

*I WAS STILL THERE*

Curatorial essay

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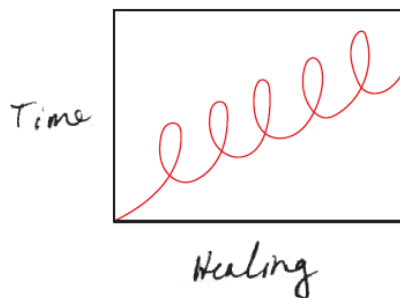
CRCP 4902: Thesis Presentation

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Grief is a complicated subject. I state this not as an empty opening to the following text, but as a framework from which we as viewers and participants can approach the artworks shown tonight.

When I was 18 years old, my father died. It was a complicated death; he had been terminally ill for more than half my life. I had begun grieving little parts of our shared lives together for more than 8 years. When I was putting this project together, my advisor Andrea Fatona was kind enough to show me what a graph of healing looks like to a medical professional:



In my own experience, this is less a linear function than a cyclical undergoing.

I should start at what this screening is missing. There are parts of grief that are inaccessible to my own timelines and scope of research. Undoubtedly, there are areas of historical and political grief that this screening will not touch upon. I bring this up to acknowledge my own limitations, and in the hopes that this short-coming will inspire future exhibitions that are more equipped to delve into the areas that I have not addressed. There is however, a method of complicated subjectivity in grief that the medium of video allows for, and I hope this approach can inform further research.

When I was 18 years old, my father died. I am telling you this because I would like to be as generous with my experience as the artists included in this screening have been with their own. Approaching grief is a daunting task, especially for those of us entrenched within it. What I am

presenting in this curated selection of video works are methods of framing grief in order to see ourselves as agents in our own healing— my own messy understandings included.

The medium of video brings about two formal properties that inform the process of reasserting agency after a destabilizing traumatic event: the power to frame and the possibility of healing within the extended present. The frame -- theorized as a method of recognition by Queer scholar Judith Butler -- is responsible for our apprehension of the of the subject within a set of norms that qualify it as a part of a larger societal mattering<sup>1</sup>. The importance of the frame is not only what it contains but the self-breakage and subversion of apprehension that becomes available to the medium in its consistent breaking-from-context. The video-works included in this show deliberately frame the precarious subject (a subject that has become unbound through trauma) as one that has agency in their own framing and apprehension.<sup>2</sup> The extended present can be understood as the ability to subvert the frame's breakage through time for the sake of agency. Because the "now" of a video work will always coexist with the viewer's experience of their own temporality<sup>3</sup>, the medium intrinsically links itself with process. It is the process of healing and its agency prolonging itself to both the viewer and the maker of a video work. With its ability to frame one's grieving self as a subject that is apprehended, and the ability to re-inscribe a mending in the initial impact of loss, video begins to reanimate its commemorative impulse with the living component of healing.

Marjorie Beaucage's *Good Grief* (1993) is a documentary following the death of the artist's youngest brother, Danny. Set a year after his passing, the work engages with family dynamics and communal healing following agonizing loss; it follows the ripples left after the absence of a loved one until they become the roar of confusion, ache and remembrance. We hear this in the many

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler "Introduction" *Frames of War* (London: Verso 2009) 3.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler. "Violence, Mourning, Power" in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. (London: Verso 2004) 21.

<sup>3</sup> Peggy Gale "Memory Work" in *Videotexts* (Toronto: Wilfred Laurier University Press 1995) 60.

overlapping voices of Beaucage's family speaking to the experience of their becoming unbound after the death of a community member. Judith Butler engages with this idea in *Precarious Life*, stating that community is one of the most central binds to our own recognition of the self; when we grieve a community member we are grieving a method of recognition. Because grief is communal in loss, "the pre-occupation of melancholia can be moved into a consideration for others".<sup>4</sup> Beaucage uses this concern to reach out and care for her family. Her presence framing her siblings behind the camera speaks to her own recognition of being bound and reflected within their testimonies. The framing contains the impact of Danny's death on Beaucage's family, but the frame breaks to include her own implication in this grief. Unbearable pain is remedied by the use of the extended present in *Good Grief*. The work continuously cuts to the site of Danny's fatal accident between family member's thoughts around him, revisiting the site of trauma for the purposes of reinscribing it with a process of healing. The extended present of this point of impact allows for the space to be revisioned as a communal remembrance. What exists in *Good Grief* is not a capsule of "what is no longer" but rather, "what has been" and the potential for transformation of a mourning narrative.<sup>5</sup>

Deanna Bowen's *sum of the parts: what can be named* (2010) retraces and reclaims a narrative of grief for the purpose of bearing witness. The work engages in what Bowen ascribes as "settling a debt" to her ancestors, making visible the incredible hardship faced in her own genealogy.<sup>6</sup> The documentary follows Bowen's own oral account of her ancestry from its earliest documented history: 1815, Jones County, Georgia. Historical subject matter ties familial relations to a violent and oppressive history of slavery, diaspora, extreme racism. There are also examples of civil rights victories against these systems. An interjection that strikes me particularly is a reference to Vincent

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler. "Violence, Mourning, Power" in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. (London: Verso 2004) 30.

