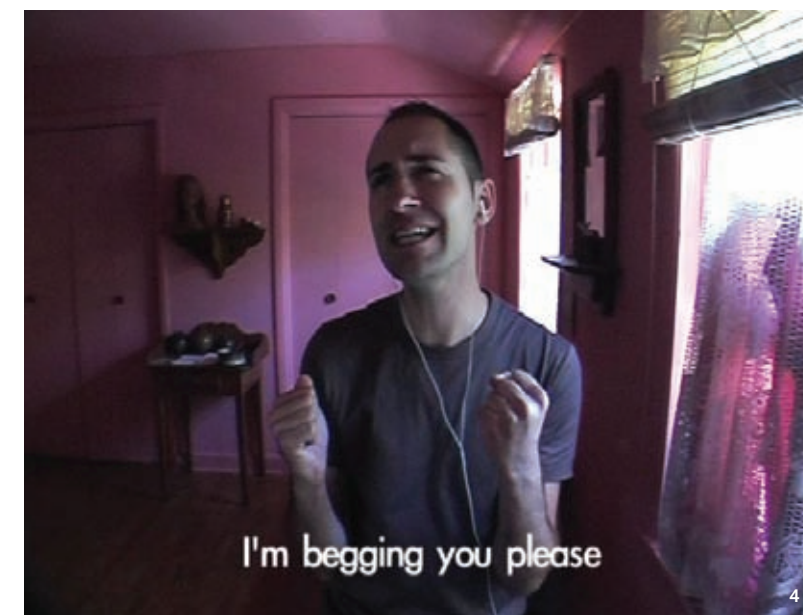


RESPONSE

**AUTO EMOTION:
AUTOBIOGRAPHY,
EMOTION AND
SELF-FASHIONING**

by Matthew Hyland

'Auto Emotion: Autobiography, emotion and self-fashioning' (Summer 2007) wrestled with questions of how we express our often messy feelings and represent the self in new ways. Curated by The Power Plant's Director Gregory Burke and Senior Curator of Programs Helena Reckitt, the exhibition featured fourteen international and Canadian artists who tread a thin line between art and life.



1 Christian Jankowski, *Desperately Seeking Artwork*, 1997, courtesy the artist, Klosterfelde, Berlin and maccarone, New York. 2 Matt Mullican, *Untitled (Under Hypnosis)*, 15 May 2007, The Power Plant, photo: Steve Payne 3 Marina Abramovic, *The Onion*, 1996, courtesy the artist and Montevideo/Time Based Arts, Amsterdam 4 Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay, *Lyric*, 2004, courtesy the artist and Jessica Bradley Art + Projects, Toronto 5 Reza Afisina, *What*, 2001, courtesy the artist

It was not altogether long ago that emotion was viewed as anathema to intellectual output, a sloppy infirmity of daily life ill-suited to artists' attention.

"He said ... my work has no meaning beyond the logic of its systems. I have done away with emotion, intuition, inspiration – those aggrandized habits which set artists apart from ordinary people."

– Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll* (1975)

In Christian Jankowski's video *Desperately Seeking Artwork* (1997), we encounter the artist in the midst of a struggle with creative block. Having been invited to contribute a new work to a group exhibition, Jankowski finds himself bereft of ideas. In search of resolution, he hires out the services of a psychotherapist who, after twelve intensive sessions, tersely concludes that the artist's block is a function of *Entwicklungskrise* (growing pains), an unremarkable, even if laborious, crisis of development. Jankowski,

apparently unmoved by this deduction, responds by cleverly inter-cutting video documentation of the therapist's parting words with footage of himself rolling out of a rug in the analyst's office, submitting the results as his contribution to the show in question.

Resolution, of course, is nowhere to be found in this process: the artist emotes, the therapist pontificates, the chasm between them remains generous and unsatisfying. While the video brazenly flirts with the uneasy notion of art as

self-therapy, it refuses to succumb to it. Instead, the work strikes at tautologies between cognition and catharsis, frustration and relief, spectacle and authenticity. Appearing ten years after its creation in The Power Plant's summer 2007 exhibition 'Auto Emotion: Autobiography, emotion and self-fashioning', Jankowski's *Desperately Seeking Artwork* and its constitutive tensions are emblematic of the increasingly strategic use of narrative, autobiography and self-consciousness amongst contemporary artists.

It was not altogether long ago that emotion was viewed as anathema to intellectual output, a sloppy infirmity of daily life ill-suited to artists' attention. The post-war years, in particular, saw the emotive fall into deep disfavour – to draw on the emotional in one's practice was to be dismissed as trite or sentimental, to be 'reduced' to one's body.¹ In recent years, however, such Cartesian approaches to the intellectual landscape have become ever more anachronistic as the language of feeling finds steadier footing.

In particular, the revival of Spinozan ethics and the attendant elevation of 'affect' as a key concept in critical thought have done much to foreground the generative capacity of emotion, lending it a fresh relevance in aesthetic production.

The fourteen artists in 'Auto Emotion' speak to this shift, contributing to a burgeoning conceptual lexicon marked by ambivalence, neurosis and affective saturation. Given the embodied implications of this amalgam, it is unsurprising to see performance foregrounded so explicitly in the exhibition, with all but four artists appearing in their work. It is instead the terms on which these appearances take place that raise interest. Where the mirror-logic of artist's self-representation frequently suggests a collapse between subject and object, these works instead evince a structuring dialectic of connection versus absence. From Adrian Paci's wry staging of funeral ritual in *The Mourner* (2002) to Andrea Fraser's scathing indictment of art-world pageantry in *Official Welcome* (2001),

it is difficult not to notice a trend toward instrumentalization—a hired performer, other people's words—to inhabit emotional benchmarks, raising questions about the instrumentalization of emotion itself. This dynamic emerges with greatest force in Matt Mullican's *Untitled (Under Hypnosis)*, 2007, a live performance in which the artist was hypnotized by a psychotherapist. In employing the distance of entrancement, Mullican attempts to access the fraught, fractured realities of the subjective. Marina Abramovic's tearful enumeration of everyday agonies in *The Onion* (1995), delivered as the artist consumes the namesake vegetable, likewise alludes to the deficit of possibilities to organically locate and sustain an affective pitch in an economy of flitter and spectacle.

Popular culture—as an ineluctable touchstone of all things emotional—emerges as a prime suspect for this disconnect. In Nikki S. Lee's photo series *Parts* (2002–5), the artist inhabits a range of female archetypes (socialite,

businesswoman, seductress) in the context of romantic relationships with men. In each scenario, the figure's 'other half' has been cropped out of the image, leaving only traces of his existence. While these images evoke a fluid relationship between intimacy and identity, they also underscore an innocuous ambivalence toward the halcyon rubric of cinematic romance. Similarly, Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay's five-channel video installation *Lyric* (2004) sees the artist isolate and assemble truisms of pop music and sing them in collective succession over several hours. While this act should swiftly render the lyrics meaningless, the artist's visible exhaustion belies such a tidy conclusion; even stripped of its sheen, the promise of the love song exacts a considerable emotional toll.

Pop culture's affective authority comes full circle in Eija-Liisa Ahtila's video installation *The Present* (2001). Constructing five short portraits of pathos and psychosis via the beige conventions of the public service announcement,

... it is difficult not to notice a trend toward instrumentalization – a hired performer, other people’s words – to inhabit emotional benchmarks, raising questions about the instrumentalization of emotion itself.

Ahtila’s embrace of cinematic narrative is a wary, albeit effective one, deployed not so much for its storytelling capacities as its formidable ability to capture the emotional intensity so keenly sought after elsewhere in the exhibition. That this is achieved in large part through the remove afforded by the pretext of fiction emphasizes the power of an imaginary third-party in opening up possibilities for emotional identification.

There is one standalone work in the exhibition that comes close to collapsing this tension between emotional engagement and its second-hand corollaries: Sophie Calle’s epic installation *Exquisite Pain* (2001), the sole work in the show to unapologetically deploy a traditional narrative arc. The portion of the installation on view at The Power Plant unfolds in two parts: the first an accumulation of diaristic photos and travel mementos that trace the weeks leading up to the artist’s devastating break-up, the second a suite of variations on Calle’s account of heart-ache presented alongside the tragedies of others. Skillfully manipulating the cumulative capacity of narrative structure, Calle is able to achieve a near-blistering crescendo of anguish followed by a deflating denouement. The results are nothing if not immersive, beckoning viewers into Calle’s emotional tangle without reducing them to it.

In this regard, that Calle’s work is generally situated in terms of the autobiographical seems ill-fitting. Instead, the installation takes the shape of something much closer to auto-ethnography, an attempt to depict a fraught moment in culture through the idioms of the prevailing order. In the end, Calle’s work, along with the other works populating the exhibit, allude not to individuated feelings, but rather collective affects. Absent are claims to an emotional core, or even an emotional zeitgeist; the manic impulses and affective confusions presented instead are exploratory, suggestive of the intellectual urgency of continued emotional inquiry.

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1. Feminist artists in the post-war period were particularly vulnerable to this kind of aesthetic assassination. The epigraph of this article, culled from Carolee Schneemann’s landmark performance, *Interior Scroll* (1975), recounts the artist’s dressing down by a colleague for the overly ‘subjective’ nature of her work. Schneemann was hardly alone in these criticisms: from Mary Kelly to Joyce Wieland to Louise Fishman, emotional content was widely used to dismiss the significance of feminist output. Accordingly, it is impossible to discuss the affective turn in recent conceptualism without acknowledging the foundational contribution of feminist practice.

6 Sophie Calle, *Exquisite Pain* (Count Down – 20), 2000, courtesy the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

7 Nikki S. Lee, *Part (3)*, 2003, courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York

8 Eija-Liisa Ahtila, *The Present*, 2002, © Crystal Eye Ltd., Helsinki, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris

