
projection, he appears to have fallen onto his left side and lies still. The similarities between his father’s execution by the Nazis in a forest and this work are evident. In 2006, art critic Richard Dorman noted a strong link between this work and the circumstances of Ader’s father’s death. For Dorman, “a psychoanalyst might say Ader’s work documents his attempt to find his irretrievably lost father within himself. I’d go further. In some works, it feels as though Ader is trying to become his father, and that for this reason his early death was entirely predictable.”

Because of the relationship between much of Ader’s work and his family history; I would argue that *I’m Too Sad to Tell You* explores the emotional pain of personal loss.

In another photographic work called *All of my Clothes* (1970), Ader has scattered his pants, shirts and other garments atop the roof of his house in Claremont, California (fig. 6). At

![Image of a roof with scattered clothes]

*Figure 6. Bas Jan Ader, All of my Clothes, photograph, (1970)*

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first glance, the work fits comfortably into the whimsical conceptual rubric practiced at the time by artists such as Chris Burden, André Cadere and Christopher D’Arcangelo; yet, considering Ader’s biography, the work takes on powerful new meaning. Rene Daalder’s documentary on Ader’s life, Here is Always Somewhere Else (2008), draws a fascinating comparison between the book Ader’s mother wrote about her experiences of World War II, Een Groninger pastorie in de storm (A Groninger parsonage in the storm), and All of my Clothes. Daalder explains that Ader’s work could be inspired by another traumatic event that occurred during his childhood, when Nazi soldiers approached the Ader residence and told his mother and her young children, including Bas Jan, that they had fifteen minutes to gather their belongings and vacate their home. Immediately reacting to the soldiers’ demands, Ader’s mother threw much of the family’s belongings, including clothes, out the window with the hope that she could retrieve them later on. With this information, All of my Clothes, like Untitled (Swedish Fall), may be contaminated by a past encounter with death. Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth questions whether trauma signifies a past encounter with death or the ongoing experience of having survived it. In Ader’s case, it may involve both.

A third work that engages Ader’s family history is the work which claimed his life: In Search of the Miraculous (1975). For the first component of the piece, Ader arranged for a student choir to sing sea shanties with piano accompaniment in the Los Angeles gallery that represented him. Setting sail from Cape Cod, Massachusetts on 9 July 1975, his solo voyage across the Atlantic Ocean was intended to be the second component of the work (fig. 7). The

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third and final component included a second singing of sea shanties by a choir for the artist when he reached his objective of Falmouth, England. Once again, in this work, Ader drew on his family history. During the early years of his marriage, Ader’s father grew restless and informed his wife that he was going on a spiritual pilgrimage from Holland to Palestine with nothing more than his bicycle and some personal objects. During this extraordinary journey, he fell sick and nearly died. After some time he recovered and finally reached his destination of Palestine. Considering Bas Jan’s interest in using his family’s history as source material for his work, we might see *In Search of the Miraculous* as an attempt to restage his father’s spiritual pilgrimage in some way. Both Ader’s and his father’s journeys verged on the impossible and could even be considered suicidal. At any rate, *In Search of the Miraculous* may have allowed Ader to negotiate the loss of his father and know him in a way he was never able to in life.
In spite of the evidence, Ader often refused to link elements of his work to the anecdotal information provided by his friends and family. In a revealing interview recorded shortly before his disappearance at sea, Ader remained steadfast in his denial of the relationship between his father’s death and his artistic practice. In his own words:

Someone once said to me: I can well imagine that you are so obsessed with the fall; that’s because your father was shot. That is obviously a far too anecdotal interpretation. Everything is tragic because people always lose control of processes, of matter, of their feelings. That is a much more universal tragedy, and that cannot be visualised from an anecdote.\textsuperscript{156}

If tragedy, says Ader, cannot be visualized through anecdotal information, then \textit{I’m Too Sad to Tell You} may alternatively demonstrate a deep engagement with the visual expression of trauma itself. The profound silence that overwhelms the work may be connected to the idea that trauma, according to Sigmund Freud, characterizes an experience that is not fully assimilated, known or understood by the witness. Trauma is a shock that appears to operate as a bodily threat but is instead a break in the mind’s experience of time. Not having fully known the threat of death in the past, the subject is continually forced to confront it over and over and over again.\textsuperscript{157} Hence, the succession of photographs and films that engage Ader’s tragic family history may directly reference the repetitious return and misunderstanding of Ader’s traumatic experiences. For Caruth, the testimony of trauma is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses the listener in an attempt to describe a reality or truth that is not otherwise available.\textsuperscript{158} Ader’s cry

\textsuperscript{156} Erik Beenker, \textit{Bas Jan Ader: please don’t leave me}, exh. cat. (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2006), 14.

\textsuperscript{157} Sigmund Freud in Caruth, \textit{Unclaimed Experience}, 5, 61.
may be the story of a wound that is too painful to be heard, and so, it takes the aesthetic form of raw emotion.

We may never fully know what caused Ader’s pain, and this is precisely the reason why the work is so engaging: it raises an open-ended question framed as a statement: *I’m Too Sad to Tell You*. It also leaves room for audiences to supply their own interpretation based on their own lived experiences and personal history. This type of relational engagement allows for self-reflection and in turn provides a meaningful basis for better understanding the self as well as the plight of the artist.

**Touch and *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects***

The conscious and unconscious reverberations of trauma are also identifiable in Steele’s video *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects* (fig. 8) While the presence of trauma underscores the work,
it is not communicated so much through verbal language as through the sense of touch. Steele once remarked that this haptic quality was largely unintentional and seemed to emerge spontaneously during her performance as part of some mysterious, unconscious impulse.\textsuperscript{159} Touch, however much it went unnoticed by Steele herself, is fundamental to understanding \textit{Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects} and is at the core of her struggle to communicate her experiences of trauma to the audience.

Hamilton-based performance artist Irene Loughlin interviewed Steele in 2008 and wrote an unpublished essay about this interview just months before creating her own version of Steele’s work as part of a graduate studio project. During their conversation, Steele informed Loughlin that \textit{Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects} represented a departure from her previous video work \textit{A Very Personal Story}. In that work, Steele tenderly explores the tragic circumstances surrounding her mother’s sudden death—when Steele was still a teenager—and her attempt to work through it in the years that followed. Steele’s engagement with memory in \textit{A Very Personal Story}, as she puts it, was quite different from her engagement with memory in \textit{Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects}. In the latter work, Steele was influenced by the type of “embodied memory” or “body-centred memory” that Marcel Proust explored in his multi-volume novel \textit{Remembrance of Things Past}. Loughlin describes this memory work by stating that:

\textit{Birthday Suit} came soon after [\textit{A Very Personal Story}], and incorporated what [Steele] referred to as a kind of Proustian reference to embodied memory. Part of the unfolding of

\textsuperscript{159} Steele, “Guest Presentation,” 2008.
the work was found in locating the body-centered memory, which assisted her in recalling details that evaded conscious memory.\textsuperscript{160}

Touch may have allowed Steele to engage the embodied memories that evaded her conscious memory. And if touch can engage certain aspects of memory, it can also register powerful affects as well. Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick believes that a strong physiological connection exists between physical textures and bodily affects. In her view, “the same double meaning, tactile plus emotional, is already there in the single word “touching”; equally it’s internal to the word “feeling.” [She is] also encouraged in this association by the dubious epithet “touchy-feely,” with implication that even to talk about affect virtually amounts to cutaneous contact.”\textsuperscript{161}

In \textit{Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects}, Steele’s exploration of embodied memory may have been communicated through the tenderness and warmth of her touch rather than the expressions on her face or the cadence of her voice. It is through touch, and its resulting affects, which enable Steele to recall previously unavailable forms of memory, and it is through this memory that Steele is able to better understand herself.

Steele’s aesthetic strategy represents a radical reversal of the Western logic of cause and effect because she shows her scars and defects to the camera first (effect) followed by a verbal description of their root origin second (cause).\textsuperscript{162} This inverted logic may surreptitiously reference the presence of trauma because, as Caruth maintains, trauma fundamentally breaks down the mind’s experience of time. For example, reflecting on the haptic element of her

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\textsuperscript{160} Irene Loughlin, “Regarding Lisa Steele’s Video Birthday Suit With Scars and Defects,” unpublished paper University of Toronto, 2008.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
performance in *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects*, Steele alludes to this collapse by saying, “I can’t claim to have known what I was doing when I did it.” The experience of trauma consists not in the forgetting of a reality that can never be fully assimilated or known, but in a latency within the traumatic experience itself. As Caruth says, trauma is not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again and again, repeatedly, in the actions of the subject. If Steele was fully unaware that she repeatedly touches and caresses the scars and defects on the surface of her skin throughout her performance, then it is entirely possible that this form of repetitious contact may be a unconscious attempt to mend and repair her emotional wounds in some way. Steele’s video may represent her unconscious impulses at work, a process of working through and repairing latent psychological wounds through repetition and touch.

During the communication of trauma to others, as Laub suggests, the interlocutor functions as a blank screen on which the trauma is inscribed. The interlocutor also becomes an active participant to the extent that s/he not only enables the testimony, s/he partakes in the victim’s struggle to communicate it. Laub provocatively suggests that the collaborative aspect of traumatic testimony creates an intimate and evolving relationship between the victim and the interlocutor. According to Laub, “Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other—in the position of one who hears.” And by extension, the listener to trauma, through the very act of listening, comes to partially experience trauma themselves. In basic terms, by receiving the story of Steele’s experiences with trauma, the audience is not only implicated in its telling but is vulnerable to trauma itself. However, the line between

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163 Loughlin, “Regarding Lisa Steele’s Video Birthday Suit With Scars and Defects.”


165 Laub, *Testimony*, 70.
affective engagement with trauma-related art and traumatic engagement with trauma-related art has never been fully articulated by theorists. This is an area of critical research that demands further attention. Even so, Laub’s analysis helps to locate and define the potential relational manoeuvres enacted between Steele and the audience, while also explaining why the audience may occupy an exceptionally challenging and emotionally taxing position when they receive the story of Steele’s trauma. In short, *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects* may be as difficult to watch as it is for Steele to carry out.

While Steele’s work calls attention to her own trauma, it may also refer to the presence of trauma in members of the audience. This type of relational engagement demonstrates that a certain level of intimacy may be shared between the artist and the audience. Commenting on relations between audience members and works of art, Caruth states that:

> we can also read the address of the voice here, not as the story of the individual in relation to the events of his own past, but as the story of the way in which one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound.\(^{166}\)

While Steele recollects her own physical wounds, some viewers may be compelled to recollect their own physical or even psychological wounds. Toronto artist Andy Patton describes this complex, self-reflective process by suggesting that, in “[*Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects*] you go right back into your own life through the body of Lisa.”\(^{167}\) Patton believes that Steele’s body, scars, and defects function as a catalyst for memory, and in turn, her performance produces

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\(^{166}\) Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 8.

