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NOTHING LEFT UNSAID

George Shaw

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Art

Sydney College of the Arts

University of Sydney

2015
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In *Ohio Impromptu* [by Samuel Beckett], the subject of the drama sits at a table while his double sits opposite reading to him from a book that tells the story of a man sitting at a table opposite his double who reads to him from a book. The story he reads, however, reports that this is the final reading. The only identity the old man has is the one sustained by the text that the other man reads; when that reading ends, of course, his presence dissolves.¹

Introduction

My studio-based research consists of four works: a sculptural installation made of blank books titled, *Nothing Left Unsaid* (2013) and three video installations titled *You, Always, Never* (2014); *Look What We’ve Done to Each Other* (2015); and *Mutually Agreed* (2015). The overarching objective of this research is to investigate how one may take the intimacy that exists between two people, to create an artwork that paradoxically relies on autobiography but attempts not to reveal the details of that autobiography.

When I began my MFA candidature, it was at the time that my wife Andrea and I agreed to separate after twenty-three years of living together – eight of those as a married couple. In the studio, my aim was to use our intimacy and the failings of our relationship to frame the limits of my work. Instead of focusing on the personal minutiae of my relationship with Andrea, I wanted to use this research, my artwork and this thesis, to explore the ethics of a relationship, as well as the dynamics of interpersonal interactions.

Critical to my work is the idea of two people encountering each other face to face, both literally and metaphorically. Every work that I have created as part of this research has a face-to-face encounter, even when the work is inanimate objects (such as books on lecterns). In this thesis, the face-to-face encounter is defined and explored through the philosophical ideas of Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995). Levinas’ position sees the encounter between people as central to human existence. At the core of this encounter is an ethics of responsibility, the responsibility we have as human beings towards each other. For Levinas, the
human face is the site from which this happens: the face is a unique signifier of “humanness” and when we have a face-to-face encounter with someone else, we are at our most vulnerable.²

In a special edition of the humanities journal Angelaki, the face comes into central focus. The opening remarks by editors Andrew Benjamin, Mark Howard, and Christopher Townsend suggest that:

> From one perspective the face brings with it the centrality of humanism that gives to the face a quality in which the particular reveals something that is both proper to human being and which has, at the same time, a universal quality.³

Levinas’ ethics pushes our responsibility for the other in the face-to-face encounter to the forefront of our humanness to allow the other to exist without compromise.⁴ Throughout the research I have found Levinas’ proposal necessary to understand the foundations of intimacy that are central to my artwork. His ideas about the other in relation to the self are of further interest, as they define ethics as a pre-original fact, the state that exists before we can assume responsibility for anything we do.

In referencing Levinas, I have looked at an ethical criterion on which to investigate my relationship and “universalize” my story. Levinas is not saying

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⁴ Ultimately he is suggesting that our mutual responsibility is to not kill each other at first sight. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An essay on exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Boston: M. Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), 203.
that responsibility is literally between two loving human beings, but rather
that it goes beyond the surface of personal interaction and to the heart of
what it is to be human. Levinas’ philosophy extends personal intimacy into
civil responsibility.5 This understanding helped me to overcome a challenge
my practice has faced; the objective to transform the “personal” into the
“universal.” This proved particularly challenging when writing my thesis.
How could I write from an autobiographical perspective but maintain the
goal of universality?

One afternoon, months into our separation, Andrea and I visited the exhibition
We Used To Talk About Love at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.6 In the
exhibition, Grant Stevens’ text-based video work Crushing (2009) (Fig. 1)
projected clichéd phrases about rejection, sadness, and despair, as they faded in
and out. The writer and curator Anneke Jaspers, has described this work as
“a stirring evocation of vulnerability, melancholy, and longing.”7 As the clichés
gradually appeared, one phrase turned into two, eight, twenty, thirty; they
started out slowly and accelerated until they resembled a barrage of text.
Art theorist Mark Pennings writes:

By using clichés, Stevens is able to refer to expressions that
epitomise human experience in the most efficient way…
the work asks us to genuinely consider the rudiments of
love and loss.8

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Philosophers: Levinas and the History of Philosophy, ed. Claire Katz with Lara Trout (London & New York:
Routledge, 2005), 157.
6 We Used to Talk About Love, curated by Natasha Bullock, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 31 January to
21 April, 2013.
7 Anneke Jaspers, “Grant Stevens,” in We Used to Talk About Love, (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South
Wales, 2013), 124.
The universality of Stevens’ ideas and themes creates a narrative that makes the work accessible to anyone viewing it. Stevens himself states:

Part of what I’m interested in is how our personal experiences, no matter how seemingly profound and unique, can also be common, shared, generic, repetitive, and banal.9

This accessibility is at the heart of my objectives. One challenge has been to find a way (similarly to Stevens) to convey what has been shaped by personal experience without the emotional expression that is often associated with autobiographical work. Stevens’ narratives are created from found mass media and internet sources, while I conceive narratives from my own relationships. By creating pastiches from anonymous real-life stories, Stevens animates seemingly endless lines of text that transform hundreds of sentimental statements into a collective biography of love and loss. However, my work, uses autobiography to reflect on love and conflict, intimacy and distance, pain and resolution.

Writing about self-expression, the curator Thomas Wulffen suggests that,

The biographical is especially important…biography is always a mediating history…while the past is an unordered mass… biography is an ordered past…aimed at an objective, an analysed history at least.10

9 Grant Stevens quoted in Are You Upset With Me?, 8.
In a similar manner, I have used the process of making art to also create an order with the aim of understanding what happens between two people who are intimately connected and disconnected in a given space and time.

The work presented is not just about Andrea and I but also about man and woman (in this case), and human relationships at large. To universalize our experience, I have written about us not in the first person but rather I have turned us into characters. When I write about me, I do so in the third person as “the Man” and the same applies when Andrea is written about as “the Woman,” to create a distance that allows for more objective and detailed analysis in the studio and thesis. This is emphasized by the way I have

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capitalized both nouns as if they were names. The final result is a suite of works about an “every man” and an “every woman.” Additionally, *Nothing Left Unsaid* is also a work of fiction because even though it originates in real life events, the protagonists are ultimately performing for the camera; it is theatre enacted in front of a lens.

This thesis follows a chronological form and is written in three chapters, each titled after a work or works chosen for discussion. Chapter One *Nothing Left Unsaid* focuses on an installation of eight bespoke hardcover books that represent the conceptual starting point for the suite of works in my studio-based research. This work is discussed in reference to the ideas and selected works by artists Ed Ruscha and Sophie Calle. Chapter One explores text in art, object making, and the book as sculptural object. It also examines personal narrative and the book as artwork.

Chapter Two *You, Always, Never* analyses a two-channel screened video, which documents a performance by a Man and a Woman. The work is discussed in relation to a selection of video installations by the artists Bill Viola and Candice Breitz. Chapter Two examines the transformation of personal experience into narratives about universal conditions, and emotion as motivation. It also looks at the use of language, as well as individual and collective identity.

Chapter Three *Look What We’ve Done to Each Other* and *Mutually Agreed*, considers two works: the first is a screen-based performance-for-video by a Man and a Woman, and the second a two-channel projection of a performance-for-video by the same two people. These two works explore parallels with the relational and autobiographical performances by the artists
Ulay and Marina Abramovic in the 1970s, which emerged directly from their relationship in art and life. Notions of love and loss, transformation, transcendence, and redemption are further discussed.
Chapter 1
Nothing Left Unsaid

Eight books slightly larger than a standard A4 size are placed on eight bespoke, timber lecterns standing in two groups of four placed with their front covers facing each other. (Fig. 2) The books appear solemn in their thick and heavy hardcover formality. Each book is stamped with the authority of a gold-lettered title on its sober, burgundy cloth front cover, and spine.

Figure 2  George Shaw, Nothing Left Unsaid 2013
A metal locking device, which includes a brass padlock is attached to each tome to secure it shut, so that the only access to the information one would usually expect to find is available only through the title.

Collectively the eight books and lecterns form a work called *Nothing Left Unsaid* (2013). This work operates as the foundation for my studio-based research. The individual book titles are: *THE BOOK OF ANGRY VOICES; THE BOOK OF UNHELPFUL ACCUSATIONS; THE BOOK OF MONOSYLLABIC GRUNTS; THE BOOK OF SUPPRESSED WORDS; THE BOOK OF PAINFUL MEMORIES; THE BOOK OF HURTFUL QUOTES; THE BOOK OF UNREALIABLE RECOLLECTIONS; and THE BOOK OF HYSTERICAL RANTS.*

(Fig. 3 & 4)

Figure 3  George Shaw, *Nothing Left Unsaid* (detail) 2013
At first sight, the installation with its tall, upright lecterns could be viewed anthropomorphically as people facing each other. Further, the padlocked books create a challenge: our first impulse with a book is to open its pages, to read for entertainment or knowledge. Disrupting the nature of this object (books are meant to be read), as well as the instinct of the viewer (here is a book I want to read) illustrates the conceptual nature of the work. *Nothing Left Unsaid* was conceived after reflecting on the things people say to each other in moments of private, personal crisis. It also reflects on something subtler: that which can’t be said or heard but what is felt, held, and stored by each person throughout a lifetime.

The size of the books is critical because each is intended to stand in as the authority on its own subject; they could not be small like a paperback novel because at that size they would not radiate enough gravitas and, at the same time, they could not be so large as to feel like they belonged on a lounge.
Combining hand-stamped gold type and a burgundy cloth material for the covers helps evoke thoughts of academic theses or Catholic bibles, both of which are accepted signifiers of information one turns to for knowledge and understanding. The title of each book is also stamped on its spine to ensure verisimilitude, as well as the practical consideration that any viewer should be able to read what the book is about from various angles or distances. The only discernible difference between these words and their front cover counterparts is the addition of the surname SHAW, which is included as an artist’s conceit.

Consideration was given to various ways of displaying the books. Would they sit on a shelf; laid flat on a table; or placed inside a cabinet to further restrict access? Ultimately the decision was made to rest each book on a lectern, an object that conjures formal occasions such as church readings, political speeches, and other ceremonies. In other words, the lectern aims to conjure the human voice – it is stood at during moments of pronouncements when important information is being read and communicated. However, a deliberate limitation is embedded in the work because the lectern’s normal auditory role and the book as an object to be read are obviously subverted. The lock is a barrier not just to the perceived catalogue of words within, but also to the temptation to look for gossip as well, perhaps the “he said, she said” section of the book.

In fact, the books metaphorically contain noise – all the commotion of dissent sucked into them and locked away. Even though the books are contained, they allow the possibility for the viewer to “hear” the words locked inside. Furthermore, the titles function as the story. Placing the reader in a position where the only access to the work is through the title
prompts the viewer to consider how each book’s topic may play out according to his or her own life.

It was interesting to consider a number of comments made by visitors to an exhibition in 2013 when *Nothing Left Unsaid* was shown for the first time. Two of the most common remarks were, “You got seven out of my eight books” and “I could have written all of them.” It is not an exaggeration to say that nine out of ten viewers during the period of the exhibition were compelled to express an opinion about the work rather than leave in silence: anecdotes were told, self-deprecating jokes were made, and *sotto voce* conversations were noted. But the most memorable comment of all during the exhibition period was expressed without a hint of irony by a viewer who remarked, “The title (of the work) says it all.”

**The Book and Ed Ruscha**

Many works of art have a prototype whether art historical, theoretical or executional. *Nothing Left Unsaid* can trace its lineage to Ed Ruscha’s series of books, from his early, groundbreaking 1960s artist’s books to more recent works involving the use of second-hand books as “canvases” on which to paint. (Fig. 5)

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From the late 1950s, Ruscha showed an interest in text by making paintings of single words, which in art historian Armin Zweite’s words were “bereft of any syntactical context.”12 Using words as abstract elements that neither clarify nor obfuscate, but simply exist in their painted form can be interpreted as a study of words-as-signifiers: what we understand by them; how we process them visually; and how they sound in our ear. Above all, how words can be rendered meaningless through arbitrary use. Ruscha’s intention was not to write his thoughts, so much as allow viewers to create their own.

Ruscha’s evolution into books-as-art in the early 1960s created the possibility of a new art object known as the “artist’s book.” Starting with *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations* (1963), Ruscha followed his linguistic interest

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by experimenting with the book as a container of words. (Fig. 6) While Ruscha’s books gave him new access to language, they also offered him a unique method of showing his indexical photographs of gasoline stations and parking lots, for example. Although Ruscha used photography to document what interested him, photography came second to his interest in transforming books into objects with the stated aim of transcending their inherent nature. In the past, Ruscha has said that, “I consider my books to be strictly visual materials. I even perceive them as bits of sculpture, in a way. They are three dimensional, they are thick.”\textsuperscript{13} Furthermore, the real interest was not the photograph in itself, as much as how to “experience a book that contained snapshots of apartments, [for example].”\textsuperscript{14}

Figure 6  Ed Ruscha, various artist books from 1963, 1964, 1970

Seen through Ruscha’s lens, \textit{Nothing Left Unsaid} could have also been titled \textit{Eight Ways in Which Couples Hurt Each Other With Words} or something

\textsuperscript{14} Marshall, \textit{Ed Ruscha}, 59.
equally mechanical, as the titles could be seen as self-contained narratives. By contrast, Ruscha’s books not only have content, they also intentionally represent photographically what their written titles promise in an exacting way, nothing more, nothing less; their purpose was simply to “convey technical information” similarly to the way German photographers, Bernd and Hilda Becher documented industrial architecture.

Like Ruscha, I too have used language (not just single words) as an integral element to convey my ideas, with the words themselves appearing as more than just a visual element. Similarly to Ruscha, who uses words as an instructive system that brings performativity to photography, I use words to create a system of narratives.

I also used language in the performance-for-video *Tomorrow is Another Day* (2011) in which my teenage son Roman drew and wrote how he felt about our relationship on my body. (Fig. 7 & 8) *Tomorrow is Another Day* was an opportunity for Roman to express his feelings without fear of objection or recrimination. Reading the inscriptions on my skin at the conclusion of the work gave me the opportunity to empathise and, ultimately, better understand my son. A further example of how I use language in my work appears in the video *You, Always, Never* (2014) in which the sound of words plays a pivotal role in how the work may be perceived. I will discuss this work in detail in Chapter 2. However, these two examples attempt to illustrate the difference between how I use language in my books and Ruscha’s more “scientific” approach.

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Figure 7  George Shaw, *Tomorrow is Another Day* (video still) 2011

Figure 8  George Shaw, *Tomorrow is Another Day* 2011
Nothing Left Unsaid also explores notions of personal narrative. As stated in the introduction, my work has been motivated by the breakdown of my marriage; and while my objective has been to explore this personal narrative, I have also endeavored to find ways to depersonalize the experience through my artwork by turning both Andrea and I into “characters” in a story that could be constructed as anyone else’s.

Unlike Ruscha, personal narrative is territory explored to the extreme by French artist Sophie Calle, who also has a penchant for books, words, and language (except that unlike me Calle is not interested in depersonalizing her story). While Nothing Left Unsaid finds expression in the form of books as sculptural objects, Calle’s books are published as traditional, standalone publications that operate as both art book and artwork. To date, the French publishing house Actes Sud has released more than fifteen titles under her name.17

Relevant to my research is her work titled Exquisite Pain (2000). In this work Calle also used the book as a way of chronicling a narrative of personal crisis to deal with the pain of intimacy. Exquisite Pain details Calle’s experiences after winning a three-month scholarship to study in Japan in 1984. When her lover expressed dissatisfaction at such a lengthy separation and suspicions she might take up with someone else, Calle immediately felt guilty and apprehensive. After three months away, Calle then travelled to New Delhi to meet her lover for a short stay before returning to Paris.

However, upon arrival, she was given a message announcing that due to an accident he would not be meeting her, after all. When she reached her room at the Imperial Hotel, Calle phoned Paris and spoke to her boyfriend who informed her that he had met another woman. At that moment, she hung up the phone. It was 2am on January 25, 1985 – the exact time and specific date being of critical importance because Calle nominated that moment as the unhappiest of her life and the motivation for this work. (Fig. 9) Back in Paris, Calle began asking friends and strangers, “When did you suffer most?” and writing down their stories. In *Exquisite Pain* she notes:

> I decided to continue such exchanges until I had got over my pain by comparing it with other people’s, or had worn out my own story through repetition. The method proved effective. In three months I had cured myself. Yet, while the exorcism had worked, I still feared a possible relapse, and so I decided not to exploit this experiment artistically. By the time I returned to it, fifteen years had passed.  

*Exquisite Pain* was exhibited in 2000 and subsequently published as a book in 2004. The first half of the book titled *Before Unhappiness*, chronicles the 92 days before Calle’s fateful phone call in letters, diary entries, photographs, and ephemera. The second half is titled *After Unhappiness* and features thirty-six stories answering the question “When did you suffer most?” – each story paired with a differently worded version of Calle’s singularly unhappiest moment. (Fig. 10)

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What interests me is Calle’s use of her despair as the central theme in *Exquisite Pain*. Having experienced the unhappiest moment in her life, Calle wants to understand the pain of intimacy, the misery of her failure. Rather than retreat behind closed doors, she carries out her investigation in the most audacious, public manner: when asked about her trip she tells everyone about her break-up instead. In *Exquisite Pain* she divulges intimate details of the correspondence with her lover, even an unmailed note she wrote confessing to an adulterous night in Japan. She reveals a taboo when she discloses her lover is an old friend of her father’s she felt attracted to since she was a young girl.
When Calle deals with her pain, she looks for ours as well: she shares intimacies and finds parallels to the depth of her anguish in other people’s stories. Investigating her pain suggests Calle’s work has a therapeutic function. This function also plays a role in my studio-based research, albeit without her level of narrative detail. In a 2005 review of *Exquisite Pain*, the writer Johanna Burton states:

Calle pressed on the fine line between empathy and self-preservation, adopting a homeopathic strategy whereby a carefully administered dose of poison counter-intuitively
amounts to a cure...[she] exhibited grief as simultaneously debilitating and recuperative, as something to be relativized and even consumed.¹⁹

Unlike Calle’s obsessive (to the point of humourous) accounts of emotional suffering, Nothing Left Unsaid relies on brevity; titles that are short, to the point, and an approach that is perhaps best described as blunt. Like Calle, I too experienced the therapeutic function of using art making as a way to emotionally liberate my angst; hence this strategy beckoned the creation of more work.

Chapter 2
You, Always, Never

Two television monitors sit on individual plinths 1.6 metres high, which are placed in close proximity so that the monitors face each other at a distance of around fifteen centimeters. One monitor frames a head and shoulder image of a Woman looking straight ahead reciting the words “you, always, never” in a seemingly random order. On the other monitor, an image of a Man appears similarly framed showing him repeating the same words in an equally non-sequential order. The rhythm and pace of the words has been carefully choreographed to ensure that neither person speaks over the other, so that the words are delivered as a dialogue. (Fig. 11)
The distance between the monitors in this two-channel installation is one of two critical elements of the work. A narrow gap exists so the viewer may only be able to glimpse a fragment, a sliver of each person. Regardless of where the viewer places him or herself in proximity to the monitors, the viewing angle is always obtuse making it difficult to get a clear picture of either person onscreen. What do these people look like? Are they actually talking to each other? Do their expressions belie or reflect their words? The situation means that to begin forming an image of the work, the viewer must first become a listener. With only three words being spoken in various permutations and in an endless loop, the sound component is the second critical element of the work *You, Always, Never*.

Many married couples in conflict seek counselling sessions over a period of time with a therapist, together or on their own. The sessions provide an opportunity to air grievances or state particular points of view, and work on strategies for reconciliation in the presence of a facilitator who acts as a sounding board, analyst, and referee when the occasion requires it. In these sessions, frank disclosure from both parties allows room for reflection, interpretation and discussion, so that couples may identify their patterns of language and behaviour when disagreements between them flare up. From personal experience, the words “you,” “always,” and “never” are often used when arguments devolve into blaming matches. The intransigent nature of these three words offers no room for ambiguity – they are strong signifiers that waste no time getting to the point.

In the two-channel video, a Man and Woman perform the work relying solely on this shared, pared down vocabulary. Rather than recreate the tones of conflict in the work’s final form, the words are spoken by each person to
the other in calm, slightly inflected tones in what appears to be a random order. The structure of the dialogue can be discerned after continuous listening, and manifests itself as two people giving each other the opportunity to answer an allegation without one necessarily appearing to have more power than the other. To someone viewing the work, the exchange would sound something like:

…you…always…never…you…never…you…
always…you…never…always…you…always…
never…you…

People use speech as a binding force in their relationship whether in conflict or at play. Being able to express meaning and intention with clarity and single-mindedness in a partnership in which both people feel equally matched can be an advantage, as well as a disadvantage. On the one hand, you can be constructive and communicate in a way that builds on each other’s ideas coherently and effectively. On the other hand, you can also be destructive by using words as ammunition to censure and hurt. The choice of words in *You, Always, Never* reflects verbal deftness in the way it communicates a story in a simple and concise manner, which means eliminating the need to catalogue every phrase or every epithet that could be imagined in moments of heightened conflict.

The challenge faced with *You, Always, Never* was to find a balance between delivering gossip and information, between divulging sensitive details and discussing relatable situations. Much in the way the books in *Nothing Left Unsaid* strike this balance with locks that prevent the viewer from opening the pages to read a story, the short distance in which the two monitors in *You, Always, Never* are placed as a barrier for the viewer to stop them from
personalizing or identifying the faces in the interchange. The aim of this placement is to create a metaphorical blank screen on which the viewer may cast himself or herself in one of the parts.

From a structural point of view, the installation of the monitors in close proximity to each other, mirrors the body language of intense confrontations and the invasion of personal space – visually it’s akin to how an escalating argument tends to appear like. It is also a way to embody the phrase “face-to-face,” which portrays an encounter between two people at very close quarters. Again, recalling Levinas’ position that when humans encounter each other they are at their most vulnerable, and that at this moment it is incumbent upon each not to harm the other – to allow the other the equality they are entitled to. Taking this view on board, I have recorded the voices without making them sound like an argument with the tone and volume that tends to escalate as anger rises, but instead the repetitive, evenly spoken mantra of the three words becomes white noise, mirroring the banality that is inherent in many domestic arguments. The looped words also function to suggest how people who are arguing stop listening to each other, intent only on having their say; it is what in the dialogue box of a comic strip could be written as “blah, blah, blah.”

The autobiographical foundations in Bill Viola’s work

In many ways, the expression of emotion is at odds with the analytical approach of conceptual art making.20 A major challenge for me has been that while the methodology is analytical and conceptually driven, the subject

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20 At least in terms of the ground-breaking period of ‘Conceptual Art’ that characterized the 1960s and 70s.
matter is personal and emotional. Studying the work of the video artist Bill Viola has helped me understand this dichotomy in my work.

Viola is an artist who questions what makes us human, how we think and feel about others and ourselves. He has explored the “inner life” since his early days as a pioneer of video art by creating works that at times are drawn directly from his own life experiences. He is also known for his interest in mysticism and spirituality. Viola chooses to approach his ongoing examination of human nature with recurring themes such as time and space, birth and death, love and loss, the interior and exterior. Above all, Viola wants to make us think by making us feel first. In an interview with the curator Jorg Zutter, Viola says:

There is still such a strong mistrust in intellectual circles about things which speak to the mind via the body...as if they can see that this...will lead to opening the locked gate of...deeper emotive energies. In my opinion, the emotions are precisely the missing key that has thrown things out of balance...the pitfalls of mere feel good sensuality and sentimentality are clear enough...By ignoring the emotional state of our nature, we have turned our backs on the source of the most human of qualities – compassion – without which no authentic moral power is possible.21

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Without compassion it is almost impossible to achieve a true understanding of the human condition, the collection of experiences that we face as we struggle to commune with one another from the day we are born; understand ourselves; transcend our pain, grief, and loss; and finally die. Viola explores these universal, existential truths by creating powerful imagery with the intention of producing an emotional effect on the viewer. It is this provocation of the heart that Viola believes acts as a catalyst on the intellect to promote self-reflection and ultimately self-discovery.

*You, Always, Never* recalls Viola’s *Heaven and Earth* (1992). This work is a two-channel video installation in which two cathode-ray tubes (naked analogue video monitors) are installed vertically with their curved screens almost touching. On one monitor there is a close-up image of Viola’s mother on her deathbed. On the other is an image of a baby – his second son just a few days old. The black and white images are silent. The narrow gap between the glass screens allows one image to be reflected on the other creating a metaphor for how life and death “reflect and contain each other,” as Viola writes. The narrow gap, which is at eye level, further alludes to the comparatively short time we spend being alive.

The view of Viola’s mother’s face in his newborn son’s face again recalls Levinas’ face-to-face encounter. (Fig. 12) For Levinas, the face is a unique signifier. It is in fact central to what he calls “faciality” – the face-to-face encounter between the self and other, the moment the other is recognised.

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and accepted in their alterity.\textsuperscript{24} This critical notion of acceptance of self and other highlights the vulnerability and responsibility each human has towards maintaining the other’s existence, without the need to conquer and transform them into the self. \textsuperscript{25} This responsibility is what Levinas calls “ethics,” the state that creates the space for dialogue between two people facing each other: Levinas believes that it is in dialogue rather than solitude that life is ideal. \textsuperscript{26}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image}
\caption{Bill Viola, \textit{Heaven and Earth} 1982}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{24} Sean Hand, \textit{The Levinas Reader}, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell Publishers, 1989), 168.\
\textsuperscript{25} Sean Hand, \textit{The Levinas Reader}, 170.\
\textsuperscript{26} Sean Hand, introduction to \textit{Facing the Other: The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas} ed. Sean Hand (Cornwall: Curzon, 1996), 3.
In the various works I have created, both Man and Woman position themselves face-to-face; they never turn their backs on each other both literally and metaphorically. Most importantly, they stand opposite each other without one being more privileged than the other, each accepting the other’s position. In *You, Always, Never* this acceptance is reflected in the way they both speak with similar modulation, as if reflecting on the meaning of those words instead of using them accusingly.

There is a commonality between *You, Always, Never* and Viola’s *Heaven and Earth* in how both works are constructed: for example, the positioning of both monitors face-to-face at a very short distance from one another. Although this is a physical comparison, the narrow gap in both instances is essential to how viewers engage with the works: in *Heaven and Earth* Viola undermines the usual way of looking at images on a monitor – he makes it difficult for the viewer to see the face of his dying mother on the monitor that is facing down, making it available mostly as a reflection on the screen below it.

In *You, Always, Never* access to a full view of the protagonists is also undermined by almost negating any view at all. In both instances, the unconventional installation of the monitors creates a new way to engage with the work giving rise – as it has been said about Viola’s selective use of space – to the notion that “it is essential to change our point of view,
to abandon our well-loved habits, beliefs and prejudices, if we want to see, and to understand ourselves and each other,” as the philosopher Otto Neumaier writes.27

As with You, Always, Never it is also not necessary for the viewer of Viola’s Heaven and Earth to know whom the protagonists are in the work or know the intimate details of their lives to connect with the concept. Viola creates from memory, experience, and observation, and prefers to focus on the nature of instead of the story about a situation, people or theme. Viola’s video The Greeting (1995) (Fig. 13) is an example of this fundamental point of view. In an interview Viola states:

The situation… is intimate and very familiar…you vividly experience the emotional arc of these women, but you don’t get bogged down with ‘this is so-and-so and her boyfriend did blah, blah, blah’…this is how we experience the world the majority of the time…it is the invisible world of all the details of people’s personal lives – their desires, conflicts, motivations – that is hidden from our view and creates the intricate and seemingly infinite web of shifting relations that meets the eye. The real energy comes from invisible things.28

Finally, unlike the sound component of You, Always, Never, Viola does not use spoken words in his work, but instead creates abstract sounds as a formative element of his images, and to address his interest in how the body

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perceives space through the eyes and ears. By altering the viewer’s perception with recognisable yet distorted sounds, Viola disrupts the reception of his images, so that the familiar becomes estranged and, at times, almost dream-like. However, *You, Always, Never* is anything but dream-like (again quite direct), anchored in words so familiar that they do not need images to be understood.

![Figure 13 Bill Viola, *The Greeting* (video still) 1994](image)

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The language of Candice Breitz

Since moving from photography to video as her chosen medium in the late 1990s, Candice Breitz has continued to create works in which the spoken word is of fundamental importance. Quite distinct from Viola, one of Breitz’s concerns focuses on how we use language as a means of defining ourselves and relating to each other. Her specific interest is in the influence the vocabularies of mainstream cinema and popular music have on our social development and interaction. Breitz favours montage as a technique to dissect the structures of mass culture and expose tropes, reconfigure scripts, and present new points of view that allow multiple new meanings. She does this by choosing pop songs and Hollywood movies, which she has used in works such as *Babel Series* (1999); *Four Duets* (2000); *Soliloquy Trilogy* (2000); *Him 1968-2008* (2008); and *Her 1978-2008* (2008), “as a source of ready made artistic material,” according to the curator Christopher Phillips.

Breitz often creates works in which characters mirror themselves or face others in video monitors installed across a room from each other. Echoes of Breitz’s work are evoked in *You, Always, Never*. Breitz also employs repetition in the form of looped sound and images, which often serve to render the protagonists incoherent and the content meaningless. For example, *Babel Series* is a multi-channel installation in which MTV footage of singers such as Madonna, Prince, and Sting have been sampled and reconfigured. Breitz resampled every length of chosen footage into a

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monosyllabic sound that is instantly recognisable as belonging to that star’s repertoire, such as “da-da-da” for Sting and “pa-pa-pa” for Madonna. These infantile sounding snippets were then looped into an endless babble and the seven monitors that make up the installation were positioned in the same room, so that viewers entering the room would be assaulted by a cacophony of ridiculous sound effects emanating from some of the most popular and idolised entertainers of their time. (Fig. 14)

In contrast, in an installation such as You, Always, Never in which the main point of interest is sound rather than imagery, the looped soundtrack is not meant to diminish the Man and Woman speaking the words, but rather serves to highlight the tedium and banality of the blame game. While the looping of monosyllabic utterances mocks stars such as Sting and Prince,
the repetition of words in *You, Always, Never* eliminates the portentousness of the things we say to each other in times of conflict by turning them into meaningless white noise through constant repetition.31

Breitz’s interest in the language of popular culture is also evident in the eight-channel installation *Four Duets* (Fig. 15) in which singers such as Karen Carpenter, Olivia Newton-John, Whitney Houston, and Annie Lennox are deconstructed in split-second edited increments. Breitz achieves this by specifically isolating the pronouns “I,” “you,” “me,” and “my” from a number of each singer’s signature songs, pasted together, and then looped. She then creates two presentations for each singer: on one monitor only the words “I,” “me,” and “my” are sung and in the other only the word “you” is mentioned. The monitors are subsequently installed on plinths that face each other in a simile of someone with a split personality. In doing so, Breitz focuses on those four words as markers of the “tension between self and other...but the binary relationship staged by each duet [is] ultimately predicated on a single identity,”32 as the curator Okwui Enwezor suggests.

In *Four Duets*, Breitz effectively strips back language to reveal the essence of who the chosen singer could be. It is an invitation to the viewer to project himself or herself as the singer on screen or as the object of that singer’s attention or, alternatively, as the celebrity or the celebrated. Although the tension created between the self and other in Breitz’s *Four Duets* is based on a single but mirrored entity, it echoes Levinas’ belief that in the history of Western thought the other is acknowledged and reconciled by the self only

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in order to be conquered and subsumed. In *You, Always, Never* the tension between the protagonists is agonist rather than antagonist – the self activates the other to produce a response rather than overcome the other in order to eliminate them. The Man and Woman take turns stating their case, neither of them winning or losing, but simply existing in a loop of acknowledgement.

Similarly to Breitz’s *Four Duets*, *You, Always, Never* strips back language between the Man and Woman down to three essential words, which were conceived as an encapsulation not of who those two people are, but instead who they are not trying to be. *You, Always, Never* is informed by personal experience in which the words never and always – in times of conflict – only serve to make one or both people feel cornered by their fullness: they tend to extinguish any room for negotiation because the statements are given the weight of fact; so the only thing left to do is fight back.
Breitz says “the motion picture is a perfect medium for not only staging psychological conflicts but also interpreting them.” In works such as *Him 1968-2008* and *Her 1978-2008*, Breitz samples various scenes from movies by Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep and presents them in multi-channel installations, every monitor declaiming at once, as if to show the multiplicity of personalities in each of us struggling to become dominant (Fig. 16 and 17). Both these works stand as a collective document of the unconscious: we watch and listen as both actors purge themselves in several scenes showing them in a variety moods: sad, happy, angry, bewildered, defeated, proud.

The subject of Breitz’s analysis of Streep and Nicholson is the performance of gender through the editing of stereotypical ideas about how men and women are. While Breitz focuses on how men and women perform emotion in Hollywood movies, my work intends to remove the intensity of emotion; and is certainly not drawing on the performance of gender – Andrea is not the stereotypical shrill woman and I am not the stereotypical hopeless man.\textsuperscript{34}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure_17.png}
\caption{Candice Breitz, \textit{Her 1978-2008} 2008}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{34} Although a gendered analysis of my works could form part of my investigation, it is beyond the scope and objective of my current research focus.
Chapter 3

Look What We’ve Done to Each Other

Look What We’ve Done to Each Other (2015) is a two-person performance in which a Man and Woman sit close and opposite each other taking turns tracing each other’s facial lines and wrinkles with red and blue felt tip pens. The actions are recorded one at a time, as the Woman traces the Man’s face with a blue marker while he sits still, eyes unmoving, until she is finished. He then repeats the action with a red marker on her face. The tracing hand is gentle, focused on marking not scoring, drawing out the past for closer inspection. Look What We’ve Done to Each Other is a two-channel back-projection with both screens positioned opposite two metres from each other. (Fig. 18) The screens sit on plinths that place them at eye level. Each screen shows a close-up face seen from the point of view of the person who is tracing the lines. Standing between the two works, the viewer can only see one face at a time, never simultaneously in a mirroring effect. The screens play concurrently in silence and in a loop, transforming each tracing gesture into what appears as a soft stroke of the face.

In this work each line drawn is a memory claimed and made visible. Looked at as a graphic pattern, the marked lines on each face could be thought of as schemata for the damage the Man and Woman have done to each other, and that they now seek to address; it is a way of bringing the evidence to life. The red and blue lines are a testament to the notion of responsibility, the idea of visibility, and the desire to transcend their present state. The action is slow, calm and focused, it is meditative and still. There are neither sounds nor words, the marked lines take their place. The various markings create
two masks: one of the Woman and another of the Man; two new “faces” in dialogue, the one mirrored in the other: the Woman can only look at the Man and vice versa.

Figure 18 George Shaw, *Look What We’ve Done to Each Other* 2015

*Look What We’ve Done to Each Other* recalls *Tomorrow is Another Day* (2011), the work discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis in which my son Roman inscribes my body with writing and drawings that relate to how he feels about our relationship at that moment – good and bad. (Fig. 19) In that work, felt tip markers were also used as a way to communicate his feelings towards me. I chose to use felt tips because their effect on my skin would not be permanent, which reflected the suggestion that whatever my son felt at that time, it would most probably change.

It was my way of saying to him, “Don’t get too caught up with what is being said between you and me because while circumstances tend to change, my love for you never does.” Using felt tip markers for that work also meant
that I could illustrate that notion metaphorically as the ink on my skin faded from day to day taking with it whatever Roman had said to me one, two or three days earlier.

Figure 19  George Shaw, *Tomorrow is Another Day* 2011

In *Look What We’ve Done to Each Other*, the felt tip markers were also chosen for their impermanence. While it is true that they trace lines and wrinkles that are permanently etched on the Man and Woman’s faces, the ink does disappear eventually (although it is not part of the work itself). The impermanence of the ink acknowledges metaphorically that although the Man and Woman have caused enough pain to each other to leave a
trace, the despair of the past does not have to continue to live in the present.

The performance of the work took place in a small, windowless studio that had every surface painted black. Because of the nature of the work, the documentation of each person would consist of one continuous take, without room for error. The pressure to get it right was exacting on both of us but especially Andrea, who is not an artist. The two studio lights pushed up the temperature and exhausted the air. Sweat made the ink run as the felt tip pushed against the skin. Amidst these challenges, Andrea and I both felt unexpectedly vulnerable during the performance (notwithstanding our dispassioned looks onscreen); despite many rehearsals and test shots, the feeling of vulnerability that day was unexpected.

Relating to Marina Abramovic and Ulay

The collaborative body of work by Marina Abramovic and Ulay, which was performed from the 1970s to the 1980s is of importance to a video performance such as *Look What We’ve Done to Each Other*, particularly the works between 1976 and 1979. Throughout this period Abramovic and Ulay defined their performances as “relational” or “work which both lives off and feeds into the investigation of relationship between two humans as they try to relate simultaneously to one another and to the world around them,”35 as described by the art critic Thomas McEvilley.

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Their collaborations began at the same time as their relationship, and Abramovic and Ulay explored various aspects of their partnership in performances that challenged them mentally and physically. As the art critic and former Abramovic assistant James Westcott recounts, while they both brought with them unhappy, self-destructive pasts, together they set out to “channel [their] formerly destructive energy outwardly into constructive relational experiments.”\textsuperscript{36} Works such as \textit{Relation in Space} (1976), \textit{Breathing In/Breathing Out} (1977), \textit{Imponderabilia} (1977), \textit{Relation in Time} (1977), and \textit{Light/Dark} (1977) distill Abramovic and Ulay’s intense relationship into actions that test themselves and each other; questioning the ethical nature of their working partnership; and making their private lives public at the same time.

In \textit{Relation in Time} (Fig. 20), Abramovic and Ulay are seated back-to-back, still and sedentary, their thick, long hair tied together, with a video camera recording periodically. As the hours pass their bodies slump, their skin sags, and their tightly knotted hair unravels slowly. By the seventeenth hour, Westcott says, “confronted with the static image of the exhausted but intensely focused Abramovic and Ulay, the public could only tiptoe around respectfully and murmur quietly.”\textsuperscript{37} In the symmetry of the tableau, the viewer sees two people united physically and symbolically in their willingness to support each other, to withstand hardship, and to present a story while in silent communion.

\textsuperscript{37} Westcott, \textit{When Marina Abramovic Dies: A Biography}, 127
Light/Dark is a performance about understanding, empathy, tolerance, and control. While kneeling opposite each other in a dark space with only a spotlight on each of them in the room, Abramovic and Ulay take turns slapping each other in the face stopping only when one of them flinches. While gentle at first, the slaps gather intensity in speed, rhythm, and aggression even though the participants remain focused and unmoved. After twenty minutes they both stop slapping at exactly the same time, even though each had remained steadfast until the last strike (Fig. 21). The performance clearly demonstrated the invisible understanding they had both created into a “third entity” that was half Ulay, half Abramovic, and which they referred to as “that self.”

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Look What We’ve Done to Each Other is not a test in the way Abramovic and Ulay’s relational works were considered “real-time” experiments about what was happening in their relationship: its freedoms and limitations, its transformation and transcendence. The works were mostly conceived without a conclusion in mind, performed only once and without rehearsal. They were about the freshness and spontaneity of a relationship in flux. Look What We’ve Done to Each Other, on the other hand, is a work that looks in retrospect – atoning for the past – it relates to Abramovic and Ulay’s motivations in their attempt to understand the depths of their relationship, its transformative power, and the desire to use this knowledge as a means of artistic expression.
Abramovic is a believer in the challenge and courage involved in people probing their private lives – for her the risk is always worth taking:

In everyday life we are all afraid of pain…the best way to liberate ourselves from this is to confront the fear… because when we only do things we enjoy doing, we repeat the same patterns over and over again, and we always make the same mistakes. If we choose to do things we are afraid of, we are stepping into a “new sphere of reality” in which we confront the uncertainty, which can give us the opportunity to transform ourselves.39

For the Man and Woman in Look What We’ve Done to Each Other, the “drawing” performance establishes enough distance between past events and pain to allow room for reflection. Sitting face-to-face, as if they were each other’s conscience, tracing each other’s wrinkles becomes a way of confronting their fear and guilt, and of setting the record straight in a symbolic act of acknowledgement, acceptance, and forgiveness. This act of acceptance again points to Levinas: to exercise responsibility, to preserve the right of the other to stand next to me as different but equal.40


Mutually Agreed

Chronicling a relationship takes time and as time goes by conditions and circumstances change. This elliptical flow of energy, this looped dynamic helped generate thoughts about time, memory, and love that, in turn, evolved into *Mutually Agreed* (2015), another two-channel performance for video. Presented as two screens projected onto adjoining walls that meet at ninety degrees, the footage shows a Man and Woman walking in a straight line along separate walls until both meet in the corner, disappear into each other, and reappear on the other person’s wall before starting again. Looped in real speed and without sound, the life-sized images create a cycle of unity and entropy, appearance and disappearance. (Fig. 22)

![Figure 22 George Shaw, *Mutually Agreed* 2015](image)

*Mutually Agreed* retraces the trajectory of a relationship: in response to their mutual attraction, the Man and Woman walk towards each other as an act of affirmation until both their bodies become one. However, this journey also drives them to a point at which they negate themselves by slowly
disappearing one body into the other, until there is no one left. As time passes, they transform the relationship and themselves by reappearing on the adjoining wall or “the other side,” each having momentarily become the other in the process. This work clearly recalls Abramovic and Ulay’s *Relation in Space*.

*Relation in Space* was the first relational work conceived by Abramovic and Ulay. It took place at the Venice Biennale in 1976. During the performance, Abramovic and Ulay stood naked twenty metres apart before they began walking and brushing past each other, as they converged in the middle of a small performance space. Repositioning themselves and restarting after each contact, they strode at an incrementally faster pace making every subsequent collision harder and louder. As their stride picked up speed, so did the force of every impact with Abramovic being thrown to the ground at least once.41 Although the idea was not a contest of either strength or endurance, it was a “test in sustaining an uneasy equilibrium through the repetition of moderated violence…they wanted to create a compound strength between their two bodies and their two wills,”42 Westcott writes.

As Abramovic and Ulay’s first performative work together, *Relation in Space* reflects the intensity of their relationship in the allegorical action of two bodies smashing into each other in an attempt to become one. (Fig. 23) Issues of dualism, identity, and dependence inform the work, as the writer Chrissie Isles suggests:

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When Ulay and Abramovic began to collaborate in 1976, they spoke of themselves as an “androgyne,” a single unit within which both sexual opposites of masculine and feminine were contained. All their relation works moved between these opposite poles, both reinforcing and undermining them.43

*Mutually Agreed* and *Relation in Space* share ideas about love, relationship, and transcendence. However, *Mutually Agreed* is not about expressing these ideas through the creation of a new, singular (id)entity; it is about cycles instead. One cycle is ruled by dualities: male/female, good/bad, light/dark, positive/negative, in/out, always/never. The other is about time and the variety of small timeframes within a larger frame that encompasses time spent together by the two protagonists: different lives, a beginning, middle and end, and evolving narratives.

In *Mutually Agreed* the Man and Woman enact symbolic transformations and acknowledge their infinite possibilities. The loop is closed and they engage in cycles of evolution. Having collided, the bodies become a momentary third energy before transcending into new individual beings, the momentary fusion of two energies into a single force containing all archetypal dualities. But in the end they are still in their own bodies, changed but the same, as Abramovic and Ulay ultimately demonstrated.

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The final work I would like to examine is Abramovic and Ulay’s *The Lovers* or *The Great Wall Walk* (1988). (Fig. 24) Westcott recounts that on March 30, 1988:

Abramovic stepped onto the head of the dragon where the Shanhai Pass rises [in China]…and began walking west. At the same moment, at the other end of the country Ulay stepped onto the tail of the dragon at the Gobi desert and began walking east.44

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After twelve years as a performing and private couple, Abramovic and Ulay announced their separation. *The Lovers or The Great Wall Walk* was their final performance together. It was not a celebration but rather a termination of their relationship. The work entailed walking towards each other from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China with the purpose of meeting in the middle, at which time they would go their separate ways. At the end of a three-month walk, Abramovic and Ulay met, embraced, and said good-bye.

With a dash of irony, the concept and execution of *The Lovers* is similar to their first work, *Relation in Space*, which also involved walking towards each other, except that at the moment of coming face to face, they would not create a new, compound entity, but rather destroy what was there instead. Since it took months of walking to cover the vast distance between the two, it is safe to say *The Lovers* gave ample time to Abramovic and Ulay to think about the work and each other.
The Lovers is elegiac in breadth and occasion, its execution is monumental, its beauty allegorical. It is about art and life, about art that makes private anguish public. For Abramovic and Ulay, The Lovers is the culmination of a relationship in which art and life were entwined. It is a work about finality, a swansong, there is no going back; at the completion of the walk the relationship comes to an end. It is a work about what has come to pass, about what has been, and what will never be. Mutually Agreed is by comparison a work about infinity. It is an acknowledgement that the Man and Woman are not prepared to end their relationship, and that they see themselves continuing to walk towards each other in perpetuity.
Conclusion

To face each other

When two people sit or stand across from each other, bump or run into one another, draw on each other’s face, or appear to vanish into the other as a means of achieving transcendence, there is an ethical exchange which takes place between their faces that according to Levinas, stands as the infinite obligation we have towards one another as human beings.45

Writing on Levinas, the scholar Sean Hand explains:

The term “face”…denotes the way in which the presentation of the other to me (the self) exceeds all ideas of the other in me. The proximity of this face-to-face relation cannot be subsumed into a totality…the face signifies the philosophical priority of the existent over Being. My presence before the face is therefore an epiphany…[that] to be oneself is to be for the other.46

The concept of “faciality” as defined by Levinas has been significant to my studio-based research: I am interested in what happens, the seen and unseen during a face-to-face encounter. The notion of responsibility each person has towards the other; the ethics underlying all human encounter; and the acknowledgement of the other’s right to be, have been a constant reference in my research (and for my personal development). Levinas understood the power of the human encounter and his position has highlighted to me the

45 Sean Hand, introduction to The Levinas Reader, ed. 5.
46 Sean Hand, The Levinas Reader, 5.
difficulties in my relationship by providing a solution to how to better “be” with others, to be responsible for my humanity and, in particular, in relation to my wife Andrea.

Developing the ideas and creating studio-based works for masters research was a cathartic process. The initial aim of the research was to gain a greater understanding of intimacy through the exploration of a specific event: the collapse of my marriage, but it ultimately led to much more than this knowledge. I sought to universalize my story and share it (like Grant Stevens) without it having to be overtly my autobiography. Upon reflection, I realise that the initial stages of my research process were driven by a desire for order and control after the chaos of a separation. Recalling events and choosing particular moments to create a coherent narrative created room for objective analysis and a way to transcend my problems. I consider that the research for my MFA has had a transformative effect: I am not the same person who embarked on this process.

