



University of
Massachusetts
Amherst

In the Absence Of

Item Type	Thesis (Open Access)
Authors	Sawyer, Jennifer Gray
DOI	10.7275/304498
Download date	2026-05-19 21:41:49
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/45859

IN THE ABSENCE OF: TRUTHTELLING AND LYING

A Thesis Presented

by

JENNIFER GRAY SAWYER

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

May 2007

Department of Art: Studio Arts

© Copyright by Jennifer Gray Sawyer 2007

All Rights Reserved

IN THE ABSENCE OF: TRUTHTELLING AND LYING

A Thesis Presented

by

JENNIFER GRAY SAWYER

Approved as to style and content by:

Susan E. Jahoda, Chair

Young Min Moon, Member

Joseph Krupczynski, Member

William Oedel, Department Chair
Department of Art

To seekers of constructions below the surface.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor and mentor, Susan E. Jahoda, for her sincere and discerning guidance. Thanks are due to Chivas Sandage for her indefatigable support and counsel. In combination, their insight and continued aesthetic contribution to my artistic and professional development have been invaluable. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the members of my committee, Young Min Moon and Joseph Krupczynski, for their astute suggestions and feedback.

Thank you to Craig Allaben, from the University Gallery, for generously providing the use of multimedia equipment for the exhibition portion of this thesis.

I wish to express my deep appreciation to the individuals who volunteered their participation in the videowork. A special thank you to all those whose encouragement, friendship and dialogue helped me to create and shape this project.

Finally, thank you to Gram for always striving to share her truths with me and listening to mine—unwaveringly.

ABSTRACT

IN THE ABSENCE OF: TRUTHTELLING AND LYING

May 2007

JENNIFER GRAY SAWYER, B.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS
AMHERST

M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Susan E. Jahoda

This thesis explores the experience of telling and constructing truths and lies, and receiving and interpreting truths and lies within the context of contemporary culture. This thesis both augments and is founded in the production of the digital video *In the Absence Of*, itself an exploration of truth, self and identity.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
ABSTRACT	vi
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
CHAPTER	
1. CONFSSIONAL SELF-PRODUCTION.....	1
Introduction.....	1
First-Person Truths	1
Filmic Infrastructure.....	5
Filmic Ties	8
2. TRUTHS & VALUES.....	10
Genealogy	10
Polysemic Truths	14
Identity, Trust & Betrayal	16
Conclusion	20
APPENDICES	25
A. THE FIGURES	26
B. TECHNICAL DETAILS	32
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	34

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Participant <i>C.H.</i>	26
2. Participant <i>C.S.</i>	26
3. Participant <i>D.S.</i>	26
4. Participant <i>H.K.</i>	27
5. Participant <i>I.G.</i>	27
6. Participant <i>J.G.</i>	27
7. Participant <i>J.P.</i>	28
8. Participant <i>J.S.</i>	28
9. Participant <i>L.R.</i>	28
10. Participant <i>L.U.</i>	29
11. Participant <i>M.R.</i>	29
12. Participant <i>R.H.</i>	29
13. Participant <i>R.J.</i>	30
14. Participant <i>S.C.</i>	30
15. Participant <i>T.B.</i>	30
16. Participant <i>T.C.</i>	31
17. Participant <i>T.P.</i>	31

CHAPTER 1

CONFESSIONAL SELF-PRODUCTION

Introduction

In the Absence Of exists within the contemporary genre of *confessional art*. But comfort it does not bring to the table. The videowork is motivated and driven by autobiography, employing dialogism between artist, participant and spectator. Seventeen interview participants are stitched into the twenty-two minute long video loop, with each subject conversationally informing the confluence of truth-telling, lying and its betrayals. An understanding of truth's plurality is formed through a composite juxtaposition of gesture, expression and voice.

Contemporary media culture has seen an increase in the popularity of first-person modes of expression—in particular, the confessional. Television is littered with reality TV, chat shows, confessional talk shows, lifestyle programs, video diaries, documentaries, docu-soaps, and caught-on-camera shows. The Internet is a Petri dish of self-production with myriad vlogs, blogs, personal albums, chat rooms, forums, podcasts and networked virtual communities. The airwaves are burgeoning with independent radio and maverick broadcasters. Not surprisingly, artists and galleries participate in the trend. Confession is integral to the human condition.

First-Person Truths

Emerging out of 18th century romanticism, the conception of the individuality has continued to gain fervor and force. First-person narrative (self-referential truth) is ubiquitously prominent in today's communications media. In most cases, subjects are ordinary folk who are transformed into pseudo-celebrity as a result of their involvement

in rendering personal occurrence. Truth—in the sense of reality and the factual—is “based upon an incessant performance of identity structured through first-person media speaking about feelings, sentiment and, most powerfully, intimate relationships.”¹

Since the flux of postmodernism, the autobiographical and first-person narrative (community-chronicle and self-documentation) have become salient genres. Questions of veracity and democratic potential run concurrent with this marked interest in intimate revelation as art form. The kudos of social conscience are inherent in the history of documentary. The merging of personal revelation and documentary blurs the once delineated realms of private and public. Rather than confusing the authority of subjective narrative, perhaps the collapsing of public and private spheres lends to reappraisals of modern assumptions about culture, identity, history and language. *In the Absence Of* offers a pluralistic approach to notions of truth and truthtelling, lying and betrayal. It finds audience not only within the narrow constrains of the academic and market art world, but also appeals to the general masses. The redefinition of autobiography, as mobiously integrated with the confessional, resonates widely with a public thirst for virtual disclosure and personal exploration. Filmic (auto)biography framed within the territory of fine art is a blending of genres. It treads in the realm of creative nonfiction, oscillating between reality and fiction. It raises questions about the evolving role of life in the rendering of art.

This work exposes the subterfuge that its subjects are engaged in. Pretense is disarmed through intimacy and candid frankness. It exploits our public’s predilection for voyeurism, playing on the human qualities of self-absorption and narcissism. In laying a foundation for the use of confession as a means toward harnessing specific

truths, Foucault offers,

“The confession plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, ordinary affairs, solemn rites; one confesses one’s crimes, one’s sins, one’s thoughts and desires, one’s illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in private, to one’s parents, one’s educators, one’s doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell to anyone else, the things people write books about.”²

Confessional dialogue knits intimacy. It serves as a rite and acts as moderator. It melts isolation, connects one to the other and reinforces community.

Fueled by (auto)biographical incidents, *In the Absence Of* extends traditional modes of representation to incorporate the interviewees’ experiences as synonymous with the interviewer. It aims to provoke the viewer to question the relationship between artist and self, spectacle and self, truth and fiction. Who is the unseen interrogator? Does the interviewer reveal traces of self that surround all of us? The videowork invites a divergence from the traditional consumption of art object to active investigation of reflexive subjectivity. The notion of an addressee is altered, at once presenting him/her as object and as spectator, encouraging a relationship between artist and observer, manifesting identification, empathy, distance, judgment, summation, selfish voyeurism and/or therapeutic outlet. Confessional in its motivation, the project serves to address a clarification of one’s own identity (both observer and artist) and personal truths. The project is thoroughly mediated; each interview and clip selected, edited, and organized to construct meaning that shifts and morphs in relation to artist, participant, witness and spectator. Subjectivity is projected through confessional discourse. The videowork asks: What is the relevance of confessional art to the human condition at this particular time? What is the value of placing emphasis on individual everyday experience,

interaction and emotional intelligence?

Michel Foucault observes that the evolution of the word *avowal* progresses “from being a guarantee of the status, identity, and value granted to one person by another ... to signify someone’s acknowledgment of his own actions and thoughts ... the individual was authenticated by the discourse of truth he was able or obliged to pronounce concerning himself.” Extrapolating on Foucault’s theory that Western societies since the Middle Ages have established confession as one of the main rituals relied upon for the production of truth, the confessor in contemporary art becomes a means through which wider cultural, ethical and moral ambiguities are articulated.³

The artist serves as confessional vessel, collapsing the public and private spheres. Through a deconstructed reality, the observer can now confess that which would be impossible to tell anyone but themselves, to a witness at once beyond and part of him/herself. The spectator experiences their own confession through the work and process of the confessional artist, engaging in a simulated reflexivity, a safe haven from the threat of judgment and social repercussion.

The “project of the self” is a late-modernity development in response to the breakdown of traditional hierarchies; it insinuates into longstanding metanarratives and serves as a key focal point for self-assessment and self-identity.⁴ As the power of overarching teleologies (such as the West, the nation, God) has paled, postmodern culture has elevated personal choice. Emphasis has been placed on reflexivity and a questioning of pre-established wisdoms as a road to locating meaning. But the disassembly of grand narrative is a prickly endeavor. In his contemplation of the trajectory of the self in *Modernity and Self-Identity*, sociologist Anthony Giddens

suggests that “autobiography—particularly in the broad sense of an interpretative self-history produced by the individual concerned, whether written down or not—is actually at the core of self-identity in modern social life. Like any other formalized narrative, it is something that has to be worked at, and calls for creative input as a matter of course.”⁵

Confessional art finds shape and value through dialectics that include, but are not limited to: spectator and confessor, personal experience and collective history, presencing and absencing aspects of the transformative self, and an interpolation of truths between actuality and contingency. Both the artist and the subjects wield influence in the nonlinear progression of reflective narrative. Both are responsible for and contribute to the analysis and content construction of social-biography.

Filmic Infrastructure

In the Absence Of relies structurally on the presence of an unseen interviewer, an interrogator controlling questions and, indeed, superintending the stitching together of contradiction and uncertainty. Yet, despite the semblance of control, the subjects erupt with precipitate emotion to the memory of lived experience. They encounter fleeting mini-epiphanies that resist editorial reins. Their understated subjective presence brings the (auto)biographical project up against the juncture between lived experience and ideology. Overarching ethical values, dictated by society at-large, chafe against the individual’s inability to consistently uphold implicit dogma. The confessional design of the videowork holds ground for therapeutic self-review. Invited to reflect on the exacting reality of personal incident, subjects fluctuate from objective detachment to rationalization, surprise, embarrassment, revelation, pain and avowal. Asked to *tell*, the

participants pass through moments of uneasiness, vulnerability, laughter, discomfort and redemption. They undergo a sense of being *heard*.

Participant *T.C.* slowly paces through a revelatory therapeutic self-review of professional and personal betrayals. (See Appendix A for participant identification.) Both dialogue and camera elicit unpredictable outbursts by participant *J.P.* as she fluctuates in and out of the discomfort of her self-awareness of the extent to which she and the people around her tell lies. Despite a casual and upbeat demeanor, *M.R.* cannot conceal the cracking pain in her voice when she considers multiple betrayals by her father. *T.B.* remains analytical and detached throughout, preferring to comment on societal ethics theoretically rather than turn the microscope on his own actions. *C.S.* embraces the interchange as a platform for avowal, while isolating the painful complications of revealing tabooed truths. Without equivocation, *S.C.* holds firm to the metaphysical tract that situates truth as a constant necessity and remedy. *J.G.* displays the archetypical post-modern identity—a fragmented self that engages in lying and truth-telling on a conditional thermometer, using variations of truth as tools to protect, appease and empower, depending on particular situations and audience.

The participants work to realize that truth is individual, it is organic to them. Whatever they create (say) is something not quite truth and not quite lie. Novelist Lawrence Durrell wrote extensively on the journey of self-discovery and plenteous facets of truth. He proposes: “Truth disappears with the telling of it.” The truths that we tell are embedded as intrinsic parts of us, rather than something created outside of ourselves. There is a koan from the Buddhist tradition that says: “The master holds the disciples head underwater ... when you have craved truth as you crave air, then you will

know what truth is.”⁶ Having been queried about the nature of truth, participant *T.B.* responds, “It’s a matter of what is there beyond my own experience, so what’s true about that? Are there absolute truths? That’s the question. Is truth something way out there that I bump into once I leave this realm of my personal experience? And, actually no, it’s not like there’s locked worlds, there’s actually a dynamic, you see.”

In the Absence Of is based on a series of videotaped dialogues with over twenty participants. The videowork resists linear narrative. Participants blend into each other, cut each other off and either reinforce or contradict one another. Although the focus of exploration is established, neither an originating impetus nor a definitive conclusion is laid out. Unidentified off-camera voices dialogue with on-camera gesture. The interviewer is at times interviewed by self (both behind and in front of the camera, but unidentified as such), and in some sense renounces authority and control, refusing claim to the work being documentary or art film. The work is distinctly filmic, as opposed to sociological narrative, due to its juxtaposition of intersubjective gesture. It relies on close-cropped shots and indiscernible backgrounds to close in microscopically on each subject. As experimental video, the work subverts the traditions of autobiography by exploring subjective expression via a tool (black & white filmic medium) understood historically to suggest objective reality. Yet, the medium itself seeks to record the mercurial effects of contingency. What is developed through the work is actually invisible—truthtelling and lying in social interaction. The video makes palpable that which has been hidden (or private) and determined amid an exploration of plural subjectivities. It follows the interconnectivity of white lies to big lies; fibs to outright betrayals between loved ones, intimates, strangers, friends and parents. The cinematic

representation produces individually delineated subjectivities that can be mapped into social constellations. “Subjectivity explored in these ways expresses itself in voice and gesture, space, movement, and response. It also resists narrative explanation and closure.”⁷ In its intimate and interactive mode of observation, the presence of the camera spurs performance of self in conjunction with confessional slippage.

Filmic Ties

The tools are simple: two consumer digital video camcorders, elemental lighting, lavalier microphone and invitational conversation. Special effects: none. Editing: heavy. (See Appendix B for technical details.)

In the Absence Of is positioned within a category of experimental filmmaking that explores the construction and re-presentation of identity through reflective questioning of cultural myth and narrative. Artists such as Sadie Benning, Su Friedrich, George Clooney, Barbara Hammer, Isaac Julien, Tracy Moffatt, Errol Morris, Jake Paltrow, Shelly Silver, and Lorna Simpson use the nuances of film and video to investigate identity formation.

In works such as *The Thin Blue Line* and his *First Person* series, filmmaker Errol Morris challenges traditional notions of what a documentary can be. His works call into question what is real, what is posed, what is performance? In his first-person interviews, Jake Paltrow utilizes personal, unconscious gesture to tear away the staging of outward show. Both Paltrow and Clooney take advantage of the black-and-white medium to manufacture a sense of truthfulness and reality. In Paltrow’s case, individual differences of the interviewees are minimalized through the medium, while Clooney is able to seamlessly combine disparate footage.

In particular, Shelly Silver weaves documentary and fictional footage as a means to address the ways in which we navigate private and public spheres in order to attain our definitions self. Silver's short video *I* offers a paradoxical commentary on the shifting allegiances of human behavior, and in similar fashion to *In the Absence Of*, employs the camera as mediator, confessor and aggressor. Silver's video projects *37 Stories About Leaving Home* and *small lies, Big Truth* ask the viewer to question: What are the spaces between appearance and reality? How fragile are the boundaries? How much do we self-impose and perpetuate sociocultural strictures? Like the works of Silver, *In the Absence Of* questions instituted systems of thought. Persistently, it nudges the viewer to recognize the subjective presence of the artist and question their assumptions about knowledge and certainty. It seeks to discompose apparent conceptual structures that establish concepts of language, identity, truth and reality.

CHAPTER 2
TRUTHS & VALUES

Genealogy

Ancient oral traditions and works of art were designed to stimulate memory of all that should not be forgotten. By design, they sought to bring truths to life—through both factualness and fabrication—whether they referenced myths of creation, parables of morality, ancestral or mythical genealogies, or tools for navigating the dilemmas of daily existence. But truth, truth-telling, and truthfulness are not nearly synonymous. To tell truths or lies, to be truthful or deceptive, can all be employed as vital tools to guarantee survival, as well as uphold and/or protect greater personal or meta-truths. The absencing of truth is an art.

The animal kingdom is rife with deceptive strategies to hoodwink adversaries. There are three basic duping tactics: mimicry (the development of similarities between species), camouflage (the development of resemblance of a species to an inanimate object) and ploy (action taken to divert an adversary's attention). The polymorphic female Great Mormon butterfly, succulent to predators, can produce up to seven mimetic forms to imitate five other species of nasty tasting butterflies. The mild-mannered Scarlet Kingsnake mimics the alternating yellow, red and black bands of the venomous Coral snake. When in danger, the innocuous Hognose snake will flatten its head into a cobra-like hood and hiss menacingly. If such a display is ineffective in warding off the threat, it will enact a melodramatic death scene, not withstanding agonized writhing, leaking blood from the eyes, gaping mouth and emission of decaying odor. The nocturnal Katydid matches its body coloring and shape to all manner of

leaves, bark and twigs to promote safety during its daytime inactivity. Tawny Frogmouths have developed camouflaged plumage to look like tree branches, while orchids deceive male insects by pretending to be that insect's female companion. White-tailed deer give birth to spotted fawns, giving them an edge in hiding from predators during immaturity. In tactical swoops, spins and grounding, the Plover will feign injury to lure a threat from approaching too close to her eggs. While the preceding organisms adapted with particular and limited mechanisms for advantage, certain primates ascended a step further into consciousness. Subordinate male chimpanzees, excited by what they deem to be sexually attractive females, have been observed screening their erect penis from notice of a dominant male. During foraging, apes are known to hide the fact that they have found food; their pack members, aware of the possibility that they could be deceived, will in-turn hide to determine if there has been an attempted concealment of available food.

With the advancement of spoken language, humans evolved beyond trickery for primal sustenance and safety to duping other humans for social power. *Homo sapiens* are sophisticatedly both self-aware and aware of others. As higher primates using languages, we are able to empathize with each other in intimate social relations. We read an assorted combination of non-verbal and verbal signs to come to some inference as to what our peers and adversaries are thinking. Deception, then, is only a step away. The ability to invent falsehoods stimulates creativity and quick thinking. Humans have honed the mental circuitry for self-promotion. One fib told requires another of equal or better ploy to uphold it. Lies arrive easily. They are at times suave, at times clunky, but usually coincide with increased heartbeat, breathing and brain function. Truths, on the

other hand, tend to be upheld with more arduous intention. Unmoderated fibbery can lead to a degradation of trust and consequently a disintegration of community. Lying is an evolutionary strategy. Truth-telling is a trained ethic established for societal stability and regulation.

Truth and all its variants are unstable. Negotiating its ambiguous terrain requires plasticity when deciding which truths to uphold and how to do so. The “how to do so” often includes manipulation of the interstice between truth and untruth. Ethical values slide along a variable scale as we pick and choose according to circumstance. There is always the nagging question: how far to swing toward truth or fiction? In a reduction of perception and ideation, Friedrich Nietzsche posits, “that lying is a necessity of life, is itself a part of the terrifying and problematic character of existence.”⁸ In his concept of “the will to power,” he supersedes social Darwinism with the position that individuals go through a natural force of expansion-and-release of creative zeal in order to flourish. In essence, beyond the drive to merely sustain our lives, we’ll tend toward using whatever tools necessary in order to extend our power and will. Lying and truth-telling becomes arsenal.

Yet, the public, as a majority, believes that for the most part they go about their days telling the truth.⁹ At their core, they trust in a foundation of basic honesty within the isolation of their interpersonal relationships. It is comforting to believe so. Having been spoon-fed the rigors of truth-telling since the widespread arrival of organized philosophy and religion (Plato and St. Augustine); one strives for honesty, at least in theory. In reality, we turn a blind eye to the untold ways in which we utilize lying to perpetuate our existence. When pushed, the participants in the videowork

uncomfortably reveal their grasp of the pervasiveness of deception. Participant *D.S.* ponders: “I think it’s inbred in all of us. I think everybody is wondering whether or not everybody is telling the truth all the time. Like I said, it’s easier to lie than it is to tell the truth.” As the research suggests, there is an overwhelming consensus that our days are actually filled with countless casual lies. In conjunction, the regular routines in our lives are stymied ever so often by the effects of more weighty deceptions. An array of individualized arguments and excuses arise to negotiate particular force majeure and their accompanying assemblages of truth. Ten year-old participant *T.P.* suggests, “You have to lie sometimes just if you’re in a really bad situation, but white lies ... [are] fine once in a while, like maybe once a month or something.” Journalist Steve Tesich has coined the term “post-truth”¹⁰ as a contemporary descriptor of the personal/societal cause-and-effect that has occurred due to historically shifting relationships to truth-telling and lying in an era of such events as post-Watergate, post-Vietnam, post-Iran/Contra, post-Clinton/Lewinsky, and post-9/11. A populace mentality exists in which the same hand cups a principled intolerance for lying alongside a systemic practice of it.

In an ethically complicated world, subjects are frequently positioned to choose between deception and truthfulness. Findings from decades of research by psychologist Bella DePaulo and others have illuminated the extent to which we lie. The ordinary person lies during one out of every four social interactions, we’re more likely to tell inconsequential “white lies” to people less important to us, we tell lies to gain an end (esteem, respect, affection, attention, promotion, materiality) as well as avoid conflict and emotional discomfort,¹¹ and we’re more likely to tell serious lies to those we value

most, to cover-up something we're ashamed of.¹² Participant *R.J.* discerns that “humans are constantly managing our place within relationships and the thing that’s called a white lie isn’t something that stands independent of everything else that it’s a part of—it’s a tool.” A climate has developed that condones dishonesty.

An expanded language for moderated truth-telling has evolved. In an attempt to de-emphasize the absence of truth, we have coined a range of substitutions such as: almost true, alternative reality, augmented reality, counterfactual statement, creative enhancement, creative nonfiction, credibility gap, distortion, embroidered truth, errors of judgment, fact-based information, fudge, half-truth, imaginative truth, improved truth, lapse, loosely truth-based, misstatement, nearly true, nonfull disclosure, nuanced truth, parallel truth, poetic truth, pretext, reframing, selective disclosure, spin, strategic misrepresentations, stretch, sweetened truth, inexactitudes, truthful hyperbole, twists of truth, and virtual truth. Euphemisms are implicated elements in the obfuscation of communication.

Polysemic Truths

Compounding the routinization of deception is the philosophy that interlocutors and their words are constantly in a shifting state of uncertainty. How then, can concepts of truth, and truth itself, hold fast to a singular root? Truth cannot occupy a metaphysical undivided point of origin. It cannot escape an inherent slippage between the presence and absence of multiple truths. The works of philosopher Jacques Derrida question the impulse toward logocentric reliance, and indeed questions the authority of philosophy itself. Deception is achieved because communication falls to inaccuracy.

The contemporary wellspring of first-person narratives is a ripping apart, a dividing of the point of origin that locates self, identity and communal existence. *In the Absence Of* positions its participants in a structural “undecidability.”¹³ They are traces of the artist. The artist is fleshed out through them. The participants question the contrasting assignments of artist/not-artist, fiction/non-fiction, self/other and either/or. Are they staging or being staged? Are they manipulating, being manipulated or self-determined? In dialogue they dismantle the binary oppositions of truth and lie, betrayal and loyalty, to fully occupy the space in-between.

Mainstream media—smart beast that it is—exploits the 21st-century citizen’s quest for individualism, attenuating its will to power by directing it into a profusion of crackpots, freakshows, and unbelievable realities. The vehemence of individual voice runs the risk of being driven and reduced to spectacle. How does one locate self amid the instant globalized access to virtual information and identities, where reality is constructed media-truth and representation? A wash of morphing images and meanings circulate without stop. Value systems are constituted more by the true-seeming than the “true.” Which isn’t to simplify the situation to a Platonist structure of illusion versus truth, but a nod in the direction of shifting “commodity fetishisms”¹⁴ in the wake of our current techno-social playground. Confessional art walks a tightrope between co-option and power. Through the process of being interviewed, the participants in *In the Absence Of* struggle to some degree between Kant’s notions of Unmündigkeit and Mündigkeit. They become aware of the tenuousness of autonomous agency and the capacity to use one’s own voice, reason and thought.

Identity, Trust & Betrayal

Basic codes of sociocultural interaction provide a set of blueprints for our involvement with truth-telling, lying and betrayal. In his accounting of self-identity in relation to real circumstances, philosopher Michael Luntley offers a distilling of intersocial relationships: the *Mercantile* versus the *Obsessive*.¹⁵ Within the boundaries of *Mercantile Belonging*, one's involvement is conditioned by desire satisfaction. Attachment to the relationship runs only so far as there is a benefit result. Participation in the relationship is conditional and temporary. Discretely mercantile belongings cannot capture the concept of betrayal; they are tradable and commodifiable relationships. Participant *C.H.* tells a story of being anxiously questioned by the seller at a tag sale about her interest in purchasing a number of stuffed animals for her dog to chew on and "disembowel." She recalls looking directly into the woman's eyes and telling a bald-faced lie in order to acquire the toys for her ravenous pup. Pseudo loyalty is factored through a primal and uncritical desire for stability, familiarity, et cetera. In contrast, *Obsessive Belonging* ensures a binding relationship regardless of the costs (or benefits). The self is submerged and obscured by notions of noble and admirable, if not superfluous and futile behavior. Here one finds deception justified to uphold any number of larger truths. Participant *J.P.* implores "but she was lying to her because she loved her." Insisting on telling hard truths for the sake of personal integrity, participant *C.S.* finds that such obsessive attachment can be problematic: "It didn't matter how I spoke the truth, the fact that I had betrayed someone—it marked me, it branded me, and the scarlet letter is very real, it is very contemporary." The "letter" seeks to label questionable behavior that operates outside of the regulatory binary norms. But the

letter is an undecidable signifier; it is a fragment within a system of language and meaning that is ripe with absent referents. In this ambiguous place it sits as pharmakon,¹⁶ neither poison nor remedy. In the case of Hester Pryn, her marking simultaneously offers redemption and condemnation. The letter attempts to mark the liar and unravel the lie, but it is unsuccessful because the system is made up of complex differences rather than simple oppositions.

Circumstantially, many find themselves situated in the vague land between *Mercantile* and *Obsessive Belonging*. These selves manipulate a scope that deliberates and evaluates its shifting attachments. Distance develops between how the self conceives of itself and its relationship to history, culture and attachments. While truth-telling knits the fabric of trust, stability and community together, lying propels the expansion of the individual self. The absence of simple truth is a tangible undecidable, further disrupting orderly communication and distinct meaning. Serious lies erupt in the wide divide of allegiance between self-conception and attachment to others. In this divide arises the poison of betrayal. By choosing to not belong to another—to blindly isolate the ego—the Machiavel finds recourse in deception. In our struggle to determine what is *right* and for whom and when do we provide allegiance, some lies result in perceived betrayal. Social theorist Roland Barthes writes of the destructive power and despair of betrayal as obliterating rejections: "...they are, literally, panic situations: situations without remainder, without return: I have projected myself into the other with such power that when I am without the other I cannot recover myself, regain myself: I am lost forever."¹⁷ When the other is experienced as a fragment of oneself, treachery by another is felt as a hard-hitting betrayal of self. Our uniqueness is

dependent upon a trace of the other in ourselves. Truths are woven between what is there and not there. Nonsingular truths short-circuit the rational laws of distinction, creating anxious encounters.