\(^{167}\) Andy Patton, graduate seminar, “Art Since the 1960s,” University of Toronto, 2008.
the affects that can accompany memory. It is these affects that allow the audience to better understand the artist as well as themselves. Recollecting and attempting to work-through such wounds, as a result of Steele’s work, can be a powerful source of healing, restoration and hope for the future. Watching Steele’s video may help audiences to recognize that others share the experience of everyday trauma, and Steele’s strength in recognizing her wounds can help others find the resolve to do the same.

Conclusion

I chose to discuss this selection of works because each one uses a radical aesthetic strategy that challenges traditional notions of memory, affect, and trauma. Both Ader and Steele have used the inherent properties of the moving image, non-verbal communication, and their own bodies to bridge the gap between structural categories of memory. In doing so, they have collapsed and re-conceptualized memory in order to illustrate the processes of memory in aesthetic form. In looking at the works discussed in this chapter, I was interested in examining claims that trauma is unrepresentable. Both I’m Too Sad to Tell You and Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects were ideal works to explore because they communicate trauma even as they follow the traditional notion that trauma escapes language and other forms of symbolic representation. Although both works support the foundational principle of trauma’s unrepresentability in some way, they are still able to communicate trauma through radical aesthetic strategies, including silence, repetition and touch. By using trauma theory, I have argued that these works manage to convey the presence of trauma, even as they fail to articulate the particular character of that trauma.

Finally, nearly every text on trauma that I encountered while writing this chapter was concerned with the listener (interlocutor) or viewer’s (audience) connection to the primary
witness. For example, the attention given to trauma-related art and its relationship to the various symptoms of post-traumatic memory and other forms of PTSD such as flashbacks, repetitions, nightmares, shock, pain, and depression, led me to believe that there is the very real potential for audiences to be temporarily or permanently distressed by certain artworks. During the process of working on this project, I have struggled with whether or not this is an acceptable risk. At this point, I would argue that it is. Rather than closing down meaning by attempting to regulate art dealing with trauma, I prefer here to open meaning. If affective shock is a “shock to thought,” as Brian Massumi proposes, then the meaning and knowledge that results from powerful affects can lead to deeper understanding of trauma and its impact on the physical and social body.

Conclusion

This dissertation originated as an examination into contemporary “confessional art” discourse and the socio-cultural influences that drove its production. My preliminary research on confession yielded little in the way of productive frameworks for understanding certain practices in contemporary art. Perhaps the most influential concept of confession that I came across was that it is a personal disclosure practiced in a disproportionate power dynamic that almost exclusively benefits the interlocutor (listener) and the hegemonic institution they represented.169 Michel Foucault proposed that confession was a ritualized, enforced and sometimes even torturous operation intended to generate truth or to modify behaviour for the purpose of civil, religious and scientific regulation.170 The conceptual translation of confessional discourse into art theory was unsuccessful for several reasons, but mainly because the artists that I examined were not required or incited to disclose their personal narratives to others. Although, one could make the argument that many institutions of art eagerly support attention-seeking movements and styles such as the trend towards sensational confessions by young British artists Tracey Emin and Gillian Wearing. Ultimately, in finding theories of confession limiting, I turned to theories of autobiography to consider how the artist willingly, and without prevarication, discloses lived experiences and personal history to the viewer.

However, rather than continue the positivist and humanist trend towards analyzing the writer or artist’s life as a primary source of meaning, I was interested in examining the viewer’s relationship to the autobiographical artwork. During my research I found that there were many studies, dating back to the 1960s, of the reader’s relationship with autobiographical literature yet

169 For a more detailed discussion of confession, see Jeremy Tambling, Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990).

art history was severely limited in studies that focused on the viewer’s relationship to autobiographical visual material. Nicolas Bourriaud’s concept of relational aesthetics came the closest but consciously resisted exploring the relationships between the autonomous art object and the viewer. His work was useful for showing the collaborative and social potential of contemporary art discourse but only to the extent where the viewer is an active participant in the making of the work itself. This idea directly conflicts with the core notion of autobiography because it breaks down its singular voice. I did not consider the viewer an active participant in the making of the work itself but as a catalyst for social discourse through personal interpretation.

As a viewer myself I was not impervious to reading the images displayed in this dissertation without input from my own affects, cultural codes and lived experiences. Writing about images of pain and suffering is no simple task nor is writing about affect and trauma theory in relation to such images. At times, my connection to the work was very close, very real and very difficult to express. Incidentally, the various concepts that I was examining began more and more to coincide with my own personal interpretations. My ideas and responses to certain ideas and images are reflected in the style and structure of the writing itself.

I have made the case that autobiographical art, and autobiographical discourse in general, allows for self-projection, negotiation and self-discovery. More and more I realized that I was trying to make sense of events that have occurred in my life through the images of these artists. Working through my past while working on these images gave me the opportunity to ground the events and experiences of my life in the lives of others. This comparative strategy was not only useful but led to a self-knowledge, strength and resolution that did not exist before. I never anticipated that this project would become as personal as it did, especially in terms of the subject.
matter, but I believe that the closer it crept in the deeper my analysis got and the stronger my ideas became. If I did not use my own life as a critical point of influence when encountering these works, I would not have been open to the types of meanings that I encountered.

The visual materials examined here are not “activist” in any sense of the word. Instead, they hold the potential for meaningful encounters through viewing relationships. At stake here is an engagement with art that can transform social boundaries and prevent the discrepancies that maintains exclusion amongst communities. This is a deeply political project because it emphasizes a breakdown of political and ideological differences and replaces them with affect. It is a state of being where differences change into connections. Through basic human facilities like emotion and feeling, we can come to better understand ourselves and others as well. The process has profound consequences for interhuman relationships in the social sphere.

It was with this idea in mind that I organized an exhibition at the McIntosh Gallery based on the ideas and themes presented in this dissertation. “Some Things Last a Long Time” takes six Canadian and American artists—Colin Campbell, Jaret Belliveau, Peter Kingstone, Lisa Steele, Barbara Astman and Suzy Lake—to examine relational viewing in a more pragmatic environment. “Some Things Last a Long Time” is the title of a beautiful ballad written and performed by Daniel Johnston. It features rolling piano chords entwined with simple lyrics of love, loss and suffering. For me, this song represented the perfect metaphor for the dissertation exhibition: the past troubles the present. Not only was the title deeply poetic but it was also open to multiple interpretations and, like the artwork in the exhibition, it is a catalyst for self-reflection and critical thought.

*The things we did, I can’t forget.*

*Some things last a lifetime.*
Preface

The following brochure was written to accompany the exhibition *Some Things Last a Long Time* at the McIntosh Gallery, Western University from 19 July – 11 August, 2012. The exhibition was created to fulfill a component of the adapted project-based dissertation stream and featured Canadian artists Lisa Steele, Suzy Lake, Jaret Belliveau, Peter Kingstone, Colin Campbell and Barbara Astman.
Exhibition Brochure

Some Things Last a Long Time

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 provided a framework for shifting 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,

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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 the viewer 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 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.
List of Images

Barbara Astman (born United States, 1950)
Polaroid SX70 on paper mounted on masonite, 76.2 x 101.5 cm
Collection of the McIntosh Gallery

Barbara Astman (born United States, 1950)
Polaroid SX70 on paper mounted on masonite, 76.2 x 101.5 cm
Collection of the McIntosh Gallery

Jaret Belliveau (Canadian, born 1981)
*Frenchy’s*, from the *Dominion Street* series, 2003
Chromogenic print, 66.0 x 66.0 cm
Courtesy of Stephen Bulger Gallery, Toronto

Jaret Belliveau (Canadian, born 1981)
*Untitled (Telling Jokes)*, from the *Dominion Street* series, 2004
Chromogenic print, 66.0 x 66.0 cm
Courtesy of Stephen Bulger Gallery, Toronto

Jaret Belliveau (Canadian, born 1981)
*Re-Admitted*, from the *Dominion Street* series, 2004
Chromogenic print, 66.0 x 66.0 cm
Courtesy of Stephen Bulger Gallery, Toronto

Jaret Belliveau (Canadian, born 1981)
*Going Down*, from the *Dominion Street* series, 2005
Chromogenic print, 66.0 x 66.0 cm
Courtesy of Stephen Bulger Gallery, Toronto

Colin Campbell (Canadian, born year 1942)
*True/False*, 1971
Looped single channel video, 9.00 minutes
Courtesy of VTAPE, Toronto

Peter Kingstone (Canadian, born year 1974)
*400 Lies and 1 Truth About Me*
Looped single channel video, 6.00 minutes
Courtesy of VTAPE, Toronto

Suzy Lake (born United States, 1947)
*Pre-Resolution: Using the Ordinances at Hand #1*, from the *ImPositions* series, 1984
Chromogenic print and painted wooden frame, 160.7 x 108.7 cm
Collection of the McIntosh Gallery
Suzy Lake (born United States, 1947)
*Pre-Resolution: Using the Ordinances at Hand* #7, from the *ImPositions* series, 1984
Chromogenic print and painted wooden frame, 159.2 x 99.1 cm
Collection of the McIntosh Gallery

Lisa Steele (born United States, 1947)
*Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects*, 1974
Looped single channel video, 13.00 minutes
Courtesy of Vtape, Toronto
Preface

The following article was written to fulfill a requirement for the adapted project-based stream and is related to but independent of the thesis project. It was recently submitted to the academic journal RACAR and has been returned for revisions. Once carefully revised, it will be re-submitted to the journal for possible publication.

In the article I critically examine the communicative exchanges between autobiographical artwork and the viewer. But unlike in the thesis project, this article differs by specifically focusing on the relational manoeuvres enacted by autobiographical artists. The artists examined here set up strategies of communication in order to produce a range of affective and cognitive responses related to, for example, the detection of truth and personal enlightenment.

The article is situated at a time when our understanding of others has changed and this has had dramatic consequences on autobiographical art. Viewers have responded to many of the works analyzed here by reconstructing them on their own terms as a method of locating deeper meaning and knowledge of the Other and of themselves as well.
Relational Manoeuvres in Autobiographical Video Art

There is a photograph by Kertész (1921) which shows a blind gypsy violinist being led by a boy; now what I see, by means of this “thinking eye” which makes me add something to the photograph, is the dirt road; its texture gives me the certainty of being in Central Europe; I perceive the referent (here, the photograph really transcends itself: is this not the sole proof of its art? To annihilate itself as medium, to be no longer a sign but the thing itself? I recognize, with my whole body, the straggling villages I passed through on my long-ago travels in Hungary and Rumania."

— Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

Around the late 1960s and early 1970s, literary theorists like Philip Lejeune started to draw their attention to the relational manoeuvres enacted between the writer and the reader in autobiographical literature. Lejeune’s groundbreaking essay from 1974, “The Autobiographical Pact,” was one of the first significant attempts to flesh out a hypothesis that rationalizes how readers subjectively interpret and respond to autobiographical modes of communication in literary autobiography. Although somewhat formulistic in its conclusions, Lejeune essentially deconstructed the writer’s unrestricted claims to accurate testimony supported by hard-edged facts. In doing so, he proffered the reader the means to adjudicate the truthfulness of the writer’s disclosures based on their own subjective responses. That being said, one of the central questions that continues to be overlooked concerning autobiographical visual art is its complex relationship to the viewer. Unfortunately it has taken nearly twenty years for art historians, curators, critics and cultural theorists to conceptualize interpersonal and relational exchanges for the visual sphere.

One of the first of these studies is Nicolas Bourriaud’s problematic—yet much needed—book *Relational Aesthetics* published in 1998. Arguably, his work is one the most influential

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contributions to understanding the social and collaborative operations of contemporary art
practice. 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.” According to Bourriaud, the 1990s witnessed a
curious tendency for artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Douglas Gordon and Carsten Höller to
engage with the “interhuman sphere: relationships between people, communities, individuals,
groups, social networks, interactivity, and so on.” In this abstracted space of cultural
expression artists enact a field of rhizomatic interactions with the viewer that specifically address
our shared experience in the world. But although he attempts to identify and describe an art
movement characterized by its social functions and collaborative potential, his writing does not
directly address autobiographical visual art. Nonetheless the relational aesthetics model provides
a significant impetus for thinking through the types of disparate connections produced between
the artist, the artwork and the viewer.

At the intersection of what art theorist Rosalind Krauss has titled the “post-medium
condition”—that which has occurred after the Modernist emphasis on medium as the source of
artistic significance—explorations into using the viewer’s own life as an progressive research
tool have been on the rise. For example, cultural theorist and literary critic Corina Caduff
stresses the value of employing lived experience as a methodological approach to interpreting
recent visual art: “‘Autobiography as method’ describes an approach in which one’s own person
serves as an object and instrument for expressing certain perceptions, interpretations and

174 Ibid., 7.
reflections.” Following a similar conceptual trajectory, curator Matthias Frehner explains that “one’s personal history… has become one of the core issues in contemporary art.” With a great deal of critical emphasis placed on the audience’s lived experience as an apparatus to understand recent artwork, it is important to consider how artists enact a field of relations with their viewers and how the act of seeing is conditioned by our personal histories.

In this essay I explore how autobiographical visual artists structure their work to facilitate meaningful relationships with the viewer. I argue that personal history determines the different ways that viewers can respond to artwork. In other words, relational viewing privileges lived experience as a way of seeing. I explain how certain artworks engage the individual’s memory, intellect and senses through the manner of its formal presentation. Thus, the autobiographical artwork may operate as a powerful catalyst for remembrance, knowledge and affect—perhaps even trauma. A methodology that is entrenched in the viewer’s autobiography not only has the potential to revolutionize how audiences approach and analyze autobiographical art, but it also resists conventional positivist and humanist modes of understanding autobiographical discourse that for centuries has seen the artist’s biography as the primary source of meaning.

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178 In his essay, “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes attempts to decenter the notion of authorship by arguing that textual analysis has historically emphasized the speaking voice of the author rather than language and writing structures. He suggests that contemporary culture’s notion of the author in literature—an entity mainly informed by an inclination towards positivism—constricts the lines of flight available to produce meaning. According to Barthes, “the explanation of the work is always sought in the man who produced it.” See: Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang), 142-148.
Relational Manoeuvres: Strategies of Detection

Why do audiences develop such a close connection to autobiographical forms of communication? There are many reasons for why this happens and unfortunately only a few can be answered in this article, but it appears that the dynamics of reception and the resulting intensity of affective engagement play a crucial role. Of course, audiences respond to autobiographical visual art in many ways. Most importantly, they can respond to it like readers respond to autobiographical literature: by becoming amateur sleuths bent on discovering the degrees of truth, accuracy and fact present (or absent) in the work. As Lejeune explains, “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.”¹⁷⁹ In this way, autobiographical visual art may be a kind of game that stimulates the viewer as jouissance. Lejeune would contend that once the reader / viewer finds sufficient enough evidence to conclude that the text / artwork they are reading is honest and sincere in its presentation of truth, accuracy and fact, then a metaphorical “pact” or “contract” is entered into between the reader / viewer and the writer / artist. In effect, the pact or contract determines the specific attitude of the reader / viewer.¹⁸⁰ This is a crucial point because the viewer’s attitude towards the text / artwork may be the determining factor in how they perceive, experience and react to the work using memory, knowledge and affect. From there a new set of critical engagements may follow.

