JUST PASSING THROUGH:
THE PERFORMED FEMALE BODY IN WESTERN CONVENTIONS

by

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Abstract

This thesis paper is the supplementary text for the Masters of Fine Arts thesis exhibition *Just Passing Through*. This exhibition explores the mediums of photo and video in immersive installation. Thematically *Just Passing Through* focuses upon the representation of the female body as scripted by social conventions, through a self-conscious process of layering image and object. Procedurally this work layers image and object through self-portraiture to embody certain distorted female enigmas. These enigmas are representations distorted by rules of etiquette, ritualized ceremonies, and popular culture stereotypes. The resulting constructed female characters walk the line between individually imagined reality and socially constructed fiction held within collective memory; a notion of true fiction asserted by Avital Ronell's *fable* as being a fiction concerned with origins hidden in full view of society. This exhibition explores themes of socially constructed fiction and collective memory, in part, through the fabrication of a composite character named LuLu Miller. Lulu haunts and/or exists in hotel rooms along Okanagan Valley’s Highway 97. She is composed in a “…game of finding meaning in coincidence”\(^1\). Her name primarily connects the disparate parts: LuLu Miller. Her stories are derived from my maternal Great-Grandmother's travel diaries to British Columbia in the 1960’s, archival media from a meticulously documented first-degree husband murder trial in 1965 San Bernardino Valley, California and, the dialogue in Harold Pinter's stage play, *The Birthday Party*, 1960. Reality and fiction mingle to parallel the nostalgic experience in order to express the imposed and assumed modalities of being a woman in the early 21st century – one that is still constrained by a late modernist ideal of the feminine.

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Dedication

This is dedicated to LuLu Miller.
Chapter 1 Introduction

“I will begin with a fable. What Derrida calls true fiction. Like quite a lot of fables, this one concerns origins. Not everyone is aware of my province, where I come from; so let me unroll with full disclosure at this time. It all began more or less as a secret rendezvous, but secret only in the sense of an open secret, like the pearl lined letter or the illicit affair between Anna Karenina and Count Vronsky, hidden in full view of an entire society. What I am about to say is widely known and yet remains concealed”

-- Avital Ronell (“Media Technology and Scholarship” Lecture, 2011).

This paper is the supplementary text for my final Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, Just Passing Through, at the Vernon Public Art Gallery. I will provide context to the exhibition work, as well as the work created over my time spent in this program that correlates to the resulting installation. I approach this written format as a chance to provide insight on the theoretical, artistic, and personal influences to my artistic process. Much of these influences return to the contradictory binaries that compose the balancing act throughout a person’s modalities of being.

“Then how should I begin?”

I am interested in degrees of authenticity. How one seeks the “authentic” through identity, materiality, rules, and memory. How this quest can become obsessive, often related with the theoretically stigmatized word, nostalgia (Boym, 1). Through the longing of something before, nostalgia permits a sense that existentialist questions can be momentarily answered even if it is fragmentary or imaginary. The search for authenticity is that of searching for living presence. The nostalgic experience is a phenomenological and cognitive convergence, a process that is still enshrouded in ambiguity. The subjective past is remembered in the fleeting present moment. This convergence repeats itself consequentially romanticizing, altering, internalizing and even, forgetting classifications between fact and fiction. And yet, nostalgia creates the sense of authenticity.

With this in mind, I look to remains within society that point to the anxiety to find authenticity. The remains are found in the everyday performance of etiquette rules, the layers of signifiers that shape identity, the human attachment and use of archival mediums and, the ideological formation and perpetuation of the West and 1960’s aesthetic. To begin, I turn my attention to etiquette as a foundation to explore the performed female body. Social conventions, like nostalgia, are repeated, internalized and, over time, become disengaged mimics of the original. It parallels nostalgia as a producer of authenticity insofar as it creates a superficiality of control over the uncontrollable complexities that govern social environments and physical bodies.

In this spirit of authenticity and nostalgia, I began creating my own narrative through a composite character named LuLu Miller. The process parallels the experience of nostalgia as a means to find the authentic to express the inherent equivocation between fact and fiction. LuLu Miller embodies the real and fictional housewife – she is the result of North American conventions - waiting underground to (possibly) explode. The everyday routine nulls their volume, repressing knowledge of the origin. The superficial nature regarding social convention, especially from a female point of view, is bound to meanings far heavier than one could concretely locate. Images and rules of “how to be” are internalized and perpetuated in and with the body. These repetitious or generations of internalized rules create distance between source and manifestation, creating ambiguity. The gendered female is expected to and physically becomes the masquerade, physically appropriating references that we tell ourselves to be true. My artistic research focuses upon the female masquerade as exemplified in 1960’s North American culture, the theoretical lens of Julia Kristeva, Svetlana Boym and Catherine Russell as well as artwork by Pipilotti Rist, Janeita Eyre, Sophie Calle, and many more.

The human figure and how this organic thinking, wondering, complex being formulates and adheres to social convention becomes the forefront of this contemplation. Rituals, especially those enacted in Western Civilization have become so subliminated from their original states that the fantasies projected onto them have “…produced one of the most powerful imaginary constructs known in the history of civilization” (Kristeva, Stabat, 311). In this particular section Kristeva is referencing the sublimation to appropriation and masochism of the Christian religion in Western civilization. Kristeva uses religious texts and
religious undercurrents that are imprinted on and perpetuated through Western culture as a way to understand the position of women in society. She raises compelling scenarios of the maternal woman, the sexualized woman and the dead corpse, as well as the certain events in history that could account for the current standing of women in society. The act of sublimation means to refine a deviant act such as sexuality into an acceptable activity. It is refined in repetition to the point that the original desire is repressed. Ironically, the repressed is then heightened as it is secretly performed in open sight and often in accordance with other sublimated desires. This process leads me to understand my own interest in the occasions where human frailty occurs, highlighting the very fact of this sublimation. This interest becomes even stronger when investigating the female masquerade because the woman exists within an immense layering system of representation that has resulted from this process.

Chapter 2 Like an empty restaurant filled with perfume and balloons

Contemplating the role of nostalgia has provided a means to formulate my artistic process and production. As a process, nostalgia permits the comingling of fictions and histories that we tell our self to be true in order to perpetuate the desire drive. Within the comingling the person is able to hold onto particular representations and material objects. Slavoj Zizek expels the notion of the desire drive, one that I believe to be progressive to existing psychoanalytical and philosophical usages, as an interpretation. The desire drive “…aims at the truth of the subject’s desire (the truth of desire is the desire for truth;) while construction expresses the knowledge about drive” (Zizek, The Seven Veils of Fantasy, 49).

2.1 Etiquette and the Performed Social Body

“People are born, are married, and, at length after a more or less ceremonious life, die. […] Ceremony is really a protection, too, in times of emotional involvement, particularly at death. If we have a social formula to guide us and do not have to extemporize, we feel better able to handle life” (Vanderbilt, Introduction, 3).

Etiquette is a system of collectively understood behavioral rules that a group is expected to follow. Unwritten and written etiquette rules produce a standard for human behavior that also produces power hierarchies and classification systems. These rules, and the

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desire to have these rules, date back to the earliest human civilizations as a way to promote social order. Behavioral rules are primarily focused on the body, originating from and interacting with the culturally and socially constructed environments in which we live. Nevertheless, this also means that etiquette is internalized and their origins often forgotten over time (Papastergiadis, 71). They provide generalized modalities for the interaction between people in various settings through rituals and ceremonies as well as providing step-by-step information on proper individual hygiene and adornment. If the group is able to follow and execute etiquette rules, all those participating are promised a happy, ease-filled experience. In attempting to understand etiquette, I hope to expose underlying ethical codes within North American society. This is true on macro- and microscopic levels regarding the variant customs within groups, ranging from the family to the state. I will attempt to outline the opposing binaries that are set and perpetuated by etiquette in an effort to understand the particular rules imposed on women in North American culture.