All of the participants in the videowork at some point expressed the emotional suffering associated with knowledge of betrayal. In fact, the profound impact of their experience of betrayal erupts from a realization of self-deception—of having trusted and been fooled. When *T.C.* comments “I had a long time getting my head around how anybody could do that,” he expresses how upsetting it was to be deceived by two close intimates, his wife and best friend. His response to the ruse was to build a more rigorous adherence to the presencing truth.

The spectrum of liars and truth-tellers cannot seem to escape the self-regulatory syntax of social community. Within *In the Absence Of*, participants engage in talk of others—gossip. Barthes proposes that “An active philology would therefore include two necessary linguistic series: that of interlocution (speaking to another) and that of delocution (speaking about someone).”¹⁸ At its most benign level gossip functions as a reputation barometer indicating who to trust and who not to align oneself with. Gossip did not develop its distasteful connotation simply from the broadcasting of objective truths and fortifying of regulating social groups. While our primate predecessors relied on communal grooming to gain intimate coalition, the multitasking *Homo sapiens* has honed skills of verbal message to gain leverage. Passing through unreliable ears and mouths, gossip falls prey to unseemly distortions. Indeed, those seeking to further their field of power have yet another means to gain advantage. Reputation is a pivotal lever within community. Through manipulation and distortion the delocator can devalue the

competition in order to extend his/her own power and will. In a feigning of *Obsessive Belonging*, the gossiping liar metaphorically finds footing to “murder by language.”¹⁹ Participant *S.C.* reveals how her father lied about the nature of her mother’s death in order to protect his clout in the professional community. He spread his own story through the gossip mill in hopes of offsetting an erosion of his standing as capable psychologist, husband and man. In turn, *S.C.* rebelliously counters the actions of her father by telling her own frank truths, and finds in them a negation of the stigmas that he worked to avoid. She says: “It’s easier to be truthful with the world, if you’re truthful with yourself, because I feel like a lot of times you lie when you’re protecting your ego or the ego of somebody else.”

The post-truth period has cultivated distaste for hearing certain truths.

Participant *C.S.* accounts: “The big lie, I told the truth about, and I was punished on every level by everyone for telling the truth.” Postmodern, post-structuralist, post-truth, and post-et cetera society is as ambivalent about its stance on lying as it is about its notion of essential selfhood. *C.S.* continues,

“...I participated in a patterning that began to be sewn into the fabric of a relationship ... and here I was telling a lie that broke a heart, and so I live with that, and consequently I discovered in the process that telling the truth isn’t always rewarded, that telling the truth actually can get you into far more trouble in terms of a community. I guess I feel that the truth is so complex sometimes that it cannot be served responsibly in the gossip mill, and in a culture.”

Truth and lies, churned as grist, may contribute to the formation of cultural alterity. In a perpetuating hierarchal axis, individuals that do not fit a group’s normative expectations are excluded. Self-esteem is bolstered through reacting against those that have stepped outside the established norms and boundaries. In some cases, the truth teller pays a penalty (job loss, disinheritance, shunning, excommunication, et cetera). In some cases,

the liar reaps reward (promotion, television and radio attention, book contracts, financial gain, et cetera). The distortion of truth gets reinforced from everyday lies to serious falsifications.

Conclusion

Contemporary culture supports a multitude of diverse ethics systems. These foundations are dispersed with layers of authorship, authority, and responsibility. Guilt and guile are situational. In a sort of mini-ethnography of post-truth culture, *In the Absence Of* concurrently arouses and controls subjective response. It invites a usurping of fixed ideologies. The interview structure and accumulation of indeterminate solutions leaves open the potential for free discussion. A receptacle for opinion and convergence, the videowork opens the gate for movement between the private and the public. Since the industrialization of print media, body politics have become increasingly vulnerable to insidious forms of manipulation. Globalization has further fragmented collective identities and powers through its exploitation of mass-media (newspapers, magazines, literature, television broadcasting, radio, internet, film, advertising). We are prey to the spectacle, to the myth of ourselves. Riding on the ascendancy of 21st century Western capitalist society, dominant political institutions have become increasingly skilled at homogenizing consumers of culture industry into uncritical pawns. In his theoretical analysis *Subject and Power*, Foucault addresses the globalizing influence of agencies of power (such as the media, business corporations, state apparatuses and religious proxies): “Never, I think, in the history of human societies has there been such a tricky combination in the same political structures of individualization techniques and of totalization procedures.”²⁰ These hegemonic

processes produce knowledges that maintain social order, as well as collective identity and individuality. The *iPod* generation is being fed the illusion of individualism in glossy packaging and digestible installments—sheep in chic wolves’ clothing. Confession, gossip and deception (through the creation of public images of self) function to convey information that may advance one’s own interest. The propagation of lies can also offer protection against the insidious collapsing of public and private spheres caused by technological globalization. Participant *J.G.* comments: “If I lie, then I keep my secrets; there’s only the surface left. All those small lies serve to create a barrier.” On another level, confession and gossip can serve to stitch together a fractured sense of self and community. Within the art medium, confession and gossip connect the nebulous space between private and public. Philosopher Jürgen Habermas views the public realm as potential ground for nourishing epistemic values. Heidegger sees it—in conjunction with private activities—as a necessary place of engagement to embody existence. Frantz Fanon sees it as a generator of dual consciousness, where there is dissonance in relation to one’s private identity. Hannah Arendt argues that the authentic self can only fully come forth through the public sphere. Confessional art bridges the divide. It propels individual insight, opinion and debate into the agency of a transnational public realm. In a world where reality is constructed and values determined by consumer machinations, it teases the boundaries between ideology and necessity.