Colin Campbell’s True/False (1972) plays almost directly into this line of thinking. In this fifteen-minute video Campbell articulates a series of sixteen statements followed by the


¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 29.
words “true” and “false.” These statements are first spoken in profile position (fig. 1) then repeated facing the camera (fig. 2). The establishment of eye contact with the viewer serves

Figure 1. Colin Campbell, True/False, (video still), 1972

Figure 2. Colin Campbell, True/False, (video still), 1972
to greatly intensify the impact of Campbell’s forthright declarations such as “I like Sackville. True. False.”; “I recently attempted suicide. True. False.” and “Colin is my real name. True. False.” Campbell’s profile and frontal positions imitate the formal appearance of early police photography like the one employed by the police prefect Alphonse Bertillon in France during the late nineteenth century. Bertillon sought to produce an archival system for identifying criminals through photographic ‘mug shots’ and anthropomorphic descriptions.\textsuperscript{181} While Campbell openly references Bertillon’s technique he also explicitly challenges the conventional photograph’s authoritative value in producing a likeness, identity or essence of the individual.\textsuperscript{182} Using subtle intonations in his voice and timed delays between every “true” and “false” statement, Campbell offers the viewer clues of his authenticity but very little proof. This strategy drives curator Diane Nemiroff to suggest that in Campbell’s work “truth is on trial.”\textsuperscript{183} Thus, Campbell’s spoken record encourages the viewer to detect whether or not he is telling the truth while his visual references to early police photography ask the viewer whether or not the truth based on images and formal descriptions are even possible.

\textit{True/False} uses the confessional mode as an aesthetic operation. By doing so Campbell impels the viewer to occupy the complex position of interlocutor—the one who listens, judges and punishes the speaker. In the first part of his trilogy on the history of sexuality, historian Michel Foucault suggests that the West’s greatest method for producing truth was the confession. According to Foucault:

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the confession became one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing truth. 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 ones crimes, one’s sins, one’s thoughts and desires, ones illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell.184

However in the context of confessional discourse, Campbell’s work presents a challenge to Foucault’s persuasive argument. In a daring aesthetic manoeuvre Campbell takes up the confessional’s formal structure but resists the confession’s power to produce an absolute truth. What True/False does is emphasize doubt, and at the very best, 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 behaviour like bestiality, drug abuse, suicide and so forth. Conversely, the viewer may experience powerful affects based on their own moral code. But without the knowledge required to evaluate Campbell’s dubious morals and ethics, the viewer may arrive at conclusions about the artist regardless of the authenticity of his statements. In this fascinating reversal, the false has become the truth.

If True/False represents a type of pseudo-confession and places the viewer in the position of interlocutor then the viewer may want to respond to the work using a confession of their own. For cultural theorist Chloe Taylor, the performance of confession touches upon a deep-rooted yearning to speak of the self from the confessant’s position: "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." In this way Campbell encourages the viewer to relate their own lived experiences and personal history to his work. Viewers may also be profoundly moved when they use their memory to identify with Campbell’s statements. When strong affects take hold, along with the realization that Campbell may have lived through some of the statements himself, a shared understanding and feelings of reciprocity may arise. For Taylor, “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.” At the heart of Campbell’s relationship with the viewer lie the potential for empathy and the realization that imperfection is a trait of the human condition.

Like Campbell, Peter Kingstone constructs a relationship with the viewer by actively engaging them to question the truthfulness behind each of his supposedly autobiographical statements. In Kingstone’s video 400 Lies and 1 Truth About Me (2003) (fig. 3) four-hundred...

Figure 3. Peter Kingstone, 400 Lies and 1 Truth About Me, (video still), 2003


186 Ibid, 168.
statements represented in white text are rapidly scrolled against a black background moving from the bottom to the top of the screen. Statements vary from the far-fetched and absurd to the possible and even unambiguously true. Considering the logic of Kingstone’s title, the first four hundred statements should be true and the last statement should be false. On the other hand, the title’s inherent logic may not dictate the order of truth. This is all part of the game and an essential component of the viewer’s jouissance. Kingstone’s relational strategy can drive the viewer to play detective in the Lejeunian sense—looking for the needle of truth in a haystack of lies.

Timing is a critical element in drawing out lies and truth from Kingston’s work much like it is for Campbell’s True/False. Nevertheless, the artists use different approaches to their temporal strategies yet achieve similar outcomes. For example, in True/False Campbell cleverly reduces the tempo of his movements, gestures and actions while inflecting the cadence of his voice with the intention of producing a lingering sense of doubt in the truthfulness of his statements. In noticeable contrast, Kingstone’s written statements scroll very quickly from the bottom to the top of the video screen. By doing so, Kingstone also casts significant doubt on the truthfulness behind each of his statements. Here the viewer struggles with locating truths because they have such little time to read, interpret and prepare an appropriate response. By altering the temporal velocity of their work both Campbell and Kingstone widen the gap between truth and fiction and revel in the ambiguity that this distance generates.

400 Lies and 1 Truth About Me (2003) also works 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 confronted with the talking head of the artist. Viewers are not confronted with the artist’s voice because the video is entirely
silent. It is clear that Kingstone’s relational strategy shares many of the same characteristics as Campbell’s *True/False* but by removing himself from the piece representationally and vocally it is less of a confession and more of an account of happenings. While some viewers may find Kingstone’s absence an indicator of insincerity, dishonesty and artificiality, others may find it deeply reassuring precisely because it is less confrontational. Thus, viewers may be more open to engaging with the work on a personal level when body of the artist is not present.

Kingstone’s work constructs a field of relations so that viewers may identify with the work by using memories of lived experiences. He does this 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.” Picking up on Lejeune’s attention to the relational manoeuvres enacted between writers and their readers, literary theorist Nancy K. Miller suggests that the contemporary autobiographical memoir is an important site for identification, self-discovery and a powerful catalyst for memory. According to Miller, “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.”¹⁸⁷ 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’s mind. Consequently, memory is one of the strongest methods of producing affect. Engaging with *400 Lies and 1 Truth About Me* may mean that the viewer can use their own autobiography to produce intense feelings and emotions. Kingstone’s

autobiography is unmistakably the central element of the work, the viewer’s own life may be the
key to understanding it.