Amy Vanderbilt, whose text I will discuss in conjunction to a video installation series created at the beginning of my MFA, became a household name beginning in the 1950’s until her death in the early 1970’s with her work on etiquette. Her surname is also that of the well-known upper class Dutch settlers of Eastern North America. In order to employ or even to be concerned with etiquette rules one must have possession. For example, how to set the proper formal dinner table setting or how to write a “regrets to attend letter” requires material goods and property that work within layered hierarchies of associative power. Etiquette informs a certain class system that is based on learned social behaviour, which becomes a ritualized performance. Etiquette is not only performed but resides in the material possessions and their organization within a home. It also resides in the proper clothing a woman should wear when cleaning the home, the way a woman moves through a room, or the socially appropriate ways certain people of certain class, gender and age are expected to

4 Naturally, I became interested in Amy Vanderbilt’s personal history from spending time with her text. Researching her journalistic career and family I came across archived articles indicating that her life ended in controversy. At the age of 66, Amy Vanderbilt had reportedly “jumped or fell” from her “fashionable Upper East Side (NYC) apartment” fracturing her skull. (http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=qW5kAAAAMBAJ&sjid=YH0NAAAAIBAJ&pg=3783,1770591&dq= amy+vanderbilt&hl=en - Chicago Herald, Dec. 28, 1975)

5 “how to be (Amy Vanderbilt’s Etiquette): chapter forty-five: invitations, acceptances, regrets” (VIDEO: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z858Vbceibg)
interact are all contingent to rules of etiquette. The hierarchy within these gestures are largely unwritten and therefore embodied and engendered within the social fabric of everyday life. Class, classification, organization, differentiation – etiquette informs the language in which each person reads another person. Unwritten rules of behaviour build complicity among the group and a sense of cultural intimacy (Boym 44). It is this particular dynamic, one that is learned and understood en masse that is reflected through the use of my own body as the subject in my photography and video work. The text is intended to be performed and re-performed repeatedly, consequently enshrining certain ideals throughout generations. Like Jacques Derrida’s inquisitive nature in “Of Hospitality” (2000) I am also curious as to why such rules continue to be carried out and how rules inform our contemporary context.

The video installation series, “how to be” (2011) is derived from the 1961 text Amy Vanderbilt’s Etiquette. The text is performed for the digital video camera within a composed patterned setting. An anonymous female character is the only figure in the series. She wears a shift dress made from the same patterned textile as the set. Her face is exaggeratedly painted as a pristine doll and she remains mute throughout the vignettes. This character interprets the guidelines outlined in chosen etiquette chapters. For example, “chapter three: the fastidious and well-mannered woman”6 or “chapter twenty-nine: hosts and guests: how to make a bed”7. She performs these tasks in a deadpan manner to enhance physical symbolic gestures such as eating tulip petals in a game of “he loves me, he loves me not”8. In this section, “Gifts before the Engagement” (15), Vanderbilt professes that “[a] man’s gift to any girl other than a relative, before the engagement is announced, should be relatively impersonal. In other words, they should never admit-or imply-intimacy or be so costly or conspicuous as to cause talk.” (15). The minimal gestures without vocal utterance or atmospheric sound intend to expose the constrictive robotic movements and the often repetitively mundane tasks expected of the woman. The video itself is intended to evoke the notion of remains; the remains being

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6 In this video my character is applying make-up in a hand-held mirror while 8mm videos are also being projected onto her face. She layers lipstick repeatedly as the footage flickers away eventually drawing tears along her cheek with eyeliner. (VIDEO: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fe6ZalJtc9w)

7 In this video my character is covering the fabric scene that matches her dress with a floral sheet and two pillowcases. She then enters into the scene again with a pair of scissors to begin cutting away at the sheet to make a silhouette of another person. Once she is finished she returns to the bed scene in a plain nightgown to lie next to her cut-out person. (VIDEO: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJEJiWHY6ZY)
the etiquette book, as well as the traditions and customs that continue to exist within our collective memory.

![Image of video installation]

Figure 2.1 “how to be: amy vanderbilt’s etiquette”, video installation, video still, 2011

The “how to be” videos are then installed within a fort that houses a bed. Louise Bourgeois writes in her journal, “The skeins of wools are a friendly refuge, like a web or cocoon. The caterpillar gets the silk from his mouth, build his cocoon and when it is completed he dies. The cocoon has exhausted the animal. I am the cocoon. I have no ego. I am my work” (Bernadac & Obrist, 173). The video is projected onto a sheet of plastic that hangs before the bed at standard home window size (3’w x 4’h). The pillows on the bed - embroidered with the text “he left town in a greyhound” - are positioned to the left side in order to invite visitors to lie down to watch the videos. The immersive quality governed by the encompassing bed sheet fort and accompanying bed is intentionally inviting and slightly disturbing. I am interested in the negotiation between the foreign and the familiar that is echoed throughout the videos, the installation, and in turn the phenomenological experience. The bed is an important element in this piece. It is an array of combating associations (hygiene, sex, fluids, comfort, sleep, dreams, nightmares…). The bed also serves as a conventional frame to invite visitors to lie down; an action that the installation elements attempt to assist in. This is inspired by Pipilotti Rist’s video installation work where colorful video projections are often immersive and accompanied by a sculptural object in which the visitor can physically engage with. For instance, in her MoMA exhibition “Pour Your Body
Out (7354 cubic meters)”(2009) Rist constructed a large sofa-like sculpture that resembles the rings of an eye. With Rist’s work in mind I felt a strong compulsion to subvert the normative video viewing situation, especially as governed within art galleries, to one that allows the body to lie horizontally, to relax, to spend time with the looped repetitive video and hopefully to question the didactic possibilities that arise in the experience as a further reflection of the themes explored in the video.

Figure 2.2 “how to be: amy vanderbilt’s etiquette”, video installation, installation view, 2011

The “how to be” video installation series in conjunction to Amy Vanderbilt’s 1960’s Etiquette text is also a reference to Vera Chytilova’s 1966 film Sedmikrasky (Daisies). I find this film to be a poignant surrealistic feminist expression of the political and social upheaval occurring in the 1960’s. Much of the imagery poetically balances the radical shifts in Czechoslovakian government⁹ and the necessity and absurdity in social convention as played

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⁹ Sedmikrasky was released two years before the Czechoslovakian political liberalization reform movement, “The Prague Spring” in 1968. Before this political shift, the media, speech and travel of the Czechoslovakian people were highly restrictive since the Soviet Union’s domination of the country after World War II. Director Vera Chytilova was actually banned from working within her homeland until 1975. (Source: Pearls of the Deep: Alumni Association in “Eclipse Series 32: Pearls of the Czech New Wave” by Michael Koresky, The Criterion Collection, http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/2269-eclipse-series-32-pearls-of-the-czech-new-wave 25 April 2012.)
by two young women. Chytilova’s film follows two girls named Marie I and Marie II who decide to live in decadence since the rest of the world is doing so. Many of the scenes play to the roles that these girls are expected to follow but often transgress into a frenzied madness. The opposition to class and female etiquette in this film truly soars in the final formal dinner table scene where both Marie’s indulge an expansive buffet disregarding every rule of proper etiquette and yet smile and gesture as if they were. As they move along each chair manically eating from platters and eventually using the dining table as a runway, swinging in the chandelier crystals, the viewer experiences a balance between comical absurdity and social commentary. “…[T]he absolute certainty, that within the field of a universal Lie the ‘repressed’ truth will emerge in the guise of a particular contingent event. […] in our everyday lives, we vegetate, deeply immersed in the universal Lie; then all of a sudden, some contingent encounter – a casual remark during a conversation, an incident we witness – brings to light the repressed trauma which shatters our self-delusion” (Zizek, 165-166). In other words, if the contingent gesture were not made, everything would remain all right and the illusion in tact. This is also true for nostalgic memory – the moment when the longing becomes belonging. For example, George Orwell’s novel “Coming Up For Air” (1939) follows the main character as he narrates his idyllic childhood, his current suburban family life, and evocations related to war propaganda, his experience in World War I and the individual, social and political premonitions of World War II are intertwined into a dream-like rhythm that ends with his physical (and poignantly alcoholic) journey to his childhood town. Have we reached a point where the dream, the illusion, the memory is already in representational ruin? To the point that the only way one is able to comment is through surrealistic acts? Sedmikrasky is an important reference for the “how to be” video installation. Playing along with the existing social conventions in an ironic manner is a subtle nod to the paradoxical nature in contemporary culture. It is the tennis match audience moving their heads in unison from left to right until the ball drops – going along with and enjoying the status quo.

It is my understanding that etiquette exists as a means to socialize sexuality. Gender constitutes the base for classifying the Other. Classifying anatomical body parts are complicated with gender-associated representations through appearance. Laurence Rickels asserts that the desire to socialize sexuality is evolutionary (Rickels, “On Drugs” Lecture).
He believes this began the moment that humans stood up. At this moment we not only lost
the ability to smell the Others’ genitals but also exposed our genitals to the Other frontally.
This shift to the full frontal view of the body brought upon the need for sanctioned control.
The blatant visibility in which sexual difference is exposed is assimilated through the social
classifications of “man” and “woman” and then further when in relationship with each other
as “couple”, “married”, “family”, etc. The system, along with its participants, needs to
maintain appearances. It is through this game between “good” and “bad” that the rules can be
perpetuated. As the revolutions continue the origins become more and more ambiguous and
therefore more and more repressed. The rules, in the case of proper etiquette, become
embodied and exhibited through our gestures, language, appearance, and environments.

The female body is something that has been and continues to be portrayed as an
object in varying degrees of ambiguity. As shown in Vanderbilt’s Etiquette text, the female
body is objectified and the female role is reduced to dutiful tasks. Without taking into
consideration a woman who is concerned with matters like health or education, she is poised
as a glorified debutante. She is represented but in such a way that is inarticulate, which
results in a complex representation of the female body – one that is split into the (un)clean
body by way of patriarchal societal domestication.

Feminist theory and gender studies posit the female gender as an Other. In the act of
Othering, often originating from a fear of the foreign body (Ronell, “On the foreign body”
Lecture), the female in particular, distinguished in lack to the male, is in turn destined to be
framed as the goddess or the monster, the femme fatale or the femme enfant, and the mother,
the wife, or the daughter. The irony in these statements is the binary quality between the
ambiguity and the definitive stereotypical classification that is placed upon the female. To
define is to fix, to compose, to play with difference, to give the appearance of truth, to
socialize. In this process the female is concealed through the classification in language,
utterance, and imagery. This is a masquerade that conceals itself within particular
representations and is maintained by both sexes through the modality of social convention.
With this understanding, we can now account for the mythological masquerade that is the
female enigma. Originating from a fear of the unknown woman has been fixed as the high
priestess while at the same time as the dangerous volatile monster. For example,
contemporary photographer Janieta Eyre appropriates this through her double self-
portraiture. Her use of flattened theatrical-like sets, meticulous costuming, object selection and placement as well as her physical gestures in the 1990’s series “Incantations” read as a layered text that the viewer is permitted to read from the seconds in which the photograph was captured. Her physical doubling suspends her being into a time and place that is otherworldly and yet indicative of universal feminine references from the bound chickens in “Albatross” (1996) to the dismissive turning up of her nose in “Pissing Silverfish” (1995). Eyre magically (or digitally) doubles herself within the frame – Othering herself in various permutations that establishes a peculiar conceptual commentary on the female form through portraiture and self-portraiture. This process of Othering originates from the representation of the physical female body. The social ambiguity associated with the manifestation of sexual difference – including the marginalization of women that occurs in contemporary society around pregnancy – leads me to explore maternal lineage as an important locus. Julia Kristeva posits that the mother-child relationship shapes spatial memory (Kristeva, *Stabat Manner*, 304) that I believe provides an alternative experience to memories of historical and family narratives. Her theoretical and personal mediations on maternity provides a focus on the body that brings it back to a porous ever-changing entity that grows over time that influences and reacts with environments. This is something that I believe is enshrined within unwritten etiquette rules and consequently perpetuates patriarchal ideals.

Like Martha Rosler’s seminal video “Semiotics of a Kitchen” (1975), a work that has greatly influenced my artistic sensibility, the repetitious serial movements that are recorded into a two-dimensional form to be looped within a closed circuit, produces an acute attention to her gestures as well as a sense of entrapment within them. Working within the popular cooking television show form where the female host elegantly chops, cooks, and prepares meals for the camera, Rosler recites the alphabet as to instruct the viewer to the various utensils in the kitchen. Her deadpan manner and strict gestures evoke both a comical and violent tone. For the “how to be” video installation series I intended to mimic this sensibility in order to interpret the etiquette text, not in a directly oppositional manner but rather as if my character has learned the rules and is now recording this internalized knowledge for the camera destined to play on repeat. The performed tasks become surreal shifts in the normative domestic tasks. Everything about my character and her surroundings are hyper-
realized and feminine, playing along with the etiquette rules to the point that the original purpose is lost in revolution.

The importance of sexual difference in etiquette is obvious in the text “Amy Vanderbilt’s Etiquette” (1951). The existence of rules automatically permits exclusion or borders. It outlines the ways in which the woman in particular is expected to act in social settings. She writes to the woman with authority and in a way grants agency to the woman reading. The text attempts to foreshadow particular universal events by providing variables on each outcome. Paradoxically, the agency expressed revolves around and the assumed destiny of being in a relationship with a man. For instance, a large portion of the book begins with how a woman should act during courting. Photographers such as Alex Prager, Cindy Sherman, and Janieta Eyre use and subvert this cultural symbolism in their constructed images. These artists employ popular culture references that have been catapulted into collective mythology. For example, Alex Prager references Alfred Hitchcock’s femme fatale in the photography series “Compulsion”(2012) and the short film “La Petite Mort” (2012). Prager does so through her use of cinematic lighting and period specific costuming that encapsulates her female subject within the equally specific Hitchcockian female character. In using this visually recognizable female trope in a hyper-realized manner, I believe that Prager is able to use the familiar in a seductive manner that subverts the traditional female objectification.

My interest in looking towards etiquette in conjunction with the performative female body provides a framework to LuLu Miller’s composite narrative. Etiquette rules parallel my personal investigation of my maternal lineage, something that I feel has not been thoroughly explored in feminist theory outside of its’ association with penis envy. The pregnant woman is physically dividing her body. She is growing as well as aiding in the growth of another being. I feel as though this experience aids in a specific understanding of the other and, in turn, what it means to be an Other herself\textsuperscript{10}. This could then constitute the perpetuation of the

\textsuperscript{10} Marilyn Hildebrandt (Grandmother): “When dad passed away in 1986 she was lost. She sold both the farms and moved into an apartment in St. Catharines in Nov. of 1988. In Feb. She took sick and spent 3 weeks in hospital with lymphoma leukemia and passed away March 10, 1989. While in the hospital she got to see Cheryl’s picture of her twins on the ultrasound. She was thrilled about them coming as she was with their older brother Tylor who was her only great-grandchild.” (Page 6 of the letter).
female as Other in society insofar as the woman is able to understand it and yet continues to go along with it. I question this through my personal investigation of archival family history, specifically the maternal line: the daughter, mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother inheritance. This investigation integrates my own embodied artistic practice to universal topics like etiquette. Maternal lineage is an important component both procedurally and conceptually when forming the composite character LuLu Miller. LuLu begins from the finding of my Great-Grandmother’s travel diaries. My Grandmother mailed them to me as a gift because she wrote specifically about her bus travels from Ontario to British Columbia, as I had recently embarked on. As I yearned for more fragments to imagine this woman, I sought secondary texts written by my Grandmother and Mother and, eventually from literary sources and archival materials.

2.2 Remembering and Forgetting

“Oblivion brings us back to the present, even if it is conjugated in every tense: in the future, to live the beginning; in the present, to live the moment; in the past, to live the return; in every case, in order not to be repeated. We must forget in order to remain present, forget in order not to die, forget in order to remain faithful” (Auge, 89).

Try to remember a “happy” moment in your life. Now, try to forget it. Try to remember a “sad” moment in your life. Now, try to forget it. Try to remember waking up this morning. Try to remember going to sleep last night. Try to remember. Now, try to forget.

These moments are punctuated in my memory as much as they are punctuated in their phrasing, language and grammar. They are situated in time – gaps between the punctuation, but also in the process of its’ original happening to forgetting to remembering to forgetting again. They are dynamic experiences in their self-reflexivity during both processes. They are indicative of each time and place in which they occur and when they are remembered and forgotten. Memories are tied to a system of reference that is integrated into the continual shaping of the present and future, and in turn, the past as well. Memory is so difficult to articulate because of this convergence. Consequently, memory is linked with the dream-reality experience. “Perhaps nature builds into us and into the world a sense of amnesia, and maybe this is our saving grace as humans, our ability to seemingly forget on cue. We are blessed and cursed with an amnesia that is so large that it frightens us while it protects us
both while we sleep and while we dream” (Coupland, 26). In attempting to understand memory and our relationship with it, it is revealed that memories are fabrications. Fabrications could seem truer or more real, but this is dependant on the process.

“These fictional scenes dive into our real life, slip in like remembrances in the same capacity as those we have lived, and it is certainly true that, in some way, we have indeed lived them. And it is exactly in that capacity, when they come back (when we see them again instead of imagining them) that they can puzzle us, disappoint us, because time has passed and we do not see them with the same eyes, unless […] the miraculous feeling of continuity mingles with our rediscoveries, our surprises, and our remembrances” (Auge, 73).

Nostalgia is the longing for something before. It is a romance between the imagination and a time and space in the past. Svetlana Boym states that “[m]odern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values; it could be a secular expression of a spiritual longing, a nostalgia for an absolute, a home that is both physical and spiritual, the edenic unity of time and space before entry into history” (Boym, 8). There is a particular relationship to a memory when it is considered nostalgic. Boym’s ideological approach to nostalgia is kin to Baudrillard’s concept of simulacrum being the layers of representation that become tarnished (Baudrillard, 9). “In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition” (Wilson, 22). The act of renewing the memory makes it seem even more familiar, and this occurs over time as it is repeated. Memory is not about accuracy but rather the convergence of presence and absence. It persists as an “image” or a reference point to pin a sense of meaning to existence. It is also transcendent in experience as if constantly attempting to find something more. Memories allow for a safe “…way to express valid desires and concerns about the present – in particular, about its relationship (or lack of a relationship) to the past” (Wilson, 26). This notion links memory to reinterpretation rather than the common association of trying to actually live in the past. Today, selective remembering and forgetting is rooted in pop culture and what perpetuates stigmatic popular culture myths. Wanting the nostalgic feeling coincides with the want of a coping mechanism
for the intense static and monolithic intake and extake in the present moment. Memory allots an opportunity to look back, organize, rearrange, play, dissect - in sum to control. This is also true for dreams. Dreams are the place where one is able to deal with and act out and sit with the intertwined anxieties of the everyday through representations that exist in the external world but are able to be manipulated within the internal construction.

“On rainy afternoons, embroidering with a group of friends on the begonia porch, she would lose the thread of the conversation and a tear of nostalgia would salt her palate when she saw the strips of damp earth and the piles of mud that the earthworms had pushed up in the garden. Those secret tastes, defeated in the past by oranges and Rhubarb, broke out into an irrepressible urge when she began to weep. She went back to eating earth. The first time she did it almost out of curiosity, sure that the bad taste would be the best cure for the temptation. And, in fact, she could not bear the earth in her mouth. But she persevered, overcome by a growing anxiety, and little by little she was getting back her ancestral appetite, the taste of primary minerals, the unbridled satisfaction of what was the original food”

(Garcia Marquez, 63).

2.2.1 The still image

“We tremble at the feelings we experience as our sense of wholeness is reorganized by what we see.” — Emmet Gowin, Emmet Gowin: Changing the Earth Exhibition Catalogue, 2004, Yale University Art Gallery, statement originally quoted April 1994.

The still image is exactly that - a still capture of a specific place and time through a lens that then transfers the light and dark gradients onto a two-dimensional surface. “The unfolding scene is captured, not only by an individual, but also by a mechanical device. The mechanical bears testimony to its true existence and is a guarantee of objectivity” (Minh-Ha, 54). As with human ocular faculties the mechanical lens mimics it with the additional ability to record the information internalized within the device. Our eyes, in terms of sense, are regarded as being “windows to the world.” A sense that records the converging layered phenomenological experience in the present moment. These records are similar to the

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11 One Hundred Years of Solitude, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Harper Perennial, NY London Toronto Sydney 1967, 2003. 63. Referring to the character Rebecca and her condition called Pica. I find this passage important because of the relationship between the physical and mental relationship with memory, one that becomes obsessive. It is also fitting because of the social deviance associated with her desired acts.
photograph in their process but reside within another system of representation that relies on subjective individual experience. It combines all the senses attached to that moment remembered, as well as the integration of the individual’s past experiences and the collective memory. Proust asserts that what makes one believe a photograph to be a “true photograph” lies in the measure of the displacement that they have undergone in relation to the self. (Shattuck, 36). “Merely to remember something is meaningless unless the remembered image is combined with a moment in the present affording a view of the same object or objects” (Shattuck, 33). If reality is the simultaneous composition of senses from the present moment and the memories that surround us then to understand how the self beholds the world is to understand the phenomenological bodily experience and the memories that haunt as well as the memories that are forgotten.

![Figure 2.3](image)

“public records” (2012) is a digital photography series employing the criminal mug shot form with self-portraiture. Each character acts as a variant from photographic criminal archives accessible online with a particular interest regarding the cultural reception of the female mug shot in media. The stark frontal and profile diptych is so entrenched in collective memory that it immediately connotes a criminal. Since the first use of photography, this format has served as a means to archive social deviant. Classification requires binary opposition. It requires the other in order to exist. In a way, it is a form of doubling an object.
The mug shot formally shows the same person doubled in two distinct moments at different times. The doubling is an effort to archive more information about the person’s identity claiming the singular photo as unacceptable in terms of societal law. Doubling, the repetition, assumes truth. Not only does the format of “public records” reference the mug shot is also reminiscent of the work of Eadweard Muybridge through the very repetition of the series. Each photograph presents myself adorned in coverings, most notably textiles and domestic materials that cover my skin. The female multiple self-portrait represents the expanded notion of self-portraiture in contemporary art. But also reflects the use of photography as a scientific tool for codifying and entrenching representation of the femininity. The photographic image includes the subjective layers from society and culture in the construction and reconstruction of identity. Additionally, it is added to the traditional reception of self-portraiture as being a representation of likeness, to an authenticity (Smith & Watson, 5).

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12 Muybridge’s initially curious exploration of serial photography is attractive to my attraction to seriality because of its structural nature, the aesthetic, and the conceptual contrasts created throughout the reading of the series.
The seriality creates a dialogue between each photograph promoting a reading of similarities and differences. This image is a record, documenting and standardizing the human form into classification. The *mug shot* format of the image reveals an ambiguity in photography between the construction of illusion and the presumption of truth that is projected upon the image. Capturing the full frontal and profile of the head in particular, ensures accuracy and leaves little room mis-identification. The face is the most significant part of the human body for purposes of identification and interpersonal communication. The distance between eyes, the pigment of skin, the width of a smile, the general facial expression and minute details of facial muscles and so on are important indicators for identification and basic human communication.

As more and more images are created or recreated throughout time, space and cultures, “[t]he socially constructed subject [becomes] more and more illusive.” (Pauli, 134). The permutation that occurs with images is undoubtedly interchangeable between memory and cultural media. This could reside in the similar notion that is associated with the performative interaction that occurs in the experience of the photograph. The assumed fixed image as Barbara Hooper (Hooper, 211) calls it is related to the photograph as being an object with energy. Hooper elaborates this with artist (Futurist) Umberto Boccioni’s explanation of “interpenetration” as being similar to the moment when “our bodies penetrate...
the sofas on which we sit, the sofas penetrate our bodies”; and plastic dynamism, as the interaction of a moving object with its surroundings: “the simultaneous action of the motion characteristic of an object (its absolute motion), mixed with the transformation which the object undergoes in relation to its mobile and immobile environment (its relative motion)”(Boccioni 1912)” (Hooper, 211). The instantaneous and simultaneous capture of a photograph, which can also be linked with the then rapid movement of still images in film or video, deforms that moment because it can be further manipulated. The image is looked at, located, hung, projected, printed, touched, moved, encased, disintegrates, lost, remembered, forgotten, edited.

“Viewing some of the family photos that are piling up in our drawers, we believe that in the features of some close ancestors we are finding those that remind us of the face or the silhouette of their descendants […] Behind every acknowledgement of resemblance a theory of decadence and lineage is outlined, more or less systematically, according to societies and eras.” (Auge, 74). Marc Auge continues this observation by comparing it to the experience of involuntary memory. Like finding clues on the body to something that resembles an authentic lineage, we take and collect extraneous materials like photographs and, in turn read them and posit them in the same manner. Equating the photograph (as well as video, objects…) with the body permits the association to truth. The physicality of the body and nostalgic-laden mediums garners an aura regarding the degradation inherent in both. They are bound to time and space, spheres that are in constant states of flux. The physical material entity is in flux, a flux that moves along another speed of decay that is not suspect in the human relation to the object. Regardless of the object’s projected “deadness” it is able to assume the sensation of continuity. Surrounding ourselves with evidence of existence and of time passed exemplifies the most innate anxieties of the human condition. It accounts for the value given to technologies that attempt to preserve the fleeting moment.

Seeking truth is manifested in the organization of archival material. This process requires systems. It must be streamed through standardized and controlled systems. Like the translation, the moment in which the original utterance is translated into a concrete system as language, it has already morphed through a lexicon of references. One could imagine this process as the externalization of the internal utterance that is latched to a universal system and then repeated in variants indefinitely. The word “indefinitely” is important here as the
very process of archiving or translation persists its existence. It is the fleeting moment that is always changing what is assumed to be the “original” utterance. Our belief in the original utterance and our attempt to obtain or preserve the original utterance may seem melancholic, but it is here where imagination, fiction, and change are able to breathe. And in order to “breathe” these processes require presence.

2.2.2 The moving image

* Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae * means The Great Art of Light and Shade (Athanias Kircher). “Video is a medium that extends far beyond the art world to a wide range of cultural practices, from broadcast television to surveillance, medical, and domestic uses. Video not only has changed the cultural role of film but has become a cultural tool that has had an impact on many aspects of everyday life in many parts of the world” (Russell, xvi).

Video works within film theory insofar as both mediums work on the same elemental principle – recording still frames that are then compiled to play in rapid succession to create a moving image. Video, especially when used in an artistic context, is different to film in the sense that it offers a do-it-yourself punk sensibility because of its accessibility in recording and dissemination. For example, Sadie Benning’s earliest work recorded on a Fisher Price Pixelvision camera, particularly “Jollies” (1990), expresses a deeply personal diary sensibility of the artist while also speaking to a larger audience with her inclusion of popular culture references like the audio of records playing in her room and the mostly extreme close-up sequences of her body. Video and dreams resemble each other because both inspire belief in the presented experience as a field of thought. Therefore, it is my understanding that video more readily expresses an intimacy and yet a universality that is suspended parallel to the imagination or dream aura (Williams, 47).

Aesthetically, I am attracted to creating video that utilizes composition and the clinical eye. Holding a stationary frame onto a highly constructed space where the subject is moving or acting permits the mechanism as neutral or clinical. It removes the photographer’s eye and relies solely on the mechanism. Ironically the mechanism is originally modeled after the human eye. On one hand the camera lens is a reflection of the human eye but on the other hand it disembodies the subject in an attempt to become standardized. The complex systems that make up the body and everything in nature is at times impossible to conceive and terribly volatile and dangerous. Harnessing such unpredictable forces, or at the very least attempting
to momentarily harness them, speaks to the human condition and my own attempt at continuity.

The clinical eye also speaks to the notion that there is always a gaze upon you. This is intensified in conjunction with technology that intensifies the body’s sense of exposure. “The return to early cinema, or ‘cinema degree zero’ [allows one] to rethink representation as a form of observation that can never be “pure”. The fixed stare of the camera determines the boundaries of on-screen and off-screen, controlling what is to be seen (and not seen); and yet it is extremely passive, uninvolved in the scene itself” (Russell, 172 -173). Equating my theoretical underpinning regarding etiquette with media is exemplified in my use of the “fixed stare” in video and photography. The camera is mummified along within the rules that are decided before the recording to then allow for an element of controlled performance throughout the time and space that becomes the video documentation.

Figure 2.6  “Just Passing Through”, two-channel video installation, video still, 2013

13 Quote is referring to Andy Warhol’s film work in particular
2.3 Mythologizing the West: The foreign body

Eddie: You know, it’s funny… you come some place new, an’ everything looks just the same ( Stranger than Paradise, Jim Jarmusch, 1984)

The desire to journey is an important theme in “Just Passing Through” as well as a point of interest when thinking about cultural collective memory. As with etiquette, I am interested in how the desire to travel, specifically to Western North America is mutually exclusive in the processes of informing, influencing, and shaping the individual’s understanding of the past, present and future. This inquiry becomes another investigation of origins, but it grounds the existential meanderings found in etiquette to an environment in time and space. The environment is able to balance itself within reality and imagination while sustaining the complex phenomenological convergence. Phenomenology speaking, the desire to travel shows a specific localization of memory and imagination in the body. It is a desire to physically rattle one’s individual memories. This manifests itself as an attempt in changing one’s surroundings. The body becomes the home, altering the normative association with a structural home. Like the binary between remembering and forgetting, travel requires the home. Home is at once “…a real space and a visualized space. It is both the contained and the container, concept and experience, space and object – inside and out” (Alison, 17). The home acts as juxtaposition to the transient space or “non-space”(Auge) of the hotel room. By providing the most basic structural elements, these “non-spaces” are able to momentarily act as veneers. One’s “home” (ideologically and physically) is able to live in memory and therefore “non-spaces”. The neutralization of the non-space allows for the projection of our memories and cultural fantasies

Positioning oneself within a group desire – heading West – is akin to the choir, the powerful group utterance. The West is canonized within entertainment, through television, radio, cinema, magazines that are repeated over time or, “hyperreality” as coined by Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard, 10). The repetition governs the desire and is the pinnacle in conjunction with episodic suspension. So much of North American culture resides on a desire to temporarily suspend consciousness but only in acceptable intervals as governed by society

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14 “The responsibility involved in this motley in-between living is a highly creative one: the displacer proceeds by unceasingly introducing difference into repetition.” (Trinh T. Minh-Ha, 21).
(i.e. the vacation, the holiday). The suspension lends itself to the trance, the dream, the feeling of being in love. In attempting to harness similar experiences to this, stimulants such as drugs, technology, religion, and the holiday are sought. Erin Manning classifies this desire as “nomadic vocabularies of resistance” where the politics of space and time are recast as ephemeral, inciting us to question the terms of inclusion and exclusion that define ourselves to narratives of home, identity and territory” (Manning, xxvi). The physical journey seeks to locate the world differently as if to tie and untie the knots of accepted systems (Manning, 34).

The West in particular lives within a set of representations and historical lineages that perpetuates an utopian aura that is then exaggerated by using a 1960’s aesthetic. 1960’s era is easily identifiable because of its large-scale push for progress. With progress comes the utopist dreams that are then synthesized into the objects, fashion and culture. It was a time when progress meant a streamlined, mass produced industry. This dictates a time where the ruins decay in a specific way, where this serge of newness produced the objects found in thrift stores and an idealist society that can be looked back upon perhaps not romantically but with an understanding. Nostalgia in itself depends on this otherness, particularly an otherness to the present. One that is kept at a safe distance and consequently perpetuates the unattainable utopia. I find a strong link between nostalgia and the 1960’s because of this procedural utopia that results from the imagined reality. Personally, I experienced this feeling when driving across the country from Ontario to British Columbia in order to begin my graduate studies. The stereotypical western landscape littered with the silhouettes of cowboys and starlets evoking the now politically incorrect Marlboro Man commercials or Marilyn Monroe’s diaries entered into my consciousness before the move, and were, sometimes disdainfully so, fulfilled upon arriving. The physical journey evolved into a self-imposed exile in part incited by the intensive personal examination required of graduate studies. Julia Kristeva notes that this shift occurs when the exiled person questions, “WHERE am I?” rather than “WHO am I?” (Kristeva, Powers of Horror, 235). The journey acts as a temporary suspension of identity while continually attempting to physically position the self within a juxtaposition that is now HERE and no longer THERE. Becoming the anonymous traveler means straddling desire between the foreign and the familiar. At once the new place and the new people are indeed “new” but only to a certain extent does the self allow the danger and risk involved with accepting this. It is inevitable to compare the new settings with
the old, with the familiar. In this process, the traveler must recall certain facts, events, and places in which to ground him or herself with a sense of continuity. This is repeated to the self as well as in new encounters in order to postulate ones’ authenticity to the statements. This process becomes an exercise in remembering, performing, and pretending. One could argue that it permits the manifestation of the person’s “true” self.

If the traveler is a woman, this complicates the traditional notion because the female is often regarded as being the centre of the household, an objectified entity that is silent and laden with the coverings of rituals and ceremonies – in a way she embodies a masqueraded constant within the home matrix. She, like the Virgin Mary\textsuperscript{15}, is perceived to be the eternal force within the family. Breaking her out of this realm positions her in a vulnerable space within society. It is the power in the opening scenes in “Psycho” (Dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) when Tippi Henderson is driving at night. She is in motion to some place but it becomes irrelevant to the audience where she is going to or where/what/who she is leaving.

The West as a geographical location in North America persists on the ideological foundations placed by the earliest colonizers with disregard to even the notion that there were civilizations, people, and communities before them. Much like the video recording of Neil Armstrong’s first steps on the moon in 1969 – conspiracy theories or not – the West exists in the beginning steps of the journey. The preparation before the journey, in this case from East (i.e. Europe or NYC) to West (California or British Columbia), permits the dreams of prosperity and opportunity, of newness. This sense of newness originates from the natural environment as well as the fabrications constructed in this stage. These moments created the cowboy and the starlet, the Wild West; notions that are still present in current ideologies to this geographical location. This process is akin to fiction because it suspends the customary norms of social life. Fiction in particular allows for the emersion into another individual and in turn to a moment “…to forget oneself, to forget of thinking of oneself as under the sign of repetition” (Auge. 80). Essentially, the desire to journey to the West is in tandem with the desire to transcend the present moment and, I believe, a moment to transcend the past.\textsuperscript{16} It is

\textsuperscript{15} Bible – text – as mythology, storytelling, as culturally significant language, morality – elaborated in Kristeva’s “Stabat Manner” as a means of seeking origins for the representations of the maternal figure
\textsuperscript{16} Joan Didion, Life Styles in the Golden Land, “Slouching Towards Bethlehem: “The future always looks good in the golden land, because no one remembers the past. Here is where the hot wind blows and the old ways do not seem relevant, where the divorce rate is double the national average and where one person in every thirty-
important to note that the West is composed of majestic figures (cowboy, starlet) that are tied to the narrative past tense - “once upon a time”.

If the West resides in the moments of beginning then must there also be preparations for the ending? Boym asserts that the ending is unimportant because it is always in flux (Boym, 23). This allows for the repetition of the beginning, a continual re-beginning or at least the aspiration to do so. Therefore, culture attests the importance of a continual re-beginning especially in the West as exemplified through the quintessential “American dream”. It accounts for the cultural obsession with entertainment and popular culture, and its ability to repeat over generations in varying intensities. Thus, ambiguity is fundamental to the contemporary human experience. Exercising this feeling of the unknown in our everyday pursuits of culture mimics the underlying anxiety linked to the ambiguity of all endings, ultimately with life and death. The beginning is seductive because it emits an aura of the sacrifice, something that is innocent and imaginative. It lives on the possibilities, the outcomes that germinate in relation to the past and present moments but are never fully realized as being the future or the ending.

Procedurally, nostalgia – once diagnosed as a disease for the dislocated – echoes the composite character as my own meshing of reality and imaginary. Nostalgia’s longing becomes something of a one-track stream of consciousness repeatedly and obsessively entwining one’s present realities with memories of the past. Similar to the narcissist, a child, or a rich drawn out dream, nostalgia is a coping mechanism where the individual can compose their own sense of continuity among a group in the collective memory. The only restriction is that the longing may never become belonging. At this juncture all nostalgic ties are lost and the imagined is tarnished. It is like the culminating scene in “The Wizard of Oz” (1939) when the travelers finally walk down the long hallway to Oz only to be turned away for another quest. The beauty of this film is the dream. We learn that the film is a depiction of Dorothy’s dream, but the rhythm of the film incites a deeper feeling rooted in reality. The journey is juxtaposed with the home or the return to home and is littered by interruptions that make the ending impossible and not as important as the travel. This is also true for Sophie

eight lives in a trailer. Here is the last stop for all those who come from somewhere else, for all those who drifted away from the cold and the past and the old ways. Here is where they are trying to find a new life style, trying to find it in the only places they know to look: the movies and the newspapers. The case of Lucille Marie Maxwell Miller is a tabloid monument to that new lifestyle.” (4)
Calle and Gregory Shephard’s film “No Sex Last Night” (1996). Equipped with two cameras and a vehicle, Sophie and Gregory embark on a road trip from East to West in USA. Taking an autobiographical approach to the romantic association to the American road trip, the pair exposes a fragility in the physical journey across land as well as in the negotiations between themselves. Like “The Wizard of Oz”, “No Sex Last Night” exposes a rich internal diary akin to the dream where the ending is decided but unimportant. The magic lies in the dreams procured throughout the journey. Nostalgia and the dream both reveal the interconnection of one’s environment, mind and body, as well as the relationship between the individual and the group. The contradictions are rife with ambiguity. “It is the romantic traveler who sees from a distance the wholeness of the vanishing world. The journey gives him perspective. The vantage point of a stranger informs the native idyll. The nostalgic person is displaced between local and universal” (Boym 12).

I suppose all we are ever searching for are uncharted lands. Unknown lands not found by persons but more importantly not yet found by that individual traveler. This place may be as common or familiar as any she has been before but in that moment and in that space she, the traveler, experiences awe. The feeling of newness to her brings forth a wonder unmatched to dreams or stimulated states (drugs or fiction) – where everything must be learned anew and where the new is contrasted with the old. The old is brought back to the foreground of the experience in a new light. It gives the old purpose, a breath for however long it returns, morphs, and is forgotten again. The physical change in movement through geography is akin to the movement between these states with a sense that the traveler has some sense of control over their destination.