Although the objectives of my research were defined from the outset, it was only during the writing of the thesis and the making of work in the studio, that the research revealed itself as transformative: as the relationship between Andrea and I changed, it affected how my studio practice developed. The fact that Andrea and I reunited while in the course of my studio-based work is an indication of the change that took place between us. It was not instant: there were false starts, pledges made and unmade, and a general wariness about repeating the past. However, as a willing participant in the works I created, and an interested interlocutor in my research, Andrea had as much time and space to evolve her feelings and thinking as I did. Andrea understood my need to go beyond a mere acceptance of our situation to a
thorough understanding of it, as well; she also recognised that to do this would require some painful thinking and rethinking about the past. Quoting the film theorist Kaja Silverman, the curator Bojana Pejic writes that, “The function of recollecting is to transform, not reproduce.”\footnote{Bojana Pejic, “Bodyscenes: An affair of the flesh,” in Marina Abramovic: Artist Body Performances 1969-1998, ed. Elena Canottì and Felicity Barbara Lutz (Milan: Edizione Charta, 1998), 33} She adds, “The key is to try hard in the flesh, in body and mind, to remain open to changes, to transformations and transitions, to the other.”\footnote{Bojana Pejic, “Bodyscenes,” 33} By making the works that constitute this research, my foremost goal was not to revise history but to make sense of it.

Perhaps Abramovic and Ulay give us the best visual example of transformation, and the face-to-face encounter described by Levinas. Twenty-two years after they walked away from each other on the Great Wall of China, Abramovic staged a new work, a three-month relational performance that involved audience participation, as part of her retrospective *The Artist is Present*, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Every day for nine hours, Abramovic sat staring in silent dialogue at members of the public who lined up to take their place across a table from her. While Abramovic maintained her stoicism regardless of whom the sitter was, participants’ reactions ranged from euphoria to sadness, with laughter and tears being common expressions of their experience. Although the encounters took place in the atrium of the museum in full view of hundreds of people waiting their turn, Abramovic was able to create an atmosphere of intimacy in which vulnerability and trust permeated the space for participants and artist alike, allowing interlocutors to see themselves in her and, importantly, also look into themselves. (Fig. 25) As days went by and audience numbers grew, Abramovic only once broke protocol and broke

\text{\textsuperscript{48} Bojana Pejic, “Bodyscenes,” 33.} \]
down herself when her former life and art partner Ulay took the seat opposite her.

Figure 25 Marina Abramovic, *The Artist is Present* (video still) 2010

The moment is captured without fanfare, the emotional rawness of the encounter hard to bear in the 2012 documentary *The Artist is Present*.49 Sitting face to face, Abramovic and Ulay look into each other’s eyes, the profound intimacy they once shared revived in the short gap between them. Silent tears run down their faces until they can’t stand their distance and stillness, and reach out for each other, a synthesising moment in which past conflict, love and togetherness are distilled into a single, physical gesture: touching the other’s skin. Just as *The Lovers* brought to life Levinas’ idea that, “the other makes me realize that I share the world, that it is not my unique possession,”50 Abramovic and Ulay’s brief reunion at the Museum

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49 *Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present*, DVD, directed by Matthew Akers and Jeff Dupre (2012, USA, Dogwoof, 2012).
of Modern Art demonstrated that, at that moment, neither of them was privileged, both existed equally in their fragility and tenderness. Theirs was a relationship in which art and life coexisted as one, the self as the other. Sitting together after twenty-years, Abramovic and Ulay reunited (albeit temporarily) in private, silent communion in the most public of forums.

I chose artists like Marina Abramovic and Ulay, Sophie Calle, and Bill Viola to comparatively consider my own ideas as an artist. From the outset I could see connections in our work, and as the research progressed it became clearer that I was learning as much from Levinas about human intimacy as I was from these artists’ long established practices. As I conclude, I have considered deeply the notion of transformation as a critical goal for my work. Abramovic, Ulay, Calle, and Viola also create works that emanate from profoundly personal experiences, which are expressed as narratives of varying styles but point towards the same goal of personal change and emotional evolution. The curator David A. Ross comments that:

\[\text{In the traditional manner of great art, Viola provokes the heart by leading the mind to avenues of contemplation and self-discovery. In so doing, the art provides the basis for an experience best described as transcendent.}^{51}\]

It is interesting to note that just as a transformation requires a “before” and “after,” so too does a narrative. What I failed to see initially was that by delving into the story of my own life, I was also creating the opportunity for a future narrative that was quite different to the one I was in when I began

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this research. All four works are about “stock-taking,” as the curator Thomas Wulffen writes, adding that working from an intensely personal source “…can serve prospective introspection by playing through the possibilities of shaping one’s own life.”

Studying Levinas’ idea about the responsibility the self exercises towards the other by recognising and allowing its alterity, the historian Michael Morgan says:

“…the face-to-face encounter between the self and the other…[is] concrete and particular. It is not an idea or a concept nor a type of action or event…The self is a particular person, and the face of the other is a particular revelation of a particular person.”

He further adds, “it is this engagement of the self with the other that lies hidden within every other interpersonal relationship.” Although the confrontation is particular, it is also about what it means to be human because in Levinas’ philosophy the encounter bears witness to my infinite obligation to the other person.

Interpreting Levinas’ philosophy through works such as Nothing Left Unsaid, Mutually Agreed, Look What We’ve Done to Each Other, and You, Always, Never has given me a clearer understanding of intimacy, and revealed an unforeseen, redemptive aspect to the works in which the protagonists, just

52 Thomas Wulffen, “Performance: Thoughts on Marina Abramovic’s Biography,” 73.
54 Michael Morgan, Discovering Levinas, 66.
as Andrea and I, discover the possibility of a second chance. Further, the process of making art helped me see that although my marriage was predicated on equality and acceptance, Andrea and I both found ourselves at a stage in which we were trying to subsume the other into our own way of living. This totalizing effect is contrary to the idea of Levinas’ infinite encounter in which acceptance of the other is always a primary goal.

With *Nothing Left Unsaid*, I am putting an intimate relationship on display, and in that kind of display the relationship transforms into something more universal – my intimacy with Andrea is now everyone else’s intimacy with their partner. The work is intended to be for “every man” and “every woman” with the aim of allowing the viewer to experience empathy for the protagonists while perhaps shifting focus inwardly to gain an understanding about themselves, because as the writer Chris Townsend suggests, “…what motivates empathy in the spectator is not the imaginary bridging of difference, but rather a recognition of mutual experience.”

Placing the events that led to our separation alongside the works created for *Nothing Left Unsaid*, I see two people who despite their conflict have attempted at all times to acknowledge the other, and his or her right to stand as an equal. Neither the Man nor the Woman is privileged, they are both vulnerable to each other in the same way that George and Andrea are both answerable and responsible to each other.

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Bibliography


Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present, DVD, directed by Matthew Akers and Jeff Dupre (2012, USA, Dogwoof, 2012).