Relational Manoeuvres: The Traumatic Response

Lisa Steele’s seminal work *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects* from 1974 has entered the art
historical canon as one of the finest examples of early feminist video in Canada (fig. 4). Like

![Figure 4. Lisa Steele, Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects, (video still), 1974](image)

much of the performance art coming out of the 1960s, video was a revelation because it gave
female artists the opportunity to explore a new medium that was unburdened by
phallocentricism. Relatively inexpensive, mobile and user-friendly, personal video cameras like
the Sony Portapak circulated on the commercial market during the 1960s. Video revolutionized
the commercial television industry by allowing artists to make work outside of the bureaucratic,
capitalist and aesthetic restrictions of conventional broadcasts. In this sense, video moved away
from industry and more towards the individual. Artists like Steele significantly cut down on the costs of video production by using their own bodies and autobiographies as subject matter. And in making video for themselves artists could also make video for others as well. As Nemiroff explains, “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.”

At the beginning of her eleven-minute video, Steele’s hands can be seen against her pallid thighs soon after she switches on the video camera, takes a step back and declares, “September 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 1947 to September 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 1974. In honour of my birthday I’m going to show you my birthday suit with scars and defects.” From there she turns away from the camera and walks through open doors to the back of a vacant room where she fully reveals her naked body to the video frame—her proverbial ‘birthday suit.’ Imitating the formal appearance of Campbell’s True/False—where the artist presents a series of statements in profile then facing the camera—Steele calculatingly turns to her right (in profile), her right again (from behind), her right again (in profile) to finally face the camera head-on once again. Steele must have been aware of Campbell’s True/False after Campbell moved to Toronto from Sackville, New Brunswick in 1973 and the two became friends. From Campbell Steele incorporated the formal structure of the mug-shot to question the skin and the body as superficial indicators of inner character. Steele’s work was important to early feminist discourse because it stood—and still stands—in opposition to contemporaneous advertising imagery of romanticized, idealized and unblemished female

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\textsuperscript{188} Nemiroff, “Performances for the Camera: Montreal and Toronto in the 1970s and 1980s,” 42.
\end{flushright}
beauty. With *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects* Steele not only presents the female body’s susceptibility to physical injury but views her scars as an embodiment of her personal identity and politic.

Following her methodical turn before the camera at the back of the vacant room, Steele returns to stand in front of the camera, bends down to reveal a large scar on the side of her neck and pronounces, “1947. Surgery at birth to remove goitre.” She continues the performance by revealing her left ankle to the camera along with the spoken description, “1947. Transfusion because of serious illness. Three months old.” She then turns to present the back of her left thigh to the camera accompanied by the words, “1950. Fell on bleach bottle while riding tricycle in basement. Three years old.” When Steele describes her wounds and presents them to the camera she can be seen gently stroking her wounds as if to psychologically mend them. What becomes clear from the visible wounds on Steele’s body and from the verbal explanations of her scars is that *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects* represents an archive of physical injury and emotional trauma for the camera and for the viewer.

The word “trauma” is derived from the Greek meaning wound and “refers to the self-altering, even self-shattering experience of violence, injury, and harm.” *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects* explores what literary theorist Dominick LaCapra terms everyday or “structural trauma” because it is “related to (even correlated with) transhistorical absence

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189 Irene Loughlin describes Steele’s feminist objectives for *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects*: “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...” See: Irene Loughlin, “Regarding Lisa Steele’s Video Birthday Suit With Scars and Defects,” unpublished paper, University of Toronto, 2009, 3.

(absence of/at the origin) and appears in different ways in all societies and all lives.\footnote{Dominick LaCapra, \textit{Writing History, Writing Trauma} (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 77-78.} His definition of everyday / structural trauma strongly differs from what he calls “historical trauma”: trauma that is limited in scale, “specific, and not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject position associated with it.”\footnote{Ibid.} LaCapra’s conceptualization of everyday / structural trauma allows viewers to recognize that some traumatic events and actions are shared. (However this is not to say that the experience and feeling of trauma is shared for the reason that trauma is widely defined by its experiential and affective singularity). From here we can understand how viewers relate to contemporary autobiographical visual art using their own feelings, experiences and personal history. If certain traumatic events or actions are frequent occurrences within society, as LaCapra claims them to be, then the viewer is likely to have experienced such trauma at some point in their lives. This may be the reason why viewing \textit{Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects} can trigger audiences to contemplate the marks on their skin while reflecting upon the trauma that either caused it or resulted from it. Andy Patton explains this introspective process by suggesting that “you go right back into your own life through the body of Lisa.”\footnote{Andy Patton, graduate seminar, “Art Since the 1960s,” University of Toronto, 2008.} Much like Miller, Patton believes that the body of the artist operates as a catalyst for memory. Therefore, while Steele candidly reminiscences about the wounds of her past, viewers may be compelled by the artist to recollect their own. Remembering and working through these wounds can be a powerful source of healing and restoration.

Even so, the problem with recollecting past injury and trauma is that emotional distress can be (re)registered in the viewer. Art theorist Jill Bennett explains how post-traumatic memory is produced in viewers through trauma-related art. She proposes that “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.” According to Bennett’s logic, a past traumatic experience can potentially reoccur in the present through the memories produced by trauma-related art. Post-traumatic memories like these can generate powerful affects and make a deep impression on the psyche of the viewer. Yet the affects produced by traumatic memories may allow the viewer to come to terms with the wounds of their past in some way. And it may be reassuring to some viewers to know that everyone’s flesh breaks in some way or another.

