

Does the oyster sleep?

Sophie Bissonnette / Martin Duckworth / Joyce Rock, Maja Borg, Marguerite Duras, Sara Eliassen, Silvia Gruner, Waël Noureddine

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Curated by Pip Day and Irmgard Emmelhainz

Does the oyster sleep? explores the relationship between love and politics—two realms of human experience often understood as antagonistic to one another. The exhibition rewrites the seeming conflict between shared interest and individual desire, imagining how they can be linked through a common longing to live differently in the world. Including film and video work by Sophie Bissonnette / Martin Duckworth / Joyce Rock, Marguerite Duras, Maja Borg, Sara Eliassen, Silvia Gruner, and Waël Noureddine, *Does the oyster sleep?* addresses the forms of care and labour we enact for each other.

The exhibition takes its title from a passage in Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector's 1973 novel *Água Viva*, in which the author describes the contortions of an oyster under drips of lemon juice. Just as the oyster is torn from its root, becoming exposed and vulnerable, can love tear us away from ourselves, toward others, or toward new relationships based on care, solidarity, and communal autonomy?

Using Lispector's visceral image as a starting point, the exhibition imagines how this radical vulnerability can redirect our attention away from Modernist frameworks for human relationships. Featuring several long-form documentary and experimental works, and



RICHARD GEORGE, *OYSTER*, 2011.

accompanied by a library of related poetry, fiction and non-fiction, *Does the oyster sleep?* welcomes sustained watching, reading, and thinking together.

Does the oyster sleep? was originally presented at SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art, Montreal, in 2016.

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Each of the videos in *Does the oyster sleep?* creates a propositional poetics about *being-in-relation* and *being-in-common*. These poetic forms of being carry conflicts between common interest and individual desire that endanger them, and they produce forms of vulnerability that can be difficult for us to handle. Yet, can shared interest and individual desire be linked through a common longing to live differently in the world?

All of the videos in the exhibition – Maja Borg's *Future My Love* (2012), Waël Noureddine's *ça sera beau* (2005), Sara Eliassen's *A Blank Slate* (2014), Marguerite Duras' *Les mains négatives* (1979), Silvia Gruner's *Un Chant d'amour* (2004), and Sophie Bissonette, Martin Duckworth and Joyce Rock's *A Wives' Tale* (1981) have to do with movement, travelling, dislocation, and change. The shift from one place to another is the condition of thought, reflection, love address, broken heartedness, and a wake of consciousness. In *Les mains négatives*, the movement of the hand imprinting itself on the cave is a primary gesture of communication, the grounds to say: "I love you." In the film, we hear this address as we see images of the streets of Paris at dawn, shot from a moving car. Between image and voice-text, a gap opens up toward the possibility of a missed address (*maladresse*) as old as the oceans. *ça sera beau* is also an address, a love letter to a failed love in Paris from a Beirut torn to pieces by civil war. Here, heartbreak is made analogous to the failure of 20th century revolutionary ideals and the prediction of a self-destructing global future. In Gruner's *Un Chant d'amour*, the subtle back and forth of the camera panning between three characters who exchange places on either side of a wall produces the *possibility* of encounter within their erotic dialogue. In their films, Maja Borg and Sara Eliassen travel far from home to ponder love and loss as they ask larger questions about technology and progress, gender and film history. In *A Wives' Tale*, Bissonette, Duckworth, and Rock document movement within their subjects that opens up towards political subjectivity. In curating this exhibition, we are not seeking to build a discourse that leads our public to read the films in a certain way. The show, selected books, and accompanying writing are meant to open up to multiple meanings, uncovering new resonances throughout. Our hope is to be able to articulate questions that frame what we feel are urgent in the present.

We intuit that *being-in-relation* and *being-in-common* are also constantly under threat by heteropatriarchy (a logic of domination and extraction underpinning late capitalism) and coloniality (a logic of domination and extraction without which Modernization could not have been possible). How can we love a *liberating love* in the context of exploitation and destruction that is Modernism? How can we love the self and others who have been broken by heteropatriarchy and coloniality? These questions are linked to how we *live love*, how we *actually love others around us*, and how love exists in our social imaginaries, social formations and relationships to exchange as they relate to the personal and the political. The slogan

SO, WHAT IS THIS THING OF
SENSIBILITY (OUTSIDE OF
LANGUAGE), SENSITIVITY (IN
RELATION TO THE OTHER AND
PLEASURE) AND THE SPACE
BETWEEN THESE THAT OBLITER-
ATES VULNERABILITY? THE LINK
TO VULNERABILITY - JE NE
COMPRENDS PAS...

OMG YOU PUT YOUR FINGER ON
SOMETHING -- I THINK THE LOSS
OF SENSIBILITY AND THE LACK
OF SENSITIVITY OBLITERATES THE
OTHER'S VULNERABILITY AND
MAKES ONE'S OWN UNBEARABLE?
LET'S TALK ABOUT THIS MORE...