In the Absence Of zeroes in on the intersubjectivity of its participants in relation to themselves, each other and the outer world. Lying and truth-telling, self-presentation and social expression necessitate partially shared divergences of meaning—

maneuvering between multiple subjective definitions of meaning. At play here is a transvaluative structure of language that allows for altered value perspectives.

Reframing situations and events displaces notions of negative and positive. In regards to lying, what one person considers an outright lie another person may find to be merely a white lie; while one subject may sustain a deception as betrayal another may see it as simply a means to an end. In the globalized post-truth existence, individuals present and adapt many selves to fit particular situations. Participant *T.B.* propounds,

“One thing that fascinates me is I cannot and nobody else can ever experience anybody else’s experience, so there is by definition a validity in that. There’s also a sacrosanct hidden aspect to it, you can never get at it. We live in a culture that deifies personal experience beyond anything else at this point. If anything that’s our hubris and perhaps our future disruption, but we certainly embrace that in all our documents of personal freedom and personal rights. So, personal experience is where we tend to measure things first. Unfortunately when we get stuck in that we become trapped by subordinating truth and experience, or I should say truth.”

In the Absence Of functions critically to bring awareness to our social world and the effects of truthtelling and lying in interpersonal relationships, community and the public sphere. It addresses the impact of betrayals by those most intimate to us (lover, parent, friend, et cetera), while also questioning the levels of trust that we invest. Utilizing autobiographical layers and first-person narratives, it investigates a post-structural construct of identity through a plural encounter of truth.

Notes

¹ Jon Dovey, Freakshow: First Person Media and Factual Television (London: Pluto, 2001), p. 104.

² Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality (New York: Vintage, Reissue edition, 1990), p. 59.

³ Ibid, 58.

⁴ Anthony Giddens, Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 2-5.

⁵ Ibid, 76.

⁶ Roland Barthes, A Lover's Discourse: Fragments, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang-Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979. Trans. of Fragments d'un Discours Amoureux. France: Éditions du Seuil, 1977), p. 17.

⁷ Susanna Egan, Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press, 1999), p. 96.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 451.

⁹ Bella DePaulo. "Lying in Everyday Life." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 70.n5 (1996): 979-995.

¹⁰ Steve Tesich. "A government of lies. (political ethics)." The Nation 254.n1 (Jan 6, 1992): 12.

¹¹ Bella DePaulo. "Lying in Everyday Life." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 70.n5 (1996): 979-995.

¹² Bella DePaulo. "Liar Liar." Interview transcript. Insight. 22 Aug. 2006. SBS World News Australia. 09 Mar 2007. <<http://news.sbs.com.au/insight/trans.php?transid=979>>.

¹³ Derrida, Jacques. Reference to essay "Plato's Pharmacy" in Dissemination, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1981), pp. 63-171.

¹⁴ Karl Marx. “Capital Volume 1.” Marxist Internet Archive. 19 March 2007 <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm>>.

¹⁵ Michael Luntley, Reason, Truth and the Self: the Postmodern Reconditioned (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 189.

¹⁶ Derrida, Jacques. Reference to essay “Plato’s Pharmacy” in Dissemination, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1981), pp. 63-171.

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang-Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979. Trans. of Fragments d’un Discours Amoureux. France: Éditions du Seuil, 1977), p. 49.

¹⁸ Ibid, 83-4.

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang-Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 169.

²⁰ Foucault, Michel, Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume III, ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley, et al. (New York: New Press, 2000), pp. 328-336.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
THE FIGURES



Figure 1: Participant *C.H.*



Figure 2: Participant *C.S.*

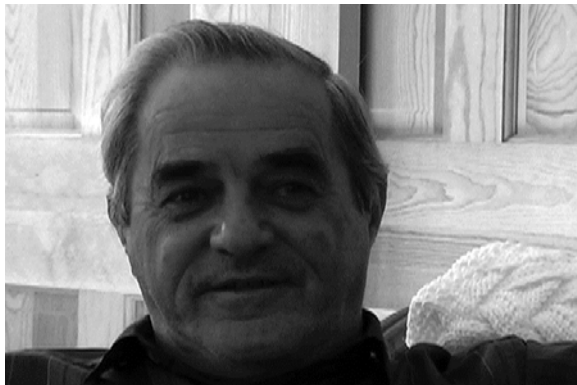


Figure 3: Participant *D.S.*



Figure 4: Participant *H.K.*



Figure 5: Participant *I.G.*



Figure 6: Participant *J.G.*



Figure 7: Participant *J.P.*



Figure 8: Participant *J.S.*



Figure 9: Participant *L.R.*



Figure 10: Participant *L.U.*



Figure 11: Participant *M.R.*



Figure 12: Participant *R.H.*



Figure 13: Participant *R.J.* (seated right) & Participant *K.J.* (seated left)