<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes *Camera Lucida* (Editions de Seuil: Paris 1980) 85.

<sup>6</sup> Deanna Bowen interviewed by Merray Gerges. "In the Studio with Deanna Bowen" *Canadian Art*, 3:31. Posted August 10, 2017. <https://canadianart.ca/features/video-in-the-studio-with-deanna-bowen/>

Van Gogh's painting *Starry Night*, a coded reference to the epitome of genius in European art and a product of much historical writing. Bowen's own parsing out of the very limited recordings of the presence of her family's history juxtaposes these asides. What is present in this work is the shift of history to autobiography – a history converted into a horizontal experience: the experience of a collective self.<sup>7</sup> There is a delicate part of this reclamation and governance of history that allows for the grief of previous generations to manifest in Bowen's recounting. Bearing witness exists as a form of validation, and in turn a beginning of reparation. Kelly Oliver defines bearing witness as a subject's "response-ability, or response to address" in *Witnessing Beyond Recognition*.<sup>8</sup> *Sum of Parts* places Bowen as subject in her response to history, using close ups of her face as a conduit. The close-up is used in popular media to signify a responding character in dialogue, a formal choice Bowen utilizes for the sake of agency over her family's historical trauma. *sum of the parts* engages powerfully with a tracing of absence through the subversion of the frame in its use of transcribed names lifted from historical documents.<sup>9</sup> Bowen's oral recounting of the presence of her ancestors juxtaposed with the lack of names from public record speaks to an unframable absence, one that allows Bowen to have agency over her ancestor's erasure.

*A Very Personal Story* (1974) frames vulnerability within the extended present to denote a shift from grief's unboundedness to agency and accountability as an individual. Lisa Steele uses the video camera as a public diary in this work, opening herself up to the very painful self exposure of a grief that had been unspoken for years. As Steele contemplates, "nobody wants to talk about it too much." The work exists in what Peggy Gale calls a method of "self exposure" rather than the

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew Ryan Smith "Relational Maneuvers in Autobiographical Video Art" In *Biography* (Manoa: University of Hawai'i Press 2014) 954.

<sup>8</sup> Kelly Oliver "Introduction" *Witnessing, Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2001) 16.

<sup>9</sup> Avery Gordon, "Her shape and his hand" *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1997) 8.

“narcissism” that had been previously theorized to exist in pointing to oneself through a television monitor.<sup>10</sup> Exposure exists in the raw vulnerability of *A Very Personal Story* through Steele’s staging: the nakedness of her body, her hands in front of her face, revisiting a day where life was inalterably different. In grief, there exists a definite point of destabilization. After loss, one becomes painfully aware of the attachments to others that form a sense of personhood.<sup>11</sup> Steele navigates this question by using the medium of film to not only expose her experience the day that she realized her autonomy was tied to her mother, but also to affirm her changed self after the day of the loss. “My mother was gone... and I was still there.” Acknowledging a point in which identity starts to unravel becomes a point of Steele’s new life as an accountable subject: she calls herself David Copperfield in her own story. *A Very Personal Story* is a retelling, and the self in Steele’s work is affirmed, but affirmed as a product of its own loss. The work engages in the painful work of grief: to exist without the person who helped to form one’s identity. It helps us reflect upon how our identity might change after that loss. *A Very Personal Story* exists as the re-tracing of a scar through the extended present, both affirming the first site of the wound and actualizing its healing.

My hope for this show lies in these works assisting their viewers to see grief as a process of self-becoming, self-complication and empathy. What lies after loss is learning to live again when we have been changed. These works commemorate the lives we mourn as a way to find life in ourselves, and to find ways to honour that self in its unravelling edges. My concern in these works are not for the dead, but for the living.

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<sup>10</sup> Peggy Gale. “I am Here, This is Real” in *Autobiography: Film/Video/Photography* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario 1978) 18

<sup>11</sup> Judith Butler. “Violence, Mourning, Power” *Ibid*, 22.

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