I'M FEELING RATHER SUPER
LOONEY AND DISMEMBERED
-FOR THAT TEXT I WAS RAW
FLESH BUT HAD ALL MY
STRENGTH -DOES THAT MAKE
SENSE? I MEAN, I CAN STILL
TRY...

A PARTICULAR QUALITY TO THE
RELATIONSHIP... SHOWED ME
A SUPERMARKET CART FULL OF
BEERS; THE VIEW OF THE
NORWEGIAN BATHS WHERE
HE WENT EVERY MORNING...
HIS BEDROOM, THE STREETS
OF GOTHEBORG, HIS ERECT
SEX.

for second wave feminist struggles (“the personal is the political”) and the reduction of the female force to reproductive labour – i.e., the assumption that mothering and ‘caring’ are a shared condition of all women – are political concerns. And yet, the form of ‘the personal’ that prevails today is individualistic and tied to self-realization, further privatizing political action while problematically universalizing the struggle of women as a fight for ‘freedom’ that posits non-Western women as inherently oppressed.

In that regard, *Does the oyster sleep?* draws its title and spirit from the urgency to create a distinction between ‘the personal’ and ‘the individual’: to explore the former as a means of generating solidarity and to problematize the latter as a neoliberal constitution of politics and love. Our project began with a form of ‘the personal’ as described by Clarice Lispector in *Água Viva*:

“My personal is humus in the earth and lives from rotting. My ‘it’ is hard like a pebble. The transcendence inside me is the living and soft ‘it’ and has the thought that an oyster has. Could the oyster when torn from its root feel anxiety? It is disturbed in its life without eyes. I used to drip lemon juice onto the living oyster and watched in horror and fascination as it contorted all over. And I was eating the living *it*. The living *it* is the God. [...] I don’t like when they drip lemon upon my depths and make me contort all over. Are the facts of life lemon on the oyster? Does the oyster sleep?”¹

HOW TO LISTEN TOWARDS YOUR
LANGUAGE, TO READ YOUR
NEEDS, TO PRACTICE WAYS TO
SLIP IN AND UNDERSTAND?

Politics, under neoliberalism, fragments action into personal, private struggles as tied to lifestyle, ethnicity, religion, ideology, self-realization. Love, under neoliberalism, transforms emotion and desire into the main objects of capitalist consumption. The mechanisms for love (feelings, emotions, seductions, desire) have been transformed by the system into consumption machines (such as online dating services). Pushed to the surface of consumption, the subject’s desire and interior life have been externalized: interiority is



MAJA BORG, *FUTURE MY LOVE*, (2012).. VIDEO, 93 MINUTES.

eliminated and the subject's libido becomes invested in the construction its own narcissistic subjectivity. This late Modernist subject is unable to fix its own limits: the dissolution of the borders between interior and exterior has radically changed the subject's relationship to another. In this context, individualism is based on fear and disgust of inter-dependency and vulnerability but is also intrinsically tied to consumerism –or, our assumed 'right' to fulfill our needs and necessities. In our culture, as Maggie Nelson writes, "The Self without sympathetic attachments is either a fiction or a lunatic... [Yet] dependence is scorned even in intimate relationships, as though dependence were incompatible with self-reliance rather than the only thing that makes it possible."² As a result, *empathy*, the core of solidarity and political organization, has been transformed into a loop, because both individualism and the denial of *being-in-common* hinder the separation between *what I am* and *what I (can) see*. Sympathetic attachments and dependence are intrinsically necessary for solidarity, but solidarity involves, after Sara Ahmed, "commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground."³ For Ahmed, solidarity also assumes that our struggles are not the same struggles, or that our pain is not the same pain, or that our hope is not for the same future.

Capitalism has made us dream of an ideal individual who is in control of everything. For us, it becomes obvious that being able to go beyond the scars caused by individualism – the command to be self-reliant, independent, capable of efficiently managing one's own human capital – is key to political organization. Our strength comes from opening outward, reaching to others, from operating within vulnerability. And in learning to trust others one can learn to

WHO DID YOU FUCK LAST
NIGHT?

BECAME A COBBLED SURFACE BY
TURNING CORNERS
A PERPETUAL COMING TOGETHER
OR FALLING ASUNDER OF FORMS
A COMPACT BLOTCH IN THE
TUMULT OF HETEROGENOUS
STIMULATION



SOPHIE BISSONNETTE / JOYCE ROCK / MARTIN DUCKWORTH, *A WIVES' TALE* (1980). DOCUMENTARY, 16MM TRANSFERRED TO DVD, 73 MINS.

make decisions on how to get organized, on what is needed, on what we want. This is not done on the basis of democracy – where we disagree but tolerate decisions made (while secretly building distrust in the system) – but on the basis of consensus, where we trust ourselves to reach an agreement together, and we stick to the decision because others have convinced us of a best decision-in-common.