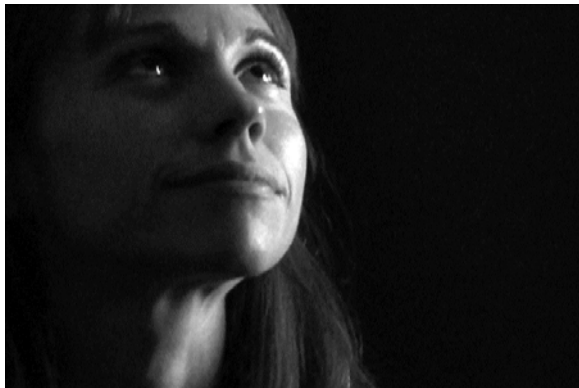


Figure 14: Participant *S.C.*



Figure 15: Participant *T.B.*



Figure 16: Participant *T.C.*

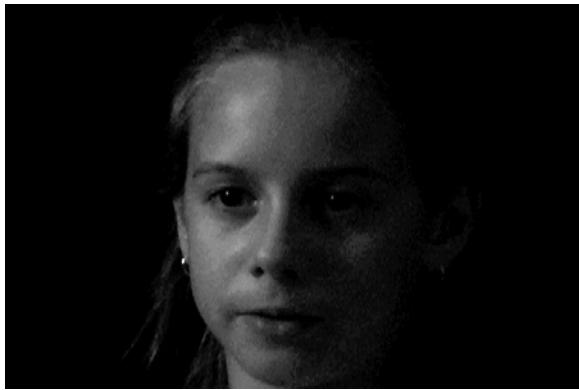


Figure 17: Participant *T.P.*

APPENDIX B

TECHNICAL DETAILS

In the Absence Of is shot and produced as digital video. Twenty-one participants were interviewed and videotaped in front of camera; seventeen were utilized in the final edited version of the videowork. Each taping session took place in a controlled environment with studio lighting and utilized a lavalier microphone. The taped sessions were transferred to computer and prepared with non-linear editing software. The final product is recorded on DVD. During exhibition the videowork is projected onto the wall via an LCD projector, with amplified sound filling the room from ceiling mounted speakers.

The following equipment was used for on-site recording:

- (2) consumer camcorders
- MiniDV tapes
- Strobe kit with stand & umbrella
- Lavalier microphone
- (2) tripods

The following equipment was used for editing and DVD production:

- Final Cut Pro
- DVD Studio Pro
- Single sided, single layer DVD-5s
- Consumer camcorder

The following equipment was used for exhibition:

- LCD projector

- DVD player
- Amplifier
- Mounted speakers
- Ceiling Projection Mount
- Overhead shelving unit for A/V equipment
- Seating for viewing
- Carpeting and material for sound enhancement

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barthes, Roland. A Lover's Discourse: Fragments. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang-Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979. Translation of Fragments d'un Discours Amoureux. France: Éditions du Seuil, 1977.
- _____. Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes. Trans. R. Howard. New York: Hill and Wang-Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977.
- Bok, Sissela. Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life. New York: Pantheon, 1978; Vintage, 1979.
- DePaulo, Bella. "Lying in Everyday Life." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 70.n5 (1996): 979-995.
- _____. "Liar Liar." Interview transcript. Insight. 22 Aug. 2006. SBS World News Australia. 09 Mar 2007.
<<http://news.sbs.com.au/insight/trans.php?transid=979>>
- Jacques Derrida. Dissemination. Translated by Barbara Johnson. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1981.
- Dovey, Jon. Freakshow: First Person Media and Factual Television. London: Pluto, 2001.
- Egan, Susanna. Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press, 1999.
- Fanthome, Christine. "The Influence and Treatment of Autobiography in Confessional Art: Observations on Tracey Emin's Feature Film Top Spot." Biography 29.1 (Winter 2006): 30-42.
- Foucault, Michel. The History of Sexuality. New York: Vintage, Reissue edition, 1990.
- _____. Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume III. Edited by James Faubion, translated by Robert Hurley, et al. New York: New Press, 2000.
- Frankfurt, Harry G. On Truth. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006.
- Giddens, Anthony. Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.
- Keyes, Ralph. The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life. New York: Saint Martin's Press, 2004.

- Koomer, H. and Jane Goodall. "Conditions of Innovative Behaviour in Primates." Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological Sciences 308.1135 (Feb. 13, 1985): 203-214.
- Luntley, Michael. Reason, Truth and the Self: the Postmodern Reconditioned. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Marx, Karl. "Capital Volume 1." Marxist Internet Archive. 19 March 2007 <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm>>.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. The Will to Power. Edited by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Random House, 1967.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying." On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978. New York: Norton, 1979.
- Smith, David Livingston. Why We Lie: the Evolutionary Roots of Deception and the Unconscious Mind. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004.
- Tesich, Steve. "A government of lies. (political ethics)." The Nation 254.n1 (Jan 6, 1992): 12-13.
- "The First Ones." Dir. Jake Paltrow. New York Times Magazine. 2007. New York Times Online. 10 Feb. 2007 <http://nytimesshorts.feedroom.com/ifr_main.jsp?nsid=a5a3aedb:11137818adc:7c55&st=1173462847163&mp=FLV&cpf=false&fvn=9&fr=021007_105204_w4ecf1e2x110ac3fd432xw1f18&rdm=647796.5208332483>
- Williams, Bernard. Truth and Truthfulness. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002.