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In the Theater of Subjectivity

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IN THE THEATER OF SUBJECTIVITY

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May, 2008
Acknowledgement

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my grandparents, Benjamin and Anna Litvak. Thank you for your love, your patience and your sacrifices.
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Abstract

IN THE THEATER OF SUBJECTIVITY

By Violetta Litvak, MFA

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2008

Major Director: Jim Long
Department Chair, Photography and Film

This thesis tracks the formal and conceptual development of my work during the two years of graduate study at the VCU Photography and Film Department. It describes the influence of photography on my evolution as an artist and contextualizes my desire to expand the practice beyond the traditional limitations of the medium. It recounts my experimentation with assemblage, video and installation and their contribution to my understanding of spatial and temporal dimensions in the formal construction of my work. In part, the thesis is also a statement of my convictions about art making. It discusses the importance of perception and subjective experience, as well as the role of personal history in my work.
Introduction

"All try their hands at miming, at repeating and at re-creating the reality that is theirs... their whole effort is to examine, to enlarge, and to enrich the ephemeral island on which they have just landed." – Albert Camus

The desire to make physical the interior space of subjectivity fueled my search and experimentations with several media during the two years in the graduate program at the VCU Photography and Film department. The private drama and the diversity of perspectives that reside in this interior space form a theater of subjectivity. My practice, as much in life as in art, is the attempt to build the stage for the articulation and the performance of this theater. It is the development of a way to bring the phenomenology and the psychology of perception to the foreground of consciousness.
Theater of Subjectivity

"I consider a photograph interesting whenever a photographer's view of reality does not double my knowledge of the world, but a difference between our respective perceptions occurs. The smaller the difference, the more intense is its effect on me. Thus it's less about a precise representation of reality than the formulation of the representation of the world. From this viewpoint and within the technical medium, we can talk about the photographer as an author who - on the basis of facts and by means of minimal shifts of perception - creates a fiction in close proximity to reality. In literature, I like those stories the best that are told in an understandable, precise language. In the best case, an author cannot only describe the situation and objects, but can endow them with a deeper meaning and lets them transcend themselves with a disturbing force. This is an irritating trait of literature (and any other art form) as it deprives us of convictions and poses more questions that it answers."  Thomas Weski

Man in Atlantic Ocean, 2007
My practice began with a formal study of the photographic medium. I was drawn to the medium for its imagery closely resembled my interior vision. The function of cutting out slices of the observed world and re-contextualizing them within a private space mimics the function of perception. The world I observed through the camera lens could easily become a projection of my own theater of subjectivity. Weski's fiction that closely approximates reality is just such a theater, which is always being preformed in the photographer's viewfinder. The events that take place on this stage have a life of their own, as complicated and rich in meaning and feeling as a living organism. The photographer only constructs the opportunity for such events to take place through a specific tuning of the perceptive powers; through the choices made of what to look at, how to look at it, and when.

My own choices depend on the "feeling" of being moved by the precise combination of many different elements within a moment of time. My selection process is guided by intuition and emotion, by my memories and my sensory experience. Growing up in a small town on the edges of the Moldavian countryside (the former Soviet Union), and immigration at the age of twelve to a large American metropolis is where my "minimal shifts of perceptions" originate. My work is informed by my experience of the Soviet Diaspora's fractured identity infused with nostalgia and longing. Applying this experience to everyday life, I hope to transform what I see in front of me into metaphors.
Touching the Sun, 2006
rather live alone than with a broken heart, 2007
Beauty through Horror, 2007
The Wound of The Opposing Thumb, 2007
The Search for Active Participation

When I began my graduate studies in 2006 I had already realized that the subjective experience I aim to describe extended beyond the restrictions of the photographic medium. I desired to draw the viewer in, to make them more of a participant in the theater rather than just an observer. I believed that this could be achieved by introducing two elements: the physicality of space and the sensation of time passing. Photography afforded me the function of describing the particulars and evoking the emotions through the powers of transference only. To feel what is described in the photograph in relation to real time and real space of the body is another matter.
Space through Sequence, Scale, and Placement

The experiments in my first semester built on an already existing practice of sequencing my photographs. The art of sequencing is an old tool used to achieve a narrative structure or to make fluid associations through juxtapositions of a variety of images. I inherited this practice in my undergraduate education, through the study of sequenced photographic monographs by Walker Evans, Henri-Cartier Bresson, Helen Levitt, Robert Frank and William Eggleston. By 2004 I began to utilize photographic sequencing to affect the viewer's spatial relationship to the work, changing the size and scale of photographs and their relative placement to one another. I was influenced directly by the work of Wolfgang Tillmans and Roni Horn, who utilized the scale and placement of photographs as a formal and conceptual device.

*Kangaroo Care* was a piece I presented at the end of my first semester. It was a culmination of my efforts in photographic sequencing and an expansion into utilizing arrangements of found objects and video. It was also one of my first attempts to create an environment. In retrospect, the video component was an important step in the evolution of my work. The sound had a dramatic effect on the physicality of the environment, not only because it added a sonic dimension to the work but also because it introduced the
dimension of time. However, in this piece, I was more interested in how the placement of the video, the photographs and the found objects effected the viewer’s movement through the space and how the sequence structure influenced construction of meaning.
Kangaroo Care, 2007
The Art of Assemblage

In connection to placement and scale I soon developed an affinity for sculptural works by Isa Genzken, Carol Bove, Karen Kilimnik, Rachel Harrison and David Altjmed. Photographic material, found objects, hand made objects, painting, drawing and video, effectively draw the viewer into the drama of the artists’ subjective theater. In addition to expanding my sensibility regarding sequencing and spatial relationships, these works resonate with me because they utilize a poetic, complex, and highly intuitive logic. Like the filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, I believe that: "Through poetic connection feeling is heightened and the spectator is made more active." These works give us room to make meaning, to draw our own connections, and in this way become active participants rather than distanced observers.

In my second semester I ventured further into the realms of sculpture and assemblage with the hope of finding new ways of incorporating the dimension of space in my work. I utilized found objects because in a peculiar way they share a similarity with photographs. Like photographs, they contain if not an imprint of time, than at least a vague memory of past use. In these assemblages the objects were like moments of time captured on film and later re-contextualized within a sequence.

The more successful pieces were most like a theater, a tableau vivant, in which a diversity of characters could relate and converse with one another. These interactions
produced varying degrees of emotions and meanings, some intentional and some unanticipated. I saw that the power of certain juxtapositions and associations is capable of producing a "living abstract organism". I am interested in the way artist David Altmejd, in speaking about his sculptural assemblages, describes the interaction between different elements of his pieces not as creating a language, but creating an energy:

"Rather than a language, I am more interested in how the elements create energy. I know that the things I use, the Star of David or certain words affiliated with political activities, are charged, and have important meaning potential. I inject them inside the installation and the meaning potential transforms into energy. My involvement is to create something that is alive, that will be able to say new things. The energy of this living abstract organism depends on the meaning of the work being unresolved, uncontrolled. When meaning is controlled, the resulting object is not alive there is no tension in a logical system that functions." – David Altmejd
The work I presented in the Candidacy Show was comprised of four separate sculptural pieces. I was continuing to experiment with video, and incorporated a successful piece into one of the assemblage works in the show. The video projected out of a mysterious chest, precariously tilted off the floor on one side, supported by a small figurine of a polar bear. At the time, I was thinking about loss in the context of the growing fears of our influence on the environment. The piece *Rembrandt’s Girl* was also considering impending doom, but what is at stake here is culture. Meanwhile, the toy chicks in the video came to life as they stared relentlessly out at the viewer, bobbing their heads up and down knowingly, perhaps even in approval or in compliance. The main tension here grew from the contradiction between the lighthearted, playful nature of the materials and the grave implications of the scenarios these materials were constructing.

*Mysterious Burden, 2007*
Mysterious Burden, 2007
The power of the symbol as the assemblages began to grow progressively more textual; the dense layering of juxtapositions, of symbol against symbol, made the work something to read and decipher. Ironically, in my attempts to learn how to control space I ended up shifting my focus away from creating an environment that could physically affect the viewer. These assemblage pieces functioned not so much through their physicality but through a poetic logic of an intuitive language. The spaces I was creating were far more cerebral than visceral. What became apparent to me through making these pieces is the conflict in my general practice. In some ways I had each one of my legs in
two different boats - physicality and cerebrality. Boating in such a way is pretty awkward and gets even trickier out in turbulent waters. Yet, these are two very important issues for me that I have all along been attempting to fuse together. The desire to achieve both a sensual experience and a symbolic language underlies this conflict and fuels the development of my work.
"Believing that the images they sought came from the unconscious, whose contents they assumed as loyal Freudians to be timeless as well as universal, the Surrealists misunderstood what was most brutally moving, irrational, unassimilable, mysterious - time itself." -- Susan Sontag

"Time is a state: the flame in which there lives the salamander of the human soul." -- Andrei Tarkovsky

I continued to experiment with video during my second year sensing the potential of this medium to resolve some of the conflicts I had previously encountered. Video's relationship to photography made the form quite intuitive and familiar to me, while its unique relationship to time was an exciting discovery. The unique property of the moving image is that it can situate the poignancy of the passed moment within the viewer's sensation of time passing. In addition to introducing the dimension of time into the work, video's easily manipulated scale and synched sound, make it an effective tool for creating a visceral environment.

The experience of time is existential. It began to play an important role in my work for it contains within it a universal experience of loss - the perpetual passing of the present moment. It is as illusive as the horizon, its presentness constantly withdrawing..."
and always out of reach. In my video works I aim to utilize the dimension of time as a visceral metaphor that can communicate symbolically while affecting the viewers' temporal experience.

Over the summer of 2007 I made *Swimming Up Stream*, a video in which I swim up stream continuously without coming up for air. The perpetual, active engagement with an impossible feat could act as a healthy alternative to mourning the passing of time. The futility of the task points back to the inevitable. The struggle inherent in the action sustains the poignant contradiction. A perpetual loop encompasses both the stillness of a sublime moment and the grief of that moment passing. The loop both invokes time passing and also stills it.

*Swimming Up Stream*, 2007
Stilling the moment through a temporal medium heightens the awareness of a time. While viewing video and film our expectations are tuned to the temporality of the medium and we are always ready for an endless succession of changing impressions. When these expectations are thwarted the viewer becomes self-consciously aware of his own experience of time. In this respect, the video works I made in the fall of 2007 all dealt with this function of the moving image. The three pieces, *Standing On Chair, In the Boiler Room, and Laying Down by The Great Lake*, present moments of absolute stillness within a duration of several minutes. *On Chair* and *In the Boiler Room*, are both unedited and the stillness is achieved through holding of a pose. The poses are unnecessarily difficult and awkward, which makes their stillness all the more effective. The action
recalls the practice of a fakir; a Sufi ascetic whose way is through the domination of his physical body. In the contemporary setting of industrial architecture these small and futile feats serve as reminders of the body’s fragility, together with grace and eccentricity.

In the Boiler Room, 2007

*Laying Down by The Great Lake* pares two videos in a two-channel projection. The channel on the left is a video of an imagined death scenario. Dressed up in my best attire, I lie down and attempt not to breathe for several minutes. Silhouetted and reclining horizontally, in my stillness I imagine lifelessness, but only for as long as I can hold my breath. In the right channel the horizon of the Great Lake is constantly changing as the
clouds move over the sky. The perpetual resurrection on the left is viewed against a continual illusion of the horizon line.

*Laying Down by The Great Lake, 2007*
"If I could walk along the rope and as it dipped than—just for a moment—I would touch the horizon, which would really talk about the incredible struggle to get to that place of the imagination. I call the piece "Touch" because it is about that moment or that desire to walk on the horizon, which is obviously an impossibility and only an illusion that can be accomplished through the video camera. And you can see I’m hardly balancing there in that place of my desire. Thinking about what the horizon means to us, it’s sort of a place of contemplation... But for me, I’m interested in it as a place that doesn’t really exist. That if we were to try to go to that place, the horizon would just recede further." – Janine Antoni

"Maybe because we now recognize the ocean as our ancestral home it has this emotive fascination for us, like that a mother country has for its long-scattered diaspora." – James Hamiliton-Paterson

Our relationship to the ocean is a metaphor I’ve often used to express the emotions underlying my work. The return of man to the ocean is an impossibility that seems as certain as the impossibility of the return to a forgotten homeland. At the edge of the ocean an instinctual longing for a primordial homeland comes in sharp contrast with the horizon. The illusory flatness of its line is a perfect and constant reminder of our exodus and the unattainability of our return.
A Diaspora’s nostalgic longing for a place to which it can not return is relevant today not only for the obvious reasons of the rise of globalization and migration in contemporary culture. There also exists an ideological diaspora, faced with a growing disappearance of a failed ideology that for many decades served as the only form of resistance to the hegemony of a capitalist global order. The idealism of our parents’ generation has suffered a great blow as at first the ruthlessness and later the disintegration of many communist powers revealed the failures and horrors of utopic ideologies. In many ways, a Romantic inspired view of human freedom and equality has been assimilated into the capitalist social order, but not without cooptation and distortion.

The longing for the ideal of the human potential is ridden with mixed emotions. In very rational and logical terms the possibilities of an ideal society are constantly undermined and defeated by history. The ideal seems to be a fiction of a well-meaning imagination. We are in a way always reliving our banishment from Eden, the minds ability to imagine a utopian dream, and the failure of this dream in the face of knowledge. But as the shift of perception found in knowledge had made realists of Adam and Eve, it also underscored the power of perception to change reality, for better or worse.

The horizon is the unreachable but sensed potentiality. Much like the utopian ideals of the past it is an illusion. Yet the value of this illusion ought not be dismissed. The horizon had driven many an explorer to distant lands, in search of perfection evoked in the flatness and horizontality of it’s line. The advantage we have today is the very
realization of the impossibility of achieving the ideal, our longing for it complicated by
the clarity and poignancy of its unattainability. For me an important question arises out
of the metaphor a contemporary view of the horizon line. When we view our distant
homelands, or our failing idealism, and fully understand the impossibility of our return to
them, will we succumb to defeatism and the status quo, or can this longing for illusory
potentialities still inspire the search for new ones?

Sarah, 2008
In the installation of my thesis exhibition I debated whether the inclusion of several pieces would suit my goals. I decided that the space would be disturbed by the presence of several pieces in close proximity. I find affinity with Doug Aitken's statement about his video installation *i am in you*: "In a lot of ways I wanted to make a piece where you are drawn into psychological landscape that was running at real time."
Where experience and perception was running at real time." The decision to show *Conversation* alone preserved the integrity of this aim. In its installation, the piece altered the exhibition space through its imagery, scale, and use of sound, to create a chamber of temporal and psychological experience. Yet the most powerful way the video affected the space, was through its subtly shifting pace that could affect the viewer's experience of time.

*Conversation* is a two-channel projection, both videos of an old man in a natural environment. The subject is my Grandfather, a man whose history is highly evocative of the themes I attempt to grapple with in my work. I offered clues of his history through several formal elements. The duality of his image speaks to his sense of fractured identity that also mirrors my own. As a Romanian Jew, Benjamin, evacuated to the Ural Mountains during World War II. After the war he returned to the region that was then occupied by the Soviet Union. He spent close to sixty years in the Republic of Moldova as Boris, only to immigrate again, this time to the United States, where he again regained his Jewish identity.

In the two projections, because the angle of the shots is different, the subject is seen from two different perspectives. In the one image his facial expression is soft, loving and sincere. He gazes directly into the camera and easily establishes a connection with the viewer. In the second image he is quite changed. He barely makes eye contact with the camera; his gestures show signs of exhaustion and anxiety. His stature fills the frame with more authority and distance. The footage in both of the videos only lasts a few seconds
but is looped to create a seamless whole. Every loop decreases in speed, starting from real time and ending with 10 percent of real time. The result is a kind of dissection of a single moment, as the rate at which we view the footage continually changes our perception of it.

Through out the 9 min and 30s of an increasingly slowed time a dialogue takes places between the two figures. I wrote and narrated the dialogue in Russian. My voice substitutes what I imagine to be his internal voice, fusing our subjectivities together, if only for the duration of the piece. The text further complicates the duality of the figure’s
identity as each refers to his self as ‘we’ but retains a unique persona of his own. The dialogue begins with a question "How old are we?" - a fact that immediately becomes a point of contention. Unable to come to a resolution they change the subject. The conversation turns to a past experience of death in the family. The story is told in the first person plural with the intent to draw the viewer into the dialogue. Boris' direct gaze into the camera serves the same purpose. In these moments of describing experience that "we" lived through while directly gazing out at the viewer, the piece implicates the audience in this exchange. However, there is one exception in the language structure.

"And then you asked her, How long will I live?" The usage of “you” in this case is meant to differentiate the two characters. Perhaps only Boris had the courage to ask this question, or perhaps Benya already knew the answer.

Looking back at much younger self, the conversation serves as a meditation on the character's present situation, his own old age and proximity to death. The final question of the narrative, "How can we live forever Benya, if our lives are filled with sadness?" - evokes an ideal that seems to have long perished, eternal life of the human soul. It is for me as much a spiritual question as it is a political one. It is the question of unrealized potentials of past ideals.
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Vitoletta Litvak was born in 1980, in Tiraspol, Moldova. She immigrated to Philadelphia, PA in 1992. She received a B.A. in Photography with High Honors from Haverford College in 2002. From 2002 to 2004 she was a Post Baccalaureate Studio and Teaching Assistant Fellow in the Department of Art and Art History at Bucknell University. In 2008 Violetta received her Master of Fine Arts in Photography and Film from Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts.