Instead of a Resolution

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INSTEAD OF A RESOLUTION

A Thesis Presented

by

NOUR GHASSAN BISHOUTY

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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Department of Art, Architecture and Art History
INSTEAD OF A RESOLUTION

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I dedicate my thesis to my mother, my aunt Nabila Bisbounty and the memory of my father.
ABSTRACT

INSTEAD OF A RESOLUTION

MAY 2014

NOUR GHASSAN BISHOUTY, B.F.A., THE UNIVERSITY OF JORDAN
M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Susan Jahoda, Sandy Litchfield, Shona Macdonald and Lynne Yamamoto

Instead of a Resolution explores the functions of narrative as an accumulative, simplified and indexed order of elements (events, persons, objects and times,) through personal or family histories. Each work in the exhibition, in its own way, locates and/or fabricates connections between inside/outside, private/public, and individual/collective.
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CHAPTER 1

ASSIMILATION (OF A NARRATIVE)

An Imperfect Narrative

“I do not know whether I have anything to say, I know that I am saying nothing; I do not know if what I might have to say is unsaid because it is unsayable [-]; I know that what I say is blank, is neutral, is a sign, once and for all, of a once-and-for-all annihilation.”

I have only fragments of a story; stories of a story, contaminated with impressions, a story that has no point of departure or landing, it has become an obsession. Sometimes it is a story about the life of a woman who in the late 1940s migrated as a child with her family from Safad, Palestine to Jounieh, Lebanon, and in early 1980 to Amman, Jordan, and who in 1992 became blind. Sometimes it is a story about blindness. And sometimes a story about a woman, concealing another about a man whose sister became blind.

My obsession with this story completes the narrative. There is a degree of justified obsession in art, disguised and even celebrated as necessary passion. But I speak of obsession not as a form of disease —“one that is culturally acceptable and relies on societal notions of madness and normality” — but as a descriptive expression of a state of incessant

1 Georges Perec, W or The Memory of Childhood, (Boston, Massachusetts: David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc, 1988), pp. 42.
2 Lennard J. Davis, “Play It Again, Sam, and Again: Obsession and Art,” Journal of Visual Culture 2006 5: 242
return, hinging on desire, or on the belief in a promise of fulfillment, of satisfaction or of pure happiness.

“In this way the image fills one of its functions, which is to pacify, to humanize the unformed nothingness pushed towards us by the residue of being that cannot be eliminated. It cleans it up, appropriates it, makes it pleasant and pure and allows us to believe, in the heart of the happy dream which art too often permits, that at a distance from the real, and immediately behind it, we are finding, as a pure happiness and a superb satisfaction, the transparent eternity of the unreal.”

The persistent state of seeking (fulfillment, satisfaction) is central to my work. My preoccupation with narratives and the many ways they are deliberated and exchanged (remembered, forgotten or invented details, versions of stories told and retold, authenticating documents, objects and photographs…etc) is fundamentally an act of remembering, preserving the unpreservable, clinging to lives that were once here but are now gone. In short, it is a testament to how memory lives in the present. But foremost, it is an attempt to assert my own life.

———

3 Maurice Blanchot, The Station Hill Blanchot Reader, (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1999), 417
The collection of photographs I have pinned to my studio wall commemorate a woman I had, in the existential sense, never known. She existed, she was here or there, she ate and drank and bathed and brushed her thick black hair. She had conversations with the baker and the neighbor and the landlord’s wife. She visited a monument, and raised her glass and reclined on a surfboard in the middle of the Mediterranean. I heard she was a brave surfer. These photographs are ordinary, they are domestic, they are approachable. They enable the empty space on their periphery to be filled in with familiarities (what accumulates between them is more than the sum total of their materiality).

This is how narrative begins: with an image, an indication, a provocation and an invitation for one’s undivided attention. It holds out the promise of a relationship and at the same time a reflection of one’s own image.

I first became interested in the photographs because they were available to me in family archives. But soon, they morphed into a peculiar and particular narrative of a woman whose ability to see suddenly and irreversibly came to a halt. I collected and repeatedly looked at these photographs, just as I repeatedly and persistently observed her, even when
our eyes made contact. The pleasure of looking, without being looked at was, self
consciously, ever present first in the physicality of her body, and later in the abundance of
photographs, official documents, handwritten letters and other revealing materials that
survived her. Yet, there was something else about these artifacts, a gravitating force. In them,
I was hoping for an explanation of her misfortune and suffering.

Within the archive there is a sense of longing for the source, a place of birth and a
point of reference. Where does this human fascination with origin come from? What is it
that gives a source its legitimating authority? “The archive is made possible by the death,
aggression, and destruction drive, and that is to say also by originary finitude and
expropriation. But beyond finitude as limit, there is [—] this properly in-finite movement of
radical destruction without which no archive desire or fever would happen”4 Fundamentally,
every life is governed by death, and the archive is nothing but a record of mortality.

Remnants make manifest the presence of death. Yet, one keeps these lifeless objects,
nostalgically preserving them as if they were more capable of remembrance. Photo albums,
souvenirs and mementos become signifiers, not only of moments or people, but also of
death itself. “Before anything else, even before the name, a signature bespeaks the possible

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4 Jacques Derrida, Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression (Chicago: University of Chicago
Press, 1995), 94.
death of the one who bears the name.”\textsuperscript{5} Perhaps by keeping these objects one remembers oneself.

**Edges, Borders And Ends**

As a child, I sometimes playfully started a book by reading its very last page, its most palpable end where, instead of a resolution, I would be faced with fragments of a cumulating story; unfamiliar names and places. Is the end of a book really located in its last pages?

There is something fascinating about ends, where everything recedes: The end of a book, of a journey, of a life. But do things unfold around the edges? Do they really start to make sense? Or do they instead pull us back inside, in search for meaning or for traces of possible beginnings?

The artifacts I speak of, articulate the last chapters of her life, and like the end of a book, they pull me in and urge me to look.

Looking (viewership) is a predetermined condition of the work of art. But, the places of looking I provide to my viewer are deficient: Besides their “limit as images,”\textsuperscript{6} they are further distanced by another layer of emptiness and removal: the cutout.

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\textsuperscript{5} Derrida speaks of Michel Servière’s signature as if it was a collectible object, and I mention this here for several reasons: First, for Derrida, this signature is a reminder of death itself, and so are objects, photo albums, and souvenirs. Second, a signature emphasizes the human intention/desire to archive. And third, a a signature (as well as a stamp) authenticates a source - a point I will discuss further in section 4 of A chapter 1 “Inside/Outside”. See: Jacques Derrida, The Work of Mourning, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 136.
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\textsuperscript{6} In Two Versions of the Imaginary, Maurice Blanchot describes the image as a limit: "The fortunate thing about the image is that it is a limit next to the indefinite. A thin ring, but one
\end{flushleft}
A terminating emptiness, which demands a sudden stop of the gaze, is significant in my work, where the negative and the removed are leveraged.

I look at the work of Rachel Whiteread for its peculiar embodiment of emptiness and fullness. In *house* (1993) the emptiness is exerted in the heaviness of the concrete as it fills the negative space of a building. The un-material place where one dwells is excavated like a “fossil”, and by doing so, this nothingness is substantiated, and the absent becomes present.

In *An Imperfect Narrative*, (2014), inkjet prints on archival paper, the removed silhouettes are also intended to **blind** the viewer. Could removing that which one desires to see: the face, the familiar, yield a form of blindness?

Likewise, these images and documents, both official and personal (photographs of family gatherings, official portraits, expired passports, driving license, ID card...etc) function in reverse; they isolate, they extract and remove everything that is not within the picture frame. The silhouette in my works acts in a similar way: it extracts the subject from its image, the figure from its place. It functions as a concealer / blinder when it removes the figure, and a revealer when it outlines it. It marks the borders of its subject, only acknowledging its

which does not keep us at such a remove from things that it saves us from the blind pressure of that remove. Through it, that remove is available to us. Through what there is of inflexibility in a reflection, we believe ourselves to be masters of the absence that has become an interval, and the dense void itself seems to open to the radiation of another day."

I think of the work of art as image. (See Maurice Blanchot, Two Versions of the Imaginary)
edges. As such, the silhouette functions very similarly to a photograph, it preserves the subject but also reenacts its death.

The silhouette as a visual form has a long history going back to 18th century Europe and the rise of Portrait Miniatures\(^7\). But it has also been extensively used in the works of contemporary visual artists including William Kentridge, Jin Lee and Kara Walker. Although each one of these artists draws from different issues and references, such as repression, slavery and feminism, the silhouette in their works is collectively a form of simplification and representation.

In most cases the silhouette is in profile view and is often a recognizable human head or body form. In my work, *An Imperfect Narrative*, (2014), however, the silhouettes take the forms of removed figures, whichever way those figures existed in the selected photographs. This prompts yet another layer of abstraction or ambiguity, where the resulting form(s) can sometimes be unrecognizable.

In another work, *Instead of a Resolution* (2014) the silhouette of the head I chose to work with is a replica of a passport-sized official photograph, which I enlarged approximately twenty times. The nature of this photograph (taken in full-face view directly facing the camera) makes it so that the produced contour is easily recognizable as a human head. But none of the features which typically reveal a person's identity, such as the shape of the forehead or nose, are available. In this way, the image can be experienced only as a faint

indication of an unknown individual. Who is that person? What is her story? What is being hidden or revealed? These are questions I hope to induce.

In *Edges, Borders and Ends* (2014) white ink on paper, the contours of repeated silhouettes from what looks like an ambiguous pattern, where one is prompted to find the edge (or the element of a the pattern which systematically repeats). Likewise, each one of contours, in its own way, forms an edge, sometimes recognizable when the silhouette of a figure is potent, and other times ambiguous, resembling the imaginary edges of maps or geographical territories.

In the space which exists between the familiar (recognizable) and the unfamiliar (ambiguous) is the essence of my work: I am interested in the potentiality of the familiar (a narrative birthing another narrative) and in the possibilities that arise in the face of the unfamiliar.
Among the woman’s artifacts was a canceled passport: a compact and official timeline of a portion of her life, documented with a collection of stamps. Together they indicate places and times, entries and exits, approved and denied work permits, paid immigrant fees, paid renewal fees, visitor’s visas and medical treatment trips.

A passport stamp authenticates, it validates, it gives permission. But simultaneously, it implies a power relationship, where one asks, and the other has the power to grant. A passport stamp also conjures borders and edges; the tense passing from one side, or not, to the other. It implies fear and edginess and epitomizes abstract notions of borders, of nations, of non-existent differences. Could that be another form of vulnerability?
In *Inside/Outside* (2014), sixty-one stamps were extracted and reproduced from the found passport. I engage the stamp as a visual element with the intent that it exceeds its immediate and metaphoric signification. It is more than an indicator of place and a symbol of power and authority. To me, the stamp functions as an embodiment, in the most physical sense, of inside/outside, positive/negative, image/reflection. Just as a reflection is dependent upon its image, the stamp is dependent upon its print.

In the context of borders and controlled geographies, both the stamp (the actual stamping object) and its multiple copies or images (the stamped document) are physical depositions of power. Yet, when I use this object (reproduce and place it in the context of an artwork), these reproduced official stamps pose another set of questions around the nature of representation: What is an image? What are the meanings / significations / allusions of an image? How and when does an image possess power? How can that power be assessed, produced and reproduced?

“When nothing arrests our gaze, it carries a very long way. But if it meets with nothing, it sees nothing, it sees only what it meets. Space is what arrests our gaze, what our sight stumbles over: the obstacle, bricks, an angle, a vanishing point. Space is when it makes and angle, when it stops, when we have to turn for it to start off again. There’s nothing ectoplasmic about space; it has edges, it doesn’t go off in all
directions, it does all that needs to be done for railway lines to meet well short of infinity.”

Edges initiate space and extend to define its territories, where inside and outside materialize and where they demand particularity (once there is an inside and an outside, there is difference, there is dominance and impotence, there is you and me). But what are the characteristics of inside and outside? When does the private, the intimate, the personal become communal, approachable and/or exposed? What are the (locations) of (sharing)?

In the creases and folds of a woman’s narrative—the experienced and the narrated—and in the intimacy of its details—the fabricated, lost, uncertain and speculated—I find a strange reflection of an outside, a reflection which extends beyond the triviality of the intimate (and blurs the edge between inside and outside), but which is undoubtedly dependent upon its existence. Her illness not only becomes a reminder of her mortality, but also of my own. Her presence, a reminder of my absence.

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CHAPTER 2
EXCRETION (OF A NARRATIVE)

Process

3 Nour Bishouty, Instead of a Resolution (detail), 2014, Stitched hair on paper.

"The acceleration of history: Let us try to gauge the significance, beyond metaphor, of this phrase. An increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good, a general perception that anything and everything may disappear—these indicate a rupture of equilibrium. The remnants of experience still lived in the warmth of tradition, in the silence of custom, in the repetition of the ancestral, have
been displaced under the pressure of a fundamentally historical sensibility. Self-consciousness emerges under the sign of that which has already happened, as the fulfillment of something always already begun. We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left."  

Central to the work of art is the process of its making. In the work of Ann Hamilton’s *Indigo Blue* (1991), a performer undertakes the laborious act of erasing printed text in selected books, clearing each page line by line using an eraser wetted with her own saliva. For Hamilton this gesture is a way of “using the body to re-mark history,” and by doing so, I believe, she is not only invoking the labor of the body, but also hinting at the questionable authority of that history and the archive. Nonetheless, the process of the making and the labor of the body are undoubtedly the work’s most significant aspect. The residue produced by the erasure of every page was not discarded, but instead was brushed and kept in a neat pile, where their function was transformed from the condition of futile excess to the condition of necessary evidence.

Questions surrounding labor and time are an inherent part of my practice. In *Instead of a Resolution* (2014) I cross-stitch my own hairs into a large-scale piece of paper to create a silhouette of a head. Through these repetitions I make a deliberate attempt to force a meditative practice or discipline, and create a space where I can be present.

9 Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire* (New York: Oxford University Press), 284

Repetition in my process functions in two contrasting ways: On the one hand there is the pain and exertion of the body in the sheer, daunting labor of making, and on the other, there is comfort and solace in the familiar and nearly automatic gestures.

In that way, the repetition can be seen as the epitome of attachment to the familiar. Thus, it is a signification of human impotence and death; “We must also remember that the repetition itself, the logic of repetition, indeed the repetition compulsion, remains, according to Freud, indissociable from the death drive. And thus from destruction”\(^\text{11}\)

Beyond its inescapable reference to the/my body, I am interested in hair as a material for its particularly defiant nature—biologically, it takes certain environmental alterations such as humidity or heat to temporarily modify the texture, pattern or shape of a hair. Also, My use of it as stitching thread is forcing it to do something it is not meant to do, shifting it from the domain of the passive, inanimate (dead) thing, to the domain of the useful, utilitarian and functional.

Doris Salcedo’s work has proved influential, especially for its peculiar use of materials such as furniture, clothing items and human hair. In her work Unland: The Orphan’s Tunic (1995-98), she transforms a mundane household object (a kitchen table) into a loaded shrine, memorializing the pain and suffering of an entire people. In one part of this work, two worn tables were cut and jammed into each other morphing into one object. Attached to this object’s highly mutilated surface was a shiny silk white covering, embroidered with hundreds of human hairs. In this case, the stiff and lifeless household object seems to reference the human body in a position of impotence, perhaps on arms and knees or prostrate with pain. For Salcedo sculpture is its materiality, she works with materials
“that are already charged with significance, with meaning they have acquired in the practice of everyday life.”

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At the start of an endeavor, there is an unremitting desire for a conclusion, an end. In this paper and in my work, I attempt to break down the essence of a narrative, in all its complexities, imperfections and mysteries, and determine what it is that draws me to it, and how, in the vigorous process of questioning, analyzing and making I can find an explanation, a resolution or a sense of purpose. However, somewhere before the start of that narrative, there seems to have always existed an inherent awareness that the place I am looking for, the consolation, does not and may never exist.

In that way, *Instead of a Resolution* is intended as a self-aware title; it is indicative of a process, of something that has already begun, while at the same time it embodies a sense of unendingness and discomfort.

What exists instead of a resolution? Is it the tangible object? The remnants which remain, and which resemble the living? Or is it the making of an abject; the cathartic, distracting, and sometime numbing preoccupation with a simpler, more immediate and resolvable problem?
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ARTIST AT WORK

Nour Ghassan Bishouty at work on *Instead of a Resolution* in Studio Arts Building Studio 122,
The University of Massachusetts Amherst August 2013