

I WAS STILL THERE

A discussion transcription, lead by Dana Snow

The following is a transcribed passage of the conversation following the curatorial screening *I was still there*. Curator Dana Snow opens with an open invitation to respond to emotionally resonant aspects of the video-works, or connections participants could make between the three films. Audience members' responses are denoted AM with an ensuing roman numeral to portray exchanges in the dialogue.

DS: Does anyone have any thoughts about something that stuck out to you, or something that you connected with when watching, or ways that you could relate to what you were seeing?

AMI: I think because we're moving at such a fast pace right now and towards the end of the year that in watching this -- listening mostly -- it made me realize the concept of time, and how integral that is to holding space. To give somebody that time, to run through that whole history or to allow them to mull over whatever it is they're going through; to watch those wheels turning in their mind and to respect their time enough to give *them* time. Even at the end where Lisa was like, "nobody really wants to hear about it." I had a friend who was going through that grief and it's funny that that's their perspective. Our perspective is: do they really want to talk about it? Because they think that nobody wants to listen, but on the other end, do they really want to speak? And that space never really ends up unfolding.

DS: Yeah. I have my own experiences with grief, and what I would feel when I would tell someone "my father passed away" -- not because I wanted to bring that specific grief up, but because it was essential knowledge for a story or some other understanding of myself—the immediate reaction is "oh, I'm so sorry to hear that." I think that becomes a wall that prevents us from asking any further questions around that experience. Both people in the conversation are forced to find a way around that wall, or that awkward feeling. What I was really trying to do with this work was provide a space to look at that wall and how we put it up; and how we can benefit as a community from letting it down a little bit.

AMII: I think for me, the first and the last piece really had a dialogue. In the first one, I was thinking about the use of silence versus the single voice, versus the multiple voices. And when it came to the part of the multiple voices sharing their stories of grief, that has been a lot of my experience of grief; receiving the stories of other people en-masse; juggling with how to put your own grief aside to deal with everyone else's. You're a part of the community that's feeling a similar grief. Hearing Lisa's piece in opposition to that, it was about being able to really experience my own position of grief unfolding for myself. It was recognizing the balance and also recognizing that... not everyone needs to share that experience with me. And it's about me having that experience for myself and understanding that how I choose to deal with grief is not necessarily the same way everyone else does.

DS: Absolutely, thanks for sharing that. It's interesting that you bring up the kind of communal grief that's happening in Marjorie Beaucage's piece, because she's written about why she made

that work and it was to balance her own grief. She found herself giving so much to her sibling and her family and her community that she couldn't balance her own grief beside it. This video kind of becomes this way of placing herself within that community and that communal grief that's happening; it becomes very powerful. And I do agree with you, I think Lisa's piece is so unusual because we don't often hear about grief in this context from an individual standpoint in history. I think we tend to think of it as a group experience and what was really powerful for me was this single voice that is able to speak about her grief in her own manner, and we see that in Deanna's piece too.

AMII: Exactly, I think the power for me in that was that she articulated a grief that only she could experience.

AMIII: I think each individual piece spoke so much to grief and mourning and the different ways that those experiences occur, but I think the way that they were all compiled together really helped it resonate with me, because of what was mentioned about time. Grief is not something that -- like in the final piece when somebody passes, they're gone. You know? And when that happens we have this moment, this funeral, this goodbye. And after that, there's a wall there again. We don't reach out to the person who lost that loved one. Today for me, marks three years since I lost somebody I loved and it reminded me now -- watching this -- that I want to reach out to the loved ones of that person. Even though it happened three years ago, grief is a journey and it doesn't just disappear. It may fade and reappear at certain times: it's unique to everybody. This piece really created this notion of length. And what stuck out for me especially in the first piece was the road, and light, and how those were constant images.

DS: The road in the first piece is such an important symbol, because it's the site of the fatal crash of Danny, the brother that Marjorie lost. And through cutting between the family testimonials and the road, she's reinscribing this place of trauma and this place of deep emotional pain with testimonies of making it through, testimonies of strength, and love within her community. Thank you for sharing that.

AMI: Just to chime in on what the previous speaker was saying, I think the three videos together, as a painter I saw it as a triptych, that really highlighted the process of grief, and how it's a non-linear way of kind of... going through the motions. The pieces, they had this deep connection in how they were ordered. And I also with the road scene, mostly because of the reflections on the road, the lines of yellow juxtaposing the black and all these symbols resolve these feelings of grief as the abstract sensuous realm of grief as a universal feeling that everyone goes through subjectively. It's hard to talk about that variable that changes with everyone's experience but I think the visuals are touching on something important.

DS: Actually in my essay, I talk about a graph of healing and time made by a medical professional that my advisor Andrea Fatona was kind enough to show me. It's on an x and y axis and instead of going up in a linear fashion, it goes up like this:

(makes an upwardly circular motion).

And that to me is the most poignant image of grief I think that I've ever come across.

AIV: I've watched all three before but together they're very impactful together. It's a very well curated program. Something that struck me was Lisa's video; because she was so young, she always looked so young. She was talking about when she was fifteen, but she looked like she was twelve. And she's about my age, and we grew up in the fifties and sixties, and it's a very slow film, and things were so much slower then. She takes her time in telling the story. But the details; we didn't lock our doors in Toronto – I mean Lisa's from the States – but we didn't lock our doors, we didn't carry keys, we walked to and from school alone whether it was a long distance or not. So just this whole memory of this young woman, young girl. The whole experience of walking home in the snow and what happened at school... Just the fact that the mother died at home where so much now...

DS: Hospitals.

AIV: Relatives die in the hospital. And sometimes we don't get to see them. So this whole experience she reveals to us of not knowing – to me it's crazy to have to feel the pulse because you can tell she's dead by just looking at her. This experience for me, is a whole other lifetime ago. If a kid were to arrive home to that now, I think the impulse would be to dial the authorities right away. Lisa has this long period with her mother. Only later does she think about what this means for her, how she will be different now. She doesn't run out and try and get a neighbor. And this whole thing with the door open and the snow coming in, when I was a kid I'd wake up to the same thing. It was just so evocative of a whole different pace in which I lived in. It's so interesting to see it now as opposed to years ago, and to think about that different way we live.

DS: And it does change, seeing it at different times. What you mentioned about Lisa having time and contemplation with her mother, I actually connected to that in a very different way. The person who I lost was terminally ill. So when you knew, you knew. So there may be a different reaction today, specifically with surprising things. But I think that moment of deep calm that happens is something that's still universal.

AMV: I was struck by the contrast between the three different videos: we really had three different perspectives. The first was an emotional recounting of a personal response to the loss of their brother, the second, very analytical with a report. The third telling a story but not really telling us what she lived, very factual but not really registering an emotional response. It strikes me that in a moment of grief we're confronted by the unknown. The unknown of what death is, but also who we are in that moment. It's something that we can't anticipate, I don't even know if we understand it. But we'll never know who we will be – you know I've lost several people in my life, and each time it was different – we never know who we are really. But that's what struck me – we deal with it in very different ways and it's something that we discover in that moment. We can't control and we can't contrive.

DS: I think, when we you go through grief, or the loss of someone we love, there's a certain unbinding that emerges. The people who made us who we are, are no longer there to keep making you who you are. What I found compelling in these works are their ability to sit with being unbound.

AMV: There's something about not being able to be false in that moment.

DS: Exactly. And the camera reveals something to that degree too.

AMVI: My understanding was limited by my hearing loss and my ability to understand the dialogue was impaired by that. I'm certainly finding that the discussion itself is helping me understand and situate and begin to understand where the work fits in with my own experiences. Something I was really struck by in the third piece was (this is perhaps also affected by my hearing loss, I'm more able to understand what people are saying) I was really struck by the difference; because the whole first part, before her mother dies, she's got her hands in front of her face. It made me think that the death of her mother was somehow liberating for her. In relating all these things to my experience, we've really focussed on grief for loss relating very specifically to death. But sometimes there's grief for loss when the person doesn't necessarily die. I had to go through a period of grieving the loss of love from someone very close to me. I never experienced their love -- maybe they did love me, I still don't know. But I went through a period where I had to deal with that and face it in order to go on with my own life. This is when I was much younger. So those are my thoughts.

DS: Grief in this screening is tied very closely to death, because I think that's where artists feel they can connect to their viewers. But I think you're talking about something extremely valid, and it can't be so easily resolved, or theorized about. You can't unpack it in the same way. Thank you for sharing that, because it's an approach I didn't consider and will continue to think about.

AMIII: On a last note, I thought about the loss of someone whom you love so deeply and is still alive versus the loss of somebody you love who has parted. There is a difficulty there, of course there is. In the final piece she says when you don't feel close to somebody it's because you can't speak to them. And when you love somebody and they're still alive and maybe there's that option to still talk to them or maybe there's not at all. So, there is an aspect that deeply connects and resonates with people who haven't lost someone to death yet, but they can still connect to it because maybe they have lost somebody who's still alive that they cannot speak to. That aspect of grieving is very powerful, I think.

AMII: We've talked about the first and the last films, but the middle one I think does address a grief that's separated from death. I think that part of it is a grief in not knowing, and a grief of knowing just enough. I think the ability to experience grief secondhandedly can be absolutely debilitating for people. In the process of approaching it as research it can look like it's not necessarily devoid of emotion but detached from it. I felt that Deanna's piece really did speak to the connection she felt between the people she was able to place in her life and the connection to herself. The branching of the family tree going back; it really looked like she was trying to situate everything she knew in relation to what they knew. It really looks like a grief that extends beyond her in a way that she cannot physically conceive because the records weren't there, but she could conceive it through the way history unfolded. That ability to hold space for that grief that she may not have experienced so directly.

DS: I think there's something to be said for intergenerational grief in that piece. It's something that we can't necessarily pinpoint in our lives, but it's also something that becomes incredibly

forming. I think Deanna's piece is so important because she's allowing those voices that she's felt the grief for to speak through her – and even speak through her in their forms of absence.