For Judith Butler, ethics – the moral possibility of solidarity – requires us “to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitute our chance of becoming human.”⁴ In brief, Butler’s ethics requires us to be able to be *bound to what is not me*, to be moved, to be prompted to act, to *address myself elsewhere*, but above all, to vacate the individualist, self-sufficient ‘I’ as a kind of possession. It is not about trying to fit in, because we come to a point where we cannot bend any further, as Maja Borg puts it. This is a move away from the form of narcissistic love, when we are unable to *see* the other, when we can only see the self in the other as opposed to the radical difference of the other. And perhaps this is the kind of unsettling love that we want as a ‘model’ (provisionally called) for the grounds of future politics, a love that can take us outside of ourselves and towards the other, a love that could be the glue for being-in-common.

We urgently need to seek ways in which our entire social and political imaginaries could be *otherwise*, based on an enduring practice of love and politics: the practice of love as able to build (or release?) political potentialities. We’re bearing in mind that after being broken down, active practices of solidarity, politics and agency need to be premised on healing. We, as white privileged women, can no longer deny what colonized peoples have always known: that it is urgent to move beyond the passivity of inclusion discourses and diversity, and that to be ‘active’ is to move in relation to different practices of love and politics, beyond individuality and back to the *personal*.

“AND AT THAT POINT YOU HAVE TO DRAG EVERYONE ALONG, NOT TO BE ALONE LIKE SAILS OF FLESH CATCHING WIND NAILED TO THOSE WE LOVE, THE WHOLE PLANET, HANGING IN OUR SKIN. HAVE YOU EVER FELT LIKE THAT?” (MAJA BORG, FUTURE MY LOVE)

“EACH ONE OF US WHO SURVIVES, SHE SAYS, AT LEAST ONCE IN OUR LIFETIME, AT SOME CRUCIAL AND INESCAPABLE MOMENT, HAS HAD TO ABSOLUTELY BELIEVE IN THE IMPOSSIBLE.” (AUDRE LORDE, A BURST OF LIGHT.)

¹ Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva*. Originally published 1973. Translated by Benjamin Moser (New York, New Directions, 2012): 23.

² Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Greywolf Press, 2015): 101-102.

³ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh Press and Routledge, 2004): 198.

⁴ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Fordham University Press, 2005): 136.

Sophie Bissonnette has over 35 years of experience directing and screenwriting documentaries, many of which have won awards. *Une Histoire de femmes* (1980, codirected with Martin Duckworth and Joyce Rock) was awarded by the Association of Quebec Film Critics as the Best Feature Film of the Year. Since then, her career as an independent documentary filmmaker has shown her interest in women's lives, history, the labour world and social justice. *Des Lumières dans la grande noirceur* (1991) - which won three awards - is a portrait of the trade union and feminist activist Léa Roback. *Partition pour voix de femmes* (2001) was finalist at the Prix Gémeaux for Best Documentary. *Sexy inc. Nos enfants sous influence* (2007) won the UNICEF Prize at the Japan Prize. More recently, Sophie Bissonnette created web documentaries: *Les Dames du DOC* (2016), *La Ligne du temps de l'histoire des femmes* (2015). She is the founder of Productions Contre-jour and Productions mainslibres.

Maja Borg was born in Norrköping, Sweden. She is an artist and film director working on films and art projects around the world. Her continued work about the world economy and global politics keeps putting Borg at the forefront of debates around human rights issues in different forums. Borg's *To She in Me* (2005) was selected for the Culture Bound 7, East Wing Collection at the Courtauld Institute, London. *Future My Love* (2008) was premiered at the Edinburgh International Film Festival in 2012 and nominated for the Michael Powell award in 2014. Borg was selected as one of the "visionaries" of *Dazed and Confused's* magazine's online platform where she premiered her experimental short film *We the Others* (2014).

Martin Duckworth, a politically engaged director and cameraman, is the author of a large and significant body of work dealing with issues of peace and justice such as *Temiscaming, Québec* (1976), *Une histoire de femmes* (co-directors: Sophie Bissonnette and Joyce Rock, 1980), *Plus jamais d'Hibakusha!* (1984), *On l'appelait Cambodge* (1982), *Retour à Dresde* (1986), *Oliver Jones in Africa* (1990) and *Acting Blind* (2006).

Marguerite Duras was born in Gia Dinh, near Saigon in French Indochina (1914–1996). She was a novelist, essayist, scriptwriter, playwright and experimental filmmaker. Best known for having penned the screenplay for Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), she received a nomination for Best Original Screenplay at the Academy Awards. As a filmmaker, her work impacted the burgeoning *Nouvelle Vague* in the late '50s and '60s through her experimentation with nonlinear plans and elliptical editing. Her films set the basis for the disjunction of sound and image through the radical use of voiceover.

Sara Eliassen is an artist and filmmaker based in Oslo and New York. Her work is a conceptual cinema practice, investigating how aesthetics and narratives presented in

the moving image create collective memories and how these influence the understanding of our selves as subjects. Eliassen's work plays with media and narrative expectations, creating projects in public spaces: *Not Worth It* (2006) consisted of false TV-ads that interfered with Norwegian TV-channels. Her films *Still Birds* (2009) and *A Blank Slate* (2013) have been presented at the Venice Film Festival, International Film Festival Rotterdam and Sundance, amongst others.

Silvia Gruner was born in 1959 in Mexico City, where she lives and works. In her installations she combines sculpture, photography, video and film. Gruner's work plays with juxtapositions of elements of indigenous Mexican culture which can be translated into a diversity of contemporary materials. Some of her pieces question the bias on the female body, while others examine Gruner's artistic heritage. Her work has been exhibited at the Americas Society, New York (2016); the Museo de San Ildefonso, Mexico City (2016); the Cisneros Fontanals Foundation, Miami (2015); among others. *Un Chant d'amour* is both a film produced in 2005 presented in this exhibition and a publication edited by RM, México-Barcelona in 2009.

Wael Noureddine is a writer, poet and filmmaker born in Lebanon in 1978. He has spent most of his life moving from one city to another. He began his professional career as a journalist and has studied History of Art at La Sorbonne. His films describe, in literary and critical terms, real-life situations, trying to capture the physical and mental scars of conflict, resisting subjugation and submission. Next to his main activity as a filmmaker, he has a great interest in learning languages and theories of linguistics, philosophy, religions, and the history of Islam. He spent a few years playing bass and singing in a soft punk music band in France before returning to filmmaking and shooting *Boombs*, a film about a religious-nihilist terrorist group. He has also presented painting exhibitions in New York. After he moved to Sweden as a "love refugee," he discovered a healthy way of living.

Joyce Rock returned to Montreal in 2011 after 13 years in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) where she co-founded the DTES Neighbourhood House of which she was Executive Director from 2005 to 2011. Using the Right to Food to mobilize their neighbours, the organization was active on all social justice fronts. In 2011, she was awarded the 3M Health Nexus Leadership Award for advancing the Social Determinants of health. "I became disenchanted with filmmaking while working in an Indigenous community which was literally invaded by every conceivable type of recording device. With rare exception, they prioritized their recordings at the expense of those they were filming. Since then, I use instead the tools of Community Development to engage my passions: the Rights of all those working in the sex industry, the Rights of prisoners and the logic of

Supervised Injection Sites. I trust and invest in it because Community Development is the natural 'home' of all of us who have never belonged or who have had our belonging ripped from us."

Irmgard Emmelhainz is an independent translator, writer and researcher based in Mexico City. In 2012, she published a collection of essays about art, culture, cinema and geopolitics, *Alotropías en la trinchera evanescente: estética y geopolítica en la era de la guerra total* (BUAP). Her work on film, the Palestine Question, art, culture and neoliberalism has been translated to German, Italian, Norwegian, French, English, Arabic, Turkish, Hebrew and Serbian, and has been presented at an array of international venues, including the Harvard Graduate School of Design in Cambridge, Massachusetts (2014), the March Meeting at Sharjah Art Foundation and the Benjamin in Palestine conference in Ramallah (2015). She is member of the editorial board of *Scapegoat Journal*, and her book *The Tyranny of Common Sense: Mexico's Neoliberal Conversion* was published in March 2016.

Pip Day is Director/Curator at SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art in Montréal where she has curated numerous events and exhibitions over the past five years. Prior to coming to Montréal, Pip worked as an independent curator, writer and educator in the arts primarily in Mexico City, New York and London. In 2003 she founded *teratoma*, the first graduate level curatorial studies program in Latin America and RIM, an international residency program for curators, artists and critics in Mexico City. There she also established *el instituto*, an organization dedicated to culture, politics, activism and research, which generated exhibitions and events such as *Spatial Practices in Revolution and Talk Show*. This work was partly supported through Pip's Andy Warhol Foundation Curatorial Research Fellowship, which she received in 2011. In the late 90s she worked as Curator at Artists Space in New York. More recently, Pip was a member of the curatorial team for the *SITElines* biennial 2016 in Santa Fe. Pip has published numerous texts on art and culture, has taught in curatorial Masters programs at Bard College and at Goldsmiths College, and has lectured widely in university and other cultural contexts. She obtained her B.A. in Art History from University of Toronto and her M.A. in Curatorial Studies from Bard College. She did a few years of her PhD at the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths and might one day get back to it.

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