Hamilton-based performance artist Irene Loughlin was so moved by Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects that she made her own version of the original in 2008 (fig. 5). In

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 5. Irene Loughlin, Considering: “Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects” by Lisa Steele, (video still), 2008**

194 Bennett, Empathic Vision, 11.

195 The author wishes to thank the artist for bringing this never before exhibited work to his attention in 2010.
Considering: "Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects" by Lisa Steele, Loughlin carefully reproduces the formal appearance of Steele’s work but articulates detailed information of her own scars and defects for the viewer. Unlike Steele’s version, Loughlin carefully edits her piece for synchronicity and flow while her verbal descriptions are significantly more detailed and traumatic: “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.” With Loughlin’s work, Caduff’s notion of “autobiography as method” takes on a whole new meaning. By transforming her lived experiences into an artwork using Steele’s formal structure and appearance as a template, Loughlin has found a different understanding of Steele’s work and perhaps even a different understanding of herself. Loughlin’s appropriation of Birthday Suit is a fascinating means of self-discovery which doubles as a powerful source of strength for the future.

This form of relational engagement holds the potential to break off into new and exciting possibilities. Loughlin’s re-staging of Steele’s work in the context of her own life represents a radical turn towards using autobiography as an interpretive tool. However, Loughlin is certainly not the first to do so. A quick internet search reveals that others have re-staged Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects for their own ends and have even re-staged the autobiographical works of other artists like Bas Jan Ader, Martha Rosler and Vito Acconci. But what does this common propensity towards recreating artwork signify? On the one hand, in our culture of confession, narcissistic communication inundates our television, radio, newspapers, magazines and web presence; it should be no surprise then that narcissistic social expressions leach into the cultural realm. On the other hand, and more likely, postmodernism and late capitalism have threatened
the fragile singular identity of the individual. As a consequence the ways that people interpret and understand others has changed. Thus, the knowledge generated from the artwork of others may no longer be enough, the work must be embodied and re-performed by the viewer to fully understand and value its meaning.

Conclusion

Art theorist and critic John Berger once said that “autobiography begins with the sense of being alone. It is an orphan form.” I wrote this article in resistance to his idea. I turned to these works as a way to make better sense of them in the context of the literary autobiographical theory. Literary theorists have mined the autobiographical genre for decades whereas art historians and critics have been remarkably slow in publishing their studies on autobiography visual art. The lack of specific theories to conceptualize these works point to a critical lull in the field that I hope can be overturned. It is my hope that from these initial studies come a more comprehensive theoretical framework for discussing the relationship between autobiographical visual art and its viewers.

As I have explained, viewers engage with Colin Campbell and Peter Kingstone’s work by actively detecting the presence or absence of truth. As part of this complex relational manoeuvre, their work stimulates the viewer as jouissance. In True/False, Campbell persuades viewers to consider that the representational image and the audible voice of the artist might not be accurate indicators of personal identity. By self-doubting the truthfulness of his statements through

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196 And like visual art, literary memoir according to Miller “is a record of an experience in search of a community, of a collective framework in which to protect the fragility of singularity in a postmodern world.” See: Miller, But Enough About Me, 14.

devices like altering the timing of his phrasing and the intonations of his voice, Campbell suggests that the authenticity of the artist’s autobiography is as dependent on the artist as it is on the viewer’s interpretation. In *400 Lies and 1 Truth About Me*, Kingstone encourages viewers to locate the one needle in his proverbial haystack of lies. In doing so, he supports Campbell’s idea that the beliefs, values or essence of the individual is impossible to locate in autobiographical artwork. Both artists are appear deeply concerned with how the viewer interacts with the work in a way that considers their own lived experiences, politic and moral code.

Lisa Steele’s seminal feminist video *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects* goes well beyond the games of detection developed by Campbell and Kingstone by considering how certain relational manoeuvres can be traumatic for the viewer. It was important for me to analyze Steele’s work in this context because I wanted to show how autobiographical visual art can trigger (latent) trauma through identification and memory. While her work may trigger the devastating affects produced by trauma, it can also be recognized for its inspirational and strengthening characteristics. Irene Loughlin used Steele’s formal structure to enact her own video performance as a way to grasp the transformative nature of her trauma. As I have explained, artists like Loughlin have pushed the concept of “autobiography as method” further in order to better engage with artwork and with their own lives. The pedagogical and transformational character of restaging particular artworks comes at a time when the singularity of the individual is threatened by postmodernism and late capitalism. Nonetheless, this act of restaging makes clear that the sense of diminishing singularity in the West is currently restructuring the manner in which cultural expressions are performed.
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PUBLICATIONS & PRESENTATIONS

Articles in Peer-Reviewed Journals:


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(Re)verse Ekphrasis, (Re)verse Ekphrasis: Works from the McIntosh Collection, brochure essay, (University College, University of Western Ontario, 2009).


Dale Chihuly: The Chandeliers and other Critical Insight into his Work, Contemporary Canadian Glass, Autumn, 2008.
Selected Interviews:

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Other Writing:
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Research Assistant: Compiling and analyzing information on artist Louis Lawler and Canadian immigration photography. Supervisor: Dr. Sarah Bassnett, University of Western Ontario, 2009-2012.

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EXHIBITIONS
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SERVICE
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