2.4 Identity and The Composite Character

“During the last century women have been naming themselves by making art and performance from their own bodies, experiential histories, memories, and personal landscapes in myriad textual and visual modes and in multiple media. These autobiographical acts situate the body in some kind of material surround that functions as a theater of embodied self-representation” (Watson & Smith, 5)

The performative social body is an important point of departure when thinking about etiquette, ceremony and ritual. This is especially true regarding femininity. Often referred to as a “masquerade” (Zizek, The Plague of Fantasies), the female body is in a constant state of
cancelling and appropriation through the act of doubling and repetition. What was once before becomes a phantom in order to progressively become another phantom (Baudrillard, *Simulation and Simulacrum*, 10). The act of giving oneself wholly to another system, whether it is an other person or a set of agreed upon rules, strips our original idea of individuality by reducing the revolution to the fixation of obtaining and discarding layers of representation. This inheritance can be exemplified in the upper class American grace with which Katherine Hepburn speaks in “A Philadelphia Story” (1940) or Sophie Calle’s seemingly perverse but beautifully tragic actions when she anonymously follows a man to Venice in “The Shadowing” (1981). It can also be found in the family stories that are told at each ritual gathering. Among families there are similarities in characters with the stories changing depending on the mood, amount of repetition, and who tells the story. Jean Baudrillard describes this desire to appropriate oneself in relation to Sophie Calle ironically as being the only way that a person is able to fulfill himself (Baudrillard, “Please Follow Me”, 22). Becoming the shadow of the other cancels each existence. Consequently, the position as subject must be nulled in order to allow for a further transformation of the self (Baudrillard, “Please Follow Me”, 22). Applying this notion specifically to the female enigma brings a deeper understanding of the “masquerade” or “mask” that is perpetuated through the material and cognitive understanding of what it is to be a woman.

“We can never derive the ‘story we tell about ourselves’ from our ‘real situation’, there is always a minimal gap between the real and the mode(s) of its symbolization…Here however, again, the very plasticity of the process of symbolization is strictly correlative to – even grounded in- the excessive fixation on the empty signifier: to put it in a somewhat simplified way, I can change my symbolic identity precisely and only in so far as my symbolic universe includes ‘empty signifiers’ which can be filled in by a new particular content” (Zizek, 119).

Like the hopeless romantic I find myself in continuous contradiction. This romantic contradiction is evident in the video installation “Just Passing Through” as represented in the layering of intimately performed individually charged gestures meant to evoke a personal relationship to image as well as reflect on the representation of the female body in cinematic form. Rather than position myself in the work as a blatant critique of women in social convention, I adorn the anonymous character to give allowance for the longing for something
lost or something that can never be achieved. For instance, seeking the totems and narratives
that could compose a woman’s internal landscape. This too is enshrined in veneered
authenticity. It is a placebo that is willingly swallowed. In the moments that the salvia
accumulates, I become fully aware that it is a placebo and yet I gladly gulp it down. In
tandem I shoot up fiction (Ronell, “Media” Lecture) and surround myself in a bath of
souvenirs, ruins, trash, and costume. This artistic process, as Umberto Eco states, is the
“frantic desire for Almost Real arises only as a neurotic reaction to the vacuum of memories,
the Absolute Fake is offspring of the unhappy awareness of present without depth” (Eco, 30).
As such, this process mimics the consumerist nostalgia and a large majority of popular
culture entertainment. Both my self-induced nostalgic coma and popular culture present or
represent the present self-reflexively in order to be comforted by authenticity. This
performance positions itself as Other to the stereotypical portrayal. “Authenticity here is
visual, not historical. There is a deep-seated fear of reflection on history and its blank spots,
on the irreversibility of time, that challenges the dream of eternal youth and possibility of
eternal recreation” (Boym, 38). In my work, this subversion is echoed in form. For instance,
the fetishized objects that composes the shrine and Sing-Along video, the cinema verite style
of the motel video that is physically layered into a haze and, the extreme close-up of the
mouths.

Creating a composite character from family and cultural remains mimics the
procedural experience of memory as integrated into the body as performed social convention
and female identity. The conflict inherent in these assumptions provides a rich lexicon to
appropriate gestures and symbols. They are re-represented through mediums linked with
memory – photography and video – using my body and the space within a motel room among
those that litter HWY 97 in the Okanagan Valley as anonymous tools for the particular
appropriations that express my interpretation of LuLu Miller. Zbigniew Rybczynski’s 1981
short animation “Tango” is an important point of reference for this section. Rybczynski’s
film is a static frame onto a room in which various characters move in and out and through
the space in specific gestures that evolve and repeat over time. There is a dynamic tension
within this piece that connotes the elementary ways in which the body moves throughout a
room through particularly quotidian tasks. The entrance and the exits direct the attention to
the off-screen space. Like memory and fiction, the repetitious nature of such movements
leads itself into a transcendental suspension. When paralleling “Tango” with the LuLu Miller character, the repetition creates a rhythm that speaks to a speculative assumption of LuLu’s family life and her role within the home. It is something that will continue to be ambiguous in my own personal pursuit in getting to know a woman who is important to me and yet have never met. Someone who is integral to every family gathering and family story, someone who is intertwined genetically, someone who lived in a different time and place but who could still feel similar dilemmas or worries. It is a relentless pursuit of the ambiguous, but a pursuit that is self-propelled. It is an existential meandering that does not have a definitive answer. Yet, the possibilities to romanticize, to speculate, to imagine, to project creates a dynamic tension that is inherent in the human facility to wonder. Like Rybczynski’s short film or the artist mentioned previously who draw upon similar representations in popular culture and collective memory, this sense of wonder is able to build upon itself and become a site of ambiguity that exists on its own plane to be further manipulated in oscillation.

2.4.1 **LuLu Emma Miller**

LuLu Miller is my maternal great-grandmother and “Miller” is her maiden surname. LuLu’s travel diaries are daily records written that evoke a sense of duty to remember while at the same time also expressing the need to forget. She writes of banal quotidian experiences, the memories that are readily available when propositioned with a blank page, resembling conversational “small talk”. Reading about her everyday happenings, specifically when she was traveling by bus to the British Columbia and California, was a very intimate experience. Her handwriting is diligent and careful, her topics as well. Even the notion that she carried these books as a totem with her provided additional intimacy. I began to believe that her texts held some secret or truth to her internal character. That the next page would hold an important cue directed at me, for me, something that no one else in my family knows.
Always a suitcase packed. Always ready to leave at a moments notice. These are the definitive words that I associate with LuLu as told by my family members. For myself, this image is bound to the suitcase packed that would be prepared for a woman close to her pregnancy date. It resonates in being prepared in a moment’s notice, to be ready for whatever chaos may come your way. On one hand it is romantic in its delivery – a preserved compilation of things that I assume to be basics or the things that you feel necessary to travel with. Like the question, “If there were a fire and you could take only one object with you, what would it be?“

“6

There was a certain teacup, a tallish lily of the valley cup, its silhouette like a fleshy neck smoothed out by the chin held high.

It was the one she was drinking from when the hospital phoned with the news of her father’s death.

She placed the cup at the back of the buffet, behind the gravy boat, Christmas platter and crystal pickle tray.
Years later, when the house was sold, the contents auctioned off, the buffet and china cabinet cleared out, the auctioneer’s assistant picked up the cup, wondered ever-so-briefly why it was separate, then put it together with the rest.”
(Munce, 139).

Figure 2.8  Installation view of Just Passing Through with shring and Sing Along video, 2013
2.4.2 Lucille Marie Maxwell Miller (San Bernando Valley, 1965) Joan Didion

Mrs. Cunningham: “You know, I read of a case once. I think it would be a wonderful idea! I can take him out in the car, and when we get to a very lonely spot, knock him on the head with a hammer, pour gasoline over him and over the car, and set the whole thing ablaze! [giggles]” (Strangers on a Train, Alfred Hitchcock, @ 53 min)

The case of Lucille Miller, a housewife originally from Winnipeg, Manitoba, exists in various evidential fragments. Her legacy exists in the first-degree murder trial in Southern California’s San Bernardino Valley of her husband, a dentist Gordon “Cork” Miller. My interest in her story begins with her name being the same as my Great-Grandmother. As I continue to sift through the remaining information about her and her crime mummified in archived newspaper articles, photographs and Joan Didion’s essay “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream” (1968), she became the quintessential suburban housewife but one who reached her societal breaking point. Each anecdote and evidence composes the balancing act between truth and fable, reality and imagination. This balance exists in my own unearthing of information. Both processes run parallel to each other in an attempt to find the authentic. This ultimately becomes futile because this pursuit is laden with assumptions and fictionalizations that become amplified within the legal system. Even the way in which Lucille is portrayed in the media calls upon a certain collective memory and system of stereotypes. With the addition of the time period and location being the late 1960’s Western North America, when the post World War II utopian American Dream is still alive. We see this in the suburbs, families living beyond their means to portray a constructed modality seductive to the foreigner. Everything about this story and this location is a transplant, a veneer.
Reportedly, Cork Miller was burned to death inside of their leased 1965 Volkswagen on the freeway close to their home returning from a trip to pick up milk. As stated in the Reading Eagle newspaper the prosecutor claims, “…Mrs. Miller poured gasoline over the interior of the car, threw in a lighted match at 12:34 A.M., and watched the car and her husband burn.” Keep in mind that this statement was given to a jury who were sworn in to not take into account Mrs. Miller’s extra-marital activity or her visible pregnancy. The media also represents Lucille in many photographs outlining her as a typical, demure housewife but who thought and executed evil. The details have the same air as a Hollywood drama, shaped and molded through the surfacing details. In contrast, this story also survives in Joan Didion’s essay. It provides context albeit through Didion’s perspective, of the time and place in which Lucille Miller’s crime was committed, positioning Lucille as a “tabloid monument”(4) to the aspirations of this generation and this place who is unwittingly grasping for the American dream. Regardless of Didion’s stark and seemingly neutral writing style one cannot forget that she is storytelling. She formulates the information she has gathered into a suspenseful and yet melancholic journey during a publicized portion of Lucille’s life. She provides the reader with vignettes like the following: “…that a sudden stop from 35
m.p.h.—the same jolt which was presumed to have knocked over a gasoline can in the back seat and somehow started the fire—should have left two milk cartons upright on the back floorboard, and the remains of a Polaroid camera box lying apparently undisturbed on the back seat.”(13). And yet, the statements from all those involved continually return to their inability to remember or the inability to accurately piece together all the events. As stated in the Reading Eagle article, this is a case of human frailty. And, it is not reserved for just Lucille Miller, but for everyone involved in the case; her husband, her children, their family and friends, the law enforcers, and the people who devoted any amount of time to reading about it. Yet, like any sort of sensation it too becomes lost in the gears of the everyday as a roadside memorial, varying in degrees of memories.

Joan Didion’s recount of Miller’s story along with the media that is archived is precisely that. It is a re-telling of a series of events that have occurred outside of the individual who finds merit in the process of internalizing only to then externalize their position regardless how neutral the stance may appear to be.

2.4.3 LuLu (Harold Pinter’s The Birthday Party, 1960)

“We live on the verge of disaster…There is something in your past—it does not matter what—it will catch up with you. Though you go to the uttermost pasts of the earth, and hide yourself in the most obscure lodgings in the least popular of towns, one day there is a possibility that two men will appear.”


Pinter’s play “The Birthday Party” (1960) became an important point of departure when composing and trying to express LuLu Miller’s character. The play itself is ambiguous but upon closer investigation professes a subtle relationship between memory and identity, and the shifting contradictions that come along with it. Reading the text obviously provides the audience with a different experience than experiencing the play on stage. Through my readings I was able to slow down, imagine, and construct beyond the direct details and dialogue given. Such an acute sense of reference flows underneath the proclamations between characters. It resides in the one-sided dialogue that anchors the beginning and end between the man and woman who own a seaside lodge. It resides in the initial meeting between Stanley (tenant of the lodge for a year) and McCann (one of the two visiting men,
intruder?) where Stanley attempts to present himself and his history twice, as well as trying to figure out McCann’s position in all of it. The first section is his alibi, which seem to be proclamations or assertions to himself as much as to this new visitor. The second section is most revealing as another interaction is happening off-stage and Stanley reveals his anxiety that McCann does not believe his alibi. It also resides in the repeated game theme. This is apparent in the dialogue’s rhythm (especially at the climax between Stanley and Goldberg to the chair circling which almost immediately drops once Meg enters the room and the party begins). The game is also repeated throughout the second act party. This is fitting as a symbolic gesture to the notion of a Birthday Party. At once, the game and the ritualistic party connote a joyous but sinister tone. Both follow rules in which the group is expected to abide. The rules suggest a standardization that governs fairness to the events that could unfold. Within the rules, each player has a role as well.

LuLu’s character is actually quite sparse and illusive. In the prologue it is stated that she is a “girl in her twenties”* and her dialogue, specifically with Stanley, shows moments of naivety but also a hard fastness to find love, or at least a partner whom she has been told to acquire. To me, LuLu represents the girl living in every small community. She may seem bright and lively but is hardened to the witnessing of her role within the town’s inner workings. She embodies the past in conjunction to the older predominately male characters, not only because of her age, but because of her gender. LuLu parallels Meg, the lady and wife and once daughter, as possessing only the daughter quality. She too is on the same trajectory as Meg.

Each conversation reads as if each character is speaking to their self. This is further expressed in the party scene when the toasts begin and the alcohol starts flowing and the lights are turned on and off. Here, in Act II, the dialogue is presented as if the audience is a fly-on-the-wall at this party, or as Stanley, who has become silent, sitting in the room, watching and listening the various overlapping interactions unfold.
Chapter 3 Conclusion

“Should say: “That is not what I meant at all;
That is not it, at all.””17

Preparing for this exhibition feels like I am gathering all the representational nuggets that are dear to me. This project morphs reality and fiction. I hold these images, references, and stories close to heart and repeat them so as not to forget their essence. Inevitably some are forgotten, some are forgotten completely, but then some return. It is as though every memory that has been referenced and created within this two-year program lies behind my back, sheltering and pushing me forward, emitted as the little pins of light along the way. I very much feel as though I have been in a relationship with this material and have walked the line between trying to make it work and letting it run its course. Spinning in its fear then reveling in the delight that comes with it.

Rules exist because of the intertwining complexities that make up life, the everyday, our bodies and, our interactions. These complexities and the desire to abide by these rules are the foundation for my own contradictions. Etiquette, nostalgia, travel, and 1960’s aesthetic all rely on ideology. Whether it is cultivated as a commodity within the collective memory or internalized within individuals’ desires, these systems enact a comfort in their pretended authenticity.

Changing the artists’ authorship, especially when dealing with the female performed body in social convention, to a system concerned with emergence – a game that is based on repetitious patterns from a simplistic denominator. For Just Passing Through, as well as the past work explored in this paper, the denominator is the name LuLu Miller. It is also the existing structures in medium, the basic set-up rules for performance, the overlapping symbolic materials and objects. They provide a framework to play. Playing within these self-imposed rules as previously explored through mediations on etiquette, posits a security for myself within the work to explore unknown possibilities. Those that are ephemeral and romantic and that arise from the quiet internalization of the rules.

Figure 3.1  “whole (tea time)”, digital photography series of 24, 2013
Figure 3.2  “whole (tea time)”, digital photography series of 24, 2013
Works Cited


